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The Proposal

a Stardrifter short story

Intro/Outro

The Proposal

David Collins-Rivera

Intro

(MUSIC-01-STARDRIFTER uhd)

ANNOUNCER

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David Collins-Rivera.

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Today's story...*The Proposal.*

(MUSIC-01-STARDRIFTER uhx)

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Outro

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-David

THE PROPOSAL

A Stardrifter Short Story

David Collins-Rivera

2018-01-16

Draft 03

There'd been no sound at all for at least an hour. Or maybe a day.

The dead-hood had gone over his head on the street corner, from behind -- just *swoop* and everything was darkness and silence.

He'd been handled roughly then, hands tape-cuffed behind so he couldn't fight back or snatch away the smart fabric bag that clung to his head like new skin. The hood didn't restrict breathing at all, but it masked all light and sound, and even deadened his own shouts somehow, so that they seemed far away and muffled to his ears. To anyone else's, they might have been whimpers, or nothing at all.

Once in their car, they taped-cuffed his feet, too. The ride had seemed endless, but might have only been minutes.

When they stopped, he was carried out by a couple of big someones; they had to be big, because Louzaun was not a small fellow himself. He was brought up some steps, then through a hallway (maybe...they walked in a straight line for a while), and then down some other steps. Finally, he was placed in a chair and taped to that, too.

This had been ages ago. It was possible a full day had gone by.

Maybe it wasn't *quite* that long; he still didn't need to urinate. In fact, he had no

idea about time. Disorientation was an effect of the hood, or so it seemed.

What had happened to his companions? The burly minders his father had assigned to him before he'd ventured out into the city night had seemed quite excessive. He'd protested their necessity, yet they proved to be entirely insufficient.

And Qeffan Hydd, his Advisor, was with him as well. For six months the man had been his assigned shadow, after poor Dariol Mizzeseur had passed, offering perspective and solid insight on everything from legal matters to the right tie for the occasion. Solicitous, well-mannered, and professional (though a bit of a flatterer), Qeffan had become a

fixture in the young man's life.

Louzaun had just arrived at Dame Giabarradio's incredible ballroom in the heart of town, when he spotted an amorphous cloud of razzibots hovering outside the entrance, like flies on a cow. His engagement to a leading young lady of Duenda, from one of the Empire's finest families, was no secret. Far from it: their courtship, their romance, had played out in the media like a fairy tale.

"*Dia!*" he'd sworn in Lowspeak upon seeing all the video drones, then ordered the car to keep driving. There was an entrance to the side of the lavish building that was unmarked, and often used when some degree of discession was required.

If Cyndranehya had been with him then, they'd have *had* to endure it for publicity's sake. Family businesses on both sides were hungry for positive media exposure, always and always. His proposal to the young woman had turned into a bit of a cottage industry all itself. Shirts, posters, fashion dolls, clothing -- lots of clothing. At a certain point, everything concerning Noble families was about social order, business, public relations, and occasionally, even love.

A marriage was what it was, and would be, for the two people directly involved, but it also meant a great deal to the family, and possibly even more to the public at large. It was about financial and political alignments, and the right

narratives to spin around them. One had to keep class distinction in mind, a thing which ever-threatened to erode. A magical romance between happy young people, ending in an alliance between two of the most prominent houses in the Empire, was rather like a military campaign. It was expensive, had the potential to change nearly everything in their culture, and meant much to many.

The abductors must have been following him, watching from the moment he'd left the house. And they must have had people covering *every* entrance, because he'd been bagged only seconds after stepping out of the car. No shots, no shouts, nothing. Just four meters to the door -- no more than that -- yet he'd never

seen them coming.

Kidnapped! And on the very night they were to publicly announce the wedding date. News of the betrothal had been revealed a year before, and had been cultured into a big event. This was the second step, and another cause for celebration. His publicity machine had been wringing out every last drop of media excitement.

There were many more announcements and events before the actual day: parties, dinners, and speeches. Spontaneous club outings that were nonetheless carefully crafted and sponsored by fashion designers and celebrity handlers weeks in advance, then *somehow* leaked to the

media at the last moment. There'd be visits from fellow Nobles, state officials, and all the beautiful people of space. There'd be Family Conferences, and dozens of fittings for clothing (not just wedding attire, but the hottest brands and labels for the pre-wedding events, and especially, the honeymoon).

Oh, and the wedding itself would be an extravaganza, inspiring world-wide jubilation and delight. Balls, parties, concerts, parades...!

Or maybe none of those things. Not now.

Thank God Cydranehya was still at the spaceport!

Her secretary had called him earlier in the

evening to relay that the in-coming shuttle of an off-world cousin (or uncle, or whatever), who she was to escort to the announcement party, had had a hiccup in docking, and would have to make its approach from a different vector; Cydranehya was waiting for him up in orbit.

The Vernes family, like others of their rank, had certain obligations placed upon them; someone bearing the name had to act as ambassador, coordinator, and concierge to arriving and departing friends and relations. Cydranehya had taken on that burden (he didn't like to use the word *job*, as it was unseemly, even though she did pull a tidy wage), and occasionally, her duties kept them apart.

She'd probably put this activity aside once they were married, but really, it was okay with him if the choice was otherwise. Louzaun was proud to be modern in his thinking, and the image of a working wife didn't repel him the way it seemed to his parents and older relations.

Assuming he survived.

Of course, why wouldn't he? His family could pay any price the kidnappers asked. It would happen quietly and without the media ever catching wind (there were, indeed, perks to owning shares in all the networks on-planet).

Louzaun had taken courses in surviving situations like this when a teenager. As

Third Son of the Du'wentelias, it had been made clear to him at an early age that he represented a potential target to certain bold, ambitious parties.

In fact, it had been drilled in that this sort of thing, right here and now, could *always* happen; that no amount of security which also allowed him to live a life of freedom could ever truly be enough. Standard protections were in place to discourage or thwart the miscreants, the fools. But if someone of skill became interested, and was highly determined, the best protective services in the galaxy couldn't stop them. A kidnapping operation running with a decent budget (you had to spend money to make money, after all), could allow a

clever, ruthless few to organize the impossible. It didn't happen often, but it did happen.

In any case, he'd been instructed to offer no resistance, and to cooperate with his abductors in every regard. He was not to struggle, nor initiate conversation, but he should answer any and all of their questions to the fullest of his abilities.

Except that they hadn't asked anything, nor given him a chance to speak of his own accord. That meant they didn't need his input. In class, he'd learned this precise set of behaviors was a good sign; his kidnappers knew what they were doing. An organized group of criminals made fewer mistakes. They prevented

their victims from making them. This was less stress for everyone involved, which was the best possible thing you could hope for. Stress caused panic, and panic was the real enemy.

He could hear nothing under the sound-proofing of the hood; no light of any kind reached his eyes. Silence and blackness. It had been going on for hours now. Or so it seemed.

While this sensory deprivation was unnerving, it wasn't yet torturous. Remarkably, the kidnappers hadn't beaten or maimed him at all. Gangs often sent proof to the victim's relations that their loved one was in mortal peril; proof such as fingers or eyes. This was a tool to

instill terror in the family, he'd been taught, to gain control over them. They were to expect it. *He* was to expect it, and endure it. Pain was temporary, body parts could be replaced. But dead...?

Dead was forever.

So Louzaun sat. And he waited.

It was warm here. This place had to be a steam room, or something of the like. Occasionally, he felt moist droplets on his hands

He was still in his formal wear: an expensive evening suit sporting next year's cut. He'd been all set to make a splash tonight. Now he'd make one for another reason.

Oh! Cyndranehya would be beside herself with worry!

No.

Focus, Louzaun told himself. Pay attention.

Any and all details were important for follow-up investigators. The hood cut him off from the world comprehensively, but this made any other facts all the more vital.

For instance, despite how completely the hood blocked light and sound, it was clear he wasn't alone. Or, at least, not all the time: his chair had been bumped once or twice by someone passing by. That

could mean the place was so small they had a hard time moving around him.

Those were facts. Louzaun tried to notice more, but, being so completely alone made him easy prey to his own thoughts. Despite the training, fear bubbled up.

This could be how it ended. He'd never see his family again! His beautiful bride-to-be...!

No.

No!

He would *not* panic.

There was no need.

These people were proving themselves to be professionals. If he stayed quiet, and offered no trouble, they'd get paid, and he'd be home in a day or so.

And wouldn't it be a great story! Years from now, when he and Cyndranehya told the tale of their courtship, this event would be the highlight; how, during their engagement, he had survived abduction and terror. How his fiance had been beside herself, enduring the terrible uncertainty -- and what a surprise *that* would be to people! She always presented such a hard exterior, but was so soft inside. He didn't often get to see that side of her, but he felt it. He knew it.

Her late father, that canny nobleman with

more titles than a dozen counts or dukes, had been a somewhat severe fellow, if the stories could be believed. She seemed to take after him. Louzaun remembered meeting the man once, at some function or other his parents had dragged him to when a child. Picturing it now, he recalled a graying beard, rumbling voice, and penetrating gaze that had been uncomfortable to endure for the half-second it had fallen on him.

But that old man was gone now, in the Barlow Troubles.

Cyndranehya, herself, had barely escaped. She didn't talk about it, and Louzaun didn't inquire. Her demeanor never afforded it.

So strange! Here he was now, enduring something similar to what she must have gone through, and he was already imagining the grand story it would make. People reacted to danger differently, it seemed.

More sitting.

More blackness.

More silence.

Only his thoughts.

Fear rose and fell, as did pride in himself for having an adventure of his own at last. The emotions came in waves, sometimes separately, often together. Yet it was still just him; there was nothing

from the outside world.

Until there was!

A hand snatched at the hood and pulled it off roughly, or tried to at first. A fist full of hair got caught up, and the effort was awkward. The sudden sensation was unexpected and startling, and, coupled with sight and sound after who knew how many hours, was almost overwhelming.

"Ah...!" Louzaun exclaimed in confusion and fear and relief. His breathing was ragged, and he looked about stupidly. The relative brightness of this dim place, after being in a black one for so long, was quite disorienting.

A woman lowered above his chair. There

was another seat nearby, occupied by a figure strapped down just as he was. Others leaned against plain concrete walls all around the room. These people were dressed in various outfits, none of them stylishly, all of it dark and unexceptional. Most watched him passively, a few with amusement. He didn't recognize a single face.

His training came back, and he took a long, calming breath.

Offer nothing unless asked; answer everything once asked. That was the mantra. Pay attention. Details mattered.

Yes! Details, like the room.

Poorly lighted by several exposed

fixtures, it was not tiny after all, nor a steam room; an abandoned storage space, perhaps, or something of the like. There were several metal doors in the walls, all tightly shut. The place was completely empty except for himself, the other prisoner, their captors, and a few extra chairs here and there (probably brought in just for this occasion).

Ten people; eight on their feet, two bound and seated, including himself.

One of the people stood a few meters directly in front of him -- a short man in his middle years. Heavy in an unhealthy way, with closely-cropped black hair and a thin beard to match, just showing a touch of silver at the chin. He wore a

long jacket like a trench coat, except it was dark and shiny, perhaps of ballistic material. Those were popular in certain circles, he knew. Well...he'd *heard*.

The fellow just stared.

"How...how can I help you?" Louzaun breathed, trying to channel his terror into something constructive. *Be solicitous*, was the axiom he remembered from class, *make them like you*.

Wait! The axiom was the opposite of the mantra. How did he never notice that before? Which was true?

Was any of it? Would *anything* he learned back then be of value?

The man gestured to the tall, hard-faced woman who'd removed the hood, and she brought him one of the other chairs. This fat fellow was clearly in charge.

The other prisoner was off to Louzaun's side, and a bit to the rear. He had to actually turn to see him, which was straining and awkward. Like the hood they'd just pulled from his own head, this man wore a black face-hugging bag. His features were hidden, and no sound escaped his mouth, but his physical frame, and certainly his manhandled suit were familiar.

It was Qeffan Hydd!

So they'd grabbed his personal Advisor at

the same time. To what end? He was an employee -- very well paid, perhaps, and not without influence of his own, but Qeffan was no Nobleman.

With shock, Louzaun noticed blood on his Adviser's lapel and collar. And...oh God! The water drops that had fallen his own hands were red! They'd beaten his man, right there sitting next to him, and he'd never heard a thing.

Qeffan was still breathing, that much he could discern; and the mask was working periodically, as if the older fellow were talking or crying out, unaware that no one, not even his captors, could hear him.

The chubby man had been watching,

stone-like, unmoving, but now opened his coat and settled in the provided chair with a tired sigh. Beneath his ballistic garment (if that's what it was), Louzaun spied a dark blue coverall, like a manual laborer might wear. A disguise, obviously.

Truly, he didn't look anything like one might expect of a dangerous gang leader. This man appeared thoughtful, and observant. Louzaun didn't know how to even approach discourse.

"My parents will adhere to any requests you might care to make," he assured, lacking anything better.

No response.

"I'll gladly answer any of your

questions," the young man offered. "My Advisor will, too. I can vouch for him...he's a fine gentleman."

This, at least, elicited disgusted chuckles from around the room. The woman who had dragged over the chair looked to Qeffan's hooded form, then spat on the floor. The sitting man crooked a finger at her. She leaned in and whispered in his ear. He nodded, but never changed expression, and never stopped staring at Louzaun.

"Sir," the Du'wentelias' Third Son tried again, "I assure you that neither I, nor my employee, will offer you anything but complete cooperation. We may consider this a business transaction, may we not?"

Certainly, the sooner our negotiations commence, the sooner we may all find ourselves at a happy conclusion."

No movement besides breathing. No changes in expression or focus. The complete lack of interaction was disconcerting. Undoubtedly, that was its purpose, so Louzaun decided to wait them out.

That lasted all of a minute.

Qeffan began struggling in his seat. The hood absorbed all sound from his head, but he was pointedly crying out, because some of it carried through his chest cavity and torso, and came across as muffled sobs. Louzaun thought he heard the man

expel a faint, thick, "Please!" but couldn't be sure.

Well, this was embarrassing!

Hitherto, Qeffan Hydd had always presented himself with perfect composure, and an admirable awareness of his rank and position. And he'd come with such a glowing recommendation from a Nobleman of stature! Honestly, panicking after some rough handling was simply distasteful; a poor showing from the Du'wentelia family (and this counted, since he was employed by them).

Louzaun would have to speak with his father about making a change. There was no way around it.

The woman was still standing by the fat man. She heard something over her earpiece, and acknowledged it with a mutter to her jacket's collar mic. She leaned in again to relay the information, and he nodded.

Two minutes of more staring followed, with nothing but impassive menace and silence. Well, except for Qeffan, who cried out another unintelligible plea from the vicinity of his heart. Truly, the man was disappointing.

A metal door in the back of the room, behind the kidnappers, opened then, throwing a trapezoid of yellow light across the dirty floor. He hadn't noticed that door prior, hidden as it was in

shadows. Three or four dark figures entered, shutting it behind them, and the light vanished. They just stood against the far wall, invisible in the gloom.

The chubby man turned to look, and received a nod or wave or some other acknowledgment Louzaun couldn't see. He then faced front and gave a gesture to the standing woman.

"Your Grace," she pronounced evenly, stepping near, and speaking in perfect Ceicion, "we would like to apologize for the sordid quality of this meeting. Discretion was required."

She towered over him, her gaze rock steady, even condescending, her tone

devoid of all deference. She was strong-looking -- solid and muscular, possessing a distinctly military bearing. She had blond hair pulled back into a tight braid. Her face was graceful but sharply angular, as if chiseled from marble, but never smoothed. Her forehead was wide, and displayed no telltale agitation or fear over the possible consequences of this outrage against one who was her better.

"Have you contacted my family...our agents?" he asked. "Or, perhaps you'd prefer that I do so?"

"No contact has been made, your Grace, nor is it wanted. No one knows you are here."

"Do you mean to kill me?"

This got more laughs from the others. Some of the others. Not from the woman, though she smirked. And not from the seated man, who didn't do even that much.

From an inside jacket pocket, the woman produced a small datapad. She tapped at it, then moved in front of him.

"Please look straight ahead, your Grace."

She held the device up to his left eye for a moment, and received a small beep.

"And a breath into the sensor," she said, in that tone which lacked any acknowledgment of his social class.

He complied without umbrage, huffing quietly upon the DNA detector of the datapad. The woman checked it, then slipped it back into her jacket. From a side pocket she then produced a piece of folded paper, and a writing stylus.

"One last proof, if you would. A signature. I'll release your hand if you're prepared to comply."

"My signature?" he asked in confusion.
"That's not a legal identifier."

"It is for certain matters," she contradicted.

He looked from her to the seated man.

"I'm sorry, but...how will it prove my

identity to my parents? Signatures are easily forged."

"This detail has nothing to do with them, your Grace," the woman injected. "It's legally required on a *Dissolution of Intent to Marry*. That's a paper document only. Archaic, yes, but many things are bound by tradition. And men are the only ones who can call off a wedding..." She paused here, as if to gather a poise which threatened to slip. "In the Empire, as I'm sure your Grace is aware, it falls upon the groom-to-be to sever such an arrangement. Under the law, among couples of a certain rank, there is no other way to do this without the feminine party risking financial and social repercussions."

Louzaun listened in complete confusion. He looked to the fat man in the chair again, who wasn't reacting.

"But I thought...isn't this about ransom?"

"Oh, no, your Grace," the blond woman continued. "We are not kidnappers...of *that* sort, anyway. Sign the separation document, and you'll be free to go. You may then call the authorities and make a complaint about this experience. It won't matter to us."

"You work for my brother, Dmitrio, don't you?" Louzaun expostulated then, seizing upon the thought the instant it came to him. "He wants me to marry Gilballa, the Emperor's grand-niece! You can repeat to

him what I have already conveyed: *I* choose whom I choose! Cyndranehya Vernes is that person. Tell him we are in love -- a state of being he wouldn't understand. I will not sign this thing. Now, release me, and provide medical assistance to my Advisor."

The heavy seated man never wavered in his attention, but seemed to be hearing something else. With a start, Louzaun realized the fellow was listening to an auto-translation of his words. His captor couldn't understand what they were saying!

"Your brother has nothing to do with this, your Grace," the woman told him.
"Though perhaps you should heed his

advice in this matter."

"I...I confess to some confusion. What do you want?"

"Your signature. Nothing more."

"But why...why don't you want us to marry? Who are you?"

The blond woman's bland expression began to wear thin, and a touch -- just a kiss -- of fury rolled over that wide brow. She started to respond, but the fat man spoke first, and for the first time. As expected, his Ceision was horrible.

"You...we no want you...no good."

"What do you mean?!" Louzaun

demanded, taking the foreigner's broken words as an insult. "Who says I'm unfit? I'll thrash that man...or see him on the field of honor!"

"No...not you...you...people...close people...*aaaah!*" he threw up a hand in apology and disgust, then held his left wrist to his mouth. He spoke quietly for a moment into a device strapped under his jacket sleeve, then held the arm steady while the small computer translated aloud with artificial ponderousness.

"From everything we've been able to learn, you're harmless enough. Your *family*, on the other hand...is concerning."

"Concerning? *My* family?! Who are you

to talk about the Du'wentelias? How do you dare?! Where are you from? Are you Alliance? What's your interest here, and why...?"

The man had been muttering into his wrist while Louzaun had been blustering; the device interrupted him.

"I am hardly your biggest concern right now. The Du'wentelias have designs on Vernes assets and holdings, and intend to use this marriage as an inroad to acquire them. That cannot be allowed to happen."

"This is slanderous, sir! A lie, or at best, a delusion. Mine is one of the oldest and most respected families in all the Empire! Perhaps I cannot adequately defend

against your assertion with fact and detail, as I don't have much knowledge of family business affairs, yet I declare that assertion to be false without any reservation."

The man listened to his wrist, nodded, then muttered at it again.

"I believe *you* believe that," the device translated. "Yet, shares in various companies and business endeavors owned by the Vernes family have been insisted upon as part of the dowry, have they not?"

"I leave such concerns to my *Advisor* and parents. Understand, sir...I don't *need* Vernes money. My family gets by rather

well, if I may say. And what would I do with these shares, in any case? Trade them? Attend board meetings? I don't do such things. I'm a painter; an artist."

"You're a dilettante," came the impassive reply, "but let's not quarrel. Your avocation is reassuring. It means your very life, tonight."

The fat man made a quick hand motion toward Qeffan, still seated and hooded. The blond woman crossed to him, and roughly pulled off the head covering, as if she were angry. Her face was still composed, but it seemed to be a struggle.

"...anything you want!" Qeffan Hydd sobbed, his plea becoming suddenly

audible.

Louzaun had to crane his neck to see the man's condition, which, as it turned out, was shocking.

Black, thinning hair was wet with sweat and blood, sticking up wildly in spikes and tufts. Dark purple, almost black, bruises surrounded the Adviser's eyes, which were swollen, and almost entirely closed. His nose was equally distended, and bent to one side. Cheeks were cut and raw. His whole face was bloated and dark, like an over-ripe grape that was seeping and shiny, ready to split open.

"God in Heaven..." Louzaun muttered at the sight of him.

And just like that, this was happening. It was not a game, or some courtship tale. It was *real*, and terrible.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" the advisor offered gratefully, as if they'd given him a wondrous boon, slurring through split and swollen lips. "As I said, I'm an Advisor to the Du'wentelia family. I, myself, have personal ransom insurance, so a payout is readily available..."

"Qeffan," the young man cautioned, "say nothing more. I don't believe this is entirely what it seems..."

As if to punctuate the observation, the blond woman hauled back and punched the Advisor full in the face with a sharp

impact that sent him and his chair backward to the floor. He cried out with a gasp, then lay there facing the ceiling, still taped to his chair, sobbing horsely, spraying blood, tears, and snot.

"Please!" Louzaun implored, "You don't have to do this! My family will give you anything you want!"

"Then sign the paper," the woman hissed in his ear.

"I...I'll sign away my shares! Is that the issue? Nothing! No dowry required!"

"That's not good enough," the man across from him explained through his wrist.

"Naturally, you're proud of your family. You love them, but not everyone does,

and those people have very good reasons for feeling that way. You will release Cyndranehya Anianna Bloxiel-Mammut Vernes from her marriage agreement. There will be no reparations sought against her family for the failure of the engagement, and you will *not*, under any circumstances, make contact with her again. Ever. I would ask if you understand, but I know you don't. It's immaterial."

"How is that?!" Louzaun demanded, feeling his pent-up outrage rising at last. "I love her! I love Cyndranehya, do hear me, sir? And she loves me. I know of no other woman I'd rather spend my life with. I am Louzaun Du'wentelia! I've had woman throwing themselves at me since

the day I was born -- yes, opportunists attempting unions with my family when I was even an infant! Great, important matches! Marriages that would have brought with them tremendous fortune and honor. Yet, there's only one woman for me. I will never renounce her. I would sooner renounce my blood relations, my title, my fortune. Never, sir. I will never be faithless. Do your worst, torture me, kill me if that is your wish. For I will die with Cydranehya in my heart!"

"Don't be a romantic fool, boy!" Qeffan sputtered from the floor, spittle flying. "A bride is nothing, but a means to an end! There are endless women for a man like you! Sign the paper, and let us be free!"

The fat man pointed to the head covering that the tall blond woman had dropped upon the floor. She snatched it up, and waved for a few of the others nearby to sit the advisor upright in his chair once again. They did so, and she stuffed it over his head, cutting off pleas and protests.

Louzaun, as if in solidarity with that man, sat as high as he could under the circumstances, proud and upright in his own stiff-backed chair, ready for their arguments and loss of patience. Ready for pain and death.

His one love, his beautiful Cydranehya - - small, smart, passionate -- was in his mind's eye. He saw her then as he first had, at Prince Reedus' Winter Ball three

years before: a lacy white gown, sparkling gems from head-to-toe; entirely present, a center of all eyes, participating while yet seeming to hold everyone and everything in contempt.

The man across from him watched without so much as blinking. After a full minute of horrible silence, he muttered into his wrist device.

"Why do you think we brought along your Adviser tonight? Do you know who he really is?"

"Of course I do, he's..."

"He's a monster!" the hard-faced woman at his side spat, the sheen of her self-control gone at last. "The very architect

of the Barlow Troubles!"

"What...what are you saying?"

"He worked for that filth, Des'que, in his intelligence branch! This man drafted the entire campaign!"

"What campaign? I don't understand. Please! Barlow? That...that was a peasant uprising. They say the terraforming was flawed...the air on that world was bad. It poisoned people, and they became animals; they went insane. Cydranehya's own father was their victim. *She* nearly died..."

He trailed off, seeing the man across from him as if for the first time.

"*Hononklo Estarran...*" he whispered, and the other nodded.

"She...Cyndranehya has spoken of you...everyone speaks of you with the greatest respect and gratitude! Sir...or..."

Louzaun was at a loss. A person of his own station did not speak to the lowly *Familiancano* of another family as if they were equals, and yet...in this circumstance...?

The young man chose to embrace it.

"My dear sir," he began formally, but the other raised his off-hand, and spoke into the other one.

"When your betrothal was announced, your previous Advisor was killed in a

vehicular crash, which, I assure you was no accident. Qeffan Hydd was then recommended to your parents by Baron Des'que as a replacement. The Baron may be looking to exact some form of revenge against the Vernes family for how things turned out in the Chorryl Prime star system. Or, perhaps not. It doesn't matter. Your family's association with that man, however secret, makes *you* an unacceptable match for a woman who has suffered at his hands."

"I am not my parents!"

"Prove it. Sign the document. If you truly love her, you'll set her free without scandal."

"How can I?" he begged. "How can you ask me to tear out my own heart? How can you do this to *her*?"

"He isn't," came a familiar voice, speaking in a familiar Lowspeak dialect. It floated from the shadows on the far side of the room. A short patch of darkness disengaged itself.

The fat man stood, and said cautioningly, "Cyndra..." But the same voice, in accented Ingliss, cut him off.

"No, Spacer! *I* must do this thing."

Cyndranehya stepped into the light, and approached. Her brown hair was tucked snugly under a dark beret, and she had on a long jacket much like the fat man's,

with gloves to match. She wore no make-up, something he'd never seen before in all their courtship. She looked stark and real in a jolting sort of way.

She stopped at his side.

"I asked my uncle to come," his fiance told him, in Lowspeak. "I asked for his help."

"But...why?" he begged, drowning in this place, in the utter confusion, the total astonishment.

"Because I trust him. So does my family."

"*We* are to be family!"

"I thought so. But your parents and your

brothers are steeped in secrets, Louzaun. They're filthy with them. This...man," she spoke, rolling a finger in Qeffan Hydd's direction, "he is a danger. An enemy agent of the Vernes family. Do you understand that? He is *my* enemy, and he works for you."

"Then he's fired! Right now, this moment. And to blazes with my family. I renounce them! I renounce their secrets! Cyndranehya, I will throw it all aside, just..."

"It's not enough!" she pronounced passionately. "You're branded by their schemes. We would be marginalized, pushed aside by my own family. My elder cousin, L'mond, is Vernes Patriarch,

as you know. He would *have* to isolate us, if only for safety's sake. Louzaun, listen to me, and understand my words: I will not be cast out of my family for any man. I do so love you. But now...goodbye."

She leaned down and kissed him. It was warm and inviting. And then it was over.

"Cyndranehya..." he breathed as she walked away. He said it again as the other shadows back there gathered her up and left as they had come. He shouted it as the metal door clanged shut.

Louzaun continued watching the darkness, waiting for a reprieve that couldn't come.

He was crying.

Well, and what of it?

The blond woman held up the paper again, and the stylus. Her expression was no different than ever.

Her nails were unpainted, and the one on her left index finger appeared as all the others: plain, long, but not overly so. It sliced through the tape that bound his right hand like a razor, which it likely was.

He looked to the heavy man across from him, who was still on his feet from when Cyndranehya had come forward. That one arched an eyebrow, as if to ask what Louzaun would do with the truth.

Hononklo Estarran.

The Alliance traveler who had appeared out of nowhere to deliver the First Daughter of Family Vernes from Barlow's fires and butchery. A dangerous fighting man, and near-legend among the noble families. A fellow so mysterious and gossiped over that many in Society doubted his very existence.

The sight of this short, portly slob wouldn't be likely to convince them otherwise!

No.

No!

They didn't get to do this. Not to him. Not to a Du'wentelia! No one snatched a someone of his class off the street, just to terrorize and intimidate! No pathetic Alliance pig could force a Noble son of the Empire to...

But the space man had been watching him closely, and could see this angry resolve forming. He nodded his head at the hooded man, who was sobbing, begging, praying in total silence.

The blond woman turned to Qeffan, drew a pistol from under her jacket, put it against the bag, and fired: a smooth action, free of delay, regret, or hesitation.

The weapon was of a silenced design; it

made a gaseous sound, like someone passing wind, and the black hood ballooned as if a melon had burst within. Qeffan Hydd fell again, and for the last time, his chair clattering over upon filthy concrete. Wet redness began widening upon the floor almost immediately.

The woman re-holstered her pistol, and returned to Louzaun's side.

He couldn't look away. He watched the dark pool growing, spreading, moving -- as if there was yet life somewhere in that wreck.

Oh God! Nothing had worked. Louzaun hadn't been able to stop any of it. His training, his marriage, his finest

intentions: they meant nothing at all.

"Your Grace?" the blond woman asked evenly, starkly. She spoke without emotion...or, perhaps with that sort of self-control that keeps emotion in hand despite a kind of hatred he still couldn't picture, even having seen it.

The paper and stylus.

He didn't read the document. It was in Latin, of which he'd always been a poor student; still, he didn't run his eyes along the text, couldn't bear to see the words that would break his heart. He simply took up the pen with a horror-palsied hand, and scribbled where the woman pointed.

She thanked him coldly, folded the paper, took back the stylus, and tucked them both away next to her hidden pistol.

With razored hands, she sliced away the remaining tape holding him to the chair.

The fat man in front of him gestured to a door at the side, which one of the others opened. There were stairs beyond.

Louzaun glanced down at his Advisor while stepping by. The pool was bigger than ever.

Then he was through the door, up the stairs, past another thug at the outer exit, and yes! Outside! He was alive!

The young man ran, stumbled, tripped

just meters from the door, springing up again, city grime on next year's cut. He slowed to a walk, sobbing, stepping from the alley, out onto the street.

Two blocks to his right, the sparkling, stuttering signs and hovering razzibots before Dame Giabarradio's ballroom illumined the dark night like a dream.

Reduced to a shuffle, now crying silently, relief and despair whipped Louzaun down the sidewalk like an overseer; they goaded him, animating leaden legs, pushing him past happy lovers and beautiful strangers, forcing him into the light.

END