**Queen of Sheffield – Part II**

Toeing the line wasn’t easy when it came to the next evening’s round. Yas expressed her concerns to The Doctor on her way to the Crucible stage door. Her first qualm had been a reluctance to have Graham and Ryan in the audience for the event, but she accepted their promise to sit at the very back of the top tier where she couldn’t possibly see them from the stage and be put off by what she described as their ‘too obvious grins’.

“I really don’t feel good about wearing a swimming costume to walk out onto a catwalk in front of people who are judging me on my body and nothing else,” she explained further. “It was bad enough wearing an evening dress, but that was about showing grace and poise and ability to speak well and express an opinion clearly. Even my uncle Ahmed who thinks I should wear a hijab with my police uniform couldn’t object to that. But this really IS voyeurism. It’s just people – mostly men – looking at my legs.”

“But you’ve been swimming before, haven’t you?” The Doctor asked. “At the seaside or a public pool. And you weren’t worried about your gym costume. That’s just as revealing as a bathing suit.”

“It’s a leotard. For doing gymnastics in the proper clothing in the time and place for it - more or less. A bathing costume at a swimming pool is fine, too. It is what women wear to go swimming. But to be honest, I always hated walking to the poolside, even at school when it was mainly just other girls. Once I was in the water I was fine. Same when I did my life saving course in police training. But a stage with no water anywhere in sight, nowhere I can just dive in and escape being looked at… that isn’t what a swimming costume is for.”

“I got you into this,” The Doctor admitted apologetically. “I’m sorry to make you feel uncomfortable. I should have considered… your cultural sensibilities. That was remiss of me.”

“I’m a modern Muslim girl,” Yas assured her. “I don’t wear immodest clothing, but that’s me, a shy girl, not my religion.” She laughed suddenly. “There’s a thought. Do you think the TARDIS wardrobe has a burkini in it?”

“It probably could, if you really wanted it to,” The Doctor answered. “It occurs to me that there’s something else it could do, though.”

She told Yas her alternative plan. It depended on the co-operation of the other contestants. To her surprise, they all agreed, even Una, who presumably didn’t want to stand too far apart from the others until she was ready to play her hand.

And so, courtesy of the TARDIS wardrobe, the Miss South Yorkshire swimsuit round was contested by twenty shapely and attractive young women wearing costumes last fashionable a hundred years before. Styles included high necklines and just above knee legs, capped sleeves and little pleated or frilled skirts. When they paraded there were roars of laughter from the audience and even the judges smiled a little, which was a first time all week. Except when they were being entranced by Una, the best description of their expressions had been ‘lugubrious’.

The joke almost came unstuck when, wrapped in silk dressing gowns the contestants waited to hear which of them had been eliminated. One of the contest organisers burst in, angrily holding up a list of rules.

“Who organised this rebellion?” demanded Miss Hegarty, Director of Events. “Who was it? She will be eliminated at once.”

Nobody spoke. Una shifted in her seat, but the two ladies who had mistaken Yas for a fellow lesbian demurely and gracefully stood on her toes. There was silence for a long minute.

“You can ALL be eliminated for breach of contract,” Miss Hegarty threatened when it was clear there would be neither any owning up nor a whistle blower. “I’d rather see this contest declared void than put up with this.”

“I don’t think so,” The Doctor told her. “Firstly, you can’t afford the loss of sponsorship and the broadcasting rights for tomorrow night’s final. For another, you’re going to love how the press report this. Beauty queens rejecting the shallow voyeuristic element of these contests. It’ll even get feminists supporting you. Thirdly….” She deftly whipped the rules out of the astonished woman’s hands. “Show me where it says they can’t wear historical bathing suits?”

Mrs Hegarty looked at The Doctor and swallowed hard. She began to speak, then stopped, tried again, then gave up.

“No more stunts,” she said, glaring around the room. “It’s bad enough we didn’t spot that FREAK until yesterday….”

There were stony looks all around as they all realised who had come down on Paulette, but Miss Hegarty wasn’t in the Beauty Contest business to be popular.

“I’ll not have any more messing around, any more attempts to bring the contest into disrepute. Tomorrow night you ARE on television. It may only be regional, but it is TV. It is archived. Your future careers may be at risk….”

She stormed out. For a few moments there was silence, then laughter rang around the green room.

Then….

“Enough!” Una shouted in a commanding tone that Miss Hegarty would have wilted under. “Enough nonsense and frivolity. You act as if you have any free will. You do not. You are here only to be judged less worthy than I am when I am crowned as your queen.”

This time there was no subterfuge, no masking her words. Everyone heard it. They turned and stared in astonishment.

“Don’t be so sure,” The Doctor told her, stepping forward. She held up her hands and met one powerful mind with her own. For as much as thirty seconds Una struggled against her, then she suddenly changed tack. A wave of something that might be called ‘conciliatory’ filled the air and moments later The Doctor knew that everyone except Yas and herself had forgotten what had been said.

The incident had passed anyway, and another moment later a runner entered the green room with a list of the ten eliminated contestants who were led back to the stage in order to take a tearful final bow and the polite applause of the audience.

Yasmin was one of the ten finalists. So was her friend, Liu. So was, unsurprisingly, Una. As the fortunate ten lined up to take their own much happier turn on stage Yas heard a hissing voice, filled with malice, close by her ear.

“You won’t beat me. You are not good enough. I WILL be Queen.”

It was Una’s voice, though she was not standing close enough to have spoken in any normal way. It was something psychic and nasty.

“We’ll see about that,” Yasmin thought, not caring if the thought could be read by the Elf or not.

“She is getting stronger,” The Doctor admitted when Team TARDIS, again, dined late in the Chinese Kitchen. Liu had the week off to devote to the contest and the other waiting staff were discreet but happy to please. “She intends to unleash her full power tomorrow night to influence the judges.”

“Tell us you can counter her,” Graham said.

“I can counter her,” The Doctor promised. “It’s going to take a lot of concentration, but I can do it. I’ve got the measure of her. I know the limits of her power.”

“She HAS limits?” Ryan asked.

“Oh, yes,” The Doctor assured him.

“But so do you,” Graham reminded The Doctor. “Are you absolutely sure?”

She answered only a beat slower than somebody who was ABSOLUTELY sure, but it was the best she could do. There was, The Doctor admitted to herself, a chance she might not be able to match the Elven power.

A chance she could die trying. But that was a chance she took every time she faced down some aspect of the evil that existed in so many forms throughout the universe.

“I'm quietly confident,” She assured her friends.

By mid-afternoon on the final day, Yorkshire Television outside broadcast vans were lined up beside the Crucible. it wasn’t quite as busy as the snooker final, but the excitement was certainly ratcheted up a notch.

The ten finalists went to tea with the lady mayoress – without her wife anywhere in the vicinity. It was one last photo opportunity with everyone wearing elegant day dresses with hats and gloves and correct posture throughout. Afterwards they were taken back to the Crucible to get ready for the grand finale night.

The first part of the show was also the finale of the talent component, with the last ten ladies reprising their ‘turns’. Yas’s variation of her routine was a secret, yet, since Miss Hegarty might have vetoed even a subtle rebellion against the treatment of Paulette and a re-affirmation of her equality message.

Miss Plusnet, known in the dressing room as Sandra, had also added a little oomph to her cheerleader routine with a gold lamé costume and pom-poms that lit up like sparklers and traced patterns in the air when the lights were turned down.

After her, and third last in the allegedly random running order, was Liu who chose another traditional English folksong to play on her Chinese pipa. This time, the mostly Yorkshire audience clapped happily along to ‘On Ilkley Moor baht 'at’, possibly the most easily recognized, if just slightly clichéd, song from the county. For the length of the piece, she had the crowd on her side – something that did not endear her to Una who waited her turn in the wings.

Buoyed up by local pride, the audience were already halfway with her when Yas stepped out on stage in a leotard she had imagined yesterday and the TARDIS had created for her. In deference to both of the football teams in her birth city, one half of the garment was styled in the red and white vertical stripes of Sheffield United and the other half in Sheffield Wednesday’s blue and white. Black football shorts were suggested in the mid-thigh length bottom part of the leotard. She carried a ball, one of the accepted accessories of rhythmic gymnastics. She knee’d it up into the air to begin her routine as the theme tune to Match of the Day began. The audience cheered and clapped along with the familiar music and thoroughly appreciated her very feminine gymnastic movements that, despite the successes of the Lionesses, represented a game still largely played by and watched by men.

Equality was here to stay, even in a contest for women who were born female.

“You won’t beat me, either of you,” Una snarled without opening her lips as she went past Yas and Liu to be the last performer to take the stage. “Both of you only got through to the last ten because they couldn’t eliminate the only two ethnic contestants without an outcry. You just tick boxes for the ‘woke’, that’s all.”

“Did she… REALLY say that?” Liu asked in astonishment at the unveiled racism.

“Yes, she did. But I don’t care so long as nobody else thinks that way, and I'm sure they don’t. Even Miss Hegarty isn’t that nasty. Come on, let’s get ready for the final catwalk.”

She wanted to get away from the stage before Una started ‘singing’.

Of course, there was no getting away from it. The big television screen was on in the large dressing room where everyone was changing into evening gowns and fixing hair and make-up for each other in a mutual mood of sisterliness.

To Yas, it still sounded like power tools slipping their gears. To everyone around her it was exquisite singing. But it was singing with a sting in it. While at one and the same time it was enchanting them into believing Una was the most beautiful, charming, graceful and talented of them all, they heard words directly addressed to each of them personally that degraded and derided them as worthless, talentless and, worst of all for beauty contestants, ugly.

And they believed it. Most of them burst into tears. Even the most confident looked at the floor as if it was more attractive than they were.

“No,” Liu called out to them all before Yas could think of anything to say. “Don’t listen to that biǎo zi.”

Thanks to the TARDIS translation circuits, Yas knew just how rude a word ‘biǎo zi’ was. The others didn’t, but the vehemence with which the sweet, friendly Liu spat out the word seemed to convey fully what she meant and the sentiment chimed with them all. They looked around at each other and though they still heard the fine singing, they also sensed, on the edge of their hearing, something of the broken toothed chainsaw or the angle grinder on granite. Una had lost her thrall over them.

“But… look at the judges,” said Miss Plusnet, pointing at the screen. “Look at the audience. She’s got them in her pocket. She’s going to win. We can’t… any of us… beat her.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Yas assured them all. “The Doctor… my friend… she’s got a plan. She’s not going to let Una get away with anything.”

Nobody asked how The Doctor was going to combat the strange, supernatural charm that was upon everyone else, but they were ready to believe. They had seen her face down Miss Hegarty. Now that they had at least partially seen through the glamour they also remembered her doing something to Una, though they weren’t altogether sure what.

Yas had absolute faith in The Doctor, though one thing worried her. She looked at the television as the view panned around the audience in the horseshoe-shaped auditorium - every seat, from the front to rear stalls, to the lower and upper circle, was filled for Sheffield’s televised event of the year – at least for anyone who didn’t like snooker.

At least half of the audience were elves, friends, comrades, or perhaps loyal subordinates of Una.

Yas remembered that half of the final result was going to be an audience vote. The other half was the panel of minor celebrities and civic dignitaries who made up the judges. They were all human, but all fully under Una’s thrall.

She had the vote packed in her favour in both ways. Even if most of the humans fought her glamour, which wasn’t likely, the Elves would be enough to counter them.

The Doctor gave her a reassuring thumbs up as the finalists went to wait in the green room to relax while the interval act performed.

"Jarv Is", the latest line up featuring Sheffield born Jarvis Cocker of nineties Britpop sensation Pulp, didn’t seem able to dispel Una’s glamour. Every human in the theatre still looked glazed-eyed and disconnected from reality as they filled in their voting forms and passed them to the staff who went down the aisles collecting them, a surprisingly low-tech means of choosing a beauty queen in an age of phone-in and text voting.

“Doctor, really, I am worried,” Yas told her.

“Don’t be. Graham was right. I can't fight her with my mind. She’s too strong. But there are other ways.” Yas, really wishing The Doctor hadn’t told her that, looked about to ask what ways they were, but the infuriating Time Lord just winked and asked her if she had ever seen the Stephen King film ‘Carrie’.

“Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“Quite a lot, as it happens,” The Doctor answered. “But don’t think about it. Just enjoy yourself. The worst was over when you got through the swimsuit round.”

And that was all she had to say before leaving Yas and the other finalists to mentally prepare themselves. They were all studiously ignoring Una. She was sitting a little distance from the rest, a faint smile on her face, as if she knew that the result was a foregone conclusion.

 "Jarv Is" performed three songs, none of them quite as well-known as their leading man’s hits of the nineties. Then, to tremendous applause, Nigel Havers and Patricia Hodge, still in 1920s evening dress from their performance of Private Lives at the Lyceum, stepped out on stage as surprise guest comperes.

Charlie Stayt, apparently, hadn’t been feeling well since the night of the interview round.

“What did SHE do to him?” Miss Plusnet asked as nine pairs of eyes looked around at Una and she flashed her green ones back at them in cold fury.

Then the cue was given. The ten finalists in flowing silk and satin gowns paraded out onto the projecting catwalk and back to stand in a semi-circle behind the two celebrity comperes. As the applause died down Patricia Hodge took an envelope from a silver tray presented to her, Yas was surprised to see, by Ryan in a smart-casual suit.

“Third place in Miss South Yorkshire 2022 goes to Miss Plusnet, Sandra Hodges… hahah, no relation.”

The audience applauded warmly as Miss Plusnet stepped forward, slightly surprised but delighted with the bronze coloured crown, the matching third place sash, a cheque for five thousand pounds and a voucher for a year’s supply of Revlon cosmetics.

As Miss Plusnet stood to one side, Nigel Havers stepped forward. He accepted an envelope from Graham, looking nearly as elegant an older man in his evening suit.

“Second place in Miss South Yorkshire 2022 goes to a lady I would not object to being arrested by, Miss South Yorkshire Police, Yasmin Khan.”

As a round of fervent applause filled the theatre, Yas was both stunned by the unoriginal comment from Nigel and by the fact that she had come second in a competition she had never wanted to enter, anyway. In a daze she accepted the silver crown and sash, a five thousand pound cheque, two years’ supply of Revlon products and a lifetime membership of the The Beauty Retreat Organic Day Spa in Middlewood Road, Sheffield.

There was a highly charged moment after the applause died down. Nigel and Patricia together took the envelope from The Doctor, dressed, surprisingly for such an occasion, in her usual asexual culottes, boots and braces ensemble.

“The winner, who will go on to represent South Yorkshire in the Miss United Kingdom, with a chance of representing her country in Miss World, is…..”

Again, there was a pause, the sort of artificial one used just a bit too often by Chris Tarrant when giving the right answer to the million-pound question.

Una was smiling widely, ‘knowing’ what was going to happen next.

The winner is,” the two comperes said in unison. “Miss Sheffield Business District, Lei Liu.”

“Yes!” Yasmin exclaimed, punching the air before realising that wasn’t quite the thing a runner up beauty queen was meant to do. She was just so pleased, first that her friend from day one of the event had won, and then that Una had been defeated.

As Liu accepted her crown, sash, and collection of vouchers for other prizes, Una screamed in rage and ran forward, reaching as if to snatch the crown from Liu’s head. The Doctor and Graham both tried to stop her, but she was foiled quite accidentally by Nigel Havers, who, unusually clumsy for a man of his usually suave and composed persona, stepped on the hem of her gown and sent her sprawling on the floor.

She was picked up by Graham and Ryan who escorted her into the wings, followed by The Doctor. The attempted interruption by a sore loser was forgotten as the two runners up hugged the joyful and tearful winner and a rain of gold confetti fell on them all.

“You lost, lady,” The Doctor told the Elf. “We beat you, with cunning and guile equal to your own and a lo-tech, non-magical solution to your plot that you would never have thought of in a million years.”

“I have lost this time, perhaps,” Una replied in a tone worthy of any defeated Scooby Do villain. “But there will be other times. One day, I will succeed. This world will bow to me.”

“Never,” Ryan told her.

“Never,” Graham confirmed. “Humans aren’t so easy as you think.”

Una hissed angrily, then shimmered and vanished. The two men looked across the empty space between them in alarm.

“She escaped?”

“She fled,” The Doctor answered. “Retreated from a defeat that will have badly stung her pride.” She pointed to a television screen where the cheering audience were still responding to the result of the competition and the credits rolled on the broadcast coverage. There were noticeable gaps in the crowd. “Her followers have gone after her. Back to the interstitial weakness, back to their own world. Tomorrow, we’ll pop along to the Nine Ladies. We can hire a minibus and Graham can drive since he knows the way. I can place a couple of force field enhancements there to make the wardrobe door stick for a century or two.”

They did that, enjoying a nice trip to the countryside into the bargain. Then in the evening they returned to Sheffield, to the Chinese Kitchen where the newly crowned Miss South Yorkshire had organised a party for twenty-eight of the original thirty contestants. Miss ‘Fake Tan’ had not returned her calls, and, of course, ‘Miss Sore Loser’ as she had been labelled, had vanished off the face of the Earth.

Paulette, Miss Sheffield Steel, who had taken delivery of several bouquets of flowers in the course of the day, was escorted to the party by Graham and Ryan. She sat with Team TARDIS and the three competition winners as Miss Plusnet recounted an odd epilogue to their night when Miss Hegarty and two men who were meant to be collecting the votes from among the audience were found in the back of one of the Yorkshire Television vans, passed out, surrounded by empty WKD bottles.

Miss Hegarty, who denied drinking anything alcoholic, had been incensed at having missed the result of the vote, and tried to say that there had been some kind of cheating, that the wrong woman had been crowned. But after she had been sent home in a taxi the rest of the organisers had discussed her assertion and decided that no wrongdoing was apparent and, perhaps, it was time Miss Hegarty stepped down from the committee.

“But… what did happen?” Yas asked, later, when the party was winding down. “How DID you change the voting to stop Una winning? And what does ‘Carrie’ have to do with it?”

“In the film,” Ryan reminded her. “The mean girls went around collecting votes for the Prom queen and swapping them for votes for Carrie so they could humiliate her on stage.”

“We collected the voting slips and replaced every one that put Una in the first place,” Graham explained.

“But that means Liu wasn’t really the winner and I wasn’t really second, or Sandra third, for that matter,” Yas reasoned, just a little bit deflated.

“Una was only top because she tricked everyone,” Graham reminded her. “Removing her was like taking out a gold Olympic medallist who failed a drug test. Those of you who didn’t cheat just got moved up a rung. You were the right choices outside of Una’s bamboozling.”

“So… you didn’t try to boost me up to winner?” Yas asked after accepting that explanation.

“We didn’t think you’d want to win,” Ryan told her “You weren’t keen to be competing as it was. Demeaning exploitation of women and all that.”

“You’re right, I didn’t,” Yas agreed. “I'm pleased for Liu. She’s a lovely girl. What’s this I hear about you making a date with Paulette, by the way?”

“She asked me,” Ryan answered. “She’s been invited to the Mayoress’s LGBT ball, and I'm her plus one. Graham was asked, first, actually but he said he’d look like an old fogey next to a lovely young girl like her.”

“Well, I would,” Graham admitted with a slight and endearing blush.

“I… said yes, because… well, she IS a lovely young girl,” Ryan added. “Absolutely stunning and a great personality, as well. And she said she’d show me some of that Kata stuff. She said the breathing and concentration on holding the moves would be great for combatting my dyspraxia. And… and stop grinning, all of you. I don’t care what anyone says.”

“Quite right,” The Doctor agreed.