

Wolf Mari

The Very Secret Agent



Mari Wolf

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Poor Riuku!.. Not being a member of the human race, how was he supposed to understand what goes on in a woman's mind when the male of the same species didn't even know?

In their ship just beyond the orbit of Mars the two aliens sat looking at each other.

"No," Riuku said. "I haven't had any luck. And I can tell you right now that I'm not going to have any, and no one else is going to have any either. The Earthmen are too well shielded."

"You contacted the factory?" Nagor asked.

"Easily. It's the right one. The parking lot attendant knows there's a new weapon being produced in there. The waitress at the Jumbo Burger Grill across the street knows it. Everybody I reached knows it. But not one knows anything about what it is."

Nagor looked out through the ports of the spaceship, which didn't in the least resemble an Earth spaceship, any more than what Nagor considered sight resembled the corresponding Earth sense perception. He frowned.

"What about the research scientists? We know who some of them are. The supervisors? The technicians?"

"No," Riuku said flatly. "They're shielded. Perfectly I can't make contact with a single mind down there that has the faintest inkling of what's going on. We never should have let them develop the shield."

"Have you tried contacting everyone? What about the workers?"

"Shielded. All ten thousand of them. Of course I haven't checked all of them yet, but –"

"Do it," Nagor said grimly. "We've got to find out what that weapon is. Or else get out of this solar system."

Riuku sighed. "I'll try," he said.

Someone put another dollar in the juke box, and the theremins started in on Mare Indrium Mary for the tenth time since Pete Ganley had come into the bar. "Aw shut up," he said, wishing there was some way to turn them off. Twelve-ten. Alice got off work at Houston's at twelve. She ought to be here by now. She would be, if it weren't Thursday. Shield boosting night for her.

Why, he asked himself irritably, couldn't those scientists figure out some way to keep the shields up longer than a week? Or else why didn't they have boosting night the same for all departments? He had to stay late every Friday and Alice every Thursday, and all the time there was Susan at home ready to jump him if he wasn't in at a reasonable time...

"Surprised, Pete?" Alice Hendricks said at his elbow.

He swung about, grinned at her. "Am I? You said it. And here I was about to go. I never thought you'd make it before one." His grin faded a little. "How'd you do it? Sweet-talk one of the guards into letting you in at the head of the line?"

She shook her bandanaed head, slid onto the stool beside him and crossed her knees – a not very convincing sign of femininity in a woman wearing baggy denim coveralls. "Aren't you going to buy me a drink, honey?"

"Oh, sure." He glanced over at the bartender. "Another beer. No, make it two." He pulled the five dollars out of his pocket, shoved it across the bar, and looked back at Alice, more closely this time. The ID badge, pinned to her hip. The badge, with her name, number, department, and picture – and the little meter that measured the strength of her Mind Shield.

The dial should have pointed to full charge. It didn't. It registered about seventy per cent loss.

Alice followed his gaze. She giggled. "It was easy," she said. "The guards don't do more than glance at us, you know. And everyone who's supposed to go through Shielding on Thursday has the

department number stamped on a yellow background. So all I did was make a red background, like yours, and slip it on in the restroom at Clean-up time."

"But Alice..." Pete Ganley swallowed his beer and signaled for another. "This is serious. You've got to keep the shields up. The enemy is everywhere. Why, right now, one could be probing you."

"So what? The dial isn't down to Danger yet. And tomorrow I'll just put the red tag back on over the yellow one and go through Shielding in the same line with you. They won't notice." She giggled again. "I thought it was smart, Petey. You oughta think so too. You know why I did it, don't you?"

Her round, smooth face looked up at him, wide-eyed and full-lipped. She had no worry wrinkles like Susan's, no mouth pulled down at the corners like Susan's, and under that shapeless coverall...

"Sure, baby, I'm glad you did it," Pete Ganley said huskily.

Riuku was glad too, the next afternoon when the swing shift started pouring through the gates.

It was easy, once he'd found her. He had tested hundreds, all shielded, some almost accessible to him, but none vulnerable enough. Then this one came. The shield was so far down that contact was almost easy. Painful, tiring, but not really difficult. He could feel her momentary sense of alarm, of nausea, and then he was through, integrated with her, his thoughts at home with her thoughts.

He rested, inside her mind.

"Oh, hi, Joan. No, I'm all right. Just a little dizzy for a moment. A hangover? Of course not. Not on a Friday."

Riuku listened to her half of the conversation. Stupid Earthman. If only she'd start thinking about the job. Or if only his contact with her were better. If he could use her sense perceptions, see through her eyes, hear through her ears, feel through her fingers, then everything would be easy. But he couldn't. All he could do was read her thoughts. Earth thoughts at that...

... The time clock. Where's my card? Oh, here it is. Only 3:57. Why did I have to hurry so? I had lots of time...

"Why, Mary, how nice you look today. That's a new hairdo, isn't it? A permanent? Yeah, what kind?" *... What a microbe! Looks like pink straw, her hair does, and of course she thinks it's beautiful...* "I'd better get down to my station. Old Liverlips will be ranting again. You oughta be glad you have Eddie for a lead man. Eddie's cute. So's Dave, over in 77. But Liverlips, ugh..."

She was walking down the aisle to her station now. A procession of names: *Maisie, and Edith, and that fat slob Natalie, and if Jean Andrews comes around tonight flashing that diamond in my face again, I'll – I'll kill her...*

"Oh hello, Clinton. What do you mean, late? The whistle just blew. Of course I'm ready to go to work." *Liverlips, that's what you are. And still in that same blue shirt. What a wife you must have. Probably as sloppy as you are...*

Good, Riuku thought. Now she'll be working. Now he'd find out whatever it was she was doing. Not that it would be important, of course, but let him learn what her job was, and what those other girls' jobs were, and in a little while he'd have all the data he needed. Maybe even before the shift ended tonight, before she went through the Shielding boost.

He shivered a little, thinking of the boost. He'd survive it, of course. He'd be too well integrated with her by then. But it was nothing to look forward to.

Still, he needn't worry about it. He had the whole shift to find out what the weapon was. The whole shift, here inside Alice's mind, inside the most closely guarded factory on or under or above the surface of the Earth. He settled down and waited, expectantly.

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