**Rome with Hillary and Talitha**

Talitha Dúccesci looked out of the tall, graceful window of the hotel suite on a view that astonished her. She was still surprised, even after three days on planet Earth by the shades of blue and white of the sky and how bright that made everything look compared to the yellow sky of Gallifrey.

Her first offworld trip had been full of such surprises, already.

The trip itself had been something of a surprise. Malika had sprung it on her only a week ago. Barely time to get a suitable wardrobe together, but that, at least was not a problem. There would be a day in London for clothes shopping before anything else, and if that wasn’t long enough, Malika was assured that there were boutiques all over the continent of Italy which was the proposed destination.

“I’m going to help negotiate a peace treaty between the Arus Federation and the Ratanian Convox,” he explained after clearing up the apparently more important issue of what was fashionable for summer in the northern hemisphere of Earth. “Premier Cardinal will assume my duties in the Panopticon while I am away. Kristoph de Lœngbǽrrow is accompanying me. His experience as a negotiator and my position as Lord High President will be of immeasurable advantage with the plenipotentiaries from both worlds.”

“How long will you be away?” his wife asked.

“It could be as long as six months. Certainly no less than three. There is much to be decided. Questions of territory, of war reparations, resettlement of displaced people, restoring infrastructure. There are ….”

He stopped. His wife was not empty-headed or vain, but she wasn’t really interested in intergalactic politics. There was no need to inflict upon her the details of the task ahead of him and de Lœngbǽrrow.

“Marion de Lœngbǽrrow suggested that the two of you with suitable escorts could spend some time on Earth, seeing historical sights, art galleries, opera, that kind of thing.”

Talitha had asked who would escort them. Marion had already decided to invite the Haolstromnian diplomat, Hillary Bar Dey, who was both a mature lady companion and a strong male presence at the same time. One of the presidential guards would accompany the three of them as a matter of protocol, but Marion had said that they were travelling in the twenty-first century, when even quite high born ladies travelled without maids, so that would be the full complement on the trip.

“I can authorise a TARDIS to get you there,” Malika added after a few other matters were cleared up. “But Marion suggested using Earth transport for the duration of the trip.”

“Earth transport?” Talitha had queried. “Like buses and trains and aeroplanes?”

Malika had laughed. Of course, Talitha was one of the most frequent visitors to the libraries Marion had set up during de Lœngbǽrrow’s tenure as Lord High President. She was particularly fond of Earth literature of which there was a great deal. She was familiar with the idea of buses, trains, and aeroplanes, but this was her first experience of using them.

Well, so far, a lot of taxis and an aeroplane, at least. The TARDIS was left in a secure parking facility near Hyde Park corner and the four, with brand new luggage, travelled to London Heathrow airport in good time to check-in for an early morning flight to Rome. Marion was the only one with a genuine British passport. Her companions were provided with very good and undetectable replicas - possibly from the Celestial Intervention Agency who knew how to provide documentation for undercover agents.

Talitha and Hillary both insisted on diplomatic credentials as they were both entitled to such. Avery Ferron, Talitha’s personal security officer was only surprised to have a paper document to identify him to the Earth authorities.

“Surely such a thing could be EASILY counterfeited?” he said, security conscious in all things. “And there are only men and women looking at the documents with their eyes. No digital confirmation?”

“Mostly it works,” Hillary said. “I have visited many worlds that still use manual systems. I only had one problem – when I forgot I was in my female form and tried to use my male documents.”

“It didn’t work in The Day of the Jackal,” Talitha pointed out, passing over the special problems of gendermorph travel. “The assassin had about four different passports.”

“I don’t remember ordering any Frederick Forsyth books for the libraries,” Marion commented. “I thought they would be a bit too violent for Gallifreyan tastes.”

Talitha admitted to having joined an Earth colony book club that supplied e-books of Earth ‘classics’ on demand. A book about an assassination attempt on a president had intrigued her, but the violence had, indeed, been a little too much.

In any case, all of their party passed the security at Heathrow, and a little over two and a half hours later at the customs at Leonardo da Vinci airport in the Fiumicino district of Rome there were no problems of any sort. The two diplomatic passports meant that they were processed with alacrity and their diplomatically unopened suitcases promptly transferred to a limousine taxi.

No matter how prestigious the car, though, Rome’s traffic congestion meant that it took nearly as long to get from the airport to their hotel. That allowed them to take in some of the city from the comfortable seats. Marion commented that she had usually travelled entirely by TARDIS and had missed out on the joys of the airport taxi.

And she meant that quite sincerely. It was an opportunity to see parts of the city that weren’t on their tourist agenda, through suburbs where ordinary people lived – people who looked at the limousine when it stopped at traffic lights but had obviously seen executive travel from the airport before and gave it no special attention.

The buildings got grander, but the streets weren’t much wider as they came near the city centre. Rome was a very dense city and some of the grandest and tallest buildings blocked the sky on both sides.

But it was, Talitha noted from that luxury suite on the fourth floor of the prestigious Hotel Eden, an associate of the London Dorchester where they had stayed after their shopping day, not a city of great towering glass and steel like the Gallifreyan Capitol. The tallest buildings, like the hotel, were perhaps four or five stories high, but they were wide, taking up whole blocks of the street, or, in the case of the Hotel Eden the whole corner where two streets intersected.

Marion had pointed out several important landmarks that they would be visiting tomorrow and in the next few days, but Talitha looked across at the beautiful park where they had spent the afternoon. They ate a light lunch in Il Giardino Ristorante in the hotel before joining a small party of guests in a luxury Mini-bus that took them on a very short journey to the Villa Borghese, a huge landscaped park with art galleries and sculpture gardens and artificial lakes. The hotel was very close to the garden, and had wonderful views of it, but high walls surrounded it and the walk to the main entrance was, they were told, tiresome. Even so, Marion, who had gone on a few coach trips to New Brighton and North Wales in her childhood, thought it was hardly worth getting into the mini-bus.

The guided tour of the gardens was, even to Marion’s surprise, an introduction to a new form of transport – a Segway tour. The Chinese invention, a two wheeled platform with a handle for steering and balance looked absurd and made everyone in the party – Human or otherwise - wonder if they could possibly manage to ride such a thing. Despite all qualms, however, everyone got the ‘hang of it’ in minutes and their tour guide took them at a speed faster than walking but slower than a bicycle, around statues to ancient gods and goddesses and modern Roman heroes and heroines, follies and water features and beautifully laid out gardens with barely a trace of perspiration under the Roman sun, no wear and tear on new shoes and positively no blisters on heels.

There were several art galleries within the park where they left the Segways outside and a choice of refreshment places. One of the most popular served Italian gelato in swirls and layers of colour and flavour at outdoor tables shaded by pastel coloured umbrellas. The Gallifreyan party relaxed over huge and refreshing portions and contemplated the beauty around them and the unique transport which had allowed them to enjoy it so thoroughly.

“We should have them in the Citadel,” Avery Ferron suggested about the Segways. “They would save time getting about the corridors without resort to localised transmats.”

Talitha laughed.

“Imagine Gold Usher on one of those!”

Marion laughed, too. Avery Ferron looked embarrassed.

“I never…. I… mean….” He stammered, remembering his place amongst their group. “I mean for the guards. I should never expect the High Council… their dignity…”

“Oh, I think Malika would enjoy it,” Talitha assured him. “And Gold Usher thinks too much of his dignity.”

“And Kristoph,” Marion added. “But NOT Gold Usher. That is too much.”

“I… could not comment on… such things,” Avery protested. “Madame… do not… tease me. I must not….”

But the thought of Gold Usher on a segway – or even trying to work out how to use one made him smile despite himself.

“Avery, you ARE allowed to laugh,” Hillary told him, aware of the young man’s continuing discomfort. “You are allowed to enjoy this trip, as well.”

“Yes… sir… I mean… madame…. Sir….” Avery Ferron was still trying to work out how to address Hillary. The hotel suite with two twin en-suite rooms and drawing room were arranged on traditional gender lines. Talitha and Marion were in one, Avery and Hillary, booked into the hotel in male form, shared the other. Hillary had promised to only morph into female form in the bathroom to spare Avery’s blushes, but he was still coming to terms with that.

He was also having trouble with two ladies of Oldblood House and one Haollstromnian aristocrat treating him as an equal. They had lunched together, and now they had eaten gelato under the same umbrella. They talked to him about sculpture and art, and listened to his opinion on such things as if he was one of them.

He understood about being ‘undercover’ and not obviously a close protection officer for the Lord High President’s wife and the wife of a former Lord High President. But it was still a shock to be dressed in a light cotton shirt and a kind of trouser called ‘Chinos’ with very lightweight shoes called ‘loafers’ instead of a breastplate and purple cloak. And it took an enormous effort not to address his companions as sir and madam – both in Hillary’s case.

“I hope you ARE enjoying the trip,” Marion said to him. “I do think it is a pity that Time Lords have the means to go anywhere they like, but only a very few actually DO travel.”

“Yes,” Talitha agreed. “This is my first offworld trip, too, Avery. We can be puzzled and amazed equally at the wonders of Marion’s world.”

“The Segways puzzled and amazed me,” Marion admitted. “They were invented since I left Earth. They are a wonderful way to get around a place as big as this and not miss anything.”

“I thought the bicycle was an astounding idea,” Hillary admitted. “They are quite new amongst the working class of Haollstrom for transport, and some of the young aristocrats are beginning to take up the sport of cycling. But it seems those are at least a century old on this planet. Did you see the sculpture of Enrico Toti? The one-legged cyclist who died in a war over a hundred years ago in this time.”

“Cyclist?” Talitha queried. She looked on her lightweight tablet for the information and was surprised. “I… do remember that statue, but I didn’t notice the one leg and there was no bicycle. I DID notice the figure was naked. MOST of the statues in these gardens are unclothed. It… seems to be a Human trait to do so.”

“It’s an Italian one, at least,” Marion admitted. “The ‘classical’ style. It did seem a bit strange in that particular case, though. Twentieth century people tended to wear clothes in public.”

“Especially for cycling, I should think,” Hillary commented.

“I WASN’T worried about it,” Talitha insisted. “I AM a married woman, after all. But I have never seen naked statues on Gallifrey.”

Since Hillary had stepped out in the sunshine in a feminine cotton sundress and wide brimmed hat, Avery felt even more left out of this conversation between three worldly-wise women about mostly male nakedness in suggestive art. Marion smiled warmly at him and assured him there was far more to Italian culture than statuary.

“We are going to visit some religious buildings tomorrow,” she said, before remembering that the Sistine chapel had one of the most famous male nude paintings in Human civilisation directly overhead on Michelangelo’s famous ceiling.

“And the opera tomorrow night,” she added quickly, hoping they were safe with that. She had never heard of a nude opera, anyway.

“Isn’t it a good thing nobody else can understand what we’re saying,” Marion said looking around at the fellow patrons of the gelato shop. She heard them all in her native English, thanks to the TARDIS translation effect, but there were German, French, Spanish and a Polish group at different tables, as well as an American couple who were telling the tour guide how disappointed they were to find none of the prices in the gift shop were in dollars.

At their own table they were speaking Gallifreyan amongst themselves. Marion was fluent and Hillary had learnt from Kristoph many years ago when they were diplomats together. They had no fear of being overheard in their conversation, though Marion did wonder what they must sound like to others. She had always thought Low Gallifreyan was something like German, with the High Gallifreyan of the government and law rather Scandinavian, but Hillary said it was quite unique in her experience of galactic languages.

Cathedrals and opera were something to look forward to. For their first night, though after so much exertion in the afternoon, they were all happy to stay in the hotel, dressing for dinner at the rooftop restaurant for which the Hotel Eden was justly praised on TripAdvisor. A Michelin starred chef did wonderful things with food even Hillary with her diplomat’s vast experience of cuisine had never tasted before and they all admired the view over Rome in the twilight.

“So many lights across the city,” Avery, dressed in a tailored suit that rivalled Hillary’s for style, commented. “Before I was in the Presidential Guard I worked many nights in the security centre in the Citadel tower – high above the city and it never looked like this. All our street lights are designed to cast no light pollution upwards, the better to see the stars beyond the envirodome. But… this city looks quite beautiful this way. And the stars are still visible from this height.”

“You can see the Kasterborus system from here,” Marion told him. “Kristoph showed me many years ago. That cluster of stars low in the southern sky – we call it Sagittarius. Gallifrey’s star is on the bow of the archer.”

Avery and Talitha, both so far from home for the first time, looked once, then turned back to enjoying their meal. There was no need to be homesick when they had so much to look forward to, yet.

“I don’t know where to find the place Kristoph and Malika are,” Marion admitted. “It may not even be visible from Earth. But… I hope they’re doing well with their peace negotiations.”

Talitha agreed. For a moment she missed her husband, then realised she hadn’t done so all day, and felt guilty for that. Then she gave her attention to the dessert menu and didn’t worry about anything other than the calorie count in a tiramisu – which sounded delicious, whatever it was.