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Title: In Case of Fire

Author: Gordon Randall Garrett

Illustrator: Martinez

Release Date: February 5, 2008 [EBook #24521]

Language: English

Character set encoding: ISO-8859-1

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IN CASE OF FIRE

By **RANDALL GARRETT**

There are times when a broken tool is better than a sound one, or a twisted personality more useful than a whole one. For instance, a whole beer bottle isn't half the weapon that half a beer bottle is ...

Illustrated by Martinez

IN HIS office apartment, on the top floor of the Terran Embassy Building in Occeq City, Bertrand Malloy leafed casually through the dossiers of the four new men who had been assigned to him. They were

typical of the kind of men who were sent to him, he thought. Which meant, as usual, that they were atypical. Every man in the Diplomatic Corps who developed a twitch or a quirk was shipped to Saarkkad IV to work under Bertrand Malloy, Permanent Terran Ambassador to His Utter Munificence, the Occeq of Saarkkad.

Take this first one, for instance. Malloy ran his finger down the columns of complex symbolism that showed the complete psychological analysis of the man. Psychopathic paranoia. The man wasn't technically insane; he could be as lucid as the next man most of the time. But he was morbidly suspicious that every man's hand was turned against him. He trusted no one, and was perpetually on his guard against imaginary plots and persecutions.

Number two suffered from some sort of emotional block that left him continually on the horns of one dilemma or another. He was psychologically incapable of making a decision if he were faced with two or more possible alternatives of any major importance.

Number three ...

Malloy sighed and pushed the dossiers away from him. No two men were alike, and yet there sometimes seemed to be an eternal sameness about all men. He considered himself an individual, for instance, but wasn't the basic similarity there, after all?

He was—how old? He glanced at the Earth calendar dial that was automatically correlated with the Saarkkadic calendar just above it. Fifty-nine next week. Fifty-nine years old. And what did he have to show for it besides flabby muscles, sagging skin, a wrinkled face, and gray hair?

Well, he had an excellent record in the Corps, if nothing else. One of the top men in his field. And he had his memories of Diane, dead these ten years, but still beautiful and alive in his recollections. And—he grinned softly to himself—he had Saarkkad.

He glanced up at the ceiling, and mentally allowed his gaze to penetrate it to the blue sky beyond it.

Out there was the terrible emptiness of interstellar space—a great, yawning, infinite chasm capable of swallowing men, ships, planets, suns, and whole galaxies without filling its insatiable void.

Malloy closed his eyes. Somewhere out there, a war was raging. He didn't even like to think of that, but it was necessary to keep it in mind. Somewhere out there, the ships of Earth were ranged against the ships of the alien Karna in the most important war that Mankind had yet fought.

And, Malloy knew, his own position was not unimportant in that war. He was not in the battle line, nor even in the major production line, but it was necessary to keep the drug supply lines flowing from Saarkkad, and that meant keeping on good terms with the Saarkkadic government.

The Saarkkada themselves were humanoid in physical form—if one allowed the term to cover a wide range of differences—but their minds just didn't function along the same lines.

For nine years, Bertrand Malloy had been Ambassador to Saarkkad, and for nine years, no Saarkkada

had ever seen him. To have shown himself to one of them would have meant instant loss of prestige.

To their way of thinking, an important official was aloof. The greater his importance, the greater must be his isolation. The Ocoeq of Saarkkad himself was never seen except by a handful of picked nobles, who, themselves, were never seen except by their underlings. It was a long, roundabout way of doing business, but it was the only way Saarkkad would do any business at all. To violate the rigid social setup of Saarkkad would mean the instant closing off of the supply of biochemical products that the Saarkkadic laboratories produced from native plants and animals—products that were vitally necessary to Earth's war, and which could be duplicated nowhere else in the known universe.

It was Bertrand Malloy's job to keep the production output high and to keep the materiel flowing towards Earth and her allies and outposts.

The job would have been a snap cinch in the right circumstances; the Saarkkada weren't difficult to get along with. A staff of top-grade men could have handled them without half trying.

But Malloy didn't have top-grade men. They couldn't be spared from work that required their total capacity. It's inefficient to waste a man on a job that he can do without half trying where there are more important jobs that will tax his full output.

So Malloy was stuck with the culls. Not the worst ones, of course; there were places in the galaxy that were less important than Saarkkad to the war effort. Malloy knew that, no matter what was wrong with a man, as long as he had the mental ability to dress himself and get himself to work, useful work could be found for him.

Physical handicaps weren't at all difficult to deal with. A blind man can work very well in the total darkness of an infrared-film darkroom. Partial or total losses of limbs can be compensated for in one way or another.

The mental disabilities were harder to deal with, but not totally impossible. On a world without liquor, a dipsomaniac could be channeled easily enough; and he'd better not try fermenting his own on Saarkkad unless he brought his own yeast—which was impossible, in view of the sterilization regulations.

But Malloy didn't like to stop at merely thwarting mental quirks; he liked to find places where they were *useful*.

The phone chimed. Malloy flipped it on with a practiced hand.

"Malloy here."

"Mr. Malloy?" said a careful voice. "A special communication for you has been teletyped in from Earth. Shall I bring it in?"

"Bring it in, Miss Drayson."

Miss Drayson was a case in point. She was uncommunicative. She liked to gather in information, but she found it difficult to give it up once it was in her possession.

Malloy had made her his private secretary. Nothing—but *nothing*—got out of Malloy's office without his direct order. It had taken Malloy a long time to get it into Miss Drayson's head that it was perfectly all right—even desirable—for her to keep secrets from everyone except Malloy.

She came in through the door, a rather handsome woman in her middle thirties, clutching a sheaf of papers in her right hand as though someone might at any instant snatch it from her before she could turn it over to Malloy.

She laid them carefully on the desk. "If anything else comes in, I'll let you know immediately, sir," she said. "Will there be anything else?"

Malloy let her stand there while he picked up the communique. She wanted to know what his reaction was going to be; it didn't matter because no one would ever find out from her what he had done unless she was ordered to tell someone.

He read the first paragraph, and his eyes widened involuntarily.

"Armistice," he said in a low whisper. "There's a chance that the war may be over."

"Yes, sir," said Miss Drayson in a hushed voice.

Malloy read the whole thing through, fighting to keep his emotions in check. Miss Drayson stood there calmly, her face a mask; her emotions were a secret.

Finally, Malloy looked up. "I'll let you know as soon as I reach a decision, Miss Drayson. I think I hardly need say that no news of this is to leave this office."

"Of course not, sir."

Malloy watched her go out the door without actually seeing her. The war was over—at least for a while. He looked down at the papers again.

The Karna, slowly being beaten back on every front, were suing for peace. They wanted an armistice conference—immediately.

Earth was willing. Interstellar war is too costly to allow it to continue any longer than necessary, and this one had been going on for more than thirteen years now. Peace was necessary. But not peace at any price.

The trouble was that the Karna had a reputation for losing wars and winning at the peace table. They were clever, persuasive talkers. They could twist a disadvantage to an advantage, and make their own strengths look like weaknesses. If they won the armistice, they'd be able to retrench and rearm, and the war would break out again within a few years.

Now—at this point in time—they could be beaten. They could be forced to allow supervision of the production potential, forced to disarm, rendered impotent. But if the armistice went to their own advantage ...

Already, they had taken the offensive in the matter of the peace talks. They had sent a full delegation to Saarkkad V, the next planet out from the Saarkkad sun, a chilly world inhabited only by low-intelligence animals. The Karna considered this to be fully neutral territory, and Earth couldn't argue the point very well. In addition, they demanded that the conference begin in three days, Terrestrial time.

The trouble was that interstellar communication beams travel a devil of a lot faster than ships. It would take more than a week for the Earth government to get a vessel to Saarkkad V. Earth had been caught unprepared for an armistice. They objected.

The Karna pointed out that the Saarkkad sun was just as far from Karn as it was from Earth, that it was only a few million miles from a planet which was allied with Earth, and that it was unfair for Earth to take so much time in preparing for an armistice. Why hadn't Earth been prepared? Did they intend to fight to the utter destruction of Karn?

It wouldn't have been a problem at all if Earth and Karn had fostered the only two intelligent races in the galaxy. The sort of grandstanding the Karna were putting on had to be played to an audience. But there were other intelligent races throughout the galaxy, most of whom had remained as neutral as possible during the Earth-Karn war. They had no intention of sticking their figurative noses into a battle between the two most powerful races in the galaxy.

But whoever won the armistice would find that some of the now-neutral races would come in on their side if war broke out again. If the Karna played their cards right, their side would be strong enough next time to win.

So Earth had to get a delegation to meet with the Karna representatives within the three-day limit or lose what might be a vital point in the negotiations.

And that was where Bertrand Malloy came in.

He had been appointed Minister and Plenipotentiary Extraordinary to the Earth-Karn peace conference.

He looked up at the ceiling again. "What *can* I do?" he said softly.

On the second day after the arrival of the communique, Malloy made his decision. He flipped on his intercom and said: "Miss Drayson, get hold of James Nordon and Kylen Braynek. I want to see them both immediately. Send Nordon in first, and tell Braynek to wait."

"Yes, sir."

"And keep the recorder on. You can file the tape later."

"Yes, sir."

Malloy knew the woman would listen in on the intercom anyway, and it was better to give her permission to do so.

James Nordon was tall, broad-shouldered, and thirty-eight. His hair was graying at the temples, and his handsome face looked cool and efficient.

Malloy waved him to a seat.

"Nordon, I have a job for you. It's probably one of the most important jobs you'll ever have in your life. It can mean big things for you—promotion and prestige if you do it well."

Nordon nodded slowly. "Yes, sir."

Malloy explained the problem of the Karna peace talks.

"We need a man who can outthink them," Malloy finished, "and judging from your record, I think you're that man. It involves risk, of course. If you make the wrong decisions, your name will be mud back on Earth. But I don't think there's much chance of that, really. Do you want to handle small-time operations all your life? Of course not."

"You'll be leaving within an hour for Saarkkad V."

Nordon nodded again. "Yes, sir; certainly. Am I to go alone?"

"No," said Malloy, "I'm sending an assistant with you—a man named Kylen Braynek. Ever heard of him?"

Nordon shook his head. "Not that I recall, Mr. Malloy. Should I have?"

"Not necessarily. He's a pretty shrewd operator, though. He knows a lot about interstellar law, and he's capable of spotting a trap a mile away. You'll be in charge, of course, but I want you to pay special attention to his advice."

"I will, sir," Nordon said gratefully. "A man like that can be useful."

"Right. Now, you go into the anteroom over there. I've prepared a summary of the situation, and you'll have to study it and get it into your head before the ship leaves. That isn't much time, but it's the Karna who are doing the pushing, not us."

As soon as Nordon had left, Malloy said softly: "Send in Braynek, Miss Drayson."

Kylen Braynek was a smallish man with mouse-brown hair that lay flat against his skull, and hard, penetrating, dark eyes that were shadowed by heavy, protruding brows. Malloy asked him to sit down.

Again Malloy went through the explanation of the peace conference.

"Naturally, they'll be trying to trick you every step of the way," Malloy went on. "They're shrewd and underhanded; we'll simply have to be more shrewd and more underhanded. Nordon's job is to sit quietly and evaluate the data; yours will be to find the loopholes they're laying out for themselves and plug them. Don't antagonize them, but don't baby them, either. If you see anything underhanded going on, let Nordon know immediately."

"They won't get anything by me, Mr. Malloy."

By the time the ship from Earth got there, the peace conference had been going on for four days. Bertrand Malloy had full reports on the whole parley, as relayed to him through the ship that had taken Nordon and Braynek to Saarkkad V.

Secretary of State Blendwell stopped off at Saarkkad IV before going on to V to take charge of the conference. He was a tallish, lean man with a few strands of gray hair on the top of his otherwise bald scalp, and he wore a hearty, professional smile that didn't quite make it to his calculating eyes.

He took Malloy's hand and shook it warmly. "How are you, Mr. Ambassador?"

"Fine, Mr. Secretary. How's everything on Earth?"

"Tense. They're waiting to see what is going to happen on Five. So am I, for that matter." His eyes were curious. "You decided not to go yourself, eh?"

"I thought it better not to. I sent a good team, instead. Would you like to see the reports?"

"I certainly would."

Malloy handed them to the secretary, and as he read, Malloy watched him. Blendwell was a political appointee—a good man, Malloy had to admit, but he didn't know all the ins and outs of the Diplomatic Corps.

When Blendwell looked up from the reports at last, he said: "Amazing! They've held off the Karna at every point! They've beaten them back! They've managed to cope with and outdo the finest team of negotiators the Karna could send."

"I thought they would," said Malloy, trying to appear modest.

The secretary's eyes narrowed. "I've heard of the work you've been doing here with ... ah ... sick men. Is this one of your ... ah ... successes?"

Malloy nodded. "I think so. The Karna put us in a dilemma, so I threw a dilemma right back at them."

"How do you mean?"

"Nordon had a mental block against making decisions. If he took a girl out on a date, he'd have trouble making up his mind whether to kiss her or not until she made up his mind for him, one way or the other. He's that kind of guy. Until he's presented with one, single, clear decision which admits of no alternatives, he can't move at all.

"As you can see, the Karna tried to give us several choices on each point, and they were all rigged. Until they backed down to a single point and proved that it *wasn't* rigged, Nordon couldn't possibly make up his mind. I drummed into him how important this was, and the more importance there is attached to his decisions, the more incapable he becomes of making them."

The Secretary nodded slowly. "What about Braynek?"

"Paranoid," said Malloy. "He thinks everyone is plotting against him. In this case, that's all to the good because the Karna *are* plotting against him. No matter what they put forth, Braynek is convinced that there's a trap in it somewhere, and he digs to find out what the trap is. Even if there isn't a trap, the Karna can't satisfy Braynek, because he's convinced that there *has* to be—somewhere. As a result, all his advice to Nordon, and all his questioning on the wildest possibilities, just serves to keep Nordon from getting unconfused.

"These two men are honestly doing their best to win at the peace conference, and they've got the Karna reeling. The Karna can see that we're not trying to stall; our men are actually working at trying to reach a decision. But what the Karna don't see is that those men, as a team, are unbeatable because, in this situation, they're psychologically incapable of losing."

Again the Secretary of State nodded his approval, but there was still a question in his mind. "Since you know all that, couldn't you have handled it yourself?"

"Maybe, but I doubt it. They might have gotten around me somehow by sneaking up on a blind spot. Nordon and Braynek have blind spots, but they're covered with armor. No, I'm glad I couldn't go; it's better this way."

The Secretary of State raised an eyebrow. "*Couldn't* go, Mr. Ambassador?"

Malloy looked at him. "Didn't you know? I wondered why you appointed me, in the first place. No, I couldn't go. The reason why I'm here, cooped up in this office, hiding from the Saarkkada the way a good Saarkkadic bigshot should, is because I *like* it that way. I suffer from agoraphobia and xenophobia.

"I have to be drugged to be put on a spaceship because I can't take all that empty space, even if I'm protected from it by a steel shell." A look of revulsion came over his face. "And I can't *stand* aliens!"

THE END

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