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# The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

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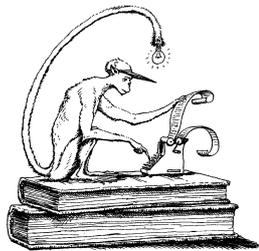
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## Editorial

In this issue: another short story from Jeremy Cavaterra and an article from the stalwart Tim Stretton about Jack's influence on his literary development and writing. I found Tim's article a stimulating read. It was remarkably different from what I had imagined it would be—pleasingly so, I hasten to add!

Also starting in this issue is the first of what I estimate will be about eight installments of *Coralia*, a space-opera I wrote quite some time back—and which has undergone a series of metamorphoses during the re-writes, and has been merged with at least two other stories from way, way back. It's a good example of ideas-recycling: a valuable skill in a writer of fiction. Ideas are just too precious too waste, and if they don't quite 'work' in one context, why not try them in another?

While we're on the topic of fiction, a few brief random thoughts on the subject.

Kenneth Burkeven wrote "stories are equipment for living", while Jean Anouilh maintained that "fiction gives life its form". These are high concepts, which creators of fiction—at all levels of skill, artistry, and accomplishment—may not be explicitly aware of, though I think many have at least an unexpressed inkling of the responsibility that is implied in these rather lofty goals.

There is, of course, always a gap between aspiration and achievement, and as every archer knows, you must always aim higher than the actual target.

The hardest thing while doing that is to, at the same time, retain our own identities and search for what might be our own contribution to whatever constitutes 'art'. Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but all it can ever be is a tool, suitable, appropriate, and even necessary to help us with our first—and second and third—faltering steps on the path. Ultimately, however, we must put it aside and learn to listen to the whispers inside ourselves and begin to understand what they're telling us.

But that path—as attested to by uncountable failures, and by just about the whole of contemporary 'art'—is difficult and perilous. It's comforting indeed to have someone like Jack, standing there, somewhere, on a rocky outcrop, holding up a light that may serve us as a beacon; a point of reference, so we don't completely lose our way.

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The CLS is devoted to showcasing literary work in any form, including fragmentary, which bears the influence of Jack Vance. Letters to the editor will also be published on a discretionary basis. Letters and submissions should be addressed to: Till Noever, at [till@clear.net.nz](mailto:till@clear.net.nz)

# Coralia

by Till Noever

## Chapter 1

"I don't want to leave! I *like* it here!"

"And, of course, Jack's here," Thea Finisterre added dryly. She touched her daughter's arm.

Claury flinched and jerked away.

Her father intervened. "Do you want to stay *alive*?" he snapped curtly.

Claury's head whipped around. "What!?"

Gart Finisterre locked eyes with her. "Will Corwin was murdered," he said sharply. "Someone sprayed Plague into his face. You understand that?—Plague!"

Claury blanched. Up to this moment she—and Jack, for all she knew—had been under the impression that it had been a fatal stroke. Of course, by the time Jack and Claury had found out, the body had been taken away. When they saw it again they must have tidied it up, the traces of Plague artfully covered, the face reconstructed to a semblance of what it used to be with cosmiplasts.

Plague?

It didn't make any sense—was so utterly preposterous that her mind refused to accept it. Plague was something from far away, in space and time. Banned over a century ago. The kind of thing you heard about in history classes. The substance wasn't even supposed to *exist* anymore!

Plague?

Will Corwin?

Her father held her gaze. "Jack doesn't know," he said softly. "Clara Corwin wanted to spare him—so she never told him." He sighed. "Claury, listen. Somebody did this to Will Corwin—and I have an idea why. Maybe even 'who'—or at least who initiated it." He flicked a quick glance at his wife. A silent communication from which she, Claury, was excluded—resentfully so.

"Who'd murder Will Corwin?" she flared. "It's ridiculous."

Gart Finisterre shook his head. "It's monstrous, but it happened—and I don't fancy being next on the list of whoever did it."

Her mother broke in. "Dad's resigned from

GenSpac†," she said softly.

Claury couldn't believe her ears. Her world was coming apart around her, and she could neither grasp the scope of the calamity befalling her, nor the reasons behind it. She'd never felt so helpless and miserable in her whole life.

And Jack . . .

Omigod . . . Jack . . .

She had to see him . . . now . . .

Her mother read it in her face. "Don't . . ."

Claury glared at her parents, her face livid with fury; the only emotion that kept her from going totally crazy with all that was happening around her.

"I'm going to see Jack!"

"Don't tell him, Claury," her father pleaded. "For his own sake."

"What should I do? Lie to him? Tell him I'm leaving because of . . . what?"

She hesitated as the full import of what Gart Finisterre had told her was beginning to sink in. "Why are *you* afraid now anyway? Is there something . . ."

Again, a quick, almost imperceptible, exchange between her parents.

"Will Corwin and I were working on a research project," Gart Finisterre said. "We think our results would have seriously . . . inconvenienced . . . certain folks."

Claury had a nauseating sensation of being spewed out from the reality she knew; as if something in herself had completely detached itself from the world around her and was now just observing it. Much as a camera might: recording, but not being in and of it anymore.

She had to see Jack. She needed someone who wasn't alien; someone she could touch.

She turned to leave. Her father's voice held her back. "Claury! I'm telling you this because you have a right to know why I'm taking you away from your boyfriend."

She pivoted to face him again. "If this is so terrible, why can't you get Jack and Clara Corwin to

† GenSpac, The General Space Corporation, was founded by one Lister Diamond, an eccentric, called by some 'the greatest genius since Da Vinci', born in the first days of the 21st century, who formulated the physical theory that led to anti-gravity devices and A-space travel. Despite his foibles, Lister Diamond was also possessed of a lively business acumen, and—before his later 'lapse' and the creation of the anti-TransNet 'Listerites' group of cyber-terrorists, who defied InfoGen and ultimately destroyed it—founded and led the initial expansion of The General Space Corporation into the still-leading manufacturer of space-going vessels.

leave as well?" Surely that must be the solution! She didn't have to lose Jack after all.

Gart Finisterre shook his head. His face was grave. "Clara won't leave. This is her home. She thinks she's safest here; that nobody will harm her."

"You already talked to her about this?"

Her mother nodded. "That's where I went this morning."

"But Jack could come? There's nothing to stop him!"

"Jack doesn't seem like the kind of guy who's going to leave his mother when he thinks that there's going to be any danger to her."

"But you said that Jack doesn't know!"

"He'll find out, won't he?" Thea Finisterre gave her daughter a significant look.

Claury knew she was right. She would have to tell him, no matter the consequences. And Jack wouldn't leave. He'd be torn up about it, but he wouldn't leave his mother on her own.

Tears of anger and frustration blurred Claury's vision. She spun around and ran out of the house.

Claury rang the bell. Clara Corwin opened the door and let her in. Her face was carefully composed.

*Empty*, Claury thought; deliberately so. Jack's mother wore a light sandy-colored dress. No overt expression of mourning here. Everything was hidden somewhere under a facade of almost-normality.

"Jack's upstairs," his mother said softly.

"Thank you," Claury said.

Clara Corwin considered her. "When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow," Claury said. "On the *Loki*."

Clara Corwin looked sad. "Jack's going to be terribly upset."

Claury considered the mother of the young man she loved more than anything in the world. "Is it true?" she asked lowly.

Clara Corwin's face closed up. "They told you?" she whispered. She considered her reply for a moment. "Yes, it's true," she said finally.

"Oh, Mrs Corwin, I'm so sorry!"

Clara Corwin shook her head. The shadows behind her eyes betrayed her distress. Claury regretted opening her big mouth. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to tell Jack the truth; especially if it hurt this much. It was bad enough that Will

Corwin was dead—but murdered?

But what could she tell Jack? That her parents had decided at the spur of the moment to leave on the next ship out of here?

She climbed the stairs with a heavy heart and leaden feet. The door to Jack's room stood open. He stood at the window, looking out across the wide lawn behind the house; and maybe at the forest beyond: a place filled with many wild, exhilarating, wonderful memories for both of them.

"Jack?" she said softly.

He turned and embraced her, pressed her to him so hard that she couldn't breathe. She was a little taller than him, but what he didn't have in height he certainly made up for in strength. And in other ways . . .

They kissed hungrily.

Jack must have sensed something because he released her and looked into her face.

"What's the matter?"

She opened her mouth to say something. Anything. But nothing came out.

Jack's eyes narrowed and his face hardened. It was a new expression; one she'd never seen before.

"They told you, didn't they?" he grated.

He knew! And he knew that she knew; read it in her eyes or whatever else he did. Damn it, was there nothing she could hide from him?

Not that she minded—not really. But it was disconcerting sometimes; especially for someone like herself, who was a bit of a control freak. She liked to be on top of things; even—and thinking of it almost made her smile—on top of him sometimes. Quite often actually—and he seemed to know when she was in that mood. And he generally obliged; so maybe it wasn't not so bad that he knew what was going on in her head.

What would it be like to spend your life with someone from whom you can't have any real secrets?

Futile thoughts, the way things were going. It didn't look as if they were going to go anywhere together.

"Oh, Jack . . ."



After the explanations were done and the tears had flowed, Jack locked his door from the inside and they said farewell. It was, as Claury later realized, the most intense and emotionally exhilarating, and

yet at the same time exhausting, experience of her life; comparable only to the very first time they had kissed. Two people just wanting to merge into each other, never to come out again.

When it was over and they had made themselves socially acceptable again Clara Corwin informed them that Claury's parents had called. They wanted her back home to finish packing the most essential of her belongings. Clara Corwin had, as tactfully as possible, informed them that she did not want to disturb the two. Apparently there had been no resistance. Claury understood later—far too late to make any difference—that her parents had been almost as torn up about her separation from Jack as she had been. After all, he'd almost been family—and not just because of Claury. Their parents had been long-time friends, with the fathers working together in close collaboration. The cliquish social environment on Coralia had further contrived to bring them closer together. It was strange, this apparent immiscibility of Terrans and Coralians; especially since Clara Corwin herself was a native Coralian. But, as Claury was to learn, expatriate Coralians sometimes had an ever harder time re-adapting to their social environment than complete strangers to the planet.

Jack decided to take Claury home. As they left the Corwin's house another friend of the family arrived: Tril Wumford, one of the few Coralians with whom the two families had formed a friendship of sorts. He was the Coralian liaison officer in charge of coordinating the activities of the GenSpac employees on Coralia. Unlike most other people on this planet he had accepted the offworlders in their midst and done his best to help them become comfortable. His efforts had been far beyond the scope of his brief.

Tril Wumford was a big man, massive in height and girth, bordering on pathological obesity, and towering over Will Corwin and Gart Finisterre alike. His cheeks turned red and filmed over with the sheen of perspiration after the slightest physical effort; his sparse hair was carefully parted in the middle, as was the current Coralian fashion, and pasted in spirals to the sides of his head. Bulging eyes, set a trifle too wide, fixed on his conversational partners with unnerving intensity. But he also laughed a lot, and his laughs shook the whole frame, providing an interesting spectacle for the observer.

Jack had never warmed to Wumford, and Claury had often wondered why. To her the man's deeds

spoke for themselves. But Jack was funny when it came to people—and while he never denigrated Wumford he kept his distance.

"It's not that there's something wrong with him," he once told her. "Just be careful."

Intuition. She'd often poked fun at him about that when they were younger. That was, until a man from the Academy had come around and tested Jack. Then they found out about his talents.

So, her boyfriend was going to be a Pilot! Claury hadn't known quite what to think about it. Pilots weren't around much. . . .

Tril Wumford greeted them cordially before turning his attention to Clara Corwin. Apparently there were a few things that had to be cleared up. Before the door closed behind her Claury caught whiffs of an incipient conversation. Something about documents.

They clung to each other as they walked back to the Finisterre's house. Jack didn't want to come in. Claury kissed him fiercely.

"Promise you'll keep on looking for me," she said urgently.

"I promise," he replied, very solemn.

"And if you don't find me," she said, "I'll find you." She tried to make it sound like a threat, but it came out more like a sob.

She fished for thing platinum-iridium chain on his neck and pulled out the pendant, a transparent metaplast rectangle with rounded edges and a picture of Claury and Jack's parents inside, and looked at it for one last time. She remembered having it taken, a few months ago. Will Corwin had had it locked into the pendant and given it to Jack as a present-for-no-occasion-in-particular, much to Jack's surprise.

"Don't forget me," Claury said softly, and tucked the pendant back under his shirt.

"Never."

They kissed again. Then, because she was going to cry again, she tore herself loose and ran into the house.



They saw each other once more; the next day, before the Finisterres climbed into the shuttle. Tril Wumford had taken them there in a flitzer, and Jack had come, too. They'd sat in the last row of seats and ignored the adults in the front. Screw them all.

But, as the shuttle lifted off, no matter how much

she tried, she couldn't see Jack through the glass of the terminal building. The shuttle rose, light as a feather, and then swept up into the sky toward the orbiting station. Out of his life, and he out of hers.



The *Loki* had taken them to Earth Station 4. From there a shuttle conveyed them to Madrid, her father's home. Gart Finisterre disappeared for a day to attend to some business he did not care to talk about. Her mother was vague about her father's doings but Claury thought that she knew exactly what he was up to.

"Where are we going to go?" she asked, for the zillionth time.

Her mother, as before, did not yield the information. "Somewhere safe."

"What have we got to fear?"

"Maybe a lot. That's why your father quit his job."

On the third evening on Earth her parents left her with her mother's sister in a small apartment building in Calle Morena, in one of Madrid's sprawling northern suburbs, while they took a flitzer to what they vaguely described as a 'business meeting'. It was a bright, sunny day. The sky was clear and blue. The apartment had a balcony which looked out over a sea of houses, many of which fortunately were below the level of her aunt Asuncion's apartment. Claury spent most of her day sitting out there, staring morosely across the city, dreaming of Jack, and bemoaning the wayward fate that had landed her in this position. She hadn't even been allowed to go out looking at the city, because her parents didn't think it was safe.

Aunt Asuncion answered the beep of the com. Claury didn't hear what was being said, but there was something wrong with the cadence of her auntie's voice.

Footsteps. Claury turned to look into the pale, barely controlled face. She knew . . .

Gart and Thea Finisterre had kept their meeting. That much Claury found out when their *abogado* contacted her later that day. But they never made it back. Their vehicle disintegrated in a fiery ball in one of the city's busiest sky-lanes.

For the first time in her life Claury had an inkling of what it meant to be afraid. She finally understood—oh so much too late!—that her parents had not only been justified in their paranoia, but that

indeed they had not been paranoid enough.

The week following the Finisterres' death was a melee of confusion, anger, fear, and loathing. The *abogado*, a certain Jose Jesus Hidalgo, informed her that her parents had been able to make out a new will; that in case of their death it was to be aunt Asuncion and Hidalgo who were to share custody and responsibility for Claury's care until such day as she was coming officially of age. Which was not going to be long, since on Earth that meant 18 years, and that was only four months to go.

After she had dealt to some degree with the devastating events in her life, Claury's first instinct was to return to Coralia. Away from Earth, which now loomed prominently in her mind as a symbol of her parents' brutal death, and which to her seemed to promise a death sentence for herself as well. She would be as safe on Coralia and with Jack as she was here. Probably safer. She was sure that Clara Corwin would make her welcome.

Jack . . .

She could hardly wait to see him again. She felt vaguely guilty about the thought. Maybe because it was the one good thing this ill wind had blown in her direction. But she fought off the feeling. She now had her own life, and her parents would not have wanted her to be unhappy. And there was only one place she could imagine being happy.

Her aunt and the *abogado* objected, but Claury was headstrong girl and in the end they yielded. The tickets were arranged.

Two days before departure Jose Jesus Hidalgo contacted Claury. "I should appreciate it if you could pay me a visit before you finalize your arrangements." He would not be drawn on details. He also insisted that the meeting remain private, excluding Aunt Asuncion. When the woman objected he asked Claury to give him a moment along with her. Claury handed her aunt the com unit, went into an adjoining room, and closed the door behind her. When her aunt re-appeared she was subdued and raised no further objections.

She arrived at the *abogado's* office. Hidalgo came to the point without delay. "This is a printout of a communication which I received earlier today, through channels so convoluted that I have been unable to trace the source," he told her. He handed Claury a printout.

"I read the first few lines of the communication. I had to in order to identify its final destination," he

said apologetically.

Claury unfolded the sheet.

*To: Jose Jesus Hidalgo. Hidalgo, Garofalo, and Farina. Avenida De La Reunion, Madrid, Spain, EC, Earth.*

*This is a message for Claurinda Finisterre. Please ensure that she receives it as soon as practicable. It is essential for her welfare that she does.*

Then followed the message:

*Esteemed Claurinda Finisterre,*

*I regret very much that this communication finds you in a position of grave distress. Your current position is the result of an unfortunate confluence of circumstances. However, you and your boyfriend, Jack Corwin, have become the victims of events which are quite out of your control. In order to survive—and I emphasize the word 'survive'!—these circumstances you must now adapt yourself. I urge you strongly to believe me when I tell you that if you don't, both you and Jack will suffer the same that which has befallen Will Corwin and your parents.*

*This is not an empty announcement of doom, as the dire fate of your parents must surely demonstrate. The reason why you and Jack Corwin are still alive is that certain bargains have been struck. These resulted in agreements which guarantee your and Jack's safety, subject to four conditions which I shall now outline to you:*

*1) Under no circumstances must you ever get in contact with Jack Corwin. This condition is absolute. It includes all forms of communications, direct or indirect. It also means that you must do everything possible in order for Jack Corwin not to get into contact with you. You must instruct your lawyer to ensure that, for all practical purposes, to Jack Corwin's cognizance, you have disappeared.*

*2) You must leave Earth forthwith and never return there.*

*3) You must, upon every change of residence, inform your lawyer of the move.*

*4) You must, once every four standard months, send a communication to your lawyer. This message must contain information about your current whereabouts and a statement as to whether you find yourself in good health. It must be sent in a sealed envelope; and done on hard-copy, which must also contain an imprint of your right thumb and a drop of your blood. This must be done in order to authenticate the origin of the message.*

*No doubt you will ask yourself why you should be subjected to such apparently arbitrary constraints. Unfortunately there are no answers to these questions. However, the facts are that, if you wish to live, and if you wish Jack Corwin to live, you must—must!—adhere to*

*them. If you don't you and Jack will be killed. There is no place to hide from those who will hunt you down if you fail to comply the instructions above to the letter.*

*Your life, and Jack's, are in your hands. Do what you have to survive. Be assured that, if you do obey these rules, the safety of both of you is guaranteed. Such is the nature of the deal that was made.*

Claury sat stunned for a few moments. Then she wordlessly handed the note to the *abogado*. Hidalgo read it silently and put it down. His face looked troubled.

"Do you believe this?" she whispered

He sighed. "My feeling is that I do. However, a feeling is all I have to go on. That and the mysterious origin of the message."

He looked at her with something like trepidation. "*Señorita* . . . I don't know what to say."

Never to see Jack again! She could not believe it. Surely this must be the sickest of cosmic jokes.

But it wasn't. Later that day they buried her parents. She stood at the tiny plot now containing the one urn with their mingled ashes. Her aunt had gone, as had Hidalgo. She had wanted to be alone. One last moment with her parents. A taxi was waiting for her at the exit of the cemetery.

Behind her the crunch of footsteps on gravel. She made as if to turn.

"Don't!" The voice had the sting of a whip. Claury froze.

"You have received the message?"

She swallowed convulsively and nodded.

"Follow its advice."

Footsteps again. She forced herself to turn, but there was nobody but an old gardener pushing along cart with a few implements sticking out. She wanted to run to him to ask if he had seen anybody—but then hesitated. Was it he who had spoken to her? She remained paralyzed in place until the crooked figure had disappeared from view between the monuments and crypts.



Claury left Earth two days later, but she did not return to Coralia. Instead she headed for Fargo 5. She procured herself a small apartment in the capital, Portage, and used part of her inheritance to spend the next three years in pursuit of a minor degree in exobiology. She also looked around for

work: things to do on the side, and to stretch her funds for as long as possible. Her lack of experience of references was partially compensated for by her personality, which people thought charming, though possibly a trifle melancholy; a combination which some, men especially, found irresistible. For a while she worked in insignificant part-time secretarial posts, and performed receptionist duties in various kinds of establishments. Some of her employers thought to take advantage of her apparent youth and artlessness, but found themselves rebuffed with such ferocity that they seldom tried again. All but one, who was so incensed by her rejection of his advances that he lost control of his senses. He followed her home one night and, after professing his undying affection and having himself rejected with the customary firmness, attempted to rape her there and then. Claury, who had by that time caught on to the need of possessing some elementary skills in self-defense, taught the man a lesson he would never forget.

Unfortunately, the society on Fargo 5 was not attuned to female sensibilities, having been founded by a mix of cultures whose attitudes toward women were impoverished at best, and stuck somewhere in medieval times at worst. Even more unfortunate for Claury, her would-be rapist had friends in the wrong places. She was arrested, charged with assault, and sentenced to several months in a Fargo prison camp. Her protestations and personal testimony did her no good. There were no witnesses attesting to her own good character. There were lots who vouched for her assailant.

Claury's experiences in the prison, with men and women alike, shocked her to the core and forever altered her relationships with her fellow humans. She also was not able to maintain her regular contact with Hidalgo and fretted over the consequences for herself. When nothing dire was forthcoming she relaxed somewhat. She notified Hidalgo the moment she came out of gaol and hoped that her letter of explanation would suffice.

A few weeks after she was released she chanced across a published list of Pilots to be graduated from the Academy in New York, on Earth, later that year. To her incredulous joy one of the names was Jack's.

*Good for you, Jack,* she thought. *At least one of us is getting some sort of a life.*

Following an impulse whose recklessness frightened her, she used a significant portion of the

remainder of her inheritance to book a ticket to Earth on the next ship. She arrived there a week before the graduation ceremony.

The day she arrived she contacted Hidalgo and told him to transmit a message to her mysterious watchers. That she was here to attend Jack's graduation. That she knew that she was violating the terms and conditions of her employment, but that she didn't give a shit. That she'd appreciate it if they let her live until the ceremony was over. That's all she wanted.

When the event finally took place, in Juno Stadium, she was there: alive. She only saw Jack from afar: a tiny figure on the podium, standing in a line of only four graduates of this particular class. She also saw him in close-up on the big screen above the stage when they pinned the insignia on his uniform. Seeing him brought tears to her eyes and it opened up a hole in her heart. She etched the sight into her mind, because it was all she'd ever have of him.

Hidalgo had not left her side during her entire stay. When she asked him why he exposed himself in such a manner, he told her that his wife had died only a few months ago and that there were no children or anybody he cared for much. "But you," he said to her, "are my client, and you truly need my help. This situation is intolerable and I admire your courage. The least I can do is to show my unwavering support."

She was been touched by his solicitude and, though she remained suspicious, Jose Jesus Hidalgo was one of those human beings who reminded her that not everybody was a creep.

He told her that Jack had contacted him some time ago. Apparently he was looking for her. Had been for all the years since he'd come to the Academy.

"What did you tell him?"

Hidalgo shrugged. "What could I tell him? I lied. I said that he must have been mistaken. That I did not know you and had never heard of you.

"He asked for your parents. I told him that I hadn't heard from them either.

"He knew that I was lying, of course. I could see it in his face. Something that went beyond mere suspicion. I don't know how he could be so sure, but he knew!

"He left me. I checked him out through my own channels and found out that he'd spent some considerable time looking for you. It was very hard to

know that I could have helped, because he was so desperate to find you.

"Then he entered the academy, none the wiser."

"How is that possible?" she asked.

"That's what I asked myself, too. I investigated some more; found that records have been tampered with; and that the police professes complete ignorance of the accident which killed your parents."

"But there *must* be a record. The news . . ."

Hidalgo shook his head. "The accident made the news, but the names of the victims were never published. And with your aunt disappearing from her address without a trace, your young man has no clues to work from."

Claury looked at him when he said that. *My young man*, she thought woefully.

She left Earth the day after the ceremony. She didn't return to Fargo, but took the *Linus Travis*, a small freighter of just over two hundred meters length, to Gherwin, where she hoped to find work on one of the many digs set up by SIHO, the Society for the Investigation of Human Origins. She thought that the qualifications she had acquired on Fargo 5, partial and incomplete though they might be, might just be found suitable for the work in question.

Not that she necessarily believed in SIHO theories. Still, one never knew. Strange things were afoot in this big wide universe. If she failed to secure a place on the digs she could always try the tourist places. By now she knew that there was something about her which would virtually guarantee her something to do.

There were bunks for fifty passengers in one of the modules attached to the long linac†. The trip took two weeks and was memorable only for the cramped nature of the quarters and the uninspiring nature of her fellow passengers, all of whom were Amish pilgrims headed one stage further: for the outlying colony of Pennyvaark, where they hoped to find a respite from the ravages civilization on Earth had inflicted upon them. Their time aboard the *Linus Travis* was spent in sober observances and concentra-

tion; activities which excluded Claury, both, by choice and by necessity.

Upon arrival at Gherwin she quickly determined that conditions as they had been represented to her in brochures were not entirely in correspondence with reality. There were only five digs, and these were overrun by over-qualified graduates, against whom she had no chance of competing.

It was back to the bars.

Gherwin's low population brought her attention to a fact which, so far, she had conveniently overlooked: that she was being watched. It came to her one day during an idle moment on a quiet evening at the bar. The Coralian had tried to be inconspicuous, but a Coralian—even one who's only lived there for a decade or so—would always sense another Coralian. And Claury sensed this man. As she started wondering and observing a disturbing picture began to emerge.

It was the beginning of her real imprisonment. From that day on she *knew*, and the knowledge ate away at her day or night.

It was always Coralians, who showed up in places they shouldn't have. The identity of the enemy was becoming clear.

Not that the knowledge helped. She still didn't know why or what. Only that it was the Coralians who were behind it all. They didn't leave her alone anymore . . . maybe never had. They went wherever she went, no matter how much she moved around.

And move she did. As soon as she had saved enough she packed her bags and left Gherwin, to find some other hole to crawl into—only to find the next place equally incongenial, and so she moved on as soon as she had the EUs to make it happen. And always the Coralians were there—like hyenas, or Coralian leeches.

Claury began to wonder about things. Paranoid ramblings of the mind, really. But when she started to think about everything always seemed to have gone wrong for her again and again, a disturbing pattern began to emerge. She allowed her mind to wander back over the places she'd been; the occasions when she had tried to drag herself out of the mess she was in. Interviews for jobs; or when she'd tried to pick up her studies again. Things that were said; letters that were written. The flimsy excuses for not employing her, in the light of what she suspected now, sounded even more contrived than they had done before.

† 'linac': Linear Accelerator. With ample energy available through the use of fusion technology, most ships were propelled by a flux of ions, injected into a long tube and accelerated to high speeds by a system of electro magnetic propulsors. The dimensions of the linacs made maneuvering of large vessels a very cumbersome affair, often requiring assistance from small tugs, which helped with the correct positioning of a ship, for example, when berthing at a space-station. However, linacs were a necessary means to accelerate space-going vessels to the speeds required for entry into A-space, and thus feature prominently on every long-distance space-transport ever constructed.

Was she seeing things? Phantoms of meaning which were really figments of the imagination of a desperate and bitter failure? Or was it all true? Had it always been true—ever since her parents' death? Was all this her own doing, or were forces beyond her ken helping to keep her down—allowing her to live, but just on the borderline of the tolerable? As a barmaid maybe, and—as it inevitably happened—a whore.

Maybe they wanted her to keep moving around! A moving target is hard to lock on to. A low-flying moving target was even harder to find. Keep her down, make her invisible and insignificant, and keep her on the move. Just in case someone was looking for her.

Like Jack maybe . . .

Jack! Sometimes—often!—she wanted Jack so much it hurt. And sometimes she envied him, and it hurt just as much. Maybe she even hated him. Or . . . not *him*! Never Jack, but rather his good fortune. How everything worked out for him; being a Pilot and all; and probably rising right up the ladder and cruising along on one of those huge passenger liners whose fares only the rich could afford.

Yeah, Jack would get there. That was his way. He'd be good at what he did.

Damn it! She could be good at things, too! And not just the kind of shit she was doing. She had more of a brain than ninety nine percent of the jerks that tried to make out with her—and were sometimes allowed to do so . . . for a price. Men and women alike. Who gave a damn anyway?

One night the implications of what had been done to her—or what she'd done to herself—hell she didn't know any more, and she didn't want to know, she was so tired of it all!—finally sank in. It happened during a particularly unpleasant episode with a middle-aged government official, who wanted his wife to witness his prowess with a whore, hoping to thus stimulate his domestic sex-life. Somewhere halfway through the procedure—with the wife standing there, watching, her pink tongue licking her lips, and making little revolting sucking sounds—Claury pushed the pervert off her and told them both to get out.

The official persisted: he had paid over good cash and considered that he had a right to have the appropriate services rendered.

Claury threw the money into his face both of them out of the room.

No more!

When the couple had left she cleansed herself as thoroughly as was possible and put on her best dress. Then she prowled the streets of Kiarty, a small metropolis of about half a million people, and the capital and economic center of one of the hubs of the human worlds, Organum Pegasi.

It didn't take her long to find what she wanted. The pusher asked too much for the goods, but she knew that what she got would be clean, not laced or diluted: exactly what she needed; with a clear syringe to make the process tidy and quick. She didn't want to go out in a haze of pain, or wait too long for it all to happen. She just wanted to go.

Claury's body wasn't used to having drugs pumped into it. She'd kept clean to this very day. No drugs, no e-stims. That wasn't her. She liked to live consciously—though right now she wondered just now 'conscious' she had really been. Still, being 'clean' showed and it improved business to no end. A drugged whore wasn't half as much fun as one who had it all together.

She reached the waterfront and walked along the sandy beach until she was well beyond the hundreds of courting, necking, and screwing couples of all persuasions who frequented this place during the hours of darkness. A solitary stalker with nothing better to do thought her a suitable victim. She broke his arm and told him he was lucky that it wasn't his neck. Then she kept on walking.

She took off her shoes and waded into the water. The tiny waves Organum Pegasi's warm ocean lapped around her ankles. In the dim light of the stars she saw a solitary rock a short distance out in the water. She headed toward it. It was further out than she thought and she was submerged to her waist when she got there. She pulled herself out of the water and climbed to the top of the smooth surface. There she sat for a while and thought about her life.

Finally she unwrapped the syringe and held it up against the sky so she could see the clear liquid. She took another look around; breathed the tangy air. She felt like she should cry, but her eyes felt dry and raw. She probed for the vein in her arm and lined up the needle. She'd never done this kind of thing, but how difficult could it be?

A loud splash right beside her! A sound like a dragon's belch. The blowfish surfaced briefly, took a gulp of air, and then returned under the surface to continue his perambulations along the sea floor.

Claury jerked at the sound. The needle penetrated her skin. A sudden pain. In an involuntary reflex her hand released the syringe. The needle-point was yanked out of her arm. The syringe clattered on the rock. A tiny splash as it fell into the water. Claury sat motionless, staring at the dark surface which had swallowed the instrument of her intended self-destruction.

Her vision blurred.

When the crying was done she slipped off the rock into the water and immersed herself. As it closed over her head she told herself that when she emerged nothing would ever be the same again. It would be a new Claury, who would never—never!—again allow anybody or anything drive her to a point of such despair. She had been touched by fate, and she would do her best to prove that she was worthy of the second chance it had offered.

She left Organum Pegasi a few weeks later on a shuttle freighter—heading for Herrykairn, a small outpost at the fringe of inhabited space, notable mainly for one of the most unusual life-forms man had ever encountered. Though tourists visited the place Another place where she might try to hide from her tormenters.



Herrykairn. Maybe things would be different. The people certainly were.

Of course, the Coralians followed her here, too, but somehow it didn't matter. Much to the bemusement of everybody they suddenly set up a permanent-seeming 'embassy' in Port Ster—but everybody knew that it was a spying operation. Not that anybody had the faintest idea what or who there was to spy on or what for. But it amused the locals and provided endless material for Coralian jokes.

How many Coralian spies does it take to turn on the light? Three, of course. One to decide to turn it on, one to find the switch, and one to operate it. Why should it be so? Only the Coralians knew, of course. But why else should there be three Coralian spies in Port Ster? They never actually *did* anything. There was nothing for them to do!

Claury never volunteered to provide a solution to the puzzle. It was better that way. She obtained a position in an establishment called the *Diarmead Inn* for the same reasons she had always been able to walk into these kinds of jobs. Something about her

personality; something that people took to. She couldn't figure out what in the world it was, but it must have been there; else it wouldn't have been so easy.

Not that Herrykairn provided many opportunities to do anything else but what she did. There were no high flying educational institutions; no large branches of large organizations of any nature. Unless one was willing to work on the orbiting station, of course; but that wasn't for her.

Claury didn't care. With the small scale of everything came benefits she appreciated. The population of Herrykairn was quirky to the point of anarchy, but had nonetheless worked out a way to build a society that functioned amazingly well. The working conditions at the *Diarmead* were generous, to say the least, at least by the standards of what she had been exposed to. Not a drug or e-stim pusher in sight. Crime was virtually non-existent and whatever there was didn't flourish for long. The work was clean and she chose carefully the customers whom she allowed to take flirtation a step further into a bedroom. Circumstances suited her well and she kept her sexual activities at a low level—more to suit herself than anything else. For, despite her experiences which would have crippled lesser minds, she refused to submit to facile pessimism. A dose of cynicism, maybe. That was necessary for survival. But her life had been given back to her that night in Kiarty and she'd be damned if she was going to waste it wallowing in the abject pessimism and joylessness so many of her co-workers subscribed to; even here, on Herrykairn, where things weren't that bad at all.

If you picked and chose, tourists were good clientele. They came and left, with no emotional component involved. This was just as she wanted it. Her emotions were locked away deep inside her, and she had no intention of letting them out again. All she needed was a kit to check for transmittables, and if the client was clean and didn't look as if he was going to be rough or ask too many questions . . . Why not? Money was money and relief was relief: a purely biological urge which required attention on a semi-regular basis.

She knew it wasn't a very healthy attitude toward things, but what the heck? Compared to the last few years this wasn't too bad at all. It gave her space to breathe. Whatever came later, only time would tell.

Sometime during her stay on Herrykairn the news of a disaster came in. Belatedly, as was the way with

interstellar news, but it came. No names, just generalities. The passenger liner *Berenice*, one of the largest ships ever built, had exploded. Miraculously with only two casualties, the remainder of passengers and crew having been evacuated well before it happened. Two Pilots stayed on board against company orders. One of them was killed, the other severely injured. Later, a panel of experts from the transport industry and the GenSpac corporation determined that the two were responsible for the ship's eventual destruction.

The affair brought back memories of Jack. Of course, she never seriously considered that it might have been him on that ship. That kind of tragedy was reserved for the likes of her.

Memories of Jack came and went. She had excluded him from her world. It was better that way. Thoughts about Jack brought only pain and a sense of an ineffable loss; of him and of her life, so many years ago. They were banished into a hidden compartment of her mind, together with everything that qualified as 'feeling'.

She couldn't forget, of course, but she could try not to remember it too much.



## Chapter 2

"Promise that you'll keep looking for me," Claury said urgently.

"I promise," Jack replied solemnly. He found himself holding onto her tightly, as if that was going to make a difference to anything; as if it was going to stop them from taking her away. The scent of her hair evoked bittersweet memories of their love-making back at his house.

"And if you don't find me," she said, "I'll find you." She looked so sad.

*I will — if it's the last thing I do.*

Claury fished for thin platinum-iridium chain on his neck and pulled out the pendant his father had given him. She studied it for a few seconds. "Don't forget me," she said sadly, and tucked the pendant back under his shirt.

"Never," he whispered. How could he? Ever? No matter what happened.

They kissed again. Then, suddenly, she wrenched

herself loose and ran into the house. Jack looked at her retreating back with foreboding. She stood in the door and blew him a kiss. The door closed with a sick kind of finality.

It wasn't going to happen like they planned. He sensed it; and he was never wrong when he sensed things like that. Never had been and never would be. When Claury took off the following day it was going to be the last time he'd see her for a long, long time. Maybe forever. The thought was agony and made him feel nauseous. She was his girl, damnit! Not entirely the first, but definitely the first real serious one. Also, they shared the experience of being each other's first all-the-way sexual partner. And together they were just so terribly and totally *right*.

And this was going to end?

*I couldn't be true.*

And yet he knew it was.

What a sick universe. What a sick planet. It had taken away his father and now it was taking away his girl. If it hadn't been for his mother . . .

Jack pivoted on his heels and marched home. When he arrived there, Tril Wumford was still discussing things with Clara in dad's old office. Jack thought of joining them; to satisfy his curiosity, if nothing else. But then he changed his mind. He didn't really want to know and it wasn't any of his business. As he turned to the stairs their voices became louder and they appeared at the door. Tril Wumford gave Jack a wave. Jack nodded almost imperceptibly. Wumford had been a friend of sorts, but Jack trusted no Coralian these days. One of them had murdered Will Corwin, and until he was brought to justice everybody was a suspect.

How did he know that it had been a Coralian? Well, he didn't. Not intellectually anyway. It was a feeling like he'd had about Claury and not seeing her again . . . the kind of feeling that made the Academy interested in him as a potential candidate for Pilot training. The murderer had been a Coralian. Period. And, if Gart Finisterre had told Claury the truth, it had something to do with the work the two men had been doing; work about which Jack and Claury knew little, since it was all hush-hush. His mother might know more, but he doubted it.

Tril Wumford excused himself and left. Clara Corwin turned to Jack and he saw that she was close to breaking down again. The self-control was just a mask and his mother was paying a heavy price for presenting a brave face to the world.

Damn it, she needed him. That's why he couldn't just leave; no matter how much he wanted to. He went over to her and hugged her, and though she initially resisted she finally gave in. Big, wracking sobs shook her as she leaned against her son and poured out her pain and grief.



The shuttle lifted off the concrete expanse, taking Claury and most of what was good in his life with it. When it had vanished in the dreary gray clouds Jack turned away, squared his shoulders, and walked the whole long way home. It gave him time to think, but the thoughts were as dismal as the sky and his soul as black as the empty space between the galaxies.

On the next ship came a testing delegation from the Academy on Earth. Three men and two women. It was the last and most impressive group in a sequence that had started a couple of years back when Will Corwin, intrigued by certain of his son's characteristics, had first proposed that Jack might be one of that extremely select group who had what it took to become a Pilot. There followed a bunch of standard preliminary tests, administered by a local GenSpac rep, which appeared to confirm the initial impression. Excitement grew. Having the 'talent' was a big thing. One in ten million people had it: a small neuro-physiological aberration which usually expressed itself as a certain intuitive talent, but whose real importance lay in the fact that it correlated with a certain set of abilities extremely desirable—and even necessary—for Pilots capable of navigating star ships through the fluctuations of A-space. The only group of humans even rarer were those with an even curioser neurological aberration which made them into prime candidates for nav-zombies.

The initial tests were followed by a spate of others, performed by various groups of experts arriving from Earth. Jack's 'talent' was duly confirmed. GenSpac offered him a place at its Academy, subject to one last series of tests.

As he faced the panel he became aware, for maybe the first time of two important and curious facts.

The first was that he wasn't too sure he wanted to be a Pilot at all. He probably would be, but if that's what he really wanted was another question altogether.

It would make him rich, of course! Stinking rich in fact. Pilots, especially those at the top of the Guild Register, commanded contract salaries that were, literally, out of this world. He would also immediately become a part of an elite group of people, looked up to by just about everybody. Not just with admiration, but also with jealousy and envy, of course. It would get him into space, to see exotic places, to explore the human worlds, to see things few were ever privileged to see. All that and more.

It would also take him away from those he loved, of course. Claury especially. Unless she found herself an occupation that would allow her to become a space-farer herself; in which case they could team up. There were a few instances of Pilots and their spouses staying together for decades in this manner.

The second fact Jack became aware of as he faced his last panel was that they were the supplicants.

That was an aspect of the situation which hadn't occurred to him until now; and when it did it came like a physical shock. These people, he realized, weren't here to test him—but to ensure that he agreed to do as they wanted him to do. They wanted him more than he wanted them!

It was at that moment that Jack came to understand something very profound about the complex relationship between Pilots and their employers; about how important the Pilots really were, and how they held it all together. More so maybe than the nav zombies, who were mere processing modules in navcomps. Without Pilots the ships would still take months and years to cross the wastelands between the worlds—instead of days and weeks. Without Pilots ships would still exit into normal space and be light-years off their projected tracks.

Jack considered the group in the light of his new insight and finally saw them as they were: a bunch of anxious nitwits whose jobs might depend on whether they were able to maintain the illusion that they were in control of him, and doing him a favor by being here. He considered playing with them, but then dismissed the thought as unworthy. Besides, it might not be such a good idea to let them know that he knew. He had an inkling that he would need every advantage he could get with these people.

After some—as Jack now understood, purely ritualistic—final tests, they finally offered him a place at the Academy. This was free and all-expenses-paid for by GenSpac. In return they asked for a ten-

year commitment from him: to operate under GenSpac control, to run the routes on the vessels they assigned, to be their man and their man only.

It all sounded very reasonable. Ten years of his for three of the training they'd provided. But Jack knew better. A few hours before the arrival of the delegation Tril Wumford had explained the legal position. Jack was obliged to give three years at the nominal fee to GenSpac. If they wanted more he could bleed them dry with the fees he asked for any commitment after that. Alternatively he could become a free contractor and hire out to the most attractive bidder.

Jack had pondered the options and decided that he preferred the three-year option. Ten years wasn't such a lot when seen in the context of his prospective life span; which was about three hundred years, and maybe more if one considered recent major advances in gerotard research. But any year given away was a lot, because you still only lived once and what was the point of the prospect of three centuries of life if it was snuffed out tomorrow? One of Will Corwin's favorite quotes: ". . . the sole life which a man can lose is that which he is living at the moment . . ."

Jack told them he was going for the three year minimum. They weren't happy, but he told them that he'd had 'legal advice'. That shut them up; maybe because they were beginning to wonder if he might just refuse to come to the Academy at all. Their reaction confirmed what Tril Wumford had told him: that they needed him more than he needed them.

Three months and then he would have to go. Which created other problems. About his mother, for example. Clara Corwin was slowly getting over Will's loss, but Jack wasn't convinced that it meant he could leave her behind. Her Coralian relations were reasonably supportive, but ever since Clara had left the planet, only to return years later in the company of the Earthman, Will Corwin, there had been an invisible barrier between her and the people of Coralia that she had never been able to breach. Neither, Jack knew, had she really wanted to. Something about this world had driven her away. Something else drew her back—and when the Corwins and Finisterres were assigned here she came willingly; only to find that, despite being home, she really wasn't.

Jack wanted his mother to leave with him; to come back to Earth and stay with her husband's relatives.

Maybe build a new life. She was still a young woman who had literally centuries ahead of her. It wasn't easy for Jack to consider his mother with another man, but he knew the reality of things; which was that no grief lasts forever and that life goes on. The bond between his parents had been strong; but eventually time would do its work, and there would be another man—who could never be his father, of course, but maybe one who could provide his mother with a new love.

But Clara Corwin wouldn't go. Period.

Still, she made Jack go.

"I'm all right now," she insisted. "I can look after myself!"

Jack didn't want to leave but he knew he would, and in the end he did.

Arriving on Earth he immediately initiated a search for Claury. Sifting through the extensive databases, he finally located the Finisterres' lawyer and paid him a visit. The man denied that he'd ever even heard of Gart Finisterre and his family. Jack knew that the man was lying, but he also knew that he couldn't prove it and that any attempts at pushing the matter would be futile. Puzzled and angry, with a heavy heart and in despair, he desisted from the search and turned to this training; trying to forget Claury and everything that had been.

A year after he'd left Coralia he received the news that his mother was dead. Suicide.

Guilt- and grief-stricken, Jack considered pulling out of the Academy. What kept him there in the end were a few friends, who'd banded together to help and offer support. The most important one of these was one Cale Perdek, with whom Jack struck up a friendship shortly after entry to the Academy; a friendship destined to survive through some very rough patches. It was hard to say what drew Cale and Jack together. Initially it might have been the fact that in this game they were members of a minority group. Blacks and Caucasians were definitely under-represented in the Pilot stakes. Out of the just over three hundred existing Pilots more than ninety percent were of Asian descent. And only thirteen were women. Not that anybody understood the genetic basis of it all; but the facts were as they were.

Over their years at the Academy Jack and Cale's friendship became something more than just a minority-group thing, earning them the nickname 'the checkered twins'. In moments of self-introspec-

tion, Jack admitted to himself that without that friendship he probably would have dropped out on several occasions, when things looked just too bleak to bear. Cale was the only person who knew just much the three tragedies of Jack's life continued to fester and eat at him—and how much the worst of them—losing Claury, knowing she was out there somewhere—was few one of the things that kept him going.

"You're not a pessimist at all, no matter what you say," Cale told Jack one day.

"No?" Jack grinned crookedly.

Cale shook his head. "No. You're a romantic. That's your real problem."

"What?"

"You *know* she's out there."

"You think I'm still looking?"

"You said you would, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"But nothing!"

Jack stayed at the Academy and eventually graduated. There was a big ceremony in Juno Stadium, just for the five of them. The occasion was one of ostentation and pomp. GenSpac spared no expense to present its latest hotshot Pilots to the world. Five more bodies to guide ships between humanities far-flung worlds. Five more Pilots meant at least two more ships to ply the routes. Two Pilots per ship.

Jack derived no pleasure from the ceremony. He saw his classmates' joy and anticipation, and felt guilty at the yawning emptiness inside him. The people he would have really wanted to be here were either dead or had disappeared from his life in other, no less decisive, ways.

What was the point?

Jack's record from his three years of training guaranteed him a start in the choicest of jobs. Which meant one of the nine big passenger ships: big cruisers with lots of comfort, more Pilots than necessary as a safeguard, and a better pay than his less fortunate classmates. Unfortunately it also separated him from his friend Cale, who was good, but not quite in Jack's class, and had to be content himself with less prestigious freighter assignments. Cale would have to work his way up. Jack knew he'd get better in due course, and would end up near the top of the Guild's register.

Jack would have been happy to team up with Cale to work the freighters, but when they started off, indentured to GenSpac for the next few years, they

had no choice about their contracts. So Jack ended up on the *Berenice*, an assignment that would have given any of his classmates else a permanent hard-on, but which he accepted with only minor enthusiasm. On the *Berenice* Jack quickly demonstrated his mastery of the craft. The ship had a better record than any. A careful analysis of the ship's logs would also have shown that this was mainly due to Jack's efforts. After two years he had advanced to chief Pilot and by the end of his last indentured year he was at the top of the Guild Register: a complicated database, listing Pilots according to a weighted system of number of trips performed, performance-assessments, and diverse other criteria.

The time of indenture passed and Jack decided to stay with the *Berenice*. Half a year later came the day when the *Berenice's* fusion chamber started oscillating wildly. Jack, with his uncanny intuition's sense knew that they were in deep trouble. The captain and just about everybody else didn't believe it. Jack tried what he could to convince them otherwise—without success. Jack then took a step which, if he was wrong, would have meant professional suicide: he invoked a never-used clause in every Pilot's contract which stated that the Pilot could, in matters of safety, overrule all officers of a ship. The clause was in the contracts because of an old competence dispute between the Guild and the companies. The Guild maintained that Pilots were ultimately responsible for the ship's safe passage, and that therefore they should have the right to ask for certain measures to be taken if they thought it necessary and vital.

One such measure was evacuation of a ship by all passengers and crew. Jack, seeing no other way out of what he knew to be a lethal dilemma, invoked the clause and had the ship emptied at the next entry-point into normal space. He and a fellow Pilot, Lee Won, stayed behind. They had an 'idea'; a wild and untried one, but it should have worked.

It didn't. Jack and Lee Won guided the *Berenice* away from the docking station, which was now crammed with passengers and crew. When the ship was at a safe distance they went to work on the *Berenice's* three, basically independent, computer systems. They had worked out that if they could transfer some of the controls from one system to the other, they might just prevent the reactor from cusping.

Too late. It happened before they could catch it,

and blew the *Berenice* to smithereens. Lee Won was fried to a crisp. Jack himself, by some freak circumstance, was shielded from the worst of the blast. A recovery team found his mangled body floating in the wreckage a day or so later, mostly dead, but hanging on by the thinnest of threads—cocooned in a spacesuit which was just about to run out of air, lined with congealed blood. They hauled him to the station and put him into cold-sleep to ferry him to a suitable facility.

By some miracle he survived—but what came out of it wasn't quite what went in. His face, and some other parts of his body, required significant creative reconstruction: months of it. A moulded titanium implant went where his upper jaw used to be, and another one under his cerebellum. His nose was completely reconstructed and re-grown. They implanted a new left eye—which worked better than the right one, zoom-mode and all. Together with his came extensive reconstruction of the chest cavity, including several rib prostheses, along which, in due course, grew new ribs, whereupon the prostheses were removed. His heart had miraculously survived the ordeal; meaning he still had the original. But the spleen was gone and in its place was a new one, grown *in vitro* and subsequently implanted. He also got to keep his liver, though they had to help it to regrow about four fifth of it; the rest was mince. In the same manner they had to regrow over eighty percent of his skin, uncounted muscles and tendons, as well as the crushed disks in his spine. There's wasn't much left of what he'd known. Not even his voice was the same. The cavity of his mouth had acquired quite a different resonance. When he first talked again it sounded to him like the voice came from a complete stranger.

But he was alive—which was something. It also made the tribunal very happy. They had somebody live to blame. They didn't want to know what he told them: that big reactors were dangerous to have around. Well, everybody knew that they were subject to fluctuations, but that's why you had regcomps! Surely, there had to be a non-technical reason why the thing went awry.

Had to be? Jack looked at the faces of the tribunal. And he knew that he didn't have a chance of putting anything across that these morons didn't want to hear. Especially not that majority of 'experts'—most of whom worked for companies that built precisely the kinds of large-scale reactors that

had blown up the *Berenice*—were in total disagreement with him.

They stopped short of recommending criminal proceedings. He was still needed. Every Pilot was needed and the fact was nobody, excepting Lee Won, had been killed. The media initially leaped onto that. For a brief few days, before the carefully seeded counter-rumors were started, Jack was a hero. But that wore off quickly. The hero faded and was replaced by the human-error factor.

They demoted him to the bottom of the heap. He'd have crap-runs for the rest of his life.

Only one bright light shone through this misery of the aftermath: Cale Perdek—who, when brought up as a witness at the hearings, did his best to defend Jack. Not that anybody cared. But it was good to have a friend—at least one—to care; and to visit during the long months at the hospital. Cale had suspended all his contracts until further notice, despite the fact that he, unlike Jack, was on his way up. His three years had finally brought him into passenger service, and the prospects were good.

When the hearings were over Jack pushed his friend back into service.

"I'll live," he declared firmly. "Trust me. You've done more than anybody. Now will you please get on with your life?"

Cale left reluctantly. Jack saw him off with a heavy heart. There went his one and only friend. It seemed like it was always like that: people walking out of his life.



'Crap-runs' was the operative term. But crap-runs were still worth money and Jack's carefully hoarded deposits continued to grow. Besides, he was still one of the best; if not *the* best. The accuracy and speed with which he guided ships between the worlds ensured that bonuses continued to flow in, and that employers vied with each other to get him contracted. But there would be no more passenger liners for Jack Corwin. Those days were over. Low-visibility stuff only, on freighters like the *Daniel-Lewis*, which plied a circuitous route through the maze of human worlds, picking up and depositing its varied cargoes along the way: an unlovely hulk, built with functionality in mind by designers whose sense of symmetry had gotten lost somewhere along their career path; manned with a brinkmanship comple-

ment of one nav-zombie and one Pilot and providing them minimal comforts.

And right now it was heading for a tiny colony on the fringe of human inhabited space.

Herrykairn . . .



# Setting the Standard

How Jack Vance influenced  
one writer's development

*By Tim Stretton*

Readers of the CLS who have read *The Zael Inheritance* from Issue 1 are unlikely to need much persuading that my writing has been strongly influenced by Jack Vance. This article sets out to trace that influence and repay a debt by now some twenty years old, which was incurred when I picked up my first Jack Vance novel, *The Face*, as an impressionable adolescent.

My early voracity as a reader was not matched by any kind of discrimination. Tales of wonder and adventure caught a pre-emptive hold on my imagination from the time I discovered the zoological adventures of Willard Price. Soon I moved on to science fiction which formed the staple of my literary diet, until I discovered Jane Austen at the age of about 16. Paul Rhoads has argued at length in *Cosmopolis* that science fiction is an essentially sterile field, and certainly much of what I read at that age drew more heavily on exuberance than lasting literary merit. At the same time my English teachers were telling me I had 'a mature turn of phrase' and 'exceptional fluency', so clearly my intellectual resources were ready for more demanding material. It was at this stage that *The Face* fell into my hands . . .

Every CLS reader will have their own memories of discovering Jack's work. Even after all these years I need only bring to mind the opening sentences:

Aloysius, with its sister planets Boniface and Cuthbert, is accounted among the first worlds to be colonized from Earth, and the traveler who enjoys the ambience of antiquity will here find much to please him.

Contrary to popular assumption, the first settlers were not religious zealots but members of the Natural Universe Society, who dealt gingerly with the new environment, and built nothing at discord with the landscape.

The NUS is long gone, but its influence

still permeates the system, and almost everywhere will be noted a sedate reverence for native customs and textures.

and I am transported back to that time. What a discovery for an avid but largely undiscerning youth! I was captured not so much by the plot – a good one, for sure, but I had read plenty of good plots before – but by the style. The crispness, the rhythm, the understated wit: suddenly the deficiencies in Doc Smith became apparent.

The library where I lived was not well stocked with Vance works. Indeed, all they could offer me was *Servants of the Wankh*, which for a British adolescent was a title fraught with callow risibility. (US readers may need to consult a British friend here). Nonetheless, my previous favourable impression was confirmed, but it was some time before I could track down any more of Vance's work. Over the next few years the *Demon Princes* and *Dying Earth* books were ensnared; *Lyonesse* and *Araminta Station* were published. It was enough to confirm Vance as my favourite writer, a preference that has remained unshaken ever since.

Before discovering Vance's work, I had often thought 'I'd like to write a story like that'; never before had I thought simply: 'I'd like to write like that.'

It was long before I came to make a serious attempt at writing a novel, and other authors whose style I also admired had also come onto the scene. Jane Austen appealed in many of the same ways as Vance: the economy, the sharpness of the dialogue, if not quite the same breezy pacing. Many of us on the VIE share this fondness for Austen, and I think there's a strong similarity in their writing. I also contracted a partiality for Raymond Chandler, the best by far of his school of fiction. I remember discussing crime fiction with Jack himself; he regarded Chandler as a purveyor of formulaic 'tough guy' stories and to my regret I couldn't convince him otherwise. But at the time I came to write *The Zael Inheritance*, the three writers I most wanted to emulate were Vance, Austen and Chandler. Since the medium I had chosen was science-fictional, Austen and Chandler were fated to take subsidiary roles.

The influence of Austen, I suspect, is almost negligible. If it is present at all, it's in the oblique nature of the attraction between Lamarck and Laura Glyde. In Austen, attraction has to be expressed

indirectly because of the social constraints of the time; in *Zael*, the restraint arises because Lamarck isn't free to act on his impulses. More direct influence is hard to detect, although I remember being pleased with the narrative voice when I wrote:

Stylishness, *chic*, and poise, bewitching and alluring as they were, did not in themselves constitute any warranty as to the character of their mistress.

Chandler had a more overt bearing on the novel. When conceiving *The Zael Inheritance*, I was conscious that I wanted to create something darker in tone and more morally equivocal than Vance. We don't, therefore, get the expected pairing-up happy ending; and largely sympathetic characters act in ways the reader isn't expected, on reflection, to endorse. Lamarck has an underlying, if usually concealed, brutality; and Laura is damaged and manipulative in a way paralleled only by Jean Parlier among Vance's heroines.

None of this should detract from the fact that *The Zael Inheritance* owes a far greater debt to Jack Vance than to any other writer. That doesn't make it a successful novel, of course: the shelves of any bookshop are littered with books that pay their dues to Tolkien and are fit for nothing but pulping: a good example does not make a good pupil. But all writers are also readers, and they're influenced by what they read; better that they should follow the example of an accomplished author than an inept one. *The Zael Inheritance* is by no means fully satisfactory (I have the rejection slips to prove it) but it's infinitely superior to how it would have turned out had I maintained my youthful fidelity to Doc Smith.

Vance's influence on *Zael* is strong – probably too strong, in fact. Attempts to 'write like Vance' are rarely successful, and the register is a narrow one to hit. Missing the target has led to some embarrassing failures, and the only real success I can think of is Matt Hughes, whose enjoyable novels capture much of the feel of the Cugel books. Nonetheless, I set out to write the kind of book I like to read, and inevitably this owed a great deal to Vance. In my defence I will say that I didn't explicitly set out to 'write like Vance': I set out to write like me, and found that not just my taste but my manner had been so strongly influenced by Jack that I had to fight to avoid parody. For the remainder of this article, I'll

look at that influence in more detail, illustrating some elements of Vance's work with which I've been particularly taken, and how I've incorporated them into my own.

I can differentiate two kinds of Vancian influence, for convenience the 'involuntary' and the 'voluntary'. The involuntary influence is primarily stylistic. One early reader of the manuscript said that reading the novel was like listening to me speak; yet, superficially at least, reading the novel is also like reading Vance. This seeming paradox can be resolved only by asserting that I speak the way Vance writes. . . . I have internalised the style to such an extent that it's become my own. This does not, of course, mean that my stylistic command in any way approaches Vance's; the notion is too risible to evoke for any reason other than to demonstrate its absurdity. Neither does it mean that there is necessarily a strong thematic congruence between Vance's work and mine.

The involuntary influence, almost by definition, is one over which I have little or no control. That doesn't hold for the 'voluntary influence', the area where I have deliberately chosen to use plot devices, signatures and motifs which we also find in Vance. I chose to write, unapologetically, a science-fiction novel, and one at the soft-science end of the spectrum. Like many of Vance's novels, the core of the plot is structured around a mystery, and it is the resolution of the mystery, rather than any scientific speculation, which drives the story.

Much of the 'furniture', too, draws on aspects of Vance's work I've enjoyed. The emphasis on eating and drinking (albeit with a much finer palate) is something we frequently find in Vance; the Grand Duchess Anastasia, with its punctilious staff and rigid social attitudes, also owes an explicit debt to Vance. And indeed it is the opening of Chapter Six, where the hotel is introduced, that is the part of the novel which satisfies me the most:

Not simply an icon of design, the Grand Duchess Anastasia embodied in its social attitudes all the reserve and punctilio calculated to lend an air of exclusivity. Expensive – even exorbitant, according to some – as its rates were, mere money was insufficient to command respect at the Anastasia. The parvenu might choose to stay once: he would be unlikely to make a return visit. The appearance of, say, a

lizardskin girl would be unimaginable.

Lamarck was not one to endorse the social philosophy of the Anastasia, nor of such exalted status as to command automatic respect there; nonetheless, as a Pangalactic operative, he was accorded co-operation, if not cordiality, so long as his behaviour remained within reasonable bounds. Visiting dignitaries, not always popular folk, invariably stayed at the Anastasia, and Pangalactic's security services were often of use. Both organisations acknowledged their symbiotic relationship.

Lamarck therefore did not attract the disdain that his everyday status might have warranted when he presented himself at the main reception. In the cool of the early evening he wore his sober dark suit, a reassurance to the management of the hotel that he intended no offences against their stylistic conventions. He stepped across the spacious lobby, tiled in a discreet black and white pattern, and spoke to the Head Clerk.

"Good evening, Mr Festig," he said. "I am here to see Miss Laura Glyde."

Festig, middle-aged and seemingly deliberately, even flagrantly, staid, had a reasonable acquaintance with Lamarck, and considered him largely sound but a trifle indecorous: almost a compliment by his Olympian standards.

"Good evening, Prime Apprehensor Lamarck. I trust you are in good health?" said Festig with formal courtesy.

"So I am, thank you. Your own health is, I hope, as rude as when we last met?" responded Lamarck, who generally found it expedient to introduce no new conversational topic when dealing with the Anastasia's staff.

Festig appeared puzzled by the notion that an employee of the Anastasia might have health of any sort, good or bad, while on duty.

"Thank you for your concern," he said, evading the invitation to reveal even such mild personal information as the state of his health. "I will inform Miss Glyde that you are here, Prime Apprehensor."

The dialogue which follows between the investigator Lamarck and the polished clerk Festig is also in the Vancian manner, if lacking some of the sparkle:

"I should not, of course, discuss the affairs of clients. I speak, of course, in a purely personal capacity, and only out of a desire to co-operate with the planetary security services."

"I understand. Please continue on those terms," said Lamarck with the beginnings of impatience.

"Miss Laura Glyde is at home in the society of the Grand Duchess Anastasia," pronounced Festig in even and well-modulated tones. He then fell silent.

After a pause, Lamarck said, "Yes? I do not doubt the truth of your statement: but a greater degree of insight, even imagination, might be helpful."

"If there is a lack of imagination, Prime Apprehensor, it is on your part. It is not everyone who can merge with the customs of this hotel. The Grand Duchess Anastasia is a family, and an exclusive one. In saying that Miss Glyde is a part of this family, I say far more than might be conveyed in many more ill-chosen words," said Festig with an air of ineffable superiority.

"While on a philosophical level there is much in what you say," replied Lamarck, "the Pangalactic officer employs less refined analysis in his investigations. He is eager to know: does an individual act suspiciously? does she receive visitors? are any other aspects of her conduct noteworthy?"

"The world of the Pangalactic operative would appear to be a glut of crude sensation and base suspicion. While Pangalactic fulfils a valuable social function, I am not sure I would care to be acquainted with its procedures.

"In response to your specific queries: I have never 'suspected' Miss Glyde of ill-breeding, or even of less heinous taints such as criminality; you are, to my knowledge, the first visitor she has received; and it is not the place of a Head Clerk to regard a client's behaviour as noteworthy."

Vance's dialogues with functionaries are peerless and characteristic. His *oeuvre* is studded with them, and here is just one superlative example which shows how it should be done. I don't think it could be bettered:

The porters moved swiftly around the room, adjusting the placement of furniture, wiping surfaces with their scented cloths, then departed, swiftly and quietly as if they had merged into the shadows. The chief porter said: "Sir, the valet will attend you at once to assist with your wardrobe. The water is already drawn for your bath." He bowed and prepared to leave.

"One moment," said Gersen. "Is there a key to the door?"

The chief porter smiled benignly. "Sir, you need not fear intrusion at Penwipers."

"Possibly not. But, for instance, suppose I were a jewel merchant carrying a parcel of gems, and a thief wished to rob me. He need merely saunter to my room, open the door and divest me of my wealth."

The chief porter, still smiling, shook his head. "Sir, such a terrible thing could never happen here. It would simply not be tolerated. Your valuables are quite safe."

"I don't carry any valuables," said Gersen. "I merely suggested a possibility."

"The inconceivable, sir, is rarely possible."

"I am totally reassured," said Gersen. "Thank you."

"Thank you, sir." He drew back as Gersen extended his hand. "The staff is adequately paid, sir. We prefer to accept no gratuities." He inclined his head crisply and departed.

—*The Book of Dreams*, Chapter 3

I always enjoyed, too, the dialogues between Vance's often somewhat naïve heroes and the sophisticated women with whom they came into contact. The relationship between Lamarck and Laura was designed to contain similar elements. Throughout the novel Lamarck is run ragged not just by Laura but Voorhies and Nina as well.

Lamarck was uncertain whether Laura would flare up or cry at this extension of his enquiries. Inevitably she did neither. With a smiling shake of her head – which Lamarck noticed made her hair swing most becomingly – she said:

"Do you never cease your investigations, Prime Apprehensor? In truth I am hardly disposed for further questioning tonight. Prime Apprehensor Narosyn was polite enough, but he lacked your capacity for irony."

Lamarck laughed. "There you see the difference between the smarse and the snoop. Be careful with Narosyn, though: he is persistent and more subtle than he appears."

The auto-tram arrived and they stepped aboard.

"I am surprised," said Laura, "that you give me advice on how to deal with one of your colleagues. I had expected to have to engage an attorney to learn such information."

"You have all the free advice I am going to give you," said Lamarck. "From a purely selfish viewpoint, you are more use to me at liberty than in the Judiciar's Suite."

Laura gave Lamarck a sideways look. "I am glad that my liberty is so important to you."

"Your freedom will allow our investigations to proceed with greater despatch," said Lamarck, skating around her irony. "You should not read my interest in it as an endorsement of your claim."

Soon after, the auto-tram arrived at the Anastasia. Laura stepped from the vehicle onto the gravel before the hotel.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Lamarck asked as she turned to go.

Laura raised her eyebrows quizzically. "Of course. I'm afraid this evening has displaced my manners. Thank you for looking after me tonight, Geir; I know I haven't made things any easier for you."

"I was thinking of my jacket," said Lamarck, indicating the garment around Laura's slender figure. "It contains, among other things, my Pangalactic identification."

Laura slipped neatly out of the jacket. "Thank you for that as well," she said softly. "Goodnight, Geir."

In *Maske: Thaery* Jubal Droad pays his addresses to Sune Mircea and also finds himself out of his depth:

"I am to undertake a dangerous mission. I would like to discuss it with you but I have been warned to discretion."

"Exciting! So you have become one of D3's secret agents?"

"D3? I work from D3 as an inspector."

"You need not be coy. D3 is the secret intelligence bureau. Don't you work under Eyvant Dasduke? How romantic. You are a lucky man! D3 agents work as they wish, and draw salary in hundred-toldeck packets!"

"I have not quite advanced to that level. I draw my salary in one very slight packet of single-toldeck notes."

"The Nobilissimus is notoriously penurious—both with public funds and his own. Never reveal that I so informed you!"

"Never. You can trust me—with anything."

Sune drank half the goblet and set it back on the table. "I must go. Please call me a hack."

"I will see you home."

Sune touched his hand with her fingers; nervous vibrations coursed up Jubal's arm. "Remember that I am a Mircea. My father would become excited to see me with a person such as yourself."

"And what of you? Are you embarrassed because I am a Glint?"

Sune thought a moment. "Let me be frank. Here I am not embarrassed. I enjoy your company. I consider you a remarkable man, and it is not your fault that you were born in Glentlin. But elsewhere, with my family and friends, I am not strong enough to cope with the pressure."

"Then I may see you again?"

"Yes. But we must be discreet."

Jubal leaned forward, took her two hands in his. "Could I dare to hope that you think kindly of me?"

Sune gently disengaged his grasp. "Here is a hack; call it to the curb."

Jubal signaled the hack and with thumping heart helped her into the compartment. She gave him her hand. "Goodnight, Jubal Droad."

"When will I see you again?"

"Telephone at my home. Announce yourself as Aladar Szantho. And tell no one that we are friends or everything will be spoiled."

"I will do as you say."

The hack rolled off up the boulevard. The rear lamp dwindled and vanished. Jubal turned away and set off along the boulevard toward his own lodgings.

—*Maske: Thaery*, Chapter 8

The amateur writer who deliberately sets his work alongside Vance's is unlikely to shine in comparison. For me Vance's best work represents a touchstone and an aspiration, and this article represents in part a measure of how far that aspiration remains from fulfillment. *The Zael Inheritance* would never have been written without the work of Jack Vance; but the work that has inspired it also casts a mighty shadow. It remains an apprentice piece, with some nice touches and some serious flaws. I enjoyed writing it, and I hope you've enjoyed reading it; but my best advice to you now is to go off and re-read *The Book of Dreams* – or maybe *Marune* – or then again, *Emphyrio* . . .



# Materia Magica

by *Jeremy Cavaterra*

The Jingui tyro swept a disconsolate eye over the assortment on the tabletop. "It seems a paltry sum for so rich a collection . . ."

"Much of which I won't be able to sell," said Gogwyl drily. "Your late master, it seems, collected those artifacts dear to his heart, rather than to the market. Oh, there are several viable items: these jade mignonettes will fetch a few silvers, as will the tortoiseshell poison-tester. The books and scrolls, I'm afraid, are worth less than their own parchment, and of course the rock collection is of no value whatsoever."

"Rock collection indeed!" huffed the young Jingui. "Those are prehistoric eoliths! Their value is beyond calculation."

Gogwyl appeared to stifle a yawn. His voice took on a pedantic nasality. "Their only value, other than sentimental, is that which someone will pay for them—conceivably an amateur mineralogist or petrophile, and one fairly new to the hobby."

"Hmpf!" snorted the Jingui, with that sulking petulance typical of his tribe. "What of this fine bronze bell, an object of rare enchantment? It rings with a sweet clear tone, despite that it lacks a tongue!"

"A charming trinket, yes—most curious. Very well, here then is my best and last offer: leave the lot of it here and walk out with gold in your pocket—ten pieces' worth of it. That's being generous."

"Ten gold pieces for my master's fabulous collection! The legacy of his lifetime!"

The Jingui's heat thawed none of Gogwyl's frosty reserve. "Your master is dead. If you so cherish his possessions, they are yours to keep. They are obviously worth more to you as mementos than as gold."

The Jingui grew silent, considering this new angle of reasoning. Gogwyl's keen-edged pragmatism had a way of cutting through to the point. "Well . . ."



Gogwyl spent the afternoon examining his spoils. Some items he discarded at once, but the rest—the majority of them—he loaded into a carton and car-

ried down a gloomy staircase to his workroom, a dusty cellar crowded with bookcases and rummage racks. He unpacked the carton and arranged the contents neatly on his worktable. Then he pulled up a stool under him, donned his spectacles and subjected each item to the unhurried consideration of the expert curiomonger. The cataloguing process was tedious, and would occupy him late into the night.

Gogwyl worked methodically and patiently, marking notations in a ledger and occasionally murmuring appreciatively. The hour grew late; from the shop above came the sound of heavy, irregular footsteps.

Gogwyl called out sharply, "Sneath! Is that you up there?"

"Yes, milord," came a slow, adenoidal reply. The workroom door at the top of the stairs scraped open; a half-human face appeared, all wens and tusk-like teeth.

"Sneath, set aside whatever dissipation occupies you and make yourself useful. Bring tea and oil for the lamps. You've forgotten again and I'm going blind in this dungeon."

The face bowed low. "At once, milord."

The tea was tepid, but Gogwyl decided it was best for his blood to overlook the fact. Sneath could handle only so many reprimands at a time. "Poor, pathetic creature," said Gogwyl in a silky voice. "Who could think me heartless, knowing that I had taken in such a shambling halfwit for a famulus, when many more deserving applicants lack posts in the world?"

Sneath, hobbling about the room replenishing the oil lamps, stood still and cocked his misshapen head to the side. "Heartless, milord?"

"Was that not how Magula described me? A 'heartless skinflint'? After I paid him good silver for his useless pentalpha?"

Sneath said delicately, "I believe Sir Magula's exact terminology was 'cheeseparating muckworm', milord."

"And he is an impudent little cockalorum!"

"Was, milord. Sir Magula went early to his grave a month hence, if milord recalls."

"I recall with pleasure! What you call early I call too late!"

"His widow was by this morning, milord."

"Well, well," said Gogwyl with new annoyance, "was she now?"

"Yes, milord. Very early."

"And what did she want?"

"She placed sharp demands, milord, to the effect that I rouse you from your bed. She was quite shrill on the point, but of course I refused to give in to her."

"That was wise of you, Sneath."

"Yes, milord. She wished to know what sort of shirking slugabed would be asleep at such an hour. I told her, 'Madame, I assure you that my master is no irresponsible idler. While his habits may outwardly resemble faineance, he is in fact a lifelong lychno-bite, and toils most of the night. If you will kindly return in the afternoon, I am sure that he will graciously permit you an audience.'"

"Sure of that, were you?" grumbled Gogwyl.

Sneath went on. "Madame refused. She insisted that milord must see it as his moral obligation to pay her fair recompense for what she claimed he had stolen from her late husband."

"Stolen!" barked Gogwyl. "My dealings with Magula were scrupulously lawful; I paid him well above the worth of his shoddy merchandise! His widow's ignorance of the fact is most likely willful; Magula probably wrenched away every groat before reaching his doorstep that evening."

Sneath cleared his throat: an unpleasant velar noise. "Lady Magula was not referring to the pent-alpha, milord, but rather to the formula for Sabbat Broth devised by her late husband."

"Oh, that. Lady Magula is a shrew with a pig's head." Gogwyl's face grew hot and swollen. "Looking after her husband's affairs, is she? She had better start at the tavern. Magula never wrote down his formula; he recited it in one of his bibulous reveries. Under such circumstances I consider his claim to the recipe dubious; I owe nothing to her. And by the four eyes of Memne, show me a widow in this town who needs the money! Flush to their wimples in it, the lot of them! Sucking the fruits of their dead husbands' hard work!" A final injustice struck him; he smote the tabletop. "And more to the point, what makes Lady Magula think that I have sold so much as a drop of Sabbat Broth?"

To subdue the tide of his master's rage, Sneath cast a sanguine eye over the worktable. "I see that milord dealt profitably with the Jingui," he observed with a jagged grin.

Gogwyl straightened his spectacles. "Yes indeed, if I may say so myself. Some exceedingly rare manuscripts and fine apparata. The Jingui's master knew

his trade, to be sure, though he apparently kept his apprentice in the dark."

Sneath's ruse proved effective; Gogwyl abandoned his fury for a mood of didactic gloating.

"Now then, look at this." He plucked an object from the miscellany and held it up to the light. "What do you see here, Sneath?"

Sneath squinted and reached forward in curiosity; Gogwyl drew back and slapped his knuckles sharply. "I bade you look at it!" he snapped, "or does one look with his hands?"

Sneath shuddered apologetically, rubbing his hand. "Forgive me, milord."

"Well, then—what do you see?"

"A rock, milord."

"Ha!" snickered Gogwyl. "You're as stupid as the Jingui. Seven years my famulus and still as numb to lume† as the day you were born!" He shook his head ruefully.

Sneath drew his warty brows together. "If it is not a rock, milord, then it is indistinguishable from one."

"So is your brain, Sneath. No, there's far more here than meets the eye . . . This 'rock' is in fact a beloculus of the Venarbi period, forged by a pyromancer of considerable virtuosity. It has lost none of its original potency. It renders the person who holds it invisible, but only on the battlefield. Kingdoms were won by this 'rock' in its day."

Sneath clapped his hands together appreciatively. "Most fascinating, milord!"

"Yes, yes, and worth a hundred times its weight in gold . . . What of this here? I suppose you take it for a bell?"

"Yes, milord, and a very pretty one, made of pewter."

"Well, at least you identified the metal correctly," grumbled Gogwyl. "That beetleheaded Jingui thought it was bronze! Still—wrong. On this one, however, I must forgive you; the lume is cleverly concealed by an occulting spell. Whoever fashioned this item wished its true purpose to be well disguised."

"And what is its true purpose, milord?"

"Your questions are tiresomely predictable,

† Lume: anything invested with magic, be it inanimate object, living organism or geographical area, exudes an aura imperceptible except to supernatural beings and magicians or scholars of advanced perceptive faculties. Lume may be measured by certain types of mechanical gauges, and varies in both radiance and intensity according to its source magic. It may be suppressed or concealed altogether by means of stifling spells, so that things thus doubly enchanted are made to appear mundane.

Sneath,” sneered Gogwyl. “If you must know, the bell is an accessway into the demon-world Casratrosque. Our Jingu’s late master, whoever he was, seems to have been interested in the field of necromantics . . . which perhaps explains his untimely death. No matter; I am glad that he did not leave us the activating cantrip.”

Sneath forced a raucous laugh. “Oh, for that matter, I too am glad, milord!”

“Enough, Sneath,” sighed Gogwyl with a wave of his hand. “I have much work to do; leave me now. If you hunger, some scraps remain from my evening meal; look for them in the larder.”

Sneath bowed his thanks and obediently shuffled away, dragging himself laboriously up the stairs.

Gogwyl returned his attention to the array of arcana. The prospect it represented cheered his spirits. He personally knew a potential buyer for almost every article. That witch from Ubelay who had been pestering him for a hattock—surely the handsome specimen he now owned, fashioned of black scorpion carapaces, would answer her needs superfluously . . . And the archimage Tillimit, a scholar of talismania—he would lay claim to the various amulets, aglae, abraçes and ananisaptas, which by themselves would command a fortune.

But the true gem of the horde, Gogwyl had realized immediately, lay among the manuscripts. The *Enchiridion* of Aszmogatz, in the author’s own hand. It was more than a legend; the work, left unfinished by the great mage upon his mysterious demise, had been lost after a series of heroics which in themselves were the stuff of myth. Indeed, that the manuscript’s tortuous fate found its terminus in Gogwyl’s hands made them tremble. No complete copies of the work were known to be extant; magicians who possessed fragments guarded them jealously. The find was opportune beyond Gogwyl’s grandest ambitions, the climax of his career. It would bring him glory; he must immediately impress a workforce of copyists and begin to collect orders in advance. In his shrewd mind’s eye he envisioned three different editions: one abridged for apprentices and dilettantes; one complete and divided into volumes, with his own annotations and commentary; and a beautiful library edition with vellum pages, richly illuminated and within the means of only the most affluent of bibliophiles.

A violent noise from the shop broke his trance. Someone was pounding on the front door. He heard

Sneath’s startled squawk, a brief muffled altercation. The door slammed shut.

Gogwyl hissed an expletive and thundered upstairs. He found Sneath in the process of bolting the door.

“Who in the name of Sabbin’s Dragon was that?”

Sneath looked shaken. “The Lady Magula, milord!”

“What! Is she drunk?”

“I think not, milord. She says that owing to your nocturnal habits she came expecting to find you at your most bright-eyed at this—er—unconventional hour. Naturally I—”

“By the old gods, the cheek! Has she left?”

In answer there came a second assault on the door, accompanied by a stream of strident imprecations.

Sneath hesitated at the door. “Master, shall I tell her—”

“No! Let the gorgon pound all night, until she bloodies her fists or else defaces the shop. In either case I’ll see her clapped into the stocks tomorrow.”

“Very well, milord. I shall—”

“No, wait—on second thought, let her in.”

Sneath’s barbed ears twitched in confusion. “Milord?”

“Let her in, Sneath! I’ve changed my mind.”

No sooner had Sneath unbolted the door that it burst open and admitted Lady Magula with a cyclonic force. She stood panting and glowering, her breast heaving with truly magnificent wrath. “It has come to my notice,” she declared in rolling tones, “that you have been selling my husband’s formulae without informing me.”

“Your use of the plural, madam, is erroneous,” Gogwyl said punctiliously. “I have been selling only one formula, to which your late husband had no legitimate claim. There was no need to inform you.”

“I might have expected you to evade the issue with glib technicalities! If you are unwilling to discuss the matter of recompense, I shall be forced to take it up with the Count-Warden!”

Gogwyl’s eyebrows arched high. “Oh, indeed? You mean to say my third cousin, the Count-Warden? And what do you think he will say when he realizes that your claim against me represents but a fraction of the total debts left unpaid by your late husband, including his own funeral expenses and—*ahem*—shall we say, arrears toward less reputable affairs?”

Was Lady Magula struck speechless, or was she preparing a stronger retort? It no longer mattered to

Gogwyl, who had tired of the discussion. Sneath, standing by the door, bade the widow a gesture of genteel solicitation. Without another word she turned sharply on her heel and marched from the premises. Gogwyl, a smile of grim satisfaction cutting across his face, returned to his workroom.

By degrees he returned to his former mood, but with difficulty. It annoyed him to admit that the encounter with Lady Magula had flustered him. And yet he assured himself that he held the upper hand. That bit about the Count-Warden being his third cousin had been a clever touch. He chuckled softly.

There was a soft tap on the door.

"What is it, Sneath?"

"Do you require anything, milord?"

"No, Sneath. You may retire."

"Thank you, milord . . . good night."

For an hour Gogwyl concerned himself with setting down some preliminary annotations and marginalia to the *Enchiridion*. It occurred to him that writing a proper introduction to the work would not be audacious, considering that he had rediscovered it. He began with some vagrant thoughts on the subject; he would arrange them in order later.

The *Enchiridion* confirms that Aszmogatz was probably the last first-class sorcerer in the tradition of Gazaal, Ornroyt the Elder, Balpha and other great spellbinders of the last epoch. Certainly in his own field of logomancy he was the innovator peerless, bringing to it a profundity hitherto unknown and since unexcelled.

Much of the work, in fact, was taken up with the subject of spell-binding. Aszmogatz's own preface read much like a concise history of thaumaturgy. There were fragments of his own magic here and there; they seemed to radiate from the pages with palpable force. By such standards today's sorcerers were an emasculated lot, lacking thrust and brilliance; they had lost the knack for binding spells of true cogency. In Gogwyl's opinion nothing significant had been added to the repertoire in a century. And yet their widows came whining about insufficient compensation!

He set down his stylus and read further. On the second page of the second chapter his sharp eye found an error, and one whose peculiarity more perplexed than annoyed him: the glyph 'qym' had been

reversed, resulting in a nonsensical symbol. It ended the last strophe of a ballad which told the story of Amaranth, a mythical princess named after the flower that never withers or fades . . . The poem was composed in that language known as Old Ithrian, using a florid and archaic style. It may or may not have been original; Aszmogatz might have merely transcribed it from another source. But why the reversed glyph? Surely such a mistake could not be explained by haste or carelessness; to the contrary, it would require conscious effort, like putting one's trousers on backwards. Impossible to reconcile such an error with the great and meticulous Aszmogatz!

Gogwyl gave an irritable click of his tongue. He preferred his masterpieces perfect. Compulsively he turned pages, scanning for further errata. Sure enough, he fell upon another such inverted glyph early in the next chapter. And then another—and another! Had he missed any before? He turned back the pages, now certain that they littered the manuscript. It was like a pestilent infestation: the few he had spotted implied hidden thousands. He understood the pattern: on the third page of the third chapter, the fourth page of the fourth, and so on. In his orderly mind he began to arrange the glyphs in sequence as he found them. *Qym, Rez, Tuôr, Nhai, Elend, Byst, Garan, Ul* . . . Suddenly he stopped, his parched mouth hanging open. Seizing his stylus, he began to transcribe the symbols correctly.

*Qym reztuôr nhai elend byst garanûl.*

*From the veins of the earth, spill forth.*

Gogwyl's skin tingled faintly. It must be a joke, a misinterpretation, a preposterous coincidence! Now his fingers moved hesitantly as they turned the pages, but more backward glyphs appeared and dashed his doubts. *From the veins of the earth spill forth, from the deep places under mountains I summon thee and enjoin thee to my bidding* . . . The entire book concealed a secret invocation. Gogwyl nodded slowly to himself, awed by the discovery. So Aszmogatz's last treatise had been also his last attempt at spell-binding.

His mind ablaze, Gogwyl jumped from his stool and went to scan his bookcases. On the uppermost shelf he found Zwerling's *Delectus of Latter-Day Spellbinders*. Straining on the tips of his toes he retrieved the heavy, dust-laden tome and brought it back to his worktable in a coughing fit.

Aszmogatz was born in Ithros and lived between three hundred fifty and four hundred years, according to Zwerling. "His life surpassed even his own magic in its miraculous and uncanny character. His later apprentices could not agree upon the date of his death; perhaps it occurred several times . . ."

A faint metallic sound made Gogwyl look up sharply. High among the shelved books, a faint glint shone through the gap he had lately cleared. Gogwyl watched dumbly as a small object dropped off the edge of the shelf, rolled across the floor, struck his toe, spun itself flat.

He sat motionless, staring down. After the sudden noise the house kept a strained and unnatural silence, as if it held its breath. Slowly he bent and picked up the object: it was a gold coin!

Decidedly peculiar . . . how could such a thing have been thus misplaced? It must have slipped into the book during his last perusal, and fallen out onto the shelf . . .

His throat felt dry and his mouth tasted of dust. He needed water. It was perhaps a good time to adjourn for the night. He would return to Aszmogatz tomorrow with fresh eyes.

As he rose, he noticed a few more gold coins scattered on the rug beneath his worktable. They seemed to form a trail which approached behind his stool, then veered away. He muttered a curse. Sneath undoubtedly had a hole in his pocket or purse. The gold amounted to almost his entire month's wages! Well, thought Gogwyl, he shall learn the price of carelessness. He gathered the coins and went upstairs to put them in the shop's strongbox. He would say nothing of the matter to Sneath—let him speculate and ponder and puzzle over it; the exercise might do that thick brain of his some good.

Gogwyl withdrew the iron strongbox from behind the shopcounter. Why did it feel so heavy? The day's business had been scant. He must be very tired; yes, it was late. With a grunt he set the strongbox on the counter. He brought out his key and unlocked it.

The lid sprang open with a force that made him gasp; at first he did not understand what was happening. Then he realized that the strongbox was vomiting gold coins. A great avalanche of them burst forth; airborne coins struck his face and he shielded himself with his hands. It was as if he had disturbed a hive of glittering, golden bees—out they swarmed by the thousands. Only when he stood knee-deep in

them did they abate.

For several minutes Gogwyl remained still. "Well," he said to himself, "that was rather odd."

It took him another minute before the realization struck him. Perhaps, he thought, he was getting too old to keep such late hours. It was Aszmogatz's spell—in transcribing it he had unwittingly activated it. For centuries the magic had lain dormant, frozen in backward-written glyphs. Now its significance became clear to him: *From the veins of the earth spill forth, from the deep places under mountains I summon thee and enjoin thee to my bidding.* An evocation to gold itself!

A source of inexhaustible wealth—and now it belonged to Gogwyl. He must reconsider his plans for the *Enchiridion*. Certainly he must never reveal the discovery of the spell. With the glyphs printed correctly they would go unnoticed; nobody would think to connect them together from chapter to chapter in a sequence as he had done.

He pulled his feet from the mountain of gold. He must take stock of his new fortune and conceal it safely. Until he knew for certain that it was limitless he must guard it from the inquisitive Sneath. But where? Sneath's duties took him to every nook and cranny of the house and shop. For the nonce he would hide it in his workroom, and lock the door. Tomorrow he would have the blacksmith forge a much larger strongbox, a trunk of iron.

Where to start? The shop floor was covered with gold—from where it heaped up around him it had spilled out in every direction, a yellow sea glinting softly in the lamplight. Gogwyl dared not entertain the speculation that he might be dreaming; the consequences would be far too bitter. A ponderous task lay ahead of him, to carry so much gold downstairs—but joyously ponderous! There was a shovel in the workroom—and a few old sacks. He would start with that. Then, if—

*Thump!*

Gogwyl gave a start, tense as a trapped animal. His ears strained painfully. Someone was at the front door.

*Thump! Thump! Thump-thump-thump!*

He narrowed his eyes and grimaced at the door. It occurred to him for the first time that Lady Magula might be factually mad. What else could explain her conduct?

*She'll have not one coin of it!* He told himself vehemently as he marched toward the door. *If there were*

*oceans of it and more, she — shall — have — not — one —  
coin — of — it!*

He jerked loose the bolt, threw open the barricade, flung the door wide.

“Madam, I—”

He gave a startled croak and sank on weak knees. Something other than Lady Magula stood in the doorway. It was a great deal larger and was made of gold. It resembled a human carcass with rolls of coins in the place of ribs and limbs. Tiny points of light glittered within its dark eye-sockets, like diamonds. The mammona took a step forward, producing a heavy jingle against the threshold.

Gogwyl’s vision swam. He recoiled, stumbled backwards on numb legs. Skeletal hands wrought from gold descended toward him. Were they real? Or the figments of some horrid waking dream turned nightmare? He had no way of knowing, even as they closed around his throat.

