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**STARSHIP:
MERCENARY**

BOOK THREE



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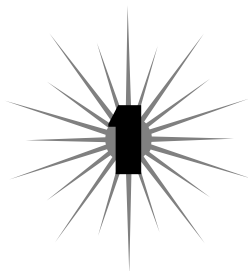
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To Carol, as always

And to absent friends:

Bob Bloch
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“David,” said the disembodied voice on the *Theodore Roosevelt’s* communication system, “I don’t know where the hell you’re hiding, but we have to talk. You show up in my office in five minutes or the next thing this ship fires on is going to be *you*.”

“Five’ll get you ten the Captain has to go hunting for him,” said a crew member.

“I’ll take that bet, ten credits to five,” said the tall, redheaded Third Officer. “If there’s one person aboard this ship that you don’t want mad at you—besides me, that is—it’s the Captain.” Suddenly she looked amused. “Besides,” she added, “how the hell many places can you hide on this ship?”

“More than you think, or the Captain wouldn’t have threatened him.”

“The Captain’s in a bad mood,” said the Third Officer. “Wouldn’t you be?”

Suddenly a bulkhead panel slid open, and an odd-looking creature of vaguely human proportions, but dressed like a Victorian dandy, stepped out into the corridor. His eyes were set at the sides of his elongated head, his large triangular ears were capable of independent movement, his mouth was absolutely circular and had no lips at all, and his neck was long and incredibly flexible. His torso was broad and half again as long as a man’s, and his short, stubby legs had an extra joint in them. His skin may have possessed a greenish tint, but his bearing and manner were properly upper-class British at all times.

“I wish you wouldn’t talk about me as if I wasn’t here,” he said.

“Right,” said the Third Officer with a laugh. “You just *wish* you weren’t here.”

“My dear Olivia . . .” he began in hurt tones.

“Call me Val,” she replied.

“A mere convenience for the crew,” he said with a shrug. “To me you will always be Olivia Twist.”

“I hate that name,” she said ominously. “You’d do well to fall in love with some other human author.”

“Other than the immortal Charles?” he said with almost-genuine horror. “There *are* no other authors. Just scribblers and dabblers.”

“David,” said the voice on the intercom. “You have three minutes to find out whether I’m kidding or not.” Pause. Then, ominously: “You want a hint?”

“I really must go,” said the alien apologetically.

As he scuttled away, Val held out her hand to the crewman. “Pay up. It serves you right for betting against the Captain.”

The elegantly dressed alien made his way to an airlift, ascended two levels, got off, and finally reached the Captain’s office.

“My dear Steerforth!” he said with false enthusiasm. “That was beautifully handled! Just beautifully! I can’t tell you how proud I am of you!”

“Shut up,” said Wilson Cole. “And stop calling me Steerforth.”

“But that’s your name!” protested the alien. “I am David Copperfield and you are my old school chum, Steerforth.”

“You can call me Captain, Wilson, or Cole once we’re on speaking terms again. I’ll continue calling you David, since you haven’t seen fit to give me your real name.” Cole stared at the alien. “I don’t think you can possibly imagine how mad I am at you.”

“But we won!” said David Copperfield. “There were five ships and you destroyed them all!”

“There were supposed to be two class-H ships!” snapped Cole. “We had to fight off four class-Ks and a class-M!”

“For which we were well paid,” the alien pointed out.

“What we were paid will barely replace the shuttle we lost and repair the damages we sustained,” said Cole. “David, I explained it to you after the last debacle: there’s more to this business than getting the biggest contract.”

“That’s *your* end of the business,” said Copperfield defensively. “My job is handling the financial arrangements. I get the contracts, you fight the battles.”

“And if they offered you ten times as much to take on a dreadnought, or face Admiral Garcia’s flagship, would you take it?”

“Certainly not,” said Copperfield. “The *Teddy R* can’t beat a dreadnought.”

“The *Teddy R* was goddamned lucky to come out of this morning’s skirmish in one piece,” said Cole.

“My dear Steerforth, if you want to be a mercenary, you must expect to fight in some pitched battles. It goes with the job.”

“I don’t think I’m getting through to you at all,” said Cole. “You’re our business agent. You are supposed to get us assignments we can handle. We’re lucky any of us are alive right now.”

“But you *are* alive,” protested Copperfield. “So clearly it was a good bargain. Two million Maria Theresa dollars for guarding Barios II against potential attack during the Jewelers’ Exhibition.”

“Damn it, David, there was nothing *potential* about that attack!” growled Cole. “They knew we were there, they knew what armaments we had, they knew what we were and weren’t capable of doing. If Val and Four Eyes hadn’t done things nobody’s supposed to do with our shuttlecrafts, we’d be orbiting the goddamned planet in a billion pieces right now.”

"I *could* get you an assignment protecting small schoolchildren from playground bullies," offered the dapper alien, "but it wouldn't pay your expenses."

"Shut up," said Cole.

David Copperfield fell silent.

"We're going to have to make a few changes in how we operate," continued Cole.

"You mean the ship?"

"I mean you and me. I can't let you keep endangering us the way you've been doing."

"But you have been victorious!" protested Copperfield. "So I am not endangering you."

"We're operating with half the crew this ship needs, we can't go into the Republic for repairs or supplies, we still don't have a doctor on board . . ."

"And you have overcome every one of those obstacles," noted Copperfield. "I don't understand why you are so upset."

"Then why were you hiding inside a bulkhead?" demanded Cole.

Copperfield paused, considering his answer. "It was cozy?"

A burst of feminine laughter echoed through the small office, and a moment later the holographic image of Sharon Blacksmith appeared, hovering over Cole's desk.

"That's a good one, David!" she said, still laughing. "I hope you don't mind if I play it for the entire crew. If you ever get tired of being . . . well, whatever it is you're being, you can always get work as a comedian."

"You were listening?" asked Copperfield.

"I'm the Chief of Security," answered Sharon. "Of course I was listening. There is an excellent chance that our glorious leader is going to strangle you before you leave his office, and such an action really requires a witness."

“Strangle me?” scoffed Copperfield. “We’ve been friends since we were in boarding school together.”

“David, I really think you’re losing it,” said Sharon. “The two of you never met until last year. You are not old school chums. You are not even a human being, and your real name isn’t David Copperfield. You are—or at least you were—the biggest fence on the Inner Frontier. Now, I know that’s unpleasant, but those are the facts.”

“Facts are the enemy of truth!” snapped Copperfield. “Do you think I’d have shown Steerforth how to avoid a lifetime of piracy if we hadn’t been lifelong friends? Do you think I’d have enticed the Hammerhead Shark to my world if I weren’t doing a favor for a classmate? Do you think I’d have turned my back on everything I’d been and come away with you if we didn’t share a special bond?”

Cole and Sharon exchanged looks. “I’ll take it from here,” he said, and her image vanished. “David, you enticed the Shark to Riverwind because you didn’t have any choice, and you came away with me because half a dozen different pirates were all out for your head.”

“Well, that too,” admitted Copperfield.

“Do you want me to return you to Riverwind?”

“No, certainly not. They might still be looking for me there.”

“Would you like me to set you down on the next colony world we come to?”

“No.”

“Fine. But if you’re staying aboard the *Teddy R*, we’re going to need some new ground rules.”

“Surely you don’t want to go back to piracy,” said Copperfield.

“No,” replied Cole. “We’re a military ship and a military crew. We were uniquely unfit to be pirates. I’m surprised we lasted almost a whole year at it.” He paused. “We can’t go back to the Republic. There’s still a price on my head, and a huge reward for the capture or

destruction of the *Teddy R*, so we'll practice our military trade here on the Frontier, as mercenaries."

"Which is precisely what I suggested to you two months ago," said Copperfield.

"I know, and it was a good suggestion—but we'd like to live long enough to enjoy what we earn. Twice in a row now you've chosen the best price without considering what we had to do to earn it. The *Teddy R* is not a dreadnought. It's a century-old ship that should have been decommissioned seventy-five years ago, except that the Republic kept getting into one war after another. There probably aren't a thousand ships in the Republic's fleet of almost two million that can't outrun and outgun us. One-on-one we can probably take just about any independent ship on the Inner Frontier—but you keep putting us in situations that *aren't* one-on-one. We've been lucky, but we can't *stay* lucky. So from now on, you bring every offer to me, and I will decide whether or not we accept it."

"But that hurts my credibility, to say nothing of my bargaining position."

"It doesn't hurt it as much as a laser blast, or a pulse ray, or slow torture, all of which almost certainly await you if you keep putting us into these situations."

"How did you get to be the most decorated officer in the fleet with that attitude?" said Copperfield bitterly.

"He is the most decorated officer *out* of the fleet," said Sharon's disembodied voice, "to say nothing of its most-wanted criminal. We're all proud of him, even if he's the reason none of us can ever go home again."

"You shut up too," said Cole. He turned back to Copperfield. "That's it, David. You will bring every offer to me for my approval—and I have to know more than what they're paying; I have to know everything that might happen, starting with why someone is paying

enough for us to consider accepting the job in the first place. If you can't get the information I need, then either I or one of my officers will speak directly to the supplicant to determine the full range of possible dangers we might face."

"That emasculates my position," protested Copperfield.

"Oh, I like that word," said Sharon.

"It makes me little more than an errand boy," continued the alien.

"We tried it your way, and we're luckier to be alive than I think you'll ever realize," said Cole. "Now we do it my way."

"I don't know if I can."

"It's your decision. We can always use another gunnery sergeant."

"But I'll give it a try," said Copperfield hastily.

"All right," said Cole. "You'll still be our point man, you'll still make the contacts. The Republic's still got huge rewards posted for me, Four Eyes, and Sharon, and there's a couple of dozen worlds that want Val dead or alive—and those two men and the alien we picked up on Cyrano all have prices on their heads. You're about the only one who can leave the ship with a reasonable chance of returning unapprehended. So tell Christine or whoever's working the bridge where you want to go next, and we'll take you there—but you no longer have the authority to commit us to a mission. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Steerforth." Pause. "I mean, yes, Wilson."

"All right. We're done. You can leave." The alien turned and walked to the door. "And David?"

"Yes, Steerforth?"

"The next time you try hiding from me inside a bulkhead, I'm going to have the panel fused into place."

"You knew?" asked Copperfield, surprised.

"The man has spies everywhere," said Sharon's voice. "It's positively fiendish."

Copperfield left without another word.

“So, you want to meet me in the mess hall for coffee?” asked Sharon, her image appearing again.

“Not yet,” said Cole. “Send Four Eyes to me. I need a damage report.”

“What about Christine and Val?” asked Sharon. “After all, they *are* your Second and Third Officers.”

“First Four Eyes, then coffee, then a nap, then the rest of the damages. We’re still functioning, we still have air, we still have gravity, and we sure as hell know our weapons work. Everything else can wait.”

“Including your love life?” she asked with a smile.

“Take a tranquilizer,” he replied. “I’ve got captainly things to do.”

“I don’t *want* a tranquilizer.”

“Fine. Pay a visit to David. He’ll explain to you that we’re old school chums and we share everything.”

“Seven thousand, one hundred and forty-five,” said Sharon.

“What’s that supposed to be?”

“The number of nights you’re sleeping alone for that remark.”