**Prorurutua III**

Marion was bored and irritated. She had been listening to the Imperatrix talking for hours about her plans for trade ties with Gallifrey and the other worlds represented by the diplomats sitting around the great golden cauldron in the ostentatiously gilded conference chamber. There had been very little pause in her speech and even less chance for any of the representatives to discuss any amendment of what seemed like proposals already immutably set in stone.

She wasn’t alone. The Third Queen of Lukasa was nearly falling asleep and in great danger of sliding off her gilded chair if she did. The Drigini ambassador had entered a state of rigid semi-hibernation from which she would emerge when the conference was over.

Marion could tell that Lady Margis of Ventura was as bored as she was. She was positively fidgeting on her seat. Of course, that was probably because she was anxious to check on the baby whose welfare she had taken upon herself for the past two weeks. Every conference, every clearly staged trip through streets of carefully organised crowds to visit a ‘model’ factory, every ball and junket, took her away from that duty and caused her anxiety.

The more professional ambassadors were managing to look interested, but only just. Hillary was especially impatient. She and General Charro found their time better used in secret investigations of the real Prorurutua, the overtaxed ‘free’ people, the enslaved men, the prisons and gulags where those who tried to raise a voice of protest were sent, and the possibility of those voices being raised more effectively under the rebel princess Astria.

Which made all of this talk of trade a thin façade to cover those activities, and the futility of it was all too obvious to the diplomats.

“Please, lets have an earthquake, or the palace catching fire… anything to put an end to this,” Marion thought. Behind her, in one of the seats provided for the Ambassadorial aides, Valena d’Arpxia shifted slightly. She had obviously read her thoughts rather to easily and was resisting the urge to laugh. But Marion was too bored even to contemplate blocking her thoughts.

Then something equally disruptive as an earthquake or palace fire occurred. The doors to the conference chamber burst open and a phalanx of palace guards spread out, surrounding the delegates. The captain saluted the Imperatrix before delivering an explanation for the intrusion.

“Gracious majesty,” she said. “There is grave news. The populace have risen in arms. The palace is besieged. Your daughter, Princess Astria, is leading them. Madame… there are MEN in the rebel army! These men even have weapons.”

The Imperatrix rose from her throne. Her face was a picture of rage, but there was something more, besides.

She was afraid. Even without any kind of telepathy Marion recognised that much. This was news she had expected, perhaps, and now it had come she feared for her life.

“Barricade the palace,” the Imperatrix ordered. “The delegates will remain here. This room will be defended at all costs.”

“The delegates will do nothing of the sort,” Hillary remarked, standing as imperiously as the Grand Imperatrix herself. ‘You will provide protection for us until we reach the diplomatic quarters and then withdraw. Your internal politics are of no concern to any of us.”

She waved a hand to bring the others to their feet. The Imperatrix protested, but Hillary was adamant.

“Do not seek to use us as hostages or as a shield to protect your own person. That is expressly against all diplomatic law.”

There was no further argument. The Imperatrix allowed four of her guards to escort the diplomats back to their quarters.

It was a nervous walk. At the high, gilded windows of the sumptuous palace there were clear signs of the rebellion in the city streets. Smoke billowed from government buildings. A tax office that was especiallly hated by all classes of society was engulfed in flames. There were crowds gathered at the great ornamental palace gates and around the high, equally ornamental but clearly defensive perimeter fence. The regular guard in their ceremonial uniforms were falling back while reinforcements spilled out from their barracks to defend the palace.

There were many questions, but Hillary waved away every attempt until they were in the safe quarters bound by intergalactic diplomacy. The Imperatrix’s guards were not allowed to follow. Security details from the Ventura, Haollstromnian and Gallifreyan contingents were already waiting. Lukasan guards and the Drigini close protection officers were coming to join them.

Being neutral in all things, even their own safety, the Alpha Centaurians had not joined this small force. Nobody worried. They didn’t think the Alpha Centaurians were likely to put up much of a fight.

General Charro who had assumed command of the small group of trained fighters met the delegates.

“Come to the Venturan ambassador’s suite,” she said. “It is the safest place to mount a defence.”

“Why should we need a defence?” Alpha Centauri asked. “The diplomatic quarters should not be compromised.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure,” Charro answered. “Come along, quickly. I will brief you when you are secure.”

The Venturan suite was comfortable enough. Nobody had any objections. A steward brought refreshments for everyone in the beautifully furnished drawing room. A maid brought the refugee baby who had been resident there for a week, now. Lady Margis took charge of him.

“This suite is no safer than any other,” Marion remarked as understanding dawned. “But the child is here.”

Charro nodded imperceptibly before standing in the middle of a gold and red rug to address them all.

“It IS a popular uprising against the Imperatrix. Her subjugation of the men, her swingeing taxation of everyone from the peasant classes to the aristocrats, her general rule of fear, all these have led to an underground resistance working for many years to undermine her hold on the people. All they lacked was a leader to rally around, but they got that in Princess Astria. She escaped from the palace, but now she’s retuning with an army to depose her mother.”

“This IS no concern of ours,” Alpha Centauri commented. “We should leave.”

“How?” Valena asked. “The palace is surrounded. The city is in flames.”

“Communication with our ships is being blocked,” Charro added. “I believe that the loyalist faction is doing that to prevent us leaving.”

“An outrageous action,” the Drigni ambassador pointed out, and had the agreement of all, Alpha Centauri expressing indignation in the loudest and highest pitched protest.

“She really does mean to make us her hostages,” Hillary remarked. “Against all precepts.”

“There is that,” Charro said. “But… also….”

She glanced at Lady Margis with the baby in her arms.

“We are all guilty of breaking diplomatic bounds when we took in that child. My information is that the Imperatrix suspects that he is here. If the palace is breached she may come for the child. Diplomatic rules won’t count at that point.”

“Then we must be ready,” Hillary said. “For our own siege within the palace siege itself. Perhaps for our own last stand battle.” She shook slightly and turned to her male form, the formal skirt suit of the female Hillary straining at the seams but holding up as well as the morale of the worried diplomats and their aides.

“I fight better in this guise,” he added. “General, if you’ve got a spare weapon I can use…”

Charro obliged. She looked around at the rest of the delegates. The Drigini Ambassador and her retinue also asked for weapons and joined the thin last line of defence.

All the rest were non-combatants, especially Lady Margis with her infant charge. She sat in a large armchair, the child in her arms and her eyes and ears alert for what might follow.

Charro went to check the forward position where the diplomatic quarters might be breached. Hillary took a defensive position facing the door, ready to protect his friends if every other line failed.

“If Kristoph were here, he’d be beside you,” Marion said, looking at him gravely.

“That he would,” Hillary agreed. “But don’t worry. We’ll manage without him.”

Hillary sounded almost cheerful when he said that, but the situation was desperate. They were all in imminent danger of being caught up in a war that was none of their making.

For two very tense hours the stewards continued to bring refreshments as if nothing more than a tea party was going on. That touch of normality was comforting, but there was no shutting out the sounds of battle beyond their not entirely safe haven. The curtains were closed over the sight of the burning government buildings and an air conditioning system prevented the smell of burning. The windows were double glazed and kept out the sounds from outside at first.

But when the gates crashed down and the rebel army, swelled by thousands of put-upon citizens, stormed the palace at last, they heard well enough. There was no mistaking the organised volley of gunfire from the palace troops or the less organised but loud return fire from the rebels, or the fact that the second volley from the guards was more ragged and panic-stricken as they fell back to the palace steps.

Valena risked looking out of the window and reported that there were bodies on the ground – guards in their uniforms and rebels. The invading force was treading over them as they advanced. Some of them fell as the retreating guards regrouped and gunfire came from the windows and roof of the palace, but they kept on advancing.

“Come away,” Lady Margins begged her. “It isn’t safe to be near the windows.”

A stray bullet that glanced off the glass proved that. Valena drew back from her observation point.

“Bullet proof glass in the palace windows,” Hillary noted. “The Imperatrix has feared this for a long time.”

“Yet we had no advance intelligence of the political situation,” Madame Thaxia pointed out as she took a seat by the ornamental fireplace, far from the window.

“We should certainly not have come if we had known,” Alpha Centauri said in a tone even higher than usual. “This situation is most unsatisfactory.”

“None of us would,” Marion pointed out. “We were all misled.”

“How much were we misled?” Hillary asked. “Did the Imperatrix bring us all here because she knew the rebellion was imminent? Did she seek to involve our governments, our armies and battle fleets on her behalf?”

Lady Margis uttered a phrase in her own language that roughly equated to ‘fat chance’ in Marion’s idiom. “My government would be more likely to join with the rebels if they were forced to choose.”

Hillary agreed on behalf of the Haolstromnian government. Alpha Centauri expressed the strictly neutral policy of the Centaurian government.

Marion expressed the hope that Gallifrey would stand with her allies, but there Madame Thaxia was more experienced.

“Our policy is neutrality, also,” she said. “But if our hand is forced, I’m afraid we would tend to support the status quo.”

“We would defend the Imperatrix, even though she is a horrible tyrant?” Marion queried.

“I’m afraid so.” Madame Thaxia glanced at Hillary. She knew full well what she was saying. In that case, Gallifrey would oppose Haolstrom and Ventura, two of the Gallifreyan government’s closest allies.

“Our best hope is for a swift end to the rebellion, no matter which side prevails,” she added pragmatically.

“No,” Lady Margis answered her. “We must hope that the rebels win. If the palace guard reach us… what will happen to this child?”

Marion, with visions of King Herod in the forefront of her mind, knew full well what would happen to the child.

“Sweet Mother of Chaos, Marion!” Valena exclaimed, having, again, caught her thoughts. “I thought your planet was civilised.”

“Its another old story,” she explained. “But this lot… they’ll kill the baby without a thought. And as for us… we’ve sided with the rebels by hiding the child. Diplomatic credentials won’t count for anything.”

“They would kill all of us?” Alpha Centauri’s squeak rose even higher. “Intolerable.”

“Alpha, shut up,” Hillary retorted. “Neutrality is another word for cowardice in my language. It means turning your back on injustice just to avoid making a choice. But here and now the choice is made for us.”

“It most certainly is,” said General Charro backing into the room. “The Palace is overrun. The loyal guard are heading this way. They mean to capture the child as a last resort, to force the rebel withdrawal.”

“He’s just a baby,” Lady Margis said, holding the child tight in her arms. “How can he be so important?”

“The rebels are supporting Princess Astria,” Marion answered. “He is her son… the heir to the throne if they get rid of all that nonsense about men being the underclass. He could be king in the future… or… what IS the male form of Imperatrix?”

“Imperator,” Madame Thaxia answered, sure of her protocol if nothing else just now.

Gunfire very close by shook everyone. The baby started to cry despite both Lady Margis and Marion trying to soothe him. General Charro and Hillary stood at the door with pistols ready. Four of the Venturan security officers and the Drigini contingent fell back to strengthen them.

The Palace Guard were in the diplomatic quarters.

“If I have to shoot them… within this place….” Hillary said. Then he squeezed his pistol. There was a suddenly cut off grunt. General Charro fired twice immediately after him. “Well, that’s it. Diplomacy is out of the window. We’re all combatants.”

‘That wasn’t a full force,” Charro added. “Just a few that tried to get through. We’re holding them off, so far.”

But surely the palace guard were a bigger force than the handful of personal protection officers the diplomats had with them? Surely

J they couldn’t hold out for long? Those thoughts chilled everyone as they awaited further developments.

Suddenly there were shouts of ‘pax’ and ‘don’t shoot’. Charro and Hillary both held their fire as three men ran into the drawing room. They had guns and ammunition belts and their faces were hot and grimy. As two of them took up defensive positions alongside Hillary and Charro, the third approached Lady Margis. She drew back, clinging to the child fearfully.

“I’m the boy’s father,” he said hurriedly. “I’m here to protect him until Astria has the imperatrix’s surrender. We have troops surrounding the diplomatic quarters, and we’re sweeping the palace guard back. It’s just a matter of time, now.”

Lady Margis relaxed a little, but the situation still sounded dreadful. The gunfight was very close.

At one heart-stopping moment the sounds came VERY close. Another small group of loyalists had broken through the rebel cordon. Hillary and Charro, with the two rebels, opened fire. They must have killed the loyalists, but at the cost of one rebel and General Charro falling to powerful rifle rounds.

The rebel was dead. Charro moved painfully. Marion hurried to reach her and pull her to relative safety. The gold and red rug was quickly stained with lighter Gallifreyan blood. She had been hit in the stomach and chest and there would have been no hope for anyone but a Gallifreyan with regenerative genes.

General Charro’s body was chalk white. She resembled a stone statue, but that was only the beginning of the process. Slowly, a waxen sheen came upon the exposed flesh and it glowed from inside. Marion watched something she had only seen once before, when her friend Li had regenerated.

But this was different. As General Charro’s new features resolved everyone was startled, but none more so than Marion.

“But… how can that be?” she asked. “She’s… she’s… not a she….”

General Charro was now a slender young man with blonde hair and green eyes who fitted his Gallifreyan army uniform nearly as well as he had as a woman. He gasped a long, ragged breath and then tried to speak.

“Oh no!” he groaned. “Not now… not here.”

‘I don’t think it really matters any more,” Madame Thaxia said. “Except that somebody will have to explain all this to Marion, eventually. Not now. There are other matters to attend to.”

Marion was puzzled. She had any number of questions in her head. But Madame Thaxia was right. This wasn’t the time.

The gunfire was gradually ceasing. Outside there was a cry of triumph from a great crowd. Valena again risked looking out of the window.

“They’re calling out for Astria,” she reported. “I think… I think…”

What she thought went unsaid. A new group of grimy rebels arrived. They saluted the father of the child, calling him General, then bowed their heads towards the baby, still in Lady Margis’s arms.

“We’re here to bring the Crown prince and his retinue to the throne room,” said the captain of the rebels. “That is… everyone here.”

“Don’t worry,” the general assured them. “There is no danger, now. But you are all needed to make what follows legal.”

Lady Margis was given a special escort, carrying the Crown Prince, as the child now was. The rest followed, wondering what to expect.

In the grand throne room a phalanx of the battle weary but triumphant rebels stood to attention. On the throne sat Princess Astria, her face streaked with the proverbial threesome of blood, sweat and tears, her clothes torn and dirty. She nevertheless bore herself in the triumph of a royal personage who had led her people to victory in battle.

At her feet knelt the former Imperatrix, wearing grand robes, but her head down in defeat.

Lady Margis walked past the kneeling woman and placed the baby in his mother’s arms. Astria thanked her personally, then repeated her thanks to the others who had guarded the secret of the child’s location for the length of her exile.

“My friends,” she added. “I have asked you here to witness the transition of power over this planet and its people. My mother will formally renounce her position in your hearing and I shall make my Oath of Accession. Both will be legally binding.”

The former Imperatrix looked mutinous and reluctant, but she was outnumbered. She had to obey her daughter’s instructions.

“Mother, you will be treated fairly. I place you under house arrest in the south wing of the palace for your own safety. You will remain there at my pleasure. Take her away.”

The former Imperatrix was led away. When the sound of her footsteps had died the Princess made her oath and formally vowed to make the necessary changes to life on Prorurutua.

“Henceforth, men shall have equal status to women. All bonded servitude for men and women is abolished. There will be a committee to report on taxation and a programme of works to regenerate the economy and create jobs for the newly freed citizens. There will be amnesty for political prisoners.”

That was a start. There would be much more to do, but for now the Imperatrix Astria had the will of the people for her reforms. That was the best anyone could ask.

“My friends,” she said. “I hope we might resume the trade talks my mother began?”

“No,” Hillary answered for all of them. “I regret, Madame, that your planet is not ready to make such intergalactic ties. As soon as it is possible we will all be leaving. But be sure we will be watching your progress. When the time is right, when your reforms have been implemented and your government is stable, we shall talk again.”

The new Imperatrix accepted that compromise. After a few more formalities the diplomats withdrew. The rest was between Astria and those she chose as her advisors.

Marion lost no time making an interplanetary call on the videophone. Kristoph was pleased to see her. News of trouble on Prorurutua had reached Gallifrey.

Everything is all right,” she assured him. “We’re setting off home tomorrow. There are some things we need to talk about. But they can wait.”