**The Last Garden Party of the Summer**

Usually Septima had turned cool by the third week. The Cúl nut harvest would be done on mornings when the grass was white with frost and the summer flowers would be wilting.

But the frost had held off. There had been no hard rain, only a few showers that refreshed everything.

And Lily D’Alba D’Argenlunna announced that she was having a garden party, the last of the summer season. It would be the party everyone had to be seen at. It would be the party that everyone wore one last new summer gown for.

Marion’s gown was hand woven silk from the market on Xian Xian. It was light green with big roses climbing from hem to neckline. It was, by far, the prettiest and most original gown because she had bought the fabric offworld where so few other ladies travelled and it had been made by Rosanda to an original idea based on traditional Chinese court dresses.

Sitting beneath a big sunhat in Lily’s rose arbour she was, as many people remarked, fully at one with the scenery, a picture of late Sumner personified.

Which wasn’t necessarily the compliment it ought to have been.

“Marion, you don’t seem happy.” The observation came from Valena d’Arpexia who came to her table and waved in the manner she was born to, summoning a waiter with cool drinks. “Is there anything wrong, my dear?”

“Oh, nothing wrong, not really,” she admitted. “Just feeling a little flat. The end of summer. It has been a very pleasant one here on Gallifrey - on Earth, too. I’ve enjoyed some delightfully warm days under blue skies and yellow ones. But the weather must break very soon. It is only a wonder this afternoon has stayed warm and dry for Lily’s party. It is usually raining hard by this weekend in Septima.”

“Omegan Summer,” Valena remarked.

“On Earth, it’s called an Indian Summer, though I don’t know why. Anyway, as nice as it is, it just makes me realise that the cold weather will happen very soon.”

“And we will be warm inside our homes with Cúl tree logs burning in the fireplaces. Instead of garden parties we’ll have afternoon tea and the Opera season in the Capitol. I like autumn.”

“So do I, now. When I was younger I hated it. Autumn meant school, walking through dreary streets there and back, sitting in cold classrooms in damp clothes, dark evenings hunkered up in small rooms with everyone fighting for a little personal space. It really never meant anything good.”

She almost shivered as she remembered those walks home from school. She remembered foster homes that weren’t always as warm, physically or emotionally, as they ought to have been. In summer she could stay out for a few hours and postpone the inevitable, but once the nights started drawing in there was no hope but to find a corner and blank out the noise of television and other children at play as she did her homework or read a book to escape from the dullness of her surroundings.

Valena read those unguarded memories but she was still puzzled. How could she understand that cold autumn weather was a class issue?

“But now you don’t have to worry about all that, surely the change of seasons is a bit more fun for you?”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Marion admitted. “Except I… feel a bit autumnal myself, and the weather just reminds me of that.”

Valena really didn’t understand.

“I’m thirty-five next birthday.”

That really didn’t mean anything to Valena, or to any of her friends here at this garden party. In Gallifreyan years a female of that age was barely starting as an Academy student, still classed as a child.

“For humans, that means ten more years, at best, for child-bearing,” she explained.

“Oh.” Valena was starting to understand. “Oh, I see. You’re worried about….”

Kristoph was out of earshot in a huddle with a group of men, talking about the things men talked about at garden parties – which could be just about anything other than gardens or parties.

“I’m worried about giving Kristoph the heir he so desperately needs.”

“Has he said anything to you?” Valena asked cautiously

“No, and I doubt he would. But it must be in his mind. It means a lot to him. It means a lot to any Gallifreyan Oldblood. I know that. They all must have a son to carry on the name. Look around us. Maison d’Alba. Here, two bloodlines come to an end because Lily and her late husband never had children. Everyone knows that can’t happen to the House of de Lœngbǽrrow. Kristoph’s line is one of the very oldest of all. They say the first de Lœngbǽrrow was sired by Rassilon himself.”

“That’s the legend of the Twelve. It is why there was so much dismay among men like my father when Kristoph brought you here to be his wife. The chance to align through marriage with one of the great Houses was gone.”

“The houses of Pretarion and Ixion are gone, already. Argenlunna will be going. People are afraid that de Lœngbǽrrow will die out. Four of the Twelve….”

“Well, it won’t, anyway,” Valena reminded Marion. “Remonte’s son would inherit if it came to it. Though there might be a small thermic implosion amongst the snobs, of course. Remote’s wife – a former maid servant, just as his mother was. It would be the thin end of the wedge, a watering of the aristocratic blood.”

“Worse than an heir born of foreign blood like me?”

“Far worse. At least they can convince themselves that you came from aristocratic stock on your world.”

“Good heavens, do people really think that way, still? I have never pretended to be anything more than I am. And I was certainly not an aristocrat on Earth.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Valena assured her. “Your real friends don’t care where you come from. As for the bloodlines of Gallifrey, my own family is in worse trouble. There is no male offspring… just me. D’Arpexia will have to be joined with another family through marriage. My children could end up being ‘D’Arpexia-Ravenswode, Rassilon help me.”

“You wouldn’t marry Lord Ravenswode….”

“If he and my father thought it might be expeditious, it might be arranged. Of course, the doors of the Panopticon wouldn’t be wide enough to get me into the wedding ceremony - with me holding onto them on both sides. But they would try.”

“Ravenswode needs an heir, too,” Marion realised. “The Twelve are in real jeopardy. Which ist why it is important that Kristoph and I have a son before it is too late. And it is starting to feel like it IS too late.”

Valena fully understood, now. She grasped Marion’s hands gently and wished her every hope for that much longed for child.

“I have seen glimpses of a future where we do have a son,” Marion added. “I hung onto those glimpses for a long time as proof that it would happen. But I have started to wonder if prophecies can be wrong… if future time lines can change for the worse?”

“Not usually,” Valena answered. “Not the really definite ones like that. There are some wishy washy legends about a ‘chosen child of Rassilon’ and a ‘bringer of end times’, the sort of thing that nobody really pays attention to. But if you are meant to have a son with Kristoph, if it has been seen clearly, then it will happen. You can depend on it. And the good news is it will happen in the next ten years. It has to, if that is the timing for a human to have babies. It’s that SOON. Be glad of that, Marion. For me it will be a century or more before I can think of such a thing… longer if I have to marry Ravenswode, because if they get me through the ceremony without use of any coercion, the bedroom doors really aren’t wide enough.”

Marion laughed, as Valena intended her to do. It brightened her mood and let that last sunshine of the late summer into her heart. She determined to enjoy it to the full and worry about the rainclouds of autumn when they came.

“I don’t think you WILL have to marry Ravenswode,” Marion assured her friend. “There are many other alternatives. If all else fails, there ARE the Houses of Contemplation!”

Now Valena laughed.

But if either woman had known what was being spoken of elsewhere in Lady Lily’s beautiful gardens they might not have laughed so much.

It was Lord d’Arpexia who had drawn Kristoph away from the crowd on a pretext of talking about business. Kristoph was a little puzzled since he had no business dealings with the older Lord.

When he heard what Arpexia really wanted to talk about, his puzzlement turned to incendiary anger.

“Look,” Arpexia began. “It’s time to face facts. As an Oldblood patriarch, you’ve left it long enough to make a real match….”

“A real match… you mean a marriage? Did you miss the announcements? I AM married. I have been for more than ten years. My wife is drinking iced tea with your daughter.”

“Yes, but we all know that a foreign woman is never going to produce a worthy heir for an Oldblood House. As I said... time to face facts. I’m not suggesting that the woman should be abandoned. A generous settlement, a house, servants…. She could be made comfortable for the rest of her life, while you make a proper Alliance with a woman of your class - a strong, healthy woman who will give you the heir you must have. That’s why I wanted to talk to you. My daughter….”

“Your daughter? You mean Inquisitor Arpexia? What does she have to do with anything?”

“My daughter… is headstrong, independent of mind. But a man of your strength of character could keep her in line. She would be....”

“Stop right there,” Kristoph insisted. “Don’t you say another word. Not one word. You are suggesting that I set aside my wife and take your daughter instead. Do you really think I would demean either of them that way? Marion is worth more to me than diamonds. I love her. Perhaps that is a concept you don’t understand, but even amongst the Oldblood Houses it still counts for something. She will never be ‘set-aside’ like a used piece of furniture.”

“As I said… a generous settlement….”

“And if you say it again I will strike you where you stand,” Kristoph threatened.

Arpexia gasped in shock at that very suggestion.

“Do you threaten me with violence, sir?” he managed when he had gathered enough of his poise to make such a reply. “Is this….”

“Yes, it is a declaration of intent. If you wish it to be public, if you wish it to be a duel under the ancient rules of ‘gentlemanly’ conduct, with witnesses to the fact, then name your time and place. I suggest that you make the time and the place far from Lily d’Alba’s gentle home and our many mutual friends here, today, otherwise I am happy to oblige.”

Arpexia was lost for words - and possibly frightened. A man who had once been the Celestial Intervention Agency’s best assassin had given Notice of Intent. Only a fool would have taken up that challenge.

Arpexia was not THAT much of a fool.

“I don’t think it is necessary to take the matter that far.”

“Then hold your tongue on that subject,” Kristoph told him sharply. “As for your daughter….”

Arpexia looked hopeful for a brief moment, but that hope was quickly dashed.

“Valena is an accomplished woman. She has the esteem of her colleagues in the Inquisition. She is trusted to oversee the most complex cases. You want her ‘kept in line’, ‘put in her place’. You want her to give up a career she worked hard for in order to ‘breed strong heirs’. Do you think so little of your daughter’s talents? Do you really see her as no more than a wife and mother?”

“I believe a high born woman’s role in our society is clear enough. The Inquisition would be fine for a Newblood woman or for a younger daughter. But she is my first born. Her position….”

“I won’t hear another word on that subject, either. You are a fool, Arpexia. You don’t even know your own daughter and you don’t respect her. If I had the right to call you out on her behalf, I would do so. As for taking her in Alliance... in place of Marion… the idea is abhorrent to me as it would be, I am sure, to her. Never speak of it again, especially not where either your daughter or my wife should come to hear of it. If the whisper of such an idea comes to the ears of either I will make you very sorry. Do you understand me?”

“I understand. But I believe you are a fool, Lœngbǽrrow.”

“Then believe that, but do so privately. Few men of consequence will agree with you.”

Kristoph walked away. As he came amongst the garden party crowd again he saw Marion and Valena laughing together at some matter both found amusing. He knew both would be appalled at the conversation he had just had.

It would get back to them eventually. Arpexia had been cowed enough by even the vague suggestion of settling the matter by a ‘duel’ – as if such a thing had occurred on Gallifrey for millennia. He would not say anything about it. But the matter would come up again. There were other Oldblood men with daughters.

Sooner or later Marion would hear of the idea and be distressed by it.

But for now the last of the summer sun was still shining and his wife was laughing.

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