**Red Moon of Chebariis - II**

But the first voice anyone heard wasn’t an expression of joy at the natural event just witnessed.

It was a scream of horror.

It came from the wife of the Primex of Astria who was staring down at the lifeless body of the youngest prince of Sagua X.

“Everybody stand still,” the Voivode of Chebariis called out. “Stay exactly where you are at this moment. Don’t touch anything.” He paused for a few seconds then called out again. “Crewman Steen, you have permission to move in order to turn on the deck lights. Then go below and ask the captain to order all the boats in the vicinity to remain in their anchorages with riding lights on.”

This was done quickly. The full horror of what had happened was revealed in the bright deck lights. A pool of dark red blood was rapidly spreading around the prince’s body. A long knife sticking between his shoulder blades was clearly the cause of the blood loss.

Kristoph, with a nod to the Voivode moved carefully, avoiding the blood and touched the prince’s neck to look for a pulse. There was none. He shook his head to confirm that fact to everyone, then, without rouching any other part of the body he looked carefully around it.

“More like a short sword than a knife,” he amended. “It has gone all the way through his body – destroying the heart. The tip of the weapon is embedded in the deck – which is rather difficult to achieve, in fact. Ordinarily the impact would push it back. Plus, I am surprised nobody heard anything. It must have happened when the music reached its main crescendo.”

Quite unconsciously, everyone turned from the horrifying sight of the body to the simply bemused group of musicians. The four clutched their instruments as if they were shields and tried not to look guilty, even though their part in the murder was completely innocent.

“But who could have done this?” asked the Ambassador from Quadrix Minor.

“Who was closest to the prince when the eclipse was at its darkest?” asked his colleague from Quadrix Major who scowled at his fellow delegate for asking the question he had been planning to ask.

“I was closest,” the slender and diminutive wife of the Primex of Astria admitted in a very small, frightened voice. That’s why I saw him first… as soon as the moonlight came back. But… but… I didn't… I didn’t kill him.”

“Well, of course it wasn’t you, Chesnyam,” Marion assured her. “Nobody could possibly think it of you.”

“Even if they had a moment’s suspicion,” Kristoph added. “That weapon is shorter than a standard sword, but still too long for a petite lady – pardon my familiarity, Madam – to have wielded. Nor could you, unless you are secretly a skilled swordswoman, have driven the weapon so deep. You may be assured you are not a suspect.”

Chesnyan of Astria sighed with relief. Marion took her hand reassuringly. As she did so, she noticed something almost certainly important, but when she tried to draw attention to the undoubted clue, she found it difficult to make herself heard in the hubbub of questions and speculation.

“The lawful authorities are on their way,” the Voivode promised as one of his men covered the body with a tarpaulin.

Whether the authorities that arrived a few moments later were lawful was debateable. A small craft drew alongside the yacht and men dressed in black with the insignia of the Saguan Securitate clambered aboard. They had guns which they pointed at the Voivode and his guests. Some went below and forced the crew up on deck.

“You will all remain here until the murderer of the Prince is identified,” said the Commander of the force. “First let the decencies be observed. The Prince will not lie beneath a sailcloth.” He nodded to one of his men, who stepped forward with an Saguan flag. While everyone else wondered why a flag was so conveniently available, it was placed over the body with something more than necessary ceremony.

“Now that the proper respects have been observed, everyone will present themselves for interrogation.”

“Interrogation?” The word was echoed with various levels of outrage and effrontery.

“We are witnesses not suspects,” the Primax of Astria pointed out. Marion half-smiled and recalled that Hercule Poirot was only one of several fictional detectives who would assume everyone at a crime scene was potentially both witnesses and suspects.

“Nothing of the sort will be done under your assumed command,” replied the Voivode with an admirably assertive tone. “We are on Chebariis, not Sagua. You have no authority. In any case, this yacht is under diplomatic protection. No passenger or crew member may be molested by you. Lower your arms and stand away.”

“Our Prince has been murdered,” the Commander insisted. “I assume the right to identify and arrest the killer.”

“The killer wasn’t one of us,” Marion said. One of the soldiers turned towards her when she spoke, swinging his gun until it was in front of her chest.

Much to the surprise of the soldier, Marion pushed the barrel away with her index finger.

“Do not point that thing at me,” she said, too outraged to be scared. “I am the wife of a plenipotentiary, under diplomatic protection. Even if I were not, is this how you behave towards women on your planet? Shame on you.”

The soldier in question looked ashamed and stepped back. While she still had her courage and the element of surprise, Marion turned to the Commander.

“If you’re looking for a killer, you’re aboard the wrong boat,” she said. “Look at THAT….”

She pointed down at the deck close to the now-flag-covered body. The sailcloth had actually covered the pool of blood more decently, but that was beside the point. All eyes looked where she indicated – to a pool of water and a trail of wetness leading to the starboard rail.

“Somebody swam to the yacht under cover of the eclipse, climbed aboard – extremely quietly – killed the prince and got away just as quietly.”

“Impressive,” Kristoph remarked. “I don’t know many assassins with that sort of stealth.”

“Silence,” the Commander ordered and a weapon swung towards him, too. “You will apologise for that disrespectful remark.”

“No disrespect was meant by my remark.,” Kristoph answered. “Not to the assassin, at any rate. I merely expressed a professional admiration for the skill of the operation. However, I would echo my wife’s sentiment and suggest very strongly that you do not point your guns at me - or any others of these good people. Marion, the lady from Astria looks weary. Take her below deck where she may rest on a couch. Likewise, the Voivodress and the other spouses. We who are the designated ambassadorial representatives, under full intergalactic diplomatic protection, will remain here to see that no further acts of barbarism are committed while the matter is investigated.”

The Commander tried to protest, but a mere look of long-held authority silenced him, while his men considered Kristoph’s words about professional admiration of the assassin and viewed him nervously.

“Now,” Kristoph continued when the women were safely below deck. “As my wife has observed, it is quite clear that the killer came from another boat – and the closest one moored on that side of this vessel was, in fact, your own Saguan Securitate launch. What does that suggest?”

“It suggests that the Prince was killed by one of his own protectors,” the Voivode said as the Commander appeared to be thinking about that for longer than necessary. “And then these came aboard MY yacht in order to accuse one of my honoured guests of the foul act.”

“Worse than that,” Kristoph told him. “The assassination occurred on Chebariis. I suspect the intention was to blame you and your administration for neglect.”

“To what end?” the Voivode asked.

“Good question. Let us put the question to the Commander. Why have you attempted to fix the blame for a Saguan political assassination on innocent people?”

“I… did not….” The Commander answered uncertainly, before unexpectedly turning and firing his weapon. The man of his own team who fell was, admittedly, aiming a weapon at his back, but the suddenness of the violence even caused Kristoph to raise his eyebrows.

“Everyone else, ground your weapons,” the Commander said as he approached the body and examined it carefully. “This man is wearing a wetsuit under his uniform. It was used recently. It is still WET!”

The Commander knew that last sentence lacked elegance, but he was trained in military strategy, not oratory and he sought only to be specific.

“You’ve got a military coup on your hands,” Kristoph told him. “Or at least the beginnings of one. You need to take both of those bodies off this yacht, work out which of your men are still loyal and find out what is happening on your home planet.”

The Commander paused, looking up at Kristoph – paused a little too long.

“That wasn’t a suggestion,” the Time Lord Ambassador said. “Do it – NOW.”

When the security launch was gone, Kristoph turned to the Voivode.

“Have your crew return us to the city as soon as possible. Meanwhile we shall join our spouses below. It is starting to be a little chilly on deck.”

The brunch in the Voivodress’ private dining room that took place on the morning after the eclipse had been arranged weeks before. The social secretaries that put it into the diplomatic schedules could not, however have anticipated the conversation that accompanied the meal.

Certainly, it had nothing to do with mineral rights.

“I’ve only just stopped shaking,” admitted Chesnyam of Astria to Marion. “How were you so calm through it all?”

“Indeed,” the Voivodress added. “We were all wondering about that. Does a finger often turn away a gun on your world?”

“Not often enough,” Marion answered. “I was scared enough underneath. But I don’t like being bullied. I don’t think the Commander wanted to be a bully. He was nervous.”

“He had reason to be,” Kristoph said. “He knew matters were on a knife-edge at home. There HAS been a military coup. All the senior men of the Saguan Royal family were executed. The queen and two infant princes have been allowed to seek refuge on another world after she signed a renunciation of the throne on behalf of her children.”

“The Commander and some of his men have asked me for asylum,” the Voivode added. “He shot the Prince’s assassin. He would be arrested on Sagua. I am allowing the request, though he was very rude to us all last night.”

“Magnanimity and mercy are valuable traits in a leader,” said the Primax of Astria. The Ambassadors from Quadrix Minor and Quadrix Major both agreed with him. This, in itself was considered a diplomatic achievement since they rarely agreed about anything.

“I believe the coup was overdue,” the Primax of Astria remarked. “Sagua was very despotically ruled. The Emperor and his eldest sons were utter tyrants. It is to be hoped – once a stable republic has been constituted – that trade for the benefit of the whole Saguan people might be established.”

Again the Quadrix Ambassadors were heard to agree with each other.

“And if that could happen – twice,” the Voivodress remarked quietly and conspiratorially to Marion and Chesnyam. “There is hope for peaceful co-operation amongst the planets of this quadrant.”

“We may all drink to that,” Kristoph whispered to them with an equally conspiratorial wink.