Malika and Kristoph’s Peace Mission - III

“Why in creation was the spaceport built so far from the mining compound?” Malika Dúccesci wondered aloud. He was looking out of a small, porthole sized window of six centimetres thick glass which gave only a dim view of the frozen wasteland beyond the railroad. A poisonous vapour blew endlessly across the frozen tundra for endless miles. Outside the sealed railway carriage was death to any oxygen-breathing species.

“It is to prevent any possibility of Arusian rebels storming the spaceport,” their Ratanian escort answered, though the question was not addressed to him. “Not that we expect such concerted resistance from such stupid, lazy creatures.”

As usual, the Ratanian had an Arusian slave standing behind him bearing the wait of a portable water dispenser. The Arusian gave no sign, not even an eye flicker, that the insulting language affected him. He and Kristoph had discussed that when they were alone in the diplomatic quarters aboard the neutral space station. They didn’t believe the Arusians were stupid, and had concluded that the water slaves were so accustomed to such language they no longer responded to it.

Besides, punishments for any sign of resistance were bound to be harsh.

“The Arusian people took back their home planet from your domination,” Kristoph pointed out. “They are not completely without strategic thinking, nor fighting spirit.”

The Ratanian escort had no immediate answer to that gibe. Kristoph and Malika both knew from independent reports that the Arusians had prevailed on their home world, the innermost planet, because its hot, dry climate was so thoroughly inimical to the water-dependant Ratanians that they could never keep more than a few administrative battalions on the planet for more than two months at a time. They also knew that the rebellion by overwhelming numbers of Arusian fighters had been more damaging than the Ratanians would ever admit. When their government reluctantly conceded that the planet wasn’t worth fighting to retain it rocked their belief in their own military superiority.

But they would not give up the two mineral rich outer planets where Arusian worker serfs were not even aware of the victory on the home world. They still belonged to Ratania.

Like cattle belonged to the ranchman, the two Time Lords concluded.

The mining compound was contained within a massive steel dome, several kilometres in radius. The outer shell, exposed to the freezing, toxic atmosphere, was dismal enough, but even that gave no indication of the misery it concealed.

In both his early life as a CIA assassin, and later as a roving ambassador Kristoph had seen civilisations under protective shields on worlds with inimical climates. For that matter, the grand Capitol of Gallifrey , on the edge of the harsh Red Desert, glittered beneath a shining envirosphere, though possibly more out of vanity than necessity.

But he had never seen anything as miserable as this place. Under artificial light, thousands of Arusians were living in ragged groups, sitting or lying on grey pieces of fabric to make the hard surface a little more comfortable. They had no furniture and barely any clothes. They communicated in low murmurs. Anything louder would be punished by the guards that patrolled incessantly.

The first thing Kristoph and Malika noticed about these groups was the expressions on their faces. The first flickers of any emotions they had seen on any Arusian face so far.

Their expression when they saw the Rutanian escort was pure hatred. Clearly, only the expectation of dire punishment was preventing them from turning on that representative of their slave drivers.

The second thing about them that the two visitors noticed was that these were mostly children, with a few elderly adults to tend to them.

The parents, male and female, for they were a species with two genders, were all working in the mines.

Which made these poor creatures not so much families as hostages to ensure the workers worked hard and made no attempt to fight against their masters.

“They are permitted to leave the work for food and sleep,” the escort explaimed. “But this is the middle of a work shift.”

And that was the third thing they noticed - the food being cooked by the elderly carers. They cooked over some kind of heat-emitting solid fuel bricks in small cauldrons.

Kristoph knelt to examine the small rations of grain they put into liquid to make a thin grey gruel even Oliver Twist would have turned down.

It looked something like rice. That grain didn’t grow on Gallifrey but he had eaten his fill in Liverpool’s Chinatown, flavoured in many imaginative ways. He knew it was a nutritious staple food in many parts of Earth. But even in the poorest of those parts they had more of it than was going into these cauldrons.

The woman who tended the pot he examined poured a little of the gruel into a saucer and offered it to him. He took it and tasted it. There was barely any flavour and he detected just about enough nourishment to keep a body alive. How anyone could live on this and do a long, hard, manual job he could not fathom.

“How do they have the energy left to procreate?” Malika asked as he looked at very small babies held in what had to be the arms of grandparents. “Or the will to bring a child into such a dismal life.”

“They are required to produce a quota of infants,” said the escort. “To ensure a future workforce. Females of fertile age who do not fulfil this duty are severely punished. Any misbirths that would lack the strength or ability to work are euthanised and the parents are punished.”

Both Time Lords turned to look at the escort in undisguised disgust.

“For the rest of this inspection you will say nothing to either of us,” Kristoph ordered. “Show us the mine operations, now. I want to see the working conditions of these poor souls.”

“Arusian animals have no souls,” the escort murmured before Kristoph froze his words with a look that in past times had been the last thing traitors and murderers had seen.

The escort silently began to lead them towards one of the elevators which were positioned every fifty metres or so around the floor, the faster to deliver workers to the mining tunnels and deposit them among their poor families at the end of a long, back-breaking shift.

Then an alarm sounded that startled everyone and caused a great deal of consternation amongst the Arusians.

“Attention! Attention!” called a harsh voice over loudspeakers throughout the habitation. “Quotas have not been met for the recent work period. As penalty, sector 15alpha will be exposed in five parminutes.”

If there was any doubt about which sector was 15alpha, the lights above it turned a garish red and blinked on and off. For the first time since they arrived in this solar system, Kristoph and Malika heard Arusians make any loud noise.

They were screaming.

The Arusians in the condemned sector began to run, elders grasping children, falling over each other in blind panic, risking precious seconds to pick the fallen up again. There was that much to say for them. There was no selfishness. They tried to save each other.

Kristoph looked up at another sound, above the screaming Arusians. It was a grinding of huge steel gears. He noticed a thick metal wall starting to descend with slow but inevitable movement. He knew at once what would happen to any Arusian left behind that wall when it slammed into place.

He and Malika both ran under the red light to grasp Arusian children and bring them to safety. When there was almost no time left, and even the indifferent Ratanians were telling him to come back, Kristoph ran into the zone and returned as swiftly as possible with a withered old woman on his back and two children in his arms.

He made it with seconds to spare. The clang of the metal wall making contact with the floor rang in his ears. He felt sure that sound would ring through his nightmares in future.

The screams of the people who did not make it out of sector 15alpha, who would die very quickly, exposed to frozen poison, would be in those nightmares, too, though the wall cut them off in reality.

Very slowly he put down the children he was still hugging tightly against his two fast breathing hearts and let the grieving Arusians take them into what care they could offer. He stood up straight and stalked towards the Ratanian escort and was pleased to see him step back, fear in his cold, amphibious eyes.

“Excellencies... You were not meant to see what just happened,” the escort stammered. “It was not a part of the tour of the facility. You were not meant to see....”

“I am quite sure of that,” Malika commented with perfect honesty.

He glanced at Kristoph and remembered all of the stories about just how good an assassin he had been. If he forgot in this moment how good a diplomat he was, then at least one Ratanian might die.

“I would kill you, right here, right now,” Kristoph said to the escort. “Except that it is obvious you are not personally responsible for any of this mindless cruelty. Those who ARE responsible WILL be brought to justice. That is my guarantee to these people within my hearing.”

He took a deep breath and steadied his hearts. Malika remembered to breathe again now that a dangerous moment had passed.

“Now... Return us to the spaceport. We are ready to make our decision about the ownership of these mining planets known to all.”

Despite realising that he was not about to be murdered on the spot, the escort still quailed in front of the Time Lords. Behind him, the water carrier’s eyes blinked and for a brief moment Kristoph thought he saw something like a smile on the red, leathery face.

The escort remained cautious as the sealed train moved off from the dreadful work camp – or as Kristoph was calling it in his mind, the concentration camp. It had all the dreadful connotations that the phrase had in the history of his wife’s homeworld.

The human fiends who had perpetrated such horrors were, in his opinion, amateurs compared to the Ratanians.

“This ends... today,” he vowed to Malika, who agreed emphatically.

“You’ve done this kind of thing before,” he said. “Was it always like this?”

“I’ve seen nothing as needlessly malevolent as this,” Kristoph answered. “Mostly, I have negotiated peace between equal aggressors, both guilty of war atrocities, both owed reparations by the other side. Nothing like this barbaric crushing of a helpless people.”

“So we are agreed... About what must be done? There is no doubt?”

“You will do nothing,” the escort said, finding his courage once more. “I have had orders.” He tapped a communication device in his rubbery ear. “At the spaceport the two of you are to be taken into custody. You will be expelled from the Ratanian Convox. Your pro-Arusian lies will not be accepted. Your Shaddow Proclamation will not make any decisions about our destiny.”

“Is that so?” Malika asked, with slightly more certainty in his voice than he would have had if he had not known something the escort didn’t know – something that made those orders redundant.

“You will talk no more,” the escort snapped, but his aggression didn’t quite have the effect he expected.

Because neither Kristoph nor Malika didn’t need an earpiece to send and receive messages. The steel dome had made it difficult for a short while. It was obviously made of something else as well as steel that repulsed telepathy – probably accidentally since the Ratanians weren’t a telepathic race and nor were their Arusian slaves.

But the train had no such protection and his provisional verbal report with Malika’s full backing, was already complete. Action was being taken, even as they travelled to the spaceport.

The escort looked triumphant as they stepped off the train. But then when he saw the guards forming up to bring them to the shuttle craft he very nearly melted in fear.

The two Time Lords were not surprised at his reaction. The first time anyone saw the Shaddow Proclamation’s leather-armoured, rhinoceros faced Judoon guards, was disconcerting, even for those who they protected, let alone those deemed an enemy.

A humanoid soldier, this one in the slightly absurd red and gold uniform of a Gallifreyan Chancellery Guard, stepped forward and saluted his president and former president.

“Everything is under control, Excellencies,” he said. “The Ratanian delegates are confined to their quarters pending the final arbitration. Their home world has been placed under direct Judoon blockade. No space transport leaving their atmosphere to make trouble elsewhere.”

“And the mining compounds are being liberated?” Malika asked.

“All of them... On both outer planets,” the officer assured him. “You might want to know that we were in low orbit in time to place a force field around the mining camp where you were visiting. The people exposed by the roof collapse...”

“It was not a collapse,” Malika corrected him. ”That implies an accident, not selected extermination of innocent people.”

“Nonetheless, and despite nobody expecting that to happen, we were able to pick up the people with a wide base dematerialisation beam.”

“They’re alive? All of them?” Kristoph asked, with visible relief. He knew measures were being taken in case the two of them were held hostage, but he hadn’t dared to hope that those people could have been saved.

“We have them in the medical centre. Shaddow Proclamation medics are making an extensive report about malnutrition, signs of systemic torture and other ill treatment. Meanwhile, Judoon guards with a battalion of our militia are evacuating the rest of the miners and their families from each of the camps. They’ll be taken to resettlement centres on their homeworld.”

“I think there are several generations who have never even seen that home world,” Kristoph said. “They’re going to need a lot of help adjusting to their freedom.”

And they would get it. He would see about that.

It was a few days before the Shaddow Proclamation assembled for the final decision. The main chamber aboard the space station saw some fifty or so Ratanians, this time without help to carry their water tanks held there under guard. The Arusians rescued from that last horror were allowed to sit facing their tormentors. The bulk of the population on the Arusian homeworld watched on giant screens wherever in the towns and cities a crowd formed to watch.

The President of the Shaddow Proclamation, a tall, thin woman with silver hair and pale blue skin, read out the list of crimes against sentient life which Kristoph and Malika had drawn up. She went through the evidence for each charge and then declared the Ratanian Convox guilty on all counts.

“Ratania will be banned from using any form of interplanetary travel, not even within their solar system. They will be kept under planetary arrest on their homeworld, the second planet of the Arusian system where they evolved. The Arusians are to be paid the full value of the minerals mined by the slave workers for the past century, which will allow them to fully develop their own infrastructure and allow them to make trade deals with other worlds to their advantage. It will be for them to decide how, when and by whom, further mining operations on the outer planets are resumed.”

This news was taken with dismay and some words of resistance from the Ratanians, all quickly silenced.

“A peace-keeping force will police the introduction of a non-aggressive system of government on Ratania. We anticipate the need for such a force to remain in place for up to four centuries, after which a review will be considered. Gallifrey, despite a long-standing policy of non-interference in extra-planetary affairs, has agreed to provide the initial force, with their troops eventually replaced by rotating battalions from other signatories to the Proclamation.”

Long standing was a modest term for the non-interference policy that had stood for something like fifty millennia. Malika was taking a huge political step by allowing troops to be deployed even to mop up after a war that was nothing to do with Gallifrey. He would have to square it with some of the more implacable members of the High Council on their return. But he was firm in his decision with Kristoph’s full endorsement.

“The Proclamation can have a few more days of our time, ironing out details,” Malika said after the Assembly was formally concluded. “Then it is time we caught up with our wives.”

“More than time, I suspect,” Kristoph agreed. “I wonder if it WAS a good idea to have a Haolstromnian leading them astray for so long.”