**Gifts from Prorurutua**

Marion was puzzled. Midway through a quiet morning she had been summoned to the Panopticon. The message had come from the Premier Cardinal. An official car had been sent to collect her, but no further information had been forthcoming.

It was very peculiar. After all, she really had nothing to do with Gallifreyan politics. Even when Kristoph had been Lord High President she had really only had a social role to play. But an official summons like this didn’t sound like a social engagement at all.

She wasn’t worried. The Premier Cardinal was a charming man who had come to dinner at Mount Lœng House many times. Although ‘cardinal’ didn’t have the same meaning on Gallifrey as it did on Earth he was a sober man, devoted to the laws and precepts of his Time Lord culture, traditional in his thinking but far less so than Gold Usher who was so frequently shocked by modern ideas.

She managed to smile at Gold Usher’s easy shockability as the hover car dipped towards the landing space on the flat part of the Citadel roof set aside for that purpose. She was met by two Chancellery Guards who bowed their heads respectably and escorted her. It was a mark of respect, not of detention or coercion, of course.

She was brought to a wide, airy room in the upper part of the Citadel. There was a wall sized window overlooking the quiet plaza below. A carafe of cool moonfruit juice and a basket of fruit and nuts were available. Marion had a glass of juice and nibbled some cúl nuts. She always liked their taste and this time of year when the trees were still budding on the southern plain they were an out of season treat.

She waited to find out what all of this was about.

Just as she was starting to think that she had been forgotten, the door opened. It wasn’t more Chancellery Guards, or even the Premier Cardinal. Instead, to her surprise, Valena d’Arpexia greeted her warmly and asked her to come along with her.

“What is happening?” Marion asked. “Why all the secrecy?”

“It’s not really a secret,” Valena answered her. “I suppose his Grace didn’t tell the driver anything other than to collect you. He’s not one to chatter with mere staff. But don’t worry. It’s actually rather fantastic.”

Marion was even more puzzled. She allowed Valena to bring her to a door flanked by two of the Chancellery Guard. They bowed heads and opened the door. The two ladies stepped into what was usually a committee room for meetings of importance to the Gallifreyan government.

There was no possibility of a meeting at this table. Blocking the view from one side to the other was a huge golden bowl. It was, truly, too big to be a mere bowl. The word cauldron came to Marion’s immediate thoughts. Or a cooking pot for cannibals. Maybe a swimming pool for pygmies. The more absurd notions flowed through her mind as she looked at the fine embossed images all around the outside of the bowl. Ladies in flowing silk dresses and lots of fruit featured.

There were other treasures laid out on the table around the bowl. There was a gold plate wide enough to contain four large Christmas turkeys, again with magnificent embossed figures. Marion was trying to remember what this kind of ornamentation on gold was called as she viewed a set of matching goblets on a tray and a dozen other fine looking pieces of wonderful craftsmanship.

The Premier Cardinal standing up was too tall to be dwarfed by the treasures, but it was a close thing.

“Good day, my dear Lady,” he said. “Thank you for coming with such alacrity.”

Marion smiled. She knew what alacrity was, but only the Premier Cardinal could ever use the word in a spoken sentence.

“I am honoured,” she answered. “But… what are these?” She waved her hand at the gold border on the table.

“They are gifts… for you,” the Premier Cardinal answered. “From the Supreme Imperatrix of Prorurutua.”

“The….” Marion frowned.

“Supreme Imperatrix of Prorurutua,” the Premier Cardinal repeated.

“And… what is one of those?”

“The Supreme Imperatrix is the title of the ruler of Prorurutua,” the good man explained. “She has sent these gifts to you in the mistaken belief that you are the ruler of this planet.”

“What…” Marion was taken aback, but was acutely aware that ‘what’ was an inadequate response to a man with such verbal acumen as the Premier Cardinal. “I mean to say… Goodness… really? How could such a mistake come about?”

“Prorurutua is a matriarchal society,” the Premier Cardinal said in a troubled voice as if the idea distressed him. “A fiercely matriarchal society. Men are little more than slaves… at best concubines. When you and Lord de Lœngbærrow have attended diplomatic functions it was assumed that YOU were the senior member of the party.”

“Oh.” Marion was nonplussed. “I… don’t remember ever meeting a Supreme Imperatrix. Several Infantas, a Voivode, three Dictators, in the old Roman sense of the word. But never an Imperatrix.”

“Nevertheless, you are known to the Majestic lady in question and these gifts have been sent to you.”

“I… suppose I had better send some kind of thank you,” Marion answered. “But what am I to do with a monstrous thing like that? Even in the grand dining room it would be oversized.”

“If you wish, the gifts may be kept here in the Citadel on your behalf,” the Premier Cardinal assured her. “But there is another problem. The Imperatrix has invited you to represent Gallifrey at a Trade Summit that she is hosting on Prorurutua. The gifts are an incentive to attend.”

“Me… represent Gallifrey?” Marion was utterly dumbfounded. “But I can’t do that. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

The Premier Cardinal looked worried.

“We were hoping that accompanying your husband on diplomatic affairs would have given you some understanding of ‘where to start’.”

“Wearing gowns to the balls and banquets is hardly the same as attending the actual summit meetings,” Marion pointed out.

The very thought terrified her. She had never really understood the things Kristoph did at these affairs. She couldn’t begin to imagine standing in front of hundreds of people and making statements on behalf of Gallifreyan mineral exports or negotiating favourable terms against countless competing interests.

At least it wasn’t a peace conference. Imagine a whole solar system at war because she got a dry mouth and couldn’t speak. She remembered the first time she had to give an oral presentation at university. All that had been about was Virginia Woolf, and but for one student near the front of the class passing her half a can of lukewarm, flat, orangeade she wouldn’t have been able to start speaking.

“Marion, have faith in yourself,” Valena whispered.

She had almost forgotten that the youngest and practically the only, female Inquisitor was at her side. She looked at Valena and thought about how she had struggled to pass the Inquisition exams, how she had faced opposition to her election simply for being a woman, and even from her own father and his clear views about a woman’s place in a high ranking aristocratic family.

Then she remembered that few people had wanted her to go to university. She was working class, an orphan, dependent on foster families who were not interested in supporting her, either financially or morally, after she turned eighteen. She had gone ahead, despite all of that, plunging into an academic world that almost swallowed her in that first year. It wasn’t until she met Kristoph that she began to have the confidence to even enjoy her studies, let alone excel in them.

But did that mean she could only do well with the support of a man? Was she no more than an ornament on Kristoph’s arm as he made peace or brokered treaties?

The ghosts of every suffragette who demanded the vote seemed to call out in her head. The names of women who had been the ‘first’ to do things men expected them to stay away from, doctors, soldiers, politicians, inventors, urged her on.

She thought about the wives of American Presidents. Yes, some of them were ornamental. Some of them merely wore clothes at their husband’s sides.

But some of them had founded charities, led campaigns to end wars or ban landmines, explore medical frontiers. And they did it mostly without their husbands.

And, after all, for most of her life, her own country had a female Prime Minister. Granted, like most Liverpudlians, Marion hadn’t liked her very much, but it had to be said that SHE didn’t need a man to help her face the whole world.

All these thoughts jammed into her mind as the gleam of a huge golden bowl dazzled her eyes.

“Kristoph wouldn’t be with me?” she asked.

“Men are not permitted to take part in Prorurutuan civics,” the Premier Cardinal reminded her. Valena gave a short laugh and looked away quickly from the elder politician. In her head, Marion thought all those suffragettes and pioneer women, First Ladies and all laughed as well.

“I have volunteered to join your entourage,” Valena added. “Also Madame Thaxia. There will be a security detail headed by General Charro.”

Marion had only met either of those two women briefly during Kristoph’s term as Lord High President. Madame Thaxia was one of the oldest female Councillors in the Panopticon. She was unusual among Gallifreyan women in having never married, despite being a younger daughter of an Oldblood House. Marion had a feeling the suffragettes would be cheering her, too.

And General Charro was the ONLY female senior officer in the Gallifreyan military command. She wore the severe uniform of a general even on social occasions when other women wore silk and taffeta. Marion couldn’t remember ever speaking to her. She wasn’t sure what she would say if she did.

“It will be spoken of… if only in whispers… for millennia to come,” Valena said with a smile that made the Premier Cardinal turn his head this time. He was clearly uncomfortable with this situation. It turned everything he believed in upside down. But he was a good man with a duty to perform and he did it the best way he could.

“You seem to have it all organised without me,” Marion pointed out.

“We explored the logistics of the situation,” the Premier Cardinal explained. “But of course, it all depends on you. The invitation is to you, no other. We could not send any substitute without causing offence.”

“Then, I suppose I will have to do it,” Marion decided. Her confidence wobbled a little as she said it, but then she rallied. “It… will be an honour to represent Gallifrey in this important undertaking.”

And, not bad for a girl from Birkenhead, she added to herself.