**Prorurutua - I**

“Azeri, Azƣri, Azoni, gefforis tessala in exameis unfrustiss Io Om ō*zet* vivasux dƣdo meso Azeri….” Marion began the formal greeting to the Imperatrix of Prorurutua. She stood erect, the stiff lace formal collar helping with her posture. Her hair had been carefully teased into a high style with gold ornaments woven into the tresses. She felt important. She felt confident that she could manage the words she had memorised.

“Caziri, yemi, Zasziy, examinis, unpore, cazzi, Azeri azriopi. Senna Zen isas, senna is inzinon, aseit, zoni, zona, veriti, verita, zoni, Azoni, gefforis thessal, vivasux dƣdo meso zionio.”

At last it was over. Marion resisted the urge to sigh with relief and made a formal but not very deep bow to the Imperatrix who sat upon a gilded throne dressed in satin and ermine and wearing a very elaborate crown. She had been instructed by the protocol officer of the Gallifreyan diplomatic corps that, as the assumed leader of her planet, she was, even without a crown, the equal of the Imperatrix. She had no need to make any deep obeisance.

It was just as well. She wasn’t sure she COULD in this outfit.

As she stood back, it was Hillary’s turn as the representative of Haollstrom to make her formal greeting. Four other ambassadors waited their turn, including Lady Margis Hella from Ventura, who was, in fact the niece of the Venturan Crown Prince. Obviously, the Imperatrix had made the same mistake as she did about the rulers of Gallifrey.

They had made the same mistake when they invited the Third Queen of Lukasa to the conference. Marion had spoken to her briefly earlier. It had been difficult for both of them not to remember the tragic events that occurred the last time they met, but the Third Queen was a pleasant woman and Marion was pleased with that short reunion.

The impossibly tall Drigini Ambassador, dressed in gold fabric, was another dignitary that Marion remembered from the Lukasan State Ball. She recalled being unsure about the androgynous looking Ambassador’s gender. She wondered if the Prorurutuans knew for sure, either.

The last delegate to be presented was the Ambassador from Alpha Centauri, known simply, but confusingly, as Alpha Centauri and one of the few non-humanoids present. Marion knew for sure that this was a hermaphrodite species, both male and female in one. Marion had never dared to ask how that worked, but the high-pitched voice was the most obviously feminine aspect and the most irritating. Alpha Centaurians were very nice people but excruciating to listen to for very long.

In all, a very oddly assorted group. Marion looked around at them and thought that the Prorurutuan diplomatic service needed to do their homework. None of the three ‘real’ females, including herself, were genuine ambassadors from their countries and those that were, Hillary, the Drigini Ambassador or Alpha Centauri, were none of them ‘genuine’ women.

But even if they were all invited by mistake, they were here to do their best by their respective worlds. They went through the odd ritual and were accepted by the Imperatrix.

Then the supreme ruler of Prorurutua waved an imperious hand. The doors to a great ballroom where lesser guests were already enjoying a party were thrown open. The witnesses to the formal greeting were invited to join this festivity. Marion noticed General Charro looking worried when she realised that the six ambassadors were not joining this party. But the palace was well guarded. Nobody was in need of extra security.

The ambassadors were led to a side room next to the grand throne room. It was smaller, possibly meant to be more intimate, though Marion thought it was too strange for that.

This room was gilded everywhere it was possible to put gold. The walls and ceiling glittered. The floor was white marble with gold patterns inlaid into it. The only real result was acoustic. Even a moderate voice sounded loud and footsteps, especially Alpha Centauri’s flat-footed shuffle echoed off the walls.

Seven high backed and gilded chairs were set in a circle around a huge golden cauldron similar to the one Marion had received as a gift from the Imperatrix. The cauldron was filled with a viscous liquid that swirled like liquid mercury but was the yellow of molten gold. There was no heat coming from it, so it was hard to know what it actually was.

There was no obvious reason for the cauldron except to look dramatic. The reason for the chairs was obvious, though. This would be the conference room when negotiations would begin in earnest tomorrow.

For this evening, it was an informal meeting with refreshments. Servants moved around with trays of food and drink from which the ambassadors were invited to indulge themselves while the Imperatrix made small talk with her guests.

The servants, of course, were all men. They were dressed in satin, but there wasn’t very much of it, being no more than loose trousers and something that Marion would call a ‘crop top’ across a small upper part of the chest. They all had close cropped hair and metal bands on their wrists that seemed to represent shackles.

Judging by their blank expressions and downcast eyes, they were shackled in their minds, long ago taught to know that their place was at the very bottom of Prorurutuan society.

Marion had been instructed by the protocol officer not to try to engage with the slave men, either in words or even a sympathetic glance. But she found the idea of slavery appalling and the strange inequality of life on this planet peculiar in the extreme.

She did her best to answer questions put to her by the Imperatrix. Again, she had been instructed on how to frame her answers when asked about the form of government on Gallifrey or the contentment of the populace.

“All citizens of Prorurutua are content, of course,” the Imperatrix announced.

“Your servants don’t look especially content,” said Alpha Centauri. They had protocol officers in the Centauran diplomatic corps, too, but they tended to be a straight-talking people who found dissembling difficult. Centauri had simply said what ‘she’ thought without considering the consequences.

Besides, even if it was an undiplomatic remark, it was one they were all burning to make. Lukasa and Ventura were both monarchies, but they had no slave classes and the lowest grades of workers enjoyed a good standard of living and personal freedom. Haollstrom, though a republic, was somewhat stratified, with an upper and lower class that rarely interacted, but the workers nevertheless had no complaints.

By and large the same could be true of the Gallifreyan lower classes.

Nobody was entirely sure how Alpha Centauri an society was structured, but it had to be preferable to Prorurutua.

“The males are not citizens,” the Imperatrix answered sharply. “Whether they are content or not is of no interest to anyone. Their role is to serve their betters. That is all.”

Centauri’s three pairs of spindly arms wavered as she prepared to make another undiplomatic reply. At the same time, Marion was wondering if she herself dared say out loud some of the things she was thinking.

But neither got to speak just then. A young woman in the ermine trimmed robes of Prorurutuan royalty stalked into the room, nearly overturning the cauldron as she passed it and stood before the Imperatrix.

“You were not summoned, Astria” the Imperatrix said to the proud-visaged woman.

“Nevertheless, I am here, MOTHER,” replied Astria with a coldness to that last word that belied its usual warm connotation.

“You are no longer my daughter,” the Imperatrix answered, equally icily. “Bad enough that you allowed yourself to be impregnated by means of the filthy ‘natural conception’ that we thought eradicated from our society, but the child proved to be male. Where is it? Did you have it destroyed?”

“My child is beyond your reach,” answered the royal daughter while the ambassadors watched in stunned silence. “As I will be in a short while. I only came to warn you that your own position is far from secure. There is a growing movement that opposes your iron rule.”

“You wish to usurp me?”

“It is my duty to the people of this world,” Astria responded. “You have suppressed them for too long. The army that answers to me grows daily in numbers and support.”

“That is a lie,” the Imperatrix cried out angrily. “Or if it is not, this movement will be crushed. YOU may be warned of that. You....”

Astria was not listening to the warning. She turned and stalked away as quickly as she had come. The Imperatrix screeched angrily after her.

“You have not been dismissed. How dare you turn your back on me when I am speaking. I shall have you flogged like a slave. I shall….”

She stopped. Astria was gone and the Imperatrix remembered that the whole unpleasant incident had been witnessed by the Ambassadors.

To everyone.so surprise, it was the mild-mannered Third Queen of Lukasa who broke the awkward silence.

“This has been a distressing incident which has spoiled the convivial mood of this occasion,” she said. “I think perhaps we should break up this gathering, now. The formal discussions may resume tomorrow in less fraught circumstances.”

“I agree,” said Lady Margis of Ventura. Alpha Centauri seconded her. Hillary said nothing but passed her goblet of wine to the nearest slave and stood up. The others took her lead. The Imperatrix tried to urge them to stay, but nobody really wanted to continue being sociable, let alone ‘diplomatic’, after that so very disturbing incident.

“I never knew that ‘diplomatic’ meant smiling at unpleasant people and lying to their faces,” the Third Queen of Lukasa remarked as they entered the sumptuous wing of the palace given over to the Ambassadors and their staff and where the palace’s guards, all presumably loyal to the Imperatrix, were not permitted.

“Unfortunately, it is mostly ALL about that,” Hillary commented. “I’ve spent a lifetime being civil to uncivil people. That’s why I didn’t say what I really wanted to say to that pompous woman.” She shook her head and shimmered slightly as she changed voluntarily to her male form. In a formal evening gown the bearded man looked strange to those who had never seen the trick before. Alpha Centauri was certainly taken aback.

“I spend as much time as a man as I do as a woman,” he said. “And I don’t feel like a slave in either form. This society is twisted, and the ‘Imperatrix’ is the worst of the lot. Any more of the false smiles and I might just have forgotten that I am the most experienced diplomat here.” He laughed softly. “If I’d had any more of that awful wine I might have done so.”

“It was rather too sweet,” Lady Margis confirmed. “Very sickly.”

“We have some good wine imported from the Earth Federation in our quarters,” Marion suggested. “And an unopened bottle of the Scottish highlands single malt that Kristoph prefers,” she added.

“Now you’re talking,” Hillary responded with a wide smile. “Let us put ourselves in the hands of the Gallifreyan service. We can discuss how to deal with this impossible ‘conference’ in convivial surroundings.”

That had been the idea, but as they entered the comfortable drawing room of the Gallifreyan suite, a new problem presented itself.