**Passengers on the Ro-Imo Express – Part Three**

In the safety of the Duke’s hovercopter, everything seemed as if it was going to be all right, at last. It certainly seemed like it to Calvi and Agafya Charrl as they clutched hands and smiled at each other through smudged and tear-streaked faces.

The man Marion was looking after would be all right, too. Kristoph had assured her that he would be. Of course, he had a hard and painful struggle ahead. Even with the advanced-medical techniques this world offered it wouldn’t be easy. But Marion felt confident for him and she told him so in the lucid moments when he tried to speak.

The four little girls were already recovering from their ordeal. Cold drinks from the mini bar revived them and they chatted between themselves happily enough.

“Will we be going home now?” Shari, the youngest of the duchesses asked, looking out of the window.

“No. We have to take the hurt people to hospital, first,” Regini, her eldest sister answered.

“But the hospital isn’t this way,” said Marta, the second eldest, in a puzzled voice. “This is the way to the spaceport.”

“She’s right,” Calvi Charrl said as everyone, startled by the child’s comment, all suddenly looked out of the windows. It was still several hundred miles away, but the silver geodesic dome over the port which was beside the traditional, now purely a tourist attraction, seaport of the western ocean, was a distinct landmark almost directly ahead. Anyone travelling by land or air took their bearings from it.

A quick conversation between the adults confirmed that they were going the wrong way. To reach the hospital the port should have been due west, on the left-hand side, not in front as if it was their immediate destination.

Again, everyone turned at the same time to look through the screen that separated the passenger section of the hovercopter from the cockpit. They immediately noticed that the two personal security officers appeared to be asleep.

“Well, that’s not right,” Agafya said. “What’s the matter with them?”

“Oh, dear,” Marion sighed. “This is all Agatha Christie, again.”

Kristoph was also thinking about Agatha Christie as he established that the pilot had been knocked out by some kind of drug administered by a small dart pressed by hand into his neck. He would recover in a little while, but it was unlikely he would remember much that could explain what was happening.

“Who is flying the hovercopter if he isn’t?” asked the Governess, who beat Kristoph to that question by a millisecond.

“Matthi is,” answered Erro, the diamond expert. “In all the drama, none of us noticed… he’s gone, along with the diamonds."

Kristoph groaned.

That completed the Agatha Christie plot. A pilot drugged with a dart, hijacked ‘copter full of high-ranking aristocrats, and stolen gems.

“This train crash was no accident,” he guessed. “Matthi has associates who did something. If we look under the locomotive, there will be a log across the line or a point damaged to cause the derailment. He did this in order to escape with the gems.”

“Never mind the gems,” the Governess snapped. “The little duchesses have ransom insurance worth more than a case full of diamonds.”

Ransom insurance! Kristoph knew many high-ranking people on many worlds who took such precautions. He was very much of the opinion that owning such insurance was an invitation to kidnappers, but the Grand Duke obviously thought differently.

My wife is aboard that ‘copter, too,” he said. “And she is beyond price to me.”

The Governess looked at Kristoph’s intense expression and knew he was not a man who would stand by and wait for developments.

Marion glanced around to ensure that the ‘privacy’ light was engaged before she spoke.

“The guards are unconscious,” she said. “Drugged, somehow. We’ve been hijacked.”

The news caused the sort of dismay expected in the circumstances.

“What can we do?” Agafya asked. “There’s only three of us women fit to do anything. Our men are wounded. They can’t fight.”

“Nobody is fighting anyone,” Marion answered. “Not in a hovercopter in mid-air. We have to act as if we don’t know anything is wrong. Girls… carry on reading your comics and drinking the juice. Everyone else… stop looking out of the window. Stop looking so tense. Our body language has to be natural.”

“Easier said than done,” the Duchess admitted in carefully moderated tomes that belied her fear. “We don’t know what this is about.”

“If it’s a kidnapping… which of us do they want? We’re all worth a fortune….” Agafya pointed out.

“Whatever it is, we can’t risk any kind of escape until the ‘copter lands,” Calvi said. “Even if one of us could get into the cockpit and tackle the pilot…. without crashing… does anyone know how to fly this thing?”

“I do,” the Duke of Exemi said. “But with my arm….”

“It is impossible,” Marion summed up. “We just have to hope for an opportunity once we’re on the ground… an opportunity either to fight or escape.”

“You sound as if you have experience of being kidnapped,” the Duchess said. “How much ransom insurance do you have?”

“None," Marion answered, ‘But I am married to a man who would search the galaxy for me and deal summary justice to anyone involved in taking me. I trust in him. In fact, we may all trust in him. He will not be trying to contact our insurance brokers right now. He will be doing something to find us.”

“It was your husband who protected both of us when the train was hurtling out of control,” Afafya conceded. “And he brought out the man you’re caring for, now.”

“Alone among the first class passengers he went back into the train to look for others in need of help,” the Duke recalled. “The rest of us did precious little….”

“You hardly could,” his wife reminded him.

“I was too drunk even to help myself,” Calvi Charll admitted with genuine contrition on his face. “I have been a fool. I am sorry for that. I only wish….”

“You’re injured, too,” Agafya reminded him, “Don’t try to be brave to make up for it. I almost lost you… we almost lost each other. Stay with me, now. We will put our trust in Marion’s good husband, and in the police who will not be idle, either. We are not so alone as we think.”

“That’s right,’ said young Regini, the child duchess with many titles before her name. “Papa and Uncle Rupert will send the army for us.”

She hugged her sisters as she spoke. They knew that there were adults who would be ready to rescue them from this frightening situation. They had no trouble deciding who they could trust.

“It’s just galling to be caught in this way and unable to do our bit,” the Duke of Exemi admitted. A feeling they all shared, not just the men who had a natural instinct to protect their women.

The Duke squeezed his wife’s hand reassuringly. Calvi nodded as far as his concussed and broken head allowed him and did the same. Marion felt a slight touch of regret that Kristoph wasn’t there to give her the same assurance.

But if Kristoph had been there, they wouldn’t be in such a situation. She was sure, mid-air or not, he would have found a way to foil the plot they were so completely trapped in.

“He’s coming for us,” she whispered and gently squeezed the hand of her semi-conscious patient who was probably oblivious to the whole drama around him. “You’ll be all right, too,” she promised.

A seriously wounded man, two walking wounded, three women and four children. Add to that the two unconscious guards and a pilot with evil intentions for them all.

Even Hercule Poirot never had that many problems to worry about at once.

The Duke of Exemi, with his private pilot’s license was probably the only one of them who had any idea how fast the hovercopter was going. He was the only one who could calculate that they were only ten or fifteen minutes from the space port. The rest were all a little surprised to realise they were on a final approach to the busy airspace.

Surprised and apprehensive. It was when they landed that they would be the most vulnerable. Their hijacker would be armed and prepared to harm any one of them who resisted. There might be co-conspirators waiting for the ‘copter, ready to take them all prisoner.

Marion got ready to protect her patient. All the rest of them were worth something to a kidnapper. The wounded chef was just a liability. They might kill him, first. At the least she could put herself in front of him. They would, she hoped, hesitate to kill the valuable wife of a visiting Ambassador.

The hovercopter landed near a small hangar two miles away from the main spaceport dome, but near a small runway where a shuttle plane waited. There didn’t seem to be anyone around apart from two technicians in overalls and caps who were checking the shuttle’s undercarriage. As the ‘copter’s engines wound down, the two strolled towards the pilot side door.

“Oh!” Marion managed to say as one of the technicians yanked open that side door and the other pulled the hijacker out onto the tarmac where he was restrained and put into plasicuffs.

“Miss Addiso!” the four young duchesses cried out at once as they recognised their governess as the overall and cap wearing technician who had tackled the hijacker. Marion smiled to see the other technician as her own husband, but he barely had to do anything. The Governess had everything under her control.

Kristoph opened the passenger door. He smiled warmly at all the hostages.

“Everyone stay where you are for a moment,” he said “You’re all safe, now. All the hijacker’s co-conspirators were rounded up as soon as we identified the spaceport as his destination. Marion, we’re bringing in an air ambulance for your man. We’ll take him out first. Then the rest of you.”

Marion was slightly regretful when a medical team came forward with an anti-gravity stretcher to transfer the patient to the waiting ambulance without the slightest painful jolt. All the help he needed was now in the hands of the experts.

She was sorry not to be going with him to see it done, but after all, she had done her duty. She could breathe a sigh of relief as the air ambulance took off.

Or could she? As other medics came to assist the Duke of Exemi and Calvi Charll there was a movement in the cockpit. At first it seemed as if one of the drugged guards was recovering. Then the Governess gave a shout. Kristoph turned and saw to his horror that the man in the Grand Duke’s livery had a gun and was holding Marion as a shield.

“Get back,” the man cried out. “All of you get back… You men….”

“Men?” the Governess laughed harshly as she dived sideways and grabbed the man’s gun arm, twisting it upwards. At the same time Marion kicked her heel backwards and caught him in the shin painfully. He dropped the gun as both women wrestled him to the ground and another pair of plasicuffs was utilised.

“You traitor,” the Governess said to the prisoner. “How many years have you worked for his Lordship, and you do this… kidnapping his children, putting their lives at risk.”

The prisoner said something about being paid to make it worthwhile. The Governess looked as if she might hit him, but then she noticed the four little duchesses watching. She turned and walked to them, hugging them in turn and assuring them that their father, the Grand Duke, would be here in person any minute, now.

Marion, with nobody to worry about, allowed Kristoph to hug her.

“The hijacker was travelling in the third class carriage,” Kristoph said to her. “He knew the rear carriages would be safe enough when the train was derailed. Meanwhile his colleague brought the Grand Duke’s hovercopter. He only wanted the children, of course. But we made him take all of you.”

“Twice as many ransoms. My injured chef was the only one of us not worth a fortune.”

“That was what puzzled us at first,” Kristoph said. “We thought it was Matthi, stealing the gems. But how could he have organised the crash, and got the Duke’s men on his side. The gems were valuable, but not that valuable. But Matthi was found at the bottom of the Gorge, spilt diamonds all around him. He had just decided to make a run for it... but picked a dangerous path for running. By then, Miss Addiso and I were heading for the spaceport. I would have come alone, but she wouldn’t stand idle while her girls were in danger. She’s quite a woman. Still reminds me of my Ethics tutor. I would back her against a gunman, too.”

Marion laughed at the image planted in her mind. The Grand Duke’s private shuttle landing drowned out her next words, but Kristoph caught her thoughts anyway.

“Hercule Poirot never had THIS much trouble.”