**Lessons in Diplomacy**

“Azeri, Azori, Azoni…..” Marion intoned, looking at herself in a full length mirror as she did so. She was trying on the formal regalia of a Gallifreyan diplomat for the first time. The collar was in the feminine style, made of stiffened lace like those worn in the Elizabethan court rather than the heavy, lacquered material that the men wore, but it still felt cumbersome. She was never going to like wearing it.

At least it ensured her posture. It was impossible to slump in such a collar.

But mastering the formal greeting to the Supreme Imperatrix of Prorurutua was proving even more troublesome than the clothing.

Madame Thaxia sighed deeply and shook her head. Marion knew she had got it wrong again.

“I know… it’s Azƣri, not Azori. I just can’t seem to get my tongue around the vowel. And it appears in six other words in the greeting. It’s driving me barmy.”

“I’m not sure what ‘barmy’ means, exactly,” Madame Thaxia answered. “But we might all be there by the end of this mission. Try again. The vowel is difficult, but try to imagine starting to form an ‘o’ but changing to an ‘a’ midway through.”

“Ooooaaaa,” Marion managed.

“Not quite.”

“Oa… Azoari… Azƣri… Azƣri.”

“Better. Now try the first sentence in full.”

“Azeri, Azƣri, Azoni, gefforis tessala in exameis unfrustiss et vivasux dƣdo meso Azeri,” Marion said with just one glance at the card in her hand. She almost had the first line by heart.

“Yes, very good,” Madame Thaxia told her. “Be careful to emphasise the second syllable of ‘vivasux’, not the first. It changes the meaning of the word quite drastically.”

“I keep hoping you’re going to say ‘By George, she’s got it’,” Marion sighed.

“By whom?”

“It’s too complicated to explain. I must take a rest, though. This collar is so uncomfortable. How do you sit through whole sessions in the Panopticon wearing such things?”

“With fortitude,” Madame Thaxia replied. “But perhaps that is enough for now.” She waved a hand towards one of the attendants who came to remove the collar and help Marion change into a light afternoon gown. At the same time herbal tea and a tray of sandwiches were placed on a table. Marion sat gratefully, looking with as much enthusiasm as she could muster at the starfield beyond a large exoglass window.

This wasn’t a Gallifreyan ship. They had travelled by TARDIS to a space station called Galactic Central 45-6-Gamma where the all female diplomatic contingent joined a ship with the neutral livery of the Galactic Embassy, a luxury starliner providing first class suites for several contingents heading to the Prorurutua Conference. They had travelled at light speed across half a galaxy during the first ‘night’ when everyone was asleep. Now they were at a normal ‘impulse’ speed. The window shields were open and it was possible to look out at the stars, the multi-coloured nebulae and a streak of faintly glowing rocks and debris that was known as the Frigeian Wake. It was the remains of two dead planets that had crashed into each other before spinning off out of their solar system and becoming a spectacular hazard to intergalactic navigation.

Marion knew she was the only Human being to see wonders like this, but it was a little like a long train journey through spectacular scenery. It was possible to be a little bored with the view.

The diplomatic staff had brought two pots of tea. One was PG Tips bought in Tesco in Liverpool. The other was a more usual Gallifreyan herbal infusion. Marion had insisted on her own preference for the journey, but Madame Thaxia preferred the traditional brew. They both relaxed in their own way. In Madame Thaxia’s case that was still quite staid, her posture always upright. Marion took advantage of the ability to sit back in her chair.

As composed as she looked, though, she was still worried about how she was going to manage that formal greeting. It felt impossible and there were only three days to get it right.

What if she messed it up? She would be letting everyone down. Kristoph was sure she would manage. The Premier Cardinal was, so was the Lord High President. Even Madame Thaxia, she was certain, expected her to be ready by the time they were in orbit around Prorurutua.

She wasn’t sure she would be, and if she couldn’t manage the greeting, everything else would be over. There was no compromise with the administration of this unusual planet.

“I really don’t understand why they insist on these rituals,” Marion admitted. “Nor do I understand their attitude to men. It is so odd.”

“Well, don’t tell them that,” Madame Thaxia told her. “That really would be a bad move.”

“I know. Which is why I think this whole thing might be a mistake. Why would Gallifrey want a treaty with them?”

“They have made the overtures to us. We would cause offense if we did not respond.”

“And they’ll be even more offended if I make a mess of all this.”

Madame Thaxia might have been about to agree with her or to assure her she was doing fine. Marion was sure it was the first, but the censure never came because a visitor was announced. Marion stood up to greet Ambassador Hillary Barr Dey of the Haollstromnian diplomatic corps. They didn’t need elaborate greetings. Marion had been friends with the elegant lady in a shimmering electric blue day gown for many years. They hugged joyfully.

“I didn’t know you were on this ship,” she said after remembering to introduce Madame Thaxia in a more formal manner. They shook hands before Hillary sat and took a cup of PG Tips tea and a Gallifreyan cúl nut biscuit, a diplomatic choice of refreshment.

“We weren’t meant to be joining you aboard,” Hillary explained. “But the Haollstromnian diplomatic cruiser developed a fault. Our shuttle docked an hour ago. The pilot was so good this great ship didn’t even need to slow down.”

“I wouldn’t have noticed if it had,” Marion admitted. “I was too busy struggling with the wretched formal greeting.”

“A task neither of us have enjoyed,” Madame Thaxia said crisply. That was patently true and still not a criticism as such.

“Yes, it is a horror,” Hillary admitted. “I had a hard time of it when I first visited the Sanctified Prorurutuan Palace. I took hours to get the vowels right.”

“You had trouble with them, too?” Marion was surprised. Hillary was such an accomplished diplomat it was impossible to imagine her struggling with a mere matter of protocol.

“Yes, I did,” Hillary assured her. “Everyone does. You ask any member of the diplomatic services – well, the females, anyway – and they will tell you it is one of the worst experiences of their careers. But the first time is the worst. After that it does get easier.”

“Oh, I hope so,” Marion said with feeling. Then she laughed as she realised something. “Do the Prorurutuans know that you’re a Gendermorph?”

“No, and it is not something we intend to tell them,” Hillary answered. “They would not take it well. They don’t approve of gender fluidity any more than they approve of gender equality.”

“How did it get like that?” Marion asked. “Heaven knows there are places where one gender rules, usually the male. There are parts of Earth that still need to get the idea, and Gallifrey has only just fully accepted women at all levels of government. But how did Prorurutua reach the complete reversal of even the most usual state of things. And I know it is. I’ve spent enough time at diplomatic banquets to know that Ambassador are usually men and their spouses women. I mean there are some lady Ambassadors and I’ve met some queens, but they’re usually just accident of birth and inheritance. So how did the usual way of things change on this one planet?”

“Its not the only one,’ Madame Thaxia six. “I can think of two or three and I’m sure Madame Hillary knows a couple more. But one instigating trade and political negotiations with what it perceives as like minded societies is a bit unusual.”

“It started as you might expect,” Hillary answered. “There was inequality. Men ruled. But there were far less of them than the women - a biological inequality as well as a political one. The women who were at every level of society except the very top, demanded parity. When it was refused they organised. When the leaders of the organisation were arrested and treated badly there was open rebellion. Since there were women at every level of the police and army as well as politics it was surprisingly easy to take charge of the means of suppression once the gloves were off. The punishment for the President and his cabinet, and the deposed military leaders was quite grim. After that, the new female elite rewrote the Constitution. Men were reduced to second class citizenry. Increasingly stringent laws removed them from all but the most menial of work. Its been that way for several hundred years, now.”

“But… don’t they have men for….” Marion couldn’t help blushing. Hillary’s pheromones were hard enough to deal with at any time, but when she was thinking about… well, sex… it was even harder.

“Reproduction is strictly controlled. The working class women are permitted to give birth to male offspring in order to ensure a supply of menial workers, but they usually have three or four female children, first.”

“So… nobody marries for… well, for love?”

Madame Thaxia and Hillary both laughed softly. Marion wondered what was so funny.

“My dear, you forgot that women can fall in love with other women,” Hillary pointed out. “It happens on Earth, if not on staid, conventional Gallifrey.”

“Oh, yes, I had forgotten that,” Marion admitted. “Silly of me not to consider that possibility. So there is love on Prorurutua, at least. That is good to know. Though I still feel sorry for the men.”

“Speaking as a man - some of the time - so do I,” Hillary admitted. “It IS an unusual society and a difficult one to do business with. I suspect all these protocols of theirs are some kind of screen to keep other people away from them because they know they ARE difficult.”

“And I think that’s the cue for me to go and get my collar back on and practice the difficult stuff again,” Marion said. She waved to the attendant, not quite so peremptorily as Madame Thaxia did, but with the knowledge that she WAS the Ambassador on this trip. She went to be dressed again in the difficult formal clothing. Hillary promised to help her with the greeting. As she rose to follow Marion, Madame Thaxia told her something that surprised her.

“I wonder if you know as much about Gallifreyans as you think from your long association with Chrístõ Mian de Lœngbærrow? We are not so set in our gender moulds as you think. We, too, can be ‘fluid’.”

“I didn’t know that,” Hillary answered. She considered the problem for a short time, then nodded as if she understood exactly what Madame Thaxia meant. “Well, well. I’m surprised the old man didn’t tell me that. I wonder... if he didn’t tell me, he probably didn’t tell Marion, either.

“I don’t think he did,” Madame Thaxia agreed. “It isn’t something we talk about if the other party doesn’t need to know.”

“Well, I’m not sure Marion needs to know,” Hillary considered. “Or if she does, its not for us to tell her.”

Again, Madame Thaxia agreed with her.