

*Ordinarily it is a great pleasure to be the Minister of Defense for the Terrana Hegemony—but even a Minister of Defense must make an occasional irreversible decision.*

## THE DEER PARK

*by Maria Russell*

THE DAY WAS A TENDER JOY OF green and gold, shot with flecks of blue that twinkled among the leaves of the tall old trees. The grass was long and soft (weaving itself into a carpet as proper grass should do) and the deer were warm shadows graciously drinking at the serene pool that lay at the end of the oaken tunnel. The Minister was very happy.

"It is," he said to his lovely companion, Ronde, "a great blessing to be the Minister of Defense for the Terrana Hegemony—for who else has as much time as I for such pleasant pursuits as these?"

Ronde agreeably dipped her flame-graced head, and squeezed the arm she held, just ever so little—just as she always did—to show that she was perfectly atune.

"It is," continued the Minister, "a grand and glorious blessing that the systems are so well protected, so well covered and concealed from whatever evil intelligences exist in the universe . . ."

"So well concealed from Nature," interposed Ronde. "How I hate the Old Ones! What nasty creatures!"

"And from the Old Ones," agreed the Minister, for, of course, Ronde had merely echoed his thoughts—thoughts which he had not yet had time nor inclination to express—echoed them just as she always did.

"And from Nature—that concatenation of the elder antagonists of man," he continued, "for, if such concealment were not the case, I should never have the opportunity to create or enjoy the dearest ideals of my heart." He was actually thinking of the deer park, but he pinched Ronde ever so slightly and gently, so that she could assume he was thinking of her. She squeezed his arm again. They were *perfectly* atune. But, after all, had he not created her?

They walked on, bending their steps into the winding footpaths, and stopping to fall upon a green



and leafy bed beneath one of the giant trees and indulge themselves for a moment, or for many minutes. Then they would rise, and continue their strolling, pausing here to stroke the antlers of a royal buck, or there to tickle the ears of a wistful doe and coo and chuckle over the reedy helplessness of a tiny fawn. The scene was altogether pastoral, altogether pleasant, altogether picturesque.

When they had encountered their third couch of leaves—or was it boughs, perhaps?—the Minister found himself slightly bored with so much indulgence, and Ronde, atune as always, rejected him with a slight push from her white hand and sat up, brushing her exquisitely milky brow with the same white hand, and petulantly waving the other.

"I think, Vwal," she breathed, "I would rather not—at the moment. I think, instead, I would prefer to see a she-lion, or some such grisly animal, attack one of the deer—a buck, of course, for the battle would not be excitingly equal if it were a doe. Do find a lioness for me, Vwal! Oh, do!"

She rose, searching among the far trees for the sight of the beast, for, of course, she knew that he could, would do that very thing.

The Minister felt a delicious pain slide through him like a razored knife. A struggle! How marvelous . . . he should have known that this most precious

puppet of his imagination would quite naturally discern the peak and crisis of satiation.

"No!" he cried, all outer sternness, all inner delight. "No, Ronde! how very immoral, how unethical of you! I will do no such thing!"

"Ah, please, dear, beautiful, most good Vwal!" Tears lept into her green eyes, and she clasped her little hands in a consummate attitude of supplication.

"Certainly not!" he said, calmer now, for he knew that he would consent, he knew the exact and fatal length to his endurance of this chasm in his being. It was an excellent and fantastic pleasure.

"Ah, Vwal," she murmured, sinking to her knees and clasping his, all in one graceful and generous movement, "I have never seen the frightful battle of these creatures, the torn flesh and the blood running, dripping on the greensward. I have never heard the cries of lust and terror, the piteous wailing of the wounded, felt the panic of the near-defeated. Let me know it, Vwal! Let me see, hear and feel!"

She pressed her supple body against his legs, and he was conscious of her breasts pleading with his tendons, her hands pleading with his thighs, her being—which was, of course, his own—pleading also. The pleasure boiled and bubbled, the pressure mounted, reaching the point of furtherest



containment, and, with a gasp of relief, he flashed the image in his mind into the qopot; the she-lion roared down on the buck. The battle was a classic specimen, and, in the end—as he had willed it—the buck victorious. The Minister was satisfied. He disliked cats of any description.

When quiet had at last settled down like a contented hen, the Minister looked around him, sensations of distaste tickling his brain. What is duller than a climax past and half-remembered?

"I believe," he said, "that I shall go to sleep." And he lay down on the last-encountered couch, and Ronde curled herself beside him, in the crook of his arm.

The Minister awoke some ten minutes later, his arm numbed from the weight of Ronde. He raised his head, and looked at her with an expression compounded of the previous sensations.

"Oh . . . disappear," he muttered, a little sulkily. She vanished as dew from the grass, but more swiftly. The Minister sighed, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

He was awakened again, this time in half an hour.

"Sire," burred the little pink flame of his fama, "there's a committee of persons to see you."

Who on earth would want to see me? thought the Minister, though he was as yet half asleep

and really supposed that he must be dreaming still.

"Oh, no one on Earth, Sire," responded the fama with excruciating veracity. "These are very minor persons," it went on, answering with its usual alacrity the unformed queries in his mind, "from a very minor planet, from a very minor system—a one-time colony of Terra's. One has no idea what they want," it concluded with an apologetic flicker.

"Oh, dear," mumbled the Minister, "I suppose I should tidy up."

He directed another image to the qopot, and, as the cloth on his body smoothed itself free of dirt and wrinkles, so did the shreds and gobbets of the big cat carcass disappear and the grass fade from rusty crimson to its usual green. As an afterthought, the Minister reduced its hue to more nearly a springtime chartruese.

"Show them in," he said, feeling the need for a spoken command. He tried to move his arm in an appropriately languid fashion toward what he thought was the entrance to the park.

But the roseal extension of his senses had already fluttered away in the opposite direction, and the Minister was left alone to attempt an attitude of comfort on the familiar boughs. He nervously summoned Ronde. She appeared a trifle tentatively, a trifle timidly, as if not certain that she was wanted. The Minister wasn't cer-



tain, either. His fingers were still numb, and, besides, he almost wished for a mind other than his own to tender the support and courage necessary to cope with this bizarre situation. But Ronde was better than nothing.

The visitors intensified the wish by entering behind him. The Minister cursed his bad memory: he had forgotten that only the week before he had removed the gates of the deer park to the eastern wall, where they would open to the morning sun. Not that it mattered where he placed his sun, for doubtless a quadrillion fireballs spun beneath the mamiraj, but an innate sense of fitness caused him to create his private dawn always to the east. Unfortunately, now, he was facing west, and Ronde was the one to notice the appearance of the strangers.

"There they come, Vwal," she stated, and he followed the pointing of the slender limb, hand and outstretched finger. He was annoyed that she had seen them first, and he created a large strawberry mark on her wrist.

There were only five of them—four men, and their leader. A female. The Minister noted in distaste her pale hair, her lean and vital body, her confident stride. He decided that he disliked blondes.

The girl came straight towards him—tall as himself and nearly half as powerful. The Minister felt threatened, abused. He

watched her swing her shoulders—gracefully, he had to admit on second thought, though, of course, he much preferred the slink and sloven walk of Ronde.

And worse still, the girl had an insolent nose, and brilliantly blue eyes . . . eyes blue as the—yes, it *was* sky! For he'd always made his own canopy that lovely, frightening color. He drew his glance away from the girl in confusion.

"Sire," announced the fama, "these are the persons from the planet Zzzt, which circles the star Osborne 542—a star, one understands, of eighteenth magnitude or perhaps nineteenth."

"Eighteenth," said the pale-haired girl, "and the true name of our sun is 'Sol,' after our parent." She smiled at the Minister with friendly abandon. The Minister stared back with shaky enmity.

"It is a *very* minor planet," soothed the fama, with a placating flicker, "and the only child of the star Osborne 542. A very insignificant piece of cosmic dust. Even today, their world is not within the mamiraj."

"You're not sealed?" cried the Minister. "How terrible!"

The girl smiled again, raw energy flooding from those disturbing eyes beneath that sun-frothed hair.

"We don't find it terrible at all."

"But . . . you live in the open," whispered the Minister, "under the . . . sky . . ."



"Yes," answered the girl, with simple truthfulness.

"It is blue, isn't it?" asked the Minister, suddenly confronted with the possibility that his sense of fitness had not functioned with perfection during the thousand-odd years of his life. "It is . . . blue?"

"Yes," answered the girl, again. "As blue as the skies of Earth. Though, of course," she added, quickly, "none of us have ever seen the skies of Earth."

"Nor have I," said the Minister, stiffly, "but I understand they're blue."

"Sire," murmured the fama, "these persons have come to implore your aid."

"Oh?" queried the Minister, uncertainly. "Well . . . perhaps you'd better sit down."

The four men gratefully arranged themselves on stump and log and fountain-lip. The girl tailor-crossed herself on the ground before the Minister.

"Sire," she began, without more ado, "for aeons we have lived, a peaceful people, tilling the soil, tending the herds, rearing our children and dying in our turn. The ways of space and the universe have been forgotten, much to our sorrow. The ships that brought us to Zzzt have been allowed to rust, until all we had left was an old creaking can of a vessel. It managed to return us to the worlds of Terrana before it fell to pieces at

one tiny blast from the invader."

"Invader!" cried the Minister, shuddering at the thought of alien presence—which alien presence he could not have said—"well! such incidents are behind us, for we lie safe behind the mamiraj . . . as can the planet Zzzt."

"Sire," responded the girl, "Zzzt thanks you. But we require another type of assistance."

There was a pause—expectancy counterpoint to a basso of faint terror.

"What type?" mumbled the Minister, but before he got his answer, Ronde was on her feet, her eyes blazing with emerald fire, her hair a contrasting aurora around her white, drawn face.

"Whelps of death!" she cried. "They wish to live in the ancient way, to be suckled and spat upon by the Old Ones!"

The girl seemed unperturbed.

"How else to see the stars?" she asked.

"We see them," snarled Ronde, "any day or night we please, and if, at any given moment, we don't care for them, we snuff them out."

"What joy in that," asked the girl, "to look at stars that may be dismissed like a candle flame caught between thumb and forefinger?"

"The joy of art, creation, power . . . security . . ." answered Ronde, calmly, framing her words in a triumphant smile.

"Security is not a joy," said the



girl. "Security is a disease." She spoke very quietly, in the manner of one who is forced to utter a sad truth, which for the sake of politeness and pity were better left unsaid. She held her sight upward for a moment, staring at Ronde; then she looked at the Minister and smiled gently, once, and let her gaze drift downwards, across the pool and the lawn, until it rested on the ground in front of the Minister's feet. Ronde followed the sweep of vision to the end; then she turned her eyes to the Minister; they were the puzzled eyes of an antique child.

"You answer her, then," she said, pouting a little. "Well? Aren't you going to answer her?"

The Minister looked from one to the other for a long moment, listening painfully for the notes of the old harmony—his harmony, with its agreeably futile accidentals—and hearing only fantastic modulations far too potent for his comfort: strange sounds from a stranger's world. Suddenly, he put his hands over his ears; then he got down on his knees, and, with first his back and last his neck crooked at the necessary angle, he looked up at the girl.

"What type?" he repeated, and his voice rang cold and hollow—so hollow that it frightened him until he remembered that the palms of his hands were pressing a myriad molecules of air against his ear drums; he removed his

hands at once. "What type," he said again, and was relieved to note that his words sang in the air—this time thinly, and with but a slight tremble.

"Ships!" The girl spoke eagerly. "Ships of space, new and bright and ready for battle."

"We . . . we have no such antiques." The singing voice became dry and whispery, and he could not have said whether it was from relief or sorrow.

But she pursued—over the inch of distance between them.

"You built them once!" she cried. "You must retain the skill!"

He retreated three inches—desperately.

"We . . . we do not need it. The qopot will create whatever we hold in our minds." And his throat choked—too late—as his brain grasped the implication of his words and the sense of that daring that had lain so deep within him that he had never recognized it before.

But the girl seemed to discover not victory, but defeat. Sadly she shook her head.

"Who can hold such a thing as a ship in his mind?"

Unsought release from unwanted duality flooded the Minister like the white rain of hope. He stood up on his feet once more, and stared down at the top of the girl's bent head.

"Exactly!" he crowed. "You must have a toria, my dear child,



a torial! and I've got none—none at all. I mislaid my entire collection at least six hundred years ago. Or was it five?" he mused. "No difference, I've not got any, so I'm really quite afraid we can't help you."

"Goodbye," said Ronde, haughtily waving her hand. At the sound of her voice, the strange notes clanged again, and the Minister wished to call out, "Wait!" but he said nothing, though the girl was now gazing up at him, sadness dampening her eyes.

"Sire," said the fama, "here is the toria you desire."

"I desire?" cried the Minister, falling back a pace, and it was with shock he noted, in truth, a queer little thought at the edge of his mind—so queer, indeed, that he did not even think to question the fama as to the whereabouts of that adolescent mislaying.

"No!" shrieked Ronde, and the strangers got to their feet.

For a thin little fire line was already uncurling from the center of the hovering flame. It wound itself into the qopot and nestled, layer on layer, around a whirling spoke. The Minister went closer and watched in horrified fascination, and he was the last to notice the look of shining wonder that appeared on the face of the girl as she looked down the great tunnel of trees to the end of the park.

There, there at the very end of the lane, by the little pool, was a

pure loveliness, poised like a great silver butterfly or gleaming bird—a ghost of old, beckoning once again to the man that lived in the Minister. He took a step forward, and was surprised to find that the others did likewise, for they had all moved as one creature, drawn by the shimmering vision that seemed to dance in ecstasy at the water's edge.

Ronde whimpered once, and flung herself on the ground at the Minister's feet. He hardly glanced at her.

"Sire!" cried the girl, excitedly, "you've given us back our home!"

"I?" exclaimed the Minister, again. He was bewildered. What had he to do with that foreign thing caught from the little spinning reel in the qopot? Yet that tiny, odd thought was bobbing and bobbing around in his mind. He looked at the fama, almost as if for guidance.

"Their fleet awaits them," said the fama, "on the far planets, just as Your Honor wished."

The Minister did not protest this time, but only stared for a minute; then he turned on his heel, without another word, and left them.

"Thank you," whispered the girl, to no one in particular.

The Minister stood behind the bole of one of the larger oaks and watched their departure. He was not really looking at the girl, but at the sheen of her hair glittering



through the shadows of the trees.

"Gold as the . . . sun," he whispered, and he followed the shining strands until they disappeared behind the moonsilver of the little ship.

And he continued to stare at the ship, for now, he thought, it lay like a poor, captured thing in the deathly beautiful embrace of the pool and gardens—eager for flight, but frozen into stillness.

A sense of sorrow overwhelmed him, and he watched, while the deer came, and nuzzled and grazed and cropped, unafraid and careless, so sure were they of the stranger's tameness and timidity.

Many minutes passed, and finally the Minister walked over to Ronde where she lay on the ground. He looked down at her, contemplation patterning his face. Experimentally, he changed one curl of her head to a more golden hue. Then a quiver of disgust crossed his heart, and he changed it back. She opened one eye, then the other, and gazed up at him.

"Have they gone, Vwal?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, dully, "they've gone."

"Good!" she cried, and leaped to her feet, as if from a make-believe sleep. "Dear Vwal," she murmured, as she fastened herself to his arm, "what terrible people those people were."

"Yes," agreed the Minister, still dully. He was looking at the ship.

"Vwal!" she cried. "Destroy it, quickly!"

"Why . . . I don't know if I can," he answered in a mild, deceptive voice.

"Try, try!" she urged, but he shook off her grasp and started for the ship as steel starts for a magnet—slowly at first, then more and more swiftly. Ronde stood for a moment still as eternity. Then she ran after him.

The Minister ran faster than she, and Ronde caught up with him only when he reached the ship.

"Vwal!"

He turned.

"I only want to look," he said.

"No!" Her hands were clawing at him, her body seeking to pull him away from the enemy. "You must not!"

He looked at her, his eyes gone wild and glad.

"Why must I not?" he cried, even as his hands found the secret of the entrance and the little ship opened itself to his longing.

She answered nothing, but only stared at him with the green eyes of his coward soul. With a great cry, he leaped for her throat and tore the slender cylinder of snowy flesh to bits and pieces. She did not call out—not once—and he was amazed when once more she lay in the grass at his feet to find that his hands were not stained with blood. Somehow he had expected her to be complete.



"The battle was excitingly equal," he muttered to himself. It was an epitaph.

He pivoted, to enter the ship, but the flickering light of the fama caught his eyes. It was glowing with a harsher color, and seemed to be expanding before his very gaze.

And, as he stared at the fama, the queer little thought, dipping and rolling around in his mind, reached out, convulsively, for the knowledge of the fama—and the pink flame disappeared, sucked into the whirlpool that was the Minister.

Suddenly he was aware of a vision both within and without his skull, a vision of gigantic galaxies and entire universes—wonder on wonder, starry cloud on cloud, infinite on infinite. He found himself the focus of a tremendous pinwheel of sensation, of desire for the sweet vastnesses of space.

The wheel spun faster and faster, and curiously appeared to condense toward a point before his mind, and the energy of his emotion directed itself straight through that point to the qopot. Swifter and swifter grew the impetus which was himself, forcing the qopot to destroy the mamiraj, to burst those bubbles which confined the worlds of the Hegemony. It seemed to the Minister that there should have been a noise of sorts, but there was no sound at all. Not even a gentle sigh, or breath of expiration.

He looked around him. The park was as it should be, a little dimmer, perhaps, for the sunlight seemed to be fading. The deer still grazed at the side of the ship, chocolate against green and silver.

"A dream," he whispered, "it was all a dream."

And then he saw the star, twinkling at the edge of a cloud. He did not know that the star was Venus, and the cloud frightened him, for he had never seen such a thing before.

But his brief fright deepened to a chill foreboding of still greater happenings. For the star, too, was fading, and not through any will of his own. And the deer park itself had a peculiar look. It seemed to grow transparent, and, through the incipient diaphaneity he could see the outlines of mountains, and these mountains seemed also pellucid, and beyond them were forests and mountains of that same strange clarity—glass rock on tree on rock, wavering and receding into the distance.

With a sudden burst of awful knowledge he looked down at his feet—and through them, through his pseudo-earth to its inspiration, and through them all into the stars and distances that should, by all rights, grace only the skies of the antipodes. He looked at his hands, his arms, his torso, and the veins and arteries and skeleton itself seemed faintly discernable through the cloth and flesh.



"What's happening?" he cried. "Ronde, Ronde!" She did not answer, but his own mind did. And he wondered how the Old Ones—the very life and rhythm of the cosmos—had tolerated these worlds of dream and shadow for so very long.

He sighed and sat down by Ronde, for there was really nothing else to do. He took up a lock of the rusty hair, and stroked it gently, and the brown deer came and snuffled at his hands, and he reached in his clothing for the bit of food which the deer were expecting. It was, he thought calmly, as solid as ever.

While the deer licked at his fingers, his eyes travelled the circuit of the dimming horizon, swept the sky in pursuit of the fading suns and their satellites, and his mind

observed, still calmly, that it had never known the boundaries of the Hegemony until this moment when they were only apparent by their swift disappearance.

The farthest reaches of the system seemed very faint now, but the deer park, strangely enough, remained clear in his vision. He watched in growing fascination as non-existence crept upon the mountains and the forest, crept closer and closer to the deer park, until at last there were only the oaks and the lawn and the gentle boughs and the little pool and benches, all glowing with a gay translucency, the whole wheeling and turning like a great room in empty space. He bent and kissed the strands of hair that lay across his palm, and waited for the darkness.



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