

We Service All

by Donald Firesmith

As usual, Jack had nothing to do except remain alert in case something went wrong. It never did. His trusty old cargo ship fired its massive engines for the exact time required and in the exact direction directed by the autopilot. Skimming the upper edge of the planet's deep atmosphere, the ship slowly sank like some gigantic steel stone that skipped several times before sinking into a world-sized pond. He listened to the sound of the thickening air on his ship's stubby wings. Initially high pitched, it grew louder until it drowned out even the roar of the engines. After a year and a half without gravity, the sudden returning of weight was both reassuring and yet strangely disconcerting after so many months alone in space. The critical time of reentry passed. The ship made several slow arcs to cut its speed before making its final approach to the spaceport. The ship smoothly touched down and rolled to a stop by the customs hanger.

As always, Jack's cargo of luxury items and alien artwork would bring a hefty profit. Remembering the empty days, weeks, and months alone in the silence of his ship, he hoped that this time his increasing wealth would be worth it. But it never was. Sometimes he wondered why he lived his life with only his old cargo ship as a companion. Then, remembering his wife's accident and her untimely death, he knew the answer. He knew that no one who could ever replace her. And alone in space, no one ever would. Though the credits in his account grew and grew, no matter how wealthy he became, they would never be enough. She was gone, and a perverse part of him wanted to suffer. He should have been with her, died with her, but he hadn't. And so he lived the monastic life of a penitent in an era without monks and monasteries, just him alone in his silent crypt of a ship.

But no spacer could stay in space forever. Jack had to land, deliver his cargo, refuel his vessel, and take on new cargo and supplies for his next run. And to do that meant landing at a spaceport, a place where those who would service the spacer as well as his ship would eagerly cater to every imaginable need. And every time he landed, Jack would do as all spacers had done before him. He would indulge his senses and seek contact, even if only for a few hours in exchange for some of the meaningless credits that would otherwise lie unused in his account.

Jack opened the hatch and stepped out into another new world. Never before had he been so far from Earth. The warm afternoon air was heavy with strange scents as if smoldering sticks of exotic incense surrounded his ship. Beyond the short blocky buildings of the nearby city stood several hills covered with large forests of purple plants that produced an oily haze that merged smoothly into the low-hanging clouds.

"Excuse me, sir," a voice said in perfect English. "Welcome to Mårtöðht."

Jack looked down to see two of the planet's inhabitants waiting for him at the bottom of the ramp. Standing no more than a meter and a half high, each had four stubby legs and four long arms jutting out at right angles from its roughly spherical body. Strands of

what looked like greenish spaghetti thickly covered the pair, started just below what he took to be a circular mouth surrounded by four pairs of small yellow eyes. They appeared to be identical, their only difference being the number and color of the small pouches that hung from the harnesses they wore.

One of them held a translator above its mouth and spoke in a soft series of clicks and unpronounceable consonants. “Excuse me, sir,” the device translated. “Welcome to Mårtõðht. I am the port customs inspector, and my colleague is from the Finance Guild. We are here to assess your import duties and landing fees. We have the manifest you transmitted and are now ready to inspect your cargo.”

Jack looked at the pair and was glad that their translator understood English. He knew he could not even come close to pronouncing the local language. “Certainly, he replied. “How long before I can begin unloading?” The translator emitted another series of clicks and vowel-less consonants.

“We should be done by midday tomorrow. Perhaps until then you would like to visit our city. I am sure we have many fine restaurants that can prepare food that is acceptable to your tastes and nutritional needs. And you will surely enjoy staying in one of our fine hotels after so many nights confined aboard your ship.”

“Thank you,” Jack replied. “I’ve been looking forward to it.”

“Please authenticate your identity here, and you may go,” the Mårtõðhtian’s translator requested as the customs inspector handed Jack a tablet and pointed one two-fingered hand to a glowing circle at its top. “We shall communicate with you tomorrow when the inspection is completed.”

Jack touched the appropriate spot on the tablet, which took and recorded a microscopic sample of his DNA. His identity confirmed and registered, it made a brief ticking sound and the circle ceased glowing. Jack handed the tablet back to the customs inspector. Then leaving them to their work, he left the spaceport in search of a good meal and some of the human contact he had avoided for so long.

Just outside of the terminal building, Jack saw the typical establishments found in any port city. First came dozens of eating establishments. Each competed for the attention of newly arrived spacers with brightly colored signs, sound clips praising the many talents of their cooks, and hidden fans blowing tempting smells out onto the sidewalk. Catering to off-worlders who could not read the menus, the restaurants’ wide windows were full of enticing sample entrées, in which local foods contended with the recreations of the most popular dishes from neighboring star systems. Although most meals just lay on their plates, Jack noticed that several dishes contained holographs of writhing worms and chittering insectoids.

After walking a few blocks, Jack started to see the same dishes over and over. He entered a small restaurant at random, led the waiter out to the front window, and pointed at what he hoped would be a reasonably safe selection. The waiter noted Jack’s choice and then led him back inside. Jack selected a table that was roughly the right height and sat down in a reasonably appropriate chair, even though it was backless and nearly three times as wide as he needed. Before long, the waiter trotted up to his table and set down a plate, the contents of which looked remarkably like the example he saw in the window.

The waiter paused as Jack took a bite. To Jack's surprise, he found that the meal tasted quite good, though it was dry and its texture took some getting used to.

"I need something to drink," Jack said, pantomiming raising a glass to his mouth.

"Mãmkt wwõtk ðh," the waiter said, looking at Jack with two of its yellow eyes.

"I don't understand you," Jack answered. "Are you asking me what I want to drink?"

"Mãmkt wwõtk ðh," the waiter repeated, raising two of its hands up and over mouth at the top of its rounded body.

Jack nodded his head. When that brought no response, Jack pointed to a cup sitting on a neighboring table where three of the locals appeared to be engaged in a lively conversation.

"Mãmkt wwõtk ðh ðãmwk," the waiter replied and left.

Once more having no idea what the waiter had said, Jack turned back to his food. He was almost done when the waiter returned with a large glass of boiling water. As usual, dining on a new planet was an adventure, and if ordering boiling water to drink was the only problem, then he would count his dinner as a success. He paid by pressing his finger to the glowing circle on the bill, got up, and went out into the night, looking for a place to satisfy his second hunger.

Jack did not have to look long. Leaving the main road and walking farther from the spaceport, he soon found the district he was seeking. The flashing signs became brighter and more garish. Eschewing recorded come-ons, each business now had a barker outside the front door, working hard to entice potential customers inside. And the dishes in the windows were now holographs showing members of various alien races.

Out of habit, Jack liked to assume that the holographs were of beautiful females, at least beautiful in the eyes of others of their species. But Jack knew he was more often wrong than right. One could never assume anything when dealing with exobiology. Alien planets were not populated by mammals or even by vertebrates with single spinal columns. Intellectually, he knew that he was more closely related to a cabbage than all creatures that had evolved on other worlds. And sex for different species often meant anything from hermaphroditic couplings to species with three or more sexes to parasitic species requiring animal hosts during mating.

Still, to each his own, Jack had learned to say. Prejudice was bad for business and something a successful trader could ill afford. He moved farther into the district, looking for just a single brothel with a human woman. Though the larger establishments serviced the needs of all manner of customers, he could not find even one with a hologram of a woman in the window.

Beginning to believe that he was too far from home, Jack was just about to head back and look for a hotel when he noticed a side street lined with several smaller establishments. Not holding out much hope, Jack none-the-less decided that he might as well go and see what they had to offer before giving up. The brothels were shabbier, and the selections they offered were considerably less than the larger establishments. He was turning to leave as a Deltinoid came up behind him.

“Both farr frrom home, Earrthling, youuu and I” the creature said. “Perrrhaps I can be of serrrvice.”

Jack turned and looked suspiciously at the being he took to be the brothel’s barker. The Deltinoid looked mostly like a huge twelve-legged purple caterpillar if you ignored the two trunks at its head and the fact that it was covered by circular scales. Jack glanced back at the window to make sure, but he only saw two holographs and they both showed members of the indigenous species. “I don’t think so,” Jack replied, feeling tired as well as frustrated by his lack of luck. The thought of spending the evening ogling a naked Mårtõhtian dancer did absolutely nothing for him. In fact, the idea was more than a little revolting, especially were he to think the thought through to its obvious conclusion. Over the years, he had heard the occasional rumor. Some sick spacer would get so lonely that he eventually succumbed to interspecies sex. Although some of the other spacers felt pity for the sick bastards, Jack thought the idea was disgusting and couldn’t imagine ever getting that desperate.

“Hasty conclusions often false, Earrthling,” the Deltinoid said as Jack turned to leave. “Ignorrrre window. My establishment now can serrrvice all. Youuu thirrirsty. Come inside. Have drrrink. Youuu see. We serrrvice all.”

The Deltinoid was either perceptive or else had guessed how little of the hot water Jack had drunk at the restaurant. Realizing just how thirsty he was, Jack decided at least to go in for a quick drink. Just one drink and then back outside to search for a hotel.

Inside, the place looked like any small brothel anywhere in a dozen systems. There was a bar, a few small tables for the drinking customers, a well-lit runway for the local lovelies to dance on, and the unmarked door in the back that led upstairs to the privacy chambers. Jack sat down at one of the tables, ordered an overpriced drink containing more alcohol than water, and glanced over at the evening’s entertainment.

On the stage in front of a Denubiat spacer was another of his species rippling and rocking rhythmically to the sounds of cymbals, gongs, and tubular bells. She was tall, slender, and looked vaguely like the product of the mating of an insect and a porcupine. She snapped her claws like castanets while the color of her carapace alternated between green and purple. Jack had to admit that she seemed to be working hard to convince the Denubian to go upstairs with her. But seven empty bottles littered the spacer’s table, four of his six eyes were closed, and he was close to comatose.

The music eventually stopped, and the prostitute’s dance ended. She looked over at Jack and started moving towards him, her claws clicking softly with each step on the stage. Jack began to feel ill at ease and was considering moving to a table farther back, when the Deltinoid returned with his drink.

“No worry, Earrthling,” the creature said as he placed the glass containing a bright blue liquid on the table. “Drrrink. Youuu see. We serrrvice all.”

Jack took a long hard gulp and felt the spicy liquid burn his tongue and throat as he looked back up at the stage. The Denubian dancer stood over him, close enough to reach down and touch him with her long spidery forelimbs. A slow seductive song from Earth started to play, and she started to sway to the music. Jack chugged the rest of his drink, and the fiery taste brought tears to his eyes.

Something was happening to the dancer, something Jack could not explain by the drink or the tears that blurred his vision. The dancer seemed to be melting. Her claws were retracting, sliding back into her forelimbs. Then the spines along her back began to withdraw into her body. In less than a minute, she had morphed into a smooth gray mass that still swayed rhythmically to the music. The morphing continued. New arms grew outwards as the gelatinous torso raised itself onto two new legs. Hands appeared and grew fingers, while a head formed, sprouting ears, eyes, and a nose. The gray skin turned a light beige as breasts blossomed and a groove formed where legs met body. Completing her transformation, her baldhead sprouted shoulder length blond hair while a small patch of identically blond hair hid the groove below. In less than two minutes, the Denubian had transformed into the most stunningly beautiful naked human woman Jack had ever seen or even dreamed of in the depths of his solitude between the stars.

“Youuu see, Earrthling,” the Deltinoid said. “No lie. Youuu have seen with own eyes. We serrrrvice all.”

Jack was dumbfounded. The woman before him swayed gracefully to the music, her right arm held modestly before her ample breasts while her left hand hid the treasure between her legs. He looked at her as though she were some magician’s assistant, suddenly appearing from the box that briefly before had held a snarling tiger.

“But how?” Jack gasped. He didn’t dare look away lest the magician perform another switch if he glanced at the barker for even the briefest of moments.

“Not now, Earrthling. Youuu like, youuu pay. Then, afterrr we talk.”

The music and the dancer became oriental. Her blue eyes became brown beneath folded eyelids, her skin a different shade of white, and her large breasts smaller though no less enticing. The buxom Swede had become a demure Japanese. Then the music moved westward and she transformed into a Bollywood dancer, followed by an Arab belly dancer, then African, and finally back to Caucasion, though this time a redheaded Irish Coleen.

“Amazing, isn’t she. A bluuvoxian shape shifter. Only one on whole planet, and I have herrr. I pay herrr well, buuut she morrrre than worrrrth it.”

The beautiful dancer took his hand and gently pulled him to his feet. Then without realizing it, Jack placed his thumb on the proprietor’s tablet and transferred the necessary credits. He follow her through the unmarked door and up the stairs to one of the brothel’s privacy rooms.

“I can be any kind of woman you desire,” she said with only the faintest of accents. Her hair and skin changed color. She grew taller, then shorter. She went from thin to muscular to Rubenesquely soft and sensuous. She even took on the faces of several famous actresses and singers from previous centuries. “I can be anyone,” she whispered as she unbuttoned his tunic and then knelt to remove his pants. Then standing once more, she moved forward ‘til her naked breasts lightly touched his chest with each breath.

Her skin was wonderfully warm and smooth as he took her in his arms and kissed her. Her lips were soft, her perfume intoxicating.

“I can do anything you desire,” she breathed as she reached down to take him in her hands. “I can fulfill your every fantasy, satisfy your every need.”

His desire grew, and he could feel his body respond to her gentle touch with an overwhelming lust such as he hadn’t felt in years. But suddenly, the memory of her as he had first seen her returned unbidden to his mind. He remembered the Denubian dancer with a spiky carapace, the razor sharp teeth, and the claws instead of hands. His manhood wilted, and his lust vanished as though it had never existed.

She drew back, as if physically struck by the intensity of his loathing, both for her and for himself. “But that is not me,” she cried. “Look at me!” She begged, gesturing at her perfect body. “This is me. This is what you want and need.”

But it’s wasn’t. Jack’s memory teleported him back to his former home on Earth, to the tragic accident that had taken his wife some twenty years earlier. Trembling, he sat on the bed, reached down and pulled his tablet from the pocket of his fallen tunic. Tapping its surface, he brought up a holographic image of his wife. He didn’t want a prostitute, even one who could become the most beautiful of women. He wanted only one woman, the one woman he can never have again. He wanted his wife. But she was dead and buried long ago on a planet hundreds of light years away.

The prostitute sat down on the bed, gently turning his hand so that she could look at the image he could only dimly see for the tears in his eyes.

“I understand,” she said, placing an arm around him and gently pulling him to her breast. The simple act was no longer sexual but comforting as her face morphed into that of his long dead wife. A skilled empath, she gingerly searched through his memories and found the sound of his wife’s voice, her mannerisms and way of speaking, and most importantly his memories of their most tender and intimate moments together. Expertly, she used her telekinetic talent to carefully manipulate the neurotransmitters in various areas of his brain. She delicately lowering his norepinephrine level, easing his stress. She gently elevated his serotonin, dopamine, and oxytocin levels to increase his feelings of well-being and to deepen his feelings of love.

“Jack,” she said softly. “Look at me, Jack.”

He slowly looked up, and there she was, looking exactly as she had on their wedding night. “Sarah?” he asked, confused.

“Yes, Jack,” she whispered, as she increased his trust by further elevating his oxytocin levels.

“But...”

“Hush now my love,” she said. “Everything is finally as is should be.” She gently eased him back on the bed, holding him in her arms and stroking his back. “Hold me in your arms, and say that you love me. Tell me all of the things you’ve waited oh so many years to say. Tonight, I am yours.”

And so they held each other. They talked for hours, and when they finally made love, it was truly an act of love, far more emotional than physical. And afterwards as they lay together and he fell asleep, she oh so slowly and carefully retook her natural form. Her body softened, losing its human form. Then beginning at his feet and gradually moving

up his legs and torso, she gently flowed around him until she had surrounded him, enveloping him in a living blanket that returned him to the dark warm safety of the womb.

And while her patient rested in a dreamless sleep, the Denubian healer used her innate abilities and her many years of study at the famed Medical Monastery of Morat to heal Jack's broken mind. She strengthened certain memories, weakened others, and repaired the holes that depression and loss had torn into his soul. And when her work was finally finished, she gently withdrew from his mind and body. Retaking the form of his wife, she leaned over, kissed him softly one last time, and tucked the soft covers around him. Then, she quietly left the privacy chamber and headed back downstairs for her next patient. Though she was naturally interested in learning his identity and species, it was only a matter of professional curiosity rather than preference. As a Denubian healer, she serviced all.