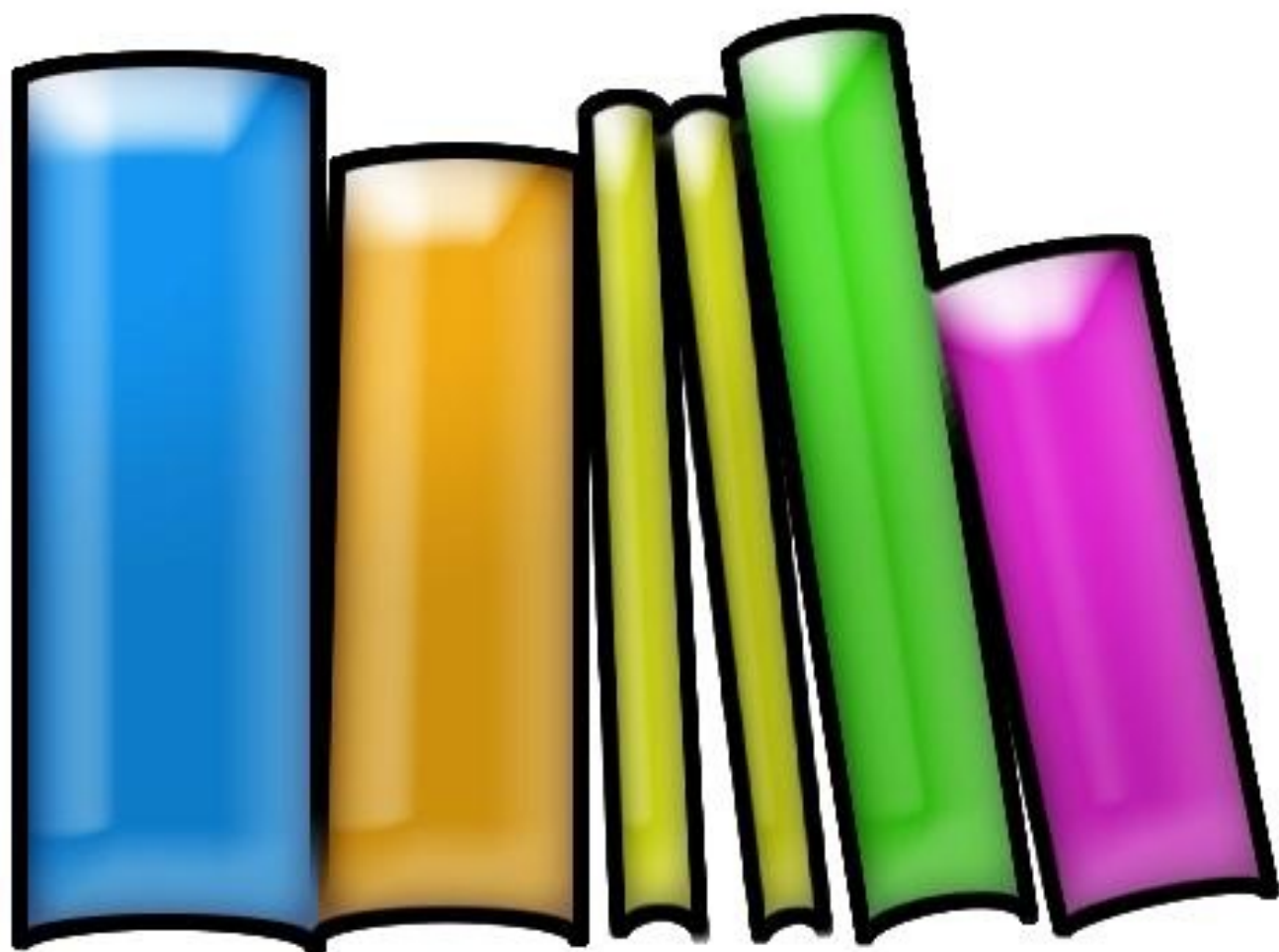


Star Risk - 01 Star Risk, Ltd



Chris Bunch

Produced by calibre 0.6.45

ONE

The woman was blond, tall, green eyed and beautiful. Her nearly nonexistent bathing suit, and her shade-hat looked and were expensive.

She was stretched on a poolside chaise lounge, on the roof of the ultra-luxury Shelburne Hotel. The pool wound and curveted through a garden, and every bend gave the illusion of privacy.

Scattered around the rooftop were a handful of hotel guests, and their guests, enjoying the late afternoon sun. There were a few livee stars, a singer or two, a gaggle of lawyers, some managers, and five or six rich, butter-and-egg out-of-towners, being heavily charged for the privilege of gawking and pretending to be one of, the current crop of beautiful people.

Forty stories below, unheeded, was the moil and bustle of Trimalchio IV, its citizens busy doing what needed being done.

Trimalchio IV was a very lucky world, in that it had no history. It was originally settled by a handful of Alliance plutocrats, who found its mild climate, islands, kilometers of beaches, and craggy mountains very much to their liking. At first, they allowed only enough riffraff in to be their servants and run the luxury shops they swarmed. Later came the restaurants, bars, hotels, and others who catered to the well-to-do. Population was very low, no more than fifty million. Surprisingly, taxes were low, mainly because the social envelope consisted of a one-way ticket to another system. It was a wonderful world, if you had money. If you didn't, starvation was always an option.

A security guard wandered around the fringes of the pool, feeling fat and over fifty. His gun sat heavily on his hip, although why management insisted he carry it was beyond him.

Bad things didn't happen to rich people.

He looked at the sunbathing woman, chanced a smile, and felt older as she looked through him and returned to her book. He glanced at its title, expecting to see some lurid potboiler, and saw *A Guide to N-Space Mathematics and a Theory of Their Unification*.

Way, way, way out of his league.

He went to the lift, dropped down to the lobby, and went into the security room, where a dozen vid screens blinked at him, showing various hotel exteriors and corridors.

The guard decided he'd spend the rest of his shift here, where he wouldn't be reminded of his age and paunch.

The primary sun moved down the horizon; the secondary, barely a flaming planetoid, had already set.

The people around the pool drifted to the lift, and to their rooms.

Yawning, the woman, M'chel Riss, checked her expensive watch, widened her eyes theatrically as she was late for a meeting with a lover, got up, stretching her almost two-meter height, picked up her real leather bag, and strolled toward the lift. Behind her sunglasses, she was watching the scattering monitors, waiting for when the two pickups covering the lift entrance swept away.

Then she moved, very, very fast, like a professional athlete, behind the lift entrance, into a tiny cubbyhole between the edge of the roof and the small building.

She waited, but no alarm came.

This was her third night in the Shelburne, and she had only credits enough for one more. She was sorry she wouldn't be able to tip the room maids, but a working girl only had so many options.

She was waiting for full darkness.

Down below, streetlights flickered on, various hues intended to give the city a perpetual mardigras feeling.

Twice a lifter flew past, close enough to make Riss want to duck down. But she knew better than to move. Eight years as an Alliance Marine, and Major Riss (Retired) knew all of the tricks and traps of soldiering.

It finally got dark.

Riss opened her bag, and took out a chameleon suit, pulled it on, and ran her fingers up the seals, turning the suit on. It took a few seconds to warm up, then, except for her hands and face, she became part of the adobe-colored wall.

Riss slid out from the cubby, and put on a pair of kletteschues, climbing shoes, and jumars. She sprayed a blob of climbing thread on the wall, and tucked some other items from her bag in the suit's pouches. The last item, a very natty cocktail dress, would be needed for her extraction. At least, if she was able to take the easy way out.

She unfastened straps, and the bag now became what might have been a backpack, except with little holes for feet like a child-carrier, which she pulled on.

Riss looked over the edge, and shuddered a little. No belay, no climbing partner, and she'd always disliked it when the training schedule sent her troop to the mountains.

But there weren't any options.

She dipped the jumars into the climbing thread, and eased over the edge of the building, determined not to be a dummy and look down again.

If you fall, you fall, she thought. And then a nice raspberry splotch will go nicely with those tinted streetlights.

There was a bit of a wind, and she swayed back and forth as she descended.

Counting windows, she abseiled down three stories to a small window, let out more thread and brought it back to the main line and sealed it. Now she had a loop to stand in.

She took a tiny cutting torch out of one pocket, and cut around the window plas. Unlike the other windows in this suite, security hadn't seen any necessity to rig this window for an alarm, sure that no one could ever weasel through it, especially at this height.

The torch's flame was blue, and very tiny, but to Riss it looked as if she'd set off a flare.

The plas was cut on all four sides. She shut off the torch and put it away. Riss tapped with a finger on the plas, and it fell inward. She grabbed fast, barely caught it, and eased it down until it hit the washroom basin.

Good. Very good. Just like the bribed room service waiter had told her.

Riss turned in the loop, and acrobatically eased her head and shoulders through the hole.

She thought about having to go back out, having to jumar back up the thread, and didn't like the idea.

If her intel was correct, she could take the easy way, and just stroll out of the suite, hand in hand with the kid.

But since when was intelligence ever right?

A bathroom, dimly lit by a nightlight in the next room.

M'chel pulled herself into the room, stood, waiting.

No alarms went off.

Tiny gun in hand, she paced into the room. It was bigger than her whole house, growing up, had been

There was a little girl, nine years, three months, two days old, or so the client's fiche had told her, asleep, illuminated by the nightlight. She was surrounded by animatronic toys, and, clutched to her chest, a raggedy doll that could have been her grandmother's.

Very good, very easy. Now, put on the dress, wake up the kid, and then we'll

"Put the gun down," a calm voice said. "Take three steps to the side, and then stand very still. We are both pros, so nobody has to die."

M'chel jerked, then obeyed.

A man stood from where he'd been kneeling, behind an entertainment center, then came toward her.

He was a few centimeters shorter than Riss, looked to be in his sixties, had carefully styled silver hair, a handsome, rugged face, and wore evening dress.

He also had a large Alliance-issue blaster aimed carefully at her chest.

"Very good," he said. "You made a little noise breaking in, which twiggged me."

"You were supposed to be at the theater assuming you're one of his bodyguards," Riss said.

"I was," the man agreed. "But I pride myself in never being just where I am supposed to be."

Riss had been watching his feet, and, as the man stepped on a throw rug, she dug her heel into the rug and back-kicked.

The man yelped, stumbled, flailing to recover his balance. Before he could shoot, Riss kicked the pistol out of his hand, and snap-punched into his diaphragm, slightly pulling her punch at the last minute.

Air whooshed out of the man's lungs, and he gagged, clutching himself.

Riss took out a small tube of gas, leaned over the contorting man, and, holding her breath, sprayed him in the face. The man jerked, went down, lay still. He would be out for eight hours.

Riss, breathing hard, had the blaster ready. But there wasn't any backup.

"Who are you?" a high voice asked.

The girl was awake, sitting up in bed. She didn't appear to be the slightest bit frightened.

"Hi, Debra," M'chel said, trying to sound calm and cheery. "Do you want to go home to your mother? I'm working for her."

"I figured that out," the girl said complacently. "You're not the first who's come to rescue me, you know. How are we going?"

"I'll put on a dress, and then we're going straight on out, through the suite's service entrance down the hall, and then to the lift and out, as if we were guests, bold as brass."

"We're not going out through the window? I heard you coming down the wall outside, watched you break into my bathroom."

M'chel realized she was going to have to brush up on her stealthy climbing techniques.

"I hope not," she said.

"Oh. Damn it. That would've been icy."

There was silence.

"Well?" Riss asked, ready to gas the child if necessary.

"I'm thinking about it," the girl said. "Mommy wasn't that nice to me the last time, you know."

Little bitch, Riss thought.

"I guess I'll go along with you," the girl decided. "Daddy's been treating me like a real shit lately, n
letting me go anywhere or anything."

She got out of bed, still holding the raggedy doll.

"Okay," she said. "Let's get out of here before Daddy and his goons come back."

Riss went to the bedroom door, turned the handle. She knelt, and peered down the hall at ankle height.

M'chel suppressed an obscenity.

There were two beefy men at the far end, wearing protective glasses, chatting casually. The
profession, bodyguard, was most obvious.

It would only be seconds before they missed the man with the white hair, and came looking.

Riss closed the door.

"Change two," she whispered. "You get to go climbing."

"Icy!" the girl said enthusiastically.

Riss had the girl put on her slippers, put the backpack on, and indicated the leg holes. Debra, ey
wide in excitement, clambered aboard.

M'chel stood, adjusting the child's weight. Not even half as bad as an expedition pack.

She started for the window.

"Wait," Debra hissed. "My dolly."

M'chel held back a growl, handed the toy to Debra.

They went back into the bathroom, and M'chel hung a strand of climbing glue to the sill, sprayed o
about half a meter, and glued that down.

She eased out of the pack.

"Now, I'm gonna clamber out there, and then I want you to go after me. Stand in the loop here."

Debra nodded. M'chel eeled out the window, clung by her fingers to the far side of the sill. Deb
came out backward, got her feet in the loop, and was outside. She looked down, and Riss saw her fac
change.

"Don't look down, dammit! And if you puke on me, your mother'll buy me a new dress."

Debra, lips compressed, nodded.

M'chel was never quite sure how she got the backpack on again, but she did.

"Now, we're going down."

She clipped the can of thread into one jumar, and locked the spray can's nozzle to its first detent.

Climbing thread came slowly, steadily out the can's spout, and slowly, steadily, the two went down and down and down.

Riss felt fine, other than her arm muscles were stretched a meter or so longer than they had been, and she was sure that when she reached concrete, she'd walk like an earth ape, knuckles brushing the ground.

She chanced looking down again, saw she was within fifty meters of the ground.

"Well," she whispered, "do you like this?"

"Not not as much as I thought I would," Debra managed.

"Hang on, kiddo," she said. "We'll have you on solid turf in a couple of minutes."

They went on, Riss's toes sliding on the pebbly stone facing of the hotel.

Then there was something under her heels, and she was down.

She cut off the climbing thread, and, just as she started for the nearby alley, where Momma's damned lifter had better be waiting, saw the doorman bow someone out. She didn't look back, but walked a little bit faster.

The lifter was there.

Momma, a fat version of her daughter, squealed, and pawed Debra out of her backpack.

"Oh, you did it, you did it," the woman shrieked, gathering Debra in her arms. The girl submitted limply.

"Of course, I did it," Riss said calmly. "I said I would, didn't I?"

"Oh, I owe you, I owe you so much," the woman burred. "I'll be cutting you a check in the morning and believe me, there'll be a sizeable bonus to it."

"You can trust me on that."

Riss started worrying.

TWO Two weeks later, M'chel Riss sat in a canalside cafe considering the croissant and her tea on the small table in front of her. That would be both breakfast and mid-meal.

She tried to stay cheerful, but it looked as if the man who'd been so enthusiastic on the vid about

hiring her wasn't going to materialize.

So much for the old "go almost anywhere, do almost anything" personal ads.

What came next?

She had less than no ideas for the future, so she reconsidered the past.

Would it have been a total pain to have stayed in the Marines and taken the assignment that dickhead colonel arranged for her, merely because she wouldn't be his "assistant" on a "inspection trip" to certain gambling planet?

Yes, it would've. She'd called up the fiche for whatever satellite of whatever frozen giant she was supposed to be the garrison CO of.

It was whatever is outback of the outback.

Or, come to think about it, should she have packed the old negligé and gone along with the colonel?

He wasn't the worst-looking man she'd gone to bed with.

Her stomach roiled. She'd never yet had sex with anyone when it wasn't her idea, and she'd rather starve than change that.

Speaking of starving, her stomach reminded her. You're a big healthy girl, with a big healthy appetite. So what's this roll and tea business?

Don't think about how few credits are in the old hidden pouch under your slacks. Or what'll be for dinner at that warehouse district diner, which served a meat none of the reluctant poverty row customers had been able to identify.

Not that anyone tried hard.

Or let's not think about sneaking back into that lousy little room in the lousy little hotel, hoping the manager wasn't on duty, and what lie she might come up with to keep a cot under her for one more night if he was.

M'chel ruffled her tawny hair. Come on, brain. You've never given up before.

I've never been this hungry before came back at her.

There was a newsscreen on the next table, and she was thinking about going to the ads, and seeing Trimalchio was hiring women in other categories than highly technical or highly available.

At the moment, waitressing looked pretty good, if anybody would consider hiring a waitress with more better experience than opening ration paks.

Then, coming out of the café into the patio was a man she recognized, and who she hoped didn't recognize her.

He was Fal'at's bodyguard, whom she'd knocked sprawling and then gassed two weeks ago.

The man saw her, smiled brightly, and started over.

Riss's hand slid down into her boot top, and the tiny pistol was in her hand, held under the table.

The man saw the movement, held up both hands, palm out, and waited.

M'chel thought, couldn't see any problem, since she had the ready gun and he didn't, nodded.

The man came to the table, still keeping his hands motionless, bowed.

"I am Friedrich von Baldur," he said. "At your service, Miss?"

Riss gave him her name.

"May I join you?"

"Why not?"

Baldur sat down.

"This is a much nicer milieu than the other evening."

Riss managed a smile as a waitress came out with a heavy tray. She saw Baldur, brought the tray over and set it down.

M'chel tried not to look at the tray as Baldur paid. There was a jug of caff, toasted breads, buttery and steaming, an omelet, sausages, and cheeses.

Baldur noticed her expression, misread it.

"I know," he said. "I am a slave to my stomach. At least I do not put on weight easily. But I should eat more like you."

M'chel tried, without success, to keep a deadpan expression.

Baldur caught the flicker.

"Ah," he said, "I had heard that the former Mrs. Fal'at is reluctant to meet her obligations. My sympathies.

"I, too, am at liberty, although at least I was paid before being punted onto the welfare rolls.

"Paid well, with the correct amount for severance," he said thoughtfully, and motioned to another waitress.

"Could we see a menu? My friend here is hungry."

"No," M'chel protested. "I can't."

But her mouth was filling with saliva.

"Yes," Baldur said firmly. "You can. And the only debt you will owe is to do the same for some other soldier who has fallen on hard times."

M'chel knew she should protest, couldn't. She ordered baked eggs, juice, multiseeded toast unbuttered, and fruit.

"Good," Baldur approved. "Starving to death is most terrible."

"How did you know I was a soldier?"

"My dear Miss Riss, very few people end up in our chosen line of work without some form of military training. And none of the amateurs would dare that entrance from the roof that you made."

"Thanks, I guess."

"If you do not mind," Baldur said. "My toast grows chill."

She nodded, and he began eating. A few moments later, Riss's order arrived, and the world vanished as she gorged, wanting to gobble with both hands, but managing to eat in a civilized manner, even if as her plates were bare in a few minutes.

"Might I inquire about your current employment?" Baldur said, who'd finished minutes earlier, and was watching her, a small smile on his face.

Riss thought of lying, thought why bother?

"Since that bitch didn't come through with the money for rescuing her crumb-snatcher, I'm looking hard. I was supposed to meet some bastard here about a courier job, but he's a no-show."

"Just as well," Baldur said. "All too many of those courier contracts mean you are carrying stolen objects. Or else drugs."

"Not that I object to either, but I distinctly dislike being the patsy in the middle who is caught with the loot, and will have to do the time, since there is no one he can sell out to save his own hide."

"What a dirty trade we have chosen."

"Maybe," Riss said. "But there's worse."

"True. True. There is always worse. Might I inquire as to your background?"

M'chel gave a brief, succinct resume of her career.

"Most impressive," Baldur said. "I especially like your time in Intelligence, and the three Expeditionary Force landings."

"You have seen the elephant."

"Since we're giving out bios?" Riss asked, waiting.

"There is little to mine," Baldur said. "I retired as a Colonel in the Alliance Navy after twenty-five or some four or five years ago, when I realized my career was not advancing as I wished.

"I am qualified on most spacecraft, have had the usual number of investitures and excursions.

"I also, although the way you caught me by surprise the other night would seemingly disprove my claim, have dabbled in some of the martial arts."

"Well," M'chel said, starting to rise, "I can't thank you enough for the meal." She smiled wryly. "Now I've got to be out and about, and find a way to pay for my lodgings."

"Actually, that was why I came over," Baldur said. "I am, as you shall no doubt learn, a creature of rapid decisions.

"How would you like a job?"

"Doing what?"

"As a partner◆ on a trial basis, of course◆

with my firm. Star Risk, Limited. I have a decided need of skilled operatives."

Riss gaped, sat back down, realized her jaw was dangling, and stared at von Baldur, speechless.

"Perhaps we should adjourn to my offices, and you shall understand my situation more clearly."

The building was ultramodern, in the current style dubbed "Unsupported Freeform." Polished steel beams jutted up, zigged at impossible angles that could never buttress or support the alloy structure scattered among them. Riss had once read an article on the style, knew that antigrav generators, each hopefully with emergency backup power, actually kept the fifty-story building from toppling.

The lifts were clear platforms that seemed to hang from spidery cables. Again, hidden antigravs did the work.

Baldur bowed Riss out of the lift on the forty-third floor.

Directly opposite were tall double doors, of what appeared to be real wood, with small, discreet lettering: STAR RISK, LTD.

"Actually, there is no such thing as a 'limited liability corporation' anymore," Baldur explained. "Balthazar Trimalchio does not much care what you call yourself, so long as your taxes are kept up to date.

"And I always thought 'Limited' sounded most elegant."

"A question," M'chel said. "What's the significance of 'Star Risk'? I mean, it's sexy and all, but does it have any intrinsic meaning?"

"As you said," Baldur said, "it is a sensual name."

He touched his finger to the print-lock, and the doors opened.

"Actually, not wood, but fireproof metal under the veneer," he went on. "Also guaranteed to stand up to at least two direct blaster hits."

He entered, coughed apologetically.

M'chel followed, looked around, and started laughing.

"Now," she eventually managed, "now I see why I've been offered a partnership."

The offices had expensive carpeting and more expensive vertical shutters.

And nothing else. No desks, no vids, no computers, no files, no employees.

"You spent all of Mr. Fal'at's payoff renting this?" she gurgled.

"Actually, no," Baldur said. "The architect, also the owner of the building, who incidentally has the penthouse suite, owes me a considerable favor. Also, this style of architecture seems to make prospective tenants a little nervous.

"He discharged his obligation by giving me this suite on a year lease.

"Now I am required to make it work."

"Um, could I ask on what basis you thought Star Risk would be a go?" M'chel asked.

"Certainly. These are times, as someone or other once said, that try men's bank accounts. The Alliance can hardly be considered a strong government, and there are many, many people who think that righteousness grows from the barrel of a gun. Or from a very entrepreneurial law firm. Or from a malleable legislator.

"Not that I am particularly shocked by that proposition.

"But in times that are close to lawless, men will seek out their own law."

"Star Risk, ltd.?" M'chel asked.

"Yes," Baldur said. "Or, since a true mercenary judges not, Star Risk is there to assist those who are acquisitive.

"Assuming," he added hastily, "they can pay for our services. Pay handsomely."

"I don't know if I like the idea of working for the bad guys."

"That is why I use a sliding scale of payments, depending on our involvement or feeling, if any, in a particular cause."


"Credits cancel morality?" Riss suggested.

"Well, I would not put it quite so bluntly," Baldur said. "But a hefty bank balance makes it much easier to look in the mirror each morning."

"So what happened? I don't see a long line of clients, wearing either black or white hats, streaming the door."

"I may have made some minor miscalculations," Baldur admitted. "Have you ever heard of Cerberus Systems?"

"No," Riss said. "Wait. Yes. I saw something on a vid a few months ago. They're a private security service, right?"

"That, and everything else," Baldur said sadly. "They'll do anything from espionage to counterespionage to union security to strikebreaking to investigative work to military advisory work to collapsing currencies to riot incitement to  and this is only a bit more than a rumor, directed violence beyond any law's forgiveness."

"How far will they take that?" Riss asked.

"The only limits are what you can pay for, the story goes. Murder is supposedly called 'Emergency Certification' by them. But that is neither here nor there, other than I generally discourage assassination. It has a nasty, nasty way of being found out, and the act blowing back on you, the police operative, rather than the villain who hired you for the dastardly deed.

"Cerberus is also very, very active in dealing with competitors. They'll pass out false rumors, put the operatives in the way of a competitor finishing the mission they were hired for, even if they themselves have no interests in that area.

"Cerberus is one problem. Another is that I am not the only one who has considered a mercenary career. It seems that every half-witted knuckle-dragger who can afford a blaster and a license to carry it are suddenly Emergency Situation Specialists."

M'chel looked down at the carpet.

"I am sorry, my dear," Baldur said. "I was not referring to you."

"No," M'chel said. "Don't apologize. Even though I think I've got talents and skills beyond ruining my manicure on the pavement.

"In fact, I've got a question. When I was in the Marines, one thing I specialized in was Target Analysis.

"Let me," Riss said, unconsciously taking on the tones of an instructor, "ask about this Cerberus Systems.

"I really don't care about how ruthless they are. Are they any good?"

"They are," Baldur said reluctantly. "They are big, so they can put a lot of operatives, equipment, and resources into any operation they undertake."

"They pay well, and they actively recruit. I am surprised, quite frankly, that they did not attempt to add you to their organization."

"Overall, they operate on the basic premise that any person is corruptible in one or another way, and all that matters is the size of the bribe."

"Which, in our chosen field, is not altogether an erroneous way to think."

"Fine," Riss said. "What are their weaknesses?"

Baldur considered. "They are slow to move, like any colossus. And once they move in any direction, it is hard for them to change direction. Also, once they decide on a given course, they are reluctant to accept input that might suggest their original examination of the situation was faulty."

"They are bureaucratic, naturally. The longer you are in their employ, the greater respect you are given, and the less likely you are to be terminated without making a series of extreme errors."

"I personally think their board of directors is hidebound, prone to doing business as they did last week and last year, and that they apply the same tactics to Situation B merely because it appears to resemble Situation A, where those tactics worked very well."

"So now you see the reality of my situation. Do you think you might be of service?"

"I don't know," M'chel said. "I don't think I could make it any worse."

"Good. Excellent in fact. It gets most lonely, beating your head against brick walls each day."

Baldur walked to one door, pushed it open. "You mentioned that you were having a bit of problem with your digs. This shall be your office."

He went to another door, and opened it. Inside was a camp cot, a clothes rack, a small refrigerator, and a convection oven.

"This is my office. So you can see that I understand your difficulty."

Riss hesitated.

"There is a lock on the door," Baldur said hastily. "And you can perform your ablutions in either of the suite's two bathrooms. There is a salvage store two blocks away that can provide you with a cot and whatever other necessities you desire."

"You do not have to worry. I have never screwed one of my partners."

"At least," he said thoughtfully, "not in that particular sense of the word."

M'chel thought about things. She certainly didn't trust Friedrich von Baldur at all.

But on the other hand, there was that mystery meat, a flea-bitten single room, a glowering hot manager, and another goddamned sugared bun for the next two meals staring at her.

"Since I can't see that I've got anything to lose," she said, holding out her hand, "we have a deal."

"For six months," Baldur said.

"For six months," Riss echoed, and Baldur touched her palm with his.

THREE ♦ ^ ♦ Dmitri Herndon was a happy man. A sweaty, tired happy man.

He pushed the ore-carrier ahead of him, toward the welcome gleam of his ship's floodlights.

There was enough high-grade in the carrier to pay off his bill with Transkootenay, grubstake himself for another lonely six weeks in this desolate belt, and some to send home to his sister on Lorraine VI. And the hold of his shabby, converted yacht was about half-full of other saleable metals.

Better still, he thought ♦ hoped, rather ♦ that he had seen trace enough to think there could be diamond "pipe" here on this rotten planetoid, which would make him slightly richer than the reverend Joseph Smith.

If this belt was indeed part of an exploded planet, God hadn't blown it up nearly enough, Herndon thought sourly, looking out into hard blackness, and thousands of spinning dots, not stars, dimly lit by the system's dying sun.

But then, if God hadn't blasted it, there wouldn't be any miners in the system, wouldn't be any fissionable ore in Herndon's carrier and ship, and Herndon himself might still be back teaching basic chemistry on Lorraine.

He often thought of the image people had of deep-space miners ♦ brawny, bearded, quick to brawl and profane.

Herndon may have had the beard, but little else. In fact, he'd grown it to not look entirely like the image of a professor, which stereotype he did resemble.

He'd quit teaching, dreaming of riches, and followed the rush into this system. It'd been six months of the hardest, most dangerous work he could have imagined. If he wasn't carefully placing and blowing charges, ever aware of the likelihood he'd blow himself to flinders as a self-taught powder monkey, he was breaking big rocks into little rocks with a powered drill, then checking them with his beta analyzer. Not to mention keeping himself somewhat fed, and his ship from expiring in a smolder of faulty circuitry.

He considered what he'd do if there were diamonds on this stupid rock.

Real riches.

He'd put his ship in the shop, have its rotten, hiccupping secondary drive rebuilt, first.

No. He'd just find some other duckling, fresh into the Foley System, and convince him the bucket was just what he needed to go mining. Just as another miner had trapped Herndon.

Then he'd buy another ship, and

No. He'd buy out his contract, and, if there were enough money, just retire. No benders, no jags, just chance to go somewhere quiet, somewhere with a big computer, and he'd spend the rest of his life happily researching the break between alchemy and real chemistry.

Maybe a planet with a big library, a big computer, and some nightlife. Professors didn't have to be reclusive, especially not rich professors.

Something like Trimalchio IV, which he'd seen on the vids, heard stories about its decadence, never visited.

His mind drifted, though he never lost his balance, bounding in ten-meter leaps toward the ship. Showgirls. Tall showgirls. Tall, blond showgirls. Or maybe brunettes. Smiling, barely clad, to be wooed with a handful of diamonds into impossible lusts.

At least he'd had brains enough to register a claim on this jagged piece of stone as soon as he'd brought in the first load of ore, so he had all the time in the world to pick its bones, dreaming all the while of wealth.

He slid open the cover of his ship's exterior control panel, touched a sensor.

The cargo hatch slid open. He pushed the carrier inside and dumped the ore into an expandable hold.

He closed the hatch from the inside, and went into the hold's airlock, cycled it.

The inner lock door opened, and Herndon unsealed his faceplate, winced, as always at the, well, reality. A few hours on the dry, recycled suit atmosphere, and he'd forget just how bad the cabin smelled, a mixture of bad cooking, and human odors.

He decided he could allow himself one slivovitz, no more, after he checked to make sure the ship hadn't developed any more mechanical surprises.

Sitting, very much at ease in one of the control room's two acceleration chairs, was a large man, beard trimmed like a dandy.

He lifted the blaster in his lap, pointed it at Herndon.

"I coulda just grabbed the ship, and left you to breathe space, y' know. But I'm a kindly man."

Herndon had heard of highgraders, had friends who'd been robbed.

He'd determined this wouldn't happen to him, and had bought a pistol when he'd last resupplied, clipped it under the chart table.

He put a smile on his face, lifted his hands, then dove, twisting, for the table, two meters distant.

He never made it.

The bearded man cursed, shot him twice in the side. Herndon crashed into the table, headfirst.

"Goddamit, you didn't have to go and make me do that," the bearded man complained, wrinkling his nose at the stink of burnt flesh.

Dmitri Herndon lay perfectly still, made no answer.

FOUR ♦ ^ ♦ How about this?" Friedrich von Baldur asked, peering at the screen of the archaic computer he'd managed to acquire somewhere. Also scrounged were the two camp chairs and table set up in the office lobby. At least they'd found the money to have a vid installed in Baldur's office/bedroom.

" 'COVERT ADVISORS needed. Growing, progressive system, troubled with internal and external troublemakers, urgently needs specialists to organize, lead its special operations. Lehigh is a ♦' "

"Forget that," M'chel Riss interrupted. "Lehigh's been looking for advisors for years. What they want is someone to organize their death squads for them."

"As long as I am not the one murdering the widows and orphans," Baldur said, "I have little trouble sleeping at night."

"I do," Riss said. "But that's not the point. They came to the Alliance Marines, with the approval of the Alliance, when I was still aboard, wanting advisors, promising they'd join the Alliance as soon as the government stabilized. We sent out a survey team, and a friend of mine was on it. She came back shaking her head, saying there's at least six factions, all playing against the middle, and nobody necessarily knows who's really on whose side.

"First they try to subvert you; then, if you don't subvert, you're on the kill list."

"As you said, forget that," Baldur said. "Pity. They even claim to offer a health fund, and I would like to get a varicose vein or two removed."

"Keep looking," Riss advised. "Somebody out there's got to be an honest sort needing thugs. Or," she added, thinking of just how low Star Risk's resources were, "semihonest will fly at this point."

The door opened, and a woman came in. Both Baldur and Riss looked at her, and blinked.

M'chel Riss had, as all beautiful women do and deny, realized at a very young age that she was beautiful.

But this woman was beyond beautiful.

She was about four centimeters shorter than Riss, had gently curling dark hair with golden tints around a face that could have launched a thousand starships, blue eyes, and a perfect figure.

Riss thought about hating her.

"Welcome to Star Risk," Baldur said, and introduced them. "Forgive our lack of amenities, but the press of events"

"I'm Jasmine King," the woman said, and Riss thought even her damned voice was perfect. "And I'm well aware of your financial precariousness."

"Oh," Baldur said.

"I'm interested in applying for a job," King said.

"Uh, forgive my slowness," M'chel said. "But if you know how broke we are, you've got to be aware your paycheck would most likely bounce. I assume you work for high credits."

"True," King said. "But I have a personal reason for wanting to work for you."

"In what capacity, if I may inquire?" Baldur asked.

"Office manager and research specialist," King said.

"We certainly don't have much of an office to manage," Riss said. "But we hope to. And what's the personal reason, if I may inquire?"

"Until yesterday, I was the head of Cerberus Systems' research department."

Both Riss and Baldur reacted in surprise and some degree of suspicion.

"You'll forgive my skepticism," Baldur said. "But Cerberus has the reputation of being tough in their practices, willing to do just about anything to keep prospective competitors from competing."

"That's correct," King added. "Up to and including false lawsuits or bombs over the transom."

"I think what Freddie's trying to say," Riss said, "is how do we know you're not a spy or a wrecker?"

"You don't," King said. "But why don't one of you check my record with them? Don't claim to be anything in the way of a security service."

"Maybe a library." She opened a small purse, took out a fiche.

"Here is a copy of my personnel record I stole before leaving. Check what the head of Human Resources at Cerberus has to say against it. Their vid address, here on Trimalchio, is"

"I shall look it up," Baldur said.

"Good," King said. "It's too easy for someone to give a false number, and have a henchman at the other end feed you exactly what that person wants to be said."

Baldur looked at her carefully. "You have worked for Cerberus."

King smiled placidly. Baldur, intrigued, started for his office and the vid.

"Wait," M'chel said. "One question you didn't answer. If you work for top credits, how do you expect to get paid by us?"

"I can defer my salary until the credits are there," King said. "I have sufficient resources for a year more." She smiled slightly. "Don't think I'm an altruist. When the time is ripe, you'll think your accounts have been struck by a tornado."

M'chel grinned.

"Go ahead and check her," she said. "Now I'm getting curious, too."

Baldur went into his office, closed the door.

M'chel and Jasmine looked at each other. For some reason, Riss didn't find the silence uncomfortable.

"A researcher? In what field?"

"Anything that seems important to my employer."

"Do you think you're an expert at anything?"

"Oh, I could say, 'Riss, M'chel.' Or 'von Baldur, Friedrich.' "

King reeled off the high points of Riss's service record.

"Great gods!" Riss said. "I don't know if I like anybody knowing some of that. Let alone how you managed to find things out. I thought military records were sealed from the general public. Or Cerberus that much in bed with the Alliance?"

"Not at all," King said. "I discovered all that on my own when I decided I'd like to work for you."

"You're that good?"

"I'm that good," King said, not bragging, but stating a fact. "And that quick, too. I have a lot of interesting friends in interesting places who don't mind telling me things."

Riss took a minute to recover, then: "There's other security firms ♦ mercenary companies. Why us?"

King smiled. "I want to be in at the beginning of things. There's always more excitement at the start of an affair than in its middle."

"True," Riss said. "What about my partner?"

"Baldur, Friedrich von Baldur. Real name, Mital Rafenger. Claims to be in his fifties, actual age sixty-two E-years. Born ♦"

"Skip ahead to the service record," Riss said, holding back laughter. Mital Rafenger, indeed.

"Claims to be a retired admiral, Alliance Navy, with twenty-five years service. Actually, was ~~Warrant Officer, Fourth Grade, fourteen years of service. Retired and I quote, 'for the good of the~~ service.' Unverified information suggests Baldur left the military shortly ahead of a courtmartial, on charges of misappropriation of government property, alteration of government records, suborning government officials."

"That figures," Riss said. "What about his talents?"

"Claims to be familiar with most Alliance and civilian standard spacecraft. That is true. Claims to have martial arts skills. That is ~~◆◆~~"

"Also true," Riss said. She'd sparred with Baldur, and, in spite of his age, the man could beat her twice out of three times.

"Never married, no known children, no fixed address. Do you want further details?" King asked.

"I don't think they'll be needed."

Baldur came out of his office.

"Mercy, but the plot does thicken. You were right, Miss King. The Resources Director at Cerberus says you only worked there two years, as opposed to the eight years on your record, that you were never more than a minor clerk, that you were discharged for laziness and inability to perform.

"Makes me wonder about all of those glowing letters of commendation in the file."

"They are trying to keep me from finding any work at all," Jasmine said, trying to keep her voice even.

"They want me to crawl back to them."

"I can see why you want to break it off with them now," M'chel said. "But what started, if you forgive the vulgarity, the pissing match?"

"They informed me that they were no longer willing to pay me, and that I was the property of Cerberus Systems," King said.

"Property!" Riss said. "Now they're slavers, as well?"

"No," King said. "They claim that I'm a robot."

Riss kept from jumping.

"Nobody that I know of can build a robot that's as much people as you look!"

"That's what I told them," King said. "But they refused to believe me. One of their vice presidents said he thought I was of alien construct, meant to infiltrate human society.

"I'm afraid I started crying," King said. "I should have cursed him, or hit him, or something."

Blinking rapidly, she looked out a window, breathing deeply. She found control.

"What about your medical records?" Riss asked. "Couldn't they just check them?"

"That and other things" King said, a bit primly, "are things I take care of myself, and don't give out to anyone, least of all my employers. I'm a firm believer in privacy."

"I'd think Cerberus being what I've heard it is," Riss said, "they could've set up a hidden X ray something."

"For some reason I can't fathom," King said, "X rays don't seem to work on me. I guess it's peculiarity of the world I come from, or something."

"There goes our health plan," M'chel murmured. "Assuming we can ever afford one."

"I think this whole subject is absurd," Baldur said. "But I do not mean to be rude, are you a robot?"

King looked at him, a touch haughtily.

"Now, if I was, and willing to lie about it to Cerberus, wouldn't I be willing to lie to you as well?"

"Conceded," Baldur said. "M'chel, if you'd step into my office for a moment?"

Riss followed him.

"Well?"

"I don't give a damn if she's a 'bot from Planet Octopus, with a pocket nuke in her purse and every intent," Riss said. "She surely knows her stuff."

"And we could well use a good I think the term used to be 'gumshoe' couldn't we?"

"We could. So let's not keep the poor woman waiting," Riss said, and they went back out.

"Welcome to Star Risk, limited," Riss said.

Jasmine King grinned, and then it appeared as if she was about to cry again.

That settled matters for Riss.

Robots couldn't cry.

Could they?

Riss was making a list up of old Marine colleagues, intending, forlornly, to drop them a line and ask they knew of any freelance militarying, when both doors opened, and a being entered.

He needed both doors, for he was very large.

M'chel guessed his height at two and a half meters, width at a meter, weight at maybe four hundred kilos-plus. He was covered with long, silky fur, had long, delicate fingers, six to a hand, plus thumb. He was proportioned like a man, not an ape, and had a humanoid number of arms and legs.

His face was like that of a thoughtful Earth lemur, but in proportion to his size.

He wore sandals, a pouched belt, and, most incongruously, a black-and-white tam.

She blinked, and managed, "Good morning, sir."

"Good morning," the being said, in an attractive, accentless bass. "I am Amanandrala Grookonmonslf. I seek Jasmine King."

"I'll see if she's here," Riss said, having no idea what business this heavy equipment hauler wanted.

Jasmine burst into the room, squealed "Grok!" and flung herself into his arms.

"You are as pretty and ageless as ever," the being said gravely.

"And you are a gentlebeing as always," Jasmine returned, coming out of his arms. "M'chel, this Grok. You do not have to use his full name, not ever."

"Especially since the Basic version of my name is not that close to being correct," the monster said.

"Delighted," M'chel said, very grateful that the Marines had sent her on more than a few missions alien cultures, so she was used to nonhumanoids.

"I got your message," Grok said to Jasmine, "and am only too delighted to offer my assistance."

"You're not a client," M'chel said.

"I detect disappointment," Grok said. "No. I am no more than an ex-service person, currently looking for a bit of excitement."

"Grok was in the Alliance Army for about eight years," Jasmine explained. "He is a specialist in communications, SigInt, surveillance, and other specialties. He left the service because you took them."

"I suppose I should be ashamed of my tastes," Grok rumbled. "But every now and then I like a good dustup, as I think you call it."

"My own worlds generally prefer the calm of philosophy, although I maintain philosophy without action is like, forgive me, masturbation without a climax."

"You don't offend," M'chel said, grinning. "If I were educated, I might agree with you."

"I met Grok when he was hired as a contract agent for Cerberus," Jasmine said. "The experience was not a good one for him."

"You speak in understatement. Cerberus not only is a very slow-paying employer, but if matters become serious, as they did in my particular case, they're quite willing to disavow their employees."

"I might do that myself, being a professional. But I would not lie to my agents in the beginning and

tell them I am behind them one hundred percent."

"Cerberus is always behind their agents," Jasmine said. "Far, far behind, or else ready to give them a push."

"Now, Jasmine. Learn to put bitterness behind you," Grok said. "Revenge is a dish best eaten cold."

"Sorry."

"At the moment," Riss said, "we unfortunately don't have any open assignments."

"So I was advised. But Jasmine also told me that you might be open to investors."

"Oh?" M'chel was very casual, considering how little money a soldier would be likely to save. "The company head, Mr. von Baldur, is out at the moment, and you'd have to discuss the matter with him."

"But I'm a partner as well. Might I inquire as to the amount you might be interested in investing?"

"Perhaps half a million credits."

Again, M'chel swore at her inability to keep a deadpan face.

"That's a considerable amount," she managed.

"I am aware of that," Grok said. "And I also expect I should offer an explanation."

"In addition to my other skills, I consider myself good at what you humans call a game of chance."

"Quite good, indeed," he said thoughtfully.

"Half a million," Riss said, in a bit of a daze.

"Just so," Grok said.

"I think Mr. Baldur would be very, very interested in you joining us," M'chel said.

Grok made a noise that Riss took as approval and happiness. Or something like those feelings.

"Now are our immediate financial woes out of the way?" Jasmine said, grinning.

"I should think so."

"Now," King said briskly, "all we need is a job."

FIVE ^ The man eased open the door stenciled: TRANSKOOTENAY MINING. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. He propped the door open, and eased an antigravity ore carrier, about the size of a wheelbarrow, through.

The ore processing plant was almost wholly automated. The few people Transkootenay needed to run it worked only a "day" shift, since not enough ore was coming in to the asteroid outstation to warrant an around-the-clock crew.

There was no ore on the belt, but the machinery hummed in quiet readiness.

The man floated the carrier to the loading bay, and dumped the carrier's cargo, a single boulder, in.

He muttered at all the extra work he'd gone to, camouflaging the charges inside the boulder, acquiring a genuine mining ship to reach the plant looking innocent, disguising himself in a miner's suit, even providing himself with false ID.

None of which was necessary. Transkootenay's security was nonexistent.

He decided they were, in the old phrase, too dumb to live.

That made him grin.

The way things were going out here, they wouldn't for very much longer.

Tough for them.

The man took a small box from his belt, went into the small operating room.

He positioned the box over a large, red switch, and turned the timer on.

Being a careful sort, he took out a plas sheet, and, even though he'd memorized his instructions, went through the checklist as he brought the processing plant up to ready state.

Then he started the timer, went out of the room, and the plant.

There was a watchman at the entrance to the field, snoring in his booth. But there were no fences around the prefab building, nor around the two barracks, one hundred meters distant.

The man threaded his way to his stolen ship, boarded, and lifted away on antigravs. One hundred meters clear of the rocky field, he went to secondary drive, watching the planetoid dwindle in his screen.

Forty-five minutes later, the timer clicked to zero, and the processor hummed into life.

The watchman woke with a jerk, feeling the vibration in his hut.

He sealed his suit, and cycled the hut's lock, awkwardly loading his blaster, as the processing plant fed the "boulder" into the crusher, which sized the rock, and hammers came down to break the boulder into chunks.

The first crash was buried under the slam of the explosives in the boulder, as they, fused with a pressure-sensitive device, went off.

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