**Hillary’s Opera Gown**

Marion and Talitha both admired their opera dresses in the huge full-length mirror in their hotel bedroom. Marion was in what was described on the Harrods receipt as a Peach Princess Bateau Beading Sleeveless Long Chiffon Dress. The important thing was that waistlines were in vogue amongst well-dressed people on Earth this year, so it was lightly cinched with a silver embroidered belt and flared gently to the ankle where silver strappy heels gave her a little extra height.

Talitha’s dress was described as a Princess Sleeveless Brush Train Applique Tulle Dresses. It was in black with beautiful silver embroidery. Neither of them had been sure what a princess neckline meant when they bought the dresses and had no intention of asking anyone in store. They later found out it was also known as a ‘sweetheart’ neckline and referred to the heart-shaped sculpting around the bustline. They had both liked the embroidery and hadn’t given much thought to the bustline.

“Hillary bought hers in the ‘Mother of the Groom’ section,” Marion said. “She must be planning to be the ‘matron’ escort.”

“I thought HE was going to wear a smart evening suit and be the gentleman escort,” Talitha responded.

“He was, until she saw the gowns,” Marion said with a giggle. “She had some idea that we didn’t do high fashion on Earth. When she discovered the Harrods special occasion dresses, she changed her mind. I was just a bit stunned to be shopping at Harrods. I’ve been shopping on Earth a few times since marrying Kristoph, but it was mostly John Lewis and House of Frazer instead of Primark and Matalan. Harrods really didn’t seem a place I would go, even though these ready-to-wear gowns are about a quarter of the price of anything I’ve ever ordered from the couturiers in the Capitol. At least I think they are. We don’t really have any exchange rate to compare.”

Talitha was confused by the class distinctions in Earth shops, so didn’t really understand the point. But it had been a revelation to Marion to find the personal attention the three of them had when they entered that part of the store. House of Fraser tended to just let you get on with it unless you were stealing or obviously too poor to shop there.

“Still, poor Avery Ferron,” Talitha said. “He’s nervous enough about coming to the opera undercover as an aristocrat. I think he hoped to have another man with him.”

Time Lords COULD change gender on regeneration. But it happened so rarely most of them were locked into the mindset of their birth gender, and an old-fashioned idea of male and female roles still existed. Avery was now the sole man going to the opera with three women all sporting interesting necklines.

But the neckline was the least of the eye-catching features of Hillary’s gown.

“What… is that?” Talitha asked.

“A ruched off-the-shoulder silk-satin sheath with brush train,” Hillary answered. This was the ticket description. What her friends saw was a floor length tube of silk satin that defied gravity with two mere loops around the upper arms instead of sleeves and nothing else holding it up. The sheath was slit to thigh level – though Marion thought it was more like her waist, if the corsetry beneath was cut high enough, while the ‘brush train’ went three-quarters of the way around, just masking the slit for the modesty anyone wearing that dress didn’t have. It was in leaf green satin that caught the light in every facet of the ruched bodice and fluted train.

“Does ‘Mother of the Groom’ mean something different on Earth?” Talitha asked in some confusion.

“Not unless the mother of the groom wants to REALLY upstage the bride – and the bride’s mother,” Marion answered. “If there is a water feature at the reception venue I wouldn’t bet on any of the dresses lasting the evening.”

The vision in her head was felt by both of her telepathic friends and they laughed. Avery Ferron came into the drawing room amidst the laughter from the bathroom where he had dressed. He almost ran back in again as the three women turned to look at him. He was wearing a ready-to-wear but well-fitting coppery-brown suit with a copper-coloured shirt and dark pink-brown tie. Dark brown slip-on shoes with a high shine finished his look. He was uncomfortable with the shoes which were so very light compared to his uniform boots that he was afraid of falling out of them.

Marion had been to La Scala in Milan, The Sydney Opera House, Vienna State Opera, Royal Opera House Covent Garden and the Palais Garnier in Paris - the one with the ghost - as well as St, George’s Hall, Liverpool which was just as grand. In comparison the art deco front of Il Teatro dell'Opera di Roma was a bit disappointing. Even for art deco, it didn’t seem as impressive as the Littlewoods Pools building in Liverpool.

Inside, though, it was as fine an auditorium as she could wish for, with the horseshoe shape found in most of those other examples. Tiers of seats rose up all around three sides with plush red velvet curtains and cushions in the boxes.

Obviously, they were in one of those exclusive boxes. The four seats on the second tier above the orchestra cost nearly as much as Hillary’s dress, and there was champagne, luxurious hand-made chocolates and a crystal bowl full of strawberries included in the price, as well as glossy programmes and opera glasses, not that the latter would be needed with such good seats.

The opera was Alceste by Christoph Willibald Gluck, based on the play Alcestis by the Athenian playwright, Euripides. Marion knew at least part of the story having read it in her first year at university, when Greek literature had been a compulsory element. She wondered if there would be the same ending in the opera.

It was about the princess Alcestis, whose husband, King Admeto, is gravely ill. An oracle tells Alcestis that only a sacrifice to Apollo will save him. She decides to sacrifice herself for her husband’s life. She sets out to Apollo’s temple, but Admeto gets suddenly better and rides out after her. They are reunited and vow to be sacrificed together, but Apollo grants them both life because of their pure love for each other.

All of which took four dramatic, colourful, and loud hours of opera. That was two hours more, Marion noted, than reading the play at university. It was a thoroughly enjoyable four hours, though, helped by the fact that all of them understood the Italian libretto.

Avery seemed especially enchanted by it all. If he had been called upon to defend the ladies in his charge during the three acts he would have been found wanting. But they were safe in their private box visited only by a waiter bringing more champagne and fruit between acts.

Hillary drank most of the champagne. Marion and Talitha had enjoyed the strawberries.

“Avery, I do believe you had all of the bottom layer of the chocolates,” Talitha said with a smile as they headed for the foyer. The young man blushed and apologised for his greed.

“It’s quite all right,” Marion assured him. “They were very rich tasting. I couldn't manage more than three of them. I’m sure Talitha and Hillary were the same. Besides, we can buy some more at the concessionary if we really want them.”

“The important thing is that you enjoyed yourself,” Hillary told him. “Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes,” Avery assured her. “I liked the music. And… It had a good ending… a happy one, for the king and princess. I… expected them both to die.”

“So did I,” Talitha admitted. “If it was a Gallifreyan opera they would have done. Just like the Pazzione. I get the feeling Apollo wasn’t always so benevolent a God, though. They both fully expected to die at his command.”

“The Greek gods could be capricious,” Marion admitted, recalling her literature classes. “But… you know I did hear that they were actually Prydonian students on a gap decade making mischief. I can’t remember if it was Kristoph who told me or his father… or maybe the Premier Cardinal trying to be amusing over dinner. It is why the Greek alphabet looks a bit like ancient Gallifreyan.”

“As an Arcalian, I can’t possibly comment,” Talitha said with a smile.

They stepped out of into a warm, Roman evening. The piazza in front of the opera house was full of patrons making their way to taxi ranks or parked cars. But the Via del Viminale was busy, too, both with pedestrians and road traffic - cars and especially, motor bikes, the easy way to get around Rome. They crossed it to reach a restaurant that had been recommended for after opera supper.

La Matriciana dal 1870 (because it was founded in 1870) was famed for its traditional pasta dishes. The Gallifreyan party chose the signature dish, bucatini alla matriciana, which was delicious, but not as exotic as it might sound to anyone who didn’t speak Italian or have an alien ability to instantly understand it. Matriciana, both the restaurant name and the dish simply meant ‘bacon and tomatoes.’

Marion recalled learning from somewhere that many traditional Italian pasta dishes, even in high class restaurants, were devised by poor rural people in times when meat was expensive and hard to get. A small amount of strongly flavoured smoked bacon would have added taste to the more plentiful tomatoes.

“I shall give the recipe to my housekeeper,” Talitha announced. “It will be a surprise to Gold Usher and the Premier Cardinal when they next dine with us.”

Marion fully intended to give her cook the recipe, too, and wondered if pasta might become a fashionable food on Gallifrey if both she and the President’s wife started to include it in their dinner menus.

“Pasta isn’t something we eat on Haollstrom,” Hillary said. “I wonder if I could purchase some samples while I am on Earth.”

“Not until we’re back in London,” Marion answered, guessing that ‘some samples’ for Hillary would mean a large suitcase full of pasta varieties. “There are rules about importing foodstuffs from one country to another. Wait until we’re ready to get back to the TARDIS.”

The idea that Italy was a different political entity to England still puzzled all of her alien friends who lived on planets with one single government, but they were not intending to cause any trouble on Earth, so Hillary quickly affirmed her intention to visit the Harrods food hall back in London. Or Morrisons, Marion suggested, feeling quite certain there was no such thing as a class distinction in dried pasta.

It was a little quieter in the street when they emerged after their meal, but still busier even than the Haolstromnian capital city at night. Gallifrey’s Capitol had very little street life at all, so Talitha found it entrancing.

At least she did until a youth in dark clothes and a baseball cap proclaiming him a supporter of Juventus football club, rushed past, grabbing her evening bag out of her hands.

There was nothing of any value in the bag, merely lipstick, a perfume atomiser, and tissues, but even so, it was HER bag and she cried out in disgust at the blatant theft.

Avery gently pushed Marion and Talitha back into the restaurant, the better to protect his principals in case the bag snatch was a distraction for serious kidnappers. It was Hillary who chased after the youth.

“Did she….” Talitha began.

“Yes,” Marion answered coolly. She had seen Hillary change gender instantly more than once, so it didn’t surprise her quite so much. “That dress will be ruined. The shoes, too.”

When she returned, triumphantly bringing back Talitha’s bag, Hillary was hobbling with the silvery straps of her shoes broken and the toes stretched. Avery quickly gave her his suit jacket to disguise the fact that the slit in her dress now reached all the way to the armpits.

“Thank you,” Talitha said.

“Did he get away?” Marion asked. “The thief, I mean.”

“Not completely unscathed,” Hillary answered. “I broke his nose, I think. But he had an accomplice on a motor scooter. I lost them around the corner.”

“That’s all right,” Talitha said. “I’m not sure I really want to explain all this to a Roman police officer.”

“Not Hillary’s part in it, anyway,” Marion agreed. “Let’s get a taxi back to the hotel.”