

GREEN GIRL BLUES

_____Martin L. Shoemaker_____

“ARE YOU NIKO? They say you do mods.”

The man she'd called *Niko* leaned back in his booth and stared at the girl, assessing the threat. He also looked around the bar to see who else might be watching. It was a small, dingy place, like he'd found near spaceports on a hundred worlds. He liked to lay low in quiet places like this while he drummed up business.

The man subtly moved his hand, shifting his sleeve so that the 'plaster hidden within would have a clear shot. He had never shot a girl that young, but it might come to that: either she was naïve, or he was getting set up by the Lund City police. She knew his current name, and not many on Pedersen did, but her approach was pretty awkward for the police. She could be just a kid, and somebody had blabbed. In that case, the man called Niko needed to decide: was it time to leave this world before trouble found him? Still, she might be a plant.

Niko snickered softly. She was *homo sapiens pedersens*, so of course she was a “plant”. Pedersen's human settlers had found it ill-suited to crop growing—but well-suited to mining, energy, and trade—so they had engineered a gene mod: chloroplasts in the epidermis to synthesize nutrients from simple molecules plus light. So, like all the natives, the girl was a lovely shade of green.

Scan, he thought, and he tensed as his sensor web sent out a brief pulse. Somebody could be watching for a scan pulse, so he was ready to move. He saw the bartender, a waitress, and five patrons (three from off-world). He could fight his way out if he had surprise on his side, but it could get sticky.

No one showed any reaction. The pulse echoed back, and the results showed no weapons. Genotype read as unmodded *pedersens* female, approximate age of fifteen years—a minor on Pedersen.

The police in Lund City were no saints, but they didn't enlist juveniles. Niko kept his voice casual. "People say lots of things." He narrowed his gaze. "Some they shouldn't. And some don't know what they're talking about. Who're you?"

"I'm Sarah Sm—Sarah. That's all you need to know."

He started a search on the partial name. "Well, Sarah," he said, "you're drawing attention. You'd better sit down." She moved to sit across from him, but Niko raised his hand. "Nah. Over here by me."

"What?" Her face flushed, a murky brown shade as blood rushed to the surface.

"Sit." Niko smiled. Sarah swung to slap him, but he grabbed her wrist, pulled her closer and lowered his voice. "I won't hurt you, but I won't get hurt *for* you, either. Pretty young thing like you comes into a dump like this, and people notice. They'll assume you're either buying or selling, and I don't want anyone thinking that *I'm* selling. So smile and sit like we're arguing over price. I won't touch you, you don't try to slap me, but we have to play this game. Act like they expect, they'll forget you were ever here. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Sarah bit her lip, but she nodded. Niko let go of her wrist, and she sat on his side of the booth. Not too close, but that suited him. He wanted room to use his plaster if he had to.

A cop would've played along sooner. A thrill-seeker would've run by now. Niko began to suspect Sarah really wanted a mod. He lowered his voice further. "I don't do cosmetics, girlie. If you're looking for a boob job to catch the boys, keep looking."

"No!" Sarah shook her head. "I want a *real* mod. I want—I don't want to be green any more. I want to be a different species, and get off this world."

Niko's eyes narrowed. She *did* know something. This bar was small, out of the way, and too run-down to be connected to the local criminal element. His scouting showed that neither the Møller nor the Bruun families ran the place, though the owner probably paid protection to the Bruuns. So Niko came here searching for clients, but not often. Somebody had put the pieces together, or a client had blabbed. He had to know more.

Gently he asked, "And you came to me? Who you been talking too, girlie?"

Sarah looked down, her dark green hair falling in front of her eyes. "Svend."

"Svend?" There had to be ten-thousand Svends here.

"Svend...Bruun."

Niko shuddered as he modified his net search: *Sarah Sm* AND Svend Bruun*. The eldest son of the Bruun family was a mean one. He ran the family's street crime, including...Niko eyed Sarah again. "Aren't you a little young for one of Svend's girls?"

Sarah looked like she might try to slap him again. "It's not like that! I just...run errands for his people. I'm nobody, so nobody notices me."

Niko eyed her carefully. She was growing into a very attractive woman, and people always noticed them. Soon she would be useless as a courier, and Svend *would* put her to work on the streets. No wonder she wanted to escape.

One of his clients must have a connection with Svend, but who? For now, Niko had only one lead. "I'm no charter pilot, kid. You'll have to get off Pedersen yourself. But assuming I could get you modded.... That kind of work ain't cheap. You got money?"

"No," she said, but Niko saw a cagey look in her eyes. She had *some* money. "But I have...information."

"Information?"

Sarah whispered. "On the Bruun family. Jobs they've done, people they've hired." She swallowed. "That stuff's valuable, right? To someone with connections?"

And to Niko. Maybe it could tell him who was leaking word about him. It might put him crossways with the Bruuns, but he would take that chance. "It might be."

“So you get me modded, and get me off Pedersen.”

“I said—”

“You must have connections, right?” She looked at Niko. “I’ll give you a datacrypt. When I’m safely in the spaceport where he can’t touch me, I’ll send you the key.”

Niko frowned. “And I’ll open the datacrypt and find it empty. No, I need payment in advance.”

“Take it or leave it,” she said. “What I know could identify me to them. I have to be safe before I release it.”

She looked fearless. Green-eyed ice. But something about those eyes.... Niko chanced one more pulse. Heart racing. Muscles tensed. Sarah was terrified of something.

Niko charged clients good money, but he wasn’t going to rip off a scared little kid. He was a criminal (on some worlds), but he had standards.

He wrote an address on his napkin and slipped it into her hand. “Tomorrow. 10 a.m. If you’re five minutes late, I’ll be gone. I’ll call you ‘Amy’. Any other name, get away fast. It means one of us is being followed.” He looked away. “*Now* I’m gonna grab you a bit, for show. And now you can slap me, and run out. Don’t stop for anyone.”

Ten seconds later, Niko sat alone in the booth, rubbing his cheek. She knew how to slap!

Niko tipped the bartender to summon an autocab. When the cab dropped out of the sky, Niko climbed into the seat, pulled the door closed, and tapped a random village far west of Lund. That gave him plenty of time to make calls. Airborne in an autocab was as close as he could get to a secure line on short notice.

Niko pulled a node address from his net and opened a chat channel. “Hi, Zeke,” he sent, “this is Mitch.” He assumed that the pilot’s name was not Zeke, any more than his was Mitch—or Niko, for that matter. Throwaway identities were common on the shady side of society. *Mitch* was a name only the pilot knew.

“Mitch, my friend! How are the kids? How’s Amy doing in school?”

Amy was further confirmation, another code word shared only with the pilot. With their identities mutually established, they got down to business. An eavesdropper would read local vacation plans,

but actually, Niko arranged transport off Pedersen for him and Sarah—and for his considerable stock of gear. He would need his mod vat for this job, and that would take a lot of cargo space.

The departure time was the only major hiccup. The Pedersen Traffic and Customs Bureau was highly regimented. “Zeke” could only offer a couple of launch windows just before noon. Niko wasn’t meeting Sarah until ten, leaving barely enough time for a quick cosmetic job to conceal her until they got off world.

Niko closed the chat and tapped the control pad to reroute the cab. But instead, the cab started dropping rapidly.

The autocab settled to the ground on a dark street in the country. The external lights came up, revealing a tall, thin Pedersen woman standing straight and ready to move. She wore the white-and-green helmet and jacket of Pedersen Traffic and Customs—and a pistol in her hand.

Niko sat in a plastic chair behind a metal table in a small room lit only by flickering illumination panels in the ceiling. Pedersen technology was mostly low, early to mid-twenty-first century by Terran standards. More reliable lighting was practically free on more advanced worlds, but too expensive for a government office here.

Niko wasn’t restrained, and the customs officers hadn’t roughed him up. They had taken his ‘plaster, but it was disguised as an atmosphere compensator, a pump that ran air through a particle reservoir and up to his neckline. They looked it over and didn’t notice anything unusual, but they took it anyway.

The inspector stood on the other side of the table and glared down through her visor. Her badge identified her as Inspector Carina Ravn. She towered over him, and he suspected her ancestral DNA had a strong Netherlands strain. So far, she had spoken only curtly to Niko and the two officers who had escorted him.

The officers left, and Niko was alone with the inspector. She pulled off her helmet and set it on the table, revealing a curly green mop of hair. “So let’s go over this carefully, Mr.—” She checked his ID. “—Amédée Charlemagne. From Moreau?”

“From Frank,” Niko said, with a long *a* sound. He had chosen the French-settled world because almost no one ever left there.

“And you trade in refined minerals and miniaturized devices.”

Niko tried to seem friendly. “Nah, I’m a broker. I find what each world does best. Your people, you do the finest miniature work in this sector. Then I broker deals, and others do the shipping.”

Ravn paced in front of the desk. “The bartender thought that your name was Niko something.”

Niko cursed inwardly. He hadn’t expected the bartender to give him up so easily after such a large tip. “Ah, just a nickname I picked up in the Tauran system.”

The inspector raised an eyebrow. “The Tauran system?”

Niko cursed again. The inspector was brighter than most customs officers. “I deal all over Manifold Space. If it’s imported, Taurans will pay extra just to lord it over their neighbors.”

“But you’re not Tauran?”

Niko pulled back his sleeves. “See any fur?” There hadn’t been any for decades, not since his first mod. “I’m a Frank, native born.” He took a deep breath. “So forgive me if I’m slow. Your air is...weak, ya know?”

“I see.” Her brow furrowed. “So Mr. Charlemagne, why did you have the bartender summon and pay for your cab?”

Niko had expected that question. “I...owe a customer some money.” When the inspector turned to look at him, he hastily added, “I’m gonna pay, I just need a little time. A deal fell through because the shipper got delayed, and their cargo spoiled. I lost a lot of dough on that one, and I’m still digging out. Last time we met, they threatened to break some bones! So I’m keeping a low profile until some other deals come through and I can repay them.”

“And your customer would be...?”

“None of your concern, Inspector Ravn.” No broker would share such information without a good reason. “The goods were made off Pedersen, the load was picked up off Pedersen, and it never passed through Pedersen space. Unless you claim jurisdiction in other systems, I got nothing to say.”

“Fair enough.” Again with the brow furrow. Then she spoke in a more casual tone. “Curious thing about that bar: we picked up some rumors that a modder does business there.”

Niko acted surprised. “You mean a gene doc? I hadn’t heard that. But then, I’m not from around here. I heard that that was illegal on Pedersen, but it’s a customs concern?”

“It can be,” the inspector answered. “The Genome Authority has its rules. It’s my job to enforce them. We’re a young settlement, only in our fourth generation. We must establish sufficient genetic diversity to ensure our long-term viability. So, at least for another generation, emigration is regulated, and modding is forbidden. As much as our youth might wish otherwise, travel off world is—” She paused. “—strictly controlled. We need to stabilize our genotype before we let anyone tinker with it again.”

Niko was impressed. She understood the basics well. His only disagreement wasn’t with her, it was with the Pedersen Genetic Council. His analysis told him their genome was stable already. “I see,” he said slowly. “Well, if I knew anything about a modder, I’d tell you, inspector. I have nothing to hide.”

“But we’re not talking about just any modder,” she said. “The man we want could pay for your silence. I may be stuck on this planet, but I *do* have sources off world.” She leaned over the table and said in a lowered voice, “We’re talking about Sandoval.”

“Sandoval?” Underneath Niko’s calm demeanor, every alarm in his network went off. “Wasn’t that some...character in a show?”

The inspector didn’t budge. “Yes, there was a video series, but it was based on a real person. Sandoval, the most wanted modder in Manifold Space. Surely you’ve heard stories of the Gene Wizard.”

More alarms. “I prefer sports. You never know what will happen.”

The inspector straightened up. “You didn’t miss much. Badly written and overacted.” Niko resisted the urge to agree with her. “But somewhere out there is the real Sandoval, wanted in fifteen systems.”

Seventeen, Niko noted to himself. “And you think he might come to Pedersen?”

“Rumor is that he’s in this sector. Maybe here already.”

Niko had to get farther away from Pedersen than he had planned. “I wish I could help, but I broker goods, not services. Certainly not modding. So can I return to my hotel? I’m tired.”

Ravn paused. “I have no more questions, but my superiors may in the morning. Perhaps we should hold you.”

Niko would have little time to pack and ship his gear. It was time to push back. “I know my rights. If you’re holding me, I wanna talk to the ambassador.”

The inspector frowned. “I don’t believe there’s a Frank embassy on our world.”

“No, but we have a reciprocal arrangement.” Niko smiled. “With Terra.”

Ravn turned a very pale shade of green. The home world was Pedersen’s major trading partner, and the Terrans were known to throw their weight around just because they could. Niko was betting that a local customs inspector wouldn’t want to draw their attention.

And it seemed he was right. She folded her arms, shook her head, and said, “That’s not necessary. We can release you—but check with me before leaving the planet. Just in case I have more questions.”

“Understood, inspector. We’ll talk again,” Niko lied smoothly. In a few hours, he would be off Pedersen, and he would never see her again. “Now please, I’m getting queasy. Can I have my compensator?”

An agent escorted Niko to the nearest tram stop on the west side of Lund. The trams were risky late at night. For every honest worker or late-night partygoer, there was a mugger or worse. Niko checked the reservoir on his plaster: two uses, three if he was careful. He adjusted his sleeve, and he boarded a tram for Lund’s expensive tourist district where one of his hotel rooms was found.

The tram held eight other passengers, including two off-worlders. One was from Kleve, recognizable by his cumbersome water helmet. Next to him, a Tauran stood in the aisle. Her casual party dress exposed too much light-golden fur. Niko understood the urge to dress lightly and keep cool in fur, but it wasn’t wise. A large young Pedersen in dirty overalls stared at her.

Then Niko realized the youth was also watching *him*. The man was dressed for rough labor, but he had a brooding look beneath his heavy green brows: suspicious, angry. Predatory.

Niko checked the tram map, and he decided to get off. It was two stops before his destination, but he liked his chances better on foot. He rose, ready to leave in a hurry—and the angry youth rose as well.

Niko responded from long habit, sending out a sensor pulse. The man had a gun holstered in his overalls, and a knife in his hand. He snaked through the passengers, past the Klevan and the Tauran.

When Niko saw the man start to lunge, he raised his left arm, aimed the chloropaster, and thought a command: *Fire*.

Fine golden particles shot out, engulfing the man's upper body. He started to cough. The particles were in his lungs, choking him, but it was the exposed skin of his face and hands that forced him to the tram floor. The chloroplasts in his epidermis did more than just manufacture nutrients. The Pedersen gene engineers had adopted the chloroplast production codes from existing plants; and in plants, chloroplasts were a primary element of the immune system. They swarmed to the site of infection, firing off defense-signal molecules... and they actively killed off infected cells. Niko's tailored allergen particles made the man's immune system declare war on itself.

The man writhed and cried out in pain. Green blotches bubbled over his skin. It probably wouldn't be lethal, but Niko didn't care either way.

Some of the other passengers leaned over to see what was wrong with the youth, but then turned away as the residual allergen burned their skin. Three of them eyed Niko suspiciously. Another sensor pulse showed more guns.

Just then the tram reached its stop, and a dozen Pedersens started to board. Niko forced his way through them. As the last passenger stepped in, he leaped out, the doors sliding shut behind him. He rushed off the platform, sighed, and turned back to watch the tram leave. The three armed men were in the window, watching him as the tram pulled away.

Niko dashed up the escalator and out to a shaded business street, decorated in fake plastic trees. The dawn showed a few people on their morning commute. He ducked into a side street and peered back around the corner of a building, focusing his irises to zoom in on the tram station.

So much for delaying tactics. The three men appeared at the top of the escalator. Despite Niko's concealment, one saw him and started running his way. Niko resumed running as well.

When he heard the loud crack of an old-fashioned firearm, Niko thought a command: *Flush*. A small reservoir of epinephrine started dumping into his bloodstream. He would pay for that later when the exhaustion and the shakes hit, but he wanted to live that long. He sped away from his pursuers and around the next corner.

The 'plaster had only one use left, so Niko had to rely only on his legs, his wits...and a top-of-the-line internal data net. He launched the Chaos algorithm, a thousand attacks on every computer system within reach. Each attack was *designed* to fail. It triggered burglar alarms all along the block, and on nearby blocks as well. Lights flashed. Bells rang. Vehicle horns blared. People looked out doors and windows. Soon the police would appear, and the pursuers would have to deal with them.

Niko, though, would be nowhere in sight by then. He had one more trick, one he had hoped to save for breaking into the spaceport. Beneath the streets ran a cargo tram system, and Niko had paid good money for a security code for it. He saw an access plate ahead, and he sent out the code. The plate slid aside, he dropped down in, and it slid shut.

His code was only good for one use. Niko could run through the tunnels to the port, sneak in right under the nose of customs, and wave goodbye to Pedersen.

But he couldn't forget the fear in Sarah's eyes, nor the determination in her face. He suspected a lot of people had let her down in her short life. He refused to be another one.

Niko exited at a hidden spot half a block from the meeting place. There were only minutes to spare, and epinephrine anxiety made thinking difficult.

He saw no hunters, but he did see Sarah. She had dressed better this time: less flashy, more likely to blend in. There was a chill, and she paced back and forth with her hands in the pockets of a light jacket.

Niko hurried up to her. "Hi, Amy, sorry I'm late. We're going to miss the start of the show." He kept walking, and she fell in beside him. At a lower volume he added, "We gotta get to the Concordia

hotel, one block south and four down. We may be followed, so if I tell you to move, don't argue. Got me?"

"Uh-huh," she said, and they kept walking. He had another room at the Concordia, chosen because the service yard there backed up against the spaceport fence. But first they had to survive to reach the hotel. Who had shot at him? The police were unlikely to knife first and ask questions later. Was it the Bruun family?

Before Niko could ponder that, he heard a voice behind them shout "Dagma!" He turned and far away saw a tall, heavy-set Pederesen man pushing through the crowd. His heart started to race again.

Then Niko felt a tug on his arm. He jolted, but then realized Sarah was pulling him into a dress shop. "What?"

"Trust me, I know what I'm doing," she answered. Then in a louder voice, "This is the *wrong* store, you idiot. Look!" She held up a sleeve. "These are kids' clothes! They're nice—" She stopped and smiled at a green-skinned female clerk. "—but they won't fit mother. I'll never find a gift for her. Take me somewhere else."

Niko's mind raced, and he realized her game: pampered princess and clueless servant. The clerk wouldn't suspect that they were hiding in the shop. "I'm sorry, miss, where shall we go next?"

Sarah was already moving through the store, right past the clerk. "There's a great place in the next block, and there's a rear entrance here. And don't touch anything. I don't want to pay for anything you get soiled."

Niko hurriedly followed Sarah out the door. "That was brilliant, kid," he said. But she was already moving. Where was she going in such a hurry?

Then he remembered. The Concordia. The danger. Damn epinephrine hangover. Lucky *she* was thinking straight. He ran to keep up with her.

Then as they neared the hotel district, Sarah started running as well, and he really started feeling the fatigue.

He was trembling and gasping when they reached the side door of the Concordia. He almost dropped his key card twice before it let them in. He pulled the metal door shut behind them, fell against the wall, and spent seconds catching his breath—seconds they couldn't spare, but the epinephrine left him no choice.

Sarah pulled at his arm. "Come on! Can't stop now."

Niko nodded, and he straightened, but he still shook all over. He led the girl to his windowless ground floor room and keyed them in.

His spare kit was near the door. He swung the door shut and locked the deadbolt. For good measure he pressed his taser against the electronic lock, shorting it out. Gasping still, he pointed at the big chair. Sarah looked at it, realized what he meant, and slid it up against the door.

Niko fell upon the bed. He *had to* treat his exhaustion, or he would collapse. Pawing through his kit, he found a quick-acting sedative. He jabbed himself with it and waited for his tremors to subside. As soon as he had control, he found ampules to treat his racing heart and his blood pressure.

Once Niko's pulse dropped into a normal range, he packed up his kit and got off the bed. Then he pointed at it. "This, too." She nodded, and they moved the bed up against the chair.

Niko turned to the heating panel in the rear wall. Normally these were sealed units, but he had unsealed his. With a quick twist, he removed the screws that held it in place. Then he gently set it down outside, avoiding any noise.

Sarah squeezed into the narrow opening. As she climbed through, Niko heard distant shouting from the corridor. Again, the booming voice: "Dagma!" It was followed by a crash of breaking glass.

Dagma? Niko started another search as he followed Sarah through to the service yard, a small paved area stacked with crates, tools, and artificial plants. He stuck the heating panel back into place, and then he and Sarah pushed a heavy crate in front of it.

"All right, over here." He brought smaller crates to the fence, and Sarah stacked them to form makeshift stairs. When the crates reached within a meter of the top, he said, "Hold it."

Just then, they heard crashing from his room, and Niko wondered how long the door would hold. "Hurry!" Sarah said softly.

Niko climbed until he could examine the top of the fence. There were power lines and spy eyes. He reached out a sensor pulse to touch them, and found stun beams concealed within. He could shut the systems down locally, but not for long before port security would detect them.