Nils M Holm

Star Tramp

No AI was used in the making of this book

http://drift.t3x.org/star_tramp/

II

‘‘Alright, stage two complete. Redshift compensator engaged. You can take over, Gorle!’’ The tramp groaned theatrically as he squeezed himself out of the cockpit, which was flat on the floor when artificial gravity was on. He fidgeted a pack of cigarettes out of the chest pocket of his worn suit and lighted it clumsily.

‘‘Okay, Charrs’’ said the man whom V’Charrs had addressed as ‘‘Gorle’’. ‘‘Redshift compensator nominal, approach vector normal, we have coordinates for orbit. Waiting for clearance to land.’’

‘‘Ah, let’s skip the fanfare and go down directly.’’

‘‘Dammit, Charrs, that’ll be more trouble than it’s worth! They’ll have our asses nailed down for at least a couple of weeks.’’

‘‘Bullshit. My friends from the Space Scouts will put in a good word for us!’’

‘‘Yeah, your good friends.’’ Art DeGorle sighed.

‘‘Right! Without my good friends we’d still be stuck at Mirerva III and break our heads over covering the port dues.’’

‘‘And without your damn extra tours, we wouldn’t get into any of the trouble in the first place.’’ DeGorle tried to be angry, but he only looked and sounded tired.

‘‘Communications?’’ asked V’Charrs.

“The usual.”
“Huh. Run the landing program and bring us down!”
“Already running.”

Via the open channel, the ground control crew first requested them to remain in orbit until it was their turn, then demanded, then threatened, and finally cursed them while the little ship descended slowly in its antigrav field and finally touched down like a feather using a well-measured burn of its main engine. Of course things happened exactly the way DeGorle had anticipated. The hydraulics of the landing gear had not even stopped vibrating when an armored vehicle of the port security arrived on screeching tires. Armed and armored men entered the confined quarters of the ship, examined the interior and the freight carefully, checked and double checked the papers, and finally grounded the ship for two weeks, further investigation pending. V’Charrs and DeGorle were barred from entering the space port and their ID cards were marked accordingly. To be really on the safe side, the men finally escorted them to the exit of the Boromar Central Space Port. The street was empty, except for a couple of automatic taxis silently waiting for a customer. DeGorle had

packed his stuff on the way down and V'Charrs always kept a bug out bag handy, so they were ready to leave when they had to. They had merely left the armored vehicle that had delivered them to the exit, when DeGorle finally vented his frustration, his face grim with anger.

"Great! There we have it. Same shit as usual! Two hours saved on the way down, and two weeks stuck in a shit hole. Congratulations, ace! Well done!"

"Calm down, man." V'Charrs lit a cigarette. His face glowed in the dark. It was the middle of the night on this part of Boromar. He grinned. "We'll enjoy ourselves for a while, and if we get bored, the local Scout base will help us disappear." He looked at his partner and offered the pack of cigarettes. "Want a cig?"

DeGorle looked doubtful, but then took it.

"Thanks" he said through clenched teeth. "And what's next? Eh?" He let V'Charrs light his cigarette and took a deep drag. "Is there any place in this galaxy where we're not in trouble?" He paused. "Aw, fuck this, man."

With these words, DeGorle boarded one of the taxis and pushed his ID card into the slot of its terminal.

"I'll call when I feel like it" he said. "I think I need some space for a while."

He pressed a button and without offering V'Charrs to share the ride, he instructed the taxi to drive him to the city. The elegant vehicle started to hover, its hatch closed, and it disappeared into the night.

Could be worse, V'Charrs thought. Could be raining. It had not been the first disagreement he and his partner had had in the past years, and it had not even been one of the fiercer ones. DeGorle would come back. What else was he supposed to do? V'Charrs did not take a taxi, he just stood there and waited. He did not have to wait for a long time. The outline of a bulky, heavily armored vehicle appeared in the darkness, approached his position, and stopped right next to him. The logo of the ITC — the Interspace Trading Corporation — decorated its side. A tall, athletic, well-shaved guy wearing a dark blue uniform emerged from the vehicle and came over to the space tramp.

''The boss wants a word with you'' he stated. His stance was not threatening, but he exuded a certain authority that made V'Charrs decide that declining was probably not worth the trouble. Without a word, he entered the vehicle. The journey was silent. V'Charrs knew where they were headed: the headquarters of the ITC. The tramp

did not really want to talk to ‘‘the boss’’, but if there was one thing he hated more than an unpleasant duty, then its was to postpone the inevitable.

The headquarters of the ITC were the 220-story ITC building, which towered above the city and protruded like a needle into a cloudless sky. The headquarters were not in the building, they were the building. All of it. This was not a coincidence. This was not some local branch of the ITC, it was the nerve center of the largest trading corporation of the galaxy. And the ‘‘boss’’ was not just some managing director, it was the boss and the sole proprietor of the entire enterprise. And he did not look happy when V’Charrs entered his office.

‘‘Office’’ was not really the right term to describe the premises, though. The personal space of the boss stretched out over the entire area of the lowermost floor of the building, some 200 meters underground. V’Charrs’s boots sunk up to the ankles into some grass-like carpet that looked like it would glow in the dark. The walls were covered with a black, leather-like material. The entire floor was one single open space, sparsely covered with conference tables, bars, couches, computer installations, and security

personnel in dark blue company uniforms. The room did not exactly look cold, but did not exactly invite to spend an afternoon, either. Two massive guys of the boss's private army had escorted V'Charrs from the leather-covered lifts at the center of the floor to a glass cube in the middle of the northern wall of the building. The glass looked thick and the space tramp was sure that some pretty heavy artillery would be needed to penetrate it. Not that he had any such intention. He entered the glass cube and, without saying as much as "hello", dropped into one of the heavy leather armchairs that were placed at a safe distance from a throne-like desk.

"Hope your journey was agreeable, V'Charrs!" said the figure behind the desk. Although his words were friendly, the voice was cold as ice and seemed to cut right to the bone. "Looks like we'll have plenty of time for small-talk, due to your faux pas at the central port."

The ITC was the closest thing to a government that Boromar had, so the space tramp knew exactly whom he had to thank for his two-week stay. If the ITC was the government, then its boss was its king, president, and chief executive, all in one person.

"Long time no see, Grange" V'Charrs said levelly. "You haven't changed a bit."

‘‘Too long’’ snarled Grange. ‘‘Where the hell have you been?’’

‘‘Ah, some place or another.’’

‘‘Oh, really? I have a suspicion. A grave one. I think you’re conducting certain experiments with the faster-than-light engines on your journeys. In particular with the redshift compensator. Or should I say, without it?’’

‘‘Me?’’ V’Charrs managed to put all the consternation he could muster into this single word. ‘‘How can you say that? Such experiments are strictly prohibited!’’

‘‘Correct!’’ stated Grange with an unmoving face. ‘‘And failure to comply with these rules will be punished harshly. Like deportation to a world without FTL travel.’’ He watched for a reaction in V’Charrs.

V’Charrs on his part took his time to study the owner-king of the ITC. He did not exactly look like one of the most powerful men in the galaxy, but then what would you expect such a man to look like? T.L. Grange was short and slender. Even shorter than V’Charrs who certainly was no giant. And pretty slim, especially for someone who presumably spent his entire life behind a desk. His attire was formal: blue suit with golden threads forming a wave-like pattern. It was most certainly real gold, or something even more

expensive. His face was well-proportioned, but a life of ambition and competition had left hard lines in it. His dark hair and his ice-blue eyes formed a beautiful, but also slightly eerie contrast. The hair had to be dyed or otherwise preserved, because Grange was certainly more than a hundred years old.

If he wasn't such a complete train wreck of a human being, thought V'Charrs, he could almost look likable.

"You disappeared rather suddenly, back then" said Grange out of nothing.

"Suddenly?" echoed V'Charrs. "Well, I should have been surprised, I guess, but I already knew you couldn't be trusted. And while we're at it: where was the spaceship you promised me when I landed on Manseyrea? If I remember correctly, it was supposed to become my property as soon as I completed your last mission."

He waited for a reaction, but Grange did not move, so he stated the obvious. "It wasn't there."

"So you faked bustling business activity on Manseyrea while you sold my container ship — illegally — and had a custom spaceship built for your own personal use. And then you disappeared without a trace."

"What did you expect me to do? Sit back and wait for your bloodhounds to arrive?"

‘‘Well, V’Charrs, let’s not talk about the past’’ suggested Grange with a voice as smooth as butter, but he could not fool the space tramp. ‘‘Let’s not talk about the theft of my valuable transporter. Or about the all money it cost me to track you down over the past 25 years. A small fortune! And you could only pull that off by using certain experiments...’’

‘‘Which you cannot prove.’’

‘‘Want to bet?’’

T.L. Grange’s word against that of some nameless space tramp? No, this was not a bet he would like to accept.

‘‘Your conditions?’’

‘‘I’m not expecting anything exceptional from you. Just be my guest for a few weeks here on Boromar.’’

‘‘Why?’’ V’Charrs fired the question like a projectile from a mass driver cannon.

‘‘Remember Ame Ryan?’’ Grange asked.

‘‘Sure. That guy you sent after me a few times. Once, he stole the log recorder from my scout ship, so you could prove that I was flying distances without redshift compensation. I have no idea where you got that idea—’’

‘‘Oh, come on!’’ interrupted the boss. ‘‘But, yes, this is exactly the guy I’m talking about. Unfortunately, the recorder never ended up in my

possession. Ryan hid it somewhere. I think he wanted to renegotiate the price, so I had him apprehended and interrogated with the most advanced methods available to the ITC. When asked about the whereabouts of the recorder, he said that 'he buried it at the end of the world'. He died shortly after that, so that's all we know."

"I guess he could not lie under the influence of 'the most advanced methods available to the ITC'. So how's the search for the end of the world going?" V'Charrs asked with a well-calculated mix of derision and satisfaction.

"Save the sarcasm, V'Charrs! Just relax and enjoy the next two weeks! Must be a welcome change not to be chased like an animal for a while."

"So you know where the recorder is? And two weeks is the time you need to retrieve it? And you want me here so I cannot get there first and snatch it away from you in the last minute? How long do you think you can keep me on Boromar if I really intend to disappear?"

V'Charrs stopped and thought about it for a moment.

"Why are you telling me all this?" he asked. "You could ruin me in no time if you wanted to, but that's not what you want. You want me to work for you again. So you've been constructing a case

that would keep me under your thumb for the rest of my miserable life. And now you're telling me that within two weeks time your plan will finally bear fruit."

Grange smiled a cold smile. V'Charrs's eyes narrowed.

"You sadistic little bastard are enjoying this! I'm already caught in your trap and you just wanted to see my face when you tell me."

Grange's smile intensified.

"You know a man going by the name Art DeGorle?" he asked innocently and did not wait for an answer. "If you're planning to leave early, I'm afraid you'd have to travel without a navigator. I'm sure Mr DeGorle will prefer the luxury of our quarters to the confined space on your little ship."

"You miserable little bastard—" started V'Charrs and rose from the chair, but T.L. Grange did not sit in an atomic-bomb-proof office floor only to be strangled by some random space tramp.

"Have a nice stay" he commented in high spirits while multiple men of the ITC security dragged V'Charrs out of the glass cube. The tramp only stopped cursing when they entered the elevator. No use exhausting your energy when there is not even an audience, and the security guys looked indifferent. At the ground floor, they escorted

him to the entrance, kicked him out of the building, and locked the door behind him.
V'Charrs calmed down quickly and then started to walk toward the city center. He planned to get a room in the Terranian, a rather luxurious hotel that could be found on pretty much every planet. Not that he could afford it, but he did not plan to stay for a long time. He certainly did not plan on staying for two weeks.

He had barely entered his apartment, when the visiphone terminal beeped and a pleasant synthetic voice announced a call. Damn those visiphone computers, thought V'Charrs. What's wrong with a simple beep? Fucking decadence. Typical Terranian way of life.
"Put it through" he said. DeGorle's face appeared on the 3D screen. "Hi, Charrs" he said and seemed to be in a hurry. "Still hunted by the ITC, are you? No, don't interrupt! A few minutes ago, some goons of the ITC broke down the door of my room. I was just assembling my stun gun, so I put them on ice. At the moment, I'm in a robot taxi going in no particular direction. I got your address when you checked in. Where do we meet?"
"Space port" said V'Charrs without thinking. "How long do you need?"