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The Doublecross Program

BOOK THREE
OF THE
STAR RISK SERIES

CHRIS BUNCH

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE LAST LEGION SERIES

**THE
DOUBLECROSS
PROGRAM**

Chris Bunch

PROLOGUE

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ONE

Trimalchio IV lazed under a benevolent sun. All was well on the tropic vacation planet ... you were flush.

Star Risk, ltd., was not, at the moment.

“I don’t believe it,” M’chel Riss snarled. “Howin-hells could we be broke? We had two, no, three contracts this year that nobody reneged on.”

Riss, with her blond hair, green eyes, and statuesque build, could have been a runway model.

Actually, she was an ex-Alliance Marine Corps major who’d resigned her commission after assignments from a line battalion executive officer to advisory slots to cover operations, because of general boredom and a lecherous commanding officer.

Looking for adventure was one thing. Eating regularly was another, which is how she became the second member of Star Risk.

“Not *quite* broke,” Jasmine King, Star Risk’s general amanuensis, said. She was improbably, prettier than Riss and had been accused of being a robot. But since she refused to admit one way or another and no one knew of a culture capable of building a robot — actually, an android — as competent and beautiful as King, the matter remained in abeyance.

“But with no income in the offing we’ll be on the welfare rolls — which our beloved Trimalchio doesn’t seem to think is necessary — in three months.”

“Three months?” Chas Goodnight snorted. “That ain’t broke. Broke is when your forwarding address is a shipping crate in an alley somewhere.”

He looked pointedly about Star Risk’s posh offices on the forty-third floor of an antigrav supported high-rise.

Goodnight was a highly modified soldier, called a bester, who could, among other things see in the dark, have reactions three times normal, hear into the FM transmission band. He could — for about fifteen minutes, until the battery at the base of his spine ran dry and he became a wobbling kitten.

Unfortunately, somewhere along the line, Good-night’s moral sense had been amputated if it had ever existed. The Alliance Army discovered this about the time they arrested him as a jewel thief. Star Risk had rescued him from some forgotten world’s death cell.

“I say again my last,” Riss said. “How’d we get so broke?”

“Well,” King said, consulting one of several screens. “Start with finally being able to repay Grok his loan that got us started — ”

“About time, by Ludwig’s mustache,” the alien, fully named Amanandra Grokkonomonself, a furry bulk almost three and a half meters in any direction, growled.

“Keep going,” M’chel said.

“There was the cost of your cottage on that out-island,” Jasmine went on. “Plus buying the island itself.”

M’chel tried to look guilty, failed.

“Not to mention a ten thousand credit advance for your vacation,” King said.

Riss nodded reluctantly. It had been a hell of a vacation, three worlds visited, in the company of that Baron... What was his name again? Never mind. It didn’t matter. But he was certainly a charmer, and never seemed to need sleep.

“That’s for you,” King went on. “Mr. Goodnight likes to gamble, as we all know — ”

“I just had a long run of bad luck,” Goodnight interrupted.

“And then there was that surefire investment Friedrich made.”

Friedrich von Baldur, a slender, white-haired, dapper charmer who claimed to have been a colonel in the Alliance but was actually a warrant who resigned just ahead of an investigation of missing supplies, sighed.

“It was, too,” he said. “At least by my lights. How was I to know a simple device that made perfect copies of your currency simply for record keeping would be thought of as a counterfeiting tool?” He shook his head at the perfidy of bureaucrats and lawmakers.

“Regardless,” King said, “I’m the only one with my nose to the grindstone.”

“Wasn’t there a small trip to Earth’s Tiffany somewhere in there?” Riss said.

“A bauble,” King said. “Or a couple or three baubles. Necessary for the old morale and all of that. But we’re not pointing fingers here. We’re trying to come up with a few moneymaker.” She looked around for ideas. No one said anything.

A long moment crawled past, then the com buzzed.

“Please, God,” Riss said. “Let this be a nice, unhappy type who needs a plan overthrown. Or kept from being overthrown.”

“One who isn’t too bright,” Goodnight added.

“And definitely not the taxman,” Freddie said, looking piously upward at the heavens.

King waved them to silence, picked up the com.

“Star Risk, limited. This is Operative King. How may we be of service?”

She listened, her face carefully blank. Then she smiled.

“Well, I’m certain we can be of assistance.”

Grok growled in pleasure.

“That noise?” King said. “We’ve had a lot of trouble with line static. Our scramblers, you know. Now, we’ll be able to make an appointment for an interview in three weeks ... n

wait, since you said time was a factor with your problem. It just happens we had cancellation, and there's a slot that came open tomorrow."

• • •

Riss was quite sure the government of Roh Bahtrine wasn't democratic — or else the man who sat across the conference table, Van Hald, was an appointee or a bureaucrat. He was simply too colorless to survive, let alone win, an electoral campaign.

Riss listened, decided he was an appointee, since he referred to the system rulers as the Supreme Council, in capitalized speech.

An appointee, definitely a potential patsy, she concluded.

The members of Star Risk were staring at Van Hald in mild incredulity.

"I must say," von Baldur said, "we've had some ... unusual assignments. But I can't recall ever having robbed a bank before."

"Oh, no," Van Hald said. "You're not robbing any bank."

"Perhaps I misunderstood," von Baldur said.

"And why couldn't you have just rounded up some local villains to do the smash and grab?" Chas Goodnight asked.

"I said, we don't wish your services in robbing a bank," Van Hald said. "And it's not just any bank, but our system's National Repository."

"Did your campaign funds end up a little short?" Goodnight persisted.

"If all of you will be silent for a moment," Van Hald said waspishly, "I'll give you the precise details and you'll understand why Roh Bahtrine's Supreme Council needs the services of a rather irregular force."

Five years before, Roh Bahtrine had been in a depression, one that hung on and on in spite of the government's best efforts.

In desperation, it finally went to the National Repository and surreptitiously removed about half of the system's liquid assets — mainly the old reliable gold, and the remainder platinum.

"This they used," Van Hald continued, "to, shall we say, encourage outside capital to invest in Roh Bahtrine, and corporations to relocate or open branches in the system."

"You mean bribe them?" Goodnight said.

"Well ... that's a rather harsh word to use.... But yes," Van Hald said.

Now the system was stabilized and its economy prosperous.

"We want your firm to arrange to put the money we, shall we say, borrowed, back, using the guise of a large-scale robbery," Van Hald said.

“Can’t you just slither it back, the same way you took it?”

Van Hald hesitated, then shook his head.

“Security measures have been radically changed since then.”

“Interesting,” Grok said. “An honest government repaying its debts? A true anomaly.”

Van Hald didn’t reply.

“Well,” Friedrich said, “I assume you have details in that pouch.”

“I do.”

“We’ll have our analysts consider them,” von Baldur said. “But I can assure you we’re interested in this unusual project. Quite interested.”

His eyes rested on the rather large, and certified, check on the table between them.

TWO

“All right,” Riss said, throwing the projection up on the wall. “This is their capital world — Gentic — and the capital city, Masd.

“Over here is the repository, flanked by two fields, garrisoned with regular troops with ground and interplanetary ships in support. *Jane’s* says they’re supposed to be pretty good.

“So the plan will be to put ourselves next to the repository, try not to kill too many of the guards, try not to get killed ourselves, shovel the gold and platinum bars — that’s the shape the geetus is in, by the by — and get out, get paid, and come home.

“Yes, I’ve already leased some antigrav wheelbarrows. Now, what’s the matter with the plan?”

“Do you mean in the design, or in the details?” Goodnight asked.

“I mean the whole idea stinks on ice, as they used to say,” Riss said. “It’s too friggin’ easy. Goodnight, you’re our resident crook. What’s the matter here?”

“I, m’love, was a high-class Raffles, working solo and in the gem trade,” Chas said loftily. “I was never part of those vulgar mobs that went around blowing up safes and such. So I know little. But it does stink on ice. I can’t believe that a gummint can’t figure out a way to put some money back in a drawer without the attendance of loud bangs.”

“No,” M’chel agreed.

“Are you voting we should pass on the job?” von Baldur asked, looking slightly worried.

“No,” M’chel said. “I’ve gotten as used to feeding off the fatted hog as anybody. I just want to take the job and walk out with my ass semi-intact.”

“Well,” Jasmine said, “there’s only two possibilities for a doublecross I can see: either they plan on letting us put the money back and then drygulching us — I do wonder where that term came from — when we show up to get the rest of our money.”

She fell silent.

“And the other possibility?” Goodnight asked.

“I haven’t figured out what that can be yet. But I know there must be one.”

“Nor do I have any sudden, gut-level Betrayal Flashes,” M’chel said. “So we’re going to take the job. The way I see it we can do things sneaky, which means tippie-toe in some night with the bags of money and only take out enough guards to make the job possible. Or else we can go in high, wide, and handsome, guns blazing — and why somebody would set fire to a perfectly good blaster is beyond me.”

“Normally, I’d argue on the side of subtlety,” von Baldur said. “But subtle takes a while and we are veering toward broke.”

“Just so,” Riss said. “Not to mention if we play it like crooks, we’ll have to recruit some strong-arm experts, us not being well versed in criminality, which means we’ll have to split the take, which I’d rather not do. So blazing it is. Jasmine, tell old Van Hald that we’re working for him. And ask him for a list of upcoming holidays.”

“All right. I assume for a cover?”

“You assume right. And we’ll need a crew — say two platoons — of shooters who’re good enough to not shoot on the ground. Plus our transport, and some friends to give us a back door.”

King was tapping keys on a calculator.

“I make it — if we can do the job in a month — about two million.”

“Make it four,” von Baldur said. “On the chance they’re going to get tricky.”

“Plus expenses,” Goodnight said.

“Aren’t we getting a trifle greedy?” Riss asked.

“Of course,” Chas said. “You don’t want me to change my lovable ways, now, do you?”

• • •

“And how does this look?” Jasmine asked, sliding the screen over.

Riss read it.

“Very sexy,” she said. “In three weeks there’s a big national holiday, so everybody goes to the shore or somewhere for a couple of days. Plus there’s a big airshow over Masd, which should give us a nice cover for any loud bangs since the repository’s right outside the city.”

“What’s it celebrating?” Goodnight said.

Riss shrugged.

“Somebody won — or maybe lost — a war. The fiche is a little vague.”

“Definitely lost,” Goodnight said. “Victories are tootled with the most mind-numbing detail. Surprised it’s a holiday.”

“Never mind that,” Grok said. “What about our backup?”

“Inbound,” Russ said. “The two transports will be in by tomorrow, those two destroyers that are costing us — sorry, I meant Roh Bahtrine — a lot more than they should be paying.... Anyway, those two’ll be in day after, along with our gunnies.”

“Who’s running the destroyers?” von Baldur asked.

“A woman named Inchcape.”

Friedrich shook his head. “Don’t know her.”

“Good résumé,” Jasmine said. “Actually worked for the same people more than once.”

“That’s enough for me.”

Riss was waiting.

“For our Plan B, which we’re not going to mention to our client, of course, and Jasmine found a way to bury the charges, we’ve got five spitkits, almost brand new, McG Destroyers Riss continued. “They’ll be here on Trimalchio ... shortly. That’s the most I was able to get from the flight leader, an ex-Alliance sort named Vian.”

Friedrich von Baldur paled a little.

Grok noticed the expression. “You know him?”

“I do,” von Baldur said. “Ironass — pardon me, ladies — Vian. Never known to take a drink or pinch a fanny of any sex. A rigid disciplinarian never known to smile. No. I take the blame back. A staff officer was making an elaborate presentation to him, waving his arms about and the staffie stuck his right forefinger in an impeller drive. Blood to hell and breakfast, and a little smile on Vian’s face.”

“So what is the matter with him as far as you’re concerned?” Goodnight asked.

“Unfortunately,” von Baldur said, “he was acting depot commander when it became convenient for me to leave the Alliance’s service in a bit of a hurry.”

“Would he remember you?” Riss asked, amused.

“I don’t know,” von Baldur said. “I don’t propose to spend much time in his company finding out. He is, as you’d assume, competent. More than.”

“So why did he leave the Alliance?” Goodnight asked. “Being as how he’s the perfect admiral.”

Everyone looked at Jasmine King, who was widely thought to know everything.

“A rather strange case,” she said. “He was riding in a hovertrain, going on leave, and there happened to be a young lady in the compartment. No one else. The train went into a tunnel, there were screams, and the young lady claimed that Admiral Vian made an indecent assault on her in the tunnel. For which he was court-martialed and requested to resign his commission.”

“How peculiar,” Friedrich said. “So he did pinch at least one fanny.”

“That’s strange,” Riss said. “One person’s claim, no witnesses, and a highly respected officer?”

“The young lady’s father was an Alliance commissioner, and her betrothed was a young fast riser in the Department of State,” King said.

“Ah,” Riss said. “That’ll do it to you every time.”

“Lecher Vian,” von Baldur said. “Very, very interesting.”

“A question,” Grok said. “I seem to recall the Destroyer-class ships were supposed to

have rather delicate drives.”

King nodded.

“The Mark I’s were ... which these are. However, Vian’s five have been reengineered after being condemned.”

“They’d better be,” Goodnight said. “I simply despise being at the center of a loud bang.”

THREE

“Whassamattah, Freddie?” Chas Goodnight asked. “You look worried.”

“I am,” von Baldur said, looking out of the battered hangar at the nearly empty landing field.

The long-abandoned field sat on the far side of one of Gentric’s moons, and had been so as the transfer point for the wealth to be returned. On the field were Star Risk’s two rented destroyers and the pair of small liners.

“What’s to worry?” Goodnight asked. “Jasmine’s in place, the transports are here, Riss ready to pebble and squeak, and we’ve even got our backdoor men standing by. All we need is a little gold and such, which is inbound.”

“I worry,” von Baldur said, closing the faceplate on his suit. “Time to dump air. They are inbound.”

“You worry,” Goodnight said cheerily, “because everything’s going too smoothly. Can you believe in good fortune for once?”

Von Baldur must have had an exterior mike on, for his voice boomed back. “No. I do once.... And look where I am now.”

Goodnight was about to reply when four destroyers flashed overhead, followed by a trail of heavy cruisers.

“And here’s our clients,” he said, sealing his own suit. “Trusting bastards that they are.”

He bowed to Riss, who turned to the four dozen men and women standing in a ragged formation.

“All right, crew,” she ordered. “Time to go breathe vacuum and dot and carry.”

“And for me to fade into the woodwork until the clients depart,” Goodnight murmured.

Star Risk had deployed carefully.

Jasmine King was the first to leave. She’d altered her appearance to include mouse-brown hair, very old-fashioned glasses, and a rare ability to walk knock-kneed that guaranteed there’d be no interested looks from any of the various other sexes.

Jasmine added a face cream that made her look as if she’d been attacked by nuclear acne, and, to make her disguise complete, rubbed a bit of very pungent cheese to the temples of her glasses for halitosis’s sake.

She coupled that with a nasal voice and a recorder. King arrived on Gentric, announcing herself as a freelance correspondent for Alliance Public Broadcasting, doing a feature on Rosh Bahtrine’s upcoming Celebration Day, which guaranteed a further lack of interest.

Claiming to have little funds, she took a room in a boardinghouse on the outskirts of Masd, on the main parade route, that not coincidentally had an excellent line of sight on the National Repository.

She then made herself obnoxious by doing buttonhole interviews about what the forthcoming holiday Really Meant to the Man (or Woman) on the Street.

By the time the day arrived, no one, not even the most paranoiac policeman, would do anything except flee in the opposite direction when she approached, and no one had any interest in the bundled electronics that were supposedly part of her craft.

She was the lookout.

• • •

The day arrived, and the citizenry of Masd grouped for a parade or, if pacifistic or easily bored, left for anywhere the roar of warships overhead wouldn't be heard.

There were parades and braying announcers and periodic military demonstrations and bands.

King pretended interest, actually kept using a very long lens to make sure nothing untoward was going on at the repository.

• • •

The hired guns made wisecracks about the bars of gold and platinum as they transferred them from the cruisers to the liners, although making sure none of them were heard by Van Hald, who was scuttling here and there.

Riss noticed Van Hald appeared nervous, could have attributed it to the utter illegality of what they were doing.

She could have ... but did not.

• • •

Grok's suit made him even more impossibly large. He held in the background, making no effort to help, in spite of the occasional scowls from the loading crew, busy with a tiny calculator.

• • •

"That's the end of it," Van Hald announced.

"That's all?" Grok asked.

Van Hald took a moment, trying to read the alien's expression. Even without a space suit, that wasn't possible. He nodded jerkily, lips pursed.

"Very well," Friedrich said. "Let us go un-rob a bank."

"You can lift any time you're ready," Van Hald said.

Friedrich keyed a mike, spoke into it, and the liners closed their ports. Gasses swirled in their drive tubes, and the four Star Risk ships lifted clear of the moon, setting an orbit for Gentric.

The seven Roh Bahtrine ships did the same, apparently setting their course to one of the outer worlds.

After a moment, Chas Goodnight came from his hiding place in a shed, and opened his comm. "The game's afoot ... which is very strange," he said without IDing himself. "Come and get me."

Five minutes later, ex-Admiral Vian's five patrol ships appeared around the moon's curvature.

...

On board one of the liners, Grok was still intent on his calculator. He growled, blanked the screen, and started over.

Van Hald came up. "Might I inquire as to what fascinates you so?"

"Expenses," Grok growled. "My expenses."

Riss was nearby, relaxing against a pile of gold bars.

Or so it appeared.

...

"Your orders?" ex-Admiral Vian asked Goodnight.

He couldn't quite bring himself to "sir" the sandy-haired man in mufti with the low-slur blaster sitting beside him in the copilot's seat with his feet on the control panel.

"Stay with those cruisers," Goodnight asked. "And don't let them spot us."

Vian looked coldly at Goodnight, nodded once without answering.

...

Below, on Gentric, another uniformed band tootled its way past Jasmine King.

She repressed a wince, remembering the old saw that military music is to music as military cooking is to escoffier.

Far overhead, she saw contrails as ships broke atmosphere.

She keyed a com. “Clear down here” — and keyed off, without waiting for a response.

• • •

“And what do we have here?” Goodnight asked, watching a screen as Vian’s ship approached the planet of Gentric.

The Roh Bahtrine ships had altered their orbit.

Vian nodded at his navigator, who touched sensors on a board. “I’d guess,” the navigator said, “they’re resetting course back toward Gentric.”

“The plot sickens,” Goodnight said. “You might want to put your crews on full alert. And stay with our friends.”

• • •

The few men and women who were watching oohed and aahed as four ships, two small destroyers and two liners, flew low over the repository, jetting colorful smoke as they did.

A few cheered, glad that the government was giving a show to the people on the way to the main displays in Masd’s city center.

The smoke dropped lazily around the repository.

King saw no signs of disturbance as the anesthetic gas was sucked in by the repository ventilators.

• • •

There still was nothing visibly wrong, but Riss muttered, “by the prickling of my thumbs,” and made sure her service blaster was loose in its holster and her three little surprises — a hideout projectile gun, a shock grenade, and an evil little knife — were handy.

• • •

King saw the four ships land behind the repository and combat-suited men and women wearing breather masks, run down the ramps, carrying small parcels that seemed inordinately heavy.

No one else seemed interested.

• • •

Riss put small can-opener charges on the outer doors, touched them off, trotted inside and put another set on the inner doors.

Two guards in a booth, three more on roving patrol, sprawled, snoring loudly.

She reached what Van Hald had described as the main vault entrance. It was closed, but the time lock had been set.

Riss spun the vault knob, a four-knobbed handle, and the door clicked open.

“You’re going to blow that one, as well, aren’t you?” Van Hald asked.

“Don’t worry,” Riss said. “We’ll cover you. You and your cohorts’ll look clean.”

She went into the vault, repressing an urge to doff her helmet in reverence. There were still long corridors between piled gold ingots identical to the ones they carried.

“Let’s schlep on down,” she called.

• • •

Grok stood in the middle of the unloading bustle, frowning at his calculator. He hadn’t even bothered to remove his suit or open its faceplate.

Suddenly, he grunted an “Ah-hah” and keyed his com.

Without preamble, to all Star Risk coms:

“Hey, Rube,” he ‘cast. “Plan B.”

• • •

Van Hald, watching the team replace the gold and plutonium, was standing next to Riss. He heard the transmission from Grok.

“What was that?”

Riss didn’t bother to answer, but slammed a hand into the side of his neck.

Van Hald gurgled, went down.

“Abort, abort,” Riss shouted. She estimated the liners were half unloaded.

As they’d been ordered, the mercenaries changed tasks. All gold and platinum not already in the vault went back into the liners, and the ships’ ramps began closing.

• • •

King heard the crack of sonic barriers, looked up, saw the seven Roh Bahtrine ships enter atmosphere. A missile curled from one, shot downward, and smashed into the ground between the road and the repository.

There were screams.

King, unhurriedly, went back to the boardinghouse and picked up a small case.

In it was another, far sexier outfit, and wipes to get rid of the cheese stink and cream.

She piled her electronics gear in her suitcase and hit a timer. It would tick down and

melt everything in her case, without flames or that much of a smell.

King made her way to a large department store in the suburbs and got rid of her false identity, then headed for the spaceport.

She had her own extraction plan.

• • •

The heavy cruisers dove at the still-grounded liners, springing their doublecross.... And then Vian's patrol ships bounced them.

"A Bahtrinian sandwich," Goodnight said.

Vian touched his mike: "All ships ... lock on your targets.... Make sure no collateral damage.... Fire at will!"

Missiles shot from the patrol ships' launch tubes down at the Roh Bahtrinian warships who hadn't seen anything above them, intent on stopping the "robbers."

One cruiser took two hits, tucked, and pinwheeled into the ground; the second was struck three times. It broke off, careening through the air.

One Bahtrinian destroyer tried to keep up the attack, was hit once in the drive tubes, and made a hard but survivable landing.

The two liners were clear of the ground, their escorting destroyers above them.

At full drive, they made for space.

• • •

"Two jumps," Friedrich ordered, and the navigators of the liners fed prearranged settings into their drive computers.

The starships vanished into N-space, quickly followed by their destroyers.

• • •

"Very good, Admiral," Goodnight said. "Now take us home."

• • •

The RP — rendezvous point, predetermined — was repressed glee. The for-hires were paid off, in gold from the liners, plus a hefty bonus, and went on their way, swearing that never Star Risk needed anything — anything, including their first born — they had but to ask.

Even the frosty Vian allowed that he'd had a most satisfactory experience, for the least time spent and without any casualties, and hoped they'd keep him in mind for the future.

The only one missing was Jasmine King, and she made her own way back to Trimalch IV before the others arrived.

• • •

“Hokay,” Goodnight said. “Now that the smoke’s cleared, and little ears have gone about their business, what the hell happened? Obviously, this was a crook run from the beginning. But why?”

“Messr. Grok?” Riss indicated.

“I had looked up a few estimates of what was supposed to be in the Roh Bahtrinian Repository,” the alien said. “I decided to keep a running count on the amount of gold and such ... if no other reason, if the Bahtrinians accused us, after the fact, of having stuck our fingers. I counted only about half, perhaps two-thirds, of the estimates, and decided something had gone wrong.”

“It had,” Riss said.

“I still don’t get it,” Goodnight said. “Why the robbery — phony robbery?”

“Messr. von Baldur?” Riss said.

“Chas, sometimes I suspect you of simplemindedness,” Friedrich said, a touch smug. “Obviously, they borrowed the treasury some time ago, as they told us. What they didn’t bother to add is that while that treasury was being hidden wherever it was being hidden, someone, or more likely several someones, made unauthorized withdrawals from the money, probably without telling their fellow politicians.

“When it was time to pay up, full accounting, those someones could not, or did not want to, make restitution. So they came up with the story that the repository now had additional security, and that the robbery was the best way to handle things.

“Of course, what they intended was to have their naval units hit us in midpayback, and then, in the course of the blood and slaughter, they would report that one ship managed to escape, which is where the missing loot was off to.”

“That’s not that bad a plan,” said Goodnight.

“No,” King said. “If you assume the people you’re going to pull it on aren’t very bright.”

“Still,” Goodnight said. “It’s pretty damned unique.”

“Aren’t they all,” Riss said, yawning and thinking about a tall, cool drink on her island. “Aren’t they all. But once again, truth, justice, and the suspicious way of life triumph.”

FOUR

M'chel Riss was fully engaged, without her usual ally, Jasmine King, for tech support in her War against Whatever Color Her Toenails Used to Be.

She was alone on the tiny islet she'd bought, near the fringes of the cluster that sprayed out from Trimalchio IV's main continent, and enjoying the solitude immensely.

Between eyeing the two different shades warring it out on her big toes and trying to make a decision as to which was favored, she was considering whether to lift in "civilization" for dinner or whap something together out of the freezer and continue reading *Beyond String Theory and Other Amusements*.

She rather thought she'd go into town — tonight didn't feel like a time for mathematics — when her com buzzed.

Riss fielded it.

"Go."

It was Jasmine, at the Star Risk offices.

"There's somebody here who wants to talk to you."

"Does he look like I owe him money?"

"If you do," King said, "it'd be worth every penny. Yum."

"I hope," M'chel said, "you're wearing a whisper mike."

Jasmine activated a pickup.

For a very long instant, the stars swung in their orbits, and she remembered a brief Temporary Duty, back when she was still in the marines.

The man was a little older and had a little more silver at his temples, and maybe a few more smile lines, since she'd last seen him.

Lieutenant Colonel Dov Lanchester, Alliance Marine Corps.

Once, very briefly, they'd been lovers, when they'd attended a Planetary Insertion course. Nothing came of it except some wonderful memories, and they went separate ways to new assignments.

The next time, he'd been fast-tracked to captain and she was still a first lieutenant. Worse, he was her temporary CO, which meant nothing was supposed to happen — and it didn't. Stupidly, Riss often thought, when the lonelies struck.

Now she rather wished that Lanchester had been her CO on her last assignment, instead of that cockless pick-leface who'd tried to weasel her into bed and was the biggest reason for her resignation from the Alliance Marines.

But as the military phrase correctly pointed out, you can wish in one hand, and shit in the other and see which one fills up first....

“Uh ...” she managed.

“Major Riss,” Lanchester said. Like everything else about him, Riss thought his deep voice damned near perfect.

“M’chel,” she said. “How are you, Colonel?”

“Dov,” he said. “I’m still in, you’re out, which the Alliance should regret every damned minute.”

“Maybe they should,” M’chel said. “I don’t.”

“I tracked you down, since I’m between assignments, to see if I might buy you dinner,” Lanchester said.

M’chel nodded.

“Shall I pick you up?”

Riss started to say no, bethought herself, and nodded.

“At seven?”

Again she nodded.

“Now, if you’ll give me coordinates to your tropic paradise ...”

• • •

Trimalchio IV was going through a fascination with antigravity. Chas had the theory that levitation drives were popular since so many citizens of Trimalchio also seemed to exist without visible means of support.

The restaurant tables were roboticized booths floating out and back on preset courses over the ocean, with waiter call sensors.

The waves were small, all three moons were out, the breeze was warm, and the wine was correctly chilled.

It was most romantic.

Dov was looking up at the sky.

“Three moons,” he mused. “Just like on ... what was it — Myrmidion II? Do you remember — ”

“I do,” Riss said. “My damned tent leaked.”

“You should have complained,” Lanchester said. “Other arrangements ... could have been made.”

M’chel carefully arched an eyebrow, didn’t reply, but changed the subject.

“So what assignment — assuming you can talk about it — brings you my way?” she

asked.

“I can talk about it,” he said. “It’s advisory.... And that’s not a cover. It’s the Khelat Shaoki Systems, generally called the Khelat Cluster. Twenty-seven worlds belong to the Khelat, fourteen to the Shaoki, and they’ve been fighting each other for half a dozen generations.”

“Who’s the Alliance backing?”

“Khelat.”

“Why?”

“Uh ... because us killer marines support honesty, love, and the Alliance Way?”

M’chel snorted and drank wine.

“Khelat is the main source for *maln*.”

“Which is?”

“A mildly stimulating, mildly addictive tea that’s become the new fad in the civilized worlds. *Main* is controlled by Omni Foods, which indirectly controls six seats in the Alliance Parliament.”

He shook his head.

“I wonder what would happen if the flag-wavers ever figured out that we spend half our time fighting for the Stock Exchange?”

“So why’d you take the slot?” Riss asked.

“Got some good men and women aboard ... including an old friend of yours, Ben Wycliffe, as my XO. And because this’ll give me a leg up on getting my star.”

“You’re still ambitious.”

“I am,” Lanchester said. “Growing less so the creakier my joints get.” He shrugged. “Enough of that. Can we order? Having no idea of what these furrin devils consider gourmet I plan on eating nothing but underdone beef or its equivalent until I’ve got to go back on combat rations.”

...

They were back on Riss’s island, and it was very late.

Lanchester drained the last of a respectable Vegan brandy in his snifter and got to his feet.

“I suppose I should get back to my hotel, if you still want to be out and about tomorrow.”

“You should,” M’chel agreed, wondering why her voice was getting a little throaty. She got up and led him to the door.

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