**Public Broadcasting**

Few of the young Gallifreyan ladies gathered in the drawing room of Mount Lœng House were completely relaxed this afternoon. Mia Reidluum always felt a little self conscious, despite, or sometime because of the way everyone tried not to mention her disability. She had arrived early and was already sitting on a sofa with a shawl over her crippled legs when the rest of the afternoon guests started to arrive.

Rika de Lœngbǽrrow was a little shy. She had never really had a chance to meet any of the high born ladies of Gallifrey before Remonte took her away to Ventura. She was sitting close to the others, but she was not really in touch with Gallifreyan gossip and wasn’t altogether sure what to say.

Her sister in law, Oriana, was equally out of touch with society gossip because she had withdrawn to her house on the edge of the de Lœngbǽrrow estate when her husband’s behaviour had made her the subject of that gossip for a time. She was only now starting to come back into the circle she used to consider her own.

Talitha Dúccesci was strangely distracted. As wife of the present Lord High President she ought to have been the centre of the group, but she was sitting quietly on the edge of it all. Even Rosanda, wife of Marion’s butler, looked more comfortable than Talitha, talking with all of the ladies in turn about gowns they had commissioned from her.

Marion had invited her to join this social afternoon as a friend, somebody that, at least, Rika might find an infinity with. So far that hadn’t really worked. Both of them were too conscious of their halfway status, neither Caretaker nor aristocrat, the one having worked her way up as a couturier of distinction and the other having married into Oldblood society, but Marion had hopes that all the distractions affecting her friends might vanish in the course of the afternoon.

Caolin came into the room followed by three maids who laid trays of finger food on the sideboard. He sent the maids out as soon as they were done with their duties and nodded to Marion.

“It is almost three,” he said. “Shall I switch on the screen?”

Marion smiled and thought about how, in the early days of television on Earth the expensive set was almost always turned on and off by the man of the house. Kristoph was not home this afternoon, but Caolin was adopting the role.

She thought of saying she would do it, but for the sake of a tradition nobody else knew about, she nodded and told him to go ahead.

Caolin switched on the power to the large video screen only recently installed in the drawing room. It defaulted to a channel devoted to Panopticon debates, but the butler turned it to a screen that was presently showing what was known on Earth as a ‘test card’ – a geometric image that utilized the whole colour spectrum that a high definition screen could manage. There was some soft music playing to indicate that the sound was fully optimised.

The conversation, such as it was, quietened as the ladies gradually turned to look at the screen in some expectation, though very little excitement.

That, Marion supposed, was because none of them really knew what to expect. The public broadcasting system of Gallifrey had never been used for entertainment before. This afternoon’s transmission of two and a half hours of music and drama was an experiment to see if such an idea might be popular. Lord Dúccesci had granted the petition by a group of Caretaker born actors and musicians to see if it might work.

Marion had read about the early days of the BBC at university. There had been questions in parliament, letters to the Times, for and against, a huge issue about whether to use the Marconi or Baird system.

Something very similar had been happening here on Gallifrey while she and Kristoph were away on their extended trip to Earth. There were those who thought it was a wonderful way to expose the Caretaker classes to high culture. There were those who thought that exposing the Caretaker classes to high culture would be dangerous, though what form the danger might take was unclear.

And now, this afternoon, in a very few moments, it was going to happen. Marion thought it was a little bit like waiting for the FA Cup Final or the Eurovision Song Contest, or possibly a royal wedding, which was why she had asked the kitchen to provide food for the occasion, but her friends had no idea what the FA Cup or Eurovision were, and most of them expected to attend royal weddings in person. She was at a loss to explain why this was a momentous occasion.

When the ‘test card’ cleared and the High Councillor for Communications appeared on the screen, sitting in front of a plain black curtain and looking very uncomfortable, it didn’t seem all that momentous. In a rather diffident tone he explained the purpose of the broadcast, recognising that information and education could be imparted through the medium of entertainment. Marion smiled to think that the motto of the early BBC, To Inform, To Educate and to Entertain, had been so closely echoed here on Gallifrey and hoped the Councillor wouldn’t talk for too much longer.

He didn’t. His speech gave way to a twenty minute musical recital, a very short section of one of the great sagas that went on for as much as twelve hours in the Opera House.

That was one thing the public broadcasting might be used for, Marion thought. Though not until the managers of the Opera House were convinced that it would not leave them with empty seats if people could watch from their homes.

After the opera there was a demonstration of an ancient and almost forgotten form of stick fighting in elaborate and brightly coloured costumes. This, at least, proved that somebody understood how to ‘mix’ footage from different camera angles and use zoom and long lens. It wasn’t in any way ‘static’ as it might have been without such techniques. The Gallifreyan public broadcasters had a few centuries of experience to draw upon, unlike those early BBC men.

The next half hour was what Marion recognised as an attempt at a ‘situation comedy’, though nobody else in the drawing room realised that. For one thing, they had never heard of such a thing before and for another, the ‘situation’ wasn’t the least bit comedic. It was during this half hour that most of Marion’s guests availed of the refreshments.

“I don’t understand it,” Rika commented. “We have comedy theatre on Ventura. Why doesn’t it work here?”

Marion thought she knew, but she didn’t really want to say it out loud. Entertainers, whether opera singers and ballet dancers, or simply comic tumblers and jugglers, came from the Caretaker classes. The ‘situation’ being presented was set in a drawing room of a country house not unlike the one they were all watching from. The Caretaker actors were having trouble acting as their ‘betters’. The lines came out clumsy and unnatural and simply unfunny.

The only thing the ‘comedy’ half hour proved was that Gallifreyan half hours were excruciatingly longer than Earth ones, and that nobody had thought about book ending the story with theme music or ‘credits’. There was simply a few seconds of blank screen before an announcer in front of the same black curtain announced the next segment.

It was a piece of ballet, recorded, not on the Opera House stage, but in the plaza in front of it. The cool fountains and sculptures of the plaza made a nice background to the dancing, and again a vision mixer understood when to come in close and when to draw back onto a wide view.

One thing the close ups made obvious, though, was a misunderstanding of make up for television rather than stage. That, too, was something learnt long ago on Earth and other worlds where entertainment had come before the informing and educating.

But they would learn, Marion thought, and the dancing WAS very nice. So was the harp recital that followed it and the selection of ‘folk songs from the southern plains’. Rika and Rosanda were both familiar with these, and oddly enough, so was Oriana. Her son’s nanny was often heard singing them to him.

The others found the songs entertaining enough, perhaps partly because they rounded off the programme. When they were done, the announcer lugubriously announced the National Anthem of Gallifrey.

Marion had a fond flashback to one of her foster families as a child, where everyone was expected to stand for the national anthem at such events as the cup final or the Queen’s Christmas broadcast. Gallifreyans, she noted, had never been taught to stand for an anthem coming from hundreds of miles away. The tune had played for several bars before they all, except for Mia, of course, stood up. They looked at each other in perplexity at first, then noticed Caolin, who had slipped back into the room a few minutes earlier. He had stepped towards the screen and stood straight and proud, his hand upon his left heart.

If a butler knew how to respect his anthem, then the ladies certainly wouldn’t be found wanting. They straightened their postures until the final stirring lines of ‘Gallifrey: Our Childhood, Our Home’ faded away.

“Well,” said Oriana as they found their seats again. “That was… interesting.”

“Oriana, you never used to be so tactful,” Talitha replied. “Interesting… doesn’t begin to cover it.”

Talitha wasn’t being mean to Oriana, perhaps just encouraging her to be justifiably critical.

“The play was dreadful,” Mia said. “I didn’t understand it at all.”

“It was meant to be funny,” Rika explained.

“t wasn’t funny at all,” Oriana said, finding her critical faculty at last.

She looked at Marion.

“You have entertainment broadcasting on Earth, don’t you?” she asked. “Is it like that?”

“The comedies are funny,” Marion answered. “Well, most of them. There isn’t so much opera and ballet. I wish there was. I’d quite enjoy more of that.”

Everyone agreed.

“I wouldn’t stop going to the Opera House, though,” Mia added. “It’s not quite the same as being there.”

But had the experiment, as a whole, worked? Nobody was sure. They talked it over while they ate more of the refreshments and drank Earl Grey tea, a compromise between Marion’s preference for PG Tips with milk and the Gallifreyan herbal infusions.

In the midst of the debate Kristoph and Remonte got home. They both looked tired after a long time in Committee discussing what ought to be done to limit the damage to morale on Polarfrey and Karn after the ‘quarantine’ fiasco. They both acknowledged their guests before pouring single malts and sitting with their wives.

“Was it as bad as expected?” Kristoph asked, nodding at the now blank screen.

“Gallifreyan comedy is,” Oriana told her brother with a wry smile.

“After all my years in the Panopticon I could have guessed as much,” he answered.

“Do you think the idea will ‘catch on’?” Talitha asked. “Marion said that everyone watches television all the time on Earth.”

“All too true,” Kristoph confirmed. “And Marion knows my opinion that humans might get more done if they watched less of it. There is an old Earth phrase ‘panem et circenses’.”

Though it should have done, the Latin did not translate into Gallifreyan easily. Everyone was puzzled.

“It means that people are distracted by entertainment to stop them realising that more important things are going on. Today was a prime example. Talitha, while Gallifreyan comedy was dying an early and perhaps merciful death, your husband narrowly escaped a vote of no confidence in his presidency.”

Everyone gasped, Talitha the loudest.

“Escaped?” she queried, her face drawn and white with shock.

“As I expected, he still has friends in the right quarters. But the Polarfrey situation has weakened his position. He cannot afford to make mistakes. And he should have delayed this broadcasting experiment for a while. It looks exactly as if he was trying to distract attention from far more important matters.”

“Did… you tell him that?” Talitha asked.

“I didn’t have to. He already knew my opinion. He can still count on me as one of his friends. But he mustn’t take anyone or anything for granted just now.”

“The sooner I get on with governing Polarfrey and Karn the better for all,” Remonte added. “I’m going there tomorrow. Rika and Remy will join me in a few weeks, but I shouldn’t delay.”

“Your mother will be pleased,” Rika said, though she didn’t relish being left behind in that way. “She wants more quality time with Remy.”

“I wouldn’t dare stop her,” Remonte answered. “Talitha, don’t worry. Things ARE going to be fine in a little while. Just be GLAD that comedy doesn’t work on Gallifrey. I understand that Earth has something called ‘political satire’. None of us would live that down.”

“That is certainly true,” Kristoph said with feeling.