**Children of the Chimera**

Rachel "Ray" Defwydd came into the TARDIS control room freshly showered after an afternoon off-road riding the Vincent on the salt pains of Nova Utah, a desolate planet in the Constellation of Andromeda named by its hardy first Human colonists who thought it resembled the Forty-fifth state of the USA.

She noticed that the Doctor was frowning as he bent over the communications console.

“Is something wrong?” She asked.

“An SOS,” he said. “A rather vague one, though definitely meant for me. It just says ‘Doctor, please help.’

“Who is it from? “

“That's the problem. It's been re-routed several times to find the TARDIS. I need to trace it back to the source.”

He stared at the screen for a long time, then a slow, grim smile crossed his face.

“It’s from Chimera,” he said. “Where Delta and….”

“Billy,” Ray murmured. Her eyes travelled in time by themselves as she recalled the boy she had silently loved in her teenage years. She smiled softly, then gasped with concern. “He’s in trouble?”

‘He’, not ‘they’. The Doctor quietly noted the distinction as he set the space-time co-ordinates for the planet of the Chimera.

Of course, for all that she heard of that planet from Delta, Ray had never been there. She had no idea what to expect. The sky that was pale yellow at the horizon and deep green at the zenith was a surprise even though she knew that Chimerans had naturally green complexions. It didn’t follow, after all. Earth skies were blue but no shade of Human skin was. Here, though, green was the predominant colour of nature except for the rocks around the edge of a wide, olive green lake which were grey and red. Curiously there was a glazed look to the rocks as if there had been a hot fire.

“This was a huge bomb crater,” The Doctor said in lugubrious tones. “The Bannerman wiped out the old capital city with one superbomb.”

“Oh.” Ray shivered. That made this beautiful lake something of a mausoleum. “How many Chimerans died here?”

She had been born just before the Second World War. She was too young to remember being carried as a baby to air raid shelters, but she knew parts of Cardiff and its environs that had been flattened in the Blitz. She had played on bomb sites as a tomboy child.

She knew the reality of war at least second hand. But this was a bit too real.

“Come on,” The Doctor said to her gently. He had seen more wars than he cared to count and never took such scenes for granted, but he had learnt not to dwell upon what could not be helped. “The new city is waiting for us.”

Ray turned and saw the new Chimeran city behind her. The first word that entered her head was ‘Gaudiesque’. She then wondered briefly if that was even a word, but it best described a city of great towers and spires that looked as if they were accreted like stalagmites rather than built. There was hardly a straight line in the structures, not even the windows that curved asymmetrically. The walls of the buildings looked whitish green but with shimmering shades of pink and purple that seemed to alter as she moved her head like one of those lenticulat pictures that changed from a rabbit to a tiger with a slight change of angle.

“How beautiful,” she whispered.

The Doctor nodded and took her hand as they walked up to a wide gateway in the shimmering and right angle free wall that surrounded the city. There was an official in a deep green uniform decorated with silver checking the many bubble shaped solar powered hover vehicles that lined up to enter the city loaded with goods for the market. In their turn The Doctor presented his credentials. At once the official stood to attention and summoned two of his subordinates from the guardroom to take the honoured visitors to the palace.

This was done in fine style, travelling in what could only be described as a Bubble Limousine. When they reached the palace, a confection of pink and green shimmering marble like surfaces, they were met by a guard of honour made up of what, for all the world, reminded Ray of a set of plastic toy soldiers with glossy green complexions to match their uniforms.

The interior walls of the palace shimmered with myriad colours that were lit from within as if they were translucent. The soft light created no shadows and there was an ambient warmth, too. The palace felt comfortable in an almost… yes, in a womblike way. Ray was surprised to find that analogy forming in her mind, but it seemed right.

The throne room was magnificent in a ‘grown not built’ way. The soft light from all around bathed everything in gentle colours and cast no shadows.

Three golden thrones were arranged on a dais. Ray suppressed a gasp as she looked at the two older people on the two higher thrones and recognised them as Delta and Billy. Both were older than when she saw them last, but it was definitely them. The young woman sitting slightly lower was the child that had been born in the Shangri La holiday camp, but who was destined to be the saviour of her world. All three were dressed in a white, lacy fabric, the two women in closely fitting full length dresses, Billy in a figure hugging all in one suit.

The Royal Family were receiving a deputation of citizens. As they waited, The Doctor and Ray heard most of their discussion. The group were ultra-pacifists. They argued that Chimera should not have a standing army because it made them appear to be a militant planet and might be attacked.

“Look what happened when the Bannermen opposed our army,” the leader of the group pointed out. “We should not be breeding soldiers, I tell you... your majesties.”

“No military at all would make us weak and enemies like the Bannermen would wipe us out without a thought,” Billy answered. “I am sorry, but it is a foolish idea. We cannot consider it.”

“Quite right, Billy, my lad,” The Doctor whispered. Ray looked at him quizzically. “There is something to be said for their argument, mind. Pacifism is an honourable position. It is why the TARDIS has no weapons. I am neutral in any conflict I come into through my travels. But while that works for a peaceful wandering Time Lord, it does not work for a planet. Yes, they need a military presence to deter those who prey on weakness. Besides, any society needs balance. It must have its army for protection as well as its scientists and artists. Ying balances yang and all that.”

The deputation left, though clearly dissatisfied with the outcome of their meeting. Now a herald in dark green robes and matching face tapped the end of a long jade coloured staff on the floor and prepared to announce the new arrivals.

“Queen Ascilla, Lady Delta, Lord William, may I present....”

“There is no need to stand on ceremony,” Delta said, rising from her throne. Billy did the same. “Doctor, Rachel... both of you are welcome as friends. Come…. We are done with formal meetings. We shall go to the Emerald Room.”

The Emerald Room had that shade of green as its predominant colour and was an informal drawing room where the queen and her two regents could relax. Food and drink, both of shape, colour and taste entirely new to Ray, was brought. Delta and Billy talked casually as with old and welcome friends. Queen Ascilla said very little. She, too, welcomed the two visitors, but she hid her anxiety less easily.

“It is wonderful to catch up on old times,” The Doctor said after a while. “But perhaps we should move things on. I believe you sent for me for a good reason?”

The three members of the Chimeran royal family looked at each other with expressions that were very nearly telepathic.

“Our children,” Queen Ascilla answered in a very sad tone. “Our children are dying.”

“Oh….” Ray gasped. “Oh no… how terrible. I am so sorry.”

“More terrible than you think,” The Doctor said. “You’d better show me the nursery. Billy… Ray doesn’t really understand how things work here on Chimera. I think you need to explain it to her as we walk.”

Billy looked as if he would rather explain how things work on Chimera to a pride of hungry lions, but he took Ray’s arm and walked a little behind The Doctor and the two Royal ladies.

“You’re looking well, Ray,” he said, starting with the sort of thing a former sweetheart probably ought to say to a woman. “You’ve been all right since I….”

“Left me to live on another planet with Delta?”

“Yes…. How long has it been since then… for you? Five years….”

“Getting on for fifteen,” Ray answered. “But it was sweet of you to make me feel younger.”

“It’s been longer for me. More like eighty years. People live longer here.”

“So - our life on Earth is a very long time ago for you.”

“Yes….”

“It’s all right. I’ve been happy. No regrets. But… when Queen Ascilla said ‘our children’ – did she mean YOUR children or… the children of your people generally?”

Billy actually blushed a deeper shade of glossy green-white. This was the bit that was difficult to explain.

“It’s different here,” he said. “Families aren’t… the same. The children… in one way ALL of them are mine, all fifty of this season’s hatching. In the way you think of it, none of them are.”

Ray was puzzled.

“You remember old Goronwy’s bees…. All the bees were born from the queen….”

“Yes… but….”

“All the children of Chimera are from Queen Ascilla. My role… is to make the eggs fertile. But….”

He blushed again, even deeper.

“I don’t… it’s not…. All I have to do is go to the hatchery and touch each egg. There’s a thing…. Pheromones… it happens just like that. It’s rather beautiful. Each egg I touch… I can feel the life begin inside….”

“But does that mean you and Delta don’t… you know… you’re not….”

“We’re life bonded,” Billy explained. “But Chimeras don’t… like that. I don’t even think that way… the Human way…. That was one of the things I gave up when I became Chimeran… being Human in that sense.”

Ray decided to let him off the hook.

“What you said about feeling each life begin… how wonderful that is. I think they ARE all yours.”

“Yes, I think so, too.” Billy smiled sadly. “That’s what makes it so hard. We’ve lost a hundred already.…”

“A hundred of your children have died?” Ray was appalled. She stopped and turned to Billy. She hugged him fondly. “I am so very sorry for you. It must be heartbreaking.”

“I’m….”

Chimeran tears were translucent green, but they fell for the same reason they fell for other races. Billy wiped his eyes and smiled weakly.

“We should catch up with the others.”

Billy grasped Ray’s hand as he increased his walking pace. She didn’t stop him. Ironically, she had once longed for that much intimacy with him. Now, it was he who needed the comfort of her touch. For all that he was a ruler of this world, powerful, dominant, in ways she only vaguely understood, he was utterly vulnerable just now.

He needed her in a way he had never needed her when he was Human.

They came to a room even bigger and more iridescently beautiful than the throne room. It was a schoolroom, a huge one with groups of children being taught in groups of twenty or so. The lessons were mixed. There were maths classes where very complicated equations were being learnt, poetry and singing groups, science, and in one section, military theory.

“Aren’t they young for some of this?” Ray asked. “They can’t be more than ten years old?”

“One year,” Billy said. “They are last year’s hatchlings. Remember... our young age rapidly from hatching to youngling. They will learn all there is to know about their designation for the next six years during which time they will mature fully.”

“Designation?”

“It’s like the bees again,” Billy explained. “Bees have workers, soldiers…. They’re designated from birth, given food that makes them into the kind of bee the hive needed. It’s… the same here. We have scientists, artists, teachers, musicians, designated at birth and nurtured accordingly.”

Ray watched the children and thought about that for a while. Something felt a little wrong about it. Surely free will and ambition counted for something? Being designated at birth as a soldier or an artist seemed like the sort of thing Red China or the Soviet Union would do.

But when all was said and done, her own Human society wasn’t much better. They separated children into grammar schools or secondary moderns, gave them careers advice not only according to exam results, but class, race, gender. Ray remembered all the opposition to her desire to be a car mechanic.

Maybe if she had been a Chimeran she’d have been designated a car mechanic!

“‘We shouldn’t be breeding soldiers’.” She remembered what the pacifist leader had said and remembered that the phrase had puzzled her at the time. Now it made sense.

“I wanted you to see how things are meant to be… before you see the nursery.”

He brought her through the school, stopping to talk to some of the children. He knew their names and smiled warmly as he introduced Ray as a ‘special friend’. She found herself the centre of attention with small hands reaching out to hers and choruses of welcome.

“I feel like the Queen on a royal visit,” she said. “I mean… the British Queen. It’s funny to think of you as royalty, here.”

“It took me a while to get used to that,” Billy admitted.

He was smiling as he talked with the children, but when they passed to the next room, again big and beautiful, but with a strangely sad air after the warm, friendly atmosphere of the schoolroom, he lost the smile, replaced by a quiet despair.

This was the nursery. There were cribs lined up in rows from one end of the room to the other, fifty at least. In some, deep green coloured newborns were sleeping peacefully, but many of the cribs were empty.

Even more obviously tragic were the cribs with pitifully ill babies in them. The Doctor was bent over one of them, carefully examining the hatchling. It’s normally deep green skin was blotched with purple and its eyes screwed up against even the gentle soft light from the walls and ceiling. It cried like a kitten, weak and plaintive.

“These are a day old. They should have developed to younglings by now. The illness is preventing their growth as well as attacking their vital organs and leaving them too weak to fight for life. They… replaced those who died already.”

“Replaced?” Ray queried. Billy shook his head sadly.

“An inadequate word. We mourn every one of them. Their souls cannot be replaced, but we tried to fill the gap in our hearts and in our society. But now we’re losing them all over again.”

“Oh!” Delta gave an anguished cry and lifted one of the babies into her arms. As she turned it was obvious from her expression that this one had just died. She hugged it close to her and cried piteously. Billy went to her and embraced her and the child as they mourned together. Queen Ascilla keened softly by the crib of another failing little life.

“Doctor, can you help them?” Ray asked. “Please say that you can.”

“I need blood samples,” he said. “But I can tell at once that it isn’t any kind of viral infection.”

Ray followed his gaze around the nursery and saw what he meant right away. If it was something that could be transmitted from one child to another it would be more widespread. The problem was peculiarly confined to one section of the nursery.

“I shall need samples of the food they are taking,” The Doctor added. He addressed the instruction to the chief nurse, a woman by name of Vexa, who hovered nearby watching the sick babies with a concerned air.

“The food?” Ray queried. “Do you think there is something wrong with it? They all eat the same food, surely? Why aren’t the others sick?”

But, of course, they didn’t. Billy had already explained about that. The future scientists or soldiers, artists, musicians, teachers, all had different food.

The Doctor and the two Queens of Chimera busied themselves taking the blood samples and gathering food bottles. Billy wandered among the cribs caressing the sick babies hopefully. Ray recalled reading once about the touch of a King being able to cure diseases. She wondered if Billy was Royal enough? The desperate look on his face suggested that he wasn’t.

“Billy, what designation are the babies who are sick?” Ray asked, suddenly.

“They’re soldiers,” he answered with just a single glance at the cribs. “They’re all soldiers.”

“All?”

“Yes. The designation is on the cribs….”

“Billy, this isn’t accidental. I think someone….”

Ray turned as a movement nearby caught her eye. It was the chief nurse, Vexa. She was going amongst the babies giving them fresh bottles of their special food.

But what was it about that action that made that made it seem somehow suspicious?

Was it the fact that the chief nurse was doing something so ordinary as distributing the food bottles? Wouldn’t that be a job for one of the junior nurses who scurried about the place doing all the dull tasks of child minding?

And there was something in her expression that was different now that she thought nobody was watching her. It was an expression far from that of a warm, tender nurse. It was utterly chilling.

Ray moved closer to the nurse, who didn’t seem to notice her at all until she was near enough to reach out and touch her arm.

“What are you doing?” Ray asked. It was a simple enough question, an innocent question. The effect on the chief nurse was startling. She dropped the tray of feeding bottles and ran. Ray dashed after her, along the line of cribs. Billy saw what was happening and ran, too, cutting between the cribs to block Vexa’s escape. She gave a frustrated scream that set the nearest babies crying and pushed two of the empty cribs aside to try to make her escape.

“Not so fast,” said The Doctor as he sprang forward and grabbed her by both arms. “I think I need a word with you… about what you’ve been lacing the baby food with.”

“Vexa!” Delta and Queen Ascilla looked at the nurse in horror. “You did this? You made them sick?”

“Why?” Billy asked. “Why would you do that? You… you are one of our children. Why would you want to harm them?”

“Why isn’t so important as how,” The Doctor said. “What have you used to poison them?”

“Plumbum,” she answered in the face of so much withering disdain.

“Lead?” Ray translated. “How horrible. That is such a deadly poison….”

“Yes, but a simple one to deal with now we know. A celating agent can be administered that will flush the poison out of the children’s bodies. We may be able to save most of them.”

“Do it, Doctor,” Delta told him. “ ñDo it quickly.” The Doctor rushed away, summoning the junior nurses to help administer the cure. Delta and Queen Ascilla looked at each other and decided that their place, as mothers to the little ones, was with them, ready to administer the promised cure.

Meanwhile guards arrived to take Vexa away to a place of detention. Billy handed her over almost reluctantly, as pained by her betrayal as he was by the tragic outcome.

The next hours were anxious ones with little to do but wait and hope. Ray and Billy spent the time in the schoolroom with the older children, enjoying their happy company and trying to mask their anxiety. Again, Ray was struck by how much they really were his children in the truest sense of the word. He loved them all and they loved him.

More than once she remembered what he had said to Vexa – ‘you are one of our children’. It was a terrible thing he had to come to terms with. A child born into this loving if extended family had done the worst possible harm to the youngest and weakest among them. The Doctor didn’t want to know why, but she knew Billy desperately wanted an answer.

It was late in the evening when he had it. By then The Doctor was able to bring him news that he had saved all of the sick babies who were still alive when he administered the celating agent. They would all need very close monitoring and lots of loving care as the poison was flushed from their bodies, but they should grow now in the usual way that Chimerans do without any long-lasting effects.

That good news came at the same time as a statement made by Vexa from her prison cell. Billy read it through and sighed deeply.

“Vexa is a secret member of the Ultra-Pacifists,” he said. “She did it to force us to disperse our army as they demanded.”

“To kill the babies destined to be soldiers is such a terrible way to achieve their goal,” Delta added. “What made her think that was the answer?”

“Who knows how fanatics come to such conclusions,” Billy sighed. “We can only be thankful that she was stopped before more harm was done.”

“What will happen to her?” Ray asked. “Billy… you don’t execute criminals?”

“Good heavens, no,” he answered. “How could we? Vexa IS one of our children, too.”

“She must be detained, of course,” Queen Ascilla added. “We may need to arrest the others of this group. They have stepped over the line between political agitation and… terrorism. But… we will try to teach them… we will do it as kindly as possible… as parents kindly chastise wayward children.”

“We will mourn those of our children who were lost to us,” Delta said in her turn. “Doctor… Ray… I hope you will stay until the mourning is done and then see how we live in happier times. There is still much we all have to talk about as old friends.”

“Oh, yes,” Ray said before The Doctor even began to speak. “Oh, yes, we want to stay, very much.”

She smiled at Billy as she spoke. He smiled back as a friend, a dear friend with whom she shared many precious memories.

And that was as it ought to be.