

---

---

# The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

---

---

No. 14 • July, 2002 ~ Published with Cosmopolis No. 28

---

## Table of Contents

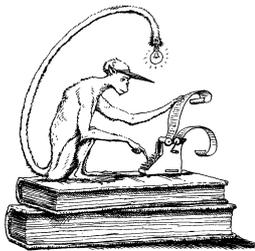
Item Fifteen  
by *Tim Stretton*  
Page 2



*Coralia*  
by *Till Noever*  
Page 11



Letters  
Page 24



## Editorial

Welcome to CLS 14. For this issue the stalwart Tim Stretton has unearthed a so-far-hidden ‘Lamarck’ short story, which fans of *The Zeal Inheritance* especially will appreciate. Lamarck does get around, and I wish we could hear of his exploits on a regular basis. Maybe Tim could be persuaded to write a series voluminous enough to fill a book. The models of Magnus Ridolph and Miro Hetzel come to mind.

Also in this issue: Chapters three and four of *Coralia*, in which Jack Corwin arrives on Herrykairn and takes his first steps toward unraveling the mysteries and tragedies of his past. He doesn’t know it yet, but he’ll get an inkling in CLS 15, and you’ll have to hang in there to find out.

And that’s all for CLS 14, no matter how much I’d like there to be more. I’ve had other potential contributors email me, to point out the difficulties they’re having starting and/or finishing stories, no matter how much they’d like to. Even those who have written material seem to fear that it lacks a certain quality which they often describe as ‘perfection’, and that its exposure to public scrutiny—and especially to people spoilt by Jack’s writings—would be embarrassing at best and humiliating at worst.

Alas, this is an artist’s lot—be she writer, painter, sculptor, composer, or, say, actor. But art concealed in a closet is art defeated; because—and I know this view might draw some flak, but I stand by it—in its essence art is communication; and ultimately this must be directed outward, away from the individual, and into society at large. Society may not accept the message, of course, but that’s part of the game, too. If nothing else, it’s a hint that one’s communication-techniques require refinement, so that the messages *do* get through.

But how can one know if they do. . . . unless one tries? The courage to fail, to be criticized, ridiculed, maligned, therefore is as important to the artist as her skill and vision.

Still, why should one risk such exposure, when concealment is so much safer? I’m not sure, but I suspect it might be because not doing it would be even worse.

---

Copyrights are owned by the respective authors. All rights reserved. The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement is published in cooperation with *Cosmopolis*, and edited by Till Noever.

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

# Item Fifteen

by *Tim Stretton*

## 1

Lamarck's latest assignment as Pangalactic Security Services' "Investigator at Large" took him far outside of his usual investigative haunts. His commission to locate Lazula Hecapilio, aged nineteen, had brought him to the notorious planet of Oosterhei, home of the so-called "indenture auctions." Lamarck's investigations had suggested to him that Lazula might well find herself more intimately acquainted with those auctions that she would like.

He transferred his pared-down belongings from the spaceliner to the orbiter above Oosterhei and remembered his conversations with Lazula's mother Sassiveg, a formidable amalgam of spite and sinew, and hoped even more fervently that he was not too late to effect a favourable intervention.

"Do not," Sassiveg had said without the remotest hint of warmth, "even consider returning without my daughter. You have all my moveable wealth at your disposal: this should be more than adequate for your needs."

Lamarck's attempts to argue that Pangalactic contracts did not work in exactly this fashion had been ignored, and he had accepted that Sassiveg was a matron who would be satisfied with nothing less than complete success, achieved if possible at minimal expense. Sassiveg lacked natural charm, grace or beauty, and although the former two were probably beyond remedy, her resources would certainly have stretched to the sort of radical cosmetic surgery common these days; but Sassiveg clearly relished her unyielding reputation and refused the slightest compromise which might undermine it. Perhaps Lazula had had her reasons for running away.

As he looked out of the orbiter's port down to the planet below, his attention was captured by the arrival of a fussily dressed local official in the foyer.

"Welcome to Oosterhei," he said. "My name is Prefect Ozbek, and if you will favour me with your attention I will outline some simple rules which will make your stay here enjoyable and free from accidents of the more sensational sort, ha ha!"

Lamarck considered this mechanical levity somewhat inappropriate. Any number of folk had fallen prey to just such an "accident" including, unless he could intervene in time, Lazula Hecapilio. Tourists were drawn to Oosterhei by its dangerous reputation; but many of them left only via the indenture auctions.

Ozbek continued. "The moment you disembarked from the spaceliner and entered the orbiter, you came under Oosterhein jurisdiction. I see that you all have your right hands dyed blue, indicating a degree of exemption from local laws, provided you also have the papers to back up your immunity. Specifically, the provisions of the Prejudicial Conduct Statute do not apply to you. Those of you who are here to pick up indentures, a brief word on the programme. Trials are held tomorrow morning: those who are convicted, heh heh, will be put forward to either the male indenture auction in the afternoon or the female in the evening."

Ozbek's gaze moved to Lamarck, who self-consciously tucked his blue hand into the pocket of his dark suit. "I sense you are new to Oosterhei, sir. An independent trader, perhaps?"

"Prime Apprehensor Lamarck of Pangalactic, if it's any concern of yours," he snapped with more asperity than he had intended.

Ozbek nodded mildly. "I deduce from your demeanour a certain disapproval of our ways of dispensing justice on Oosterhei?"

"I reserve judgement," said Lamarck dryly, "but there would seem to be reasonable evidence to support the contention."

"Wait and see, Prime Apprehensor. Wait and see. Our ways have their merits, ha ha!"

Lamarck said nothing and waited for the transport module to break orbit and touch down. It was not his job to question the validity of the local laws, he told himself for the hundredth time.

## 2

As soon as the transport touched down, Lamarck made his way to the local Pangalactic office. He noticed with some chagrin that no-one had been sent to meet him although he had given plenty of notification of his arrival.

This snub – as it surely was – at least gave him the chance to acquaint himself with the surround-

ings. Oosterhei was arid and unwelcoming. Lamarck, in common with most of the blue-handed offworlders, wore a suit of deep black, which absorbed the maximum rays from Oosterhei's mighty sun and powered the micro-refrigerators pressed against his skin; but even this ultra-efficient suit struggled to cope with the heat and humidity. Lamarck strolled down the main street from the landing port, noting the cracked paving and the parched building fronts. Oosterhei was a rich planet; but Lamarck doubted on this evidence that much of it was lavished on the populace.

The heat began to become oppressive. Lamarck, no stranger to hot climates, felt giddy and made his way to a bank of seats in a nearby plaza. The instant he sat down a gaggle of ragged locals surged towards him.

"Taxi, sir!"

"Taxi! Taxi!"

"I summon a taxi on the instant! Observe my conduct!"

Lamarck was puzzled at this outburst from the previously cowed indigenes. A taxi to the Pangalactic office was clearly a good idea and he tried to catch the eye of one of the throng.

At this point a man in a uniform of grey shorts and white shirt appeared. Addressing the locals, he called out:

"That's enough! Be off with you! No prejudicial conduct here!"

As the crowd scampered off, throwing up a cloud of dust as they disappeared into the heat haze, the man looked deferentially at Lamarck's blue hand and said:

"Sorry about that, sir. They saw you looking a bit lost and thought they might be arrested for prejudicial conduct if they didn't help. Can hardly blame 'em, poor little pink-hands, eh?"

A significant proportion of this discourse bewildered Lamarck and he pulled out his ID. "Prime Apprehensor Lamarck, Pangalactic. Can you get me to the office?"

The man's deference went up another notch. "Officer Raxen, local Pangalactic office, at your service. I'll call you an aircar. And a word of advice, sir. As an outworlder you'll find things work a little strangely on Oosterhei. Whatever you've come here to do, you'll find it easier to work with the system than go against. Begging your pardon if I've spoken out of turn."

Lamarck smiled. Whatever else was awry on Oosterhei, Raxen was the kind of straight glax you could find on any planet in the galaxy.

"You've been most helpful and commendably frank, Officer. You have my gratitude."

By the time his temperature-controlled aircar ride to Pangalactic headquarters was over, Lamarck had recovered his bearings. Immediately he asked to see the Director, who received him with little warmth.

"Prime Apprehensor, a pleasure," he said tersely. "A rare one, too, to have a visit from offworld. Would you care to outline your business in a little more detail?"

Lamarck responded with equal crispness. "I am fulfilling a commission from our Chrysoptolis office to locate one Lazula Hecapilio and reunite her with her a mother, a somewhat forceful personality. Lazula has led me a merry chase across the sector, but I now learn that she is here on Oosterhei. I am eager to pick her up before she ends up in the indenture-woman sales."

The Director tapped at his screen briskly. "It would seem you are too late, Prime Apprehensor. Lazula Hecapilio was arraigned on charges of prejudicial conduct yesterday. She comes before the court tomorrow."

Lamarck cursed. "Is that as bad as I think it is?"

The Director shrugged his thin shoulders. "That depends on your expectations. She'll be convicted and in the indenture-woman sales by tomorrow evening and probably offworld the next day with a forty-year indenture round her neck."

"You seem remarkably composed considering she's about to be sold into legal slavery. *How do we get her out?*"

"I've been here twenty years, Lamarck. This is how things happen; if you turn up on Oosterhei with pink hands you can hardly complain if you end up a forty-year indenture-man. No-one asks tourists to come here; they have only themselves to blame if things go awry. If that sounds callous: this is no planet for liberals."

"In other words, you won't help me?"

"I can't help you in the way you envisage, so the question of inclination doesn't come into it. I'll give you advice, which you may not like."

"Go on," said Lamarck.

"No-one is acquitted of prejudicial conduct. Don't think you can get her off. Your only hope of taking

her offworld is to buy her.”

“What – ”

“To work on Oosterhei you have to think like a Oosterhein. Someone will be buying her indenture tomorrow night. In your situation I’d make sure it’s you.”

Lamarck shook his head. “I can see it has a certain bizarre logic, but . . .”

“No buts, Lamarck. I cannot intervene in this. It’s your only hope. I’ll fix you an appointment with the Public Protector: if you have enough cash you may be able to put in a pre-emptive bid before the sale. OK?”

Lamarck nodded wearily. It was hardly the way he had envisaged resolving the case, but he had access to 200,000 marks of Sassiveg’s money and the idea might just work.

It was early evening when Lamarck found himself in front of the most salient building on Oosterhei, the Public Protectorate; a marble exercise in vulgarity through whose columned entrance Lamarck strolled.

The Protectorate administrative machinery was efficient and soon Lamarck found himself closeted with Public Protector Jolarion, the fleshy and genial figure who represented the highest legal authority on Oosterhei.

The temperature control was so adamant that Lamarck, who had been sweating from his journey outside, was almost shivering. He suspected that Jolarion was a man who enjoyed keeping his guests off-balance.

Lamarck briefly outlined his intentions with regard to Lazula Hecapilio. Jolarion stroked his round chin and nodded gently.

“We tend not to use names where felons are concerned here. The woman you refer to is shown on tomorrow’s case roster as “Item Fifteen” and that is how she will be presented at the indenture market in the evening. Assuming, of course, that she is convicted . . .” he finished with an urbane laugh.

“I had been led to believe that conviction was a formality.”

“Put it thus,” said Jolarion with a rumbling chuckle, “in the six years I have been Public Protector I remember no acquittals on the charge of prejudicial conduct.”

Lamarck raised his eyebrow. Jolarion was clearly disposed to expand on the subject.

“Your own employer, Pangalactic, of course

enforces law on this planet. I hold it a tribute to their investigative rigour that only the guilty are brought before our courts. Don’t you agree?”

Lamarck was skewered and he knew it. Oosterhei was a monstrosity, an affront to human dignity and any form of abstract justice; and Pangalactic not only allowed it but enforced it. He was in no position to take a moral stand.

“I understand your attitude,” he said quietly. “That’s why I want to buy Lazula, or Item Fifteen as you insist on calling her.”

Jolarion leaned back. “Good, good. You adapt to reality quickly. I admire a practical man. As to details: let us assume that Item Fifteen is convicted and asked to serve the community for forty years. How much might you offer to take on her indenture?”

Lamarck suspected that Jolarion would not be a soft negotiator. “You will appreciate that I have a finite expense account. I do not have an unlimited line of credit.”

“Indeed,” said Jolarion with a frown. “Nonetheless an indenture has a market value, and I would be derelicting my duty not to recognise that. Item Fifteen, by no means unattractive as I remember, would have a reserve price on her indenture at, oh, 150,000 marks, I should estimate.”

Lamarck sipped at the almost passable imitation of Chrysopolitan tongue-twister before him as he bought time. “That is a little more than I would be eager to pay,” he said with as much urbanity as he could muster. “Nonetheless, I recognise the realities of your position, and I suppose I could go up to one-fifty to avoid the inconvenience of an auction.”

“You misunderstand me,” said Jolarion sadly, rustling in his expensive silks. “The reserve price is not the finishing point; it is the beginning. If I could only raise 150,000 marks for Item Fifteen’s indenture tomorrow I should have had a poor day indeed. I hope that you have more funds at your disposal than that.”

Lamarck sighed. This wasn’t going to be easy. The two men fenced a little longer. Then Jolarion leaned forward and said decisively:

“Enough of this! You have an expenses budget: name its scope, and I will tell you if it enough to persuade me to pull Item Fifteen out of the sale.”

Lamarck’s trust of Public Protector Jolarion was mathematically indistinguishable from zero; but the deal seemed his only chance.

"Two hundred," he said tonelessly.

Jolarion was silent a moment. He stroked his chin. "No," he said. "I'm sorry, two hundred isn't enough. I know Aurora Amberley will be at the sale tomorrow. She is Magda Gilderhaus's representative, you know. Aurora will bid high if she has to. My chances of beating 200,000 are too good for me to sell her indenture to you so low outside of the sale."

"But what if Aurora Amberley doesn't want her?" cried Lamarck in desperation. "Isn't a certain two hundred better than a maybe two-ten?"

"No, it isn't," said Jolarion with the beginnings of impatience. "If it gets out that I am prepared to do private deals for reserve price plus a third the market will fall; revenues to the state treasury will fall likewise and I will be out of a job. If you want the girl you must bid for her yourself."

Lamarck rose with reasonable dignity and left the Public Protectorate. He had had a further idea of how he might work with the system. . .

Half an hour later he found himself in the suite of Aurora Amberley, Head of Acquisitions for Magda Gilderhaus's remarkable chain of sexual services establishments.

The suite was plush – indeed, probably over-opulent for most tastes. Lamarck thought that Aurora Amberley looked most at home in it. She was a tall, cool and perfect blonde with kiss-me lips and that indeterminacy of age which could only be the result of expensive nano-surgery. She was not, he estimated, less than thirty but she might easily be fifty.

Aurora Amberley extended her right hand, dyed blue as a sign of her trade exemption from local laws, as Lamarck approached. Her deep blue dress co-ordinated perfectly with the dyed hand but gave her complexion a subtle pallor.

"A pleasure to meet you, Prime Apprehensor," she said in an impeccably modulated voice. "Most glaxes I meet these days are from the Office of Public Morals and they usually find some way to vex me. I am sure our relationship will be more cordial," she finished with an arch smile which Lamarck did not find especially alluring under the circumstances.

"That rather depends," said Lamarck with that urbane dryness which was his hallmark when interviewing polished and assured women. "Clearly I want something from you, and I am not sure whether I offend etiquette in asking it."

Aurora Amberley crossed her legs languidly. "You intrigue me. You are clearly a stranger to Oosterhei

and I wonder what you can want. Outline your proposals," she said with an underplayed coquettishness.

"Simple enough," said Lamarck. "There is a young woman who is likely to be convicted tomorrow and her indenture sold. All I am asking is that you don't bid for her."

The flirtatious element fell away from Aurora Amberley's persona. "I heard you had been making enquiries. I take it you are referring to Item Fifteen?"

"Her name is Lazula Hecapilio," said Lamarck with a trace of heat. Aurora Amberley made a gesture with her blue hand to indicate such semantics were of little consequence.

"You put me in an awkward position, Prime Apprehensor," she said. "I have a quota and I need to leave this sale with it filled. Item Fifteen is borderline Prime-Ultra and it does not look as though there will be much quality in tomorrow's sale. If I have not fulfilled my quota on the first fourteen items I must bid for Fifteen. I'm sorry."

"It's not even good business!" cried Lamarck. "I will bid above the market price if necessary: you will not get a bargain."

Aurora Amberley shrugged. "I'll pay what it takes. Item Fifteen looks good material, and I must meet my quota."

Lamarck weighed his words. "Have some humanity, Miss Amberley! There is a girl's liberty at stake here."

"I hope that you aren't going to play the moralist with me, Lamarck," she said. "It is not a position that a glax can adopt without incongruity. Your colleagues are the ones underpinning the whole order you find so repugnant."

"I am familiar with that line of reasoning,. The fact remains that by leaving me a clear run you will be performing a humanitarian act."

"Your own motives are hardly humanitarian, Prime Apprehensor. You want to see Item Fifteen go free so that you can fulfil your contract; but all that would mean is that I had bought a different girl instead. If you think you are being moral in this you are a hypocrite, Lamarck," Aurora Amberley continued with a hint of shrillness. "And if you think I am wicked, then you know very little about this trade. Magda's girls rarely serve the full term of their indenture. Normally they are released, often with a handsome gratuity, after as little as ten years of

what many consider congenial work, as well as acquiring a *recherché* set of skills which will help them with their rehabilitation in the community.”

“That’s nothing to me,” said Lamarck harshly. “If you want to rationalise your disgusting trade I can’t stop you. But don’t for a moment think that I consider you anything other than a repulsive leech and a degrading and degraded pimp. You’re making whores out of innocent girls and all your talk of *gratuities* can’t alter the reality that once a jade, always a jade.”

“What do you know, Lamarck?” she cried in sudden rage, leaping from her seat and slapping his face in one movement. “When *you’ve* done *your* ten years with the perverts and inadequates and monsters and worse – *then* you can tell me that you know something about it! You come in here and tell me – ME! – what this trade is about. You know nothing – you cannot even imagine!” she shrieked.

Lamarck fingered his cheek which was burning a deep red. “I think that’s called touching a nerve,” he said with as unpleasant a smile as he could muster. “I didn’t realise the practical experience that was necessary to earn the post of “Head of Acquisitions”. One lives and learns.”

Aurora Amberley’s blue eyes emitted enough radiation to sterilise the entire planet. “If you ever tell anyone here what you’ve learned tonight you’ll regret it for the rest of your life. I make a delightful friend – not that you’ll ever find out – but I am not an enemy you would want.”

Lamarck shrugged. “We all have to make sacrifices. I’ll bear your disesteem with as much fortitude as I can summon. Be seeing you.”

He stalked from the suite. Satisfying as provoking Aurora Amberley had been, and potentially useful as he might find the knowledge that she had once been an indenture-woman, he had made no concrete gain. Ultimately all he had achieved was to antagonise the last person who could have helped him.

### 3

The next morning Lamarck presented himself at the Public Protectorate. Aurora Amberley was there as well, presumably checking merchandise; Lamarck stayed to the back of the room and took care to keep out of her sight.

He watched in dismay as the trials began. Jolarion read out the charges against the unfortunate in the dock, a glax was called on to testify witnessing the transgression in question – colliding with a rubbish bin on one occasion and “immodest demeanour” on another – and Jolarion pronounced a guilty verdict and imposed the penalty. Lamarck watched three such travesties before slipping from the room.

He remained outside until Item Fifteen should be brought on. The spectacle was shocking enough on its own merit; but to see glaxes standing before the court testifying to witnessing immodest demeanour turned his stomach.

His com soon alerted him that Item Fifteen was about to stand before the Seat of Justice. It seemed that Items Four to Fourteen had been treated to summary justice.

Lamarck arrived in time to see Lazula Hecapilio – as he now had trouble thinking of her – standing alone in the dock. She looked younger than nineteen and her shoulder-length auburn hair was dishevelled.

Jolarion read from the charge sheet.

“Item Fifteen, you are brought before the Seat of Justice to answer the charge that you engaged in prejudicial conduct by reason of jaywalking on Hexday evening. How do you plead?”

Lazula tried visibly to compose herself. She had seen the previous fourteen trials; she could hardly hold out any hopes of a favourable outcome.

“Not guilty,” she said in voice of greater power and modulation than Lamarck had expected.

“Prosecutor? You must prove your case,” said Jolarion. The Prosecutor, a wiry grey man with a fascinating wart on his chin, rose from his seat.

“As you, command, sir. On Hexday evening, Officer Mocquet of Pangalactic apprehended the defendant Item Fifteen walking not on the pavement provided for pedestrian use but in the roadway provided for the passage of auto-trams. This clearly amounted to conduct prejudicial to the common weal and Officer Mocquet effected a speedy arrest.”

The prosecutor sat down and Jolarion nodded. “I see Officer Mocquet before me. Are these the facts?”

Mocquet did not bother to rise. “They are.”

“The case is proved. I find the defendant – ”

Lamarck rose to his feet with a bellow. “This is absurd, Jolarion. Can she not even defend herself?”

Jolarion’s ruddy face darkened still further.

"What ill-mannered guest is this? Lucky your hand is blue, Lamarck, or you would be next in the dock!"

Lamarck realised that his interruption was futile but he could not leave the point. "You haven't even heard what she has to say! This is an abomination – and I speak as a glax!"

Jolarion had recovered his urbanity. "An officer of the law – an employee of your own corporation – has testified to her guilt. What more can we want? Why need she defend herself? She will only deny all. Let them speak and every smooth-tongued rogue in the sector will escape justice. This is the way of Oosterhei. I find Item Fifteen guilty of prejudicial conduct. In view of her youth and previous good character I decree that she assist the community for a period of forty years. Call next Item Sixteen!"

Lamarck sank back into his seat. He was beaten – for now at least. His only chance was to win the auction.

#### 4

That evening Lamarck made his way to the auction house, a quaint stone structure conveniently adjoining the Public Protectorate. Its interior was surprisingly spacious and comfortable; presumably the good quality light and ambient temperatures were designed to show the indenture-women in the most flattering surroundings.

Lamarck surveyed the auction's other patrons with distaste. There were several folk who were clearly little more than disreputable old lechers; he hoped they had come merely to satisfy their lubricious fantasies rather than to take any of the unfortunates into perpetual durance. Lamarck also saw Aurora Amberley, now attired in a cool sea-green dress which complemented nicely her blue hand. There were various other professional types patronising the booths, possibly "acquisitors" on a smaller scale than Aurora Amberley's operation.

Lamarck wandered among the cells look at the dispirited inhabitants. Soon he found Item Fifteen; she seemed listless but otherwise composed. She certainly was an attractive girl and Lamarck understood why Aurora Amberley might be inclined to bid for her. Just as long, he thought, as she doesn't go above two hundred . . .

Soon a tone rang to signify the start of the auc-

tion. Lamarck was surprised – although only momentarily – to see that the auctioneer was none other than Public Protector Jolarion.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced in polished tones. "Welcome to this evening's sale of female indentures. The nineteen women before us have been convicted of the serious crime of conduct prejudicial to the state of Oosterhei. We are a small community and poor, and it is the wisdom of our system that we pass to others the burden of administering correction. We are not, of course, selling the unfortunate women themselves, merely their indentures for periods ranging from ten to fifty years. At the end of the indenture period the convicted are again free."

Lamarck watched in fascinated horror as the sale of indentures proceeded. The women seemed to draw little consolation from Jolarion's stipulation that it was their sentences rather than themselves which were for sale.

Aurora Amberley bid briskly during the early stages of the auction and soon secured the indenture of a frightened but obviously comely blonde, although the bidding seemed to go higher than she would have liked. The most grotesque moment of the sale came when one of the unspeakable old creatures Lamarck had seen earlier acquired a tall brunette whom he immediately led away to explore over the next thirty years. Although it was relatively cool in the early evening sunlight, Lamarck had to fight down a sudden spasm of queasiness. Aurora Amberley, he noted, manifested no such discomfort: indeed it had been her withdrawal from the bidding which had allowed "Item Four" to be acquired by her monstrous guardian.

The next hour or so passed in a daze of horror. One girl after another was dragged up to the dais to facilitate inspection, bidding followed with a vigour proportional to her attractiveness, before the inevitable melancholy conclusion.

At last the moment for Item Fifteen arrived. Lamarck had been following Aurora Amberley's progress and suspected that she was still short of her quota. He would soon find out.

Jolarion finished his introduction of Item Fifteen. "In summary, an indenture-woman of considerable charms and many years' nubility ahead of her. As an additional frisson, we may note that an offworlder has appeared with the romantic notion of redeeming her from servitude. Let the bidding be brisk.

Who will offer one hundred and twenty thousand marks for her indenture?"

Lamarck had no wish to prolong the ordeal, either for himself or Lazula. "One fifty and be done with it!" he called out. There was no point in fencing below the reserve price.

"A bold bid from the glax with money to spend!" cried Jolarion. "Who will make an auction of it?"

"One-sixty," came a call from towards the back of the hall.

"One six-five," said Aurora Amberley without raising her voice. Lamarck swore to himself; Aurora Amberley still had spaces in her quota.

"One seventy-five," said Lamarck with an assurance he did not feel. The man at the back of the floor shook his head.

Aurora Amberley did not respond immediately. From the little Lamarck knew of the indenture business, one seventy-five was probably about Item Fifteen's market value. If she paid any more she would be buying dear.

"One eighty," she said at last. Evidently she feared missing her quota more than paying a premium.

"One ninety!" said Lamarck quietly, beginning to grow in confidence. How much higher would Aurora Amberley go? She had balked at one eighty.

"One nine two," she said expressionlessly.

"Objection!" called Lamarck. "Bidding must be in five thousand mark increments."

Jolarion spoke with reluctance. "The glax is right, Miss Amberley. You must bid 195,000 or withdraw. We uphold justice here."

Lamarck doubted this latter point but at least Jolarion seemed to be sticking to his own rules.

"Very well," said Aurora Amberley tetchily. "I bid 195,000 marks and let that be an end to it."

"Two hundred," snapped back Lamarck immediately. He was at his limit; but Aurora Amberley was not to know that and she was too professional to continue bidding to infinity.

Aurora Amberley sagged visibly. The brittle temper he had noticed the previous night was not far below the surface.

"Will anyone top 200,000 marks?" asked Jolarion. "Aurora Amberley? It seems a shame when the glax must be close to the ceiling of his finances."

Lamarck sprang from his seat in rage; Jolarion had all but told Aurora Amberley that another bid would win the auction!

"You dog, Jolarion! Justice! Justice would be you in the indenture pen. . ."

Jolarion's urbanity was unruffled. "Any further disturbance and I will ask you to leave the auction, Prime Apprehensor," he said. "Now, have we any further bids?"

Aurora Amberley rose with measured dignity, unravelling her sea-green curves. She looked sideways at Lamarck with a smile. "I bid 205,000 marks."

"What a pair!" cried Lamarck in fury. "A pimp and a wh- "

"Enough," said Jolarion with his full judicial gravity. "Glaxes, escort Prime Apprehensor Lamarck from the compound. Item Fifteen sold to Aurora Amberley at 205,000 marks. Next, Item Sixteen, as you see a redhead of some spirit. . ."

Lamarck missed the rest as three glaxes dragged him away from the compound and pitched him headlong into the dust. Jolarion and Aurora Amberley had cheated him; Lazula had been sold into slavery. He could not imagine a more complete failure of his mission.

## 5

The next morning a dejected Lamarck took the transport offplanet to the orbiter until the spaceliner should arrive. He had no desire to spend a second longer on Oosterhei; and he understood the planet's judicial system well enough to know that appeals to Jolarion and the local Pangalactic office would be useless.

As he waited for the transport to touch down he saw Aurora Amberley appear accompanied by three young women, one of whom was Item Fifteen. Lamarck had never spoken to her; now he caught her eye.

"Lazula? I'm sorry," he said quietly as the entourage came past. "I tried to help you but it wasn't enough. I don't know what to - "

Lazula gave Lamarck a half or quarter-smile before Aurora Amberley came over. "Fifteen! Rejoin your colleagues please. Lamarck, you do no good by interfering here. These women are well-treated; this is no unhappy ending."

Lamarck turned his back and waited for the party to board the transport. Before being allowed to board there were the exit procedures under which

dyed hands were restored to their usual hues. Lamarck looked at his pink hand with unutterable relief; another hateful aspect of Oosterhei left behind.

A thought struck Lamarck. Could it really work? He thought back to his briefings and he could see no flaws in his idea. Seeing Officer Raxen performing some kind of security detail he called him over.

"Raxen! Over here! I have a job for you!"

Raxen looked dubious. Lamarck pulled out his rank insignia. "I'll square it with your office. But I need you now."

An hour later the transport had docked with the orbiter. Lamarck's luggage was taken aboard and Aurora Amberley once again appeared with her trio of indenture-women. He nodded to Raxen and walked over to Aurora Amberley.

"Miss Amberley! About yesterday – I may have been unreasonable."

Aurora Amberley, a vision in red, smiled graciously. "Things work differently here. It takes a while to acquire that flexibility."

Lamarck leant forward with a smile and whispered into her ear. "And a whore like you should know. However hard you try you can never escape that. *Once a jade, always a jade.*"

There was a pause while the effect of Lamarck's words sank in. Then, as he had known it would, her self-control shattered. For the second time in three days she caught him a mighty slap.

"You glax scum!" she screamed. "What can you know? I'll rip your boll- "

Lamarck stepped back before any such threat could be carried out. "I think not. Officer Raxen? I point out to you that in striking me Aurora Amberley is clearly guilty of prejudicial conduct. Kindly make the arrest."

Raxen whitened. "Sir? Are you sure?"

"I am," said Lamarck. "The orbiter is still part of Oosterhein jurisdiction; and as you will see Aurora Amberley's hand has been decoloured. She no longer has immunity from the Prejudicial Conduct Statute. Make the arrest, man."

"Yes, sir. Madam, I'm sorry about this."

"Lamarck!" cried Aurora Amberley with giant eyes. "Not again! Don't do this, I beg you, please please please! Have pity!"

"Pity?" said Lamarck. "A novel word in your mouth, Aurora. If it was up to me you'd be in the pen tomorrow. As it is, release Item Fifteen's inden-

ture to me and we'll pretend this never happened. I'll even pay you 175,000 – which I believe is the market value of her indenture – if you release the other two girls. You'll fill no quota this trip."

Aurora Amberley looked at Lamarck with a mixture of desperation and hatred. Marshalling her dignity she said, "That leaves me over 300,000 marks down."

"Raxen? Enter up the charges," said Lamarck.

"All right!" cried Aurora Amberley. "You win! Here are the papers. There are the girls. Give me my money."

Lamarck wrote out a draft on his Pangalactic account for 175,000 marks and handed it over to Aurora Amberley. He had not had to pay her anything, he reflected: but it was Sassiveg's money and her strident temper had caused him considerable vexation in the past. There was justice to be found on Oosterhei after all.

Then, with a gesture whose theatricality amused him, he incinerated the three sets of indenture papers with his pulse gun. With a bow to the three young women, Lamarck said:

"Ladies, you are now free citizens. I hope you have profited from your experiences."

The three women threw themselves on Lamarck with sufficient enthusiasm to convince him that the journey had not been wasted. Indeed, the petite brunette once known as Item Six appeared to strike such an immediate rapport with him that he resolved to follow it up during the evening. Of Aurora Amberley he thought no more.

## 6

After transferring to the spaceliner, Lamarck's evening entertainment of the former Item Six was so comprehensive as to leave him little scope to worry about Aurora Amberley or Lazula. He was somewhat surprised, on emerging from his cabin the next morning, to find the pair of them in detailed conversation.

On seeing Lamarck, Lazula disengaged herself from Aurora Amberley and came over to him.

"Prime Apprehensor? May I speak to you a moment?" she said with a pleasant modesty.

"Of course," said Lamarck, whose mood was unnaturally sunny.

"Have you met my mother? I assume she sent you

to bring me back.”

“I am familiar with Sassiveg,” said Lamarck dryly.

“Then you will understand that my enthusiasm to return is limited. I have been discussing things with Aurora. She tells me that not all of her “acquisitions” are indenture-women, and that there are many career opportunities for a hard-working girl at Magda Gilderhaus’s.”

Lamarck paled. “Lazula! Aurora Amberley had bought you as a slave to do that! And you’re volunteering?”

“It isn’t the same at all!” she said airily. “I’ve only signed a two-year contract – and look at the terms!”

Lamarck was silent. “How old are you?” he said after a while.

“Nineteen!” she said with breezy assurance. Seeing the desolation on Lamarck’s face, she continued. “I really am sorry that I can’t come back with you after all you’ve done for me. But I am a grown-up and I’m not going back to Sassiveg.”

Lamarck struggled to frame a response. He saw Aurora Amberley looking across at him with sly triumph.

“If you want my advice,” continued nineteen-year old Lazula, “you’ll run off yourself, maybe with that nice Item Six who likes you so much. No-one will ever find you and you can live happily ever after.”

And Lamarck, thinking of how he was going to explain to Sassiveg that he had spent 175,000 marks of her money to launch her daughter in a career of prostitution, decided that maybe Lazula’s naive advice was not without merit after all . . .



# Coralia

by Till Noever

## Chapter 3

Jack unstrapped the webbing holding him in place. His eyes were dry and raw from several hours of unsatisfactory sleep and troubled dreams. The ship reeked with the exudations of human living in confined quarters and endlessly recycled air. The computer was screwing around with the environmental settings again. The heat was stifling, the humid air clung to his skin like a soggy towel.

Jack told the computer to improve conditions if at all possible, before floating up and out of the bunk, along the narrow corridor, and into the cramped space that passed for a 'bridge'. Once inside he looked around. The nav-zombie—in real life one David Rigoster—lay as he had lain for the last three weeks; hooked up to his IV, the discharge collectors, and a bunch of colorful wires connected to his implants. The telltales above his head indicated that he was alive and well, and contributing his bit to getting them from A to B—or, in this case, from Fargo 5 to Herrykairn.

*Good boy. Stay alive. That's all I ask.*

The hypo unit strapped to Rigoster's neck made a faint hissing noise and injected another few micrograms of gnarl-extract into the zombie's carotid: keeping the juice levels to just the minimum threshold required; keeping it cheap and keeping it safe; safeguarding the interests of the company as much as those of the zombie. After all, next to inertialite thread maybe, gnarl-juice was just about the most expensive substance in the known universe. It also had some interesting effects when taken in overdose.

Jack knew. He'd seen it happen.

He coasted to the pilot seat and strapped himself in.

"Trajectory parameters."

"Holding on projected course," the navcomp told him; starting off the dialogue on a prophylactically positive note.

"E.T.A.?"

"Three hours, eight minutes, nine seconds."

*Sure. And now for the bad news.*

"Estimated error?"

"One hour, two minutes, and thirty six seconds."

Great! With that kind of margin they might overshoot, or fall short of, the target by several light-weeks. Which would mean lengthy re-computation of re-entry and trajectory parameters. If he was that lucky! If he ended up too near to the central star to return to A-space it could be worse. Meaning, quite possibly, an extended trip through normal space. And no bonus.

*Thanks, but no, thanks.*

Jack had the navcomp display a holographic representation of the current computed trajectory into the space above the controls and examined it critically.

*I think we can do better than that.*

Over the next couple of hours the computer and Jack worked out several alternative approaches to Herrykairn. In the end Jack selected the most suitable of those by the usual process of giving the computer an, apparently-random, ten-digit number off the top of his head. The machine performed an integer division of this number by the number of choices, discarded the quotient, and used the remainder to select between the choices offered. That done the navcomp tweaked the *Daniel Lewis*' teracs by a few micro-tics here and a few milli-teslas there. The net result, if it all worked out—and one never knew if it would, though with Jack it usually did—would be that their E.T.A. was extended to five hours, but that at the same time the error margin was reduced to less than three minutes. Which was much more to Jack's liking.

He sat back and contemplated his handiwork. It might be an idea to attempt another course-adjustment in a few hours. Shave some more margin off the errors, cut down traveling time, and up his bonus by another fraction of a percent.

They dropped out of A-space in full, glorious view of Herrykairn. Since nobody else was going to do it, Jack patted himself on the back. Jack Corwin strikes again.

A few moments after the ship appeared back in normal space the gibberish on the com started up. Traffic-controller speak: same as everywhere; especially when they tried to cover their excitement and agitation with jargon.

And were they ever agitated! The *Daniel Lewis*, all five-hundred meters length of cargo holds and linacs, had re-materialized indecently close to plan-

et and orbiting space-station alike and frightened the living daylight out of everybody.

*Live with it, folks. It happens.*

They'd think it was by accident, of course—that he had just barely missed hitting them or their planet by sheer freak chance. Ships sometimes—very rarely—*did* come too close. Errors worked both ways.

They were wrong, of course. It was skill. Pure, unadulterated Jack Corwin skill.

He stopped laughing. "Voicepic. Connect."

Jack spent the next few minutes responding to the babble and making arrangements for docking. He was in luck, they told him. The *Lister Diamond* had just discharged its complement of passengers and cargo before retreating into a higher orbit to avoid blocking the way for other vessels trying to dock.

Jack's ears pricked up. The *Lister Diamond*! Now that the *Berenice* was no more, the *Lister* was just about the largest piece of space-faring hardware in existence.

Jack swallowed convulsively, dislocating the lump in his throat. The hollow feeling in his gut wasn't so easy to dispose of though. Strange, how it didn't let him go. Not even after all that time.

He switched the second viewer to surround-angle mode, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. He'd seen her once before, a couple of years ago; a massive hulk that put smaller asteroids to shame. But his search was in vain. Jack desisted from his efforts and attended to the needful.

The company came on-line soon after the traffic controllers went off. The local rep's face appeared on the screen: a porcine countenance which shone greasily; eyes too close together; mouth too small and effeminate; a chin that sloped down to a fat neck without much of a transition.

Genes. Too much food. Too little exercise. Too much licking up to the company.

"Corwin? Hilyer Kern. Good to see you! You've made good time."

Jack shrugged. "I always do."

"Of course," Kern said with just a hint of condescension. "Well, the company surely appreciates the speedy turnaround."

Jack's ears pricked up at the subtle inflections.

"Not so fast! You owe me a big bonus and a week's shore-leave."

Kern opened his mouth to say something but Jack

interrupted him. "The answer is 'no'. I've just had two weeks in a ship with a virtual corpse for company. If you want a functioning Pilot who doesn't crack up on the next trip, you'd better give me my break."

Kern's mouth snapped shut. "All right," he said placatingly. "One week. One Herrykairn week."

Jack's ears picked up a subtle inflection. "Meaning?"

"Meaning," Kern said, "the equivalent of four standard days."

Jack nodded ruefully. Of course! Herrykairn rotated rather briskly, making its day about sixteen standard hours long; ten local hours: one to just over one and a half standard hours. Jack knew that his body-clock was going to have to do some serious adjusting.

E-stims and melatonin, here we come.

"One local week," he agreed. Not that he had much of a choice. The 'local' clause was standard in virtually all Pilots' contracts. Why, he had no idea. Guild logic, like all corporate logic, was a strange animal. In the end, of course, it all averaged out—so who cared anyway? Besides, inside of a week, even a short one, he'd have seen about all he wanted to see of Herrykairn; slept with all the prostitutes he could possibly handle; and be more than ready to get back into space and the cocoon he'd created around himself.

A week was just fine.

The docking crew goggled at Jack through face-covering oxygen masks. They stayed as far away from him as they could.

*Paranoid twerps.* What did they think? That he was carrying some terrible social disease?

*If only...*

One of them motioned him toward a decon chamber. Jack surrendered his 'card'<sup>†</sup> and UnIfac<sup>‡</sup>, but

<sup>†</sup> An colloquial abbreviation for officialdom's cumbersome 'Universal Identification and Transaction Card'. The 'card' is a self-contained computing/bio-interface device, which becomes active only if in physical contact with its owner—whom the card must register as being alive to become active—with whom it is linked through a DNA signature, as well as an array of uniquely-identifying physiological tracer identification protocols. The 'card' is used for most identification, economic, logistic, or forensic requirements across the human-settled worlds. It is possible to 'fake' a 'card', but the process is so complex that in practice it is almost always uneconomical—though, with enough funds, resources, and a suitable motivation, even this can be accomplished; and indeed has, but with only a handful of cases actually having come to the attention of authorities.

<sup>‡</sup> UnIfac: 'Universal Interface'; a descendant of an early-computing-days device known as a PDA, or 'Personal Data Assistant'. Prior to the

kept the pendant around his neck. He'd only let go of that once, and that was when he had no choice, because he was almost dead.

The man took the items gingerly and placed them into a drawer, which disappeared into the wall of the airlock. The door to the decon chamber hissed close behind Jack. A voice told him to undress and dispose of his garments into a bin. He complied. The lid slit shut and the container merged into the wall. The voice told him to take a deep breath and hold it. Then he was hosed down with some disgusting spray that stung on his skin—but after the crap of the last two weeks it was like a revitalizing douche. That was followed by a rinse, and a blast of warm air to dry him. He was prompted to exit into an adjacent cubicle where he found some underwear, a belt, and a Guild uniform: standard gray-and-blue, somewhat tight, overalls with the golden shooting star arcing toward an infinity-symbol delicately embossed on the left chest, just above the heart.

*Where would we be without the precious signs of our status?* It was an indication of the Guild's pervasive influence that a Pilot's right to be provided with a nice, clean uniform wherever he went had remained unchallenged for as long as Jack could remember.

He was about halfway dressed when there was a little whirring sound and a drawer in the wall slid open to reveal his 'card and UnIfac—duly decontaminated, but hopefully without the use of astringent sprays. Jack buckled on the belt, slipped the 'card into its slot, attached the UnIfac to its clip, and told the walls he was ready. The door hissed open, and he had the freedom of the station.

Or maybe not quite: Hilyer Kern was there, look-

ing even less savory than on the viewer, smiling at Jack with all the welcoming sincerity of a Deluvian mask-devil.

"Feel better?" he asked solicitously, eyeing Jack up and down; not entirely, it seemed, without envy.

Jack took a few deep breaths of the slowly circulating station air. He knew it was stale, too, but to him it was a breeze from heaven.

Kern immediately tried to change his mind about shore-leave, but Jack wasn't having any of it. He parted with Kern as expeditiously as possible and on amicable terms—at least superficially; for Jack knew that their dislike was mutual and deep-seated, and that the gulf between them would never be bridged.

The next transport to the surface was due to leave in less than three local hours. Plenty of time for Jack to get his legs used to some gravity again. The station's spin generated only half-normal at the promenade level, but that was enough. It was nice to know 'up' and 'down' again, and to feel a steady tug. His muscles were in good enough condition, because he was a fanatic when it came to using the ships' exercise facilities. But all the strain and impact exercises in the world couldn't make up for the comforting feel of gravity's tug.

Jack ambled along the curved promenade with its booths, shops, and eating places; allowed himself the luxury of a sinfully expensive cup of freshly-brewed real coffee. He went to the local banking facility, plugged in his 'card, had it verified and updated with the company's most recent transfers, and took out a heap of local currency tabs.

He stood there holding them thoughtfully. Hard cash: it had been some time since he'd had a need for that. However, on Herrykairn they used specially printed currency tabs of differing denominations. One 'jin' exchanged to one standard EU\*. But whereas EUs could be fractionalized to within four decimal places, a jin divided into subunits of one hundred 'jincens'. Currency tabs of various colors, decorations and sizes were available down to a minimum quantum of five jincens.

Jack ended up with a bulging pocketful of tabs, the largest of which was about the size of his 'card. It felt odd, but after a little while he didn't notice anymore. Adaptation to local idiosyncrasies wasn't always as simple as this.

\* EU: an Economic Unit; a currency standard and exchange reference common to all human-settled worlds and the means of payment for all interstellar trade.

---

Listerite revolt and the collapse of TransNet this type of device had fallen into disuse, in favor of interface implants, which were generally regarded as more 'advanced' and 'cool', and which for the best part of a century, became the prevailing fashion; with only a few die-hard conservatives refusing to be 'integrated', 'linked', or 'com-nected' into Carl Ilkwood's cybernetic empire. However, with the demise of TransNet and the introduction of Earth's new, comparatively stringent, privacy laws, as well as the accompanying awareness of the fragility of personal freedom, small, portable, but essentially net-independent, devices made a comeback. The design of the present-day UnIfacs, conforming to a set of basic requirement specifications, remains essentially unchanged, though its capabilities have expanded by orders of magnitude: in terms of computational capacity, application, and user-interface. The utility and interface characteristics of a UnIfac are almost infinitely variable. It has been stated that no two will be the same, as each owner will have imprinted his or her own set of requirements, foibles, and preferences upon the unit or units they own. Thus a certain school of psychology, native to Triandis 8, has made it a specialty to psychoanalyse humans purely on the basis of how they have configured their UnIfacs. The utility of such an analysis is dismissed by others, who prefer more conventional, though equally debated, methods of classifying the human animal.

As he waited for the shuttle to board he gazed out through the wide viewing ports at Herrykairn rotating below him. The resemblance to Earth was pronounced. A lot of water—more than Earth, but not quite as much as Coralia—and the rest brown and green land masses, some flecked with dots of white where stood tall mountains.

The night side of the planet came into view, and with it a peculiar sight; as of a giant luminous amoeba with several bulbous pseudopods extending across a substantial fraction of a large peninsula of the main northern continent. Jack's stared at it with fascination. Here was the reason why cruise ships berthed at Herrykairn: one of the wonders of the populated galaxy.

Jack popped his 'card into an interface slot, held his Unlfac to the transfer plate, and had it download a chunk of planetary data into the device's quantum-dot memory. He'd look at those at his leisure later. On second thought he also requested a complete history of the colony. Cultural stuff was important, especially on shore leave. Getting dumped unprepared into the peculiarities of the local ambience could really spoil one's chances of having a good time. Of course there was usually an enclave catering for space-travelers and visitors. But once one had released one's pent-up energies at the ubiquitous brothels (which he did) gotten oneself a headache in the bars using whatever brew happens to be cheap and plentiful (which he did occasionally), though he preferred expensive, imported stuff, which was safer—and at the gambling tables and machines (which he avoided like Plague, because they invariably got him into a kind of trouble that most people would have welcomed)—once all that had been sampled it was time to step outside those confines: out of curiosity, if nothing else; to experience a new world, its landscapes and seas, autochthons, the adaptations of men and women to the localities and circumstances beyond their conception, and to which they and their descendants had been forced to accommodate or perish.

Amazing, really: how it was always different and yet, when you looked deep enough, the same.

As the shuttle plunged toward the planet below, Jack asked himself, for the zillionth time, why he was bothering with this stupid game. He was rich enough. He didn't need to subject himself to those endless, wasted hours; to the loneliness and the brooding that invariably came with it; to stints like

those on the *Daniel Lewis*, with a near-corpse as the only companion.

Being a Pilot had been interesting. Once. Now it was just a job, whose only redeeming feature was that it got him around the inhabited galaxy, and gave him a chance to see what mankind had made of itself after over three hundred years in space.

The bottom-line so far: not very impressive—and the prospects for improvement looked none too bright either.

*Why am I keeping this up?*

Maybe, he told himself, because he just hadn't found the right place to stop.

*Is that what I'm doing?*

How would he know if and when he found it? Would he know at all?



## Chapter 4

"Pilot, eh?" The man in the seat beside him had been quiet for far longer than Jack had expected him to. Amazingly restrained in fact, for most people hit on Pilots the moment they got the chance: the price you paid for being part of an elite.

*Well*, thought Jack, *I shouldn't complain*. If he had desired anonymity he could have chosen not to display the symbols of his profession, and no one would have been any the wiser.

The conversational opening lacked originality, but Jack wasn't going to be a bastard about it. He nodded politely, but said nothing.

The other man wasn't to be put off. "Been to Herrykairn before?"

Jack shook his head. "First time."

The man grinned. "Going for a bit of R&R, eh?"

Jack nodded. "It's been a long trip."

"Where'd you come from?"

"Fargo."

The man's reaction, oddly enough, was that of one who knew the answer; but he asked Jack anyway. "How far's that?"

"Just over twenty six light-years."

Jack thought that his companion's face was the kind of wise look people put on when they're trying to hide the fact that they have no idea of what's going on. Except that in his case Jack thought even that was an act. In fact, he knew it was. Jack was a Pilot, and Pilots intuit things; that was their job—

and, with Jack at least, the intuition, the 'sense', very much carried over into his everyday life. In this instance it told him that this guy knew exactly what Jack was talking about.

So, why the witless expression?

"You've been in space for quite a while then," the man commiserated. "Must get lonely out there."

Same questions every time. Except . . .

"It does," Jack agreed. He was about to add something more but then stopped himself. Maybe, he wondered, this conversation wasn't such a good idea. There was an air of something not quite right about it all.

If Jack hadn't been a Pilot he would have written the whole thing off as a brief attack of some groundless paranoia, occasioned by over-extended period in solitary confinement and a subconscious desire to add a sprinkle of spice to my life. Which is what it should have been. After all, there was nothing in Jack's life that would have warranted paranoia of any kind. Unless someone was looking him over for a contract, of course. There was that . . .

Was *that* it?

Jack flicked a quick glance at his companion, who was sitting back with a serenely careless smile, nodding his head ever so slightly. He was taller than Jack, with short cropped black hair sculpted into an almost Mephistophelean widow's peak above his high-set eyebrows.

Something else odd about him; like Jack knew him from somewhere; like he was familiar, even though Jack had never seen his face before.

Then Jack knew . . .

He turned to the man. "Tourist here yourself?" he asked lightly.

The head gave a slow shake. "Coralian embassy." Indeed!

"This place is important enough for an *embassy*?"

The Coralian wagged his head. "Someone seems to think it is."

"A big one?"

"Just three of us."

'Embassy' . . . ha! Jack kept his face studiously neutral. 'Nest of spies' was more like it.

*I'm sitting beside a Coralian spy—who just happened to get the seat beside me on this flight. Coincidence—of course. And my mother was a Hernian flywig. . .*

"Been a while since you've been back home?" Jack asked.

The Coralian shrugged. "Yeah. It's a long way."

*Tell me about it.* Over one hundred light years: at least two standard months' travel if you took the usual route via Earth. With good Pilots, but with mediocre ones and sundry delays *en route* it could take twice that long.

He wondered if the man had also sensed the connection between them. Or—the notion troubled Jack—did he know who Jack was?

Jack's thoughts kept coming back to the question he'd asked before. What was so important about Herrykairn that merited Coralian attention? Something a hundred light years away on the other side of the human galaxy, on a little backwater planet with nothing but some local flora as tourist-attractions?

Curioser and curioser.

*None of your business, Jack!*

Yeah. So why did he just know that things weren't as simple as that? The PTBs—the Powers *That Be*, the Fates, God, or whoever happened to run the show—were at it again. He could taste it.

"You must get homesick," Jack said.

The Coralian nodded. This time, Jack sensed, he wasn't pretending. Coralians were always homesick, even half-breeds like himself.

The man glanced sideways at Jack. "*You're* a Coralian," he said. His tone suggested that he had only just now thought of it.

Jack wasn't fooled. "Sort of," he admitted.

"From Tyre?"

"Where else?"

"How long since you've been back home?"

Jack wasn't going to argue about the terminology. "About twenty standard years," he said.

"Long time."

Jack pretended a carelessness he didn't feel. "My contracts never took me that way," he said lightly. "Seems I always ended up on this side of the arm."

The Coralian gave Jack a sympathetic look, but this time Jack's sense told him that it was a fake. Indeed, he was sure now that he wasn't telling the spy anything the man hadn't known already. Jack noticed that he'd never bothered to ask him for his name. It could have been shyness, of course. Maybe around here one didn't do that kind of thing.

*Or maybe he knows it already.*

The cabin's speakers came to life and announced their imminent arrival at Port Ster. Jack excused himself and directed his attention out the little

round window to view the final stages of their descent.

Port Ster was situated in the temperate zone of Herrykairn's northern† hemisphere. It lay at the western edge of the largest continent, nestled in a shallow valley, wrapped around a small bay of the tideless blue ocean which covered more than eighty percent of Herrykairn's surface. Behind it, not very far inland, lay the natural attraction which brought tourists to this place from near and far.

The delta-wing shuttle alighted on the tarmac of a small space-port on the other side of the hills which half-encircled Port Ster. A few scattered buildings marked the space-port. There was general passenger-handling area and waiting lounges with shops and stalls, offering departing passengers a final opportunity to spend their left-over jins.

Jack was asked to subject himself to having his name recorded and picture taken. "These records will be erased once you leave Herrykairn," an official assured him.

Jack doubted it, but there was nothing he could do. If he wanted his shore-leave, he'd have to play by the local rules.

Outside the terminal waited an array of conveyances, ready to ferry people to and from the town. All of these—taxis and buses, with not a fly-yourself in sight—were gravity-polarizing flyers, also known across human space as 'flitzers'‡. There were no wheeled vehicles, which was sensible for small colonies. Flitzers used energy to re-polarize their mass, but, operating immersed in the gravitational fields provided by the planets on which they flew, this expenditure was minor when compared to that required to generate completely artificial gravity on a ship in interstellar space, where the ambi-

ent fields were many orders of magnitude smaller. Flitzers also required none of the, usually expensive and hard-to-procure, replacement parts needed for wheeled vehicles: tyres, complex mechanical linkages, or parts that wore out, like brakes. Ground vehicles also required roads, or something like them, and they were far less mobile. On the other hand the friction-based braking and turning systems of wheeled ground-vehicles were far more effective than turbofans. In high traffic density, such as that of the major cities on the more industrial colonized worlds, ground-based vehicles therefore remained in widespread use. For small outlying colonies like Herrykairn, however, the manufacturing of ground-vehicle replacement parts was impractical, and the cost of importing them from one of the industrialized worlds was generally prohibitive. As for creating endless miles of roading. . .

On the other hand, flitzers went wherever they needed to, and their fusion units—depending on manufacturer, quality, and, of course, cost!—could provide almost-maintenance-free energy for possibly hundreds of thousands of hours. Despite the high price of acquiring even the smallest of vehicular fusion units, the investment invariably paid off in the end. As a result of this and their overall design, flitzers 'aged' very well indeed. At a glance, Jack guessed that most of the vehicles waiting at the landing field were well past the first and second bloom of youth, with quite a few looking as if they qualified—at best—as 'sprightly geriatric'.

Jack bade a civil but distant goodbye to the Coralian spy—making a mental note that, like Jack, the man had neglected to supply his name—and made his way to the taxi stand. He picked the first in a string of flitzers, which came in a dazzling, anarchic assortment of colors and decorative motifs, ranging from abstract swirls to simplified representations of what Jack presumed to be the Arkrod. The inside of the taxi he'd picked betrayed the vehicle's age and extensive use. The mismatched upholstery suggested that it had been cannibalized from decommissioned vehicles; the odor was a mix of myriad human exudations; the windows, though clean, exhibited striations and scratches; a strip of broad adhesive tape had been used to patch over an imperfection in the roof's interior lining.

The driver, a solidly-built individual of middle age\*, with short-cropped gray hair, a skin evincing

\* 'Middle age': a relative term because of the wide variation in gerotard

† 'North' being defined in the usual way by reference to planetary rotation, applying the right-hand rule, with the thumb pointing 'north' and the curled fingers indicating the direction of rotation.

‡ 'flitzer': a term probably derived from 21st century German—a language confined to a fairly small portion of Earth population. In due course the word became a part of English vocabulary and spread across human space. The reasons for its success are unclear. Did people think of 'flitzers' as 'flitzing'? The German word signified something along the lines of 'moving along at a fast pace'. Some flitzers conform to the image invoked by the name, though the more ponderous transport units definitely don't. So, why did 'flitzer' stick, when 'slipper'—another term, once in brief use, which alluded to the mode of flitzer-propulsion: differential gravitational polarization, aided by air-fans; which is akin to slipping the vehicle in question through the lines of the field in which they find themselves immersed—survived only only for a negligible period: a fate shared by 'huggers', 'gliders', 'flyers', 'zoomers', 'zippys', as well as a host of other, more obscure items of nomenclature?

long-term exposure to the elements and actinics, gave Jack a cursory glance and expertly assessed the size of his purse. "Twenty jins to town."

It didn't take an intuit's sense to make Jack reach for the door handle. The driver lost his bored mien.

"Ten jins," he amended. "Because you're a Pilot."

"Five," Jack countered, because it felt right. "And only if you get me to a decent hotel."

The cabbie hesitated, considered Jack for another moment, nodded. "Done."

Jack sat back and relaxed. The driver was probably going to drop him off at some place giving him a commission. That was all right; as long as it was good, comfortable, and not a ripoff.

The trip into Port Ster was quick and efficient. The flitzer, traveling at a height of about a hundred feet, followed a trace of beacons spaced at even intervals along the ground. Traffic was sparse and there was no dodging or weaving, but just a smooth ride all the way, over a vast expanse of fields and orchards adapted to Terran crops. The cab rose higher and swept up the slope of the port-hills, through a notch in the rocky crags, and then down the other side and into the town.

A 'town' it was. Too small for a city; too large for a village; and, by the looks of it, not built with much of an eye to any plan either. The houses were small and possessed of an almost willful individuality. Some, narrow and multi-storied, with steep roofs and ornamental gables, towered above others which were just as determinedly broad, spread out, and unadorned. The center of the town was as inhomogeneous as the periphery, though there was a

use and the effects on different individuals. Since life expectancy—with an early start to the use of gerotards, and a favorable genetic predisposition—has reached as high as four hundred standard years, the attribute 'middle age' might well be synonymous with 'just over two centuries'. However, since research into life-span extension continues apace on several worlds and its possible results are entirely unforeseeable, even this may become meaningless, as those currently qualifying as 'middle-aged' bear the appellation only because nobody as yet factors in the possibility that their life-spans could, in the not-too-distant future, be measured in millennia, rather than centuries.

The term, does, however, retain a more conventional meaning for those who insist on being allowed to die of old-age decrepitude, at about five-score-and-ten standard years. When gerotards became widely and cheaply available and mankind surged into space, Earth's traditional religions charred and exploded like trees struck by lightning; but some of the myriad fragments have failed to decompose gracefully. For members of these splinter groups—lumped together under the rubric 'rejectionists'—'middle age' still means anything between fifty and sixty standard years.

Caarl Optek, the famous wit of Fargo 5, once said about the rejectionist position: "Evolution is taking care of them. It won't happen overnight, but it will happen. Then, when they're finally all gone, the rest of us will wonder at their folly."

propensity toward taller edifices. Some of them might even be called 'buildings'—if one stretched the imagination. Certainly, to anybody from Earth, Fargo, or Organum Pegasi, this here was, at best, what Coralians called a *kaff*.

But Jack liked it. Port Ster had a quirky streak about it that hit it off with him right away. It bespoke of people who had fled from regimentation into a kind of measured anarchy. If there was a visitors' enclave here it wasn't immediately noticeable. None of the structures here suggested the cosmopolitan style that was common to such enclaves all over the inhabited galaxy.

The cab slowed down, descended to ground level, and wove its way into the center of the town, creeping along narrow streets, which were filled with the kind of bustling activity one might find in an oriental market on Earth. Not that Jack had ever been in one, but he had seen vids.

As he contemplated the scene, it came to him that it was designed for, and directed at, tourists like himself. He suspected that most of the items peddled in the stalls and shops sold here were utterly useless souvenirs the locals wouldn't deign with a glance, and probably regarded with the contempt they deserved. He considered the people littering the street. The vast majority were offworlders, instantly recognizable by dress and behavior; probably from the *Lister Diamond*, doing their bit to support the local economy.

Jack had an notion why his driver was taking him through here. More likely than not he had an economic share in one or more of the businesses here; maybe even owned one outright.

Jack made throat-clearing noises. "Thanks for the tour," he said dryly, "We can go to the hotel now."

The cabbie looked over his shoulder and saw Jack's grin. He winked at him. They rose above the roofs and, through a smattering of apparently unregulated flitzer traffic, drifted across the town.

"You don't have an enclave," Jack stated.

The driver shook his head. "Our lives are dependent on the free traffic of people. An enclave would not be useful. We're not like that. There's nothing to isolate tourists from. Our lifestyle is uncomplicated. The rules for public comportment are simple; nothing more than commonsense."

"One man's commonsense is another's idiosyncrasy," Jack pointed out. "This, at least, is my experience."

"Pah! We have made a virtue of simplicity," the cabbie asserted. "The merit of our rules is self-evident. No one may molest the local females or children. Public discharge of bodily wastes is considered bad form. Intrusion into homes without invitation is strongly discouraged. A person's privacy is inviolate, barring the most exceptional circumstances. The transfer of ownership of property from one person to another without the explicit or tacit agreement between the parties involved is deemed extremely bad form. The local flora and fauna outside Port Ster is considered sacrosanct and may not be interfered with. And that exhausts the list."

Jack had to admit that it sounded commonsensical enough. But then again, he was of a cosmopolitan disposition. To the residents of Telara the prohibition against the molestation of children might not be of such self-evident merit—and a Margrave from Tarn would consider it his self-evident right to appropriate any item displayed in a shop or a public stall without the tendering of any equivalence.

"How about enforcement?" he asked.

The driver shrugged. "Unpleasant consequences tend to be sufficient deterrent. However, we avoid punishment, but rather endeavor to prevent repeat transgressions. The offending visitor is subject to prompt arrest and immediate and permanent expulsion from Port Ster and Herrykairn alike. There is no appeal to conviction."

The driver met Jack's eyes in a rear-view mirror above his head. "Rules this uncomplicated are surely understood by even the simplest of minds."

Jack agreed. "So one would think. But things happen. People get intoxicated. They may forget themselves. Surely this happens—to locals and visitors alike?"

"It does," the driver admitted. "In such instances locals are faced with public humiliation in the square. An appropriate period of unpaid labor usually suffices. Visitors are simply expelled. In extreme cases, such as those involving murder and rape, the offender—once his or her guilt has been clearly established—is executed without delay. In such instances the distinction between visitor and indigen becomes meaningless.

"Intoxication is never an acceptable excuse. The management of establishments dispensing liquors and other substances which cause such states are highly attuned to patrons who might be in the

process of becoming uncontrollable. They have special ways of dealing with them—usually well before they become a nuisance."

Simple? But executions, possibly summary?

Jack shrugged inwardly. This was *his* point of view. 'Justice', 'morality', 'ethics', 'civilized behavior': terms whose meaning varied as widely as the human worlds on which is was defined.

"Who establishes the guilt of offenders?"

"You mean, do we have a judiciary dedicated to such matters? We do—but only in cases of significant doubt about a perpetrator's guilt do we bother. A convocation of selected members of the community is then used to establish the truth.

"Crime is rare in Port Ster," the cabbie told Jack. "When it happens, the fact of guilt is usually readily established. Under such circumstances we prefer to waste neither time nor public funds on meaningless rituals."

He shook his head. "Of course, there will be objections. We had an incident, less than a year ago. . . ."

He glanced at Jack, who nodded. "I'm always game for curious stories."

The driver grimaced. "'Curious'? I suppose you could call it that. The matter started off as an argument between a 'Disciple of the One God' and an 'Eternalist': something incomprehensible relating to the 'true' reasons why gerotard use was 'unnatural', 'blasphemous', and even 'perverted'. The Eternalist asserted that they delay the individual's entry into the 'Heaven of Eternal Peace' and therefore interfere with the divine plan of things. He produced his copy—the latest and most up-to-date!—of the *Eternalist Guide to Ethical Life Extension: When To Say 'No'* and waved it in front of the Disciple's face; then opened it up and started quoting excerpts.

"The Disciple, predictably, was unimpressed. He responded with only a modicum of civility, asserting forcefully that the Eternalists were nothing but a bunch of irrelevant, namby-pamby dimwits, and that any book such as the *Guide*, which had gone through one-hundred and ninety-two editions wasn't worth the plap it was written on. He proceeded to belabor the virtues of the *Qur'at*, which, he emphasized, had remained unchanged for centuries, and was the only scripture holding any authority on spiritual and ethical matters. The Disciple duly produced his copy of said tract and proceeded to read from it at length—much to the annoyance of the Eternalist, who kept

on trying to interrupt the Disciple's logorrhetic flux, but without success.

"The argument took place inside the main bar of one of our larger establishments, where just about all the other patrons were happily 'perverted' gerotard users." The cabbie chuckled. "Let's face it, this is the situation just about everywhere, is it not?"

He caused the flitzer to descend into a narrow gap between buildings, a cobble-stoned alley about twice the width of the flitzer, and flanked by a continuous wall of terraced houses of varying façade, painted in colors ranging from dirty gray to gaudy yellow, without apparent system.

"At first," the driver continued, "everybody seemed to have enjoyed watching the two griping at each other. Finally, however, it became tiresome, as such things usually do. One attending patron was Berto Lit, an inoffensive local, who adhered to the doctrine of 'Cosmic Redemptionism'. These folks, as you may know, subscribe to the belief that the cosmos is the only redemptive agency in existence, and that life—and love, especially of the male-female variety—is the only true 'heaven' anybody's ever likely to find.

"Berto, giving voice to the other patrons' sentiments, finally told the Eternalist and Disciple to shut up—or, even better, to take themselves and their tedious disputes elsewhere. The Disciple, true to the precepts of his creed, took this as a direct insult to his beliefs: something he was apparently willing to tolerate—barely!—from the Eternalist, but not from some atheist, cosmos-worshipping gerotard user. After some verbal exchanges of increasing intemperance he produced a primitive snip-gun and fired a projectile at Berto, killing him instantly. In the ensuing *melée* he killed two more people—including a woman who had taken no part in either the verbal or physical exchanges. He was finally brought down, disarmed, and taken before the relevant authority."

The flitzer drifted slowly toward a building with a brick-red façade and tall, narrow windows, lending it an air of dignified antiquity.

"There was no question about what had happened. Still, the Disciple insisted on his 'inalienable right' to have what he termed a 'fair trial, subject to the laws of civilized conduct'. When it was pointed out to him that there was nothing 'inalienable' about his imagined 'right', and that such a procedure—whose outcome in this instance was a foregone con-

clusion—would be a waste of time, he threatened with the imminent wrath of his deity and his brethren, who would pay back tenfold any injustice inflicted upon his person.

"Everybody in attendance, I am proud to say, conducted themselves with the solemnity and dignity the situation demanded—even if the Disciple, apparently unable to understand that his execution was imminent, continued to behave in a most obstreperous and disgraceful manner.

"In a peculiar twist to the story, the Eternalist not only felt compelled to defend the Disciple's actions and his plea for a 'fair trial', but went even further and argued that only deity was qualified to render judgment on the Disciple, and that secular law or custom had no right interfering in divine business of this sort. Indeed, so the Eternalist contended, everything that had happened had really been the fault of the bystanders, and particularly Berto, who, by ignoring the laws of sensitive civilized conduct, had provoked the Disciple into a hot rage. Since Disciples are commonly known to be of a volatile, even violent, disposition, the fault clearly lay with the bystanders' religious insensitivity."

"An curious argument," Jack commented.

The driver nodded. "And irrelevant."

"What happened?"

The vehicle drifted to a halt and settled on the ground.

"When the Eternalist continued to argue, he was advised that, according to some of the witnesses, it was *his* behavior which had primed the Disciple into a particular susceptibility to imagined insults, and that he, the Eternalist, might therefore be considered a causative accessory to the killings. He denied his even more vehemently than he had previously argued his metaphysical point of view with the Disciple. However, he refrained from further attempts to defend the Disciple, slunk away, and was heard from no more. No doubt, right now he's arguing the fine points of metaphysics with somebody else."

The driver shook his head. "Maybe we should have done the universe a favor and . . ." A shrug. "Too late. What's done is done."

"And the Disciple?"

"He was executed shortly afterwards—despite his protestations. When it finally sunk in that his life was drawing to an inevitable and premature close, he launched into a hysterical diatribe against his accusers. It was an unpleasant, undignified business. Exe-

cutions are always distasteful; the taking of a human life is a serious matter indeed. I myself subscribe to a doctrine close to Cosmic Redemptionism, and we consider every human death—even that of evil or foolish people—a tragedy. Had the Disciple behaved with some grace or decorum . . . maybe someone would have spoken for him. All it needed was *one* . . .

“Whatever chance he’d had of forgiveness he tossed aside in his hatred. Now all that remains of him is an unpleasant memory—and his ashes, absorbed by the waters of a world he was not worthy of walking on, and scattered there by the hands of people he vituperated.”

“Hmff.” Jack looked out the window. “This is the hotel?”

“Note that it is small. For this reason, if no other, it is not one usually chosen by tourists. But it is cheap, friendly, clean, and comfortable—and only a short walk away from those amenities visitors tend to frequent.”

Jack handed him a ten-jin tab. The driver took a money bag from beside his seat placed the tab inside and withdrew a red-and-purple fiver.

Jack waved it aside. “Keep it. In my experience information is a commodity whose quantity and reliability often—though not always!—increases in proportion to the amount paid for it.”

The driver replaced the tab. He allowed the flitzer to settle on the ground and deactivated its propulsion system. “What do you want to know?”

“Several things.” Jack thought about it for a moment. He hadn’t really intended to quiz the cabbie. But the idea suddenly presented itself and he’d decided to go with it.

“Do you have many embassies here?”

The cabbie looked perplexed. “You mean extra-planetary representations?”

Jack nodded. “Like the Coralian one.”

A knowing smile spread across the cabbie’s face. “They’re spies,” he said. “I thought you meant diplomatic missions.”

“You *know* they’re spies?”

The driver shrugged. “Of course. What else can they be? Herrykairn never had any reason to exchange diplomats with Coralia, and still doesn’t. But the Coralians think differently—or should I say, they started thinking differently a few years ago, when they established their ‘embassy.’” He shook his head. “Why? All their so-called ‘diplomats’”—he

contrived to make the word sound like a contemptuous insult—“ever do is mingle with the locals and ask inane questions. Or sometimes, like today, they take the shuttle up to the station and then come back down again soon after. That usually happens when a ship arrives. Like the *Lister Diamond*, or yours.

“By the way—and if you don’t mind me asking—what were you carrying?”

“Coffee mainly; biotronics; station maintenance equipment; a miscellany of other items.”

The cabbie smiled. “Coffee? That’s good news! Our stocks are running low. Prices are becoming exorbitant.”

“What’s here for the Coralians to spy on?” Jack asked.

The driver made a dismissive gesture. “Only they know. We have nothing they could possibly want.”

Jack sensed that the man meant what he said. “How about other representations?”

“There aren’t any. We occasionally have brief visits from off-world diplomats; usually at the same time as economic negotiations are in progress. Not that there is much call for that either, but we are a popular tourist target, and some small interest occasionally exists. Company representatives often feel more comfortable in the presence of diplomats from their own worlds, believing it lends them an advantage.” The cabbie grinned. “Which it doesn’t but we won’t tell them that.” He shrugged. “When the company representatives leave, so do the diplomats.”

“I see. Thank you. That’s all I wanted to know.”

“You’re easily pleased. Five jins easily earned. I thought for a moment you were going to ask me the usual questions.”

“Like what?”

“Like where to find the best professionals; the most profitable gambling; the best liquors.”

Jack laughed. “If you want to, you can tell me about that, too.”

The cabbie grinned. “You’ll find the cleanest and most sophisticated professionals at the *Diarmead Inn*. You’ll also find them the most expensive—and possibly occasionally unwilling to indulge your whims or excessively imaginative erotic fantasies. But they are invariably pleasant, beautiful, and possessed of unusual intelligence for men and women of their craft.”

“Men and women?”

“Of course. A few androgs even. Our visitors

sometimes exhibit eclectic tastes. We aim to please everyone." The cabbie peered at Jack, trying to see behind the mask that was Jack's face. "You, however," he said, "appear to be of a more mainstream disposition. You'll find the women attractive and excellent company. I'm certain they'll help you forget your lonely hours in space. We even have a few offworlders at the *Diarmead*. Some of them just drift in and out. Other choose to stay. If they do, we make them welcome."

He bit his lower lip and appeared to consider his next words carefully. "As for the gambling, I counsel you to avoid it if you can. The game is always rigged. It's not a question of whether you lose, but how much. If you walk away from any of the games with more than you came in, you may consider yourself either extremely fortunate, or else you're a better cheat than they are."

*Or unless you're a Pilot*, Jack thought, but said nothing.

"About liquor," the driver continued. "We serve everything the galaxy has to offer. At a price of course, but, again at the *Diarmead*, you'll find the most extensive of selections."

"You wouldn't happen to have a financial interest in the place?" Jack asked dryly.

The cabbie smiled. "Of course I do—but that doesn't make my words any less true."

"Thank you." Jack stuck out his hand. A gesture imbued with a universal symbolism throughout the human worlds. "Name's Jack. Jack Corwin. I'm on shore leave. Be here for a few days. Maybe I'll see you around."

The cabbie reached out and took Jack's hand in a firm grip. "Gastel Mobil—at your service. And, by the way, I am a licensed guide to the Arkrod. The hotel has a contact number."

Jack laughed. "Of course you are—and of course they do..." It was nice to meet to a man who enjoyed his profession.

Jack pushed open the door and stepped into a small foyer. To his left was a small counter with brochures and a display case containing trinkets for purchase. Off to the right lay a winding stairway. A couple of couches and three arm-chairs, all constructed in a style fitting in with the foyer's rustic, rather than urban, ambience, stood arranged in a wide arc around a low table. Wood, or some material suggesting wood, appeared to be the predominant

construction component.

A few moments after Jack's entrance an individual appeared behind the counter. Jack suppressed a smile. The face was a dead giveaway: a slightly distorted duplicate of his brother's; a trifle thinner, with a crooked nose that must have been in a fight and was never properly repaired. But the eyes were the same: canny and knowing, though not without benevolence; with little crinkles radiating outward toward the temples. Still, somewhere behind the benign expression there lurked a shrewd little mind who sized you up and, in the end, probably contrived to receive the maximum benefit out of your mutual interaction. Jack had seen it in the cabbie's eyes, and it was here as well—maybe even more so.

"Welcome to *Badecker's Rest*," the man said in a carefully accentuated voice.

"Your brother recommended this as good place to stay," Jack said casually.

The eyes narrowed slightly before returning to their blandly polite state. The faintest of smiles twitched the mouth.

"I cannot deny it." He shrugged, dismissing the matter as inconsequential and inclined his head. "Polkad Mobil at your service."

"Jack Corwin."

"You are planning on staying for how long?"

"Several days. Possibly a week."

Gastel Mobil's brother pursed his lips. His eyes flicked sideways to a screen hidden from Jack's view behind a display case.

"You would want something befitting your status," he ventured. "There is the Meave Suite, which is currently vacant."

Jack shook his head. "I'm on my own," he pointed out. "I don't need a 'suite'."

"Of course. Well, there is a one-bed room with a private facility. Simple and possibly too spartan for your taste..."

"As long as room and bed are clean I don't care. I have no intention of spending much time in there anyway."

For a polite interval they haggled over the price and eventually settled on something mutually agreeable. Polkad Mobil transferred a map of the town and surrounding countryside into Jack's UnIfac, advised him as to the location of the *Diarmead Inn*, and then took him up a flight of stairs to his room. As he stood in the doorway, politely waiting, Jack looked around, poked his nose into the small, but

well-equipped, bathroom, tested the bed, and pronounced everything satisfactory. Polkad Mobil handed Jack a key to the archaic mechanical lock and departed with a slight bow.

Jack closed the door behind him and dumped himself on the bed. Outside the light was slowly fading as Heoa, Herrykairn's sun, settled behind the port hills. A sudden disquiet befell Jack. Imminence hung heavily. He knew the feeling and dreaded it. He'd had it before, and invariably it was followed by momentous, and usually unpleasant, events: the murder of his father; the sudden departure of the Finisterres from Coralia; his mother's suicide; the *Berenice* mishap.

But what could possibly happen on an insignificant world like Herrykairn? Besides, what could life possibly do to him that it hadn't done already? It had taken first his father, then Claury, and finally his mother—which just about exhausted the people he truly cared about. His reputation as a Pilot—the one other thing that might have mattered—had gone by the wayside as well.

*What're you going to do to me now? Kill me?*

He grimaced into the semi-darkness.

*See if I care.*

Despite his defiant posing though the unease did not want to go away. Jack forced himself to calm. He got up and stood at the window, watching the crimson sky turn a dark green, and finally purple. The stars became visible.

Jack looked down at the street below where people moved back and forth in the dim illumination of the street lights. He wrinkled his nose. It may have been his imagination but he thought he still detected the stink of stale ship's air on himself—despite the scrubbing on the station.

Jack pulled the curtains and turned to the bathroom.

*To put it all behind me.*

Now why was he thinking that?

To put *what* behind him?

Whatever it was . . . it had to start with washing off the last whiffs of ship-stink.

He headed for the bathroom.



## Letters

To the Editor,

I read Tim Stretton's 'Setting the Standard' in CLS 13 with great interest. My basic reaction is that he is much too hard on himself and severely underrates his own talent.

The 'Zael Inheritance' is entertaining, witty, sophisticated and Vancian. It left me looking forward to a sequel. What will happen to the three main characters (I count Voorhies)? Stretton thus shares with Vance the ability to fashion an ending which leaves you wanting more.

I am stunned that publishers have rejected this gem.

On another note, your sometimes solitary stand vs. monotheist illogic in Cosmopolis proper is greatly appreciated. I do not know what world they are living in, but it is not mine!

*Bruce Downing*

New London, NH, USA

Editor's reply:

Thank you, Bruce, for your letter. I entirely agree: Tim is a damn good writer, and publishers ignore him to their own disadvantage. Alas, this kind of neglect is commonplace, and Tim isn't the first, nor will he be the last, to suffer from the effects of editorial misjudgment. However—as I can attest to from experience—persistence is often the final deciding factor in getting published, and I think we all should join in to encourage Tim to try again and again and again, until these people finally see the light!

As for the on-going Cosmopolis debate: I see Jack's work as a celebration of the existence of the diverse, divergent, and, indeed, apparently barely intersecting, 'worlds' you're referring to. The phenomenon is sometimes called 'plurality' and some people find its existence unsettling. However, despite the disturbance it engenders within them, it probably won't go away. I, for one, find this immensely comforting.

*Till Noever*

Dunedin, New Zealand

