**Prorurutua - II**

“Is that… a baby?” Hillary asked. It was very much a pointless question since the infant’s cries were unmistakable.

“Is the Lord High President an Arcalian?” Marion asked in a version of a Human joke that was meaningless anywhere outside Earth in her own century.

She stepped towards the basket and picked up the child. She looked around at Valena D’Arpexia and Madame Thaxia, and at General Charro who all looked helpless and dumbfounded in equal measure having just returned from the ball a few minutes ahead of the delegates.

“One of you could have picked it up,” she said accusingly. “It needs changing and its hungry.”

The requisites for both were in the large basket. She called for an attendant to come and remove her stiff formal collar before proceeding to change the baby on her lap, still wearing the luxurious formal robe of a Gallifreyan Ambassador. Madame Thaxia was astonished by the very idea of desecrating the robe with talcum powder and worse. Valena d’Arpexia was just astonished. General Charro turned to her subordinates and demanded to know how the baby got into the suite.

“Well, I don’t think it got here by itself,” Lady Margis remarked as the delegates found seats and were served drinks.

“No, he didn’t,” Marion replied.

“He?” Madame Thaxia queried.

“I just changed the nappy,” Marion pointed out as she began feeding the baby with a prepared bottle of milk. She glanced at the basket which was big enough for what she guessed was a two week old infant and essential supplies for several days.

“On Earth that kind of woven crib is called a Moses basket for a very old, old reason.” She went on to explain the story from the Old Testament that involved a slave’s infant boy set adrift in a basket to prevent it being killed by a superstitious pharaoh and its rescue by the pharaoh’s own daughter.

“People on your planet massacre babies?” The Third Queen of Lusaka asked.

“It is a story,” Marion conceded. “But if it really happened it was thousands of years ago. The point is….”

“I think in this case it is the pharaoh’s daughter who cast this baby adrift,” Hillary noted.

“Indeed, we hardly need to guess whose child this is,” Lady Margis agreed. “’My child is beyond your reach’ she said. The diplomatic suite of a foreign government is beyond the reach of the Imperatrix and her palace guard.”

“But where is the mother?” Madame Thaxia asked.

“That’s not the important matter right this minute,” Hillary said. “Marion, if the baby is fed, now, give it to Lady Margis.”

“Why?” she asked, cuddling the now content baby close.

“First, because you need to let go of that baby before you get too emotionally attached,” Hillary told her. “I’m sorry, my dear, but that child can’t replace the one you lost. It can’t be Kristoph’s male heir. He needs a child with his own Gallifreyan DNA. Besides, if Astria doesn’t reclaim her child… if he has to be given refugee status, Ventura is the best place for him. He would not stand out as ‘different’ as he would on Gallifrey, Haollstrom or even Alpha Centauri and Lukasa has no system of formal adoption. Ventura should give the child its diplomatic protection.”

All of that made perfect sense, especially the first part, which was why Marion was so reluctant to pass the baby to Lady Margis. She watched jealously as her Venturan friend cuddled the child.

“Let us consider the trade and diplomatic negotiations we might put to the Imperatrix when we resume tomorrow,” suggested Alpha Centauri. “It is why we are here, after all.”

“I’m not sure either would be of benefit to Haollstrom,” Hillary said. “I know we have several days of negotiations, but I’m going to need some persuasion that being friendly with a government like this one would be advantageous. As for trade, we could do a deal. Our chief exports are expensive perfumes, spices and silk cloth. They seem to use a lot of that here. But, again, I wonder about the ethics of making any sort of deal with the Prorurutuans.”

“I agree,” said Lady Margis between soothing the baby to sleep. “Ventura is a free and open society. We cherish all of our people. And those people would not want us to ignore the deplorable condition of the men on this planet.”

“Slavery is not something we tolerate on Lukasa,” the Third Queen agreed.

Marion got ready to give her opinion on the matter, but she was pre-emptied by Madame Thaxia who spoke of the potential trade in precious metals and gems. Marion was a little annoyed by the intervention to begin with. It may have been a mistake, but SHE was the one invited to the conference. Madame Thaxia was meant to advise her, not take over the discussion.

Besides, she wasn’t short of her own thoughts on the matter.

“The ‘potential’ is exaggerated,” she cut in quickly. “Gallifrey is noted for its production of high quality precious metals and gems. Prorurutua is famous for crafting those precious materials into beautiful things. We have seen plenty of examples of how gold is used in the palace. But they buy those materials cheaply. Too cheaply in fact. Gallifrey doesn’t need trade of that sort. We have our own craftsmen.”

“You know about intergalactic trade prices?” Madame Thaxia asked a little too sharply.

“I did marry into a family whose wealth comes from gold and diamonds,” Marion replied stiffly. “And when this trip was suggested I asked Kristoph to advise me about such things. I have looked at the commodities market. Gold is especially high at the present moment, far higher than Prorurutua would wish to pay for bulk gold imports. It would just be exploitation. Our miners would be no more to them than cheap labour to them… like… like Brazilian coffee pickers.”

Her comparison didn’t mean very much to her companions, but she had made her point without it, especially to Madame Thaxia. Marion knew that the lifelong councillor had underestimated her.

“I don’t believe we should cultivate diplomatic ties with such a government,” she added. “It’s not as if we have to be nice to them in order to stop them declaring war on us. And I wouldn’t want to rely on them to aid us militarily. Yes, I checked that, too. Kristoph was also able to put me in touch with people who know about those kind of things. But if you don’t believe me, General Charro has been investigating the security of Prorurutua.”

General Charro nodded and then straightened formally to give her expert view.

“Madame De Lœngbærrow is correct,” she said. “This planet is no military threat to any of our worlds and of no value as an ally. There is no space fleet other than an imperial liner used when the Imperatrix and her retinue go offworld. The army are quite well disciplined, especially those in the palace guard, but they are only really skilled in putting down peasant revolts in the countryside.”

Marion was perhaps not the only one who reminded herself that the Prorurutuan army was entirely made up of women. Gender equality apart, such a bullying nature seemed wrong, somehow.

“My information is that they’re rather TOO good at pushing unarmed civilians around,” Hillary commented. “I’ve done some poking around, too. The military is no friend to the people. When the Imperatrix said that the people are content, that was, I’m afraid to say, a huge lie. The people have few outlets for expressing DIScontent that wouldn’t be put down by the army.”

“Well,” said the Third Queen of Lukasa, “As we are all of one mind, just about the only thing left to decide is whether to give the big bowl back.”

Marion laughed and declared that she had no use for such a thing, not even for serving punch.

“Then perhaps we should inform the Imperatrix that the negotiations are already at an end,” Alpha Centauri suggested. “I agree that the whole thing is a non-starter,” Lady Margis said very quietly but with a tone that got everyone’s attention. “But I think we ought to… go through the motions… at least for a few more days… as… as….”

She faltered in her words and looked around at the assembled delegates and aides. She was trying to find the right words.

She hugged the baby in her lap as it gurgled quietly and its eyes flickered between sleep and wakefulness, almost as if trying to take in the mystery around him.

“This child is safe under diplomatic protection,” she said.

“That is certain,” Madame Thaxia agreed. “No-one would dare interfere with that one indefeasible intergalactic law.”

Even Valena, who was well studied on legal matters, was impressed by the word ‘indefeasible’ used in one of the very few contexts it could be used, but Madame Thaxia’s interjection served mainly to allow Lady Margis to gather her thoughts more fully.

“Yes,” she continued. “But I think we should try to find out more about what lays behind his placing in our care. Where has the Princess Astria gone? I don’t believe she has simply abandoned her child. His birth was so very important to her and so outrageous to the Imperatrix. She must care for him very much obut has gone somewhere or is doing something that would not be safe for him. I think we ought to try to find out what that is and….”

Again, she paused. Everything she said so far was more or less within the bounds of diplomatic neutrality in what was clearly an internal political problem on Prorurutua. Her next words crossed the boundary.

“I think… we should consider whether we can help in some way. Yes, I know what I’m saying. If I was a professional diplomat like Hillary I really couldn’t say this. But… as the king’s cousin, with only a basic understanding of the rules, who came here because they needed a woman of royal birth to represent Ventura, I have to say that my sympathies would be with anyone who opposes the Imperatrix. She is a tyrant who SHOULD be deposed.”

Hillary, the professional diplomat said nothing. Nor did Madame Thaxia, who also had long experience of such things. The others gave voice in various forms to their agreement with Lady Margis’s statement.

“We stay, at least, to see which way the wind blows,” Hillary confirmed. “And perhaps for an opportunity to reunite this young political asylum seeker with his mother. What else may occur, depends on how the next days unfold. For now, I think I’ll have another glass of that fine whiskey before retiring to bed with a very dull report on the intergalactic gold exchange for reading matter.”

“I’m going to help Lady Margis put the baby to bed,” Marion decided as the fellowship broke up.

General Charro nodded her assent. There was no need for her protection within the diplomatic suites. She could put into action her own plan for finding out exactly what lay behind these curious and twisting events and what danger they might pose for the Gallifreyan delegation.