

# The End of Honor

L. D. Alford

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**\$16.95**

F1C028010 **FICTION** / Science Fiction / Adventure  
ISBN: 978-1-60290-014-1

Published in the U.S. by:

**OakTara Publishers**

P.O. Box 8, Waterford, VA 20197



# THE CHRONICLES OF THE DRAGON AND THE FOX

*Fantasy ladies and knights come alive  
in this sci-fi/adventure portrait of futuristic societies,  
vengeance and betrayal, warfare and honor.*

## **The End of Honor** BOOK ONE

An intragalactic war threatens to tear apart  
the Human Galactic Empire and the lives of  
Prince John-Mark and his bride-to-be, Lyril Neuterra.

## **The Fox's Honor** BOOK TWO

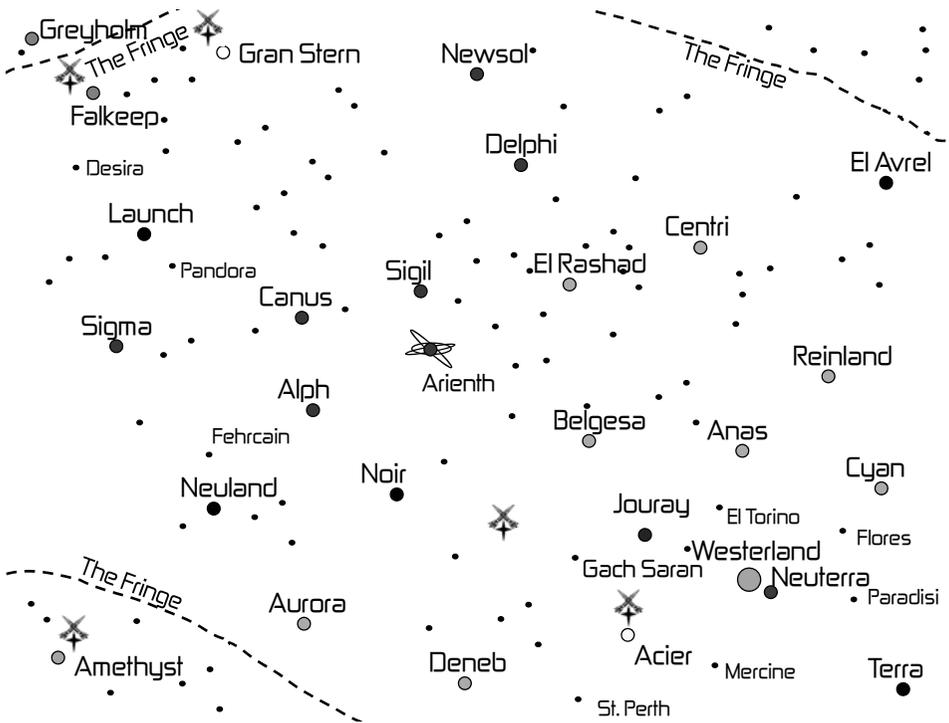
It was a time of treachery and vengeance...  
of nobility and redemption...all because of love.  
But the ultimate price could be Devon Rathenberg's life.

## **A Season of Honor** BOOK THREE

Baron Shawn du Locke must choose between  
honor and desire...with the fragile peace of the  
Human Galactic Empire hanging in the balance.



# THE HUMAN GALACTIC EMPIRE







## Prologue

Dr. Freisen D. Haupenberg

*Just What Were the Accords?*

Interstellar copyright X785 (10,785) ATA (Ancient Terran Accounting)

*Guidebook to the Human Galactic Empire* (4,000 to 7,785 ATA)

**I**t is appropriate in the year we celebrate the 3,000th anniversary of the end of the Human Galactic Empire that we start our study with an overview of the Noble Accords. The Noble Accords, the Rules of the Code, or more simply, the Code are all synonyms for the set of written laws that governed the genetic heritage of the Nobility of the Human Galactic Empire. As you know, the leadership of the Human Galactic Empire was developed through genetic manipulation. This was necessary to successfully colonize newly discovered planets; however, over time, these leaders took on the political and social aspect of feudal rulers. A hereditary ruling class overcame and replaced humankind's most precious democratic ideal. The Empire was a stable and reasonably just system that ruled longer than any other human authority. This culture vibrantly colored almost 4,000 Terra standard years of human history.

The Code maintained the culture and power of the Nobility. It also ultimately led to the destruction of the Nobility and as a result that

entire society. But let us start at the beginning and not the end.

Since the Nobility was bred to lead, a strict code and method was developed to retain those characteristics deemed necessary for leadership within the gene pool. These characteristics themselves were determined by a not-so-equal balance of scientific genetic manipulation and natural selection. As a consequence, the skills and characteristics to lead were ingrained in all of the Nobility, while the specific skills essential for certain degrees of leadership, for certain environments, and for survival were not necessarily evenly shared.

In terms of degrees of leadership, for instance, the skills of a common Knight were not sufficient to rule a planet, much less the entire Human Galactic Empire. Those environments such as very cold or hot planets, specialized environs, or resource-limited planets required a much stronger hand and harsher style than the fat and comfortable planets. The most critical characteristics of the Nobility were those dealing with survival, both the survival of the individual and the survival of the genes themselves. We shall see later how this lead to the destruction of the Nobility.

The Codes therefore were designed primarily around the continuation of the genetic legacy. This meant the most important characteristic of the Nobility was the ability to reproduce and breed true. To ensure this capability, all methods of artificial reproduction or fertility enhancement were absolutely forbidden. Only genetically certified children of certified parents, conceived via natural human sex were permitted to join the ranks of the Nobility. This certification process was called *investiture*, and it was required for all official births and marriages.

In the Empire, investiture took on a political as well as physical meaning. To be invested in the Nobility, all the critical functions relating to reproduction had to take place with an appropriate level of scrutiny required for certification. For the Knight, this meant a pilgrimage to his County's capital. For the Count, it meant a trip to the Duke's planet and court. For the Duke and his household, it meant his marriage and children's birth had to be ratified on the Imperial planet, Arienth. This later certification was solely a function of the Emperor. The political dimensions of this power are obvious...



## One

**M**y name is Lyral. I am no longer alive. My life has flown like the cry of a tropical bird, a ragged call on the twilight of an Empire. The sound, like my memory, is quickly forgotten in the important matters of the times. Yet, in the important matter of my death, no one gave me a choice, and I did not want to die.

While my body lies in a pool of its own blood, the Nobility of the Empire confer around it as though the passionate stain of red never touched their thoughts. Dear Lord, my body still twitches—in tiny movements, my arms and legs send up a morbid benison to the Hall of Accords.

How ugly is my bruised face, stuck on a pole for each man to adulterate with his stare. But they don't stare. They don't even look. My virgin body lies eternally silent. My once fine features are clasped in an angry death spasm. And neither my House nor my love is here to avenge me.

I beg to feel a single spark of emotion. My spirit, kneeling before my headless corpse, cannot cry. My spirit is emotionless and nearly without feelings, yet I find analysis easy. Death did not push away knowledge; it only made all knowledge horrible because I can no longer act on it!

Yet, analysis is not difficult. I am numb, a spirit without emotion. The seeds of emotion exist. I know them, but I cannot feel them. They are no longer sensations. They are only perceptions, conceived but now foreign.

Although I sense the movement of human affairs around me, I am no longer concerned with human life and all its trivialities. Yet life—if I could, I would seize it again. But, like emotion, the physical has flown. I cannot remember the love and desire I felt for my betrothed, though, as I contemplate his end, I know a pang in my soul; let his death, dear God, be less savage than my own.

Death was so easy. I remember a sharp swift pain, but the feeling was diminished by anticipation. And I fought the loss of that treasure of God. As the mortal wound poured my life's blood on the stone floor of the hall, I fought the loss of my life. For a moment, I felt lost and dizzy. Then I saw myself. At first, with horror: I thought I saw through the eyes of my sundered head. My body lay before me splattered with gore. As I stared at it in awful contemplation, my executioner—assassin—held aloft my head. I saw it clearly not less than a meter from where I knelt. With deadly certainty, I knew I was indeed past the point of life. My soul had escaped its mortal frame, yet I saw with undimmed eyes.

I viewed everything with crystal clarity—better than I could in life. Shadows were no longer shadows to me; they opened as if filled with light. The depths of souls seemed to open to me. The men who watched my death became flames of spirit in my new eyes. Unknown to them, they cast off their true selves like the spectrum of a burning star: I could read them. I knew their petty fears and ways. I knew their thoughts. Some watched with horror, others self-righteously, still others fearfully. They were all open to me. I looked at myself and saw no flame. The flame had gone out and not an ember was left.

I was free. I was unfettered from any bond of my physical body. I rose to the heights of the Hall of Accords and moved down below the floor. I slid forward and back through walls and windows. Yet life had been so dear, and I gained little joy from my newfound freedom. No joy, but no remorse either. My only thought was for the living.

I was sad my own life was forfeit—ended so early, my youthful longings unfulfilled, my dreams sundered in a sword's keen slash.

I had dreams. I would have been a Princess. My rank was high and my father and mother had groomed me for that role. I was to become the lady to a Prince of the Human Galactic Empire. I remember my parents with regret, but I remember them no more than I do my love.

Life is too short that love should so early be cut off. At once I knew the feeling that would be his despair, and for a moment, I felt the emotion grip my being. He loved me; indeed, he loves me.

My father was Duke Paris Neuterra, the ruler of the Duchy of Neuterra, the first of the Thirty Kingdoms of the Empire of Human Space. Under the Emperor Maricus, my Father controlled the populated systems of Neuterra, Acier, Terra, Flores, Paradisi, Mercine, St. Perth, El Torino, Westerland, and Gach Saran. In addition, he held sway over a host of unpopulated star systems whose planets couldn't support human life but were valuable for exploration and mining.

Neuterra was his personal holding and estate. It represented ten large cities and five hundred million people, the largest population in the Empire. Neuterra was the first planetary system successfully colonized by Terra. The system specialized in bio-products with an emphasis on genetic research and development. Neuterra also provided perhaps 90 percent of the personnel and organic supplies in the work of terraforming other planets in the Empire. Neuterra was a very rich and powerful system.

I was the Duke of Neuterra's eldest daughter, his only daughter, his only child. He and his dame, my mother, could not bear another child. Though they tried, their vitality was gone, and the Codes of the Noble Accords forbade them from any artificial means of increasing their fertility.

They were stuck with me, and the only hope for our House was an alliance marriage. With this in mind, my father groomed me to attract the attention of another great House, one that would willingly accept the Duchy and the name. With the approval of the Landsritters, the Emperor would be forced to accept the new House Neuterra descended through me.

I was well prepared to fill this position. I was made to be a Princess. I was educated to be a scientist of political solutions and ventures—an advisor, steward, mother, ruler, lover, and I was all of these and more. My heritage and intelligence allowed me to excel in these studies as if I was truly born to them, which I was. But I was not the Princess my Father hoped I would be.

Part of the problem was physical; I was never beautiful—just

pretty. My features were warm and sunny, youthful and impulsive. I could never appear aristocratic and mature or refined and striking. More often than I was recognized as a Princess, the daughter of Duke Neuterra, I was mistaken for a lady-in-waiting.

A Princess should domineer and overwhelm; I was quiet and petite. People were comfortable around me, and I had more friends than servants. I was a scandal in the making, so said the Matron Pembrey. My problem wasn't knowledge or understanding; I knew exactly how to be a Princess. I thought I could perform the job of a Princess better than any other woman born to the position, but somehow, I was not fitted physically or emotionally to be a Princess.

My father, consequently, despaired of ever finding a suitable match for me.

Fortunately, a match found me, and it happened this way:

Every morning, I walked the garden paths of my father's estate. That was one of my greatest pleasures. The early spring garden was beautiful. It was filled with new growth and neatly trimmed with dew that sparkled in the early morning light of Asa-Thor and our sun. The garden was filled with life. My time spent among the gardens of the estate, I counted among my most enjoyable moments.

My Father's gardens were exotic places. They were filled with plant and animal life from a thousand different planets. Around our manor and the Capital city of Neukoln, he had laid out over a hundred biomes in nearly a million square kilometers. The estate's private gardens, at the center of the national gardens where I walked, were laid out in an octagonal pattern. They were decorated with walks, fountains, pools, and statues interspersed delightfully throughout.

My favorite part was the Terran garden. As if it struck some collective memory inside my mind, everything seemed familiar to me. The plants and animals on all the terraformed worlds resembled their genetically altered descendants, but here lived their genetic originals. Here our world isolated them in purity from the necessary mechanizations of our terraformers. Their forebearers climbed the evolutionary ladder with mankind, and now they, like their masters were established throughout space.

How odd to think that Terra herself had not survived while her

children multiplied.

The Terran system was nearly a wasteland. Long ago, the Empire established a colony on the terraformed fourth planet, but of humankind's original primary, existed only a radioactive ball. Prior to the Sessionist's War, luckily, the scientists of Neuterra recorded the genetic codes of all the living creatures of the planet.

All the plants and animals of Terra could be duplicated from their genetic information; the planet, unfortunately, could not. Even now Terra was a black mark on humankind, a distinct warning about the potency of human hatred and folly. Yet the caution went largely unnoticed. These days, no one but the Neuterrans thought much about the birthplace of humankind. They were reminded only because of their jurisdiction over the system, and because of the work they accomplished in genetics—adapting the flora and fauna of the original to the environments of the Empire.

My father's collection of Terran life was the most complete in human space. It was a small part of our long-lost heritage, kept thankfully alive. My father enjoyed the garden almost as much as I did. And though it bordered his study and offices, he never truly said what motivated him to place it there, for he kept it under very close scrutiny. I had hoped to learn the reason sometime—that is, sometime before my death.

Asa-Thor, the primary of my world, rose with our sun this morning. The days would be very pleasant for the next week of our lunar cycle; both our sun and our planetary primary would grace the sky. Neuterra was a moon circling the gas giant Asa-Thor and orbited the huge planet at nearly a hundred million miles.

Asa-Thor was an aborted star, an active gas giant. And, because of the additional heat it provided its large moon, our planet, the combination with our sun made both the winters and summers comfortable. Our system's sun was not nearly close enough to give Neuterra a properly tolerable climate, but with both sources of light and heat, Neuterra was a veritable paradise.

The only disadvantage was Neuterra's diurnal cycle. The human metabolism could barely adapt to it. When our sun and Asa-Thor shared the sky, the days and nights were in proper order, however,

when our sun and planetary primary were on opposite sides of the moon, the dividing line between night and day was nearly undefinable. Normally, the cycle divided into four weeks: a week of proper light and dark; a week of successively lighter nights and slightly darker days; a week of nearly similar dimly lit days and nights; and a week of lightening days and darkening nights. The cycle, except for eclipses and odd angular lineups was incredibly regular.

Humans had problems aligning their bioclock to the phenomenon, and other difficulties presented themselves. One problem was the tides; a difference of thirty meters was not unusual. The landmass of Neuterra was lacking already, and the high water didn't help. Neuterra, being an old and established moon, didn't suffer often from the earthquakes that would have plagued a younger planetoid, but minor vibrations were common when the star and Asa-Thor were in juxtaposition.

As I entered the garden from the house and walked into the sonic bordered expanse that held the environs of long dead Terra, I couldn't help but notice the young man. To my amazement, he hung out of a window in my father's study. He seemed to be trying to get a better look at the rose bushes in the beds below. The window was nearly one and a half meters above the ground, and he stretched downward for a rose just out of the reach of his fingertips. For a moment, I was shocked into stillness, but then, with a grin I asked, "May I help you?"

He was really very young, almost as young as I. In spite of his youthful looks, he was dressed in the uniform of a Major in the Emperor's Huscarls, the Emperor's private guard. I immediately thought it odd a lowly Major should be conversing with my father in his private study, but then I noticed the drapeau and gold of a nobleman. Still, my Father had few dealings with noblemen of so low a rank to be only a Major in any force. I wanted to be courteous, and at the same time find out what he was doing here.

At my words, the Major snatched his hand back in embarrassment. He swayed off balance in the window for a moment, then caught himself with both hands on the lip of the sill. He seemed a little taken aback by my appearance, as though I'd caught him in a forbidden act.

When he didn't answer my initial question, I repeated myself, "I said, may I help you?"

He smiled. I remembered that smile to my grave. I remember it now: his eyes, a washed gray lit like glowing stones. They were as clear as a spring of water. The corners of his mouth curled into a hundred expressions at once, then his upper lip raised slightly, showing the tips of his teeth. He sported a mustache and goatee. These accentuated his features and telegraphed the humor in his thoughts to me. His clear eyes seemed to catch me like a camera. They at once appraised me and, like a photograph, catalogued me, frozen in midstride.

He looked directly in my eyes. “The garden is lovely, my lady. I was only trying to sample its fragrance and finery more closely.” His voice was strong and clear, yet he spoke softly as if he was afraid he would frighten me away. “The question, now, my lady, is: are you a part of the garden? You seem lovely enough to be. Are you a wonder of nature or a miracle of the garden?”

I colored slightly at his words, but I chose to ignore the slight impertinence—at least, my Matron would have said impertinence. I answered more boldly than I intended, “You could come into the garden yourself, then you could discover whether I was a wonder or a miracle. The door is down a short flight of stairs just a few feet beyond the next room.”

“I would love to, my lady, but I await the pleasure of the Duke of Neuterra. I fear if I kept him waiting that might bring out his worst disposition. Right now I need his most patient spirit.” The young Major said this with such a bland voice and wry look I could barely keep from laughing. My Father’s wrath and dispositions were legendary.

I smiled at him. “Yes, I think you’re right. The Duke doesn’t like to be kept waiting. But here—” I picked one of the roses he tried so vainly to reach and lifted it to him—“you can enjoy the garden though you haven’t set a single foot in it.”

My action seemed to astonish the Major. He was taken aback for a moment, then, in a single motion, he reached down to take my offering. He grasped the fragile blossom, and at the same time, caught my fingers and pressed them gently to his lips. “Thank you, my lady. The garden is indeed beautiful, but you—you are more lovely. I think you must be a miracle.” He smiled more broadly as he released my hand.

I laughed a moment, but the eyes he held to mine were full of sincerity and repeated the strength of his words.

As if taking in the garden in a single whiff, he touched the rose reflectively to his nose. Then I heard the study door open and shut with a bang, and I knew the Duke had entered. The Major half turned, then turned back to me, but I was gone. My father had passions—many in general, but specifically ones about being disturbed, so my mother, and I, and all the servants, holders, and common people took the greatest pains not to interrupt his business.

I wondered why the Major should want to speak to my father. Perhaps we were related, and he sought a boon. He would find none forthcoming from my Father. Perhaps he was a messenger from the Emperor. That might be good or bad. Not much later, I learned, from the servants, the Major was undertaking an alliance between our House and the Emperor, or another family, or something. They didn't have the information exactly right, but the house staff was always the first to know...that is, after my mother.

I wandered the garden the rest of the morning and absorbed its pleasures. I thought long about the man I'd met. He affected me like no one ever had before. His smile, his eyes were burned on my retina like sunlight, and his words were like the cool garden. I couldn't seem to shake his look or his voice. I laughed again at his pronouncement that I was beautiful.

I looked at my reflection in a still pool. Yes, I was right, I was not beautiful: my nose was too small and turned up; my lips were too thin; my eyes were green, far too common, and they perched in high cheekbones that trailed twin dimples to the corners of my mouth. Overall a strange face, and too plain to be the face of a Princess, it was neither sharp nor delineated, neither fine nor delicate. When my face was still, it was soft and pretty, but when I smiled, my features transformed into the wild and impulsive appearance of a sylph. My hair, curled only through close attention, was straight and black but also soft. It fit my face and figure. I was as slight as my features were thin. I was a wand of a woman, but if one looked closely, I thought, in the smaller perspective of my proportion, you could see the fullness of a woman nonetheless. Boughs and leaves framed my reflection in the

pool, and I fit the frame. I could have been a dryad, a woodland nymph, a part of the garden itself—a miracle of the garden.

I laughed again. I liked the young Major. Somehow he'd touched my thoughts as no one ever had, but I was sure he was wrong about my beauty. If he wanted to compare beauty, he should see Tamar. Why couldn't I look at least a little like her? I sighed. Well Tamar was my best friend, and she would have traded looks with me, if she could, and if I asked her. That took me to other subjects much less happy than the one I'd started with. I did not want to pursue those difficulties now, so I went back into the house to talk to the servants about the Major.

I met Benet, the Major Domo, just outside the kitchens. Benet was a graying Sergeant Major who happened to also be my father's chief valet. Benet stood ramrod straight. As if the battlefield were moments rather years away, he was belted elegantly and stiffly into his uniform. An old scar transfixed his nose and cheek and disfigured a large portion of his face. As a child, I traced the deep pattern of that scar a thousand times and begged over and over to hear the account of the daring action that produced it.

I spoke idly to Benet for a few moments and finally asked him, "Who is the Huscarl Major with my father?"

He laid a finger on the side of his misshapen nose and pronounced in his usual cool voice, "I don't know the Major's name, though I did meet him at his ship and convey him to the estate." Benet looked about, to see that we were alone. "I approve of the Major, but with his subordinates, for a military officer, the man is much too forward."

By that comment, I gathered, Benet meant himself. I had to stifle a giggle; the Major Domo's impression of decorum went only so far as it included all Nobility other than myself. I was his friend, although he would be shocked at the use of the word to describe our relationship. Yet, no other noble or officer could be a friend or friendly to Benet without appearing improper to him.

The Major must be important, I thought, for Benet himself to accompany the officer, so I stepped a little closer. "The Duke must have been concerned about the man's rank and his safety to send you instead of a driver alone."

"Oh, my lady," recounted Benet, "I didn't go myself. I simply

escorted Sir Pershall.”

“Sir Pershall? The steward! Who is this man to invoke such honor?”

“To tell you the truth, my lady,” and he bent conspiratorially toward me, his voice suddenly quiet, “I believe the Duke himself was going to meet the man, but a private message forbade him.”

“That is interesting, Benet. Who do you think this man is?”

“Perhaps a personal emissary from the Emperor.” Benet cocked his head. “But I cannot be certain. I think what he carried was much more important than who he was.”

“And why is that?”

“He brought many containers of bookdisks and ancient papers Sir Pershall bade me convey with extreme care. Sir Pershall seemed very agitated. I don’t know what got into the noble.”

I thought a moment. “Do you know what the Major and my father spoke of?”

“Only that they discussed alliances and holdings. The Duke brought out the Book. They poured over the Accords.”

“Did you see his noble rank?”

“He is a lesser baron; of the realm, I believe.”

“Benet, you know too much,” I accused him laughingly.

He blushed at my tease and became very serious. “My words are only for my lady’s ears! I wouldn’t let anyone but you know the personals of the Duke.”

I placed a light hand on his arm. “Thank you, Benet. I know the secrets of our House are safe with you. But,” I breathed almost to myself, “I would know more of this young Major,” then louder, “I am pleased to be privy to this information. I would like to know more.”

“Yes, my lady.” Benet smiled and bowed.

Benet had been a part of my House for three generations. In times of war, he fought beside the Dukes of Neuterra and, in times of peace, helped run the estate, train the steward, protect and teach the Dukes’ children. I was his only student now. Benet was a man of honor and intelligence. He was devoted to our House, and he was devoted to me. Like a grandfather, he supplemented my initial education with lessons of survival and honor.

If my sex and manner were a trial to my father, it did me no harm with the rest of the House. To Benet, the servants, the holders, the people, I was the Princess of Neuterra. Though I didn't look like one, and perhaps, I didn't act like one, the people liked me. They listened to me, and they were dedicated to my security, wants, needs, and desires. When my father gave up his rule, I could have easily replaced him. But a Princess, in our Empire, cannot rule without a Prince!



## Two

**W**hen I returned to my rooms, the Matron Pembray was already there. She arranged my schedule for dinner and laid out casual dinner clothing.

The Matron Pembray was a short stocky woman, who maintained a regal air. She possessed a presence of body and energy that was breathtaking. She was much more than a normal servant. As my Matron, she was my protector, chaperone, social coordinator, advisor, and teacher. I also knew she was more than an average matron. I could not say whether she ever was a spy, but I knew she was born and educated on the planet Acier, the center of Imperial intelligence training. She had her fingers fully entwined in the intelligence business. I knew this, because my Father put me under her tutelage to learn such things. She had a broad Acierian accent that matched her personality, and I loved her very much.

Matron Pembray answered the question in my look immediately, “The Duke is engaged in business this evening. He will take his dinner in the study. Your Mother invited you to share dinner with her on the escarpment.”

My father’s gardens were, by no means flat. They were sculptured in square plains, set between a demarcation of rolling hills with some very steep cliffs. These variations in terrain accommodated the different types of plant and animal life and prevented intermingling of the biomes. They also lent diversity to the garden’s beauty.

The escarpment was one of the prime delights of the garden. It was

a steep cliff that divided the garden near its center. It chiefly separated the Terran biomes from the non-Terran. At the top of the cliff, the Terran biomes stretched lazily ten kilometers to envelope the main house. Thirty meters below, a beautiful but sometimes eerie landscape trailed as far as the eye could see. If you looked closely, bordered by hills and sometimes force barriers, the octagon of each biome was visible. The Terran environs blended much less distinctively into one another and were separated only by sonics.

A small river intersected the cliff at its top. It ran in almost a direct line from the main house and tossed itself from the height to the rocks and a lake below.

At the top of the falls stood a large structure almost completely hidden by the foliage and earth. From it, a partially covered and railed plaza protruded out over the river and away from the cliff; this was our family's summer dining room. We called it the verandah, and it could support any event from a family dinner to an Imperial ball. Father had it built so ingeniously it barely intruded on the natural beauty of the falls or the environment of the cliff side.

The cliff was riddled with guest rooms and suites. From the verandah, you could see isolated and connected balconies throughout the cliff face, most near and behind the fall line. These unobtrusive and nearly invisible structures connected with the outermost rooms. The windows of the suites were plentiful but hidden by stone-tinted ceriplast or force barriers.

A platform and some of the balconies extended behind the falls into a natural grotto. This grotto was also a family dining spot.

Mother's favorite spot for dinner was the verandah overlooking the falls. It was a place of exceptional beauty and in spite of the falls, amazing quietness.

"So the Duke is busy with matters of state?" I asked the Matron Pembray.

The matron's face took on a guarded look that said to me, I don't know what your father is doing, but I'll find out. What she said was, "The Duke is busy with House affairs. He is not to be disturbed."

I was intrigued. Father rarely spent so much time on business. He usually reserved the dinner hour for his family and guests, and he

habitually introduced them to one another there.

The Major's message and information must be very important, I thought, but perhaps he held too low a rank to present to the family. Still, I anticipated dinner alone with Mother; she shared brilliant insights and always had interesting information to convey. I was sure she would give me some more ideas on the Major. Why—she might tell me right out who he was and his business with Father.

Rarely was my father so engaged in anything that he missed our formal dinner. The unknown suddenly burdened my thoughts. I was filled mostly with the fear we might be embroiled in a conflict. More than anything, I was alarmed by the fact I could not determine the circumstances and reasons for the meetings on my own. I was a fully trained lady and graduate of Pembroke's School. I should certainly be able to discover as great a difficulty as a war or an important alliance in the making.

Wars, thank goodness, were uncommon in the reign of Maricus, our current Emperor. He was a benevolent ruler, and his leadership improved the stability of the Empire, but still, the problems and ambitions of some of the Nobility could provide the motivation for a full-scale war. The embarrassing position of the House Neuterra was an example of a potential area of conflict. My father might now, I thought with distaste, be examining worthy candidates to marry me. I grimaced; better he determined war plans; it was less uncomfortable to think along those lines than to imagine the Major and my father discussed me.

I dropped that futile line of reasoning immediately. Maybe Mother would have something more to say about it and more, especially, about the Major.

The easiest way to the escarpment and the verandah was through the house's transit tubes. They crisscrossed the gardens and grounds and communicated with the outlying portions of the estate and our Capital city, Neukoln. The only other means of transportation were overland through the garden or by air, but the first method was time-consuming and the second inconvenient.

I stepped into the twilight of the verandah and found Mother already seated and waiting for me.

The Lady Nieva Neuterra was almost my twin. She was small and dark-haired, and her skin shown so clear it was almost translucent. She possessed sylvan features like mine, but instead of wild and sibilant, her face was regal and disciplined. She was the Princess I was supposed to be. In me melded her perfection and my father's fierceness.

She raised her hand, "Oh, Lyril, hurry dear, Asa-Thor is so beautiful as it sets sunward." On the horizon, the red afterglow of our sun bathed the large planet. A lance of brightness creased the horizon and accentuated the large round body that covered a good tenth of the sky. The planet sank rapidly, chasing the sun, and left the sky dark and the stars brilliant. My mother didn't say anything for a long time after that. She sighed and signaled to Benet. He lit the candles around our table, and a thin stream of music filtered through the night.

"I hope you like the music I picked, Lyril." Mother stared across the table wistfully.

"They are very nice. Old Terra, aren't they?"

"Yes, old Terra." She paused. "I also picked a dish from Terra for tonight."

"Father will be sorry he missed such a meal."

My mother didn't show any emotion, but a rigid set to her jaw informed me she was upset. I was warned so, regretfully, I didn't raise any of my questions. I sat quietly with her, enjoying the food and the soft and pleasant evening.

Before we parted, Mother was in a much better frame of mind. She talked of the fashions of Jouray and the events of the Imperial Palace on Arienth. Whatever bothered her thoughts earlier was soothed by the excellence of the evening. I believe she may have been concerned about the same things I was, but I guessed she found an answer. Likely, one she didn't welcome. Perhaps I could persuade her to part with some of her information tomorrow.



Early the next morning, I again visited the European biome of the Terran garden. I didn't know exactly why I chose to repeat my walk of

the day before. I usually varied my jaunts through the gardens. Maybe, I thought, if I duplicated my wanderings exactly, I could recreate the encounter of the previous morning. Why I wanted to meet the Major again, I didn't know exactly. I tried to put my thoughts in order: I didn't know who he was, I had no idea of his social standing or family, but, in a way, that didn't matter. He was an acquaintance of the moment, a casual friend. At least I thought of him as a friend—a kindred spirit in his appreciation of the garden. I believe I wanted to see his eyes and his smile again to reassure myself they were real. Somehow I convinced myself the entire first meeting sprang from my imagination—a linden tree episode, like the medieval stories that put a premium on casual encounters.

So convinced was I of the impossibility of the previous morning, as I came within sight of the study windows, I stopped dead, startled by what I saw.

The Major was there, again sitting in the window. "Hello," he called. "I waited most of the morning for you." He smiled.

I walked a little faster, but not quickly enough, I hoped, to look like I hurried. My heart was joyful, and I couldn't explain why.

He wore a uniform similar to the one he had on yesterday, the white of the Imperial Huscarls.

I stepped boldly to the window and gave him my hand. "Good morning, Major."

"Good morning." He acted surprised again that I recognized his rank. He touched my fingers to his lips.

"Are you still at the beck and call of the Duke, or can you join me in the garden this morning?" My forwardness startled me.

He shook his head with regret. "Yes, the Duke still requires my presence. I'm waiting for him now."

"You must be a very important person to take so much of the Duke's time."

He smiled broadly, the smile I remembered that twitched his mustache in humor. "The Duke and I counsel together concerning the future of the Empire."

I pretended to look impressed. I had little notion then that he told the absolute truth.

“Best of luck, then. That sounds awfully tedious to me.” I almost said, “Don’t let my father bore you to death,” but I caught myself. If he knew who I was, he might not speak so freely or congenially; the formalities of royal comportment made for poor communication.

“Our studies are acutely boring,” he copied my emphasis, “but the day has brightened considerably since I saw you. I hope you still don’t think me too forward to say you are the most beautiful part of the garden I’ve yet encountered.”

I spoke with sudden candor. “You are kind to say so, but that just isn’t true. I am barely beautiful, and I find the simplest flower easily surpasses my best attributes.”

He was taken aback but a moment. With a slight frown, he grasped his beard. His voice was gentle. “My lady, don’t be offended if I say, in my eyes, you indeed rival this garden. Your beauty, to my tastes, is extraordinary and cannot be classified with ordinary prettiness.”

“We have not been introduced,” I protested with his same seriousness. “It is not fair to present a complement in terms I cannot resist.” I smiled shyly at him.

He smiled back at me.

I thought he would say more, but at that moment, I heard the study door open, so I again disappeared.



That evening, my mother and I ate by ourselves once more. Tonight we sat at a table halfway down the escarpment. Our position was far enough from the falls that the cliffside muted the loud sound of cascading waters. Alien disturbances rose like soft mutters from the environs below us.

Tonight my mother was in a much better mood. I divined from her disposition she must have discovered something. The rumor among the servants was that the Duke would be busy with his work throughout the next week. Mother almost confirmed this by asking me to dine privately with her until the next first-day. I could tell, behind her smug veneer of successful discovery, she was disappointed to lose her lord for

even that short time. I was disappointed myself. Father was a pleasure at dinner and seldom separated himself like this. But my disappointment didn't stop me anymore than it did her, and I pumped my mother for all the information she was worth.

"This is all a very complicated business," started the Lady Neuterra, answering and cutting off my questions in one statement. "Your Father is trying to work out a solution for our House, and this young man may have found a way to protect our family and heritage. You realize yourself the difficulties."

I didn't say the obvious: I was the chief difficulty.

My mother continued. "The young man is of a good family, but his noble rank and name have not been disclosed to me." She slitted her eyes. "In any case, they may be inconsequential. The Duke has him under guard—for what reason I can't fathom. Although your father has never shown such discomfiture over the issue before, I don't think my Lord wants anyone to know who the man is or why he's here. The whole situation bears analysis, but my information is meager."

"Oh, Mother, I thought you'd know much more about it all."

"Don't be silly, Lyral. These men keep to themselves, but be assured, when your father has finished his study, he'll come to me to analyze the situation politically."

I knew that. She could not have made a truer statement. My mother, the Lady Nieva Neuterra was something of a political sorceress in the eyes of most of the Nobility and my father. She worked miracles for our House, family, Kingdom, and the Empire. The Nobility attributed two particular strategic solutions directly to her astute political wisdom, and they were both taught in Lady Pembrook's School that I attended on the Imperial planet. They were called the Neuterran gambit and Lady Nieva's choice.

I had attended school on the Imperial planet Arienth since I was fifteen. Unlike most noble young ladies, I hadn't spent my entire educational career under Arienthian tutelage. Until I was fifteen, my mother, the Matron Pembrey, and any other specialist my parents could hire taught me in the proper subjects necessary for a noble Princess. I even spent an entire summer on Acier with the Lady Elizabeth Acier, learning about intelligence and military politics. At the tender age of

fifteen, my parents sent me to Lady Pembrook's Finishing School for Young Ladies on Arienth. My father's rank and my mother's popularity stood me in good stead, and I had many friends, both political and genuine.

Unfortunately, the girls I most wanted to be my friends were also the ones "beneath my rank" or outside of my social station and strata. Nonetheless, I did make friends with many of my "social inferiors." My best and most controversial friend was the Lady Tamar Falkeep. She was the youngest and third daughter of Duke Falkeep, and she had attended Lady Pembrook's School through most of her life—almost from the day her mother died. Tamar visited her home planet during the holiday breaks, and her father loved her like sunshine. I spent nearly the full part of one of Falkeep's summers with her and half of another—until my father found out where I was.

The Duchy of Falkeep was the least of all the Imperial kingdoms, and a neutral, by choice, in Imperial politics. Although the Emperor Maricus systematically courted Duke Falkeep, the old man refused to wholly clasp the Imperial standard. In spite of this, or maybe because of it, Tamar was the brightest and most beautiful woman I knew. Except for her keen wit and unparalleled intelligence, she was every bit a Princess. I mean by that, her intelligence scared off her suitors, and she could never be coy enough to silence it.

Tamar was a determined, outspoken young woman, and I loved her like a sister. We were matched intellectually; where I was destitute in grandeur, beauty, and grace, she more than made up for it. And where she lacked openness, vivaciousness, friendliness, and patience, I more than made up for that. We were doomed to remain in our mutually hopeless states: me, friendly, pretty, not at all a Princess, but destined to be; she, beautiful, grand, commanding, a Princess through and through, but never to be one. To one another, we laughed over our circumstances, and we cried when we had to part: I, a graduate, and she still a struggling student. We promised to visit one another and to write. Already, as my mother would say, I created political associations and alliances outside of House agreements and family boundaries. I thought I just had a friend.

I didn't mention, without the permission of my House, two

Neuterran years ago, I invited the Lady Tamar to visit me, and she had. The importance of this was that the Duchy of Falkeep and the Duchy of Neuterra found grounds for a tentative political relationship they never knew before. Tamar impressed my mother and father more than either would admit, and in their minds, Duke Falkeep and his kingdom became a closer ally than Neuterra revealed even to the benevolent Maricus. We attended Falkeep's famous ball the following year, and, this year, if I were there instead of on Arienth, I would still be alive.

My mother did open up enough to say about Tamar Falkeep, that she was the most politically astute woman she ever met, and that was in regards to a single summer and of a girl of seventeen. I felt my acquaintance with Tamar was the friendship of a lifetime and looked forward to visiting her again.

Well, that was all Mother would tell me about the Major. If I were to get anything more, I would have to twitch the strings of my servant intelligence network. Perhaps Pembray learned something more than she admitted the day before. She was, after all from Acier and trained in the business of intelligence. Maybe she garnered some clandestine information in the course of her snooping...I mean duties. Yet that might be a last resort; working information out of Pembray was difficult but not impossible.

The matron waited up for me. As I slipped out of my clothing, I was thinking so intently, I hardly listened to her while she showed me her choices for my garments tomorrow.

"Well, my lady, are you even listening to me?"

I stood naked in the closet doorway and tugged off my stockings. "Pembray, please don't scold me. I am surrounded by mysteries."

"Tush, child." She handed me my nightgown. "What do you know about mysteries?"

"Not enough." The words were muffled as I pulled the gown over my head.

"Certainly, not enough?"

"Then they are not mysteries to you, Pembray?"

"Of course not."

I sat, waiting, on the edge of the bed frame and gazed at her in anticipation.

“Well then, why do you stare straight through me, girl?” the matron huffed.

“If it’s not a mystery to you, then enlighten me, please.”

“It’s not a mystery because I do not feel a need to know the answer. The simplest explanation is that the Emperor sent an important professional scholar of the Noble Accords to research the position of Neuterra under Imperial alliance.”

I was slightly disappointed—a scholar of the Codes was about as boring a profession as I could imagine. “But why?”

“Because—” the matron raised her brows at my stupidity—“the Emperor Maricus is a wise man. Neuterra is his most solid and powerful ally. Your father has you and his House to consider, and the Emperor wants a say in who is to control House Neuterra in the near future and that means who is to marry you.”

“Oh.” I dropped my eyes. “But,” I perked up, “why send a Huscarl?”

“Simple child. Don’t you remember even the rudiments of what I taught you?”

I just stared at her.

“There are in the Imperial Huscarls—” she ticked off on her fingers—“field officers, staff officers, and then there are the Emperor’s staff officers.”

My heart sank. With embarrassment I recited, “The field officers command the Huscarls. The staff provides support, logistics, and political integration. The Emperor’s staff are advisors only; they are appointed by his majesty and have no legal command over officers or warriors, but they do rate the honors of their grade and are paid in accordance with the standard military scale.”

“Yes, I see you didn’t completely forget your lessons.” Her voice turned gentle and soothing. “I know, my lady, you are disappointed. The answer seems so simple once you examine the evidence.”

“I see.” I turned my face, unwilling to let Pembray see the full measure of my disappointment. “So the Major is probably a professional emissary of the Emperor, who is helping Father solve my delicate problem.”

“That is a probable solution,” answered Pembray ambiguously.

I looked at her with amazement. “Don’t you believe the conclusions you just made? The evidence seems to support them.”

“I, my lady, did not make any conclusions at all—you did. I simply suggested a train of events that led to a reasonable conclusion. Your conclusion is neither the only one nor perhaps the accurate one. It is based only on the limited information you now possess.”

“Oh,” I cried in frustration, “I wish Tamar were here. She would quickly discover the answer.”

“If she were given the proper facts and information, the Lady Tamar Falkeep would indeed have the answer directly. However...” Pembray looked down her nose at me, but her eyes were bright with amusement. “Tamar would never get close enough to the Major to find out directly from him what he was doing. She knows her proper place and station.”

“Pembray.” My face fell. I was frightened. “You won’t tell Mother or Father, will you?”

“Child, since when have I snitched on you? I believe you do me a disservice. But, I warn you, my lady, one of my duties is to prevent you from even giving the impression you besmirch your own or your House’s honor. I will move quickly to prevent that. But, rest assured, my girl,” she patted my hand familiarly, “I act on my own. You will face my wrath and not your Father’s; that is part of my job after all.”

“Thank you, Pembray.” I slowly let out my breath. “I promise not to cause a problem.”

“You will cause a problem.” The matron laughed as she pulled back my sheets. “But, as always, we will be able to recover from your predicament.”

I slid between the cool material and lay completely on the repulsor field below me.

The matron, already at the door, waved out the lights. “Sleep well, Lady Lyril, and remember your teaching and knowledge. The greatest secret opens to the patient seeker.”

Already drifting into slumber, I mumbled a reply. I had little hope; in the light of Pembray’s reasoning, my mystery was dismissed as trivial. Well, perhaps the reasoning would carry my dreams into the daylight....

For more of the story, read on...

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“The finest escape in literature is an escape into a real and inviting culture,” asserts novelist **L.D. ALFORD**. He enjoys exploring with originality and intimacy those cultures and societies we think we already know in order to build compelling tales that make ancient and future worlds real to his readers. His stories uniquely explore the connections between events close and familiar and those possible—all woven together with threads of reality and fascinating technology that bring

the future alive.

L.D. Alford is familiar with both technology and cultures. He is an experimental test pilot with over 6000 hours in more than 60 different kinds of aircraft. He also served in worldwide military operations as a member of three different operational combat squadrons. L.D. earned a B.S. in Chemistry from Pacific Lutheran University, an M.S. in Mechanical Engineering from Boston University, and is a Ph.D. candidate in Aerospace Engineering at the University of Dayton. He is a graduate of Air War College, Air Command and Staff College, and the US Air Force Test Pilot School. He is widely traveled and has spent long periods in Europe and Central America. He is a featured writer for **www.WingoverKansas.com** and the author of the acclaimed novels *Centurion*, *Aegypt*, and *The Second Mission*, as well as Book Two, *The Fox’s Honor*, and Book Three, *A Season of Honor*, in The Chronicles of the Dragon and the Fox series. He has also written and published over 40 technical articles.

L.D. Alford is currently working on the sequels to *Aegypt: The Goddess of Light* and *The Goddess of Darkness*.

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