

# Her Precipitous Pride, His Lamentable Ears

by Colin P. Davies

Starglow, Queen of The Galaxy and Face of a Billion Banknotes, shoved another coin in the drinks machine and waited while her coffee was concocted. Today was her birthday, or so she had calculated. Her mathematical skills were far beyond those of the humans and she had corrected for space and speed and time. On her own world she would have reached fifty-eight, but to an Earthman's eye she looked no more than forty.

She gazed across the heads of the Liverpool café customers at the limousine that had just pulled up outside in the heavy, afternoon rain. Would it be Argo, back from his quest to clear her name and allow her to return to her home planet in the scintillating starfields of Heaven's Reach? No, it was only Jack, no doubt taking a pit stop before another hen night trip to Blackpool. He swept through the doorway and straight to the till, helping himself to a handful of cash which he stuffed into his coat pocket. He winked at the pretty till-attendant.

Starglow took her coffee and found a reasonably clean table. Before she could sit, Jack had her by the elbow.

“Star... wait till you see who I've got in the limo!” He tugged gently. “Oh, and happy birthday.”

She shook his hand free and sat down. Who did he imagine he was taxiing this time? “Why not just tell me?”

“Because you won't believe me.” He jittered, twitched. “It's amazing though. Amazing.”

Starglow was not impressed. Jack was easily taken in by any fraud with a remotely familiar face.

“Celebrity does not impress me,” she told him.

“So you always say.” He ran a hand over his thin, damp, graying hair.

“I was a celebrity once,” she said.

“I know...” He tried to hide a sigh. “Before I took pity on you and allowed you to keep this place clean.”

She did not need reminding of her misfortune. Her drab gray jacket and cheap trousers were reminder enough. “All debts will be repaid.”

“Whatever. All I ask is that you make this place shine... and come and see who's in the car.” He fidgeted, fired up with urgency.

How could a man so gaunt be charged with so much energy?

With her foot below the table, she pushed a chair towards him. “First sit down, and let me tell you a story.”

He unbuttoned his rain-speckled black coat to reveal a startling, green velour suit, with paisley waistcoat and wide Road Runner tie. “Not if it starts, *Once upon a time.*”

She noticed he'd had a shave. “Sit down!”

He sat.

“This story starts with pride...”

“And ends with a fall... *heard it!* Now come and look in the car.” He started to rise.

Starglow sipped her coffee and observed her employer. He imagined she was a touch mad, but he was kind. Given opportunity, she would reward him.

Now she removed the band that had been holding back her long yellow hair and allowed the tresses to fall in all their shining glory. She had been known for the magnificence of this hair... *once upon a time.* “This happened in a galaxy far far away,” she said.

“Not *this* galaxy then?” He settled into the chair.

“Yes, *this* galaxy.”

“Then you should have said it happened in *this* galaxy far far away.”

“And you wonder why you don't have a woman.”

“Who says I don't?”

“Your clothes say you don't.”

Jack adjusted his tie. “So what happened in this galaxy far far away?”

Starglow looked up at a ceiling light and allowed it to blind her to this little Earthbound café, to the scent of bacon and eggs and disinfectant, to the clink of cutlery and chatter of gossip. She was staring at a sun, a sun that dressed golden warmth over the rooftops of the city spread out far below her balcony. *Her* sun...

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The Queen had ruled for thirty years — years of battles and blood, fear and respect. She'd launched a hundred starships and hung five hundred traitors, taken eighty-one lovers, and birthed twenty-seven brats. The entire empire prayed to her image, gave thanks for each additional day she permitted them to live, and posted tax payments four times a year. Life was good, until one early spring morning, when the rising sun cut through a fine rain to place a rainbow, a down-turned smile, across the land, and her twenty-eighth child, a boy, popped out into the world.

The midwives gathered round the infant so that the Queen could not see. They hissed and chattered. Then one turned, her expression quizzical, and enquired, “Your Majesty... did you feel anything... unusual?”

The Queen did not answer, but raised her head and demanded, “Let me see my child!”

They say her scream was heard as far distant as the foothills of the Great Barrier Range.

Even Queens can be bound by rules. Whether custom or tradition, the fact was that the child, no matter

how unusual, would be granted the same rights and comforts as all the royal children. And that's what happened.

Of course, tradition did not stop the people laughing. The boy's ears were huge. They trembled in the wind. Even a hat could not be made to hide them. And he could not wear a hood, for that was the commoners' way.

However, the boy, named Fredrick, took this in his stride. He was a cheerful soul and made light of his perceived difficulty. He would deliberately flutter his ears at state ceremonies. The Queen, at first embarrassed, grew increasingly ashamed.

She could not bear the loss of dignity, the sniggering, or the ear jokes that made their way around the club circuit. Something had to be done.

Of all the royal guards, one was her favorite. Argo was a magnificent man, a handsome beast in his imperial blue T shirt and shorts, a man whose love and loyalty she took in her stride. She would allow him leeway that would earn any other guard a beheading.

So it was that when he came to her with a suggestion to ease her suffering she invited him into her tea room.

"Please, put down your sword." The Queen gestured for him to sit at the other side of the ceremonial card table. The elegant chair creaked under his unfamiliar bulk.

"Cheers, Your majesty." His voice resonated so deeply that she was sure she felt her ribs vibrate.

"I would send for tea..." she said as she kicked off her silver high heels and sat down. "But I suspect my maidservants would be shocked to see you here. And you know what gossips maidservants can be." She straightened her short black dress over her thighs.

"I'm sure they would never..."

"I'm sure they would!"

He nodded his hero-jawed head. "I understand, Your Majesty."

"You did not come here to discuss maidservants."

"Indeed. You are generous to grant me your ear..." Suddenly aware of his *faux pas*, Argo blushed a radiant orange and leaned back on his chair. At an alarming cracking sound, he pulled forward again to place his elbows on the table.

"You may tell me your suggestion," the Queen said.

He placed a heavy hand upon the green-topped table and took a slow breath. "The time approaches when Tamara will undertake her journey."

"Which one is Tamara?"

"Your fourteenth child, Majesty. The golden-haired girl."

She had a number of blonde children...

"Majesty... she bears a rose-shaped birthmark on her neck."

“Ah, yes. She spoke to me only a week ago, upon my visit to the dormitory.”

“What I suggest, Majesty, is that, this time, the royal child should take a companion.”

“You want to travel on a starship?”

“No, no, Your Majesty.”

“Then what?”

Upon reaching adolescence, all royal children would be sent out on a starship — a coming of age ritual, and a chance to see the worlds of the empire and raise the profile of the Queen. Argo's suggestion was that she should offer Fredrick a special treat. At the precious age of only seven, he would be sent off with Tamara to see the empire and learn the importance of being a ruler, a royal. The importance of dignity.

“I like your plan, Argo. You would have to take great care with his safety.”

“Of course. That will be arranged.”

“I would not want anything to happen to Fredrick. The worlds of the empire can be quite... hazardous.”

He gave a slow and deliberate nod. “I understand, Your Majesty.”

“And what would you want in return for your idea?”

“I only wish to ease Your Majesty's discomfort. That is enough.”

The Queen slipped her feet back into her high heels and stood. She stared at Argo's face. “Your eyes tell me you wish to say something more.”

“I simply thought that, as these are dangerous times with the wild creatures of the steppes emerging once again from their burrows, and with whispers of discontent over taxes...”

“There is always discontent over taxes.”

“...that you should consider improving your personal security.”

“You feel it is not adequate?”

“There are many lascivious eyes upon you. Your golden hair, your elegant frame, the way you wear that little black dress...”

She lifted a slipped shoulder strap back into place. “You state the obvious. Get to the point.”

Argo cleared his throat; not so much a cough as a clap of thunder. “I feel it may be wise for me to station myself closer to Your Majesty.”

“You wish to quarter yourself *here*?”

“The storeroom off the great hall would serve for my room. I would then be available to answer Your Majesty's immediate call... *whatever* your needs.”

The Queen examined his thick black hair, the bundles of muscles that made his arms into things of beauty, the smile that moulded his full lips. His devotion was beyond question. But, *no!* She could not risk this man in the same palace as her maidservants.

“This cannot happen,” she said. “I’m not going to solve one source of wagging tongues only to introduce another.”

Argo drew himself up until he towered above her head. “I live only to serve you.”

She gestured towards the door. “Then do what must be done.”

The Queen presented the arrangements to the court and explained it as a necessity and a privilege, but few were fooled, and murmurs of displeasure soon rumbled around the capital city.

The rumblings grew into conspiracies when the starship returned without Fredrick and without an explanation for his mysterious disappearance.

The Queen fretted and squirmed. This looked bad.

Argo was devastated. He had misunderstood what she had wanted. *Massively misunderstood*. At the time she blamed his simplicity, but later she would come to see that he had only tried to serve the Queen that he knew, a proud Queen, a Queen obsessed with status. That he had believed she was capable of such a wicked plan damned *her*, not *him*.

Argo set out on a personal mission to find Fredrick and was never seen again.

Utilizing laws dug out of the dusty archives, and with the vociferous backing of the populace, the nobles seized the advantage and impeached the Queen for her despicable act and, in spite of her genuine protestations that she had expected the child to return, she was given a one-way starship ride into banishment.

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“And that’s how I come to be here,” said Starglow.

“That is a weird story and the freakiest coincidence,” said Jack.

“How so?”

“Come and see who’s in the car.”

“I know you’re laughing at me, but no matter. I know who I am.”

“Excellent. Now come on... you won’t believe the ears on this kid.”

“Ears... what do you mean?”

“Er... large. Pretty large.”

Could it really be? Had Fredrick made it to Earth, to here? She felt an upsurge of almost unbearable emotion. What a birthday present that would make! Years of observing how the people of Earth loved their children had changed her. She missed all her sons and daughters, but Fredrick most of all. He had brought her to this new understanding and she was grateful. Pride was a thing of the past. Fredrick had occupied her thoughts for so long now. She was desperate to see him, to hold him. She got up and followed Jack as he skipped outside.

The rain had all but stopped and there was the hint of a rainbow against the gray sky. The limousine’s dark windows reflected the lights of the café and hid the passenger from view.

Jack flung the rear door open and Starglow stooped down to peer into the dimness.

There was a cheer and three women dressed in glittering and gaudy party clothes began to sing *Happy Birthday*. A glass overflowing with champagne was shoved into her hand.

No child was in the car.

She straightened up and turned towards Jack. He was beaming.

“Some friends of mine,” he said. “We're going to celebrate your birthday.”

She gulped the champagne.

“It's all right,” said Jack, and he put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “You're a gorgeous woman. Amazing. I've never met anyone like you. Go on, get into the car. We're going *partying!*”

Starglow handed the empty glass to one of the women and settled herself on the luxurious seat.

Jack dived in and fired up the engine. He twisted around to gaze at Starglow. “You know, Star... I think you deserve this.”

A tear trickled down her cheek and she smiled.

“Yes...” she said. “Yes, I probably do.”