
The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

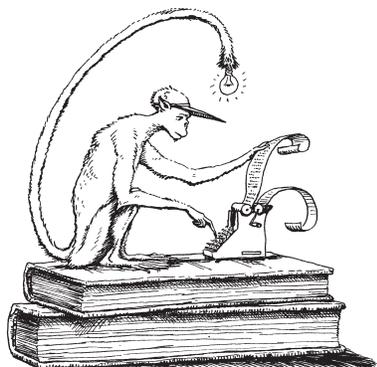
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Editorial

Gentle Readers,

Yes, the *CLS* still breathes, and will probably continue to do so for at least another issue. That's how long it'll take to finish *Coralia*, which is being presented to you in big chunks, so we can finish it off. After that: it depends on you. If the dearth of submissions continues, the *CLS* will go into suspended animation, which may possibly lead to its death from starvation, if for no other reason than the editor's increasing reluctance to make it into a showcase of his writing!

Meanwhile here's the penultimate instalment of *Coralia*, and a somewhat 'different' contribution from the *CLS*'s composition-man. I need not write a preamble to Malcolm's piece, since he's done that himself:

[*Empery*] is a piecemeal introduction to a tale in mind but as yet untold. It is only scaffolding and stage scenery, but serves to illustrate the truth of that footnote at the front of every *CLS*: 'The *CLS* showcases literary work in any form, including fragmentary, which bears the influence of Jack Vance.'

I hope this partial offering encourages others to submit work as yet unfinished, if they perhaps haven't the happy knack of polishing off a novel per lunch-hour in the manner of a Till Noever . . .

I basically agree with his comments: all but the final few words, that is; which do not quite do justice to the intricacies and tribulations of the process of story-telling. However, knowing Malcolm and his ways of expressing himself, it's probably as complimentary as it'll get.

Till Noever



Coralia

by *Till Noever*

Chapter 17

"I'm glad you're here," Cale declared, "and not just because I'm just happy to see you again."

Jack laughed. "That's good to hear."

They stopped to listen to an announcement on the public system. There would be an unscheduled delay due to a malfunction in a minor subsystem. No, it was nothing to be concerned about. Their progress would resume as soon as the system was fully operational again.

"A 'minor subsystem'?" Claury echoed.

Cale laughed. "It *is* a subsystem. Whether it's minor is a matter of interpretation."

Jack took Claury's arm. "Get some sleep, Cale. We'll meet at eight in the Promenade." He motioned to his friend. "Go on. You'll be no good to us if you're falling asleep on your feet. That little Coralian blonde would be very disappointed if she found you torpid and unresponsive."

Cale made a rueful grimace, waved at them, and disappeared into a descensor shaft. Jack turned to Claury. "I'm glad this is over."

She looked at him with a curious expression in her face.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing," she said distractedly. "I guess it's all going too fast for me. Too many things. Too little time. I'm just dazed."

"So am I. Seems we're lurching from one crisis to another. To think that just a few days ago I was complaining about life being too dull."

Claury laughed throatily. "Be careful what you wish for!"

Jack gave her a lopsided grin. "Right now I'm not aware of any impending crises. Seems like we were given a few extra days to figure out what to do with our problems. Which isn't all bad, is it?"

"You mean we can relax?" she said with facetious incredulity.

"I wouldn't go that far."

"OK then, what next?"

Jack shook his head. "Nothing. I'm going to drag you to the social hub of this ship—that being the Promenade—and we're going to sit down, and watch the people go by, and indulge in completely idle speculations about totally useless subjects. And then we're going to go to our cabin and watch a movie and make love and pretend that everything is just so. Typical cruise ship activities. No crises. No hurry. By the time we're done with all that it'll be eight and we'll have to meet with Cale and Teara."

"Sounds good to me," she said.

The afternoon passed as Jack had planned—surprisingly, he thought. Indeed, it was almost eerie. Finally they got ready and, a few minutes before the appointed time, made an appearance at their agreed-upon meeting place. Cale and Teara were already there, immersed in animated conversation.

Claury pulled Jack up before they got there. "I wonder if we should leave them to their own," she whispered.

"Maybe later." Jack grinned. "But I need to talk to our new Coralian acquaintance. She obviously knows Said Khatabi well enough to talk to him. I want to know why and what she can tell us about him."

Claury squeezed his arm. "Back in crisis mode, huh?"

"Not 'crisis,'" he disagreed. "Just fishing."

In the end it was Claury who did the fishing.

The evening had proceeded in a pleasant manner. Conversational subjects had remained, if not decorous, then at least innocuous and unprovocative. But, as the dinner wore on, Claury thought she sensed unresolved issues. Things that needed to be said but weren't. She couldn't put her finger on the elusive feeling and wanted to dismiss it, but found that it wouldn't go away that simply.

She excused herself to go to the bathroom.

"Wait, I'll come with you," the Coralian said to her. She gave Cale a beaming smile which carried the promise of a prompt return. Claury flicked a glance at Jack and saw that he was suppressing a grin.

There came a moment, when there weren't too many others around and the two women were touching up their make-up in front of the wide mirrors, that Teara stopped doing what she was doing and looked at Claury.

"There's something I've wanted to say to you," she began. "I don't quite know to start this. I guess . . . I just want to apologize."

Claury put down her mascara applicator. "What for?" she asked, genuinely puzzled.

Teara sighed. "Oh, I suppose for coming on to Jack last night. I wasn't really . . . you know. It's just that . . ." She seemed to have trouble articulating what was on her mind. "It's just that . . . you know . . . there aren't a lot of Coralians aboard this ship, and I immediately recognized Jack for one. And you, of course. It's just like . . . well, a taste of home, I suppose . . ."

"You're homesick."

Teara shrugged. "Odd, isn't it? I mean, I never knew! Everybody told me that this would happen—but you never know until you actually feel it, I suppose."

"Why did you leave?"

"Oh, I didn't really 'leave,'" the petite woman told her. "I just wanted to get away for a while. Away from the small towns and the claustrophobic place. You know the feeling? Away from family and . . . just everything."

Claury shook her head. "I'm not a native Coralian. Neither's Jack. We have an attachment to the place, but it's nothing like what you seem to feel. At the same time we also never really had an opportunity to feel that the place was closing in on us."

Teara nodded thoughtfully. "I guess you're right. Back at the table you did say you were from Earth—and I was quite surprised. You must have lived on Coralia for a long time. I mean I recognized you as Coralians."

"Well, yes, we did live there for quite some time. Long enough, I suppose."

"So, you must feel it, too!"

"Not as much as you seem to. But it's there. For both of us." Claury saw an opening. "There are no other Coralians aboard?"

Teara shrugged. "None, except for Said."

Claury looked at her with polite interest.

"Said Khatabi," Teara elaborated. "He's an artist of sorts. Not that I know what kind of art he does—and at home I've certainly never heard of him. I suppose he paints. I've seen him sit in cafés and draw people."

Another woman came in and positioned herself a few feet away from them. Teara leaned closer to Claury. "Anyway, he doesn't count," she said lowly. "He talks to me when I see him, but that's about it. To be honest, I

think he's just here to . . ." She broke off and considered Claury for a moment. She sighed and came to a decision. "I think he's here to keep an eye on me," she said.

Oh?

"I . . . I'm . . . oh, damn." Teara's face was a study of conflict. "The Squire's my uncle," she said tonelessly. "If you're a member of his family you don't get to just go off on your own into the big wide universe. Someone's always hovering around."

She looked closely at Claury, whose thoughts were racing.

"I wasn't going to tell you this," Teara said lowly. "I just want to be Teara—not the Squire's niece."

Claury didn't need an intuition's sense to realize that Teara was speaking the truth. The woman was genuinely distressed.

"It doesn't matter," she said.

The Coralian's face brightened a little. "Don't tell Cale," she begged.

"Why not?"

"Because I like Cale—and because I just want to be *me*; not some brat from the Squire's family. A lot of people hate us." She shrugged. "Knowing uncle Theodore, there probably are good reasons for it."

"You don't like your uncle?"

Teara grimaced as if she'd bitten on something sour. "He's my mother's brother. But there are things about him . . ." She shook her head. "You know what they say about relations. The one thing in this universe we don't get to pick and never can do anything about."

"Cale will find out sooner or later," Claury noted.

"I'd rather it were later. Right now, I think, he quite likes me. It would be nice to have someone like me without him knowing who I am."

"But it's not exactly honest," Claury told her.

Teara sighed. "My mother—who else!—told me to be careful of ship-board romances. If she were still alive she'd probably be horrified to find out that I'm interested in a Pilot, of all things—and a Afro-Terran at that. She had very firm opinions on such things."

Claury had a sudden thought. "This Said Khatabi, if he's what you think he is, do you think he'd actively interfere in your social activities? That he'd take active steps to prevent such involvements?"

Teara's eyes widened. "I never thought of that!" she breathed.

Claury gave her head a vexed shake.

Damn!

She had to tell Jack. It looked like matters were on a collision course with trouble again.

She couldn't tell him immediately of course. That would have been a bit too obvious. But she managed to avert any covert enquiries from his corner. When he tried to steer the subject in what she considered a dangerous direction she gave him a look and the tiniest shake of her head. Jack interpreted it correctly and desisted from pursuing his line of enquiry.

Another idea bothered Claury. She'd seen what the Coralians had done on Herrykairn. Surveillance and, when required, assassination. Did that mean that Khatabi was quite prepared to do the same thing? Or was his function less lethal?

The dinner passed pleasantly, though Teara appeared less at ease than she had been at the beginning. Claury suspected that this was because of her suggestion that Khatabi's mission brief might include more than just an observer's role. Presently however Teara seemed to relax under the influence of the wine and the general conviviality, and almost became her former self again. She flirted shamelessly with Cale, who responded in kind. When Jack and Claury excused themselves, the others chose to remain awhile. Claury gave Teara a wink. The Coralian grinned.

Claury bit back on her grin.

"What was that all about?" Jack asked her when they were finally alone.

Claury shook her head. "Our cabin," she whispered in his ear.

When the door had closed behind them Claury placed a finger on her lips and stepped close to him. "Can you scan this room?" she whispered in his ear.

Jack stiffened. His face went white and grim. He detached his UnIfac and typed in a sequence on the control pad; walked around the room pointing it this way and that. In the end he lowered his arm and shook his head.

"Seems safe," he said. "As safe as it can be."

He looked at her. "Now, what's this all about? You've been quite odd ever since you came back from the bathroom."

Claury told him. Jack listened with a stony face.

"Like that, is it?" he said finally.

"Teara is a good person!" Claury insisted.

Jack shook his head. "I've got no problem with Teara. Being the Squire's niece doesn't make her into a monster. But if we're getting involved with her, with Khatabi knowing who we are, it makes everybody but her into prime targets, Cale included."

"What're we going to do?"

Jack grimaced. "We'll have to do what we don't want to do: drag other people into this mess we're in. Just like we did on Herrykairn."

"But . . ."

"They're going to get hurt anyway. I've always thought that one best fights with the truth—or as much of it as is manageable."

"You're going to tell Cale?"

"And Teara."

"You're going to tell him who she is?"

"I'll have to."

"She'll hate you for it."

"Maybe." He went to the com outlet and requested a connection with Cale's cabin. As expected, the two had lost no time in becoming very closely acquainted indeed. He was getting vox only.

"Cale? Jack here."

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt whatever I'm interrupting, but we have to talk. Urgently."

"Now?"

"Now. And to Teara as well."

"Who?"

"Cale!"

"Hmmff."

"This can't wait."

There was a sigh on the other end of the line. A whispered exchange.

"Where?" Cale's voice came back.

"Come to our cabin. And, if you can, take some detours through the crew quarters where people can't readily follow you. It would be good if no one knew where you're going."

"What's going on, Jack?" Cale's voice sounded strained.

"Not over the com," Jack told him. "Just get here."

"So you see," Jack concluded, looking at Cale and Teara's bewildered faces. "This is quite serious."

"But what's Teara got to do with it?" Cale asked puzzled, glancing at her.

Teara looked at her hands. Claury and Jack were silent.

"I'm a Coralian," she said lowly, finally meeting his gaze. "I'm also the Squire's niece."

Cale exhaled sharply. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?" He paused, his face registering understanding. "You thought it would have made a difference?"

"It always makes a difference," she said quietly but firmly.

"No," Cale asserted.

"To me it does," she said. "As long as you don't know I can be sure you're only seeing 'Teara'. Once you do know, it's never the same again. From then on I'm the Squire's niece."

"I think you underestimate Cale," Jack interjected.

Her head snapped around. "What would you know?"

Jack shook his head.

"About your situation: nothing; I can only conjecture. About Cale: a lot; more than you do right now—obviously."

The words stung, as they were meant to. Teara stared at Jack and Claury, angry and bewildered. Silence hung heavily. Then Teara, her face no longer defiant, but desperate, looked down at her hands again and began to sob. Cale, with a menacing look at Jack, got up, pulled her out of her chair and hugged her. She relaxed against him.

Jack glanced sideways at Claury and winked. She shook her head. *Bad boy*, her expression told him; but her eyes were laughing. Cale also looked at Jack. He saw the grin on Jack's face, and his expression softened. He let go of Teara.

"Are you all right?"

She sniffled. "I guess so. I'm sorry—I should have told you . . ."

" 's all right." He made her sit down again and sat down himself, but did not let go of her hand. Jack thought it a most touching scene.

Cale looked at him. "What you're saying is that there's a Coralian spy on board who is keeping an eye on Teara and who might just interfere in . . . whatever . . . and who may have also been assigned to keep an eye on you two, and to carry this warning message to Earth. And he might just be prepared to do considerably more drastic things?"

"Something like that," Claury agreed.

"Bastards!" Cale looked sideways at Teara. "Nothing personal," he said softly.

She shook her head. She took her hand out of his and procured a tissue from her handbag, with which she proceeded to clean up the mess the tears had made out of her eye make-up.

"We're sorry about all this," Claury told them. "We didn't know."

Cale shook his head. "Hardly your fault."

Jack considered his friend. "Got any suggestions?"

Cale thought for a moment. "Not really. There's nothing much we can do about Khatabi—unless he does something to get the captain suitably peeved."

"That is unlikely. Khatabi would do his best to control himself."

"No doubt."

"But he could make life very difficult for you, could he not? I mean, what's the company's policy regarding 'relationships' between passengers and crew?"

Cale laughed. "You've been out of touch! The Guild has recently re-negotiated some aspects of our contracts. The crew may not be allowed to 'fraternize' but it's a different story for the Pilots. During our 'off' hours we are, for all intents and purposes, private citizens, with the same rights as anybody else."

Jack nodded. "Nice going."

"Yeah. The company was dragged kicking and screaming to the block."

Teara's hand came to lie conveniently close on the table between them. Cale placed his own on top of it.

"There must be something we can do," Jack declared.

"Maybe we could just lose Mr. Khatabi," Claury suggested.

"Lose him?"

"Yeah. There's another stop before Earth, isn't there? What if Said Khatabi left the ship but failed to board again?"

"It's a freight exchange stop only," Cale said. "A mining colony at that."

"Still," Claury insisted. "There'll be a station."

"Oh yes. A fairly large one."

"Are people allowed to visit?"

"It's a major attraction actually. A hive of sleaze, with lots of souvenir shops, bars, gambling dens, whore-houses."

Claury raised an eyebrow at his tactless nomenclature. "Well, I would have thought it a part of your average spy's job description to at least have a look around?"

Check on the status of things. Maybe even get in contact with their local snoop. Stuff like that.”

Cale nodded. “I suppose so. Still, the exit logs would show that he was missing,” Cale pointed out. “They’d look for him.”

“I’m sure that can be taken care of,” Jack said succinctly.

Cale chuckled. “I suppose so.”

“Could you?”

“They’d kill me.”

“Don’t get caught.”

“Ha! Now there’s the rub!” Cale looked at Teara. Here, Jack thought, was a classic instance of two people being smitten beyond repair. Funny how it just happened. *Click...*

Cale sighed. “Why do I have the feeling I’m in over my head?”

“Because you are,” Jack said. “But you don’t have to be. There are alternatives.”

Cale looked bemused. “Yeah, I know. But why am I being so stupid as even to consider the ones you offer?”

There was another moment’s silence as each of the four pursued their own thoughts.

“So, you’re just pulling out of the game completely?” Cale asked Jack.

Jack shrugged. “What else can I do? Besides, I’ve had it. And, even if we survive this . . .” He grimaced. “Time for a new start.”

Cale nodded. “Interesting concept. But how, or with what, does a Pilot make a new start?”

“I have no idea,” Jack told him.

“I’ll help,” said Cale, and Jack knew he’d considered his options and made a decision. Maybe, he thought, there was more to Cale than he’d given him credit for only hours before. Maybe the reactor thing had shaken something up. Maybe Teara had. You never knew.

“Good,” he said. “Are we going to try what Claury suggested? And if I can positively identify another courier, maybe we can do it to them, too.”

“What did you have in mind?” Teara spoke up.

Jack looked at her. A plan was forming in his head. It was hazy as yet—but maybe . . .

“Would you help?” he asked Teara.

She nodded. “Of course.” She glanced at Cale.

“It could get you into all sorts of trouble,” Claury warned her.

Teara nodded. “I know that.”

“We don’t know how protected you’ll be—despite your position,” Claury insisted. “Whatever’s going on here may be so big that it won’t stop even at the Squire’s family.”

Teara nodded. Her face was set in determined lines. “I know. But I suddenly find that I don’t care. Or, maybe I care, but not in the same way I would have—even a short while ago. What they’ve done to you is monstrous. If it helps, consider my cooperation an attempt at atonement; trying to make up for what my own people have done.”

Claury looked at Jack. He knew what she was asking him.

Can we trust her?

He nodded. Teara was genuine. He felt a pang of guilt when he considered that, yet again, innocent people were being dragged into his and Claury’s plight.

The dinner in the captain’s private guest room was coming to a close. Conversation, up to this point, had been light and informal. Captain Sanders was a gracious host, who smiled ruefully at Jack’s reminiscences of his time aboard the *Berenice*; and especially his dislike of the social obligations of the crew.

“I know how you feel,” she declared. “Believe me, for the captain the situation is worse.”

She sighed and leaned back. Jack sipped on his coffee.

“There is,” Lila Sanders said in a somewhat different tone, “a subject I’ve been avoiding. But it has to be addressed eventually.”

Jack looked up. Here it was.

“What I’ve been carefully refraining from asking you,” the captain said, “is why ‘Jack Corwin’ and ‘Claurinda Finisterre’—which, I presume, are your real names—are not aboard this ship; and why both of you two have IDs which, quite convincingly, argue that you are Herrykairneans, whose names are nowhere even close to your real ones. It must have taken some effort to make such a switch of identities. All of which suggests that this is more than a frivolity.”

Jack put down his cup and glanced at Claury. They’d anticipated this, and there had been some disagreement as to how to deal with it.

“True,” Jack said. “It took some effort. But we had help.”

Captain Sanders sighed. “Under normal circumstances I’d be forced to give this matter to my security

chief to investigate it at some length. In fact, it was he who brought it to my attention—and it took considerable persuasion and all of my authority to tell him to let the matter rest. The circumstances are not, after all, ‘normal’.

“He will, however, continue to investigate. There’s nothing I can do about that. Still, I have insisted that he report to me first; no matter what he finds.” She contemplated them for a moment. “I’d appreciate some hint of what he’ll find,” she concluded significantly.

“Nothing that’ll incriminate us in anything illegal,” Jack said. “Your chief may find—if he downloaded the latest public records from Herrykairn Station—that by boarding the *Lister Diamond* I effectively canceled my contract with Blue Cluster Carriers. This is bad form, since the *Daniel Lewis* is now effectively stranded at Herrykairn until they procure another Pilot. But it isn’t illegal—or even improper by Guild standards. Not if I have a good reason for doing so.”

“Which you think you have.”

Jack nodded. “Yes.” Lila Sanders gave them both a searching inspection. Then, apparently satisfied, she leaned back in her chair. “You’re not going to tell me though, are you?” she said dryly.

Claury looked at Jack and then at the captain. “It’s better if we don’t,” she said.

“All of which would lead an observer to suspect that you’re both running away from something or somebody.” Lila Sanders eyed them with speculation. “If you arrived piloting a ship,” she said to Jack, “then where did you,” addressing Claury, “come into the equation? The *Daniel Lewis* is a freighter; not carrying any passengers, isn’t it?”

“We met on Herrykairn,” Claury said softly. “We’ve known each other since we were children, but we got . . . separated . . . a long time ago.”

The captain eyed them thoughtfully. “I see. An interesting puzzle. Since you told me you were ‘bonded’ I assumed, of course, that you had been together for some time.” She shook her head. “If you don’t want me to probe, I won’t. As long as I have your assurance that whatever it is you’re obviously running from is not going to endanger the ship or compromise passengers or crew.”

“We have no reason to think that it will,” Claury assured her. “Not at this point.”

“Good. As soon as you think it might, I want to be the first to know. Is that understood?”

The two nodded. “Of course,” Jack said. “And something else. The reasons we’re doing what we’re doing are not frivolous. It’s because we have no choice; because we’ve been pushed into a situation that leaves us no option but to run. In other words, we are, in a very real sense, victims of other people’s machinations. All we want is to be left alone.”

Lila Sanders nodded thoughtfully. “I believe you,” she said simply. “If I can help, let me know. But,” her voice acquired an edge of decisiveness and uncompromising command, “do nothing to endanger this ship, or its crew or passengers. My first obligation is to them, no matter *what* you’ve done for us already.”

Jack nodded. “Understood.”

The *Lister Diamond* dropped out of A-space less than seven light-hours from Korten Station. It wasn’t a particularly good hit: not for a ship like this with top-class nav-zombies, Pilots, and an enormously expensive nav-comp. The ship would have to spend at least another day or two closing the gap and matching orbits. Jack was unimpressed and said so in front of Cale—who, it so happened, was not one of the Pilots on duty during the last phase.

Cale looked at Claury and Teara and chuckled. “That’s Jack for you. If he weren’t so good I’d tell him he was an arrogant jerk. Problem is, he probably would have placed us within spitting distance.”

Their plans for what they were going to do gained shape. Jack had eliminated the third of their suspects, Klovis Renfield, from the list. Now it was only Khatabi and Claire Zuniga to deal with. Jack still wasn’t sure about the latter: a peculiar situation which suggested that her involvement in the whole affair might be peripheral and incidental.

“Maybe your Coralian spy just gave her a simple message to carry?” Cale suggested. “People often get approached to do that kind of thing.”

“We’ll have to get it off her then,” Claury said.

“But not until we’ve disposed of Khatabi,” Jack declared. “He’ll know that she’s a backup courier, and if we take action now he’ll draw the right conclusions.”

Cale nodded. “We’ll deal with her after we’ve left Korten Station.”

Korten Station became a discernible shape against the backdrop of the slowly roiling surface of the giant gas planet around which it orbited. It was a huge cylin-

der, about three hundred meters wide and almost eight hundred meters in length. It was composed of two sections. Half of its length was a framework of mooring points, access tubes, shuttle bays, and service slots for the mining vessels docking there. At its extreme end Jack could see the housing and cooling fins for the fusion reactor powering the station. The other part was a pressurized living module. It rotated at a fairly brisk rate relative to the stationary half, generating a centrifugal pseudo-gravity of more than three-quarter normal in its outermost layer, thus saving energy by not expending it on the creation of artificial gravity. This was a common enough stratagem, though a luxury cruise ship like the *Lister Diamond* eschewed energy economy in favor of a uniform internal gravitational field and a concomitant arrangement of internal structures which corresponded to those of the passengers' habitats.

The *Lister Diamond* slowly nudged closer to the main docking tube and finally came to a relative halt. The link was extended and joined to the ship's main lock. Air hissed into the tube. Presently, ship and station formed one continuous life-support system.

After a minimum of formalities, many of the passengers, eager to get off the *Lister Diamond* and to explore the much touted, often illicit, attractions of Korten Station, filed through the checkout and out of the ship. Before being allowed to exit the ship each passenger was asked to record a waiver of company culpability for anything that might befall them while off-board. This was routine, but in this instance, because of Korten Station's titillatingly unsavory reputation, there had been a special ship-wide announcement with explicit warnings about the dangers awaiting the unwary at this stop. These dangers did not stop at petty theft, larceny, seduction by the local prostitutes, and fleeing by unscrupulous gambling establishments; but included potential hazards to life and limb, which might befall those foolish enough to venture into the station's 'dark' districts.

Jack, who had been to Korten once before, agreed. "The place is a pit of tert-worms," he told Claury. "In other words, exactly what we're looking for."

"How can such a place function?" Teara wondered. "Who's in control?"

"The station's owned by Connor Mines," Jack told her. "They have the rights to all the ore in this system. There's a station manager, who rules this place with

absolute authority; answerable only to his company superiors. The rules of conduct are flexible. Whatever the manager decides is intolerable will be punished. Everything else is permitted. It's as simple as that."

Jack, Claury, Teara, and Cale—who had obtained another dispensation from Captain Sanders to 'look after' his friends—filed through a hundred meter low-gravity tube. There was a brief moment of disorientation as they had to step from the stationary tube onto a moving floor. Around them, a few passengers lost their balance, and had to be assisted by bored-faced helpers who were waiting here for this very purpose.

Once inside the rotating module, 'up' and 'down' soon re-defined themselves, though not in the manner the passengers were used to. The visitors, following a series of indicator lights, headed toward the periphery along a radially spiraling passage, which, to their subjective perceptions, appeared like a straight, gently sloping corridor. It ended at the 'Warren', almost fifty thousand square meters of shops, bars, brothels, restaurants, gambling dens; all connected by a bewildering maze of passages. Usually frequented by a total of about two thousand or so miners who came here at more or less regular intervals to relieve the tedium of their daily toil, this area was now flooded by the passengers of the *Lister Diamond*; folks with EUs to spend and eager to do so: willing, cooperative prey.

The four stopped.

"Time to split up," Jack said to Cale and Teara. "Make sure he follows you two. Make sure you act as suspicious as possible."

Teara eyed him strangely.

"You know," Jack said casually. "Holding hands. Lots of kissing and hugging and stuff. Things that'll give him gray hairs trying to figure out what to do." He grinned. "Just do what comes naturally."

Both blushed. Cale gave Jack a dirty look.

Jack chuckled. "We'd better get going," he said, grinning even broader. "We'll only be here for six hours. That's not a lot of time. We'll meet in two hours, at the *Regis*."

Jack and Claury looked after their departing friends. Claury took Jack's arm. "You're a bad tease."

Jack chuckled again. "Yeah. But it's fun."

He turned serious again. "I hope Khatabi sticks with them and ignores us for at least an hour or so. By then we should have been able to arrange something."

Jack remembered some things from his previous visit. He dragged Claury down a series of passages, past a bewildering array of establishments, into an area which looked sleazier and dingier with every step they took. They arrived at door, above which was a sign, proclaiming this to be *The Yllinian Peacock*.

Jack noticed Claury eyeing him sideways. He shook his head. "No. I haven't been here before. But one hears things."

They passed through a heavy curtain which reeked of smoke, alcohol, and unwashed bodies, and entered a bar room dimly lit by red, blue and green lights arranged around the periphery. A few patrons were in evidence, playing pool on a solitary table, crouching on stools at the bar, or sitting in small, noisy groups around a table. The sound system played a metallic tune with a syncopatic beat that served as an excellent guardian of privacy of conversation.

Jack and Claury marched to the bar, found a free space at a comfortable distance from the nearest patron, and attracted the attention of the tender, a middle-aged bald individual with tattoos all over the visible areas of his skin.

He grunted something that might have meant anything.

Jack produced his 'card. "I need a job done," he said, coming to the point without delay.

Tattoo Man looked at the card and then back into Jack's face.

"What?"

"Quickly and efficiently," Jack said. "No questions."

"What?" The man's eyes wandered over to Claury. They lingered on her face, and then traveled down to her throat and the front of her blouse until they came to rest on her breasts. He winked at her and smirked. Claury's mouth twisted into a grimace of distaste. Tattoo Man's grin broadened.

He looked back at Jack.

"Any ideas?" Jack asked him.

"Depends on the job," the man said.

Jack nodded. "We just arrived with the cruise ship. I need someone who came off it not to get on again."

The face exhibited mild interest.

"How disabled do you want him?"

"Just enough so he can't get back on. I don't want him badly damaged. A stunner would do the job nicely."

Tattoo Man shrugged. "Right."

Jack pursed his lips. "There are complications."

"Oh yeah? Like?"

"Like the guy's a Coralian spy, and his buddy here on the station . . ." He paused. "There's at least one Coralian stationed here, right?"

"Damn right!" the man spat.

It looked like the Coralians hadn't won any popularity contests here either.

"And," Jack continued, "he mustn't know about this until the ship's gone. Otherwise he will try to interfere."

"It will cost you!" The eyes had assumed a familiar glint of cupidity. Jack knew the expression. He looked at Claury. Her face was a stony mask, and she was staring into nothingness. When she saw him look at her she gave the faintest shakes of her head.

Jack redirected his attention to the bartender. "How much?"

"Four thousand."

"Two."

"Three."

Jack shrugged. "Three it is. Half on deposit. The other half in a time-lock trust."

"All of it up front!"

Jack shook his head. "I only *look* stupid."

Tattoo Man considered for a few seconds. "How do we ID the target?"

Jack pulled out a small hardcopy image of Khatabi, which Cale had extracted from the *Lister Diamond's* files.

Tattoo Man looked at the picture. "Where is he now?"

Jack shook his head. "Don't know—but I'll know where he'll be in," he looked at his timepiece, "half an hour."

Tattoo Man pushed across a banking terminal. "Your money," he said curtly.

Jack inserted the 'card. The transaction was completed, with half the sum put under a time lock.

"He'll be in the bar at *Traveler's Heaven*. Have I mentioned the need for discretion?"

Tattoo Man nodded. "You have been unequivocal." He thought for a few moments. "There will be three. When they come in, wait a few minutes, then leave. Head back in this direction and make sure he follows you."

The bartender moved away; casually, as if nothing extraordinary had happened. Jack glanced at Claury. She slipped off her stool and they left the establishment.

Outside he put an arm around her waist. She was tense. Her muscles felt like steel wires under his hands.

"What's the matter?" he said softly as they walked away from there.

Claury took a few deep breaths. "Nothing," she said tonelessly.

"Talk to me!"

And then he knew—even without her telling him—and he cursed himself for his insensitivity.

He stopped and turned to look at her closely. Her face was devoid of emotion. The way it was when she was making a supreme effort to control herself.

"Please trust me," he said gently. "It'll never happen again. That's over and done with. Do you hear me?"

Tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

"Jack, I . . ."

He pulled her to him.

I should have them kill the bastard.

Cale and Teara were waiting for them in the *Traveler's Heaven*, one of the Warren's better establishments. A waitress came and they ordered drinks. Jack excused himself and went to the men's room, using the opportunity to surreptitiously look for Said Khatabi. He spotted him, sitting on his own at a table in a far away corner.

Jack disappeared into the men's room and checked his timepiece. Ten minutes to go. He emerged after a short while and made his way back to table, making sure that he sat facing the entrance.

Cale and Teara looked at him curiously. Jack motioned with a tiny gesture of his head in the general direction of Khatabi's table. At that moment the door opened and three men came in. They went straight to the bar and positioned themselves where they had a view of the whole room.

Their drinks came. Jack slipped his 'card into the waitress' banking terminal and paid their tab.

"We'll have to leave in a moment," he explained when she had left.

They took a few sips of their drinks, before Jack signaled that it was time to leave. "Act suspicious," he said lowly. "We have to make sure he follows us."

They left the establishment and Jack led them back the way they had come. They were about halfway there when Cale stopped.

"Did you hear that?"

They all stopped.

"Let's go back," Jack said.

They went all the way back to the *Traveler's Heaven*. The three men and Said Khatabi were nowhere to be seen.

"That's it?" Cale wondered.

Jack shrugged.

"What about the exit records?" Claury asked Cale.

"I'll take care of that when I get back."

Jack looked around him. He saw the expression on Claury's face.

"I think we'd better get back to the ship," he said. "There's nothing for us here."

They all agreed.

The *Lister Diamond* detached itself from Korten Station and backed away. When it was at a safe distance, it oriented itself into the correct direction and accelerated. A voice announced the completion of the separation phase.

Claury undid her restraint and got up. She had been in a strangely solemn, withdrawn mood since the proceedings in the *Yllinian Peacock*. But now, as she looked at Jack, he noted that much of the darkness had dissipated, allowing the old Claury to show through again. It was still there, but it was not in control.

He contemplated bringing the matter out into the open, but decided not to. It was something which would come up again. A open sore that would bleed and weep again and again until one day it was healed over. And she'd need all the help he could give to complete that healing process. Right now the wound was quiescent and it was probably better to leave it that way.

Claury stepped closer to him, undid his restraint as well, and took his hands, pulling him out of the seat.

"I want to see nobody but you for at least a day."

"Done."



Chapter 18

Claire Zuniga was about to open her cabin door when Jack and Cale walked up behind her. She heard their footsteps and paused. Cale gave her a cool, professional smile. Jack stayed behind, observing. This was Cale's show.

"Ms. Zuniga? We would like a word."

She considered his uniform. Jack wondered if she knew it was a Pilot's, or if to her it just identified Cale as just any member of the crew. He decided that, whatever she thought, it seemed to lend their presence the authority required to do what needed to be done.

"What can I do for you?" she asked politely; smiling faintly, though obviously puzzled. Dark-blond curls framed an intelligent, heart-shaped face with a pair of alert brown eyes.

"We are sorry to bother you," Cale said, "but a matter of possible criminal implications has come to our attention and we may require your assistance."

Now she looked alarmed. Cale made a calming gesture. "Nothing directly implicating yourself. But we believe that, during your stay on Herrykairn, you may have been approached by a man who may have given into your care a message capsule or something of that sort . . ."

Her eyes widened. Cale nodded. "That is correct, I see."

She nodded. "He gave me a capsule. I was to take it to Earth and deliver it to a certain address. He paid me in advance."

"You thought nothing of it?" Cale asked her.

She shrugged. "It is a common enough thing. He paid well; which is also common." Her look wandered from Cale to Jack's studiously indifferent face. He was going to keep out of this if at all possible. He was just here as a backup, and to let his sense work on her to determine if she was talking the truth. Which, so far as he could tell, she was.

Cale nodded agreeably. "This is correct. However, in this instance we have grave reason to suspect that whatever it is you're carrying may be material in a criminal conspiracy."

"I didn't know!" Her eyes narrowed. "What kind of conspiracy?"

Cale's face closed up. "I'm afraid that's not something I'm fully cognizant of. I have, however, been ordered to secure the message and to deliver it into the hands of the proper authorities."

Claire Zuniga now looked genuinely scared. "I didn't know," she repeated.

"We're aware of that," Cale declared, with a brief glance at Jack, who nodded faintly. Claire Zuniga observed the exchange—as she was meant to—and drew her own conclusions. In her eyes Jack had just

acquired the status of a shadowy figure of some mystery; someone who had the power to command cooperation of the ship's crew. Imagination would supply a more credible story than explanation.

"Nobody is implicating you in anything," Cale said. "All we want is the message."

She nodded. "Of course," she said hastily. "If you'll excuse me . . ." She motioned at the door to her cabin. "Would you like to step inside?"

Politely they declined. Claire Zuniga, appearing relieved, disappeared inside her cabin and emerged again soon after. She handed them a small, gray capsule hanging from a chain which she evidently had worn around her neck and taken off her in the privacy of her cabin.

Cale took it and handed it to Jack. The metal of the chain still felt warm from her body heat. For some reason or other Jack was reminded of the chain around his own neck and the photo he still carried with him everywhere he went.

He nodded at Claire Zuniga. "Thank you," he said. Then he thought of something. "There was some more payment forthcoming upon delivery?" he asked her.

She nodded. "How much?"

She hesitated. "One thousand EUs. One half of the total payment."

Cale whistled. Claire Zuniga nodded. "I guess I should have known that something was wrong. If someone was willing to pay that much . . ."

Jack shook his head. "Professionals would charge several times that amount." He motioned at a nearby com outlet. "We would not want you to be out of pocket. And we would like your complete discretion in this matter. If you'll plug in your 'card, I'll make sure that you're fully compensated."

They both plugged in their 'cards. The ship's system effected the transfer of the balance owed from Jack's account to Claire Zuniga's—who presently parted from them, still somewhat bewildered, but not entirely dissatisfied.

Cale and Jack made their way back to Jack's quarters. Cale eyed the capsule in Jack's hands. "How do we know this is it—that she didn't just give us a dud?"

Jack grinned. "It is the real thing. I wouldn't care to try and plug it into a reader though. I suspect it's booby-trapped. Even if it isn't, it'll still be encrypted. I suggest we dispose of it discreetly once we're planet-bound again."

"Will it be safe?" Claury asked anxiously.

Jack shrugged. "Why not?" he said carelessly and dropped it into the drawer of their bedside table.

Cale rubbed his hands. "A satisfactory end to the affair then—for the time being anyway?"

Jack nodded. "A week's peace," he said. Hard to believe, but it really looked that way.

Almost, but not quite. They had overlooked a small detail. Captain Sanders' summons reached them two days out from Earth.

"We seem to have mislaid a passenger," she told them when they sat in her ready-room. Her eyes wandered from Jack to Claury, and back again. "I have a notion that you might be able to help."

Jack went cold inside. He avoided looking at Claury and concentrated on keeping a straight face.

"Whatever makes you think that?" he asked ingenuously.

Lila Sanders smiled without mirth. "If nothing else, your lack of surprise at what I just told you."

Jack shook his head. "That's hardly an indication."

"Don't you want to know who the missing individual is?"

"Not really," Jack told her.

"Well, I'll tell you anyway. He's a Coralian, who joined this flight together with a certain Teara Huil, who, so my records tell me, happens to be a relative of the Squire; and who also, even more oddly, happens to have developed an interest in your friend Cale Perdek—and, it appears, he in her."

Jack contrived an expression of surprise. It probably wouldn't work, he thought, but what else could he do?

It *wasn't* working. Captain Sanders shook her head as she looked at them both. "I have interviewed Pilot Perdek. He feigned ignorance of anything associated with Said Khatabi, the missing individual; though he admitted to his—shall I say 'involvement'?—with the Squire's niece."

Jack shrugged. "That's not surprising—if for no other reason but that it might just be the truth."

Lila Sanders' mouth twitched. "Pilot Perdek was very careful to be evasive, rather than negative, in his responses. I could have forced him to answer more specifically, of course—but that would have compromised his position; especially if he would have had to lie. Possibly even if he had told the truth—as the truth in

this matter might just be serious enough to result in disciplinary measures."

She sighed. "The facts are this. My security chief is worried. The matter of the missing passenger and the suggestive connections with you, Teara Huil, and Pilot Perdek is becoming too much of an issue to ignore. Anything involving Coralians is serious—and since in this instance there are four of them implicated . . ."

"Four?" Jack interrupted.

"You two have at least a connection with the place," Lila Sanders noted dryly.

"You've been busy," Claury said.

The captain looked at her. "It wasn't that difficult. A ship the size and significance of the *Lister Diamond* carries a large database on almost anything of import in the human worlds. The names 'Corwin' and 'Finisterre' had surprisingly extensive entries; which, however, also included some puzzling omissions, especially about your parents." Lila Sanders paused. "I'm sorry about the terrible thing that happened to them." She looked at Jack. "And your parents as well. It must have been difficult."

Jack nodded. "More than you can imagine."

The captain leaned back. "Be that as it may, if you want me to continue to help you I need to know the truth."

"About Said Khatabi?" Jack asked.

Lila Sanders' eyes glittered. "I notice that you're using the name with an easy familiarity. Far more than one might expect after a single mention of it." She leaned forward and folded her hands on the desk. "I owe you a profound debt, Jack. We all do. But I'm also the captain of this ship and I have duties to others. And I certainly cannot condone or support illegal acts aboard my ship. I need to know the truth: all of it. Something to convince me that I am doing the right thing by obstructing my security chief's investigation!"

"You might find the truth very difficult to believe," Jack told her.

"I believed you when you told me about the reactor."

"This is far more complicated and unbelievable."

"I invite you to try me!"

"Jack." Claury touched his arm. "I think we have to." She looked at Lila Sanders. "I think the captain's trying to be our friend. I think she deserves to know."

Jack looked at the two women. "Remember what happened to another one who tried to be our friend?" he said bitterly.

"I know," Claury said, "but that was different. Now that Khatabi . . ." She caught herself.

Sanders looked at her sharply.

"Khatabi is on Kortén Station," Jack told her. "Probably being looked after by his local spy-friend in that place."

"Spy-friend?" Lila Sanders echoed.

Jack nodded at Claury and sighed. "Go ahead," he said. "Tell her."

He looked at the captain. "You wanted to know the truth. Well, here it is."

Claury swallowed. "It all started about twenty standard years ago . . ."

Hours later, Claury and Jack had finished their story—with a lot of interruptions and questions from Lila Sanders, who had listened to their expositions with a face sometimes stony, sometimes compassionate, and more than occasionally disbelieving. When it was done and the last of her questions had been answered she sat quietly for a while.

"So you see," Jack added, "we're just fighting for our lives—and our right to be together. And, you've got to admit, considering everything, we've been very considerate with our enemies. You've no idea how tempted I was to tell those goons on Kortén Station to kill Khatabi and eject his useless carcass into space."

Captain Sanders nodded slowly. "If your story is true," she held up a hand to forestall their protest, "and I have no doubt that it is!—then you've got every reason to be angry. Still, I don't appreciate your battles being carried onto my ship."

"If it hadn't," Claury pointed out quietly, "you might not have a ship by now."

Sanders grimaced ruefully. "There's that. Still . . ." She paused again, thinking.

"No matter what your feelings are," she said then, "I must insist that you refrain from taking matters into your own hands as you have done so far. Especially if you're involving members of my crew!"

"Cale is one of my few friends," Jack told her. "For what he's done, I owe him more than I can express—not just years ago, after the *Berenice* disaster, but also here, when more than just my reputation was on the line."

"He's also an officer of this ship," Sanders pointed out crisply.

Jack shook his head. "He's a contracted Pilot. The company pays him for a service. It seems that in this

instance the payment wasn't enough to blunt his sense of higher duty."

The captain gave him an intense stare which Jack returned without flinching. Finally she relented. Jack got the impression that she hadn't really meant it anyway.

"I don't envy Pilot Perdek his dilemma," she said. "I wonder if I had a similar courage of my convictions if the situation ever arose."

"I think you've already shown that you do," Claury told her.

Lila Sanders shook her head. "I'm just trying to get to the truth."

Jack saw Claury smile, but she didn't press the issue.

"What now?" he asked the captain.

Lila Sanders shrugged. "Now you two be good passengers and keep out of trouble. I'll persuade my security chief that everything has been explained. Not that he'll believe me . . ."

"I wouldn't," said Jack. "However, there's nothing much he can possibly dig up. In order for this conspiracy to work, some fairly extensive tampering with the official records must have taken place. He can look until the day he dies and be none the wiser."

Sanders nodded. "Still, I'll hold him back from taking any action. He will, no doubt, institute some degree of surveillance, but I'll make sure that's kept to a minimum."

She grinned. "I'm not exactly a beginner when it comes to on-board intrigue. You don't get to my position without some measure of political savvy."

She rose from her seat. "Leave it to me. And no more enterprises without my advance knowledge and approval. Is that understood?"

They, too, stood.

"Very clearly indeed," Claury told her.

The *Lister Diamond* entered Earth's influence after a one-day cruise through normal space.

"Don't say it!" Cale warned Jack.

Jack grinned. "All right, I won't."

"But you're thinking it!"

"Sorry . . ."

Cale laughed. The four of them stood on level four of the Promenade, watching the Earth draw nearer on the giant screen plastered against the curved ceiling. By a cunning trick of perspective imaging it was as if

they looked straight out into space. Better than a view-port, really, Jack thought.

Earth grew big and bright. A half-illuminated moon hung off to the port bow. Despite himself Jack felt a surge of a strange and powerful emotions that brought tears to his eyes. This was, despite everything, the place of his birth—and the cradle of everything human, no matter how long they'd been out there between the stars.

Beside him he heard a soft gasp. It came from Teara Huil, who stood, leaning against Cale.

Claury's arms around Jack tightened. He returned the pressure. Despite all the uncertainties awaiting them down there he had the feeling of finally coming home.

The public system announced the imminence of the docking cycle. Cale nudged Jack. "The captain invites the three of you to the bridge for the docking."

"Really?" Teara beamed at Cale. He looked down on her fondly, and Jack wondered where all this was going to lead. After all, Teara was going to leave the ship here. Besides, Pilots' relationships were notoriously difficult. Those on passenger ships had a somewhat better time of it, of course. Their spouses and children were often written into the contracts and accompanied them on their voyages. Still, the life on board a ship was not suited to everybody, and many Pilots' marriages were volatile and transient.

Looking at Teara and Cale, Jack wondered. Here, more than just adaptation to a life-style was at issue. The Squire's reach was long, and her family would not be pleased with Teara's choice of a bonded—if she had made, or was going to make, such a choice. Jack didn't like their prospects.

Cale took them to the bridge and they sat down in the seats Jack and Claury had previously occupied. This time the maneuver lacked the tension of imminent danger and as such everybody enjoyed it much more. Lila Sanders gave them a brief wave and attended to the ritual of overseeing the attachment of the ship to the huge ring of Ilya Station.

When it was all done and control of the ship was temporarily transferred to the company again she came over to them.

"Good luck."

"Thanks for everything," Jack told her and shook her hand.

Claury gave Lila Sanders a hug. "Thanks for trusting us," she said.

Lila Sanders, covering her embarrassment at Claury's impulsive action, turned to Cale and Teara. "Pilot Perdek, I hope you'll continue with us."

Cale grimaced. "I don't know, captain. There are issues to be considered." He saluted her. "Whatever may be, it was a honor to serve under you."

Sanders returned the salute. "Dismissed." She stretched out a hand to Teara and shook it. "I wish you luck."

Teara smiled. "Thank you, captain."

The four left the bridge.

"That's it, I suppose," Cale said to them when they stood in front of Jack and Claury's cabin. "You sure there's nothing I can do?"

Jack shook his head. "From now on, no. We want you to stay alive and healthy and helping us isn't going to accomplish that. Maybe one day. . ."

Cale, somewhat choked up, grabbed Jack's hand. "So long."

"So long, and good luck." Then Jack embraced the petite Coralian woman. "And to you."

"I still think I might be able to . . ." she began.

"Don't!" Jack said. "This is as far as it goes. You've got your work cut out for you. Believe me, I don't envy your position."

"If there's anything we can do . . ." Claury began.

"Stay alive," Teara told her. "One day I'd like to meet you again. Both of you!"

Presently the parting ceremony came to an end, and Jack and Claury were alone in their cabin.

Claury wiped her red eyes and picked up a bag with their things.

"We'd better go."

Jack took another look around. He felt around in his pocket for the message capsule Claire Zuniga had given them. His hand closed around it. They were going to take the shuttle to New York. Maybe dropping it into the Hudson River wouldn't be such a bad idea.

Yes, that was what he'd do.

"Want a hand with that bag?" he asked Claury.

She shook her head. "Nah! I'm a strong girl."

Jack laughed and took her bag anyway—and she put up no resistance at all.



Chapter 19

There were anxious moments when they passed through station inspection—and another when they boarded the shuttle—and yet another when they exited at NY Space Center. Jack had forgotten just how intense Earth's immigration controls were. This was the old planet after all; the world where things had become so bad that in the end it fomented a revolution: the Listerite Rebellion, which resulted in the collapse of the planet-wide TransNet, thousands of indirectly-caused deaths, and a significant restructuring of the relationship between government and the private citizen.

Jack reminded himself that a mere three checkpoints were nothing compared to what would have been in place, say, a hundred years ago, when citizens of Earth, except in the most remote and inaccessible of places, and after centuries of an insidious process of tightening of technology-aided government controls, had virtually no privacy left to speak of; when—at least in urban areas—just about every passage in every building, every public space, every vehicle, and even most homes, had some sort of surveillance mechanism in place: in the name of crime-prevention, traffic-flow control, facilitation of public services, fairness of taxation, ease of communication, or whatever excuse had been ready, convenient, and saleable. The result: an interconnected network of technology inside of which there was no space to be alone, and which had, ultimately and inevitably, come under the control of those who would use it for their economic or political aims.

The system's complexity of course created its own problems. Those with the resources could avoid becoming trapped, and indeed could reap immense profits by using the vagaries of the network to their advantage. But they were, by and large, few and far between. To the vast majority of people the existence of the network implied a constriction of their freedoms; no matter that most of them had been made to believe otherwise.

With the advent of practicable space-travel—made possible by a fortuitous confluence of scientific and technological breakthroughs—the network, quite logically, attempted to extend itself into space, but found its efforts thwarted by distance and the ensuing communication delays. Ships could translate from one point to another with what amounted to net speeds thousands

of times greater than that of light. But the delays resulting from interstellar distances, and the relative scarcity of ships traversing the great voids, effectively prevented the same kind of feedback and resulting control possible on Earth to extend to cover the whole of human space. In many ways the situation was not dissimilar to that on Earth centuries earlier, when European civilization attempted colonialization of the globe, only to find that control of a far-flung empire by means of a communications network with significant in-built delays was inherently impossible, at least in the long-term future.

Of course, the network spawned smaller copies of itself on the colony planets—at least those whose settlements became large and complex enough to sustain its brood. But the colonies were unavoidably sovereign from Earth, though underneath their apparent freedom there lurked a form of local control that was almost as insidious as it had been on Earth. And, equally naturally—when the news of the revolution on Earth had finally propagated to them—they were equally infected by the virus of revolt.

And now, almost a century later? The situation no doubt was somewhat better than before the Listerite revolt, but Jack still considered Earth's environment invasive of personal freedom and privacy alike. A significant proportion of the instrumentality of control was still in place, and, though it had been badly damaged, it had ultimately been reconstructed and improved. And since it existed it would be used; and since it would be used it would also be *abused*.

Indeed, Jack thought that the situation was ramping itself up to its previous state again. Slowly and cautiously, so as not to invoke any resistance, because what men don't notice they won't fight against. Society almost always ignored creeping changes—as it had before the Listerite Revolution, which, Jack thought, might in turn never have happened, had not the then Listerite leader, Jim Heldin, fallen in love with Sam Ilkwood, the daughter of the man at the apex of the pyramid of control.

Fate works in mysterious ways.

Jack looked around at the milling crowds in the terminal building. In another couple of hundred years, give or take a few decades, the whole damn thing might well repeat itself. And again. And again.

Until they learned—which they never might.

Making use of the benign aspects of the network, Jack and Claury's first action upon arriving at their

hotel in the old Manhattan, was to call up a database and initiate a search for 'José Jesus Hidalgo'. The database came up with several thousand entries in continental America alone. They narrowed the selection by specifying an approximate age range, the man's profession, which might or might not be current, and the postal address Claury sent her periodic messages to, a box in a small post office in greater San Diego.

The database returned an entry count of zero.

Jack frowned at the screen.

"He's got to be in there somewhere," Claury said.

"Unless he's dead."

They added the 'deceased' attribute to their last query.

Still nothing.

"Let's ask for the real address of the owner of the post box," Claury suggested.

Jack made a skeptical noise.

He was right. Their enquiry was rejected on privacy grounds.

"I bet if a government agency or bank asked for it they wouldn't get this crap," Claury grumbled.

Jack nodded. "Most likely."

"What now?" Claury asked. "He's got to be around somewhere. You don't get to be a lawyer for most of your life and not have a register entry somewhere."

"Unless it's a hidden entry."

"Or," Claury's eyes lit up, "unless we were looking in the wrong place! Who says he's got to live on this continent?"

They extended their query to include Europe. The database came up with one entry.

"Yes!" Claury looked triumphantly at the display.

Jack transferred the data into his UnIfac.

"Santiago de Compostela," he mused.

"That's where dad was born," Claury said. "Makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Hidalgo once told me that he had been the *abogado* for my family for some time."

"Old Spain? We'd better get us a reservation on a shuttle." A few minutes later he looked up from the terminal. "We could leave today—or early tomorrow morning."

"Let's stay here tonight," Claury suggested. She stood at the window, looking out at the bright New York afternoon. It was later summer; the sky was clear and the afternoon balmy and pleasant.

"Let's go out for a while," she suggested. "It's been—what?—just about seventeen or eighteen years since

I've set a foot in this place. Or anywhere on Earth for that matter. Ever since I attended your graduation." She fell silent. Her face closed up.

Jack got up and went over to her. He turned her around to face him and saw that haunted expression again.

"I'm glad you were there." He kissed her gently. She remained passive for a moment, then yielded into his touch.

"Damn them!" she said crossly when they separated. "How dare they do this to us?"

She touched his face with her right hand. Her fingers traced its outlines. "I was so afraid. Still am."

"Of course," he agreed. "But right now we're a few steps ahead. Let's keep it that way and make the best of it."

They left their room and the hotel and stepped into the streets of old New York. Several hundred years had seen many renovations and improvements, but basically they were still the old streets, wedged between walls of concrete and steel, filled with people and vehicles, flanked by establishments of all kinds, from the bagel eateries in the side streets to the *haute couture* salons of the more fashionable thoroughfares. An ant hill of activity; random, and yet with the subtle order imposed by individual purpose.

Claury and Jack merged with the stream and allowed themselves to be swept up by it for a time. History was a palpable presence. Taken for granted by the residents, but impinging strongly upon the acute senses of the visitors. The monument to a terrorist atrocity from the 21st century still stood stark and grim.

They shunned the fancy restaurants, content with trekking through a variety of small, ethnic establishments, and gorging themselves on the, to them exotic, fare offered there. Small bites at a time. The only way to get through as many as possible without becoming satiated beyond repair.

Finally though they had enough.

"I couldn't even look at another olive," Claury laughed.

Jack ruefully agreed. Arm in arm they made their way through the brightly-lit night back to their hotel. Arriving there the concierge had a surprise for them.

"A message for Ainé O'Connor and Lothar Kolyad. Delivered by hand." He looked at them significantly as if to emphasize the unusual nature of such a method of conveying information.

"By whom?" Claury took the envelope.

The concierge shrugged. "The individual concerned did not identify himself."

"A man then," Jack said.

The concierge, a short, lean individual with short-cropped hair and a nose that would have usefully served a raptor as a beak, nodded. "I got the impression that he was but an agency delivering the message."

They thanked him and walked off toward the elevator. No open shafts in this establishment. Very traditional.

Claury tore open the envelope and extracted a sheet of paper. looked at it and frowned. The elevator doors opened and they stepped inside. Claury folded up the paper and gave it to Jack who tucked it into his jacket. The other five people in the cabin ignored them, or looked on incuriously, depending on their disposition. They got out on their floor and hastened to their room. When the door closed behind them Jack extracted the envelope from his jacket. They sat down on their bed.

Located in the top right corner of the sheet was a small square, labeled "Ms. Finisterre's thumb-print". Claury touched it. The random dots on the page formed into letters.

Dear Ms. Finisterre and Mr. Corwin:

I see that after all these years something seems to have happened which has upset the status quo. I don't know what and how, and how you've come to be together (and alive!), and even less how you've obtained your current identities. However, let me point out that, that if you're wanting to stay alive, you'd better become much more careful than you have been in your attempts to locate me.

The ease with which I traced you, established your true identities, and now convey this message to you, should convince you that you have made potentially fatal mistakes. Searching for me in a public database is one such error. I happen to have a search-lock on my name which instantly alerts me if any query contains it. Tracing the enquiry to its origin was child's play. Obtaining your pictorial IDs from the hotel was a little more complex, but not particularly so.

If I can do this with such ease, can you imagine how easily someone else with considerably greater resources and access could do the same—and more?

So, above all: take care! I don't know if your enquiry has indeed compromised you (and me by implication), but

there is a possibility that it has. In such an eventuality I have no idea as to how to assist you.

In case those interested in your fate have not seen fit to observe certain precautions, I write you this note, which I urge you to erase as soon as you have read it. It will be delivered to your hotel by a New York associate of mine, who will receive it as soon as I'm done. It was transmitted encrypted, and its hardcopy is finger-print and DNA encoded. Still, someone will wonder, investigate, and decipher this message eventually, and when they do I will be compromised; as will you.

I don't know what you want from me, and I'm sure that, whatever it is, I won't be able to help you. But you, no doubt, have other ideas, and I suspect it would be futile to try and dissuade you from pursuing whatever it is you're after. Having entered into the lion's den, as it were, in order to find me, you're unlikely to stop just because José Hidalgo says so.

So be it. In order to avoid you making any more mistakes I suggest that we meet at a place of my choosing. The Café de la Almeida, Plaza de la Azabacheria, Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Be there at 1400h in two days from now. Take a seat at one of their footpath tables and wait. I will arrange the necessary to make contact without exposing either of us. Should anyone approach you and preface his remarks with the code phrase 'es un día hermoso', please follow his instruction without question or delay.

Until we meet, I remain

Yours faithfully

José Jesus Hidalgo

Jack and Claury stared at each other. He took out his UnIfac, and began to sweep the room. Nothing obvious or readily detectable. Which probably meant no transmitting surveillance equipment. If there was any it was wired in.

"I'll have a chat with the concierge," Jack said.

"I'm coming with you." Claury grabbed the 'genuine denim' jacket she'd bought earlier that day and followed Jack to the door.

The concierge was adamant about the hotel's privacy policy. "There is no surveillance equipment," he insisted. "*Tranquillity* prides itself on its discretion. The privacy of our guests is unconditionally guaranteed."

Jack nodded. "Your assurance is comforting. Thank you."

He turned away from the desk.

"What good is his word?" Claury hissed as they walked back to the elevators.

Jack shrugged. "He believes it. What he said felt right. It's possible of course that he doesn't know, but I doubt it. If anybody knows about such things it'll be him. As far as I'm concerned our room is clean. Which means that we might just have gotten away with it. This time . . ." He shook his head. "God, how stupid!"

"I still think we shouldn't stay here tonight," Claury insisted.

"What does it matter?" Jack replied. "If they're on to us, there's nowhere we can go. They'll trace us in seconds, no matter where we are. Since it appears that so far they haven't, I must conclude that we're as safe here as anywhere."

Claury grumbled some more, but finally yielded to logic. Presently she relaxed and their first planet-bound night for almost three weeks passed most pleasantly.



Chapter 20

While New York was afflicted with the monuments and scars of centuries of history, this was nothing compared to Santiago de Compostela, whose history spanned two millennia—and possibly more. The streets they walked, the churches, cathedrals, cloisters, and pilgrims' resting places were thick and heavy with the presence of uncounted souls and fates. The cafe, outside which they waited for a sign of emissary from Jose Jesus Hidalgo, had been here centuries before the first men ever left this planet. And—though the modern age was present, with its vehicles, the Unlfacs in people's hands, the fashions of the day—despite all of that, the spirit of the city's history pervaded it all like a subsonic hum; outside the range of perception, and yet impossible to ignore.

"I don't want to sound fretful or impatient," Claury said to Jack, "but we've been sitting here for almost two hours."

Jack nodded. "I hope Hidalgo knows what he's doing."

Claury pushed her sunglasses back up her nose to shield out the rays from the sun, which was slanting

down toward the spire of the church of San Martin Pinario. Tourists were still milling around the Plaza de la Azabacheria; would be well into the hours of darkness, when the plaza would be lit by a system of street-lighting whose archaic style concealed the modern lighting elements inside. The new world yet again.

Pilgrims? Jack wondered. Hardly. Not now; except for a few diehard believers of old faiths and traditions; and these would hardly be strolling along the plaza, but attending to their devotions in the churches.

"*Es un dia hermoso, verdad?*"

Jack looked up at the voice, to look into the eyes of a bespectacled male individual of indeterminate age. Maybe eighty, he guessed. The Iberian features were deceptive: a pair of clear, dark eyes inspected them with open, if dispassionate, curiosity.

Jack collected his wits. "*Si*," he replied, thereby almost exhausting his Spanish.

The man smiled at them both and bent low, as if to inspect something on the table. "If you would follow me, please," he said in perfect *Inglisch*.

Without waiting for a response he turned away. Claury slipped a hard-currency EU certificate as a tip under a plate and got up. Together they followed the man, who was strolling away without looking back, keeping a few paces' distance from him. He led them out of the plaza, around several corners, along two blocks of buildings and into a dark alley, where he stopped to allow them to catch up.

"Wait here," he hissed as he stepped back to the entrance of the alley. He looked around and then came back to them. Jack suppressed a comment about the futility of such precautionary measures which, under the circumstances, had a ridiculous air about them. Darkness was hardly a method of concealment from IR scanners. Even his Unlfac's sensors, suitably aimed, would have picked them up in here.

"It never hurts to at least look for the obvious," the man told him.

Jack started, and then grinned ruefully. Had he been that unobvious?

"Come," the man said.

They stumbled after him through the murk. He stopped and rapped at an unseen door, which opened after a brief delay, revealing a dim glow. Their guide motioned them on. Jack let Claury precede him. She ducked into the low doorway. A small exclamation

escaped her as she took a few quick steps and embraced the figure standing near the door.

Jack stepped inside. Someone closed the door behind him.

Claury let go of the man she was hugging and turned to Jack.

"This is Hidalgo," she said fondly.

The old man, who stood almost as tall as her, nodded and stretched out a hand. "Pleased to finally meet you, Mr. Corwin."

Jack took the hand. "Jack."

Hidalgo nodded politely and made a gesture to the back of the room. "Let's go upstairs. It's much more comfortable."

"I really don't know what you're expecting to find here," Hidalgo told them. They were sitting in the parlor of one of Santiago's old houses. The ornate windows were covered with thick curtains that would make any attempt to listen into their conversations with laser-mikes extremely difficult. The man who had assisted Hidalgo had disappeared without a word.

They had summarized the essentials of the last few weeks. Hidalgo had listened attentively, nodding occasionally in silent emphasis of a point made.

"You were very fortunate," he said when they had finished.

Claury agreed. "We know that. And, so far at least, it seems to have seen us through."

Hidalgo smiled a wise smile. "Ah, but *Fortuna* is fickle. Too much reliance on her will eventually always lead to grief."

"Don't question good luck," Claury quoted her father.

Hidalgo smiled. "Not in small portions anyway," he agreed. He turned serious. "Tell me, what are you actually planning to do? I mean, *is* there a plan? Or are you just going to run and keep running? Because—and I know this sounds grim, but we must face realities—that's all I can see in store for you. The most promising scenario is one where you manage to retire to some backwater planet and there live out your lives in constant fear of them someday catching up with you."

Claury scowled at Hidalgo's gloomy assessment. "There's got to be a better way. That's why we're here. The first thing we need to know is 'why': why this has been done to us; why our parents had to die; what it is that makes the two of us so . . . dangerous? . . . once we

are together. What do we know? Do we know anything? If it's not knowledge, then what is it?"

Hidalgo shrugged. "I wish I could tell you, but I can't—because I don't know. I merely act as an intermediary between two parties, one of which is you, and the other one is somewhere on Coralia. I receive the messages which confirm your continued well-being—if that's what it can be called—and relay them to the Coralian party."

"Who is? . . ." Jack prompted.

Hidalgo smiled crookedly. "I have not attempted to follow the labyrinthian trace of the message after it is delivered to its e-dress—and even if I had, I am certain it would have done me no good. On the contrary, the party concerned might well have resented such attempts, which would have made my role as an intermediary difficult, and possibly even placed me in danger of becoming a target myself." He made an apologetic gesture. "I, too, do not care to die before my time. The threat of personal extinction is a potent one. And so I do as I am bid."

"We're not blaming you," Jack told him. "But if there's anything at all you can tell us. Any snippet of information . . ."

"And what are you going to do with it?"

Jack shrugged. "I have no idea. But if I haven't got the information, how can I tell?"

Hidalgo nodded. "There's only one thing . . ."

"Yes?" Claury leaned forward.

Hidalgo made a small gesture. "I already told you. I forward the information about Ms. Finisterre's current status—to an e-dress on Coralia. I have never traced it, but . . ."

". . . we could," Jack concluded.

"Not from Earth, to be sure," Hidalgo stated.

Claury exhaled sharply. "You mean we'd have to go to Coralia," she said tonelessly.

Hidalgo nodded. "Not a comforting prospect, I know."

Claury shook her head. Jack saw that her face had assumed that look he dreaded: empty, closed, afraid. He reached out and touched her hand.

"Don't!" She snatched it away.

Jack and Hidalgo looked at each other. Jack saw a great compassion in the old *abogado's* eyes. He suspected that the man knew only too well what Claury had been through. Nobody could know the full depth

of her despair, of course, but here, at least, was one other human being who at least had an idea.

Jack slipped along the sofa and put an arm around Claury's shoulder. She stiffened and made a jerking motion to shake him off. For a moment Jack was going to oblige, but then he looked at the *abogado* again. Hidalgo shook his head almost imperceptibly. Jack, instead of letting go, reached out with his other arm and pulled her around to him. Claury resisted for a few moments, but, sensing that he wasn't going to give in, yielded to his pull and leaned against him. Another moment passed. Her hands crept around him, until finally she clung to him fiercely and dug her face into the crook of his neck. Over her shoulder he looked at Hidalgo. The old man's eyes were red. In them he saw the same question that was going around in his own mind.

How could anybody have done this to her?

He rocked her gently and in that soothing motion she slowly, almost imperceptibly, relaxed. Dry sobs turned into a steady weeping. Jack stroked her hair and kept rocking her.

The crying fit exhausted itself. Her grip on him loosened. She lifted her blotchy face from his shoulders and pulled back; then stopped, pressed her cheeks against his, pulled back again and wiped her eyes.

"Oh my God, I'm a mess . . ."

Jack smiled. Claury turned to the *abogado*. "I'm sorry."

Hidalgo shook his head. "Don't be. I've always admired your resilience. Lesser souls would have yielded and gone insane a long time ago."

Claury wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her blouse. Hidalgo withdrew a folded white handkerchief from the pocket of his jacket and handed it to her.

"Where were we?" she asked.

"I . . ." Hidalgo began, then fell silent.

"I'm fine. Honestly."

Hidalgo nodded, eyeing her with an expression of profound admiration. "We were saying that you might have to return to Coralia. For that's where it began; and there lies the center of the web that's been holding you prisoner."

Jack grimaced. "And how do you propose we do this?"

"There are ways of tracing e-dresses."

"But that requires certain resources," Jack said. "None of which we are likely to have on Coralia . . ."

He stopped and looked at Claury. "Or maybe we do," he said slowly. He glanced at Hidalgo. "We'll need to locate someone. Quickly."

"Who?"

"Someone who arrived with the *Lister Diamond* at the same time as ourselves."

"The individual in question would have disembarked as well?"

Jack nodded. "That was her intention."

Claury's head snapped around. "Teara!"

"She said she wanted to help."

"Is there any way we could get a line to the *Lister Diamond*?" Claury asked the *abogado*.

"Who'd you want to talk to? If she's not aboard . . ."

"Not her," Jack told him. "A friend of mine."

"It's possible, I suppose."

"Well then, can we do it: preferably soon?"

Hidalgo sat in thought for a few moments. "It would be better to use an alternative com account. My own, if used in such a context, would trigger off alarms all over the place." He picked up his UnIfac from the coffee table and established a connection. Some minutes later he looked up. "What's the name of your friend?"

"Cale Perdek. Pilot Perdek."

"A member of the crew?"

Jack nodded.

"Handy," Hidalgo said dryly and returned his attention to the UnIfac's screen. There was a brief exchange with someone on the ship. Jack and Claury caught the gist of it. Cale was not on board. He had taken four days' shore leave.

Yes, there was an address, but it was not available because of the privacy laws.

Jack signaled to Hidalgo. "Get me in contact with the captain," he said.

Hidalgo raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Tell whoever it is you're communicating with to let Lila Sanders know that Jack would like to talk to her."

Hidalgo shrugged and complied with the request. Finally, somewhat bemused, he handed Jack the UnIfac. Presently, Lila Sanders' face appeared on the screen. She smiled at Jack. "Greetings! Enjoying your stay on Earth?" The question was loaded with hidden meaning.

Jack smiled back. "It's been some time since I've seen it. It's all kind-of new and bewildering."

Lila Sanders laughed. "I know the feeling," she said. "By the way," she continued, "you might be interested to

hear that the ship's comps have been reprogrammed along the lines of your suggestions."

Jack stared. "That was a quick decision!"

Lila Sanders shook her head. "Not really. My chief had it all pretty much worked out by the time we got here. His proposal was accepted as it stood. Well, *your* proposal actually, but . . ."

Jack grinned. "I don't mind. So, what's the schedule?"

"We're on target," the captain told him. "The ship will proceed as scheduled. Another four days in the dock for maintenance and we're off again."

"Where to?"

"Coralia, Hesperus, Sadhu, and the rest."

Jack glanced at Claury. She looked uncertain. "Captain," he said. "Any way we could get a berth as far as Coralia?"

Lila Sanders' eyebrows shot up? "Fed up with Earth already?" Another question with lots of hidden content.

He nodded at her image. "We have pressing business elsewhere."

"I see. Just a moment." Lila Sanders' image was replaced by a 'Hold' message. Jack looked at Jose Hidalgo. The *abogado* eyed him quizzically. "You have interesting friends . . ."

Since they hadn't told him the full story of their trip, Hidalgo had every reason to be bemused. Not everybody was on those kinds of terms with the captain of the largest ship ever built.

Jack laughed. "Long story. Anyway, if the *Lister Diamond* leaves in a few days that should keep us well ahead of the wolves, should it not?"

Hidalgo nodded. "Probably."

Jack looked at Claury. "You're all right with this?"

She shrugged. Her eyes still had a faintly haunted look. Behind the veneer of restored normality there were a lot of unresolved issues. Jack hoped that she could keep them under control for the time being.

"I'm all right," she said. "We have to do this, Jack. I know that."

"Good."

"Jack?" Lila Sanders' voice came from the UnIfac's speaker.

"Captain?"

"My purser tells me that the ship is fully booked. Unless your friend, Teara Huil, or someone else decides to stay on Earth, rather than continuing on to Coralia. Or—and this is another possibility, but you'll have to

take this up with her—unless she's willing to let you share her suite."

The captain's words reminded Jack of the original purpose of his call. He nodded at Sanders' image. "That's why I called to begin with. I presume Teara's with Cale? I was trying to get hold of his current whereabouts—"

"—and you wanted me to override the privacy lock," Sanders grinned. "I see. Not a social call then." She chuckled. "Never mind. Here's Pilot Perdek's current address—and his projected itinerary." She did something out of his sight and some lines of text appeared at the bottom of Jack's screen. Jack touched the 'store' icon. "Thanks," he said to the captain's image.

Lila Sanders nodded. "Let me know how you get on with Ms. Huil. And good luck. I'd love to have you with us again!"

"Same here, captain."

Lila Sanders' image nodded and collapsed into a 'discom' message. Jack handed the UnIfac back to Hidalgo.

"We'll have to get to Cale and Teara," he said.

Hidalgo recalled the address Sanders had transmitted. "In the American Rockies; heading for the Caribbean. Cuba, to be specific. Trying to see it all in a few short days, I suppose."

Jack shook his head. "He's just showing Teara around."

Jose Hidalgo contacted Havana and arranged for a reservation at *Hotel Alicante*, the same place Cale and Teara would be staying at. He also booked the shuttle which would convey them to Cuba in the morning. That done he leaned back and relaxed.

"I hope it all works out," he said when he put the UnIfac down.

"So do we," Claury said darkly.

Jack had been wandering around the room, studying the ornaments on the mantelpiece, the reproductions on the wall, the intricate designs on the antique writing table. He finished his inspection and turned back to Hidalgo, his hands on his back.

"When Claury's parents saw you—the last time before they were killed—what exactly did they tell you? What did they come for?"

Hidalgo shrugged. "As I told you before: they came to arrange for certain financial matters. They also made their wills. In the evening we went out for dinner and

subjects other than business came up. There was a mention of unspecified problems on Coralia—and of your father's murder. I urged the Finisterres to consider taking their concerns to the authorities, but they rejected the idea. Such a course of action, they maintained, would only exacerbate the situation. There were secrets, they said, which were better kept close to the heart—or at least that was what Will Corwin had insisted upon; and they were inclined to agree."

As if in response to Hidalgo's words, Jack felt the brush of something familiar; some meaning of profound significance. He tried to pin it down, but it fled like the memory of a dream.

"Your father maintained that the only solution was to retain a low profile," Hidalgo said to Claury. "He thought that inaction was the best guarantee of their and your safety. When I suggested taking precautions—perhaps in the form of depositions entrusted to myself for safe-keeping—he replied that there was no safe place to keep the kind of information and that I, as the keeper, would myself be exposed to grave danger."

What a terrible secret it had to be!

Jack remembered . . .

. . . his father, during the weeks before his murder, extremely preoccupied with something he had never communicated to his family; grown distant, much more distant and aloof than Jack had ever known him. A different man, almost. Brimming with energy in one moment and plunged into the depths of depression in the next. Still, the affection he had always felt for his son shone through on odd occasions; like when he surprised Jack with posing for the picture of the family with Claury. The same picture Jack still carried with him today.

Instinctively Jack's hand reached for his chest, feeling for the metaplast pendant resting over his heart. It had seen him through a lot of things. Just having it there. The dearest memories of his life in one small image.

Claury looked at him from the sofa. Jack's hand dropped away from his chest. But she had seen the gesture, and he knew that she knew. She got up and came over to him. "Are you all right?"

Of course he was all right! Compared to the way she'd been treated, he was more than all right.

He took her hand. "I think we'd better go. The shuttle leaves rather early."

Jose Hidalgo got up from his armchair. "You have booked a hotel?"

"*El Gitano*," Jack told him.

"Good. Small but pleasant." Hidalgo sighed. "I shall not see you again, I fear. It is too dangerous."

Claury gave him a hug. "Thank you for everything."

They exited the same way as they had come. Alone this time. Stepping out of the alley they made their way back to the Plaza de la Azabacheria and from there to their hotel. They advised the concierge of their planned departure and went up to their room.

Jack closed the door behind him and leaned against it.

"Nothing, damn it!"

Claury shrugged. "Had you expected something? What could he tell us today he hadn't already told me years ago?"

Jack shook his head. "And yet . . ."

Claury dumped herself on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "Yet what?"

"I get the feeling he told us something. Quite without knowing it maybe, but there was *something* . . ."

She rolled onto her side and looked at him. "Like?"

He sighed, pushed himself off the door, went around the bed, and lay down beside her. She rolled over to the other side so that she faced him.

"I don't know," he said to her unspoken question.

"I think maybe we're chasing rainbows," she said.

"No," he insisted. "I know we're not. In fact I know it's right under our noses. Something so obvious that we'd never think of it."

"But we don't even know what we're looking for!" she exclaimed.

"Which means we mightn't even know it when we see it," he agreed gloomily.

He caressed her face and stroked her hair.

"Are you all right? You had a bad spell back there."

Claury exhaled explosively. Her glorious eyes looked troubled. "I get these flashbacks. My life in the prison. The man in the cemetery. All those men . . ."

She rolled onto her back. "Jack, I was a whore for almost ten years of my life. Do you know what that means? What that kind of thing *does* to you?" She shook her head. "Of course you don't! Nobody does. Not unless you've been there." She sighed. "And now I'm just supposed to pick up my life as if all that had never happened. Just switch it off. Ignore it. Get on and pretend that . . ."

“. . . everything's all right?" he said.

"Something like that. And yet everything that happens takes me back to it. Every sleazy bar. Every familiar sight here on Earth. Even seeing Hidalgo. It all brings back these memories; when all I want is to keep them out of my mind! But I can't—because they're in there; because they're *me*, and it's never going to be any different, and the Claury that you once knew is gone, and it's all fake and pretend. . . ."

Jack levered himself up on one elbow and looked down at her face: a mask of conflicting emotions, remote and strange.

"Then they've won," he said.

Her eyes flicked over to him; and away again; and back. . . .

"Are we really going to let them do this to us?" he asked her. "Just like that?"

"Do we have a choice?" she said emptily.

"Of course we do."

"Nothing 'of course' about it."

"Yes, there is!" he insisted, despite the sick feeling that was spreading all through him, because he felt her slip away again.

"Claury, look at me."

Her eyes wandered back to his face.

"What do you see?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said," he told her. "What do you see?"

She shrugged, still distant. "I see Jack Corwin."

"Nothing else?"

She shook her head.

"What do you remember about Jack Corwin?"

"A lot of things."

"Good things?"

"Only good things," she said.

"Not a single bad one?"

"No."

"How about that episode with the Coralian millipede?"

She hesitated, and he knew that she remembered. A slight smile played around her lips, but as yet it didn't reach her eyes.

"There was that," she admitted.

"Which, you may recall, happened in the same place where, not too long after, the same Jack and the same Claury made wild and passionate love—all the while laughing about the millipede episode all those years ago."

He might have imagined it, but he thought there was a spark of sorts.

"You forgot the millipede, didn't you?" he said gently.

She considered him solemnly. "The point of all this?"

Jack sighed. "The point, my love, is that the millipede episode—unpleasant as it was, and revealing the more sordid part of my otherwise sweet nature—was an essential part of our history. An inseparable element. In fact, if you care to think back, it led to the worst fight we ever had. The names you called me are not, I believe, official components of any vocabulary. And it was my efforts to make up for what I realized was a disgusting prank which finally led to our first kiss. And then. . . well, history tells the tale."

This time the smile reached her eyes. "Without that kiss I might have paid more attention to Louis Oentkin, who was, at the time, considerably more attractive."

"So you keep telling me."

"Oh, Jack. . . ."

He held her eyes, not quite daring to hope.

She rolled on her side, reached for him, pulled him to her. "Jack, I'm sorry," she said. "I know what you're telling me. I just wished I were stronger."

"You are strong," he said. "You've made it through all this!"

"But. . . ."

"But nothing. Just don't leave me again like this, all right?"

"I'm not going to leave you. Not ever."



Chapter 21

"There they are." Claury pointed. Cale and Teara were sitting by themselves in a secluded spot at the periphery of the garden bar of the *Hotel Alicante*. In the hot evening, under the imitation lampions ringing the area, they looked just like an ordinary pair of star-crossed lovers, enjoying an evening by themselves; alone even among the crowd gathered here.

Jack and Claury wove through the throng of patrons and stopped at their friends' table.

"Hello again."

The two looked up. A broad grin spread over Cale's face. Teara's face displayed pleasure at seeing them again.

"Hope we're not disturbing anything."

Cale stood up and gave Jack a big bear hug, while the women embraced somewhat more decorously.

"What're you doing here? How did you know where we were?"

Jack chuckled. "Your captain was kind enough to provide me with your itinerary."

Cale clapped him on the shoulder. "Jack, boy, it's good to see you!"

He procured another two chairs and they arranged themselves around the small table. They talked about irrelevancies for a little while but Cale was not fooled. He fell silent and eyed Jack and Claury with open curiosity. Teara watched.

"This isn't a social occasion, is it?" Cale asked.

Jack shook his head. "No. I wish it were—but the truth is that we need help." He looked at Teara. "From you mainly. Seems like we'll have to take you up on your offer."

"What can I do?" she asked simply.

"Two things," Jack told her. "First, we'd like to hike a ride to Coralia on the *Lister Diamond*—and in your cabin, since there's no spare ones."

Teara shrugged. "Done."

"The second favor is a bit more complex, and will need some explaining. It may also involve you in doing something which will probably be against the interests of your uncle. I know you've offered your help, but this may be more than you'll feel comfortable doing."

Teara shook her head. "I mean what I said back then. I will help you in any way I can."

Claury placed a hand on Teara's arm. "We know you said that, but . . ."

Teara put a finger on her lips, admonishing Claury to silence. "I said I *meant* it," she chided.

Claury shut up and smiled. Teara looked at Jack. "Actually, I'm glad you're coming to Coralia. I may need all the friends I can get. I may end up asking for your help yet."

"To do what?"

"To leave again."

Jack looked from the Coralian woman to Cale and something told him the remainder of the story. Cale nodded. "I'm going on one more round trip with the

Lister. Then I'm out of it as well. You must be setting a trend."

Jack chuckled. "The things women do to you."

"Hey!" Claury protested.

They all laughed together. Cale signaled to a waiter, who materialized at their table soon after. "A round of rum and cola," Cale told him. When the drinks had come they clinked their glasses. "Here's to adventure," Cale said. Jack looked at his friend in astonishment.

How wrong can you be?

"Just make sure you don't get too much of it," he added as a dry rejoinder.

Cale sobered. "I'll do anything I can to help as well," he said.

"Thanks," Jack told him. "What exactly are you two planning?"

"We don't quite know yet," Teara told them. "But it looks like, homesick or not, I won't be able to stay on Coralia."

"That doesn't bother you anymore?" Claury asked her.

Teara made a wry face. "It does, but I mustn't let it matter."

"It's not going to be easy," Jack warned her. "Native Coralians really suffer."

"I know. I hope whatever I'll get in compensation will make up for it."

Jack glanced at Cale. "What're you going to do?"

"I'm open to suggestions."

"What else do you want from me?" Teara asked Claury.

"Jack wants to find somebody," Claury told her.

"Who?"

"Whoever's been doing this to us. And maybe who killed Jack's father—and my parents."

"And then what?"

"First things first," Jack told her.

"How can I help?"

"I need someone to find the owner of a Coralian e-dress."

"Consider it done."

"It won't be as easy as it sounds."

Teara shrugged. "I know some people who will *make* it easy."

Jack grinned.

"Excellent!"

Earth swung out of their field of view. The *Lister Diamond*—which, courtesy of a Jack Corwin suggestion, had not required the impossibly complex and expensive modifications that would have grounded her for months—accelerated in the general direction of Choarynda, the M-class star whose sole satellite was Coralia, planet of immense turquoise oceans and two large islands.

The three watchers in Teara Huil's cabin undid their restraints. The two women resumed a temporarily interrupted discussion about the pros and cons of the various variations of gerotol currently on the market. Jack listened with a detached mien.

"I'm going for a walk," he told them.

"You all right?" Claury asked him.

Jack nodded. "Yeah, I just want to do some thinking."

She blew him a kiss. "How about we see you in the usual place in—what?—an hour?"

Jack keyed the opening mechanism for the door. "Yeah. See you there."

The 'usual place' was the *Life Tide Café*, which had become a sort of a hangout for the four of them.

The door hissed close behind Jack. He looked at it for a moment and thought about how it was good that Claury had another woman to talk to. The two, despite their disparate upbringings, had a lot in common and got along just fine. Jack knew that he and Claury could talk to each other about anything, but every now and then talking to another woman was probably a good thing for her, if for no other reason but that in this case it helped her realize that, though they might look simpler and less problematic, other lives could, in their own way, be just as screwed up as her own had been for a good many years now. Privilege, wealth, and power did not come without a price, and not everybody was able to pay it.

Teara certainly didn't seem to. Too much of a conscience and not enough of an ability to deceive herself about the truth. And now there was Cale, of course.

Jack shook his head. They were an odd mix, those two. He couldn't really have thought offhand of a more unlikely combination. But what do you know? They clicked and that was that—and now they both were apparently willing to make a major break with their former lives, just in order to be together.

Jack hoped that it would last.

He stepped into descensor and drifted down several levels before grasping an exit handle and levering him-

self into the corridor beyond. He went to a com outlet and requested the captain. The connection was refused politely but firmly. Jack insisted and left a message for Lila Sanders to contact him if and when she had the time.

He discommed and continued on toward the Promenade. As he turned a corner in the passage a com outlet to his left emitted a melodic whistle. Jack stopped.

"You wanted to see me, Jack?"

"When you have the time. I don't want to impose."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"I have a few minutes. Turn left and print-ID yourself on the pad next to the red door marked I-34. You'll have a clear passage to my office."

"Thanks."

He did as he was told and a few minutes later stepped into Lila Sanders' ready-room through a back door. She turned upon his entry and motioned to a chair. "Have a seat. What can I do for you? Where's Claury?"

"Chatting to our gracious Coralian host."

The captain smiled. "So, we're alone. Well—maybe this is the time for a heart-to-heart talk then. Just you and me, and nothing but the truth." She made a small gesture. "And then I'll see if I can do whatever it is you need done this time." A wry grin.

Jack liked this woman. She wasn't just the captain of Earth's largest ever ship, and therefore astute and presumably highly intelligent. She was also the kind of no-nonsense person that went down well with him. Not much of a politician here—which made him wonder how she'd gotten to where she was. Hard work, all of it, most likely.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

Jack shook his head. "Not a good idea. Especially not for one in your position."

Lila Sanders sat down in a chair opposite him. "Try me, Jack. You never know; I might be able to help." She eyed him speculatively. "And, yes, this is completely and utterly off the record. You're telling this to Lila Sanders, not the captain of the *Lister Diamond*."

"I'm not sure you can divorce the two," Jack cautioned her.

Lila Sanders smiled. "I've had to learn a long time ago to compartmentalize my personality into two dis-

tinct entities. To become a controlled schizophrenic, if you will.” She shrugged. “You get used to it.”

She leaned forward. Her dark-brown hair—dyed no doubt, but rich and thick nonetheless—was wrapped in a tight bun at the back. It gave her a stern, but also a slightly Latin look. Her slight, but athletic, figure lent her the easy grace of a Flamenco dancer. Jack could imagine her like that. An incongruous contrast to the person in charge of a ship the size of a small town and the lives of thousands.

“Come on, Jack,” she said. “Tell me. What’re you up to now?”

He told her.

“And what do you want from me?” she asked him when he was done.

“I need access to some spare computing capacity.”

“What for?”

“So I can work out some things.”

“Like?”

“Don’t know yet.” He held up a hand. “Honestly, I don’t. I don’t even know what I’m looking for. I need an idea generator. You know, something equivalent to the navcomp when it gives Pilots navigational alternatives to choose from. I need to feed a panoply of facts into something that’ll make connections I haven’t been able to make.

“It doesn’t matter if most of them are wrong, but I need something to choose from. This is stuff I can’t do with a UnIfac. It just doesn’t have the database or the computing capacity. Not even my Model Q will do that.”

“That kind of activity will register,” Lila Sanders told him.

Jack nodded. “I know. But if it could run under your login and with a privileged access lock then it doesn’t matter. You could even delete the database access stats, so nobody can reconstruct things along that path.”

The captain whistled softly. “You’ve got this all worked out, haven’t you?”

Jack blew out his cheeks. “I’ve got nothing else to go on, Captain.”

“Lila.” She smiled. “As long as we’re in private.”

Jack nodded. “Thanks . . . Lila. As I said, I’ve nothing to go on. No motives, no hints as to the ‘why’ of all this. And I need something before we get to Coralia. Tracing that e-dress isn’t going to help me a big deal if I haven’t got something to work with. You can’t fight for your life if you haven’t got the right weapons. That’s

what I’m trying to find: a weapon; something that’ll keep Claury and me from being killed.”

“You may be looking for something that doesn’t exist.”

“It exists all right! Because we’re still alive. Somebody’s got to be holding a gun to somebody else’s head. And I’d dearly like to know who is doing what to whom.”

Lila Sanders nodded. “A sensible enough suggestion.” She thought for a few moments. Her sea-blue eyes rested on Jack’s face. She had, he thought, a very penetrating gaze.

Finally, as he had known she would, she nodded. “All right. Let me know when you want to start. I’ll get you access to one of my com-terms.”

“Tomorrow—if that’s all right.”

She signaled her agreement. “Let me know. And my access code is 343TH. That way you can get me from any com-point in the ship, without having to go through the router.”

“You’re very generous,” Jack said hesitantly. “I promise, I’ll try not to become a total pain in the neck.”

Lila Sanders chuckled. “If I thought you would I wouldn’t have given it to you.” She stood up. “I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

Jack shook her hand. “I don’t quite know how to thank you.”

Lila Sanders shook her head. “Don’t.”

Jack took his leave and returned to the Promenade, where he sought out a vacant table at the *Life Tide*. Claury and Teara joined him soon after. Claury pulled her chair close to his. “How’d thinking go?”

“I went to visit the captain, actually.”

“Oh, yes? Anything interesting?”

“She’s going to give me some computer time to help me figure out some things.”

“That’s nice of her.”

“Yes, very generous.”

“Teara and I finally figured out how to deal with our little problem.”

“The sleeping arrangements?”

“Yes. We’re going to use it in shifts. That way we can use the same bed and still have our privacy. We’ll allocate two six-hour periods every ship-day where we are assured privacy. The rest we’ll try to manage as it happens.”

"If it's all right with you," Tera said with a faint blush creeping over her cheeks, "we may move those periods around a bit; depending on Cale's shifts."

Jack grinned. "No problem. It's your cabin. We're the interlopers!"

"Speaking of shifts," Claury said, looking up, "there comes Cale."

Cale bent down and gave Tera a lingering kiss.

Jack raised an eyebrow and winked at Claury. She gave him an I-told-you-this-was-going-to-happen look.

Cale plonked himself down in the last vacant chair.

"Hard day?" Jack asked.

Cale shook his head. "Not at the moment. But I tell you, your little power-ramping scheme is costing us time! This whole round-trip is going to have another four weeks added onto it."

"Better late than dead," Claury said dryly.

Cale laughed. "I'm not complaining! My contract specifies a huge bonus for time over-runs that are not caused by me." He glanced at Tera. "Every extra EU helps. Especially if I'm going to get out of the business."

Tera eyed him anxiously.

Cale saw the look and patted her arm. "I do want to get out. Don't worry about that."

The three ordered drinks, and presently the women explained their proposed cabin-sharing arrangement. Cale nodded agreeably. "Actually, it's less of a problem than I thought. The captain took me aside earlier and explained that she understood our difficult situation. Seems like she's not going to raise a ruckus if Tera spends time in my cabin. It's not company policy to allow that kind of thing, but ultimately it's the captain's decision what to allow and what to forbid. As long as nobody complains and we're discreet about it. After all, it's nothing unusual to have couples—even families—in those cabins. I mean, take Kieran Hadrow. He has his wife with him!"

"The captain is very accommodating, isn't she?" Claury said, looking at Jack. "I think she likes you, Jack."

Jack grinned. "Jealous?"

Claury chuckled. "Should I be?"

Jack laughed with her. "I think she's a nice person. Don't mistake her for a weakling though. She'll be as tough as metaplast when it comes to the crunch."

"In other words, a good person to have on your side," Tera said.

Jack nodded. "Yes. I think we're incredibly lucky again—to have someone like that rooting for us. Just like the Mobil brothers. . ."

"But of course you had to save the ship first," Cale said to Jack.

Jack shrugged. "I suppose that has something to do with it. But it's more than that. I've just got a feeling that we're cashing in on all the crap we've suffered for the last two decades. Maybe the cosmos is doing something to balance the scales."

"I'm not sure it works that way," Cale said.

"Maybe it doesn't, but it looks as if it did!"

"Looks like it all worked out, huh?"

"Hmm." Jack ran his fingers across her back. She stopped nibbling his ear and raised her head to look down on him. "I still think she likes you."

He grinned. "Somehow I can't see that influencing her decisions a terrible lot."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I think we're driven by strange impulses—emotional decisions we've made long before we've rationalized them."

He muttered something.

"What did you say?" She grinned.

"Never mind."

"I thought. . ."

"You think too much," he said and pulled her face to his. When they separated again they were both breathless.

"See, another 'strange impulse'."

He laughed softly. "Definitely."

Claury lifted her head again. "You're full of them, Jack. Admit it! Only you call it 'intuition'—as if that wasn't just another name for the same thing." She smiled and hooked a finger into the platinum-iridium chain around his neck. She pulled up the pendant and toyed with it briefly. She looked at it fondly. Then back into his eyes.

"That's really me?" she said in a small voice.

Jack smiled at her. "Yeah. And I can see so much of that girl right now."

"Flatterer!" But he saw that she was pleased.

She brought her face closer to the pendant and looked at it. "What's that your dad is wearing around his neck? Looks like a necklace. In fact," she peered closer, "it looks just like *this* one."

Jack shook his head. "Dad didn't go for that kind of stuff."

Claury made a face at him. “Well, you obviously haven’t bothered to look too closely at a picture you’ve carried around with you for two decades!”

“It was mostly you I looked at.”

“I’m serious, Jack!”

“So am I!”

She made a small exasperated sound and rolled off him. “See for yourself!”

Jack, grinning, rolled over and reached for her. She squealed and rolled away even quicker—and off the bed.

“Ouch!”

“Serves you right,” he laughed. He swung his legs off the bed, slipped the necklace over his head, and looked at the picture.

She was right. His father was wearing a, then-fashionable, open-chested long-sleeved, collarless mauve shirt. Clearly visible—to those who bothered looking!—against the exposed part of his chest, was the curve of a thin band, from which dangled a pendant very much like the one Jack held in his hands right now. He’d never taken note of the implications before; familiarity breeding a lack of critical analysis.

Curious. He tried to remember his father across the gulf of time and shook his head. “Dad *never* wore a necklace.”

Claury picked herself up from the floor and sat down beside him on the bed. She put an arm around him and pulled close to him. She felt warm and soft.

“He did *then!*” she told him, looking at the pendant.

Jack peered at the object dangling on his father’s chest. “Looks like it contains another picture.”

“It does . . .”

“I wonder what it is,” he said pensively.

Claury studied the pendant. “Impossible to tell.”

Jack shook his head. “No. This is a hi-res molecular image. You could magnify that a few thousand times and still not lose resolution.” He glanced at his UnIfac on the bedside console. “In fact . . .”

He stood the pendant on the console, leaning it upright against the wall. He placed the UnIfac a couple of handbreadths away so that its top edge faced the pendant.

“Acquire image,” he said to the device. There was a tiny whirring sound as a shutter drew back from a lens set in the UnIfac’s casing. Another whirr as it adjusted itself to focus on the close-up object. A few seconds later an image of the pendant appeared on the UnIfac’s

screen. Jack issued another few instructions. The image expanded until the pendant on Will Corwin’s chest filled the UnIfac’s screen.

They both stared at it? “What? . . .”

Claury shook her head. “This is stupid. How could he possibly wear a pendant with the same image?”

Jack caused the image to be magnified even more.

“It’s definitely recursive,” he said.

They looked at each other.

“This has got to be a joke,” Jack said.

“Funny, haha!” she said. She looked at him strangely. “I wonder why he did that.”

“So do I. One thing’s for sure: dad wasn’t wearing that necklace when I took the picture.”

Jack picked up the pendant and studied it. Something was nudging him; something he’d heard not too long ago.

Why would his father do something like that? It wasn’t like Will Corwin at all.

Jack tried to think back to the day he was given the necklace. Claury had been there. It was about a couple of weeks before Will Corwin had been brutally murdered; on Jack’s birthday.

“You remember anything?” he asked Claury.

She shook her head. “It was just a birthday present. I think he laughed at your face when he gave it to you.”

“It wasn’t exactly the kind of thing I would have expected from him.”

“Maybe he was laughing in anticipation at you finally discovering this!”

“Yeah.” Jack stared at the pendant in his hand. Again he had the feeling of something significant lurking tantalizingly just beyond his reach.

“Maybe he was trying to tell me something.”

“Maybe.”

“And maybe that isn’t the only aspect of this image that was manipulated after the taking.”

“But why?”

Suddenly, with preternatural clarity, Jack knew.

“Remember what your friend Hidalgo said? About Will Corwin saying that some secrets are better kept ‘close to the heart’?” He shook his head. “You couldn’t get it much closer than that, could you?”

Claury stared at the pendant. “He was trying to tell you something.”

Jack nodded. “Looks that way. And it took me twenty years to see it. And without you I still wouldn’t be seeing it!”

He weighed the pendant in his hand. "It occurs to me that the size of this particular picture is almost exactly the same as that of a sixteen-teraquant organomol memory tab. The same type they use in UnIfacs. In fact, I bet you it's *exactly* the same size—if for no other reason than that's what it *is*. My dear father merely had the picture layered onto both of the surfaces."

He reached for the UnIfac and manipulated a slider inset in the device's edge. The back flipped open to reveal a number of accessory bays, as well as a black rectangle only marginally bigger than the picture in the pendant. "See?" Jack pointed at it. "There's the main memory. In a removable frame, so it can be exchanged if required. The contacts are along the edge: too thin to see. The whole unit integrates into the neural net of the main processor. And here," he pointed at another, empty rectangular indentation, "is a spare slot for another tab. Like the one in the pendant." He exhaled sharply.

Claury reached for the pendant and held it gingerly.

"All we have to do now is get the tab out of the pendant," Jack said. "Unfortunately I have no idea of how to do that. Especially without damaging the tab in the process."

"Shouldn't be a problem," Claury said, handing him the pendant again.

"Why? Do you know?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea. But there are several jewelry stores on the Promenade who sell these things. I'm sure they'll be able to tell us."

Jack hugged her. "Claury, I love you."

"I bet you say that to all your girlfriends."

"I don't have any."

"What about Lila Sanders?"

"Stop teasing!"

The shop assistant handed them a metaplast pendant from the display case. "As you can see it's in two halves which attach to each other. You insert the image, put the two halves against each other so that the two removable marker lines line up. As you can see they're made so they're always properly matched. Now rotate the two parts clockwise until the holes for the chain ring line up. The rims have matching molecular locks which bond and effectively make the pendant into one single metaplast unit. Insert the chain ring and use the

supplied kit to bridge the gap between the ends. All you need now is the chain."

"That's simple enough," Jack said affably. "But what if we wanted to take the picture out again?"

The shop assistant smiled. "The chain ring is the actual lock. Remove it and rotate the two halves counter-clockwise. It's not easy though, and we have a special tool to do this."

Jack nodded. "All right, I'll take that one." He reached up and pulled out his own pendant. "And maybe you can get open this one for me? But be careful not to touch the picture."

"Excuse me." The shop assistant went off and returned with a small, complicatedly shaped, plier-like device which he first used to cut the chain ring and then applied to the now vacant hole. A quick twist. The two halves rotated and the contents lay open to the world. Jack carefully took possession of the pendant. He paid for his new acquisition and they departed, Jack cradling his precious cargo in one hand.

When they arrived in their cabin he placed it on the table, and opened up the UnIfac. He up-ended the pendant so the tab dropped into the bay containing the tabs and, under Claury's curious gaze, nudged it into the vacant memory slot. The tab's molecules locked with those of the receptacle, so that, when Jack tilted the UnIfac it appeared firmly wedged in place. He slid the compartment cover back into place. The device beeped. Jack turned it around looked at the display.

'Integrating memory—please wait . . .'

Another few seconds passed. The message was replaced by another. 'Integration complete.'

"Show contents of new memory unit," Jack said.

A list appeared, indicating the presence of one audiovisual and three database records.

Jack, his heart now thumping with excitement, looked at Claury.

"This is it," she said softly.

"Should be interesting," Jack said with barely suppressed excitement.

"Play the audiovis." He held the device so they both could see the display.

The screen cleared, to be replaced by the image of Will Corwin, back-dropped against a landscape. In the distance, the unmistakable outline of Koral Peak, on Coralia.

"Hello, Jack," Will Corwin's image said. "I'm recording this far away from office and home alike, because

only out here am I reasonably confident that nobody who shouldn't is listening. If you're watching this audio-vis it's almost certain that I'm dead. I hope, of course, that it won't come to this, but"—he grinned wryly—"sometimes we haven't got any control over things like that.

"What I'm going to tell you may or may not still be a secret at the time you hear it. If it isn't—well, it won't matter. But if it is . . ." Will Corwin shook his head. "God, I don't know. So many imponderables! But someone has to know, Jack; and—except for your mother and the Finisterres—you're the only one I trust. I'm sorry to lay it on you like this . . . but someone *has* to know . . ."

Another sigh..

"Sit back, Jack and make sure no one looks over your shoulder—because this is going to take a while . . ."



Proem: Concerning Empery

by Malcolm Bowers

Playing Games

You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of discussion.

—Plato, philosopher of old Earth (427–347 BC)

The playing of games is part of every civilised society. Only dullards and drudges forbear—but let us waste no time on those vapiditys who lose all joy and imagination along with their youth. As well as giving innocent and elementary pleasure, games can instruct in and reflect upon the competition and coöperation that form the warp and weft of society. Athletic contests have their part in celebrating physical fitness and the bodily skills pertaining to war; mental contests celebrate and hone the minds that direct strategies and shape the cultures that wars protect or advance.

—*The Foundations of Strategy*, Duke Aruzustin of Veäxe

Empery, sometimes known as Crown Circle, is the noblest game in the dominions of man, and it hardly need be pointed out, the most popular. The only game to use living pieces, it inspires the fever of gamblers and the fervour of collectors. It appeals equally to the intellect and the senses. It has a balanced interplay of skill and chance, combining subtle strategies, verve, and spectacle with excitement, tension, and high drama. Fortunes have been made and dukedoms lost in play. Its tactics are discussed in taverns and courts; its winners lauded and emulated; its famous victories retold in glowing detail. Princes, philosophers, poets, and priests have pondered on it, argued over it, drawn lessons from it, extolled and denounced it. Its influences seasoning life, love, art, and conflict in salient cultures from the subtropical to subarctic, it has been an unbroken thread of vivid colour in the tapestry of recorded history.

—*Empery: The Game of Kings*, Peristaad Persimmid

Natural History

Ants, bees, beetles, spiders, and termites are known in the world but not numerous compared to the most common and successful arthropods: fast-breeding taupe-hued scavengers known as milliards. Their underground nests are found nearly everywhere, often under low bushes on bare soil, and are well-sealed against intruders with the creatures' strong metallic silk. Geometric patterns of this silk laid down about the single entrance are used by those within the nest to sense movement in the vicinity. The milliards themselves are near-blind and soft-shelled, with little defence outside their nests but speed and overwhelming numbers. At unpredictable times, when no intruders can be detected, the nest lid opens and many thousands stream forth, in one or more columns, with force sufficient to knock over a creature as large as a mouse or small bird. Once the foragers depart, the lid is quickly resealed. The moving columns seek and ingest decaying vegetable and animal matter, dung, insects and small creatures knocked over by their rush, and so on, and once gorged return to the nest, whereupon the lid is opened for them and they stream back in.

Naturally other creatures take advantage of the teeming milliards for sustenance. Birds and lizards move rapidly to the sides of the columns and carefully pick off many hundreds on any foraging run.

The chief among such predators, though, is a genus of small crustaceans, the schribs. These exist in astounding variety: tall, short, long-legged or solid-set, thin, squat, with diverse numbers of limbs and claws, and multifarious external arrangements of armour; their shells smooth, fluted, or encrusted with weird and baroque embellishments. Individuals can range from the size of a grape to that of an apricot. Schribs live a handful of years, growing only slightly after maturity, but moulting their shell annually. All are poisonous and foul-tasting to potential predators, and advertise this fact by gaudy displays of bright colour and conspicuous patterning.*

* One bizarre creature has adapted to feed on the schribs, but its depredations are seldom noteworthy, since it is inesurient, rare, and slow-breeding. The sthurgrem is a squat, broad, six-legged lizard, prussian blue to slate blue in colour, with four peculiarly baleful yellow eyes set two a side in its triangular skull ridge. It feeds by shooting out its flat lower jaw under small prey to knock them over, the many back-curving teeth preventing escape as the jaw retracts into the mouth. The sthurgrem concentrates the ingested

The schribs' development seems to have depended upon a number of forces. They are a social animal with possible inklings of intelligence, since disparate species cooperate, managing some form of rudimentary communication by a series of clicks and chirrs. They apparently learned to work together to veer the rushing streams of milliards along routes where other younger or less able schribs lay in wait. Each variety served some purpose or exploited some niche, able to anchor itself firmly and deflect a milliard column perhaps, or trap or corral or split off individuals to be devoured. Wedge-like carapaces, adhesive bands, scent lures, flensing claws, harpoons, poison fumes, and a hundred other ingenious means were employed. In parallel with this, to compete for mates, some species developed turrets, horns, ridges, spires, antler-like nodules, and other grotesque adornments, along with ever more striking colour patterns. Ritualised fights, involving wrestling and manoeuvre in the main rather than injurious attacks, served to settle courtship disputes unresolved by display. All these factors contributed to the evolving species.

In time, the schribs were so successful that they had to compete for their food: loose groups, known as clans, would meet and struggle for control of the immediate area around a milliard nest, from which the emergent hordes could best be deflected. The clan that won control would likely gorge, together with its associates; the losers would be left hungry and disconsolate. As in their mating fights, these struggles were formalised, almost more ballet than battle, with one group attempting to outmanoeuvre, block, or force aside the other. The process was further constrained by the patterns—radial lines and arc segments—of metallic silk laid down by the milliards, since to tread on the lines would alert the nest and delay any egress. Movement

schrib poison and excretes it into rows of vesicles on its dorsal skin. The toxin renders attempts to feed on the lizard fatal to would-be predators; a mere mouthing could prove instantly lethal if a blister bursts.

Assassins prize the sthurgrem for its manifest utility to their calling. The poison can be drawn off from the sthurgrem by means of curious cupping and syringing devices, albeit at considerable danger to those who fail to exercise acute care and skill. It is effectual when ingested, insinuated, or inhaled (as aerosol, vapour or, when properly treated, powder); more than transient skin contact is also usually fatal. It becomes ever more potent as the sthurgrem ages, and so is graded as 'ten-year', 'twenty-year', and so forth to indicate its efficacy, and correlative value. The vintage venom from a century-old sthurgrem grown past the size of a man's forearm is of uttermost virulence and without antidote.

had to be careful, quick, and controlled, struggles had to be quiet and contained; bulkier schribs could not close easily on the centre where the metallic lines were too close, leaving control of the centre to less robust, more agile breeds. Opponents might be inverted, tossed aside, bound, or stunned, but although a limb might be lost or a carapace cracked, fatalities were rare. Ever more elaborate bodily forms and strategies developed over the millennia to aid control of territory: to the winners, the feast!

— *An Introduction to the Invertebrates*, Phral Treeplin

Taxonomists fix the number of schrib species (most of whose members can interbreed) at seven, but the number of subspecies is not known. Perhaps, as the poet Nrial has written, they are like snowflakes, with seven primary patterns, but near-infinite variety. The number of *common* subspecies catalogued is in the hundreds, the number of others in the thousands. New subspecies are discovered every year, most often by intrepid hunters seeking rare specimens in dangerous and hostile zones, but every now and then in the woods and fields closer to home.

It is to some a cause of regret that a rigorous nomenclature was not imposed upon the schribs from the beginning, but this was not to be. Even if every schrib type were known, the categories of scholars would likely be ignored by the general populace in favour of the curious terms assigned over the years by collectors, gamblers, and enthusiasts, whether descriptive or poetical, based on appearance, behaviour, tactics, real or fancied resemblance to human military, architectural, or social entities, or merely a matter of caprice.

— *The Seven Stirps of Schribs*, Vanathil Wrax

Origins and Derivations

It is clear that at some early stage in his history, man saw schribs contest the patterned ground around a milliard nest, and was fascinated by the miniature struggles of the colourful hosts. Wagering on outcomes soon followed; casual and organised excursions took place to view the schrib battles, but they were leisurely affairs. The creatures moved and fought in their own time, without apparent haste, since milliard excursions took place many hours or even days apart. Schribs might stay still for tens or scores of minutes. Manifestly,

watching and gambling on these diminutive tournaments was a country pastime for lazy summer afternoons in the dappled sun and shade of leafy trees, with tankards of foaming ale and crisp cider to quench one's thirst. Schrib contests gained wider appeal when they were transformed into a faster-paced, governable, and portable game.

— *Empery: The Game of Kings*, Peristaad Persimmid

An account of the game Empery's origin is given in records so ancient that truth shades into legend. There it is written that Immornam the High King had fallen from his horse during a boar hunt. With one leg and two ribs broken, his convalescence would be long. He was a quick-tempered and impatient man, easily bored when inactive, and he soon tired of the entertainments offered. Dancing, music, and storytelling quickly palled; the few games of chance of those times, using dice and ivory plaques, interested him for only a while longer. The royal household tiptoed increasingly softly around the increasingly irascible High King.

From compassion or for peace of mind, Ravannifer his Queen then summoned the wisest men of the kingdom and commanded them to create something to keep the King amused. They conferred and in a stroke of near-genius devised a game based on the struggles of the schribs around milliard nests, with a circular board and carved and painted pieces representing the schribs. The King was amused, but not for long: the game was all cold intellect and strategy, with no room for chance or luck; the rules were labyrinthine and hard to follow; play was slow (and besides, everyone let him win). Where was the excitement, the drama, the opportunity to wager?

The Queen was merciful: the wise men were merely stripped of their worldly goods and banished to the far south. New wise men were sent for. With the example of their predecessors before them, they worked with vigour. The flawed game could be fixed. If they used living pieces, there was the extra colour and chance that the King sought. One sage had studied schribs for many years, observing their organisation, tabulating their clicks and whirrs and subsequent responses: their actions could be controlled by simple patterns of sound, he said. Another, a musician, constructed an instrument to duplicate the noises. The patterned metallic silk of a milliard nest was carefully laid over a circular board. Schribs were caught. They quickly adapted to the arti-

ficial conditions, organising themselves into formation just as if the board were a real nest, and for the most part responding to the tuned clicks and whirrs made by the new instrument, the *clastrid*. After all too brief a testing period, the sages presented the new game, not without trepidation.

The game proved a spectacular success. The schribs and their interactions were unpredictable enough to make wagers interesting, and fresh schrib varieties and combinations provided near-infinite permutations of play. King Immornam was amused for his entire convalescence and beyond; Queen Ravannifer and her courtiers were grateful; the wise men became wealthy, and so far as is known, gave themselves over to lives of ease and indolence, and contributed nothing further to the world.*

— *A Book of Myths and Fables*, Harfare Gastenmil

Mercantile Aspects

Prices are set by utility, rarity, beauty, fashion. Even the standard stock that forms the core of most teams— escherids, renitents, vagabonds, and impellers— can be valuable if their markings and colours are resplendent or distinctive enough, or currently in vogue. The more specialised types fluctuate in price depending on the season and buyer, but good silver can generally be had for malfeasors, bander-binders, or subulate inverters. Rare varieties can command a high price: a star-crowned archon or fretted helical is worth as much as a good horse. Aristocratic collectors might pay even more extravagantly to satisfy particular whims: it was said that Lord Frosserthil gave the hand of his younger daughter to the man who brought him the scarlet and azure vexers that completed his clan, a matched set in his heraldic colours.

— *A Collector's Guide to Schribs*, Vanathil Wrax

* As to the original wise men, they made their way to the distant southern ice-empire of Virunia, perhaps slightly disaffected by their near miss and subsequent exile. They found that the people there enjoyed their original game (as much as those austere and ascetic folk could be said to enjoy anything), perhaps precisely because it was all intellect and strategy. The land was too cold for milliards and schribs to prosper in any case, so it must suffice. With simplified rules and the addition of dice for gambling purposes, the game spread north again, but it remains very much a poor cousin of the real thing (whence it is sometimes known as Common Circle).

—◆—◆—◆—◆—
Pring Brothers, Finest Schrib Mercers in Froid
 —◆—

*Buy or trade; good prices for rare specimens!
 Escherids and catarans in all hues! A special schrib for every
 need: inveigler, slype, scuttling bagger, spandrel, pipe-crab!
 manumitter, dissolutionist, dire vizier, spindleshanks! pied
 lancer, ravening maw, shimmering teardrop, turreted mantis!
 noxious puffer, ghost wedge, effectuator, wistful orb! needler,
 encrusted malkin, precatory dissembler, spined assassin!
 Hundreds more in stock!*

New! Theme clans!

*Ever wanted to employ a bronze lattice, creeping doom, or
 Zabrun's fork, but lacked the right pieces? Buy prepared clans
 that can effect the stratagems perfectly! Reasonable terms
 possible on clan purchases (some conditions apply).*

Pring Brothers, for all your gaming needs.

—◆—◆—◆—◆—
 —Shop hoarding in Hare Twitchell, City of Froid

The Game of Empery (Itself!)

The advisers of a past king have been credited with the creation of the game of Empery as we know it. Whatever the occasion, the formal game seems to have come together quite quickly at some point in much the same form as we know it today: circle, clastrid, and clan. The circle is a wooden round two feet in diameter divided by concentric arcs and radiating lines of metal to mimic the patterns of metallic silk around a milliard nest entrance. The player controls the actions of his clan of schribs by twisting the screw and stroking or plucking the comb-like teeth of his clastrid to produce clicks and chirrs of varying pitch. The schrib signified responds as is its wont, moving and jousting as bid—at least, most of the time. Since the controller just directs and accelerates the inherent ritual schrib combat, the rules are minimal, simply specifying that moves alternate within a certain span (with time enough for side-bets), and specifying aggregate team weights and finishing conditions for a given match. The player whose clan controls the greater area of the circle after a set or randomly-determined time or number of moves is the winner; one who completely clears the territory of his opponent's schribs wins a 'full circle' and is accorded considerable acclaim.

—*Empery: The Game of Kings*, Peristaad Persimmid

Half the strategy in the game involves the selection of a clan. While more or less random groups congregate in the wild, human ingenuity has seen opportunities for fine-tuning combinations to exploit strengths and weaknesses. Some schrib types and teams are markedly good against others, or signally efficacious when directed in particular tactics and manoeuvres.

The core varieties of schribs in any clan are usually in effect much the same, since a clan must always be mixed to some extent: heavier renitent breeds are used to hold the outer circle, smaller, sprier kinds to gain the inner. More flexibly employed medium-sized schribs (escherids, vigesmipedes, tricorne helicals) usually predominate. It is, however, the specialist types that give the clan its distinct 'theme', its particular styles of attack and defence in the opening, middle, and end games. Since one cannot hope to cover all avenues, and few can afford to try, it is prudent to take pains in the selection of schribs both active and reserve.

The outcome of any contest is by no means certain. A skilled player can compensate for a weaker team. Heavier pieces defeat light ones in general, but there is a nemesis for any type (and an opposing player just might field it). Individually skilled (or lucky) schribs can defeat ostensibly superior antagonists. It is important to remember that chance can always affect play in one way or another. A sudden change in weather could alter a clastrid's pitch enough to render control uncertain. A clan may perform poorly on a given day, from fatigue, poor digestion, or a score of other causes. Every now and then a piece might fail to react to a complex command, or do the wrong thing, much to the consternation of its owner.

—*Empery the Easy Way*, Breun Fivrenesse

Assess your opponent: his manner, his deportment, his garb, his clan case. All can reveal his personality and hence his likely tactics. Adapt your clan to counter. You have flexibility in your choice of schribs for a game; that is why a clan case has spare capacity.

Does the foe have a military bearing? His style of play is doubtless brusque and direct; he will want to win with a decisive stroke. You must frustrate this: choose your clan with an eye to a yielding strategy that bogs down his bold moves. Agglutinaters, artful coquettes, bureaucrats, recanters, and crested pettifoggers must be your mainstays; your ploys should involve the twisted skein, wedding dance, or (if you seed your

ranks with coiled shrikes and dissimulators) the deadly vineyard.

— *How to Win at Crown Circle*, 'A Gentleman Gamer'

A Counterblast

Empery, the game of kings? Empery, the maker of paupers! Dice and ivory plaques have bankrupted the weak, but Empery is worse than them all. Addictive, obsessive, omnipresent: does not even the meanest table in our lands have edge-boards that can be raised to form a gaming area?

Vast sums can be expended simply to purchase clans. Oh, the outlay of a silver or two could get a serviceable clastrid, and they say most any farm lad could collect a rough and ready team, but 'once the schribs bite', the player always wants more. He could win next time, he says to himself, if only he had a matched pair of sword-stars, or perhaps more exotic breeds, to round out his clan. But there are always better teams, and so it goes: he invests more heavily and debts mount higher . . .

The stakes for which participants play can be large, but pale in comparison to the wagers on almost every aspect of the game: from the deployment, where the pieces are placed at the periphery of the circle and the curtain raised, through the intense manoeuvring for position, to the clash of forces and the margin of the final victory—and defeat. Side-bets are laid on each move; as excitement mounts, more and more extravagant pledges are hurled. All, players and spectators alike, are caught up! But when they reckon the cost, what then? A handful of winners shine like stars; for the rest, the black void of despair!

Empery is a maelstrom that pulls down the unwary, and few escape its drag. Lives and businesses brought to ruin; homes and families lost; a widow weeping over her husband's self-slaughter; starving children in the streets and alleys: these are the true faces of that curse of society, that pestilence upon our lands! Empery! Vilest temptation to have afflicted man!

— *The Scourge of Empery* (anonymous pamphlet)

