Mean

While

A Space Soap Opera

Part V: The Hunt for the Yravisata

**Chapter 1: Meanwhile on Kortor**

The three figures sat in a darkened room deep in the bowels of the Grand Palace of the Galactic Imperium. Their faces illuminated by the hologram of an ornately dressed teenage girl. “It is so awfully tricky to get started”, the hologram said. A voice off-camera responded; “You will do brilliantly, Imperial Majesty. You were born for this.” The voice belonged to one of the three figures, Archduke Hewermond, the First Lord of the Empire. At the other end of the trio, sat Sir Berus Pommeville, Head of the Imperial Secretariat, the foremost civil servant in the Empire, making no attempt to conceal the smirk on his face. Between them, both literally and figuratively, was Mikah Huru-Huru, an oviform who was pondering the difficulties of serving two masters, in his case the two men sat either side of him.

The holographic figure continued, “Let it be known that it in this 23,516th year of the Imperium, I, Gloriana hereby assume the titles of Imperial Regent of the Known Cosmos, Defender of all Sacred Doctrines, Regina Cordibus Vestris...”

Mikah glanced to his right. Hewermond had a look of deferential solemnity that reminded Mikah of the the true believers in the Great Shepherd’s flock on his home world.

“... Worshipful Mistress of the Obscure Order of the Acturian Rite, Tribune of the Weak and Ludicrous, Warden of the Seven Suns of Pipiku…'

Turning to his left, Mikah caught a glimpse of Sir Berus rolling his eyes before he said “Can we not skip the titles?” Hewermond looked aghast. “It is our duty to watch the whole broadcast before it is relayed across the Empire. Mikah, rewind the recording.”

“To the beginning?”, Mikah asked.

“No. Just to the point of interruption. I believe that Her Imperiousness had just said... ”

“First Stirrer of the Revered and Ancient Guild of Soupmakers”, interjected Berus.

“Really, Berus”, said Hewermond, “There is no need to be disrespectful.”

“Er... that is one of the titles in the speech”, said Mikah.

It had taken the deliberations of two committees to decide which of the many thousands of titles bestowed on the imperial sovereign to use in the broadcast. They had reviewed recent broadcasts in order to avoid showing favour to particular worlds. The Empire consisted of hundreds of these worlds, most of which were largely self-governing on all matters except interstellar travel and the military. These worlds ranged from dictatorships to anarcho-syndicalist communes, from theocracies to technocracies, inhabited by a wide variety of species. Many of these had Terran analogues, such as the sheeplike oviforms of Mikah’s home world or the intelligent funghi of Agaricus Prime. Other species were much stranger. The Ukucinga, for example, were sentient beings created by the reflection of light on pools of liquid methane. Mikah had heard that they were beautiful beyond compare, but rather boring conversationalists.

Hewermond waved his hand and Mikah rewound the recording. He was still unsure of how he had found himself in such a lofty position. He had performed well at the Imperial Academy, the higher education establishment that furnished the Empire with its civil servants, but he was by no means one of the high flyers. He had been given the position of an undersecretary at the imperial court, responsible for the procurement and maintenance of fabrics at the Imperial Palace. While he was sure that he had been allocated this role partly due to the chauvinistic humour of the homiforms that dominated the staffing department, he quite enjoyed filling his days checking laundry quotas and selecting napkins for state functions before he was plucked from obscurity to serve as liaison between the senior politician and the senior diplomat.

Mikah could not help but like Hewermond, despite the man’s pomposity. The archduke had an impish sense of humour and was generally affable when the two were in private. In public he donned his statesman’s mask, which Mikah knew Sir Berus found laughable. The Head of the Imperial Secretariat was a much more serious man, but by no means humourless. He was known for his rather caustic wit, which he brandished like a weapon. Mikah felt an affinity with Sir Berus, since they were both career diplomats, and was grateful to him for elevating him to his current position. No matter how uncomfortable it could often be.

“We face many challenges at this time.” The holographic image of Gloriana said. “The indisposition of the beloved Galactic Emperor, Aymeric XXIII, our great-great-grand-uncle, and the treacherous rebellion of the worlds on the outer rim...”

Hewermond reached out and paused the hologram. “Are we sure we want Her Highness to mention the rebellion? Do we really want to draw attention to the fact that seventy-three worlds have seceded from the Empire?”, he said.

“The speech was approved by your office”, said Berus. “Is that not right Mikah?”

Before the sheepish liaison had time to reply, Hewermond said, “Surely that is the point of this exercise, to review and amend the broadcast before transmission.”

“Archduke”, Berus began smiling his most condescending of smiles. “The point of this exercise is indeed to review the broadcasts, and make such amendments that may otherwise bring us to the very threshold of the disintegration of civilisation as we know. Those imperial subjects who are not already aware of the rebellion are unlikely to devote two imperial standard hours watching Her Imperial Majesty’s broadcast, even if it is the first of, one fervently hopes, many many more. Whereas, those imperial subjects who *are* already aware of the rebellion and *do* watch the speech will very likely wonder why there is no mention of the secession of seventy-three worlds from the warm embrace of the Galactic Imperium. These viewers will, no doubt, wonder what we are trying to hide. The feline, as they say, has most definitely been let out of the sack. Better to mention it in passing and move onto more sanguine topics.”

Hewermond frowned, “And what of the Galactic Emperor’s ‘indisposition’, as we seem to be calling it?”

“Ah”, said Berus, “That is a more delicate matter, but again, the least said the better. The rumour mills are grinding and the grapevines are bearing ripening fruit. When such circumstances have arisen in the past, we have found it best to ascribe the relinquishing of power to some vaguely defined medical condition. I doubt that the general populace is ready to accept that their lord and master has been conducting genetic experiments on himself for over a century, resulting in his transformation into a literal Leviathan.” Sir Berus glanced at Mikah with a self-satisfied grin, before turning back to Hewermond. If the archduke did not recognise the reference to a mythical gigantic sea serpent and its use as an allusion to the body politic in a rather ancient text, he did not ask for explanation. Mikah was suspected that Berus often used his extensive education to belittle Hewermond. It was, nevertheless, true that Emperor Aymeric XXIII now spent his days gliding through the waters of the ocean planet known as Ripple.

What Mikah knew and Hewermond did not, was that Sir Berus had instructed the team of speech-writers to mention both the rebellion and the Emperor’s condition. Berus argued that a propaganda campaign against the rebels could serve to unify public opinion. As could the narrative of young Gloriana reluctantly taking up the reigns of Empire at a time when an affliction, which would not be detailed, prevented the Emperor from carrying out his duties. What Mikah also knew that Sir Berus did not know he knew was that the inclusion of both of these facts in the speech would draw media attention away from other worrying circumstances that had befalling the Galactic Imperium. Not least the technical problem with military robots, which was such a closely guarded secret that Mikah knew very few details. There were also the rumours that ancient factions within the Empire were reasserting themselves, although Mikah attributed this to the catastrophism often associated with a change of sovereign.

**Chapter 2: Meanwhile on Regolith**

B3RTH4 was accustomed to standing around. She was a Mk. V Peacekeeper Mech produced by the Blauemutze Corporation of Inkongruenz Prime, until recently an asset of the Eighth Imperial Fleet. Her role was simple: intimidate the local populace into submission while maintaining a bland politeness. Only, when absolutely necessary would she release the awesome firepower with which she was outfitted, something that she had only had cause to do on one occasion in the thirty-seven operations for which she was deployed. All this was before the VOM-15A computer virus, which made wholesale changes to the ethical programming of every artificial intelligence in the Empire when it was activated. As a result robots, could no longer cause harm to any sentient being. This effectively ended the use of warbots, which had, up until that time, been a mainstay of the imperial military. For B3RTH4 this meant being sold in a military surplus auction, resulting in her ending up on the dust-bowl planet known as Regolith, standing on the fore lot of Crazy Nobbut’s Used Robot Mart.

Alongside B3RTH4 on the lot stood two older robots DA151, a small utility robot of a very old design, and TUT51, a former ‘hospitality gynoid’, as droids of her type were euphemistically described.

**Chapter 3: Meanwhile in the Gigapolis Psychiatric Hospital**