Avery and Margarette I

The Villa Cimbrone near Ravello on the Amalfi coast had long been one of Marion’s favourite places. She had visited it many times both during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when it was a private mansion and in early twenty first century when it was an expensive and exclusive hotel.

 It was famous for its views from the terraces on the edge of cliffs that fell sheer to the sea and its gardens laid out by Vita Sackville West and finished by her contemporaries in sculpture and design.

It had been the summer retreat of countless artists, musicians and writers in that golden era before fascism took Italy by the throat and in later, more prosperous times, it was the venue for the weddings of glamorous celebrities from across Europe.

Sitting at a marble topped garden table in a quiet, honeysuckle swathed niche on the Terrazza dell'Infinito, Marion looked out over the green-blue Aegean sea and up at a sky one poetic guest in the past had called ’limpid’. A breeze that stopped the sun becoming unpleasantly hot wafted over her. It was a perfect place to spend a relaxing afternoon.

 She sighed contentedly and thought serenely about Edward Morgan Forster, her favourite of the Bloomsbury group of artists and writers, the men and women who had famously stayed at Villa Cimbrone nearly a century before this time. He had been one of her favourite authors when she studied literature at university, and thanks to the wonder of time travel she had taken afternoon tea with him in this very spot. The table was different but the tea set was vintage Clarice Cliff that might well have been used here when that style was new and fashionable.

And the view hadn’t changed one little bit. Edward Morgan or any of his era would know it just as well as she did.

Her two aristocratic companions broke off those thoughts of afternoon tea in past times as they joined her, talking cheerfully, both colourful and cool in sundresses and wide brimmed hats, since Hillary had chosen to be a lady for this leg of their tour of Italy.

As they sat, a waiter appeared so promptly that Marion wondered if some kind of telepathic compulsion had summoned him. Talitha would never be so controlling of a non-telepathic sentient being, but Hillary, with her Haolstromnian pheromones that could turn the heads of people of either or no gender and a thoroughly wicked sense of humour, might have done such a thing just for fun. Her **fun**, not the person she had bewitched.

It was probably fortunate it was a hotel employee she had summoned, and not a hapless fellow hotel guest.

Anyway, a large pot of tea, a silver tray of smoked salmon and cucumber sandwiches and another of delicate cakes were delivered promptly.

“Where is Avery?” Marion asked as the plate of sandwiches diminished quickly, all three of them having an appetite for the al fresco meal. “He likes cucumber sandwiches. Cucumbers don’t grow on Gallifrey. They were a pleasant surprise to him.”

“We can order another plate just for him,” Hillary promised. “He is a little preoccupied, I think.”

“Preoccupied?” Marion queried, noting a lascivious tone in Hillary’s voice. She also noticed a frown on Talitha’s face as if she disapproval of something.

Talitha did find Hillary’s loose behaviour a little shocking, but what could Avery have done?

“He has a lady friend,” Talitha said before Hillary could put it more crudely. “He has been searching out every little walled garden and sheltered folly where he can find a few minutes’ privacy to talk to a very pretty creature he met last week.”

“There are plenty of lovely little places to do that in,” Marion commented. It was the least important point in the discussion and certainly true. The numerous quiet nooks and mock classical crannies at the Villa Cimbrone were a large part of its charm.

The handsome young presidential guard meeting a ‘very pretty creature’ in any of those quiet spots made her think of scenes from any one of the Merchant Ivory films of her dear friend Forster’s novels. It was a pleasurable image.

But there were some obvious problems with Avery forming a relationship with a human woman.

I don’t mind that he is being negligent in his duty as our protection officer,” Talitha assured her friends. “We hardly need such protection here in this private and socially exclusive place. He may have his leisure with all our blessing. But....”

“But if he is serious about the lady, what will happen when we move on from Cimbrone?” Marion asked. For her that was the most important matter.

“Is he serious?” Hillary asked. “He doesn’t seem to have got further than hand-holding. Hardly an ardent lover.”

“Not by your decadent standards,” Marion told her with mock chiding. “Or a lot of humans, for that matter. But gentlemanly behaviour is becoming of him as a Presidential Guard and as a Gallifreyan.”

“And that is to his credit,” Talitha agreed. “But he must realise he cannot expect the lady to accompany him home to our world. And I should hope he is not... what is your Earth expression... roping her along....”

“Stringing,” Marion corrected her.” No, he isn’t like that. I’m sure he’s not. We’ve got to know him well enough on this trip to know that much. He wouldn’t make promises he knows he can’t keep.”

Hillary trusted in Avery's good character but she couldn’t fathom the romantic integrity both Marion and Talitha were certain of. Short term relationships, merely for fun, to pass a little pleasurable time, were normal on her world. Nobody would feel used or slighted when such a brief flirtation ended.

“Quite apart from disappointing the lady in question, how is Avery going to feel when he must break it off?” Talitha wondered.

“I’m not sure I want to see a broken-hearted Gallifreyan,” Marion added. “Double broken hearts must be terrible.”

“We read our emotions from the head, not the hearts,” Talitha said. “But, all the same, I think we must try to guard our guard and see how we can avert sorrow on both sides of those tryst.”

“You aren’t going to forbid him seeing her again, are you?” Marion asked. “You have the right, of course. Malika appointed him to take care of us all. But you wouldn’t....”

“I suspect it has already gone too far for that. The hurt would be just as deep. And besides, I wouldn’t be so cruel. After all, we have treated him as a friend all this time. To act as a forbidding mistress now would be unthinkable.”

Marion and Hillary agreed, on principle at least, though Hillary still didn’t quite see the depth of the feelings at stake.

“This would be nothing but a passing fancy on my world. Lovers come and lovers go...”

Marion started to answer her, but she was cut off by an angry screech of rage – and that was the apt word for the noise, no hyperbole at all. The three ladies turned their heads to see a well dressed woman who was stalking along the terrace like a lioness closing in on a hapless prey.

They recognised her as a fellow guest staying in one of the most expensive suites. They had seen her in the restaurant demanding attention from waiters and complaining if the service was not up to her exacting standard. A standard every other guest found to be absolutely excellent, leading to the conclusion that this woman was simply fond of complaining.

When she saw the three women who were staying in equally superior suites, and therefore her social equals, if not better, she stopped screeching, but her face couldn’t quite relax from the extreme anger that twisted it, and she was a florid shade of red beneath her exquisite cosmetics.

“Have you seen my....” she began in what sounded like a German or Dutch accent though the TARDIS travellers heard her in their own respective languages.

 “Worthless woman,” she continued. The word ‘worthless’ translating into something much nastier in Haolstromnian, which interpreted tone of voice as well as the meaning of words. “Plain, sallow faced, no sense of style.... Did she come this way?”

“We haven’t seen any other guests for at least an hour,” Marion answered quite truthfully. “Or do you mean a member of staff here? I always thought they were very nicely dressed.”

“I would hardly waste my time searching for some peasant waitress,” the woman replied. “There are plenty of those to do my bidding in their clumsy way. I am looking for my....” She stopped again and shrugged. “Never mind. It is no concern of yours.”

With that she walked away, this time with a more refined, ladylike step, knowing that she was being watched by people of quality.

“Eeithafolmuwch,” Hillary said in an acid tone. Marion and Talitha looked at her in puzzlement. “Hmm. Either the TARDIS we travelled in has a profanity filter or the word is too rude to translate. But on my world she would be one.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Marion said, thinking of some English words that might fit, especially some terms used around her native Merseyside that might not translate, either.

“I have just thought of something a little worrying,” Talitha said. “I think we really should find Avery, right now.”

“I agree,” Hillary said, needing no telepathy to guess what her friend was thinking.

They passed the angry woman returning along the terrace. She said nothing, but there was a look in her eyes that made everyone feel sympathy for the ‘worthless woman’ she was looking for and consider having dinner served on the cool, moonlit balcony of their suite, just to avoid being put off their food by that sourness.

They found Avery after twenty minutes exploring the Cimbrone gardens with rather more urgency than they would have liked. He was standing quietly in a niche just about the size of a guards sentry box at Buckingham Palace. He was apparently alone, but there was a look on his face that spoke volumes.

They were, Marion again thought, volumes that Edward Morgan Forster could have written. He was at once bashful and embarrassed as well as defiant and enigmatically hiding his real feelings. His brain must have been putting up a formidable brick wall to the two telepathic minds that approached him.

“Are you all right?” Talitha asked him gently. “You seem... agitated.”

“It is nothing, Madame,” he began diffidently, turning his eyes from his aristocratic employer’s face in a way they thought they had cured him of.

Talitha started to speak again, assuring him that he could speak freely of anything that might be on his mind. Then they all heard that screeching voice again, calling a name – Gretta. Avery’s face turned as pale as the limestone of his niche and he stepped back into its shade.

“Oh, chaos,” Hillary said and went to the wrought iron gate to this walled garden to head off the angry woman.

“I have it on good authority that the person you seek took the hotel minibus to Ravello some time ago,” she said. “So go away and stop disturbing the peace of this garden with your caterwauling.”

“She will regret such wilfulness when she returns,” the woman said and having failed to cow Hillary with a scowl she turned away, her footsteps receding until she apparently came upon an unfortunate member of staff and demanded a wheat and lactose free high tea delivered to her suite – at once.

“She’s out of our way, now,” Hillary confirmed. “You can both come out, now.”

Avery stepped forward and behind him, from a space a little larger than it appeared at first glance, came a young woman who was in no way plain or sallow-faced. Her hair was shoulder length brown curls framing an oval face with blue eyes and small, pink lips that shook a little with nervousness. It was true that the dress she was wearing didn’t suit her, but Marion recognised castoffs not necessarily chosen by the wearer.

 Avery grasped her hand reassuringly as he waited for any one of the ladies who employed him to speak.

“The cucumber sandwiches will be wilting in the sunshine,” Talitha said. “Rather like you, my dear,” she added, taking off her own hat and giving it to Avery’s young woman who was bare-headed and looking flushed, either from the sun or from nervous excitement. “That will keep you cool until we get back to the suite. We can order new refreshments from there – if the staff have managed to satisfy that OTHER guest.”

On the off chance that some other guest was looking out of a window at the terrace Talitha’s hat was a disguise, as was the close companionship they all made around her.

Explanations of what certainly needed explaining could wait until tea was served.

Afternoon tea for five was promptly served on the private balcony that could not be seen from any window or from below. Avery and his young lady looked hesitant, but Hillary insisted that they should sit and poured tea for both of them.

“May we be properly introduced?” Marion asked as she offered the sandwiches and the troubled pair both took one small triangle each. Marion thought the woman could use more nourishment than that and urged her to eat a few more.

“This is Margarette Möller,” Avery said in a semi-formal manner. “From a place called Frankfurt.”

“I’ve been there,” Marion said, grasping the possibility of a normal topic of conversation. “Very beautiful city.”

“It is... but Liselotte prefers to travel all the time...And even the most luxurious hotel begins to look... dull...”

“Anywhere would be dull when all she sees of it are the laundry rooms,” Avery insisted. “That is where I found her, fretting over a wine stain she would be blamed for even though it was not her fault.”

“Liselotte?” Talitha queried. “That’s the angry woman?” Margarette nodded and almost surreptitiously took a smoked salmon sandwich.

“So you are her... maid?” Hillary asked. It seemed the most obvious position, an unenviable one with such a mistress.

“I may as well be. She treats me as such,” Margarette answered. “She even calls me by what she says is a peasant name – Gretta – to make me feel so much more unworthy.”

“I don’t,” Avery asserted. “Margarette is a beautiful name. And she is no maid. She is Liselotte’s sister.”