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## —And Devious the Line of Duty

Tom Godwin



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Title: --And Devious the Line of Duty

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Release Date: September 12, 2007 [EBook #22585]

Language: English

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Produced by Greg Weeks, Stephen Blundell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

# **—And Devious the Line of Duty**

**Sometimes the most diligent and loyal thing  
an old man can do is fumble,  
drink beer, and let a young man get into trouble....**

## by Tom Godwin

Illustrated by Schelling

"We're almost there, my boy." The big, gray-haired man who would be Lieutenant Dale Hunter's superior—Strategic Service's Special Agent, George Rockford—opened another can of beer, his fifth. "There will be intrigue already under way when this helicopter sets down with us. Attempted homicide will soon follow. The former will be meat for me. You will be meat for the latter."

Rockford was smiling as he spoke; the genial, engaging smile of a fond old father. But the eyes, surrounded by laughter crinkles, were as unreadable as two disks of gray slate. They were the eyes of a poker player—or master con man.

"I don't understand, sir," Hunter said.

"Of course not," Rockford agreed. "It's a hundred light-years back to Earth. Here on Vesta, to make sure there is an Earth in the future, you're going to do things never dreamed of by your Terran Space Patrol instructors there. You'll be amazed, my boy."

Hunter said nothing but he felt a growing dislike for the condescending Rockford. Only a few weeks ago President Diskar, himself, had said: *For more than a century these truly valiant men of the Space Patrol have been our unwavering outer guard; have fought and died by legions, that Earth and the other worlds of the Terran Republic might remain free—*

"I suppose you know," Rockford said, "that there will be no more than four days in which to stop the Verdam oligarchy from achieving its long-time ambition of becoming big enough to swallow the Terran Republic."

"I know," Hunter answered.

Jardeen, Vesta's companion world, was the key. Jardeen was large and powerful, with a space navy unsurpassed by that of any other single world. A large group of now-neutral worlds would follow Jardeen's lead and Jardeen's alliance with the Verdam People's Worlds would mean the quick end for the Terran Republic. But, if Jardeen could be persuaded to ally with the Terran Republic, the spreading, grasping arms of the Verdam octopus would begin to wither away—

Rockford spoke again:

"Val Boran, Jardeen's Secretary of Foreign Relations, is the man who will really make Jardeen's decision. I know him slightly. Since my public role is that of Acting Ambassador, he agreed—reluctantly—to come to Vesta so that the talks could be on a neutral world. With him will be Verdam's Special Envoy Sonig; a wily little man who has been working on Boran for several weeks. He seems to be succeeding quite well—here's a message I received from Earth early this morning."

Rockford handed him a sheet of the green Hyperspace Communications paper. The message was in code, with Rockford's scribbled translation beneath:

*Intelligence reports Verdam forces already massed for attack in Sector A-13, in full expectation of Jardeen's alliance. Anti-Terran propaganda, stressing the New Jardeen Incident, being used in preparation for what will be their claim of "defensive action to protect innocent worlds from Terran aggression." Terran forces will be outnumbered five to one. The urgent necessity of immediate and conclusive counter measures by you on Vesta is obvious.*

Hunter handed the paper back, thinking, *It's worse than any of us thought*, and wondering how Supreme Command could ever have entrusted such an important task to a beer-guzzling old man from Strategic Service—a branch so unknown that he had never even heard of it until his briefing the day before he left Earth.

He saw that they had left the desert behind and were going up the long slope of a mountain. "The meeting will be on this mountain?" he asked.

Rockford nodded. "The rustic Royal Retreat. Princess Lyla will be our hostess. Her mother and father were killed in an airplane accident a year ago and she was the only child. You will also get to meet Lord Narf of the Sea Islands, her husband-by-proxy, who regards himself as a rare combination of irresistible woman-killer and rugged man-among-men."

"Husband-by-proxy?" Hunter asked.

"The king worshiped his daughter and his dying request to her was that she promise to marry Lord Narf. Narf's father had been the king's closest friend and the king was sure that his old friend's son

would always love and care for Lyla. Lyla dutifully, at once, married Narf by proxy, which is like a legally binding formal engagement under Vestan law. Four days from now the time limit is up and they'll be formally married. Unless she should do the unprecedented thing of renouncing the proxy marriage."

Rockford drained the last of the beer from the can. "Those are the characters involved in our play. I have a plan. That's why I told Space Patrol to send me a brand-new second lieutenant—young, strong, fairly handsome—and expendable. I hope you can be philosophical about the latter."

"Sir," Hunter said, unable to keep a touch of stiffness out of his tone, "it is not exactly unknown in the Space Patrol for a man to die in the line of duty."

"Ah ... yes." Rockford was regarding him with disturbing amusement. "You are thinking, of course, of dying dramatically behind a pair of blazing blasters. But you will soon learn, my boy, that a soldier's duty is to protect the worlds he represents by whatever actions will produce the best results, no matter how unheroic those actions may be."

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"Attention, please." It was the voice of the pilot. "We are now going to land."

Hunter preceded Rockford out of the helicopter and onto the green grass of a small valley, across which tall, red-trunked cloud trees were scattered. Pale gray ghost trees, with knobby, twisted limbs, grew thickly among the cloud trees. There was a group of rustic cabins, connected by gravel paths, and a much larger building which he assumed would be a meeting hall.

"Hello."

He turned, and looked into the brown eyes of a girl. Her green skirt and orange blouse made a gay splash of color, her red-brown hair was wind-tumbled and carefree about her shoulders, in her hand was a bouquet of bright spring flowers.

But there was no smile of spring in the dark eyes and the snub-nosed little face was solemn and old beyond its years.

"You're Lieutenant Hunter, aren't you?" she asked in the same low, quiet voice.

"Princess Lyla!" There seemed to be genuine delight in Rockford's greeting as he hurried over. "You're looking more like a queen every day!"

Her face lighted with a smile, making it suddenly young and beautiful. "I'm so glad to see you again, George—"

"Ah ... good afternoon."

The voice was loud, unpleasantly gravelly. They turned, and Hunter saw a tall, angular man of perhaps forty whose pseudogenial smile was not compatible with his sour, square-jawed face and calculating little eyes.

He spoke to Rockford. "You're Ambassador Rockford, here to represent the Terran Republic, I believe." He jerked his head toward Princess Lyla, who was no longer smiling. "My wife, Princess Lyla."

"Oh, she and I have been friends since she was ten, Lord Narf."

"And this young man"—Narf glanced at Hunter—"is your aide, I presume. Lyla, did you think to send anyone after their luggage?"

A servant was already carrying their luggage—and cases of Rockford's beer—out of the helicopter. Hunter followed the other toward the cabins. Narf, in the lead, was saying:

"... Ridiculously primitive here, now, but I'm having some decent furniture and well-trained servants sent up from my Sea Island estates...."

---

The cabin was large and very comfortable, as Rockford mentioned to Princess Lyla.

"I'm glad you like it," she said. "Val Boran and Envoy Sonig are already here and we'll meet for dinner in the central hall. I thought that if we all got acquainted in a friendly atmosphere like that, it might help a lot to...."

"That reminds me"—Narf glanced at his watch—"I promised this Boran he could have a discussion with me—Vesta-Jardeen tariff policies. I suppose he's already waiting. Come on, Lyla—it will do you no harm to listen and learn a bit about interplanetary business."

For a long moment she looked at Narf silently, her eyes thoughtful, then she said to Rockford, "If you will excuse us, please. And be prepared for Alonzo to come bounding in the minute he learns you're here."

She walked beside Narf to the door and out it, the top of her dark hair coming just even with his shoulder.

"And that," Rockford said as he settled down in the largest, softest chair, "was king-to-be Narf, whose business ability is such that all his inherited Sea Island estates are gone but the one Lyla saved for him and who owes a total of ten million monetary units, to everyone from call girls to yacht builders."

"And she is going to marry him?" Hunter asked. "Marry that jackass and let him bankrupt her kingdom?"

Rockford shrugged. "You may have noticed that she doesn't look the least bit happy about it—but she is a very conscientious young lady who regards it as her most solemn duty to keep the promise she made to her father. For her, there is no escape."

"But—"

"Your first duty will be to cultivate a friendship with her. I'm going to use her, and you, to get what I want."

"Use us?"

"Yes. One of the most rigid requirements of a Strategic Service man's character is that he be completely without one."

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Rockford was asleep in his chair an hour later, three empty beer cans beside him. Hunter watched him, his doubt of Rockford's competence growing into a conviction. Rockford had spoken knowingly of his plan—and had done nothing but drink more beer. Now he was asleep while time—so limited and precious—went by. He hadn't even bothered to reply to Hunter's suggestion that perhaps he should call on Val Boran and counteract some of Envoy Sonig's anti-Terran propaganda.

Hunter came to a decision. If Rockford was still doing nothing when morning came, he would send an urgent message to Supreme Command.

He went outside, to find a servant and learn how mail was handled.

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"Rook out!"

Gravel flew as overgrown feet tried to stop, and something like a huge black dog lunged headlong around the corner and into his legs. He went to the ground head first over the animal, acutely aware as he went down of the fascinated interest on the face of a not-so-distant servant.

"I sorry, Rootenant."

He got up, to look down at the doglike animal. There was a concerned expression in its brown eyes and an apologetic grin on its face. He recognized it as one of the natives of the grim starvation world of Altair Four. The Altairians had emigrated to all sections of the galaxy, to earn a living in whatever humble capacity they could fill. Many were empathic.

"I run too fast to meet, Mr. Rockford, I guess. Are you hurt, Rootenant?"

He pulled a cloud tree needle out of his hand and looked grimly down into the furry face. "In the future, try to look where you're going."

"Oh, I rook, awr right. I just not see. My name is Aronzo, Rootenant, and I stay here awr the time and guard everything for Princess Ryra. I prease to meet you and I wirr run errands for you, and do things rike mair your retters, for candy or cookies, which I are not supposed to eat much of, but Princess Ryra say not too many wirr hurt me—"

"Mail letters?" Hunter's animosity vanished. "I'm sorry I was rude, Alonzo—all my fault. I may write a letter to my dear old mother tonight, and if you would mail it for me in the morning—"

---

Rockford left ahead of Hunter and it was a minute past the appointed time when Hunter reached the meeting hall. He heard Narf's loud voice inside:

"... Boran must have stopped to watch the sunset. Told him I wanted everyone here on time—"

The low voice of Lyla said something and Narf said, "Not necessary for you to defend him, my dear. I made it plain to him."

A new voice spoke from behind Hunter:

"It seems I have annoyed Lord Narf."

He was a tall, black-eyed man, with the dark, saturnine face of an Indian. There was a strange, indefinable air of sadness about him which reminded Hunter of the sombre little Princess Lyla.

"You're Val Boran, sir?" he said. "I'm Lieutenant Hunter—"

Inside, Narf sat at the head of the table. On his left was Lyla, then Rockford. On his right was a spidery little man of about fifty, his slick-back hair so tight against his skull that it gave his head the appearance of a weasel's. His lips were paper-thin under a long nose, like those of a dry and selfish old maid, but the round little eyes darting behind thick glasses were cold and shrewd and missed nothing. He would be Verdam's Special Envoy Sonig. Hunter appraised him as a man very dangerous in his own deceptive way.

A servant showed them to their places at the table. Rockford and Val Boran exchanged greetings. The moment everyone was seated, Narf said, "Dinner tonight will—"

"Excuse me," Lyla said, "but Mr. Sonig hasn't yet met—"

"Oh ... the young fellow there—" Narf gestured with his hand. "Rockford's aide. Now, ring the chime, Lyla. Those forest stag steaks are already getting cold. I killed the beast myself, gentlemen, just this morning; a long-range running shot that required a bit more than luck...."

The dinner was excellent, but no one seemed to notice. Narf was absorbed in the story of his swift rise to eminence in the Vestan Space Guard. There were humorous incidents:

"... Can't understand why, but I seem to attract women like a magnet. I'm strictly the masculine type of male and I approve of this but it can be a blasted nuisance when you're an ensign going up fast and your commander finds one of your blondes stowed away in your compartment...."

And there were scenes of tense drama:

"... Made a boyhood vow that I'd never settle for anything less than to always be a man among men. Seem to have succeeded rather well. When I saw the crew was almost to the snapping point from battle tension I knew that as commander I'd have to set the example that would inspire."

Hunter recalled Rockford's words of a few hours before: "*Narf got to be commander, finally, but only because he was the son of the king's best friend. His record is very mediocre.*"

Princess Lyla tried three times to start a conversation of general interest and was drowned out by Narf each time. Sonig's pretense of being spellbound by Narf's stories was belied by the way his eyes kept darting from Rockford to Val Boran. Val's own attention kept shifting from Narf to the silent Lyla, whose downcast eyes betrayed her discouragement. She watched Val from under her eyelashes, to look away whenever their eyes met, and Hunter wondered if she was ashamed because Narf had given Sonig the seat of honor that should have belonged to Val.

Of course, Narf's own position at the head of the table was actually Lyla's.

"... So there's no substitute for competent, unwavering leadership," Narf was saying. "Received a citation for that one."

Sonig nodded appreciatively. "Your military record well illustrates the fact that the tensions of danger and battle can bring forth in a competent leader the highest kind of courage. But it seems to me that these same circumstances, if the leader is frightened or incompetent, can easily produce hysterical actions with disastrous consequences. Is this true, your lordship?"

Rockford was watching Sonig intently and Hunter saw that there was an eager anticipation in Sonig's manner.

"You are quite right," Narf answered. "I've always had the ability to remain cool in any crisis. Very important. Let a commander get rattled and he may give any kind of an order. Like the New Jardeen Incident."

A frozen silence followed the last five words. Hunter thought, *So that's what the little weasel was fishing for....*

Rockford quietly laid down his fork. Val's face turned grim. Lyla looked up in quick alarm and said

to Narf:

"Let's not—"

"Don't misunderstand me, gentlemen," Narf's loud voice went on. "I believe the commander of the Terran cruiser wouldn't have ordered it to fire upon the Verdram cruiser over a neutral world such as New Jardeen if he had been his rational self. Cold-war battle nerves. So he shot down the Verdram cruiser and its nuclear converters exploded when it fell in the center of Colony City. Force of a hydrogen bomb—forty thousand innocent people gone in a microsecond. Not the commander's fault, really—fault of the military system that failed to screen out its unstable officers."

"Yes, your lordship. But is it possible"—Sonig spoke very thoughtfully—"for a political power, which is of such a nature that it must have a huge military force to maintain its existence, to thoroughly screen all its officers? So many officers are required—Can there ever be any assurance that such tragedies won't occur again and again, until a majority of worlds combine in demanding an end to aggression and war?"

Rockford spoke to the grim Val:

"I know, sir, that your sister was among the lost in Colony City. I am sorry. For the benefit of Mr. Sonig and Lord Narf, I would like to mention that the Verdram cruiser fired upon the Terran cruiser over neutral New Jardeen in open violation of Galactic Rule. An atmospheric feedback of the Verdram cruiser's own space blasters tore out its side and caused it to fall. The Terran cruiser never fired."

"But Mr. Rockford—" Sonig spoke very courteously. "Isn't it true that certain safety devices prevent atmospheric feedback?"

"They do—unless accidentally or purposely disconnected."

Sonig raised his eyebrows. "You imply a created incident, sir?"

"It doesn't matter," Val Boran said. His tone was as grim as his face and it was obvious he did not believe Rockford's explanation. "Colony City is a field of fused glass, now, its people are gone, and no amount of debating can ever bring them back."

---

**T**he dismal dinner was finally over. Rockford stopped outside the door of their cabin to fill and light his pipe.

"It was a profitable evening," he said to Hunter. "I can start planning in detail now—after a little beer, that is."

*He'll go to sleep after he drinks his beer, Hunter thought, and there will never be any plan unless I*

---

Soft footsteps came up the path behind them. It was Princess Lyla.

"I want to apologize," she said, "I just told Val ... Mr. Boran the same thing."

Her face was a pale oval in the starlight, her eyes dark shadows. "I'm sorry my husband mentioned the New Jardeen incident."

"That's all right, Lyla," Rockford said. "No harm was done."

"He's an ex-military man, and I guess it's his nature to be more forthright than tactful."

"You certainly can't condemn him for that," Rockford said. "In fact, he's an extraordinary teller of entertaining stories. It was a most enjoyable evening."

---

"And, in a way, it was," Rockford said when she was gone and they were in the cabin. He was seated in the softest chair, a can of beer in his hand, as usual.

Hunter thought of the way she had looked in the starlight and said, "Why did she let that windbag sit at the head of the table and ruin the meeting that she had arranged?"

"He'll soon be her husband—I suppose she feels she should be loyal to him."

"But—"

"But what?"

"Nothing. It's none of my business."

"Oh?" Rockford smiled in a way Hunter did not like. "You think so, eh?"

Hunter changed the subject. "Are you going to start talking to Boran to undo the damage Narf and Sonig have done?"

"It would be a waste of time, my boy. Val Boran's mind is already made up."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Drink six cans of beer and go to sleep."

"I thought you had a plan."

"I have, a most excellent plan."

"What is it?"

"You'd scream like a banshee if you knew. You'll learn—if you manage to live that long."

Rockford was sound asleep an hour later, snoring gently. Hunter sat thinking, hearing the steady murmur of a voice coming from Val Boran's cabin. Sonig's voice—using every means of persuasion he could think of, at the moment capitalizing on the New Jardeen incident and Boran's withheld grief over the sister he had lost.

And the Terran Republic's representative was sprawled fat and mindless in a fog of beer fumes.

Hunter hesitated no longer. The fate of Earth and the Terran Republic hung in the balance and time was desperately limited—if there was now any time at all.

He took paper and pen and began the urgent message to Supreme Command, headed, TOP EMERGENCY. It would be sent via Hyperspace Communications from the city and would span the hundred light-years within seconds.

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He was up before Rockford the next morning, and went out into the bright sunlight. He looked hopefully for Alonzo, not wanting to be seen mailing the letter in person. Rockford, despite his drunken stupors, could be shrewdly observant and he might deduce the contents of the letter before Supreme Command ever received it.

He was some distance from the cabin when he heard the pound of padded feet behind him.

"Rootenant," Alonzo had the grin of a genial canine idiot. "Do you want me to mair your retter to your dear ore mother?"

"Yes, I have the letter right here."

"O.K. I got to hurry, because the mair hericopter reaves right away. I charge six fig cookies or three candy bars or—"

"Here—take it and run—and try not to slobber all over it."

---

They were served breakfast in the cabin. Afterward, Rockford went for a brief talk with Princess Lyla. He came back and settled down in the easy-chair, his pipe in his hand.

"Your morning's duty won't be at all unpleasant," he said. "The obnoxious and repulsive things will begin to happen to you later. Maybe this afternoon."

"What do you mean?"

"This morning you will go for a walk with Princess Lyla and discuss changing the Vestan Space Guard into a force along Terran Space Patrol lines. Narf is still in bed, by the way."

Rockford added, "I'll give you a bit of sage advice, for your own good—try not to fall in love with her."

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**H**unter and Princess Lyla sat together on the high hill, their backs against the red trunk of a cloud tree. On the mountain's slope to their right lay the dark and junglelike Tiger Forest—he wondered if it was true that the savage tree tigers never left its borders—while the toylike cabins of the camp were below them. The mountain's slope dropped on down to the deserts, beyond which were other mountains, far away and translucent azure.

"It was George who suggested we come up here," she said. "He knows I do that often when the responsibilities of being queen of a world—I'm such an ordinary and untalented person—become too much for me. I always feel better when I sit up here and look down on the mountains and deserts."

"Yes," he said politely.

"A ruling princess can be so alone," she said. "That's why I appreciate George's friendship so much—it's never because of any ulterior motive but because he likes me."

*I'm going to use her, and you, to get what I want.*

He looked at her, at the lines of sadness on the face that was too old for its years, felt the way she was so grateful to Rockford for what was only a cold-blooded pretense of friendship, and the dislike for Rockford increased. He could not force himself to speak civilly of Rockford so he changed the subject:

"I understand you wanted to talk to me about the Space Guard?"

"Yes. Even a neutral world can't feel safe these days and George suggested that."

"I'll be glad to help all I can. Of course, the change will require time."

"I can understand that. They say you Space Patrol officers begin training at sixteen, after passing almost impossible qualification tests."

"The tests can seem extremely difficult to a farm boy from Kansas. I—"

"Kansas?" Her eyes lighted with interest. "My grandmother was from Kansas! She used to tell me about the green plains of grain in the spring, and how different they were from the deserts of Vesta...."

It was almost noon when he took her hand and helped her to her feet, realizing guiltily that they had talked all morning without ever getting back to the cold, dry facts of military efficiency.

"It was nice to talk up here this morning," she said. She looked down at the cabins and the shadow fell again across her face. "But nothing down there has been changed by it, has it?"

He held to her hand longer than was necessary as they went down the steep part of the hill. She did not seem to mind.

When they reached her cabin she said, "It's still a little while until lunch—time enough for you to give me a rough outline of the Space Guard change."

Everything inside the cabin was feminine. None of Narf's possessions were visible. There was a heavy door leading into Narf's half of the cabin, with a massive lock. Hunter wondered if it was left unlocked at night, thought of Narf's sour face and leering little eyes, and found the thought repulsive.

The answer to his conjecture came with the entrance of a servant as they seated themselves.

"By your leave, your highness," the servant said, bowing, "I came to make Lord Narf a key for that inner door."

"A key?" There was alarm in her tone. "But we're not married—not yet!"

A puzzled expression came to the man's face. "Lord Narf told me, your highness, that you had ordered the duplicate key made and given to him before evening. I found I could not do this without first borrowing your key for a pattern."

There was a frightened look in her eyes as they went to the door and back to the servant. "No ... don't try to make a key!"

"Yes, your highness." The servant bowed and turned away.

A familiar gravelly voice spoke from behind them:

"Ah ... an unscheduled little meeting, I see!"

It was Narf, anger on his face, already within the doorway as the servant went out it.

"We were going to talk about the Space Guard," Lyla said in an emotionless tone. "Lieutenant Hunter has promised to show how Space Patrol methods will improve it and—"

"By a coincidence, Sonig and I were discussing military matters only a few minutes ago," Narf said. He looked at Hunter. "I'm afraid that Sonig and I agree that the Terran Space Guard is quite out of date, now. *The* fighting force of the galaxy is the Verdam's Peoples Guards."

Narf spoke to Lyla, "You may go ahead and talk with this lieutenant if you wish to, but it's a waste of time. I'm arranging to have Sonig send Peoples Guards officers here to supervise the rebuilding of the Space Guard.

"And now"—there was insinuation in Narf's tone as he spoke to Hunter—"I have to give Sonig a demonstration of my skill with weapons. He insists on it—he has heard of several of my modest feats."

Narf left the door open behind him so that by turning his head as he walked, he could see the two inside.

"I suppose I might as well go," Hunter said.

Lyla did not answer. She sat motionless, staring unseeingly before her, and he wondered if she was thinking of how very soon Narf would be king and his authority as great as hers.

She did not notice when he quietly left the room.

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**R**ockford was waiting in the cabin, still in the easy-chair.

"Well," Rockford said, "what do you think of her?"

Hunter tried to keep the personal dislike out of his coldly formal reply:

"If you refer to your suggestion that I not make love to her, sir, I can assure you that such a suggestion was never necessary. I happen to have a code of ethics."

"I didn't say 'make love'. I said, 'fall in love'. That's quite ethical. Did you complete your discussion with her?"

"Well ... no."

"You must do that this afternoon, then. Can't let anything as important as that be delayed."

Hunter stared at him, trying to find one small grain of sanity in Rockford's actions. The Verdam empire already had Jardeen within its grasp, and Vesta, and the end for Earth was inevitable. And Rockford slept, and drank beer, and regarded it as very important that the Vestan Space Guard discussions—of a change that Narf would never permit—be continued without delay.

He walked slowly into his own room. In the nightmare situation of frustration there was one single sane and stable conviction for his mind to cling to: Supreme Command would by now have received his message and shot back the reply that would relieve Rockford of his command. Perhaps it wasn't yet too late—

Then his mind reeled as a new conviction struck it.

There was a sheet of paper on his bed—a message.

*His message!*

... SITUATION EXTREMELY CRITICAL ... VAL BORAN ALREADY CONVINCED BY SONIG'S PROPAGANDA ... MUST REPORT ROCKFORD IS UTTERLY INCOMPETENT, HIS MIND AND WILL DESTROYED BY ALCOHOL ... REPEAT: ROCKFORD IS DOING NOTHING, HIS MIND DESTROYED BY ALCOHOL....

The words screamed up at him and he felt the sickness of one who sees the last faint hope shattered and gone. All was lost, now....

He went outside, feeling a savage desire for violence rising above the sickness.

"Rootenant!" Alonzo came bounding to meet him and slid to a halt with his saucer feet scattering gravel and the idiotic grin on his face. "I mair your retter and you owe me six fig cook—"

It occurred to Hunter that it was not Alonzo that should be punished. He, Hunter, was the one who deserved execution for ever entrusting anything so important as the message to an imbecilic animal.

He said with cold distinctness:

"The ... letter ... is ... inside."

"Oh?" Alonzo blinked. "I sure mair something, awr right. After Mr. Rockford correct it."

"Correct it?"

"Oh, sure. Mr. Rockford, he up rong before you this morning to find me and say you are writing a retter rast night and I must bring it by for him to make awr your mistakes over again."

*So Rockford was watching all the time, pretending to be in a drunken sleep....*

"Rootenant—" Alonzo shifted his big feet impatiently. "You stirr owe me six fig—"

Hunter swung around and strode away, afraid he might decide to choke the animal after all. A culture of twenty worlds was the same as already destroyed, and he was held in a maddening quagmire of helplessness by a crafty alcoholic and a dog with the mind of a small child.

"Ah ... my boy!" Rockford came out of the cabin, beaming as though nothing had ever happened. "Look to your left, among those ghost trees—Narf is demonstrating his quick-draw skill to Sonig. Narf is supposed to be a very dangerous man, you know."

Hunter looked, and saw Narf whipping up the blunt, ugly spread-beam blaster—known to soldiers as the Coward's Special, because at short range it could not miss and would always cripple and blind a man for life even though it would not always kill him. Sonig was standing by, nodding his weasel head and smiling in open admiration.

"Of course," Rockford said, "Sonig isn't mentioning the needle gun all Verdam envoys carry up their sleeve. He's flattering Narf's ego for a reason—he intends to have Vesta, as well as Jardeen, sewed up for the Verdam empire when he leaves here."

"And so far as I can see," Hunter said coldly, "Sonig never is going to have anything vaguely resembling intelligent resistance to his plans."

"Ah, yes ... so far as you can see," Rockford agreed amiably. "But you obey my order to take Lyla for another walk and everything will turn out all right. In fact, I'll speak to her about that right now."

Hunter stared after Rockford as he walked away. There could be no possible shred of doubt—Rockford was insane!

The breeze shifted and the voice of Narf came:

"... Certainly no weapon for a timid man, this spread-beam blaster. Have to meet the enemy man-to-man at close range."

"In that respect, too," Sonig said, "you remind me of our great General Paluk. His skill in hand-to-hand combat was something that—"

"Rootenant—"

Hunter quivered and steeled himself.

"Rootenant—" Alonzo came to a flopping halt beside him. "I terr Princess Ryra and she say I are bad to be mad at you. So I not mad, even if you didn't give me my pay."

"Thank you," Hunter said acidly. "I was deeply disturbed by your resentment."

"Oh, I know, you don't rike me. But I think you not as mean as you act. But Rord Narf—he is. I terr you, he awready mad enough to kirr you."

"What? Lord Narf wants to kill me?"

"Oh, he know you hord Princess Ryra's hand awrmost awr the way down the hirr this morning. Mr. Sonig, he see you, and he run and terr Rord Narf and Mr. Boran, too."

"But I was only helping her down the hill."

"Rord Narf, he are going to say mean things about it to Princess Ryra, too. I know. He are awrways saying mean things to my Princess Ryra."

Alonzo sighed, a sound strangely humanlike in its sadness.

"Who wirr watch over my Princess Ryra after she marry Rord Narf? He said, 'The first thing to go around here wirr be that stupid brabber-mouth animar that are not worth what it costs to feed it.' I think maybe he are afraid that if he ever hit my Princess Ryra, I wirr kirr him." The brown eyes looked up at Hunter, and suddenly they were unlike he had ever seen them; cold with deliberate decision. "I wirr, too."

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Hunter was still standing by the cabin, thinking of what Alonzo had said, when Rockford returned.

"I also stopped by to see Val Boran," Rockford said. "While you're off with Lyla, we'll go to the city. Lyla is giving us free access to the Royal Library and the records of a neutral world carry more weight than anything I could say. Not that it's going to change his mind any—but it will give me a chance to work on him in another way."

Rockford went into the cabin as Val Boran came up the path, Princess Lyla walking beside him. She was saying, "... And anything we have in the library is yours for the asking."

They were close enough for Hunter to see her expression as she looked up at Val and added with what seemed a touch of wistfulness, "I'll be glad to go in with you and Mr. Rockford and do what I can to help if you want me to."

"Lyla"—it was the grating voice of Narf who seemed to have the ability to materialize anywhere—"I'm sure the man knows his business. Besides, I want to talk to you about something as soon as I have finished my discussion with Mr. Sonig."

With that, Narf started on toward his cabin. Sonig, close behind him, paused long enough to bow to Lyla and say with the meaningless smile, "Good afternoon, Princess Lyla. Your husband was just demonstrating his marvelous skill with weapons. I would very much dislike"—the little eyes darted to Hunter and back again—"being the man who aroused his lordship's wrath."

Then Sonig followed Narf, with one last flickering glance at Hunter to see how the remark had fallen.

Rockford came out of the cabin with his brief case and said to Val, "Are we ready to go?"

"I just told Val"—Lyla spoke quickly—"that I would be glad to go along and help any way I can." The words were addressed to Rockford but her eyes were on Val, with the same wistful expression. "Do you want me to?"

Val answered her with cool, formal courtesy: "The librarian can find all the records we will need, Princess Lyla, without our interrupting your schedule for the day or your discussion with your husband. Thank you very much."

For an instant Lyla's face had the hurt expression of a child rebuffed without reason. Then she looked away and Val turned to Rockford and said, "I'm ready when you are, sir."

Lyla watched them walk away and she was still watching when the helicopter had lifted into the air and faded from sight.

Hunter hesitated, then spoke to her:

"I understand you want to talk more about the Space Guard, Princess Lyla?"

"*Princess Lyla!*" Her lips curled as she turned to face him and she seemed to spit the words at him in sudden, unexpected resentment. "I love the meaningless sound of my official figurehead title! It's so much better than being regarded as a living person with feelings that can be hurt!"

"But Princ ... I mean—" He floundered, not quite sure what had caused her reaction.

She made a visible effort to compose herself. "I'm sorry," she said. "I suppose my ... husband ... is quite right; an immature female has no business trying to rule a world and the sooner the marriage is confirmed, the sooner a competent man can take over the job."

"No," he said. "I think—"

He decided that what he thought had better be left unsaid.

"I'll"—she looked toward the cabin she shared with Narf—"let you know when we can talk."

She went back toward the cabin, walking slowly. From inside Narf's half of it came the sound of Narf's voice as he spoke to Sonig:

"... Of course, this collection of heads is nothing compared with what I have in the Sea Islands ... but some interesting stories here ... take that snow fox there...."

Hunter sighed, and saw that Lyla had stopped before her door, as though dreading to enter. Narf's voice droned on:

"... Only wounded, so I finished it with a knife. Even with its heart half cut out, it still wanted to

live ... beautiful pelt ... coat for Janalee, the strip-tease queen ... always had a way with women—Lyla could tell you that ... had my pick of hundreds but I'm letting her be my choice...."

He saw Lyla half lift her hand, as in some mute gesture of protest, then she turned and walked swiftly away; up the path that led into the ghost trees, and out of sight.

He waited, but she did not come back. He went into his cabin and moved about restlessly, hearing again Narf's sadism-and-sex boasting and seeing again how she turned and almost ran from it—

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"Rootenant!"

Alonzo was panting, a look of frantic appeal in his eyes.

"Prease herp me ... Princess Ryra ... she wirr die!"

He felt his heart lurch. "She's hurt?" he demanded, and was already on his way to the door.

"She are about to cry and she are going to where the tree tigers riv. They wirr kIRR her—prease come with me!"

He asked no more questions but went out the door and up the path, Alonzo running ahead of him.

The ghost trees grew thinner as they went up the mountain's slope, and the blue-green fernlike trees of the tiger forest began to appear. They grew thicker and thicker, until the ground was black with their shadows and the midday sunlight was filtered out by the foliage overhead. Alonzo was trailing her, his nose to the ground, and Hunter hurried close behind him, watching for the red-and-white of the clothes she was wearing and hoping they would not find her too late.

They were deep in the forest when they found her.

She was standing motionless in the center of a clearing, facing away from him and looking as small and alone as a lost child. She seemed to be waiting....

He realized for the first time how alone she really was, with only a doglike alien, Alonzo, to love her or care what might happen to her, and with a future she could not bear to face. But Rockford had been wrong when he had said, *For her, there is no escape.*

There was escape for her. She had only to wait, as she was waiting now, and it would come in the windlike whisper of a tiger's rush through the grass behind her....

He hurried to her. She turned, and he saw the stains of tears now dry on her face and in her eyes the darkness of utter defeat.

"I was afraid you might get hurt, Lyla—"

Then, seemingly without volition on his part, he put his arms around her and she was clinging to him and crying in muffled sobs and trying to say something about, "*I didn't think anybody cared....*"

It was some time later, when her crying was finished, that he was reminded of the tigers by Alonzo:

"Rootenant ... awr the time, some tigers are coming croser and croser. We better get her out of here, Rootenant, before they find us."

Lyla looked down at Alonzo. "Thank you, Alonzo, for watching over me and ... and—" Her voice caught and she dropped to her knees and hugged the shaggy head tight against her.

Hunter watched ahead, Lyla beside him as they went through the dense trees. Alonzo walked soft-footed behind them, watching the rear. When they came to the first ghost trees and the dwindling of the tiger trees, Hunter thought it safe to walk slower and talk to her.

"I saw you go," he said. "I didn't know where until Alonzo came running to tell me."

"I heard him bragging about killing, and about his women—I was weak, wasn't I?"

"Weak?"

"I was afraid to face the future, just because it isn't to be exactly like I thought I wanted."

"What was the kind you wanted, Lyla?"

"Oh ... I guess I wanted a husband who could see me only, and children, and evenings together in the flower garden, and ... well, all the silly, sentimental little things that mean so much to a

woman."

He thought, *Even with its heart half cut out, it still wanted to live ... Coat for Janalee ... the strip-tease queen....*

They passed through the last of the tiger trees and she said, "We're safe, now. The tigers never attack anyone outside their forest."

She was walking slowly and he said, "We should get on back before you're missed, shouldn't we?"

"Who would miss me?" she asked. "So long as I remain physically intact for the marriage night, who cares where or why I went away?"

There was the cold bleakness of winter in her eyes as she spoke, and in her voice the first undertone of brass. He saw that this was already the beginning of the change that Narf would make in her; the transformation of a girl young and wanting to love and be loved into a hard and cynical woman.

He put his arm around her shoulder, thinking that he should tell her that *he* cared and that she must never let Narf change her.

"Lyla, I—"

He realized how futile and foolish the words would sound. She would marry Narf, he would return to Earth, and they would never meet again. There were no words for him to speak on this last walk together, no way to tell her that he wanted to help her, to protect and care for her. No way to express the feeling inside him....

He did what seemed as natural under the circumstances as it had been for him to put his arm around her in the clearing. He tilted up her face and bent his head to kiss her.

And walked with jarring impact into the knobby elbow of a ghost tree limb.

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**T**he sun was down and dusk was darkening the camp when they arrived back at her cabin.

"Thank you, Dale," she said. Her hand squeezed his arm. "I didn't know I had a friend ... but now we'll have to be strangers because—"

Gravel crunched loudly on one of the paths in the ghost trees and they looked back, to see Narf and Sonig coming, walking swiftly. Even at the distance, there was anger like a red aura about Narf.

"Well," Lyla said softly, "here comes my medicine."

Sonig stopped at his own cabin, to stand just within the doorway, watching. Narf strode on and stopped before Hunter and Lyla, his face twisted with savage hatred as he looked at Hunter. He spoke to Lyla with grating vehemence:

"You've done an excellent job of making an ass of yourself—and of me—haven't you? Come on in the cabin!"

Narf seized her by the arm, towering over her as he jerked her around toward the door. Hunter stepped quickly forward, feeling the hot flash of his own anger, but there was the paleness of Lyla's face as she looked back, an appeal on it that said, *No!* He stopped, realizing that Narf would not physically harm the woman who would make him king of Vesta, and that any interference on his part would only make everything the harder for her.

He watched the two go into the cabin—into Lyla's half—and Narf slammed the door shut behind them. There followed the quick bang of windows being closed, and then Narf's muffled tirade began: "... *May think I'm a fool ... I'm going to tell you a few things...*"

Sonig was still standing within his doorway. Hunter knew, without seeing it, that the thin-lipped smile would be on Sonig's face.

He turned and walked back to his own cabin. There was nothing he could do but withdraw—and listen from a distance and be ready to act if it seemed she was in danger.

He sat on his doorstep in the darkness, hearing occasional phrases in Narf's unrelenting abuse. One was: "*So prim you had to countermand my order for a key to that lock—then you went out to play with that second lieutenant....*"

Alonzo materialized out of the darkness, coming as silently as a shadow. He was no longer the bumbling clown. The idiotic grin was gone and his eyes were green fire, slanted and catlike, his teeth flashing white in a snarl as he looked back toward the sound of Narf's voice.

"She are *my* Princess Ryra," Alonzo said. "He are cursing her. If he ever hurt her, I wurr tear out his throat and his river."

"He won't hurt her, Alonzo," Hunter said, wishing he could be sure. "He'll only use words on her."

"He never ask her *why* she run away—he onry curse her and threaten her because she embarrass him."

"Embarrass him?"

"He and Sonig, they see you coming out of the forest with your arm around her. They watch with high-power grasses."

"But there was nothing wrong in that—"

"That are what Princess Ryra say. She say you onry put your arm around her because she are stirr scared of the tigers. And then he say, what about the other? And he cawr her awrful bad names."

"What other?"

"Oh, when you are bending down to kiss Princess Ryra and are wawrking into tree."

He gulped. "*They saw that?*"

"Oh, sure. Rord Narf are so mad he want to kurr you right then but Sonig say, 'Wait, I have a pran.' Then Sonig say, 'It are too bad we don't have a camera—we could have made that rootenant the raffing stock of forty worlds.'"

The thought made Hunter gulp again.

"What was Sonig's plan that Narf told Lyla about?" He asked.

"Oh, he not terr *her*. I hear Sonig terr Rord Narf when I spy. Sonig say, 'Tomorrow we be friendry and we ret those two go for another wawrk in the woods. And we have cameras with terescope rens and when they kiss and hug we take moving pictures.'"

"Why, the gutter-bred rat—"

"And Rord Narf say, 'That is what we wirr do. And then I wirr kirr him as soon as we have the pictures and she wirr have to toe the mark from then on because if I pubricry show the pictures of what she did, she wirr be ashamed to show her face anywhere on Vesta.'"

"Why, the—" He could not think of a suitable expression.

"And then Sonig say, 'To make sure she go out tomorrow, you bawr her out good so she wirr want to cry on the rootenant's shourder again.' And Rord Narf say, 'I wirr be very grad to terr the two-timing hussy what I think of her, don't worry.'"

"Why, she was only a scared girl and that rat thinks she—"

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"... *Your promise to your dying father,*" Narf's voice came in accusation. "*He's gone, now, and you can betray him, too! Why don't you go all the way in your deceptions ... your father will never know...*"

Alonzo said, "I think I go back and stay croser to her cabin, Rootenant."

It was an hour later, and Narf's voice had settled to a low, steady growling, when Hunter heard a helicopter settle down near the camp. A minute later, Val Boran was outlined momentarily in the doorway of the cabin he shared with Sonig. There followed the exchange of a few words—interrogation in Val's tone—and then the sound of Sonig's voice alone, which continued for minute after minute.

*Sonig is telling him all about it, Hunter thought, including my walking into that tree. But there won't be one word in sympathy with Lyla.*

Sonig's story ended and Hunter saw Val leave the cabin. He came straight up the path toward Hunter, looming tall in the darkness as he stopped before him. There was the pale gleam of metal in Val's belt—a blaster. His voice came cold and flat:

"I want to talk to you, Lieutenant."

Hunter sighed, thinking, *I suppose he wants to kill me, too.*

He got up and said, "We'll go inside. Shut the door behind you—I don't want your friend straining his ears to hear us."

Val sat tall even in the chair, his face like a carving in a dark granite and his eyes as bright and hard.

"I understand that you took Princess Lyla into the tiger forest today." Val's hand was very near the blaster. "I understand you then played the role of affectionate rescuer."

"Do you believe that story?" Hunter asked.

"Do you have a different one?"

"You might ask Lyla. Or Alonzo. Alonzo is the one who came to me for help when he saw she was going out to die."

"To die?" A startled expression came into the black eyes. "She *wanted* to die?"

"I'll tell you what happened," Hunter said, and told him the story, omitting only the embarrassing kissing incident and knowing that Sonig had not.

Val was silent for a while after Hunter finished speaking, then he said, "It isn't for me to comment upon Lord Narf's character or actions. She is his wife by her own choice. But the thought of someone else taking her out and—"

"I know. It wasn't so." Then Hunter added, "You think a great deal of her, don't you?"

Val's face hardened and Hunter thought he would not answer. Then he smiled a little, even though without humor, and said:

"Since I came here to kill you if I thought you deserved it, I suppose I am obligated to answer your question. My regard for Princess Lyla is the respectful one that any civilized man would have for another man's wife."

There was an unintended implication in the statement and Hunter made a conjecture:

"You and Princess Lyla were engaged—how long ago?"

There was surprise on Val's face, and something like pain quickly masked. "So she's already

making it public information?"

"No. I learned of it from ... other sources. I don't know, of course, why you persuaded her to break the engagement—that's none of my business, anyway."

"No," Val said. "It's none of your business. I'll tell you this: *I* didn't ask her to break the engagement. But so long as that was what she wanted, I certainly wasn't going to beg her to change her mind."

Val stood up to go. "If you don't mind, I would rather you said nothing to Princess Lyla about this visit tonight. I'm afraid my misplaced surge of chivalry would make me look like a fool to her."

Then, as an afterthought, Val added, "Mr. Rockford had further business in the city."

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**I**t was late when Narf finally left Lyla's part of the cabin. He went to the cabin occupied by Val and Sonig, aroused Sonig, and the two of them went to the helicopter field. Hunter heard the helicopter leaving for the city a few minutes later. Val's cabin remained dark and after a while, the light in Lyla's cabin went out.

He went to bed, but not to sleep. Over and over, a lonely little Princess Lyla clung to him for comfort, crying, while he held her close. He twisted and turned restlessly as he thought of the hours she had sat alone and unloved while Narf poured out his hatred and fury on her.

There was a yearning for her, a desire to hold her and always protect her, that would not let him sleep. And he realized the reason why.

He thought miserably, *I'm in love with her!*

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Rockford was in bed, snoring loudly, with six empty beer cans on the floor beside him, when Hunter got up. He went outside and found Alonzo waiting for him.

"They got it awr pranned to kirr you for sure today, Rootenant."

"How?" he asked.

"Rast night, Rord Narf and Sonig go to the city and Rord Narf, he hire four bad-rooking men with brasters, and Sonig hire four more that are his countrymen, and they bring these men back and now they are hiding in the woods. And they awrso bring back movie cameras with terescope renses. And Rord Narf raff and say he wirr marry Princess Ryra today before your dead body is even coor."

"Oh?" Hunter said. He thought of the snoring Rockford and his words of two days before: *If you manage to live that long*. How, he wondered, could the lazy old drunkard have made such an accurate guess?

"And then," Alonzo said, "Rord Narf wake up Princess Ryra—onry I know she wasn't asreep—and he terr her he ruv her and have awready made awr the arrangement for them to get married today, right after runch. And he terr her she is right about the Space Guard and she wirr have until runch to tawrk to you about it."

There was the sound of Narf's door opening and closing and Alonzo said, "I go now—Rord Narf might guess that I are terring you things."

A few minutes later Narf and Sonig came down the path toward Hunter. Both carried packsacks—the cameras, of course—and both carried long-range rifle blasters.

"Good morning, lieutenant!" Narf was smiling and pseudogenial again. "About last night—sometimes a man has to be stern with his wife to impress her. Very foolish thing she did—might have been killed. I'm afraid I was so badly shaken with worry over her that I didn't even thank you for bringing her back."

"A beautiful morning, lieutenant!" Sonig was smiling, coming as close to beaming as the nature of his face would permit. "Lord Narf is going to take me stag hunting this morning—I'll get some lessons from a master. Did you ever see his lordship's collection of heads? Amazing!"

"But it seems a sportsman's collection is never quite complete," Narf said. He was still smiling but the hatred was burning like a fire in his eyes as he looked at Hunter. "There's one more head I must have—I intend to get it this morning."

Narf and Sonig were gone when Lyla came out of her cabin, her face pale and drawn. Val came

out of his cabin and the two spoke to each other in greeting. There was a silence, in which neither seemed to know what to say.

Finally, awkwardly, Val said, "I heard about yesterday, Lyla. Why did you go into the tiger forest?"

"Oh ... I was just walking, I guess, and didn't notice where."

"You went there to die, didn't you?"

"I ... when you have nothing left—" Then she lifted her head in a proud gesture and said, "Should it matter to you?"

For a moment Val had the look of a man struck. Then it was gone and he said in an emotionless voice:

"No. I was asking about something that is only your husband's business. I won't do it again."

He turned away, back to his cabin.

"Val—" She took a quick step after him, the proud air gone and her arms outstretched. "I didn't mean—"

He turned back, his tone politely questioning.

"Yes?"

"I only wanted—" Then her arms dropped and the life went out of her voice. "What does it matter ... what does anything matter?"

She hurried into her cabin and the door closed behind her.

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Rockford spoke from the doorway behind Hunter:

"Well, my boy, are you ready for your day's duties?"

He followed Rockford inside, where Rockford settled down in the easy-chair and yawned.

"I had a rather busy night," he said. "Certain events occurred yesterday afternoon which forced me to change my own plans to some extent. Or to set them ahead a day, I should say."

He made an effort to put the vision of Lyla from his mind and asked, "Did you make any progress with Val Boran?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Of course, I didn't expect to." Rockford yawned again. "There was another message from Supreme Command. The situation is getting worse. Which reminds me of your Duty For The Day and the fact that if you can live through it, you will have it made."

*He's my superior, Hunter thought. He's supposed to outrank a Space Patrol General—and he's amused by the situation he's here to remedy.*

"Right now," Rockford said, "Lyla faces a grim future and feels like she doesn't have a friend in the world. She needs a shoulder to cry on. You will take her for a walk and supply that shoulder."

Somehow, even though the order had nothing to do with the Terran-Verdam crisis, he did not have the heart to object. She had been crying before she even reached her door. Later, after he had comforted her, he would demand that Rockford get down to determined effort on the Verdam problem. No more than an hour would be lost by that....

"Yes, sir," he said. "But in the interests of Princess Lyla's safety, I had better talk to her in her cabin. Alonzo saw Narf and Sonig bring back eight—"

"Professional killers, to dispose of you," Rockford finished. "I know all about it, and I know that Narf took time last night to spend an hour with his favorite girl friend and brag even to her that he was going to marry Lyla today before your dead body had time to get cool."

"But you just take Lyla for another walk and you will cause the beginning of the end for the Verdam Peoples Worlds. You will go down in history, my boy, as the man who saved the Terran Republic."

Hunter went out the door, again feeling a feverish sense of unreality. He was to go forth and get blasted into hamburger and by some mysterious process known only to Rockford, the Verdam empire would contritely start collapsing....

He did not knock on her door. He did not think of it as a violation of her privacy. She would be

feeling too alone and unwanted to care.

She was not crying as he had thought she would be. She was standing by the window, staring down at the gray, distant desert, her eyes as bleakly empty as it.

"Hello, Lyla," he said.

"Hello, Dale. I was just thinking; this is the day that I, as a woman, should always have dreamed about"—she tried to smile, and failed, and the brass came into her voice—"my wedding day!"

"Alonzo told me about it."

It seemed to him he should add something, such as to wish her happiness—but such words would be meaningless and farcical and they would both know it.

But there was no reason why he should endanger her by obeying Rockford's insane order. He would not do it—

"Ah ... good morning, Lyla!" Rockford loomed in the doorway, jovial as a Santa Claus. "Did you know Dale wants to go for a walk in the woods with you this bright spring morning—and he's no doubt too bashful to tell you so? Do you good to get away from camp"—there was the suggestion of a pause—"while you're still free."

He turned a beaming smile on Hunter. "Don't stand there like a dummy, boy—take her by the arm and let her have a last walk with someone who cares what happens to her."

There was one thing about Rockford not compatible with his air of fond fatherliness: his eyes were hard, gray slate as they looked into Hunter's and there was no mistaking their expression. Rockford had not made a fatherly suggestion for his own amusement. He had given an order that he intended to be obeyed.

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Hunter and Lyla walked on through the thickets of ghost trees and arrow brush, each with little to say, Hunter feeling more and more like a ridiculous fool. They had no destination, no purpose in their walk, other than to abide by Rockford's desire that a total of ten assassins get a chance to slaughter a certain expendable second lieutenant.

He did not put his arm around Lyla as they walked. If they killed him, it would have to be without their having the satisfaction of the pictures they wanted with which to blackmail her.

They came to a tiny clearing, where a cloud tree log made an inviting seat in the shade, and Lyla said:

"No matter how far we walk, I'll have to go back to face it. Let's stop here, and rest a while."

He saw that the clearing was fairly well screened, but certainly not completely so. It would have to do.

He sat down on the log several feet away from her, not wanting to take the chance of her getting hit by accident.

*Not that I'm enthusiastic about getting hit by intent, myself,* he thought. *What a way for a Space Guard officer to die.*

He wondered if Rockford would ever inform Headquarters that Lieutenant Dale Hunter had died in the line of duty—by whatever twisted logic this insane episode could be called duty—and he wondered how the Commemoration Roll would read for him.... *Displaying courage above and beyond the call of duty, Lieutenant Hunter sat conspicuously on top of a hill and calmly waited for ten assassins to slaughter him....*

"It's peaceful and quiet here, isn't it?" Lyla said.

He had been trying to watch four different directions at once and he realized that the constant swiveling of his neck was causing his stiff blouse collar to slowly cut his throat. And he saw that it was—for the moment, anyway—peaceful and quiet where they sat. The sun was warm and golden before them, bright flowers sweetly scented the air, and giant rainbow moths were fluttering over them, their tiny voices like the piping of a thousand fairy flutes.

"I wish I had been born a country girl," Lyla said. "I'd like to have a life like this, and not—what mine will be."

He asked the question to which he had to have the answer:

"Once you were going to marry Val and live on Jardeen, weren't you?"

"I ... so my foolishness is no longer a secret?"

"Foolishness?" he asked.

"We met two years ago when I was attending the Fine Arts university on Jardeen. I was younger and a lot more naïve then than I am now. I thought we were desperately in love and would get married as soon as I finished school and would live happily ever after, and all that."

"And it didn't turn out that way?"

"I had to make that promise to Daddy and when I wrote to Val about it, he seemed to approve. He didn't suggest I renounce the proxy marriage when the time was up, or anything. He just wrote that I knew what I wanted to do. He seemed relieved to be free to go ahead with his political career."

"I see," he said, and then, "you don't feel bad about it, do you, Lyla?"

"Feel bad? I wouldn't marry Val Boran if he was the last man on Vesta! Even Lord Narf isn't as self-centered as *he* is!"

"You don't have to marry Narf either," he said. "You know that."

She looked down at the ground and said in a dead voice, "I made a promise."

"Rockford told me that your father never really knew Narf—that on the few times they met, Narf put on the act of being a refined gentleman, very respectful toward the king's daughter."

She did not answer and he said, "Is that the way it was?"

"Yes. That's the way it was. But how could I tell Daddy, as he lay dying?"

"You couldn't, Lyla. But if your father could be here today and know what you know about Narf, do you think he would want you to marry him?"

"No ... I guess not. But Lord Narf loves me in his own way, I think—and that's more than anyone else does."

Then her tone changed and she said, "I'm so glad that you're here today, Dale—I'm glad that there is someone who cares at least a little about what happens to me."

On her face was a poignant longing for someone to love and comfort her. It seemed to him, now beyond any doubt, that there could never be anything for him in his career but loneliness. How different the warm love of Lyla would be from the cold austerity of the military and its endless succession of weapons and killing—

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He moved, to sit beside her and put his arm around her shoulders. "Lyla," he said, "I want to tell you—"

"*Dale....*" The word was a despairing sob as her composure broke and she held tightly to him, crying, her voice coming muffled as she pressed her face against his chest. "Help me, Dale! How can I marry that sadistic beast when it's someone else I can't live without—and he doesn't even know I love him!"

"But he does!" He hugged her closer, "He does know, and he loves you even more than you love him."

"Are you sure?" She raised a tear-stained face, hope like sunshine through clouds on it. "Are you really sure Val loves me, after all?"

"Val?"

The revelation was like the stunning concussion shock of a blaster beam passing two inches overhead. His vision blurred and there was a hideous roaring in his ears. She was still holding to him for comfort and it seemed to him that was wrong—he should be clinging to her for support....

"*Dale ...* what's the matter?"

"But I thought—" He swallowed with difficulty. "I thought you meant that I was the—"

Something struck the top of his head; this time, for certain, the concussion shock of a blaster beam passing close above it. There was a vicious crack as the beam split the tree beyond, then a crash and explosion of wood fragments as a second beam followed the first.

He rolled from the log; taking Lyla with him. The arrow bushes shielded them briefly, long enough for them to reach the temporary safety of a small swale.

"Dale!" Her dark eyes were wide with puzzled surprise and one small foot was bare from the loss of a sandal. "Someone shot at us!"

He thought, *So Narf got his pictures, after all.*

"Rootenant!" Alonzo came running. "They are *that way*—awr spread out to be sure to kirr you."

Alonzo motioned with his nose, a movement that seemed to cover all the high ground beyond them. At least, the enemy was not between them and camp. Not yet.

A distant shout came, an order from Narf to his men:

*"All of you—down that ridge! Get between Hunter and camp!"*

"*It's him!*" Her fingers gripped his arm. "He wants them to kill you!"

They had fired from a distance too great for his own blaster. He could not defy them from where he now stood.

"I'll have to try to get within range of them," he said. "I'll go back—"

"*No!*" Her grip on his arm tightened. "Don't leave me, Dale—don't let him find me here."

He looked down the length of the swale. At its lower end the ghost tree forest began, dense and concealing—but all down the length of the swale the snarevines lay in thick, viciously barbed entanglements, overlying a bed of sharp rocks and boulders. She could never get to the safety of the ghost trees in time.

Narf had his pictures, now. What would he do to her in the insanity of his hatred and triumph when he reached her?

"All right, Lyla," he said. "I'll see that you get to the trees—"

---

**T**here was a crashing of explosions and debris leaped skyward behind them and along both sides of the swale. The firing continued, scattered but very effectively consistent, and he said as he drew his blaster, "I guess they don't want us to go away."

He set the regulator of the blaster at lowest intensity so that the beam would not clip dangerous flying fragments from the boulders. The green, tough vines disintegrated reluctantly while the precious minutes sped by; while the unhindered assassins would be hurrying to the point where the entire swale would be visible to them and under their fire.

Alonzo was following along near the top of the swale's side, ignoring the danger as he watched the progress of the enemy and reported it to Hunter: "Now they are halfway, Rootenant, hurrying faster—"

They reached the lower end of the swale. The last of the vines disintegrated and the ghost tree forest lay before them.

He touched her cheek in farewell. "Get on to camp, as fast as you can run."

The firing abruptly ceased as he spoke. There was an ominous silence. Alonzo came running, his tone almost a yelp in its urgency:

"They are awrmost where they can see us! We got to get her out of here, Rootenant—awrfur quick!"

---

"*Lyla!*"

It was the voice of Val, sharp with concern for her. He came running out of the ghost trees, all his cold impassiveness gone. "Are you hurt, Honey—are you hurt?"

"*You came for me!*" She whispered the words, her face radiant. Then she ran to meet him, her arms outstretched, crying, "*Val ... oh, Val....*"

Their arms went around each other.

Then the woods erupted as ten blasters laid down a barrage to block any escape to camp.

"I'll try to give you a chance to get through," Hunter said quickly. "Be ready for it when it comes."

He ran toward the firing line, taking advantage of the concealment afforded by the first fringe of ghost trees. They should be almost within range of his own weapon, now—

Again, the firing abruptly ceased, as though by some signal. There came the furious raving of Narf:

*"It's that Boran she wants! Kill him, too!"*

Sonig cursed with bitter rage. *"Jardeen is lost to Verdram if any witness escapes—and we'll all hang, besides."*

There was a second of silence, and then Narf's command:

*"Kill the woman, too!"*

There was a roar like thunder as the firing began. The ground trembled and debris filled the air with flying fragments. Hunter, still running toward the enemy under cover of the trees, saw Val trying to get Lyla to safety and saw them both hurled to the ground as a tree exploded in front of them. They would never live to rise and run again—

---

He saw Rockford's plan, at last, and what his own duty would now have to be. He knew why Rockford had said of this day, *"If you can live through it, you will have it made."*

And he had a cold feeling inside him that he was not going to have it made.

He took a deep breath and ran toward the enemy, out of the concealment of the ghost trees and in the open where they could not fail to see him, his blaster firing a continuous beam that fell only a little short of the enemy, that showed them he would be close enough to kill them within seconds if he was not stopped.

The fire concentrated upon him, giving Lyla and Val their chance for escape. He ran through an inferno of crashing explosions, twisting and dodging on ground that trembled and heaved under his feet, while razor-sharp rock shrapnel filled the air with shrill, deadly screaming sounds.

Something ripped through his shoulder, to spin him around and send him rolling. He scrambled up, firing as he did so, and ran drunkenly on.

Something struck the side of his head and he went down again. He tried to rise and fell back, a blackness sweeping over him that he could not hold away despite his efforts to do so.

It seemed to him that the firing had suddenly stopped, that in its place was the hoarse buzz of a police stun-beam. It seemed he saw helicopters overhead, bearing the bright blue insignia of the Royal Guard and then there was nothing but the blackness.

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There was a brief, dreamlike return to consciousness. He was in a Royal Guard helicopter and Alonzo was beside him, grinning, and saying, "You be O.K.—I grad! And my Princess Ryra—rook at her now, Rootenant!"

He saw Lyla, her hand in Val's, and her face was glowing and beautiful in its new-found happiness. Then she was bending down, kissing him, and saying, "Dale ... Dale ... how can we ever thank you for what you did?"

---

When the blackness lifted the second time he was lying, bandaged, on a cot in the meeting hall and the voice of Rockford was saying, "... Ready to go in just a minute."

The hall was filled with members of the royal court who had come for the wedding. He saw the white robes of Church of Vesta dignitaries who had come to officiate at the wedding. Then he saw the seven grim old men seated at the far end of the table.

The Royal Council—with the judicial power to give even death sentences in crimes committed against royalty.

Sonig, his face white and staring, was being half led, half carried, away from them.

Narf, in the grip of another Guardsman, was standing before the Council and saying in a tone both incredulous and sneering:

"Is that my sentence?"

"There is a qualification to it," one of the Council said. "It seems only just, in view of your crime, that you be tortured until death—"

The rest of the words were lost as the blackness swept back. But before unconsciousness was complete, when all else in the hall was gone from him, he heard Narf's cry; an animal-like bawl of protest, raw and hoarse with anguish....

---

"Ah ... you're coming out of it, my boy."

Rockford was standing over him. "They gave you a Restoration shot on Vesta forty-eight hours ago. It will be wearing off in a minute and your head will clear."

He sat up, and the dizziness faded swiftly away. He saw that he was in the compartment of an interstellar ship and he knew that it was Earthbound.

And that Vesta, and brown-eyed Lyla, were now part of the past....

"Don't look so sad, my boy," Rockford said. "You'll get due credit and promotion for the invaluable part you played in my plan."

"But—"

"I know. But she was never yours. You'll find life is full of heartbreaks like that, son."

"And we accomplished our mission. Narf's crime neatly invalidated the proxy marriage. Then Lyla set a new precedent by marrying Val that very day. Earth has never had two such loyal and grateful friends as Val and Lyla."

"You knew all about them, didn't you?" he asked.

"Strategic Service has to know everything. And I knew they were still in love even though each was too proud to admit it. That's why I had to insist on Val coming to Vesta. After that, it was only a matter of using you to awaken Val to the fact that she did *not* love Narf. And of taking care of various little details, such as faking an official request for the helicopters to come out two hours ahead of time, getting Val off to find her at the proper time, and so on."

Rockford smiled at him, "And you learned that an old man's mind can be mightier than the space fleets of the Verdram empire—and that the line of duty that produces the best results can sometimes be very devious."

He thought of the white-faced Sonig, and the anguished bawl he had heard from Narf.

"I suppose they were going to hang Narf and Sonig at once."

"The Council would have, no doubt. But Lyla was so happy that she begged the Council to give them very light sentences—or just let them go free. So I suggested a compromise. The Royal Council regarded it as very fitting."

"What was it?"

"For Sonig, no punishment. The murder attempt, being news of public interest, will be broadcast upon Vesta and other worlds, including a factual, unbiased account of Sonig's participation in it. Shortly afterward, Sonig will be taken to Verdram and turned over to his own benevolent government. Vesta will file no charges."

"But Sonig lost Jardeen for his government. They'll execute him for that!"

"Yes. I'm afraid so. Shall we call it poetic justice?"

"What about Narf?"

"His sentence was life-long exile on his Sea Island estate. He will be provided with all the luxuries to which he has been accustomed, including a full staff of servants. He will continue to enjoy all his possessions there, including his gallery of nude paintings, his risqué films, his pornographic library, and so on. In fact, since he is so fascinated by pornography and such a collector thereof, any pornographic material which might become available on Vesta in the future will be sent to him."

"That's not right ... I mean, they were going to torture him to death."

"Not 'to death'. It was 'until death'. There's a difference."

"But that bawling noise he made—"

"Ah ... that was due to the one restrictive qualification to the benign terms of his exile. Every woman on his estate was to be removed before he reached there, leaving men servants only. Patrol boats will see to it that for so long as he lives no woman shall ever set foot on the Sea Islands."

Rockford smiled again. "Lord Narf succeeded beyond his wildest dreams in keeping his boyhood vow of being always a man among men."

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