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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ENVOY, HER ***

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Vyrtl weighed a pebble in his hand. "You expect to be executed," he stated flatly.

the envoy, *Her*

by H. B. Fyfe

The Emperor must be getting old, they thought, to deal so mercifully with the upstart Jursan Rebels—which was quite true. He was not too young to dream....

Despite the concentrated patrol defenses, the Emperor's space yacht slipped down to the surface of Klo, second moon of Jursa, without incident. Only recently, such a show of force would have drawn a flight of torpedo rockets from the rebellious planet; but the Jursan agitators for a scientific renaissance had at last been beaten to their knees.

A landing tube was connected between the ship and the transparent dome that had been constructed on this airless satellite for the convenience of the lord of the system. Notables in military posts or present on some other excuse gathered to greet their master.

"By Pollux!" gasped one onlooker. "Those guards must all be seven feet tall!"

The file of magnificent soldiers, who gave the impression of being almost entirely armor-plated, deployed on either side of the landing tube exit. They were followed by a figure glittering enough to be an emperor; but since he was attended by only four officials in bejeweled scarlet the crowd recognized him for a chamberlain.

"His Illustrious Sublimity the Lord Vyrtl, Viceroy for Terra, Emperor of Pollux, and of all its fourteen planets, and of all their thirty-seven satellites, and of all the nations thereon, Co-ordinator of the planet Hebryxid—"

It went on at some length, but the man who led the next little parade out of the landing tube paid no heed. The part about Terra was a vestige of centuries before communications had lapsed, and served no purpose but to remind him that new contact with the original planet was one of the Jursans' aims. The rest of his titles he could, by now, recite backwards.

The crowd of officialdom gaped at him as he stood there. He was a tall man, which conveniently helped conceal a tendency toward obesity. Under the excess tissue, his face had a massive strength, with broad bones and jutting chin and nose; but the gray eyes were weary and cynical.

"Wilkins!" he ordered in a bored monotone. "Find which yokel is in charge, and burn a jet under him!"

A resplendent aide hustled forward to where the official in charge of the dome was wetting his lips over his rehearsed greeting. It was quickly made plain that His Illustrious Sublimity desired transportation and a look at the quarters he would have to put up with until the jackals on Jursa came to their senses.

The official had tried to provide for every known imperial fancy. He smirked delightfully when Vyrtil caught sight of the lozards tethered at one side.

"By Pollux!" exclaimed the Emperor, his eye brightening. "We hadn't expected the pleasure of riding till this was over."

"He tells me they have built a forest, Sire," reported the aide. "About half a mile square. At least, you will have some relaxation."

"Good! It is all very well playing the soldier and roughing it informally, but a man must have *something!*"

He surveyed the reptilian mounts that were led forward and chose one whose eight legs were a trifle longer than average. With reasonable agility, considering his bulk, he hoisted himself into the saddle and set off toward the miniature palace awaiting him. His guardsmen trotted alongside while the rest of his retinue mounted and followed as best they could.

He drew rein once, to gaze up through the dome at the yellow-green disk of Jursa. Wilkins overtook him.

"Note the dark line in the southern hemisphere, Sire," he said. "The result of Marshal Tzyfol's sweep—the one that broke through their fleets and led to their plea for terms."

"Excellent!" said the Emperor. He lowered his gaze and stretched his neck uncomfortably. Vyrtil was unaccustomed to looking up at anything or anybody. "They will bear our mark."

"It will teach them the lesson they deserve," agreed Wilkins dutifully. "Autonomy, indeed!"

"Quite," said Vyrtil, urging his lozard forward. "Who are those fools to think they can demand exemption from established imperial laws ... they should be satisfied with the standard textbooks and forget their puttering! Ha—what's this?"

He pulled up before a small replica of the palace.

"The dome engineer built it for your wives, Sire."

"Our wives?"

"Twenty of them volunteered to share the rigors of the campaign. Their special transport arrived just before us."

"Humph!" grunted Vyrtil, riding past.

Early the next morning, after the engineers had arranged a dawn for his benefit, Vyrtil called a council of his commanders. Chief-of-Staff Robert Tzyfol reported on the situation.

The rebellious Jursans were sending a representative to ask for terms. In the Marshal's strongly expressed opinion, no leniency was necessary. The imperial fleets were slowly but surely stamping out all resistance, making Jursa unlivable.

"Abject submission is their only course," he declared.

It was the sort of declaration with which Vyrtil might have agreed, had he been able to voice it first.

As it was, he announced that he would keep it in mind when judging the fate of the rebels. He had no inclination to destroy a perfectly good, tax-paying planet if he could whip its inhabitants into line by other means.

He ended the conference by stating his intention to ride in the artificial forest. He enjoyed the glances of relief among the generals—especially the older and more brittle ones—when he gave them leave to resume their military duties instead of attending him.

A few hours later, Wilkins found Vyrtil and a small retinue resting beside a pool at the edge of the forest.

"The rebel envoy has arrived, Sire," he reported.

Vyrtil kicked a pebble into the pool and spat after it. "We shall see him immediately," he announced. "No use wasting ceremony on the villain."

Returning to the palace, he strode into the audience chamber and signaled for the envoy to be admitted. Still warm from his ride and insultingly disheveled, he sat in the imitation of the great throne on his capital planet, Hebryxid.

"If he isn't brisk," he muttered to Wilkins, "we may teach him promptness by hunting him through the forest tomorrow."

Above the whispers of hastily assembled officers, courtiers, and a few of Vyrtil's wives, a chamberlain announced, "The Jursan envoy, Daphne Foster."

"A woman?" murmured Vyrtil.

"So it seems. She looks quite ... distinguished."

"Ha! The witty Wilkins! A pretty choice of words."

The woman approached the throne amid a low buzz from Vyrtil's attendants, and bowed gracefully. Gracefully but not too abjectly, considering the situation and his own position, Vyrtil thought. She raised her head and endured his deliberate scrutiny.

She *would* have to be a rebel, Vyrtil told himself. He supposed they had scoured all Jursa for a real beauty to dazzle him; but they would discover that it would not work.

At first glance, she had seemed slim, but he saw now that, though tall, she was very well proportioned. A net of tiny, glittering jewels was woven into the black hair that hung to her shoulders. Her features were regular, but expressively alive compared to the artificial placidity of the court beauties.

But what disturbed the Emperor of Pollux most was the way she looked at him! He felt that it was stretching diplomacy a bit far.

A smile in deep blue eyes was pleasant, when someone was sufficiently accomplished to muster it in his presence; but this was a shade too familiar. She seemed to put herself on a level with him—as if to share an amusement beyond the others present.

The next moment, he was trying to decide just what quality made hers the most beautiful female voice he had ever heard. Consequently, he missed most of the formula about "the gratitude of all Jursa" at his receiving "his humble slave."

That smile lit the blue eyes again. It was hard to tell if a ghost of it lingered at the corners of the full lips, but the total effect was of anything but humility. He pulled himself together, aware that Wilkins had noticed his hesitation.

"So the Jursans seek to soften our just anger?" he said. "They send their surrender by one who is obviously the loveliest jewel of their misguided world."

A few of the courtiers snickered dutifully. Vyrtil was annoyed; he had not meant to be funny. He glanced swiftly at the half-dozen wives present, but their expressions showed no jealousy. He decided that the empty-headed creatures had at least learned not to embarrass him publicly.

"Your Illustrious Sublimity is too gracious," replied the envoy. "I regret that my message is not unqualified surrender."

Vyrtil frowned. "You dare ask terms?"

"I must carry out the commands laid upon me by the Council."

She smiled into his eyes and made a rueful little gesture with both hands, which she allowed to fall gracefully to her sides. Vyrtil's gaze was led up and down her figure again.

He forced himself to meet her glance. Rather than expressing any resentment of his appraisal, it suggested that her resistance to his demands would be merely formal.

They've sent me a clever one, he thought, but they will find I cannot be bought off so cheaply. Still, it can do no harm to show that Vyrtil can be the diplomat as well as a soldier.

"We are unprepared for any discussion," he said aloud. "Since we are not disposed, however, to be hasty in our judgement, you may wait upon us in the council chamber in two hours."

The envoy stepped lithely aside when he rose. With some difficulty, Vyrtil kept his eyes front as he strode from the hall with Wilkins and his personal guards at his heels. He hastened to his own chambers for a bath and change of clothes.

He allowed himself to be bathed, scented, and dressed in the most imperial costume he had brought from Hebraxid. Blonde Xota, his official favorite who had taken no chance of losing her place by absence from his side, admired his dazzling jewels and scarlet silks extravagantly. Vyrtil permitted her to serve him a light lunch, paying little attention to her chatter.

Once, when he had taken her from the Co-ordinator of his sixth planet, he had fancied himself in love with her; now he merely amused himself guessing from day to day to whom she sold her supposed influence. He sometimes wondered if any wife he owned were innocent of spying.

He rose, summoned Wilkins, and led a small procession to the council chamber. They found the necessary quota of high officers waiting. Daphne Foster was summoned.

Vyrtrl took his place on a dais at the head of the table, and his aide arranged the gold-stiffened ceremonial robe. The generals made little professional jokes, each striving to act as if the victory had been mostly his own doing. Even the lean Chief of Staff, Tzyfol, looked satiated.

The Jursan envoy was announced.

Once again, Vyrtrl was so fascinated by the girl that he paid scant heed to the ceremonious greetings. He decided she was younger than he had thought earlier.

Finally, the conference got down to business.

"My people," said Daphne Foster, "ask but a few minor concessions, which we believe will benefit the remainder of the Empire as much as Jursa."

"We are disposed to believe your good intentions," said Vyrtrl encouragingly.

He caught himself smiling, and immediately resumed the mask of dignity.

The Jursans, it developed, would give up demands for autonomy and resume allegiance to the Empire. They pleaded, however, for freedom of scientific research, promising that their discoveries would be placed promptly at Vyrtrl's disposal.

In the matter of indemnities, they were willing, Daphne Foster said with an intimate glance for Vyrtrl alone, to rely upon his generosity. They asked only that they be allowed a reasonable time to restore the damage suffered in the fighting and that they be permitted to make part of the payments in the technical equipment they were so skilled at manufacturing.

Some of the officers raised objections that Vyrtrl thought well-put, but he overruled them. The main point, he pronounced, was to restore a valuable possession to productivity. There would be no looting and destruction.

He felt less sure of himself when old Tzyfol protested that free research was one of the roots of the trouble. Consequently, perhaps, the imperial glare that silenced the Marshal was the more withering.

After that, Vyrtrl sat back and allowed his cohorts to promulgate a number of minor, harassing conditions. These would satisfy their egos to some degree, keep the Jursans aware of the folly of questioning his authority again, and show their envoy how things might have gone had Vyrtrl not been merciful.

In the end, he added one condition of his own.

"It will be necessary," he said, "to hold frequent conferences on these affairs. If the Jursan Council should appoint their envoy as permanent ambassador to our court, we should be inclined to approve."

It was tantamount to a command, but the girl showed no resentment. Not that Vyrtrl expected anything so rash as outward reluctance—but a lifetime of piercing the flattery of courtiers had made him a shrewd reader of facial expressions.

He granted permission for an immediate broadcasting of the treaty, overriding Tzyfol's desire for deeper consideration in favor of Daphne Foster's plea that delay would cost lives.

After having copies of the rather simple document drawn up for the facsimile broadcasters, Vyrtrl gave her leave to depart. Without seeming to watch, he admired her gait as she walked from the conference chamber.

Afterwards, he left the generals to their post-mortem and retired with Wilkins to a private balcony for a bottle of wine.

"How did it go?" he asked, leaning back more comfortably when his aide had removed the heavy robe.

"You were most generous, Sire, or so I thought."

"It is a virtue that requires a public display now and then, to strengthen the roots of the myth that grows from it. Too bad old Tzyfol failed to see that. Why do you suppose he tried to be obstinate?"

"I expect, Sire, he disliked having an old woman seem to get the better of him after he had won the military victory."

Vyrtrl laughed indulgently and sipped his wine.

"Even Tzyfol," added Wilkins, "might have been generous had she been young and pretty. Unfortunately, I suppose, it takes an old head to be an envoy."

The Emperor set his glass down very carefully.

"What did you say?" he demanded evenly.

Wilkins stared, with the expression of a man who fears he may suddenly recall having used an obscene word in polite company, or having bragged falsely and unwittingly of tax-evasion to an imperial collector.

Vyrtl repeated his question in a tone a note higher.

"I-I-I said that if she were young and p-pretty—"

"How old do you think she was?" rasped Vyrtl.

"About s-s-seventy. Maybe seventy-five."

"What?"

He surged to his feet, overturning the table. Immediately the glass doors opening on the balcony were flung back with a splintering crash.

Four gleaming guardsmen charged out with drawn weapons, each obviously aching to become a hero. Wilkins prudently stood rooted, peering at them from the corner of his eye.

Vyrtl recovered his poise with an effort.

"As you were!" he ordered. "Help General Wilkins pick up the table I knocked over. Clumsy thing!"

It was done, and the guard captain apologized for the doors.

"Relax, Wilkins," said Vyrtl when they were again alone. "It just occurred to me that I ought to have another word with that woman. Have someone get hold of her at once!"

He left the disordered balcony and waited in a nearby library. The books lining the walls were real, he noticed idly—another painstaking point by the designer of the palace.

There Wilkins found him presently, to report that the Jursan envoy was already on her way back to that planet.

"I called the landing field guard," he explained, "but she had already taken off. His spotters swept space for them and got a curve on the ship."

"Of course," mused Vyrtl. "The treaty has been broadcast."

"Shall I have the patrols close in on her rocket?"

"No." The Emperor pondered a moment. "Have a telescreen set up in here so we can speak directly."

A frenzied bustle ensued as Wilkins directed a platoon of awed techs through the process of bringing the mountain to Mohammed. In the end, the Jursan ship was in communication. The aide called for Daphne Foster, then stood aside.

Vyrtl was glad, when she appeared, that Wilkins had placed a deep armchair before the screen for him.

Was *this* the woman with whom he had—?

She was still tall, but her white hair gave her the look of the seventy years with which Wilkins had credited her. Deep laugh-wrinkles bracketed the mouth, with more at the corners of the still bright eyes. The delicate bones of her face were more prominent.

There was nevertheless a clear resemblance to the Daphne Foster he had received earlier.

She looks ... she looked, thought Vyrtl, *as this woman might have looked when she was young ... or might have wanted to look.*

No, that was not quite it.

As she knew a man would have liked her to look!

The woman on the screen spoke, her eyes smiling into his in a manner that was painfully familiar.

"Your Illustrious Sublimity has become the first to share my little secret."

Vyrtl, with a concentration of will, prevented his eyes from peeping sidelong at Wilkins' expression.

"We are somewhat surprised," he said, knowing it for an asinine remark but afraid to risk his dignity by being plainer.

"Of course," she said, "I hardly expect it to make any difference in the imperial announcement of peace, but if any clarification is desired of me, I shall be happy to oblige."

Vyrtl thought furiously. Had he actually *said* anything to Wilkins or anyone else? He tried to

remember every word spoken at the conference. It seemed to him there had been one or two slips, but they had been taken for imperial witticisms.

No, he was safe enough. The Jursan Council and their technicians naturally must know the "clarification" offered him, but they would know better than to publicize it. He could afford to show no mercy if they did. As things stood, it might be best to stand by his published word.

"We desire," he said slowly, "that you, as ambassador, return immediately. You will have every facility to communicate with your government, to repay the inconvenience."

The old woman stared him in the eye, then bowed silently.

Vyrtrl saw that she realized what it might mean. He hoped she would not arrange an "accident" before her ship returned.

He had Wilkins take over and check with the captain of the rocket. It was determined that the best effort would bring the ship back to the dome on Klo about "mid-morning." Vyrtrl left orders that the woman was to be brought before him the moment she arrived, and retired for the night.

He found Xota sprawled confidently upon his bed, and kicked her off in a temper. His groping had found no loose object to fling after her as she slunk out the door, and that made his temper worse. He was a long time getting to sleep....

The next morning, he pecked at his breakfast and sneered at the artificial dawn that had been delayed for his benefit.

"Get me a lozard and a squad of guards!" he snarled to Wilkins. "I'll have a run through the woods while I wait."

He left the guards at the fringes of his engineers' forest and rode the eight-legged reptile recklessly among the huge trunks. Since the builder had artfully omitted all low branches, there was little chance of his knocking his head off.

Towards noon, he paused to rest at the little pool on the edge of the woods. He waved to a group of guards he saw peering at him across an open field of what looked very much like grass. One of the men ran over.

"The Jursan envoy is back, Your Illustrious Sublimity."

Vyrtrl sighed.

"Tell General Wilkins to bring her here immediately."

He turned away and sat upon a flat stone beside the pool.

After a while, he noticed that the ground was liberally supplied with pebbles for casting into the water. He was watching the spreading ripples about fifteen minutes later when he heard approaching voices behind him.

A glance over his shoulder showed him Wilkins and two guards escorting the old woman. He turned away, tossing another pebble into the pool with a half-hearted motion of his arm.

When Wilkins coughed discreetly behind him, he told the aide and the guards to withdraw. He listened to the footsteps until he knew they were beyond range of ordinary conversation.

"You are the same Daphne Foster?" he asked, still facing the pool.

"The same, Your Illustrious Sublimity."

"Let us dispense with formality. Tell me how you did it."

"It is simple ... in a way. But it requires the use of a not-so-simple instrument."

"Such as I?" he asked, apparently intent upon the water.

"I did not mean Your Illustrious—I did not mean it that way. It is a little triumph of our Jursan technicians, which will shortly be at your disposal. I used it to force an illusion upon you."

"And very cleverly, I admit. Do you have it with you?"

"Yes. It is compact. It merely operates upon the idea that other forces can be used to produce hypnosis besides lights, drugs, and soothing sounds."

"Turn it on!" ordered Vyrtrl.

He waited a moment, then twisted around on the stone to face her. There was no sign of the woman he had seen crossing the field. Before him seemed to stand the black-haired, lithe girl.

The only change was in her eyes, which no longer smiled into his so provocatively.

Funny, thought Vyrtil. *When we actually were strangers, she seemed so intimate. Only now does she look at me so coldly.*

"You see?" she said, and started to reach for some switch or button concealed by the jewel at her breast.

Vyrtil stopped her with a gesture.

"You must also be skilled in the sciences of the mind," he remarked. "What I mean is ... I suppose you never really looked like that?"

She shook her head a trifle ruefully.

"Not quite. Most of it is in your own imagination. We know a good deal about you, Your—"

"You deduced somehow what I would look for," interrupted Vyrtil, nodding. "I can see how a study of the things I chose to have about me—paintings, statues, furnishings, even people—might yield keys to my preferences. You did remarkably well."

He tossed another pebble and stared at the ripples.

"I suppose every man has his ideal of a woman," he said. "I doubt that any man has *seen* his absolute ideal—except me. I wonder if you know what it does to one?"

He chose a flat pebble and sent it skipping across the surface with a vicious snap of his wrist. It bounced three ... four ... five times, and sank.

"I presume," said Daphne Foster, breaking a tight little silence, "that you will grant me time to set my affairs in order?"

Vyrtil weighed a pebble in his hand.

"You expect to be executed," he stated flatly.

"Naturally, we knew all along that someone would have to pay for tricking you. The Emperor of Pollux must, after all, maintain his dignity."

Vyrtil wondered if he had detected a note of irony in the musical voice. He marveled anew at the pleasure of listening to her. But of course, he reminded himself, he heard his own imagined ideal of what a lovely woman's voice should be.

"No," he said abruptly, swinging about. "I am merely going to insist that you fulfill the terms of the agreement by remaining at my court. I want you near me from now on."

She blinked at that.

"But, surely ... you must realize ... it is only an illusion!" she protested.

"As am I," said Vyrtil. "A figurehead imprisoned in a maze of formalities and so-called pleasures."

He saw that she could not understand what could be wrong with his position.

"Once, when I was very young," he said, "I thought I would rule. But fourteen planets require a whole *council* of co-ordinators! I gave up that idea and tried to enjoy myself."

She stared at him uncertainly. He waved a hand at the artificial forest.

"It has been like that ever since. They fall all over themselves to devise new ways of getting my attention and to present pleasures and entertainment I am incapable of enjoying. I have more wealth than I can estimate, I sometimes forget which palace I am in, even my wives look alike by now."

"I must sympathize with Your Illustrious Sublimity."

He flung her a hard stare.

"Perhaps you ought! Even my generals and their soldiers have their dreams—of conquest or loot. The engineer who built this dome pictures himself famous and admired. Wilkins is proud of his influence, and other courtiers have visions of doing away with Wilkins and replacing him."

He stood up restlessly.

"You will laugh at me, I know—but there is little enjoyment in life when every whim is catered to at a snap of one's fingers. What have I to *desire*?"

"I see." She nodded slowly. "The old saying about the pleasure of anticipation outweighing that of attainment."

"You should know. You Jursans and your scientific renaissance, your goal of contacting Terra again."

He beckoned to Wilkins and the two guards. They ran eagerly across the grass.

"You see?" he snorted. "Sometimes I almost wish they would ignore me!"

He looked at her and saw the blue eyes achieve their knowing, amused smile once more.

"That's right," he said, smiling back. "Now I shall have something to keep my thoughts from becoming dull and bored. A man needs some impossible dream for moments when he wants to relax."

Wilkins panted up, trying to look alert and willing.

"The unattainable Lady Daphne will accompany us to our capital," said Vyrtl. "Make the necessary arrangements."

He enjoyed the way his aide covered up a momentary bewilderment.

No one else will ever, ever understand this, he thought with an unaccustomed thrill of pleasure and amusement.

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