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# The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

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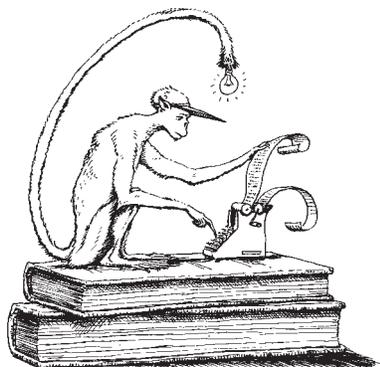
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## Contents

Coralia  
Chapters 5–7  
by *Till Noever*  
Page 2



Letters  
from *discerning readers*  
Page 20



## Editorial

Gentle Readers.

Welcome to *CLS* 15. Some potential contributors haven't, so it's a tad thin: just some more of *Coralia*, as well as letters from Malcolm Bowers and Tim Stretton.

I'm glad to hear Tim has started on another novel, and if that means no more for us for a while then so be it. Embarking on a novel-length piece of writing is a daunting task. There is no sure-fire recipe to get one over the first flutters. No matter how much mental preparation or research has gone into it—and no matter how often one has gone through the process—the first few pages are never easy, and there's no promise that the rest are going to be easier. From *planning* to write something of this magnitude—no matter how seriously, diligently, or methodically it is done—to actually sitting down and *doing* it is a prodigious step. It becomes less difficult with repetition, but the daunting aspects of the task never quite disappear. The blank page—for the painter: the blank canvas; the sculptor: an unhewn block of stone or an amorphous blob of clay—dares us to fill it with structure, meaning, content. The words in our heads are never those we end up writing down: sometimes not even remotely so; the story we had conceived turns out to be impractical or inadequate; the characters take on lives of their own and challenge our, usually simplistic, preconceptions about who they are, and what they can and will do. At every turn, artistic creativity and word- and story-engineering struggle to come to grips with each other. That out of this complex interaction there should emerge something coherent, and even enjoyable!—like, in sticking with Tim, *The Zael Inheritance*—continues to astonish me.

Till Noever



# Coralia

by Till Noever

## Chapter 5

Refreshed from the shower Jack set off to find the *Diarmead Inn*. It wasn't hard to locate. Nothing could be hard to find in this town, which, despite its small size, was the largest human settlement on Herrykairn, as well as the seat of the planetary government—as much as there was of it—and all connected agencies. An indicator, Jack thought, that the planet might be spared the ravages invariably inflicted on those worlds whose ecosystems happened to match too closely to that of Earth. Herrykairn's natural attractions brought in tens of thousands of visitors every year. But it had no minerals that couldn't be mined more effectively on interplanetary debris. Its native proteins were completely unsuited to human consumption. These two factors probably saved it from suffering the dire fate of, say, Fargo 5—or Earth, for that matter.

Herrykairn's autochthons, such as there were, were equally safe. The planet, despite the two tiny human enclaves, effectively still belonged to them. Port Ster and the only other settlement, Port Herry, were ecological islands in an alien sea. Herrykairn provided a hospitable climate, but no other biological support, to terrestrial organisms. For all intents and purposes it was sterile and would remain that way; impervious to the encroachment of imported organisms, which found no fertile areas to spread into beyond the boundaries of the carefully tended fields of imported soil, in which grew terrestrial and other human-consumable crops.

An all-out effort to adapt Herrykairn to earth-like organisms could, of course, be made, and would probably eventually be successful. But it wouldn't happen. The economics weren't right. There were too many other worlds much more amenable to adaptation—or 'terraforming', as it was commonly called: a nice, cosy euphemism, which hid the brutality of what really went on when the native flora and fauna was wiped out, and replaced by organisms more useful to humans. Jack detested the blithe disregard involved in terraforming. He had no objection to doing it to barren worlds. The

problem was that nobody bothered with those. Planets existed in plentiful supply and people usually wanted those which had their native life-forms. At least they did until men came along.

Herrykairn, by sheer good fortune—a fortune which would probably never be appreciated by its native life forms, none of them being sufficiently sentient to be capable of such reflections—was to be spared. Its tourist attractions were more valuable than its industrial prospects. Those who chose to live and work here carefully guarded it, and fleeced the tourists to their hearts' content.

As Jack walked along the streets of Port Ster, he considered the people drifting past, usually on foot, but also on bicycles, and, occasionally, in a flitzer. But powered vehicles were rare. Unless they had a commercial use, the inhabitants appeared, sensibly, disinclined to spend their jins on the purchase of such things.

Notable also was the apparent lack of paranoia among the inhabitants. The doors of many houses, often consisting of upper and lower halves which could be opened independently, stood wide open to admit the mild night air. The residents went about their business inside, often in plain view of the passersby. An easy lifestyle, which Jack envied them.

The *Diarmead Inn* loomed before him, announcing its presence with a sign painted with myriad tiny multi-colored lights. The name arced above a representation of a curled-up dragon-like creature, with a long, looping tail, huge half-folded bat-wings, and a head reminiscent of a tiger.

There had been Diarmeads once, but they had suffered the same fate on Fargo the tiger had suffered on Earth: extinction. Jack wondered how a saloon on Herrykairn had acquired the symbol and the name.

The place was packed. Tourists, from the look of it: a lot of them, probably from the *Lister Diamond* again. The town's hotels had to be full to capacity. It was just as well that Gastel Mobil had pointed Jack at *Badecker's Rest*. He might have had problems in the other places.

The crowds spilled out on to a wide, wooden-planked veranda, where a haphazard arrangement of tables was fully occupied. Beyond them loomed a tall archway which led into the main bar and lounge area. Here, too, tables were set up without apparent system. The ceiling was held up by an array of dark-brown columns with a wooden appearance and texture. At the top these connected to a matrix of crossed black beams. The base of

each column was surrounded by a ringed table at a height suitable for people standing or perched on tall bar-stools. Beyond, against the back wall, was a long bar where at least a dozen attendants served the crowd with everything from what was advertised as 'genuine Scotch Whiskey' to the locally produced sour beer. To Jack's left a flight of steps lead up to the second level where, he suspected, one would find the gambling rooms.

And the prostitutes?—or 'professionals', as his driver had so delicately put it? Jack considered the crowds. Waiters and waitresses, distinguishable by their stylish red-top-blue-bottom uniforms, which were the same as the bartenders' and cut to a low cleavage for men and women alike, wove through the crowd, serving the tables. Some of them were sitting down, usually in company of only one other person, sometimes of the same, but usually of the opposite, sex—conversing: some distant; some animated; some stiffly; some leaning forward into close proximity. Touching maybe.

As Jack watched, one male-male couple arose and moved off through the crowd toward the exit. It wasn't done on the premises then. The escort went back to the solicitor's hotel.

Jack became conscious of background music emerging from hidden speakers. It was loud enough to be audible and help to set the mood it was meant to set, but not too loud to make conversation impractical. The ambient smell was that universal reek which adhered to any establishment of this kind, no matter where it was: a blend of liquor fumes, smoke, and the exudations of human bodies in varying states of cleanliness, excitement, and intoxication.

Jack stood there for a while, just taking it in. If Gastel Mobil had anything but the smallest of shares in this place he was a wealthy man. What was he doing driving around in a cab?

Looking to his right along the street Jack noticed, not far off, another similar establishment; also apparently well frequented. The full scope of the income derived from tourism in this town slowly dawned on him.

His sense told him that there were eyes on him. Not uncomfortably so, but the pressure of observation was palpable nonetheless. He looked around casually but nobody met his gaze. No surprise here. In his Pilot's uniform he stood out like a beacon. Surely, a lot of eyes were on him. He remembered the feeling only too well.

It had often been that way in his off-hours, on the *Berenice*, when the bridge crew had to submit to the obligatory public relations exercises; like dining with the passengers and particularly the first-class ones; parading around the observation lounge; showing the human aspect of the flag, as it were. Depending on their dispositions, Pilots loved or loathed it—and sometimes both.

Jack sighed, dismissed the pressure as irrelevant, and, carefully pushing his way through the bodies, proceeded to the bar. A stool was being vacated, and he claimed it before anyone else did. Having found a resting place he looked around. To his right a totally bald youngish person of indeterminate sex (Jack later decided that it was a 'he') was engaged in an animated, occasionally embarrassingly intimate, conversation with another youngish person of equally indeterminate sex (whose voice, when Jack caught it, later gave up her secret). Their clothes were of unknown style and origin. Jack suspected that the garments had been thrown together randomly and selected to conform to no style at all—that being all the rage and *chic* on several worlds he'd recently visited. On his left sat a solitary patron: overweight; stolid; alone; serious in his drinking and staring fixedly at his glass.

No conversation here for him. Jack shrugged and tried to attract the attention of a bartender. There was one a few arm-lengths to his right, with a head shaved bald like a fresh-laid egg and a tattoo of an abstract motif of unknown origin engraved across his forehead. A light chain dangled between loops through his ear lobes, supported in the middle by another loop through his nasal septum.

Jack tried to catch his eye, but egg-head was too distracted by the large-bodied female whose prodigious mammaries rested on the bar in front of him, threatening to burst the constraints of their confining garment. Egg-head obviously liked big-bosoms, and she liked egg-head with the chains across his face. Jack could see where this was going and gave up on his futile gesturings. He looked over to his left. A woman stood there, serving drinks and simultaneously talking to another patron whom Jack could not see from his position. She didn't seem too excited about it all. When she caught his gesture she detached herself from the customer with what seemed like relief and came over.

She wore the same uniform as the others. A lot of stuff showing and even more suggested with that cleav-

age. Her nipples were clearly delineated through the tight-fitting thin elastic fabric of her uniform. Dark-brown eyes, heavy with just a hint of weariness; almost black hair, cut to shoulder length; a nose just slightly off the straight and narrow, adding a quirky sort of imperfection; the mouth slightly twisted, lending it a wry, self-deprecating, and maybe just a touch cynical, expression.

She was about Jack's age. Past the first flush of youth; past the first, and second, and maybe third, disillusionments as well—but with at least another two to three of centuries to look forward to. More if she wanted to and she could afford the new high-tec gero-tards.

Jack blinked. The face...

It wasn't possible. Not at all.

The woman smiled. A professional can-I-help-you-what-would-you-like-today kind of smile.

And he knew it was possible.

There was a tiny scar at her left jaw. The eyes used to be softer. Life had done things to her; not all of them nice. But some tiny lines radiated from the corners of her eyes, and Jack knew that she at least still knew how to smile. Maybe not just professionally.

Jack felt his hand clamp on the edge of the bar to steady himself. His breath came shallow and he had to resist an urge to turn away in order to hide his face. He wasn't sure how she'd react to seeing him here; or if she'd welcome meeting him again. After all that time nothing was certain. Who knew who and what she was today? Her outfit left no doubt that she was in the same business as everybody else around here.

The notion of Claury as a prostitute was grotesque. What could have happened to drive someone like her into this kind of predicament?

Jack controlled his instincts and reminded himself that Claury couldn't possibly recognize him. The face she'd known had been lost with the *Berenice*. There wasn't enough left of him to link him to the young man she'd had to leave behind.

He looked at her and wondered if she still called herself 'Claury'. He looked closer and found familiar features in the face. Strange how things come back. Suddenly the face was young again, and it was beside him, and they were looking at each other, lying side by side under a canopy of trees whose tops swayed high above, and he could hear the wind and smell the leaves on the ground, and his right arm was numb from the

weight of her head, but it didn't matter—and he was running his finger along her contours of her face and she took his hand and put his finger into her mouth and bit it ever so gently...

*Oh my God!*

His stomach felt hollow and sick; a reaction delayed for decades finally set in.

Jack took an shuddering breath.

Claury, or whoever she was now, appeared concerned.

*No wonder—I must look a sight!*

"Welcome to the *Diarmead*. What can I get you?"

The voice threatened to release another flood of memories. With an effort he clamped down on the whole chaotic mess inside him.

"Bourbon," he said hoarsely. His voice was sounded strange. "The real thing." He didn't drink hard stuff as a rule, but there and then he needed it.

Her gaze lingered on him for another moment; uncertainly, he thought. But then she turned on her professional smile again. "Bourbon. Right." She reached up, pulled a snifter-type glass from a rack above the bar. She excused herself and moved further down the bar toward a enormous rack of bottles and liquor containers from all over the known galaxy. Jack watched her as she looked around and finally picked out a bottle. She inspected it, considered it thoughtfully, and then came back with it.

She held it up for him to see. "That 'real' enough?" There was a trace of mischief in her voice.

He didn't recognize the label, but it said that it was brewed in 'New Orleans, N.A.C., Earth'.

Jack nodded. "Looks good."

She tilted the bottle three times, measuring off a nip with each tilt, before he told her to stop. "That's fine. I'll keep me company for a while." He paid over three ten-jin tabs and accepted the change. "Do they tip here?"

She shook her head. "No."

"What if people insist on tipping?"

"It goes into a pool and we distribute it among us. In proportion to the time we work here."

He handed her a two-jin tab. "Add that to your pool."

She took it and dropped it under the counter somewhere out of his sight. "Thank you Pilot." Friendly and cool.

"Jack."

"Jack?"

"Name's Jack," he said. It was his real one, but it didn't matter. There was no face to match. Nothing of the young man she'd known.

A shadow passed over her face, but then she smiled again, professionally. "Nice to meet you, Jack. I'm Deane. This your first time on Herrykairn?"

"Yes. Nice planet you've got here." He tried to smile, too, and maybe he succeeded. Standard opening lines, all of that. Usually leads to more action and less talk later.

All the right words, followed by the correct ritual.

*There we go again.*

Except...

*Not this time, Jack.*

Sometimes the PTBs drove him crazy!

*Tough luck, Jack—but we have other plans.*

They'd done it to him before. Again and again. Usually bad stuff.

What was the game now?

*What kind of a sick joke is it going to be this time?*

As if to confirm his worst suspicions he saw Claury's face cloud over. Her eyes focused on something just off to his left. Jack turned his head and saw the Coralian 'diplomat' beaming at him.

Jack contrived a smile. The Coralian stretched out his hand. "Hey! Good to see you again! I see you're already seriously R&R-ing." He pumped Jack's hand up and down. "Sorry. Didn't introduce myself earlier. Very rude of me. Name's Jerad. Jerad Arundel."

"Jack."

"Jack?"

Jack wasn't going to oblige. Especially not with Claury behind him, listening.

"Yeah."

Jerad Arundel nodded, let go of Jack's hand, moved closer to the bar, and eyed Jack's drink. Claury hadn't put the bottle back yet; it stood on the bar, just off to one side. Jerad Arundel squinted at it. "What's that you're drinking? Earth stuff? Hmmf. Expensive tastes, you have. Well, I guess with being a Pilot and all." He shook his head. "Why not? I'll be reckless and have one, too."

Jack's eyes briefly met Claury's. She was trying to hide it, but, even after all these years, he thought he could still read her face like a book. A Coralian puke-fish would have received more favorable consideration than Jerad Arundel.

*We've met before, have we? Not under pleasant circumstances, I bet.*

Jerad Arundel appeared blissfully unaware of Claury's smoldering detestation. Jack added some more facts to his collection of recent oddities.

Her gaze brushed his face again. She reached up for another snifter and looked at the Coralian. The man held up two fingers. Claury measured off two nips of the bourbon. Jerad paid for his drink and picked up the glass; held it under his nose as he gently swirled the liquid around the wide-bottomed vessel. "Nice," he commented.

Jack suppose he meant the drink, though he thought his eyes were on Claury. She focused on Jack again, excluding the Coralian from their exchange. "Can I get you something else? A tapa maybe? We have olives, potato wafers, cheese—all locally produced. And imported stuff, of course. Anchovies. Artichokes. Or sweets, if you like! Chocolate-covered coffee beans. Or just chocolate—the real stuff, imported all the way from Earth."

Jack's mouth was watering but he shook his head. "Not right now. But maybe in a little while." He paused and fought a quick battle inside himself. The outcome was a foregone conclusion, but it was the ritual that mattered. "Maybe later you can show me where one can have a proper meal."

All part of the game. Only this time it wasn't going to proceed as it usually did. In fact, he had no ideas what he was going to do with this whole situation. But there was no question but that he had to talk to her some more. He was aching to know how she'd been. What had happened in that big temporal void since they'd last seen each other.

Claury nodded. "Sure. Let me know when you're ready."

*Yeah...*

Jack smiled at her and she moved off. He looked after her. What in the world was he going to do?

He remembered Jerad Arundel. Now there was another strange thing...

"Nice girl," the Coralian said lightly, looking after Claury. His face gave nothing away. Just average interest in a good-looking piece of flesh—with a faint leer thrown in, inviting Jack to join into the man-to-man thing about women and whatever goes with it.

Jack shrugged and allowed himself a thin smile. "Yeah."

What game were they playing here?

*The rules, please!*

A Coralian spy who probably—make that ‘surely’—knew who Jack was. Maybe he even knew who Claury was—and who Jack and Claury had once been.

Safe assumptions?

Definitely.

Which meant that the Coralian knew that Jack knew Claury, but that she didn’t know who he was.

Jack thought about how annoying it was to know that someone else is totally aware of something which you’d really like to be secret, how invasive of one’s privacy. Jack felt violated to the core. And the guy hadn’t actually *done* anything—yet! He just knew things Jack wished he didn’t.

Will Corwin’s first rule of information gathering: *what you don’t know is always more important than what you do know.*

Will Corwin’s corollary to the first rule: *they only tell you what they want you to know.*

How to make use of these pearls of wisdom? What did Jerad Arundel *not* know? That Jack knew that he knew? He mightn’t know, but he could suspect. After all, if he suspected that Jack knew him to be a spy and then...

Jack cursed the PTBs again. He could do with fewer ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’.

“Another Coralian,” Jerad Arundel said, looking in Claury’s direction.

Jack didn’t have to act surprised. He was. Not at what the Coralian had told him but the fact that he told him. On the other hand, he really had nothing to lose, did he? After all, he suspected that Jack knew and that Jack expected him to know.

“A lot of Coralians around here, it seems,” Jack said lightly.

Jerad Arundel nodded wisely. “We do get around. As you should know...”

Jack contrived to smile back. “Indeed.”

“Any places you haven’t been?”

Jack nodded. “Plenty. Mostly out-of-the-way ones like here. Main traffic is between the major worlds. That’s where the work is.”

Jerad Arundel nodded. “Which ones do you prefer?”

“Are we talking women or planets?”

Jerad Arundel grinned as if the joke were funny. “Planets.”

Jack shrugged. “Worlds like this are much more interesting than the main centers.”

“What’s there in a place like this to interest you?”

Jack hesitated, sensing that the question was double-edged. What was Jerad Arundel was hoping to achieve! He couldn’t possibly think that Jack would tell him anything that’d be even remotely interesting to him. On the other hand, maybe for people of his ilk *anything* was interesting. The intelligence community has their own rules.

“Culture,” Jack explained. “The ways in which human beings adapt to an alien environment—rather than moulding it into a shape they want.”

“What’s culture got to do with it?”

“It’s one of the expressions of the adaptation.”

“That kind of thing interests you?”

Jack nodded. “It’s fascinating.”

Jerad Arundel took another swig from his glass and then placed it on the bar. “I wouldn’t have expected such predilections in a Pilot.”

“Got to have some interests.”

The Coralian’s face assumed what might have been a leer. “I thought after weeks in space there was only one major ‘interest’ to be pursued.”

Jack shrugged. “That’s remarkably easily taken care of. Figuring your way through cultural peculiarities is much more intricate—and a lot of fun besides...if you go in for that sort of thing, of course.”

“Of course.” Jerad Arundel looked around at the bodies thronging the hall. He looked back at Jack. “There’s another place down the road, you know. The ladies are considerably more entertaining and colorful than here.”

*You don’t really think this is going to work?*

Jack nodded in the Claury’s general direction. She was serving drinks to a loud-mouthed threesome who seemed incapable of making up their minds about what they wanted to drink, and instead tried to chat her up. He caught her glancing over in his direction. She saw him looking at her and gave him a wink.

“I think I’ll stick around here,” Jack said. “I like the company.”

Jerad Arundel shrugged with what Jack sensed was fake indifference.

“You haven’t answered my question,” Jack said to him.

Jerad Arundel looked puzzled. “Question?”

“What’s a Coralian embassy doing on Herrykairn?”

Jerad Arundel blinked; uncomfortably, Jack thought. The Coralian shrugged again. "Someone considered it important to have a representation. Don't ask me why. I just work here."

"You're not the ambassador?"

Jerad Arundel laughed. "No. The ambassador is someone we share with four other worlds. He's only here some of the time. I'm just an attaché."

"Strange," Jack said.

"What do you mean?"

Jack looked at him closely. "I've been around a bit, you know. But this is the first time I've seen a Coralian representation anywhere but in the main centers."

Jerad Arundel picked up his glass, which he drained in one quick gulp.

"That was nice. Nothing to beat a good whiskey."

"You haven't answered my question," Jack repeated. When in doubt, be a pest.

A trace of testiness was creeping into the Coralian's voice. "Why are you so interested?"

"Curiosity?" Jack suggested.

Jerad Arundel looked at Jack, who suddenly saw something behind the bland face that sent a frisson up and down his reconstructed spinal column.

"You're a Coralian," Jerad Arundel said, as if that explained everything.

"Actually, I'm not," Jack corrected him. He still didn't understand what the Coralian was trying to say.

"Cards don't matter," Jerad Arundel said. "Blood does."

*When did I mention anything about my antecedents?*

Or was Jerad Arundel just guessing?

"And you must know enough," the Coralian continued, "to appreciate Coralia's delicate position in the galactic scheme of things. A place which we haven't held because we were shy about ensuring that our rights are protected. And if this means, for one reason or another, that we need an embassy on a backwater dump like Herrykairn, then so be it."

He put his glass down on the bar. There was an air about him which told Jack that their conversation was about to be terminated—on a not entirely pleasant note.

Jerad Arundel flicked a quick glance along the bar. Almost too quick to notice, but Jack did. Right now he'd notice everything this man did. His sense was screaming warnings at him, sending him into a hyper-alert state of being in which nothing within the focus of his attention was either missed or forgotten.

"It is not for me to question the reasons," Arundel continued. "Neither, as a Coralian, is it for you."

"I don't consider myself a Coralian." That was only half-true. Whether Jack liked it or not, it was in his blood. He'd been there for too long for this not to be true.

Jerad Arundel dismissed Jack's objections with a flick of his right hand. "You are," he asserted. "Your considerations are secondary to the truth. I know it and you know it. And, as a Coralian, you owe us your loyalty."

He gave Jack one last sharp look. Jack wondered why he'd brought up the 'loyalty' bit.

*Did he want to tell me something?*

If so, he was missing the point.

Jerad Arundel nodded at Jack with cold urbanity. His earlier, more congenial, mask had been discarded. Jack sensed that now he saw much more of the real Jerad Arundel; and what he saw wasn't pretty.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Jack," the Coralian said curtly, his tone belying his words. He was anything but pleased. Somehow Jack's being here was highly discomfiting to him.

*Why?*

"I hope you have a safe and trouble-free stay."

Jerad Arundel turned away, merged with, and disappeared into the crowd.

Jack stared after him. He was slowly coming back down from his hyper-sensitized state. His mind was awl with questions without answers.

He must have sat there like that for quite some time.

Claury's voice came from behind him. "Going to finish that drink?"

He turned back on his stool to face her. He picked up his glass and downed the remainder of its contents.

"Unpleasant fellow, isn't he?" Claury said. There was a quizzical expression in her face. Her eyes refused to meet his—unlike before, when there had been an occasional moment of wordless communication. Jack wondered what had changed.

Him talking to the Coralian?

He leaned forward on his stool. "He's not what he seems," he suggested.

"Hmfff! He's exactly what he seems," she said firmly. Now she looked at him again. "A spy—and not a very good one either."

"That's somewhat of a wide-open secret around here, huh?" Jack smiled at her, trying to take the edge out of the situation.

She shrugged and looked at his glass. "Want another?"

He shook my head. "No, thanks. I'm hungry now."

Their eyes met again and lingered for a moment. That slightly twisted smile appeared around her mouth again. The eyes almost followed suit. Then they drifted away again.

"Want me to show you where you can get a good meal?"

"That would be nice."

"My time doesn't come free."

Jack nodded. "I know. But, just so we understand each other: the meal is all I want." It certainly was all he could handle—and all he would get. Because things were the way they were, and because his shore leave was screwed up beyond repair, and because this was Claury.

She nodded. "That's fine. I get paid by the hour. That's the way I like it."

"*You* like it? You decide the charges?"

She smirked. "Our takings are our own. The establishment provides us as a customer service. Their profits derive from the other activities around here."

There was something surreal about all this. Was he really having a conversation about solicitation with his old girlfriend?

Jack tried to shake off the uncomfortable sensation. "Doesn't seem like an efficient way to make a living at this," he suggested, half-jokingly.

"Wait till you find out my rates," Claury said. She leaned her head sideways and laughed, making him go all funny and hollow inside again.

"Just one thing," he said. He flicked a quick glance down her dress; deliberately not making it look too suggestive. "Would you mind changing into something else? These outfits..."

Again she laughed. "They're meant to be alluring and sexy."

"That they are—up to a point. But when I go out to dinner with someone I'd rather have them wear something a little more...conventional."

"All right," she said. "Just give me a few minutes." She turned away, hesitated, and came back to him. "It won't make any difference, you know. Everybody knows everybody around here. If *that's* what bothers you..."

He shook his head. "I've long ago given up caring much about what people think of me. But these costumes are somewhat..." He was looking for the right word.

"Garish?" she suggested. "Would you prefer something slightly more demure?"

"Anything but this."

"You got it." She went off and disappeared through a door at the other end of the bar. When she was gone Jack let out a deep breath. This was getting fiendishly complicated, on more levels than one. He had a sense that all around him yawning pits were opening up; that any misstep was going to have dire consequences.

He looked around at the other patrons—most of them off-worlders, meaning they came from the *Lister Diamond*—out for a good and totally brainless time. Just a little while ago, when he came in here, he was going to be just like one of them. Having fun and all that kind of stuff.

*Sure...*

Define 'fun'! A much-used but rarely-analyzed term. That extravagantly-dressed old codger for example... Jack guessed he derived from Narziss, whose one and only colony consisted of a single metropolis of some five million inhabitants, who seemed to have nothing else on their tiny minds but to outdo each other by inventing endless permutations on the limited ways in which garments designed to be worn by anthropomorphs could possibly be designed. Of course, Narzissians made a mint out of exporting their products, which were considered *the* standard for fashion. What InfoGen had failed to accomplish—an interstellar kind of dominance over the human mind—the Narzissians had managed without so much as trying hard.

One of the peculiarities of Narzissian life—one which generated a fair number of emigres—was that a condition of living there was the complete rejection of gerotard-use. 'Old age'—its decrepitude, the heightened sense of mortality occasioned by the awareness of it having become a matter of choice—were considered a necessary element in the creativity required to guarantee Narziss' status as a leader in the world of fashion.

The old man being attended to by not just one, but two, girls in *Diarmead* uniforms, looked like he was coming perilously close to the end of the line, but still determined to have what some might describe as 'fun'. He looked wealthy, and probably occupied a first-class

cabin on the *Lister Diamond* and could afford to have the girls with him all night.

Jack turned away, feeling inexplicably sickened by the sight of the old man. Though it was true that the only life one could ever lose was whatever one had right now, it was even more true that doing it in a healthy body was even better; and if one had the prospect of a future...that added a definite icing to the cake.

*Poor, deluded bastard. Have your 'fun' as long as you can.*

Jack grimaced. It occurred to him that he was, in his own way, being just as presumptuous as the two anti-gerotard zealots Gastel Mobil had told him about.

*At least I don't inflict my opinions on those who don't ask for them.*

Jack was beginning to wonder where Claury had got to. Her 'few minutes' had well passed. Maybe she had been referring to 'local' minutes? Or maybe 'few' meant something different to her than it did to him.

*Patience, Jack. Don't fidget. It won't make any difference. She'll come when she comes. Some things don't change.*

He leaned forward and peered along the bar but couldn't see her.

"That better?"

Her voice came from behind him. He looked around. He'd forgotten how tall she was. It wasn't so obvious when she'd been behind the bar; but now, standing in front of him, it all came back.

"Well?" she asked, turning so he could inspect her outfit from all angles. A loose dark-gray blouse over black slacks. A pair of thin-strapped low-heeled sandals.

"Much better," he said. "Unbelievably much better."

He slid off the stool, and now her eyes were at the level of his forehead. Tall girl. She smiled and linked her arm under his.

*Unreality.*

"Where shall we go?" she asked.

"You tell me," he said.

She flicked him a quick sideways glance. He wasn't supposed to notice it, but he did. They pushed their way through the throngs of people and out into the street.



## Chapter 6

They stepped off the wide veranda and onto the sidewalk. "There are some nice restaurants at the waterfront."

"You're the guide," Jack told her. He didn't say anything more. He wasn't sure if he could have. She wore a light perfume, but underneath that...

Phew!

Claury pulled him along with her. Her left arm was firmly hooked under his right one, and the warmth of her communicated itself through the thin fabric of her blouse.

How had she ended up in a place like this? It was one of the things he was determined to find out. But he'd have to go about it gently; from the casual point of view of a stranger, out for a good night in the company of an attractive woman and moderately curious about her. The game had to be played by the rules.

For a moment he seriously considered the alternative: telling her the truth—right now.

He pushed the thought aside. It wouldn't work.

They continued along the street and turned down a narrow alley toward the waterfront. Jack hesitated momentarily before going on. Narrow, dark alleys were places he avoided like the plague; on the more populated worlds anyway. Then he reminded himself where he was, and that Claury should know best.

She had felt his hesitation and stopped. Jack shrugged. "It's all right. Just a reflex."

Claury glanced down the alley and back at him. "Bad experiences?" she asked softly.

"Survival instinct," he said dryly and pulled her along. "Let's go."

"If you want, we can..."

"No, it's all right." They continued down the alley and emerged on the other side.

A curved promenade arced along the contours of a stony beach, just barely visible in the lights from the buildings lining the other side. Small waves lapped on the stones, reflecting the lights in long dancing streaks on the water. A sweet, tangy scent hung in the air. A few people walked along the water's edge. From some of the establishments came the noises of people in conversation. A few notes from a violin echoed across the water from the other end of the promenade, carrying fragments of a melancholy tune.

"That's Florian," Claury said, "playing his fiddle. Want to go over there?"

Jack smiled. "Food any good?"

"Yep."

"Good food. Good music. What more could one ask for?"

"It's a start," she said softly. "But I could think of a few more things."

"Like?"

"Friends."

"There's that..."

They crossed to the other side of the promenade and strolled along the edge of the beach, listening to the small waves of the tideless ocean lapping on and swishing in between the stones.

"How long have you lived on Herrykairn?" Jack asked.

"About four years," she said. "Four local years." Just over five standard years.

"Mind if I asked what brought you here?"

Claury took a deep breath of the sea air. "A need to get away, I suppose. It's quiet here. The community is small. Once you're accepted, they tend to be very supportive. Mind you, they're nosy, too—but that's a small price to pay."

"Where'd you come from?"

"Earth...mostly."

"Been around a bit, huh?"

She nodded. "Too much."

*What happened to you?*

Jack slowed down and stopped. Claury followed suit, but said nothing. He looked out at the firmament arching over the ocean; tried to identify stars. He quickly gave up: the skies here were as strange as could be—as was to be expected this many light years from Earth or Coralia. Yet one continued to seek for familiar patterns.

He sighed and looked behind him at the row of houses—just in time to see someone ducking out of sight into the alley from which they had come. Or maybe he had imagined it? It was very quick, and might just have been a trick of the senses.

But his intuition told him that it wasn't. In fact, it was his intuition that had made him look in that direction in the first place.

The Coralian, no doubt—or maybe one of his cronies.

Why this morbid interest? What could they possibly want?

"What are you looking at?" Claury's voice said into his right ear.

"Nothing," he said. "Just taking it all in. This is a nice place."

"It is," she agreed.

They continued along their way.

The restaurant was called *El Gitano*. It was decorated in old southern European style, with about twenty tables separated from each other by partitions consisting of a brown imitation-wood latticework, which had been carefully threaded with various kinds of live plants: creepers; vines; ficus.

The place was packed, but Claury, through some stratagem beyond Jack's ken, managed to procure a table within a few minutes. When he commented on it she just smiled. "I come here often; even when there's not a load of tourists cluttering up the place. The maitre looks after me."

They sat down, ordered drinks and food and passed the time until their food arrived with inconsequential small-talk about the weather and life on Herrykairn. Claury asked Jack about his work. He responded with a generic description of a Pilot's existence: stuff she'd probably heard before.

Dinner came: a four-course meal of locally-grown produce. No meat. Claury explained that it was too inefficient to raise animals for slaughter on a planet which did not support the production of digestible proteins.

Nonetheless the dinner was delicious. They might have suffered from restrictions on Herrykairn, but from whatever there was the cook had produced flavors amazingly familiar and tantalizingly 'home'. Meaning Earth, of course. 'Home' still...

Florian added to Jack's mildly melancholic state by playing an assortment of Earth tunes from the homeland of his ancestors.

After a dessert of fruit-salad, laced with a shot of genuine Terran-produced and hideously expensive brandy and a caramel sauce, they finally sat back, pleasantly satiated.

"That was great!" said Jack. "Best meal I've had for months."

Claury considered him soberly. "You're a freighter Pilot, you said. I suppose the food's pretty dull."

"Definitely. Pre-cooked. Pre-chewed." He smiled lopsidedly. "Sort of..."

"When we think of Pilots, we usually think of those on the passenger ships. They eat better there?"

"Much."

She rested her elbows on the table and placed her chin on her fisted hands. "I suppose you'd prefer to be on one of them, huh?"

Jack shrugged. He looked into her eyes and saw genuine interest.

Why not? There weren't too many sympathetic listeners to go around. He didn't like whining about his life, but every now and then it helped to just tell someone. At least part of it.

"I used to be," he said.

She raised her eyebrows. "Really?"

Jack shrugged negligently.

*You talk too much!*

But then again...people seldom remembered the details of morbid news for long—and the further away it had happened the less it mattered anyway. This was the way of things, and if Claury had been holed up on far-flung worlds like Herrykairn...

"The *Berenice*."

Her eyes became round. "The one that had the terrible accident?"

So she remembered. Well, who didn't?

"You were on board when it happened?"

Here was his last chance to worm himself out of the situation he'd created.

"I was."

"Why didn't you get off?"

How *much* did she remember?

"We thought we could save it."

"We'?"

"There were two of us."

Her gaze was fixed on his face. "But only you survived."

Jack nodded. "I was...injured. But I lived."

"That must have been terrible."

"I've had better experiences."

She said nothing for a moment, but considered him with genuine empathy. "What exactly happened?"

"The regcomp—that's the complex of computers responsible for running the reactor-system—malfunctioned. We tried to fix the problem but..."

"That's not what I mean," she said. "I meant afterward. What happened to you?"

Jack took a sip from the red wine in front of him, savored its tart dryness, before continuing.

"I spent some time in a hospital. Then there was a hearing. They weren't too pleased with the duty-Pilot."

"You?" she guessed.

Jack nodded.

"But why?" she insisted. "There were no casualties."

"Only the co-Pilot. And several billion EUs worth of hardware."

*And me, of course.*

"That's not fair!" She grimaced. "I'm sure there was nothing you could have done."

Jack grinned. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, I agree with you. But the ship was a wreck. They decided that 'human error' was to blame—and the only handy humans were the duty-Pilot and his co'. The co' was dead. Which left me..."

"They fired you?"

Jack chuckled without humor. "You don't 'fire' a Pilot. You just don't renew his contract for another journey. Fortunately there aren't that many of us to go around. It makes for pretty good job-security. So, I still have a job—though it's a bit less glamorous these days."

She reached over the table and placed a hand on his. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I've accommodated myself to the situation."

"But if they treated you unfairly..."

Jack laughed. "Last time I looked the universe wasn't too interested in fairness."

Her hand slid away from his. Her face became withdrawn and thoughtful. "No, I guess not."

Jack caught her eyes. "You sound as if you knew something about that."

She averted her gaze. "Don't we all?"

Jack didn't take his eyes off her. "Well, I've told you my sad story. Want to tell me yours?"

She shook her head. "Not really."

"Not even a little bit?" he teased gently.

She didn't rise to the bait. "Not even a little bit," she said.

Jack leaned back. "Now *you're* not being fair," he said gently, "and that's a different matter altogether. I'm sure there's more to your drifting into this backwater than just a desire for peace and quiet."

She smirked. "Why should there be?"

"Because nothing is ever what it appears to be."

She looked at him oddly. "What makes you say that?"

"That's just the way it is," he said.

"You think that goes for people, too?"

"Of course," he said. "*Especially* for people. We're all actors. The only difference between us and the professional kind is that we don't get paid."

She smiled wistfully. "You think I'm acting?"

"Of course. In your business, I suppose, you have to." He sighed. "Well, do me a favor. Don't act too much. A bit of just being yourself would be immensely refreshing."

A cloud passed over her face. "I'm not too sure who or what that is sometimes," she said. Her eyes locked with his. "Why do you go out with prostitutes?"

The question caught him totally off balance. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. Why do you do it? Why do you pay women to go out with you? And to have sex presumably..."

"What a question..."

"Do you mind?" she challenged.

"No...yes...no." He shook his head. "It's just unexpected."

"Well," she insisted. "Are you going to tell me?"

What was he going to say?

*When in doubt, tell the truth.*

*Which one?*

The truth. Trust Claury to throw one of these questions at him. When she didn't even know...

"The truth," he said slowly and sighed. "The truth is that I'm not sure. Expediency, I suppose. Or maybe it's because after weeks and weeks in space, and in the company of instruments and people whom you can't pick but who are assigned to you—people with whom you usually have next to nothing in common; not unless you happen to like talking about the same inane crap over and over again—after weeks in A-space where you can't even see the stars—in a ship that reeks of human leftovers...after all that time...I at least would die for just lying in a normal bed... and not alone, but with another head on the pillow beside me, and a bit of human warmth..."

"Just to lie there...even if I have to pay for it." He shook his head. "It's not the sex. Sometimes there isn't any."

True. Sometimes there wasn't. Not because he didn't want it, but because he just wanted the sensation of a warm female body beside him. It was a sanity thing, really. Close physical contact with another human being, and a female one at that. It didn't really matter if it was paid for or not; even if some of the whores had made no bones about how strange they thought it was. That's why he was very careful about choosing them.

Jack fell silent and looked at Claury. "I don't really want to talk about it, if that's all right." Particularly since this was Claury—and because right now he felt irrationally guilty about every woman he'd ever slept with. He told himself that he shouldn't—but that didn't do much good.

*She hasn't exactly been abstinent either.*

*Yeah, and so what?*

Claury stared at him. Then she smiled. "You're a strange one," she said.

*You don't know the half of it.*

"I know. But I grow on people."

She was silent for a moment, then picked up her glass and twirled it in her hand, held it up against the light, and swirled the remainder of the wine around in the bottom. She put the glass down again and considered him with a penetrating kind of look that had a thousand questions behind it. He wondered what they were.

"What is it?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "Nothing. Nothing at all." She compressed her lips and looked down at the table. Then up into his face again. "I told you the truth," she said. "I'm here for the peace and quiet. I was born on Earth, but I've spent quite a few years on Coralia. Over the years I've lived in a lot of places. Most of them I'd rather forget—including Earth and Coralia. I like neither very much. Too much emotional ballast."

She gave a small twitch of her shoulders. "When I came here I knew nobody. It was like a new beginning. It still is, in many ways. If it weren't for..." She fell silent.

"What?" he prompted.

"The Coralians of course," she said bitterly. She nailed him with her gaze. "How did you know that man?"

Jack guessed that she was referring to Jerad Arundel. "He happened to be in the seat beside me on the way to the surface."

Claury snorted. "Yeah. By accident, I bet."

Jack agreed with her, but wasn't going to admit it. "There's no reason for them to be interested in me." That was partially true—though, with a bit of imagination, one could find some reasons for it not being a coincidence at all.

"There are always reasons," she said dryly. "One of them being of course that you're a Coralian yourself."

The silence following her statement weighed heavily.

She looked at him sharply. "Am I right?"

Jack nodded. "I've lived there."

*Careful now!* This was getting rather close. How many Pilots called 'Jack', were born on Earth, and had lived on Coralia? Claury was no fool. Anything but! If she started thinking along the right lines...

On the other hand: why should she?

"Reason enough," she stated flatly. Her glance darted sideways and immediately returned to his face. "That's why there's one of them sitting in my line of sight, about three tables off to your right. And he probably has a voxrec trained on us and is recording every word we say."

Jack felt a chilly frisson in the back of his neck.

"That's what I hated about Earth—and so many of the other colonies," she continued, her tone sharp and acrid. "Your privacy is non-existent. Despite the Listerite Revolution. Despite the anti-violation statutes. There's just too much stuff around. Pickups everywhere. The laws are all there but I don't believe they're being paid attention to."

"Not so here," Jack said, remembering his conversation with Gastel Mobil.

She shook her head. "No. Folks here won't stand for it. It's only the offworlders—Coralians especially—who operate recs and carry implants. Of course, they deny it, and as long as they don't do anything overtly nasty, nobody's going to take action."

She sat back and appeared lost in thought for a few moments. Then she reached out and grasped his right hand, which still rested near the glass. "Let's go to your hotel."

Jack swallowed and felt himself blush furiously. The whole thing was made worse because he knew she was seeing it all.

Claury laughed. It was almost as if she was relieved about something; as if he'd just answered an unasked question.

She leaned forward. "I'm not trying to seduce you. But I do like my privacy—and that Coralian is grating on my nerves."

Jack's heart slowed down its rate just a trifle. "All right," he said, trying to inject a light note into his voice.

The Coralian spy pushed his way into his thoughts. A pickup, huh? Probably a directional voxrec. An invasion of privacy: his and Claury's. It didn't matter that they went back to the hotel. Part of their conversation, innocuous as it was, was already in the Coralian's rec. When he got back to his 'embassy' he would load the data into a computer, filter out the extraneous bits and pieces, and have a complete and clear record of every word they'd been saying.

Jack found his mellow disposition evaporating.

Claury must have caught the change of mood. She looked faintly alarmed.

"What is it?" she said lowly.

Jack thought furiously. He didn't think that what he was considering was wise, but screw wisdom! He wasn't going to stand for this.

He gave a quick nod of his head in the general direction of the Coralian. "I'm going to make a scene," he said. "There is a possibility that you might find this a bit disconcerting or even unpleasant. But I find myself terminally irritated by the unasked-for attention I've been getting."

She looked even more alarmed. "You're not..." she whispered.

"Watch me," Jack said. He pushed back his chair. "Sorry, but this has to be done. If you'd prefer to leave, now's the time to do it."

She looked at him big-eyed. The faintest twitch of a smile appeared around her lips. She inclined her head as the smile broadened. "You're not going to let this rest, are you?"

"No."

"I hope you know what you're doing," she said, more seriously. "There may be consequences..."

"Screw the consequences," Jack snapped. "We pay lip service to the Listerite ideals, but when it comes to the crunch we're just hypocrites. Do you really think I can sit here and just take this? Because some Coralian might get upset about it?"

Claury exhaled sharply. He could see that she'd come to a decision. "What're you going to do? Ask him to give you the rec?"

Jack grinned humorlessly.

"And you think he's just going to do that?"

Jack shook his head. "Not voluntarily."

"You're going to *force* him to give it to you? Wrestle him maybe?" she asked sarcastically.

"If necessary. But there are other ways."

Claury relented. "All right," she said softly. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

"Going to join me?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

They got up and made as if to leave the restaurant. Their way took them past the Coralian's table. Jack avoided eye-contact with the man until the last moment, when they stood in front of him. Jack wordlessly pulled out one of the two spare chairs for Claury and made a big ritual of seating her. Then he pulled out the other one and planted himself on it. That done, he finally looked the Coralian straight in the face.

*He plays it well*, Jack thought. Bland. Just the right amount of surprise. Disdain even. Underneath, noticeable only to one looking for it, an almost undetectable touch of perturbation.

Jack folded his hands on the table and gazed the spy.

*Surprised?*

Jack considered the positions of the *dramatis personae*. The Coralian with his back to a partition. Himself and Claury effectively blocking a speedy exit.

*Just as it should be.*

"I'm a firm believer in not wasting time," Jack said lowly, almost casually, as he glanced around the restaurant.

He hesitated, and focused his attention on the Coralian's tight face.

"I want the rec."

The spy's face didn't even twitch, but twisted into almost convincing expression of perplexity at the rude disturbance he'd been subjected to by these two total strangers.

He raised a questioning eyebrow. "I beg your pardon?"

"I want the rec," Jack repeated. "The one you've used to snoop on a private conversation."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the man replied.

Jack raised a mocking eyebrow.

A brief staring match.

The Coralian shook his head. "I have no reason to give you *anything*. You obviously have me confused

with somebody else." He glanced at his plate. "I'd really like to get on with my dinner. So, why don't you just go away and save me from having to making a scene here."

Jack grinned wolfishly. "Funny you mention that, because that's just what I am going to do."

"What?"

"I am going to make a scene—unless you hand me over that rec."

"You don't understand..."

"No—you don't. You see, you are the only one with anything to lose by what you call a 'scene'. I mean, given who and what you are, that's no wonder is it?"

"I don't get you."

Jack chuckled siccantly and leaned closer to the Coralian. "It's like this," he said confidentially, "I—and my companion here—are not going to leave you, or this place, until we have your rec. That is a fact, simple and unalterable: a natural contingency, if you want to look at it that way. There's nothing—absolutely nothing—you can do to change that. If you try, I'll accuse you openly, right here and with everybody listening, of illegally breaching our right to privacy.

"The least that'll happen as a result is that your position will become severely embarrassing. Whom, do you think, are people going to believe: a man wearing a Pilot's uniform over someone widely known to be a Coralian spy? And what, do you think, will happen then? You really think 'diplomatic immunity' is going to count for *anything*?"

"You can't..."

Jack laughed into his face. "Really?"

The man made a move as if to rise from his chair. Jack did the same. "If you want me to get physical, that's all right, too," he said lowly. He glanced around him. "I'm sure it wouldn't go unnoticed."

Slowly the Coralian sat down again. Jack followed suit. "I cannot let you leave," he pointed out. "You'll just dispose of the rec. That I will not let you do. Whatever happens, happens here and now..."

The spy's equanimity had evaporated. "I could *kill* you here and now," he hissed.

Jack glanced sideways at Claury. "Ahh, the mask has come off. Did you hear that? A foolish, overt threat of violence. With a witness present at that. Tut, tut."

Claury nodded. "I heard. I won't forget."

Jack looked at the Coralian. "You really think it's worth it: killing me for the sake of a recording of a

conversation containing nothing that's any of your business? Do you really want to add another botchup to your already impressive list?"

He stretched out his left hand across the table, palm facing up. "The rec."

The Coralian glared at him coldly. He reached into the left sleeve of his loose shirt. Jack saw him detach a small device, only a little larger than a thumbnail, from the skin of his arm. Wordlessly he dropped it into Jack's hand.

*Too easy!*

Jack kept his hand where it was. "And the other one as well," he said.

The Coralian's glare was hot and livid with tightly controlled anger now.

"Come," said Jack, "I know you have another. If you don't give it to me I now have the evidence"—he pointed at the button lying on the table—"to compromise your position beyond repair."

The Coralian, his face a mask, reached under the table.

Jack froze.

The Coralian came up with another voxrec—it must have been attached under the table—and dropped it into Jack's palm.

Jack exhaled. "That's better." He got up. Claury—who had been watching the whole affair with a mixture of amusement, bewilderment, and a certain measure of apprehension—pushed back her chair and followed suit. They went to the exit where Jack paid his bill. Then they stepped out into the night.

"There," he said, trying not to show his relief, "that wasn't so bad."

Claury wasn't fooled. "You pushed it right to the edge there," she said as she took his arm again.

Jack dropped the two recs on the footpath and ground them to a pulp under his heels. "Not really," he said. "I knew what he was going to do. I just had to push the right buttons."

"You knew? How could you? That was a gamble if ever I saw one!"

Jack laughed. "Never gamble with a Pilot," he said. "And particularly not with..." He bit down on the words. "...me," he finished lamely. He grinned sideways at her, trying to cover the near-miss. "Better ones than that moron have tried," he added, with deliberate braggadocio.

Claury looked at him in an odd sort of way. "So, what are you? Something special?"

Jack nodded immodestly. "One of the best. Despite the *Berenice* screwup. That's why I'm richer than most. I always get my time-bonuses. I'm never off-target..."

"...and modesty isn't one of your weaknesses," she concluded dryly.

"No," he admitted. "It never was."

She sighed and nodded. What to, he had no idea. She gave him another quick look from under her long eyelashes. "Let's go and chat where they aren't snooping on us."

"That might be hard to do."

Claury shook her head. "At *Badecker's* we're safe. The place looks antique, but it's as private as they come. Trust me, I know..." She fell silent, squeezed his left arm, and pulled him away from *El Çitano*.

This time they avoided the dark alleys.

They didn't talk much more on the way to *Badecker's Rest*. Jack couldn't figure out what had happened, but something had changed. He wondered whether it was because the sense of being watched was gone. Or maybe because the events in *El Çitano* had had a cathartic effect. Or was it just because Claury was simply disinclined to talk? To Jack she seemed preoccupied and troubled. From his peripheral vision he thought he caught her glancing at him sideways from time to time, but he couldn't be sure. Jack himself kept looking straight ahead, giving her space to her own private thoughts. As for himself, though he was pleased the way things had gone in the restaurant, he was left with a sense of unease. This matter was by no means over and done with. Once again he told himself that he wished he knew the rules of this game.

The instant they stepped into the foyer of *Badecker's Rest*, Polkad Mobil appeared behind the reception. Then he saw who had arrived, nodded politely, handed Jack the key to his room, and disappeared again. Jack smiled ruefully. He knew what the man was thinking. If he were in his position so would he.

Claury's demeanor told him that she'd been here before. Quite a lot of times, possibly. Again, Jack felt an irrational swirl of anger, or maybe jealousy, stir within him. As before, he dismissed it, but could not deny its reality. He nodded at the stairs and they proceeded up the first flight to his room. He unlocked the

door, reached inside, and touched the sensor pad of the light switch. The lamps above the bed and in the far corner of the room came on. He stepped aside and allowed Claury to precede him. Then he withdrew the key from the lock and followed her, closing the door behind him.

He turned to face Claury, who stood almost directly behind him. Her eyes were just above the level of his.

A mask she had worn since he'd met her in the *Diarmaid* had fallen away. She stared at him in the manner of someone who saw, but couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"Jack?"

One hand came up to his face and gingerly touched his cheek.

"What happened to you? Your face, your voice, your eye..."

She stepped nearer her face now only inches from his.

Her pupils had dilated until her eyes were almost completely black. He saw himself reflected in them and somebody had suddenly rewound time and they were in the woods behind his house again.

"Jack?"

How could he ever have thought to fool her—or conned himself into believing that he'd even *wanted* to fool her?

He cradled her face in his hands. "Where have you been?"

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. She placed her face against the side of his and he slipped his arms around her and pulled her as close as he could—and in this manner they stood for a long, long time.



## Chapter 7

"What happened to you?" She ran her fingers along the contours of his face. Her tears had left streaks on her cheeks where the mascara and makeup had run down in little rivulets and then had carelessly been wiped away.

"How did you know?"

"How could I *not*?"

*Indeed...*

"How many Pilots are called 'Jack'? Especially ones who come out and tell you to your face that they're 'one

of the best'?" Her eyes searched his face for signs of the young man she had known. "I was there at your graduation ceremony, you know..."

"What?!"

Claury sighed. "I was there—against the wishes of those who feared that it would compromise my position."

"What are you talking about? What position? Why didn't you get in contact with me? You know how desperate I was to find you? To think you were so close..." Irrational anger mixed with a dreary feeling of loss at wasted years and opportunities.

"I'm so sorry!" She sniffled and wiped her face. "After the graduation I lost track of you. Pilots move around such a lot. I never knew...the *Berenice*...you..." She paused, searched his face. "What happened?"

"After the passengers had been evacuated in the lifeboats, and even the captain had given it up as a lost cause, we stayed behind and tried to save the ship."

"Why?"

*Why?*

He's asked himself the same question again and again.

*Just for once: the truth!*

"Money, I guess—or maybe just stupidity." He shrugged. "It amounts to the same thing. Salvaging the *Berenice* would have made us so rich we could have given up piloting and done whatever we wanted to do with our lives. Not that either of us knew *what*, but it didn't matter. If we piloted anything at all we wanted it to be our own ships. Lee Won wanted to go exploring as badly as I. See what's out there; keep searching for the one thing we've never found, but we all hope—and maybe fear—is out there somewhere."

"Sentience," she guessed.

"Something like that."

"So you tried to stop it from blowing up."

"The reactor was going critical, and the regcomp had gone crazy. We tried to override its automatic functions while, at the same time, retaining the low-level ones..."

"And it didn't work."

"Everything went wrong. The containment field went into uncontrolled oscillations. The reaction cusped and blew the *Berenice*'s tail to smithereens, and half of the main hull with it. Lee and I were shielded from the blast and radiation by the bulk of the ship, but it was still enough to fry him to a crisp and leave me critical for months.

"And then, to top it all off, they ended up blaming us; claimed that we should have left the regcomp alone; that it would have dealt with the whole situation, and that our manipulations caused the final explosion."

"Oh, Jack..."

He shook his head. "Bygones." He took hold of her shoulders. "What did you mean when you said that thing about 'compromising' your position? *What* position, Claury? What's going on?"

Her shoulders slumped in defeat. "Too late now. Oh Jack, why did you have to come here?"

He was completely confused now—confused and hurt. His hands fell off her and he stood back, not knowing what to say. A moment ago he'd felt as close to her as he ever had—even after all these years.

But now?

Claury looked terribly lost and forlorn, but her eyes didn't leave his. And something in them told him that he was just about as wrong as he could be—because they were the eyes of someone who'd been through a private hell of her very own, and was still around to tell the tale; the eyes of a survivor who had struggled hard to stay afloat and was not about to give up, despite a brief interlude of despondency. All of which made Jack think that maybe he was a self-indulgent piece of shit.

He mellowed as soon as that realization came to him. "I'm sorry," he said, reaching out for her hands, which were cold and unresponsive. The corners of her mouth twisted into a lopsided smile that never reached the eyes.

"We're both up to our necks in it right now," she said softly. "We were the moment you set foot on that station up there."

He pulled her with him and made her sit down on the bed. He sat down beside her. "Tell me about it."

"It's a long story."

"We have all night—and I'm paying, remember?"

She chuckled sadly. The she looked down at his hands, which were still holding hers. Suddenly self-conscious, he let go.

"Don't," she said and reached for him. "Don't. Please." She caught hold of his hands. "It wasn't all selfish, you know," she said. "My avoiding you, that is. They told me that if didn't you'd be killed."

"What?!"

"Don't you think I would have contacted you the instant I found you again? Remember what we promised each other the day my family left Coralia? I meant it!"

He stared at her. "*Who* would kill me?"

"I don't know. I never did and I *still* don't. But I believed every word of it."

"Why?"

"Because they killed mum and dad."

"Claury..." he said helplessly, but couldn't go on any further. Whatever he was going to say would be inane at best and inappropriate at worst.

"Bygones. Ancient history." She grimaced. "It *should* have been ancient history...only now you show up here..."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that we broke the quarantine: the only thing that's keeping us alive..." Her eyes looked troubled. "I'm afraid this meeting hasn't just compromised me, but you as well—possibly even more so!"

"Jack, I'm so sorry! We're both dead. We just don't know it yet."

A few pieces of the puzzle fell into place. It was hard to tell where in the big picture they belonged—but at least they hung together and provided some small-scale sense. Like the Coralian accosting him on board the shuttle, and then, later, in the bar. Like the fact that there was a Coralian 'embassy' on Herrykairn, and that a Coralian had been monitoring their conversation in the restaurant.

"They're here because of you," he said.

"Who?"

"The Coralians."

"Of course. They're my watchdogs. I suppose I should feel flattered that I warrant three of them, stationed here solely for my benefit."

"What are they trying to prevent from happening?"

"Meeting you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I really don't."

"But..."

"It has something to do with your dad's murder—and with mum's and dad's as well. And I think—no, I *know*—that the Squire has a hand in this. That's because they more or less told me so—and because they've been around like a bad smell ever since." She grimaced. "That's all I know."

He believed her—and it wasn't just his sense telling him that Claury was exactly who she appeared to be. He still could read her like a book. The PTBs, he reflected, had, indeed, been at it again: stirring up an

old, smelly mess that obviously needed attention—landing him and Claury right in the middle of it.

Hell, what was he thinking? It sounded as if they'd been in the middle of it all along, whether they had known or not!

They looked at each other silently for a long time.

"When did you know I was me?" he finally asked.

Claury smiled. "I don't know. When I heard your name—I guess that started it all off. From then on I kept looking for signs. There were hundreds of them—and they all confirmed it. And when you decided to face that Coralian in the restaurant...well that was my Jack all over again. Remember the way you dealt with Fidel what-was-his-name?"

Jack grinned.

Claury shrugged. "It was the same scene. Different context, but..."

Jack chuckled. He liked the way she'd said 'my Jack'. It made funny little butterflies dance around in his solar plexus.

He looked around the room. If Claury was right it was only a temporary cocoon of safety—and maybe not even that—which might soon be breached by those who disapproved of his and Claury's sudden encounter. A sobering thought. The mellow mood evaporated.

Still, for tonight they might be safe. The Coralians would not be so foolish as to attempt anything here and now. There was ample time to plan and execute. After all, he wasn't going anywhere or contact anyone. He couldn't have if he tried. There was nobody. There never had been after he became an orphan.

Jack looked at Claury: the only person who, outside his family—and maybe Cale Perdek—had ever meant anything to him.

*Well, what do you know?*

It hadn't been a 'place' at all!

Claury saw his smile. "What is it?"

Jack chuckled. "I was just thinking that I've been deluding myself for the last two decades."

"About what?"

"Oh, a lot of things. Myself above all."

Her eyes searched his face. "In what way?"

He exhaled sharply and brought his face closer to hers. "I told myself that some things just have to be allowed to rest. Like Dad's death. Mum's suicide. You. The *Berenice*. That it was just crap that life throws into your face and there is nothing you can do about it. So, why waste time and energy on futile gestures? Got to

get on with living. Never look back. Just try to get as far away from the place as you can so that the memories don't cripple you."

He looked at her eyes, which were only inches from his. "Know what I mean?"

She nodded. "That's why I came here."

He laughed softly. "Yeah, right. You, too." He took in the tiny lines radiating out from the sides of her eyes; the smeared mascara and makeup.

"Give me a moment," he said softly and disengaged his hands from hers. He stood up and went into the bathroom. He wet one corner of a towel and wrung it out. He came back to Claury, sat down on the bed, and started to wipe the smears off her face. She tolerated his attentions without a protest. When he was done he put the towel aside and turned back to her. Her eyes had filled with tears again.

"What's the matter?"

She smiled, reached for the towel, found a clean corner of it, and wiped the tears off her cheeks. "Nothing, Jack," she said softly. "Nothing at all."

"But, you see," he continued, "I was wrong."

"About what?"

"About the past. You can't bury it. Those unresolved issues come back to bite you—sooner or later. And if you don't attend to them, something's sure to happen to throw them right in your face."

"Like now," she said.

"Like now."

She sighed. "So, what're we going to do?"

Jack shook his head. "Don't know." He bent down, undid the tabs on his shoes, and pulled them off his feet. While he was down there he undid the straps of Claury's sandals as well. When he was done he sat up again. He motioned at the pillow.

"I think we both need a rest. Let's lie down. And then you tell me all about it."

She considered him, a strange expression in her face. He knew what she was thinking and chuckled. "I'm not trying to seduce you. But I'm tired—and since we're likely to spend the night together—talking!—we might as well be comfortable."

Claury shook her head. "That's not what I was thinking about," she said. "Though..." She blushed slightly.

*Yes, you were. We both were.*

*How could we not?*

Claury shook her head. "You do understand that there's no turning back from whatever's going to happen?"

The double meaning of her words wasn't lost on him. He lay back and swung his legs onto the bed. "Of course there isn't," he said. "That's my point. What's done is done. We've kicked a couple of pebbles and the whole hill's coming down. If we tried to stop it now we'd only get buried. Only one thing left to do now."

"What's that?"

"Learn how to ride the avalanche."

Claury looked down on him. She shook her head. "You're worse."

"I wasn't *that* bad!"

"I remember different."

"Female selective memory!"

"Ha! How about that stupid swim across Tyre Bay? Or leaping from the second floor window with a home-made anti-grav belt which barely had enough battery power to stop you from breaking your neck? Or that evening mum and dad went out and they weren't even out the door before you seduced me right there in their bedroom?"

"*You* who seduced *me*! I remember it well."

"Oh yeah? And you said something about 'selective memory'?"

Jack grinned and reached held out a hand. She yielded with an expression of fake resignation and lay down on the pillow beside him. They looked at each other across the few inches separating them.

Claury smiled. "I guess it was me."

"Definitely."

She sighed. "It should have been you."

Jack laughed. "Since when did Clairinda Finisterre care what 'should' be?"

She blushed. There was a good feeling between them, he thought; almost as if the intervening years had never happened.

But they had.

"Tell me what happened..."



## Letters

To the Editor,

With vanity natural to any author, I'd like to express my gratitude to Bruce Downing for his supportive letter, and to Till as well for his endorsement. Amateur writers create essentially for their own enjoyment and amusement, but as Till says elsewhere, art is about communication; the knowledge that readers of Jack Vance—by definition sophisticated and articulate persons—find merit in my work is a welcome affirmation that I must be doing something right.

I am sorry to disappoint Bruce by telling him that there is no sequel on the horizon, although the door was deliberately left open to allow that possibility. Asking for a sequel is perhaps the sincerest compliment a reader can pay, a feeling that the race is not run, and that the characters I lived with for so long still retain a vitality of their own. Lamarck, Voorhies and Taslana may well make further sallies in the future; but for now, I am in the early stages of a new novel. The milieu is very different, but I hope that many of the Vancian influences remain, and that it will find a similar appreciative readership.

*Tim Stretton*

West Sussex, England

To the Editor,

I was appalled, aghast, at your Editorial in *CLS* 14. There on the PDF before me, as plain as the acid stains on a wife-murderer's shirt, were travesties I had not thought to see in a publication that once shone with promise. I refer of course to the following passages:

"an artist's lot—be she writer,"

"important to the artist as her skill"

Why this exclusive use of the female pronoun? I cannot suppose it to be mere grammatical ineptitude. Is it that you only want female writers for the *CLS*? It would seem so, but no, you cry out for written material, even attempting emotional blackmail to pluck stories from their authors.

I can only surmise, then, that it is the bile of political correctness gouting up in a mental parallel to esophageal reflux. Possibly you were recently brain-wiped by the vile combination of television election coverage and continual exposure to a mind-numbingly

bad computer operating system, and were warped, temporarily one trusts, into an ecofeminist or political analyst or something of the sort. (They actually have degrees in ecofeminism in the US, and some think the country has a future. Poor deluded fools.)

I protest against this lapse in taste and judgement. Just as politics is the enemy of truth, political correctness is the enemy of communication and therefore (as you stated in a lucid moment) art itself. It is an insidious form of censorship, as hypocritical as a terrorist's apology, that stifles the creative impulse.

Anyway, I take this opportunity to express the hope that you will soon recover from your apparent mental aberration and return to some degree of normalcy, at least in the use of pronouns.

*Malcolm Bowers*

Dunedin, New Zealand

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Some of Malcolm's references are to the last New Zealand elections (at the time of writing just behind us), which were of the 'snap-election' type. We were spared interminable months of campaigning, but even so had to suffer the usual flood of pre-election drivel, posturing, misrepresentation, and never-to-be-fulfilled-promises pouring across our small nation for six agonizing weeks—nor did it save us from having our streets defaced for several weeks by the very-much-larger-than-life likenesses of people we'd rather not look at unless at the point of a gun, but who grimaced at us from strategically selected positions where one could not possibly ignore them.

