Royal Visits

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Diplomatic Intrigues, Dark Secrets

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Vallei

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The Republic of Azalea is a large and powerful country in Asia. The proud nations of the Danes and the Dutch are for all intents and purposes identical and pleasantly interchangeable. Both have splendid diplomatic services and both, as well as most countries in the world, have Ambassadors in Azalea, guided and supported by their competent authorities back home. Like the Republic, they are entirely fictitious.

To M

The Invitation

The Chief of Protocol carefully studied Beatrice's thighs. Some of these European female diplomats really had exceptional legs. The Chief wondered how far he would be able to look up her skirt without breaching his own Protocol. Beatrice Blomgoyer, Second Secretary (a junior diplomatic rank) at the Dutch Embassy in Azalea, was taking notes on a strategically placed pad on her lap. Why would a girl like that wear a microskirt to a meeting and then spoil the effect with a huge writing pad, the Chief wondered. She sat with her legs bent, her skin and muscles taut. Women had to do a lot with their legs. Gentlemen didn't. Gentlemen could sit with their legs crossed, or with their ankle crossed over their knee, it would not matter, as long as the legs would be clothed in pinstripes. He suddenly realised that Ambassador Paul Slagter was still droning on about the 'splendid great most glorious relations between our two countries could not be better and to crown this all we would actually propose and would it not be wonderful?' Slagter was nervous as hell. He kept grinning and crossing and uncrossing his legs, folding and unfolding his hands. 'Indeed' the Chief said. 'I could not agree more.' He did not have a clue what the Ambassador was talking about.

The Chief of Protocol's name was Ta'ak. He was a senior diplomat with the rank of Ambassador in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azalea. His job was to look after the many foreign embassies that had set up shop in the capital. He had direct access to the Minister and even to the President of the Republic. He received the many foreign visitors who came to Azalea to pay tribute to his magnificent country. He also organised the official visits of the Azalean President to foreign countries. Not to pay tribute - certainly not - but because the President liked to travel. Ta'ak was always immaculately dressed: dark pinstripe suit, silk tie, gold cufflinks, well polished shoes. He was a fine judge of his many foreign visitors and of the clothes they wore.

Beatrice changed into an even more promising position. The Chief glanced at his briefing notes. Something about a visit from the Dutch or the Danes. So this Ambassador must be the Dutch Ambassador. Or the other one. It did not really matter. The Chief had some difficulty telling all those small European countries apart. Perhaps he should ask his Assistant to attach a photograph of each visitor to his briefing notes. That would certainly help. As Ambassador Slagter went into a new round of nervous twitter, Ta'ak read the usual reassuring phrases: small country, behaved itself, never a word of criticism about our abysmal human rights passed their lips, they want to sell cheese, we agree to a State Visit, they actually have a King. A King? Funny folks, those Dutch. Call themselves democrats but still stick to prehistoric leadership notions. Time to put the Ambassador out of his misery.

Ta'ak looked at Slagter and said: 'We shall be happy to agree to a State Visit. Our President shall be honoured to receive your eh' he tried to find the name of the person in his notes but decided he had to settle for just the 'Head of State.' 'June is quite the right time. We

will take care of the usual arrangements.' The Ambassador jumped from his seat, fell back and was now positively flailing his arms. Whatever possessed the man?

'Thank you, your Excellency' the Ambassador almost shouted. 'I am very happy that all the problems have been solved and we look out to the trip. It will be a success, this is true. Oh, I am so happy.'

The Chief did not quite take to overexcited Europeans. On the other hand, this one was clearly elated, which meant that he had not quite expected Protocol's response, which meant that he did not have a very strong negotiating position. He decided it was time for a dose of Azalean inscrutability and for some thumbscrewing to squeeze whatever was squeezeable from his visitor.

'Of course' Ta'ak said. 'For the visit to be a success we expect that you will take care to solve any outstanding problems.' He had no knowledge of any outstanding problems between Azalea and the Dutch, but it was a safe thing to say as there usually were any number of them in any relation between his own magnificent country and the lesser states on the fringes of the globe.

'Once that is done, I am certain our Head of State will be delighted to receive your Head of State' the Chief of Protocol continued.

Beatrice was busily scribbling notes, her skirt had crept up again and the Chief was certain he now saw the beginning of a buttock. The Ambassador did not seem to notice. He said that he also hoped problems would be solved. Ta'ak decided it was time to frighten Ambassador Slagter. 'If our Head of State is in town, he will of course receive your Head of State with full honours. If he is not, for instance because he has to deal with a certain problem that may not yet have been resolved, someone else will' the Chief said. Slagter appeared frozen in his chair.

'Would that other person be the vice-president?' he asked.

'The vice-president, unless he has to deal with a certain problem, or perhaps the Prime Minister.'
'I see'. Slagter was looking intently at him. Ta'ak saw the fear in his eyes.
'There is always one of the vice-premiers' the Chief said in what he thought was a polite, yet sufficiently menacing manner. Whatever problems existed between Azalea and the Dutch (and given the reaction of the Ambassador there were indeed problems), it would be solved to the satisfaction of his own magnificent country. The Dutch were clearly hooked on this State Visit. They would make the necessary concessions to avoid their Head of State being received not by the President but by one of the many lower-ranking dignitaries. That would be a diplomatic disaster for the Dutch. The Ambassador would rather commit suicide than let that happen, so his own magnificent country now had an ally on the other side who would pay any tribute to make the Visit a success. He had the Ambassador entirely where he wanted to have him. His bosses would be pleased.

The Chief and the Ambassador looked at each other. Years of experience had taught them to recognise the split second when a diplomatic meeting had come to an end without any of the two actually having to say so. Neither of them would have to embarrass the other by suggesting that there was no more interest in continuing the session. They got up. The Ambassador actually made a bow as he said his farewells. He would be putty. The Chief wondered whether he had not let him off the hook too easily. Beatrice offered her hand. She raised her left shoulder as she did. Her breasts moved under her silk blouse.

'Lovely city, Copenhagen' Ta'ak said as he walked Ambassador Slagter to the door. He had noticed the name in the briefing notes.

The Ambassador giggled and said 'And so is Amsterdam.'

As far as silly responses were concerned, this one took the biscuit..

Disaster

After Paul Slagter and Beatrice had left, Ta'ak looked at his watch. 'Do I have any other engagements today?' he asked his Assistant. His Assistant looked weird. A fine young man, promising material, but much too nervous and willing to please. For a moment, the Chief regretted having fired his previous Assistant, who had been a fine young man, promising material, but who had mistaken the Chief's studied informality with his staff for genuine friendliness. The Chief had fired him when, in a serious breach of Protocol, he referred to the Chief as 'my boss' in the presence of a foreign Ambassador. The Chief would not tolerate such appalling Americanisms and such a lack of decorum.

'Well?' the Chief asked.

'Your Excellency, you have one more meeting, but there might be a problem.'

'A problem?' the Chief raised one eyebrow.

'Yes, Your Excellency, you just invited the Dutch to a State Visit, sir.'

'I am quite aware of inviting the Dutch to a State Visit, young man.'

'Yes sir, of course sir, but about the invitation.'

'What about it, young man, you don't agree?'

Occasionally, the Chief would display a touch of humour for the benefit of his young Assistants. If this young man would give the appropriate response, he would go far in the diplomatic world.

'Sir, actually the briefing suggests that an invitation for a State Visit be issued to the Danes.'

Ta'ak could not believe his ears. This fine young man would have to be replaced even sooner than he had thought. If he could not tell the Danes from the Dutch he would have to go. The Chief was only vaguely aware of the existence of these two Scandinavian nations. He relied on a keen Assistant to remind him of the difference, if any, between them.

'Today, we issue one invitation for a State Visit and one for an agricultural official' the Chief said. 'Note the difference, young man.'

'Actually, Sir, the Danes want the State Visit and the Dutch want their agriculture minister to visit.'

'I cannot see that that really matters, young man' the Chief said archly. This was a little bit tiring, but he was now aware of the fine young man's problem. The poor chap clearly had not yet realised that a State Visit is the ultimate diplomatic achievement whereas an agricultural minister's visit could be dealt with almost entirely by the Agricultural Ministry. They were the sort of chaps who would visit farms and pigs and generally do the kind of things that he, as Chief of Protocol, felt rather uncomfortable with. He had been forced to visit a farm during one of the incoming State Visits once and he had had to throw away his Italian-made leather shoes afterwards because the maid could simply not get the smell of manure out of them. It had been a shocking experience.[1]

[1] For the difference between a State Visit and a state visit, see the Annex: A word on Visits and visits.

'They are two entirely different visits' the Chief lectured. 'And there is no problem to have them at the same time or at any other time, but may I remind you once more: this will be your first State Visit so do pay attention from the beginning.'

'Sir, Your Excellency' the Assistant's voice was shaking. 'Sir, we have just invited the Dutch but it is Denmark that asked for a State Visit.'

'What' the Chief said. 'They also want a State Visit? And they want their farmers to visit us as well?'

'No sir, not 'also'. They wanted the State Visit all along. The Dutch only asked for their agricultural minister to be invited.'

Suddenly, his Assistant was very far away. The Chief could see his lips move but he could not hear any words. A loud humming sound had filled the room. It had all of a sudden become quite dark as if the curtains had been closed. Something was pulling at the carpet and the Chief had to grasp the back of a chair to stay on his feet. He managed to sit down. He looked at the pale face of his Assistant who was crying. The Chief felt his stomach contract. He put his hands on his desk to steady himself. He had a curious sensation of looking at the scene and himself from outside. He wanted his mummy. In an instant he recalled the sounds and sights when he had smashed his grandfather's chinaware as a little boy and he was looking for a place to hide before the elders would come and give him a thorough beating. He could again hear the angry voices of his father and his uncle.

The room was silent. Ta'ak became aware of his surroundings again. This was a catastrophe. He was with his back against the wall. He tried to think but his thoughts were all a jumble. Whatever he had done wrong, he would certainly not admit it. This would cost him his job, perhaps even his liberty – such as it was. Slowly, his thinking became more coherent. His adult life had been spent in the netherworld of

the diplomatic jungle. And in that jungle nothing was ever what it seemed. There was no relation between cause and effect. Most of his work was smoke and mirrors. Victories turned out to be defeats and defeats came out victories. He could not possibly retract the invitation. There were three witnesses. He would deal with his own Assistant, but the Dutch were a different matter. Like other Azalean bureaucracies the Ministry operated on the basis of the principle that successes were claimed by many and failures by none. The reverse tactics applied when one wanted to get out of a mess. He would have to involve as many people as possible – and as soon as possible – in this disastrous decision. In fact, he was already convinced that many people had contributed to this serious breach of Protocol. They were all responsible. He would make sure no one would think of blaming him. If necessary he would litter the bureaucratic battlefield with their corpses. It was war now. This was the moment his years of living in the diplomatic netherworld had prepared him for. This was the epic battle. He would survive. He felt the beginning of decisiveness. In fact, by now he was almost convinced that this disaster was of other people's making.

'Has the Dutch Ambassador left?' he whispered.
The Assistant stumbled to the window.
'His car is pulling out of the gate now, sir.'
'Right. Now, first of all, I want all your notes and give me your desk diary.'
The Assistant stared at him but did not move.
'Give me your notes and files and your diary, get it, now!'
The Assistant almost ran out of the room. The Chief called his secretary on the intercom.
'Call the Danish embassy and tell them I cannot not see their Ambassador.'

'Yes sir. He is probably on his way sir' his secretary said.
'Call them now. Tell my Deputy to receive the Danish Ambassador and tell him to say that we 'review' their request for a State Visit.'
'Yes sir.'
'And I don't want to see anyone, anyone at all. Tell the guard not to let anyone enter this floor.'
The Chief ended the call. There was a knock on the door.
'Yes' he said, his voice now under control.
His Assistant entered with a stack of documents.
'This is all I have, sir.' The Assistant put the stack on the desk and remained standing, his eyes averted.
'Young man, you have made a very serious mistake' Ta'ak said.
'But sir …'
'Don't make it worse than it is' the Chief interrupted sternly. 'This could have severe consequences, very severe consequences for our relations with these two great nations Dutchmark and eh and eh …'
'Denmark, sir.'
'Precisely, Dutchmark and Denmark. We have put you in this position because we thought you would be the bright young man with a future in the service, but at your very first opportunity you make a terrible blunder.'
'But sir, it is all in the briefing I gave you, Denmark for the State Visit and Holland for the agriculture visit, really sir.'
'Oh, we have a third country now, do we. Dutchmark, Denmark and Holland. Any other visits you want to inform me about?'
The Assistant's anger was the getting the better of his fear. He was also a good head taller than the Chief and in fighting fit condition. What is more, he had a cousin in the security service.
'I gave you all the right documents' he said much too loud. 'It is all there. I cannot help it if you don't read them!' He realised he had

gone too far and that this would be the end of his career. ‘Your Excellency’ he whispered.

The Chief had to be careful now. This fine young man could probably be around for years, even if he would kick him out of the diplomatic service. The Chief had also heard rumours about a link with the intelligence agencies.

'Don't raise your voice with me' he said. 'I am not unreasonable. Clearly, the Protocol department is not your cup of tea. There is a vacancy in Washington coming up. First Secretary in the press department. It is a very fast promotion as you are now only a Third Secretary. You could start this summer.'

The Assistant felt weak at the knees. First Secretary in Washington, USA! That was one of the dream-postings for young Azalean diplomats. He looked at the Chief and he saw the cold and calculating eyes. He knew that the Chief knew that he knew that the Chief had made the unforgiveable mistake of inviting the wrong country. He was really angry about being blamed, but he realised that there was more to be gained by being a scape-goat in decadent Washington than being right. So he roller-coasted to the occasion and sold his soul.

'Thank you, Your Excellency’ he said. ’I do realise I should have given you a better briefing and a verbal briefing as well, my mistake, I apologise for raising my voice. It is just that I feel so privileged to work for you and to attend these important meetings and I had just forgotten.'

The Chief nodded. That would do. The young man could think on his feet. His answer had been a bit on the humble side and he would have preferred a reference to his own excellent leadership, but it would do. The Assistant had shown the right kind of reflexes. He looked at the young man, who was still a bit dazed, but who was also trying not to show his elation of escaping from this mess with a tremendous promotion and a plumb job in America. The boy was

unaware of the merciless guerrilla warfare that his passed-over colleagues in the Diplomatic Service would conduct against him for at least the next twenty years until they would have destroyed him or caught up with him, rankwise. A few years from now the Assistant would curse his luck.

‘That is alright. I have to make a telephone call now, so please wait outside for a minute or two. I’ll call you when I have finished.’

The young man left. The Chief called his secretary on the intercom.

'Did you get in touch with the Danes?’

'Yes sir, the Ambassador has already arrived and your Deputy speaks to him now in the downstairs reception room.’

'Tell my Deputy that I need him right now. Immediately. When he gets to your office, tell him to wait. And then get me the Chief of Personnel on the phone urgently.'

A minute later the Chief of Personnel came on the line.

'Have you filled that press job in Washington yet' Ta’ak asked.

'We have a candidate, yes' Personnel said cautiously.

'Does he have a name?'

'It is the current First Secretary in the department for geographical affairs' Personnel said even more cautiously.

'My Assistant is a fine young man' Protocol interrupted. 'And he is doing a very good job. I think he would be an excellent choice after the upcoming Dutch State Visit.'

'You mean the Danish State Visit.'

'I know it is not easy to tell them apart, but I am afraid you are mixing them up. The Danes will only send their agricultural man.'

'Oh. I though the Dutch would. But isn't your Assistant a bit young?'

'Well. We have all been young, haven't we?'

The Chief could hear Personnel draw in his breath. A certain youthful decadent indiscretion when Personnel was young - and not yet Personnel - had always served the Chief of Protocol rather well.
'If he is really that good, we'll certainly consider him' Personnel replied. 'But he'll make a lot of enemies by jumping the queue.'
'That cannot be helped. But please do consider him. You will not be disappointed. I think we can settle any other outstanding issues. Let us have dinner soon.'
'I do not see any problems really. Do you need any help with the Danish, I am sorry, the Dutch State Visit?' Protocol asked.
'Well. Have you already assigned staff to the Danish agricultural man?'
'No. That is, we thought it was going to be a Danish State Visit, so now it appears we have assigned too many people.'
'I'd like to have them for my Dutch visit. We only need one or two for the Danes.'
'No problem. I'll assign a group today and I look forward to dinner.'
'Splendid. You have been a great help. You will not be disappointed.'

The Assistant stepped back into the room. The Chief spoke: 'We are going to have a Dutch State Visit. You will not be assigned to it. I want you to write an in-depth report on our past and current cultural relations with northwest Africa. I want policy proposals - at least three and I want to have it on my desk exactly two months from now. If you do your work well, you'll find yourself in an excellent position in America. One thing: you are not to speak to the Danes. Not at all. Any questions from them will be referred to the Deputy.'
'And the Dutch?'
'I don't expect any problems from the Dutch' the Chief said with a smile. 'You will, however, under no circumstances speak to them either. Thank you, that is all. You'll like Washington.'
'Thank you, Your Excellency.'

After the Assistant had left, the Chief of Protocol called the Chief of the Africa Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and arranged the transfer of his Assistant for the next morning.

'The what relations?' Africa cried.

'Cultural. We really do not have reliable information on that and we need to finetune our policy.'

'You'll tell me later what he has done wrong. I can give him a desk in one of the offices on the other side of town.'

'Splendid.'

'My Assistant needs a transfer, who have you got to replace your Assistant?' Africa asked.

'Personnel have someone from the European department lined up. I'll check with them, they don't have a replacement for their vacancy yet. Shall I put a word in on behalf of your Assistant?'

The Chief put down the telephone. Africa was a good friend, but he did not want any of his spies in his office. There was a delectable girl in the Europe Department who would much better meet his needs. His last call was to that same Europe Department. The desk officer dealing with the Scandinavian countries was attending a seminar. The Chief of Europe himself finally came on the line.

'The Dutch and the Danes have just been to see us' Protocol said. 'The Dutch will get a State Visit. '

'Nonsense' said Europe. 'That is the Danes. I know it is not easy to distinguish between the two. I do try.'

'It rather does look your Scandinavia man mixed up the requests' Protocol said. 'I don't want to pursue this, but I have it from the Dutch that they want the State Visit. The Danes did not even come to see me. They only very briefly spoke to my Deputy. You know what that means. The Dutchman left my office a few minutes ago.'

'One moment please.'

Ta'ak heard Europe ask his secretary to get Miss Delectable on the double. Europe had served twice at the Azalean embassy in the United States and he liked to show off his outdated American slang. Europe came back within a minute. 'According to my Western Europe Section the Dutch only want their agricultural minister to visit us' he said.

'Really, the quality of staff these days' the Chief replied. 'I have just seen the Dutchman in my office. They are delighted that we have agreed to a State Visit. The man was positively blubbering. The Dane came to see my Deputy for a few minutes and then left. That looks like agriculture to me.'

'We have a serious problem with the Dutch' Europe replied. 'They have dared to criticise us at the World Trade Organisation in Geneva for our import duties on their cheese. So we cannot possibly invite them for a State Visit. We will receive their agricultural minister at Second Secretary level, we'll only confirm that meeting half a day before he arrives and we plan to keep him waiting for at least twenty minutes at the main gate when he shows up in June. We have asked the Meteorological Department to arrange for torrential rains that day. Hell will freeze over before the President agrees to see any of those cheeseballs.'

Ta'ak felt as if his own cheeseballs had been crushed. Another wave of flashbacks. This time he had stolen money from his mother's purse and he went into hiding in the servants' quarters. He could hear the angry voice of his father. He pulled himself together.

'Has the President's Office issued an instruction about a possible Danish State Visit?' the Chief asked.

'Not yet. We are preparing a draft for an incoming Danish visit.'

'Ah. May I make a suggestion? I just had the Dutch Ambassador here. On his knees. The man was practically incoherent. They've given in on everything. I told him we might only have a vice-premier available to

meet their Queen and he still looked positively elated.' And even better: terrified, the Chief thought.

'Really. That changes the situation. Our people in Geneva must have scared them witless. Do you think they would agree to be met by a Second Secretary?'

'Look. Apparently they desperately want their Head of State, who happens to be a Queen, to come so they'll probably agree to anything we propose to them.'

'That sounds interesting. By the way, I thought they have a King as Head of State, but never mind. Will you get in touch with the President's Office to confirm this?' Europe asked. Whatever the Dutch had begged for, State Visits were Serious Matters. He was not going to stick out his neck on the say-so of Protocol.

'Don't you people usually do that?' Ta'ak asked.

'We do, usually, but this is quite sudden and I'd rather the President's Office hears this from the horse's mouth, so to speak.' Europe smiled. Clearly Protocol had a problem. There was something not quite in order about this Dutch visit, but it would be Protocol's neck, not his.

'And what about the Danes. Why would they not want to have their visit? They have tried hard enough?'

'I believe there are internal reasons, elections or what have you' Protocol said. 'They were anything but clear, rather apologetic, in fact. If I understand my staff correctly.'

'Well, they have not mentioned anything to me. This must be very recent. Please send me a note on this. I suppose you told them that they'll have to get at the end of the queue now?'

'I believe my Deputy may have done just that.'

'Did the Dutch explain at all why they are now so keen on this visit and why they give in on cheese?'

There was silence on the line.

'Well?'

'I think they have decided that we are giving them too many problems in other fields.'
'They have, haven't they?'

Europe smiled. Protocol's story did not quite hold up. Cheese was important to this little country, and they would sell their royals to keep their exports going, so why would they give in so easily? On the other hand, if they would pay a visit, they would have to be received at the proper level. No jokes there about Second Secretaries (of which their embassy, by the way, had a rather splendid sample). His side would show magnanimity. The Danish slot would be used for the Dutch. The President would hardly notice the difference anyway. Meanwhile, Europe's contacts would have to get him some background on this rather interesting new development. Not at all like these crude little dairy farmers to roll over like a dead dog. It would be useful to cover his backside by submitting some carefully worded doubts about Protocol's story to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Judgement

After he had replaced the receiver, Personnel sat looking blankly into space. He went over and over the words Protocol had used. Protocol had proof of his indiscretion with a foreign lady when he was still an aspiring diplomat. Would he finally get the photos? Would this decades-long torture by Protocol be over? Why did Protocol have a change of heart? Why did he now want to settle 'outstanding issues.' The only outstanding issues were the old fashioned negatives of some high-quality photographs. The Chief of Protocol must be mixed up in some sort of a crisis. Either there was something wrong with the assistant Protocol wanted to get rid of, or it had to do with the Danes. Personnel made a note for his Deputy to conduct a thorough review of the resumé of the assistant that Protocol wanted to get rid of. Then he had to find out everything about this supposed State Visit by the Dutch. He would not be surprised at all if that bastard Protocol was teaming up with other enemies to destroy Personnel. Not at all.

Ta'ak took the briefing notes from the file his assistant had put on his desk. Two notes, one page each, the standard briefing format. One read: 'Your Excellency's meeting with the Dutch Ambassador' the other one read 'Your Excellency's meeting with the Danish Ambassador.' The top half of the page gave the 'points to make', the

bottom half background information. Except for one paragraph the contents of the papers were almost identical: two small West-European countries by the North Sea, each with a Royal as head of state, both rich beyond his own magnificent country's wildest dreams. He put the notes exactly next to each other, taking care to align the top and bottom of the pages. They were almost identical, except for one paragraph. The Dutch note read: 'The Ambassador will come to see you about their agricultural minister's visit. Our relations are currently bad because of their complaints about our tariffs on their cheese. We will deny entry to ministerial level visitors. Contacts should be restricted to middle diplomatic service level. It is worthwhile to tell your visitor that our relations with Denmark, whose Ambassador you will also see today, are excellent because of the reasonable position of the Danes and that their Queen will make a State Visit this year. We also expect to buy more Danish cheese.'

The Danish briefing paper read: 'The Ambassador will come to see you about the State Visit. Our relations are currently excellent as they meet all our demands, quite contrary to the Dutch, whose Ambassador you will inform that we do not wish to receive their minister. We are delighted and honoured to invite the Danish Queen for a State Visit in June.'

He had had both papers on the side table during the meeting with the Dutch Ambassador. At one point he had simply mixed up the two. It was easy to make that mistake. His assistant had a silly way of drafting briefing notes. It should not have happened, but he had just committed a Serious Breach of Protocol.

What would happen now? Who were his allies, who his enemies? The Dutch would not complain. They had accepted the invitation on the

spot, they had not said a word about cheese, so they must have understood that that problem would have to be solved by them. Personnel would back his version, in exchange for the negatives of the photographs. His Assistant knew where his interests lay. Africa would not care: he would help him with whatever Africa wanted to have help with.

On the other hand, the Danes would have to be pacified. They could raise hell, in a Danish sort of way. Ta'ak smiled: he'd merely have to remind them of their colonial and racist past – he did not have a clue what their past was, but as Europeans they were sure to have one - and send them on an extended guilt trip. There was something about the oppression of a group of people in Snowland or Iceland or some such place. One or two well placed articles in the official government newspaper and they would be putty. The Chief of the Europe Department was clearly not convinced that the Dutch would now take the place of the Danes as far as visits were concerned: Protocol would have to find a way to neutralise him. The greatest danger would come from contacts between the Chief of Europe and the Danish Ambassador. So he would have to ensure that Europe would stay away from the Ambassador. He turned to his small library and pulled out the Azalean Encyclopedia. He looked up 'Dutch' and noticed that the official name of the country was The Netherlands, but that it was better known under the name of 'Holland'. Its government and all government agencies were based in a town called The Hague, which appeared to be a suburb of a place called Amsterdam. That was the capital of the country, located a short distance from the border with Germany. The Dutch maintained the feudal system of a 'monarchy' as the current 'King' and his ancestors had managed to keep the position of Head of State within the family. It was all rather confusing. The Azaleans did have kings in their feudal past but they had simply ended

that system by beheading anyone suspected of carrying the royalist virus.

The entry on Denmark was brief. It explained that the Danes, though small, had indeed had a colonial past and that they were actually imperialist dominators of a place called Greenland - he soon found it on the office globe. He saw a reference to people called Vikings and looked that up as well. Vikings, it appeared, were the very epitome of racist hegemonism and aggression. People whose main entertainment was burning down things and killing and raping. Denmark remained committed to the feudal monarchy. He'd have to talk to the press department and the cultural department. There were some very nasty periods indeed in Danish history. The state press would have to do a series on them, starting this week. He also had to find out whether any plans had been discussed between the Europe Department and the Danes. It occurred to him that the Dutch were likely to have had a nasty past as well. The Encyclopedia described their bloody colonial history and, surprisingly, their commercial and political contacts with the Azalea of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That coincided with Azalea's military campaigns of the age when the country had laid waste and enslaved large tracts of Asia, sometimes with the help of the Dutch. It could be just a little bit awkward to emphasize those Dutch-Azalean coalitions today. The Encyclopedia would have to be re-edited if the need arose. Meanwhile this shady part of Dutch history was of no use to the Azalean republic right now. Nevertheless, anything that would embarrass anyone would come in very handy indeed.

Ta'ak leaned his head against the window and tried to collect his thoughts. He would have to work very fast. He had been a perfect idiot. He had committed A Serious Breach of Protocol. He thought about an appropriate way to express his predicament.

'Shit' he said. 'Shit!'

Confusion

Paul Slagter, the Dutch Ambassador, had called an urgent meeting of his staff. He was utterly confused. In the car returning to the embassy he was entirely unable to decide whether a good or a bad thing had just happened to him. He was of two minds and about to reach a clinical state of schizophrenia. Was this good or bad news? Should he be happy? Should he claim success? He had come dangerously close to jumping out of the car into the path of the oncoming traffic, just to stop the zillion questions. The response to his plea to allow the agriculture minister to visit his counterpart in Azalea had been the totally unexpected, and never asked for, invitation to the King to come on a State Visit. Instead of giving a cold shoulder the Chief of Protocol had been very friendly, if somewhat distracted. The Ambassador felt a bit neglected as the Chief had looked only at Beatrice every time he spoke. Ta'ak had also made a silly joke at the end of the meeting at the expense of the Danes. What was the Chief playing at? Protocol had been quite clear. But he had also hinted at concessions that would have to be made: 'You'll get a State Visit but you'll have to drop the cheese.' What should the Ambassador tell the Dutch headquarters in The Hague? He could keep quiet, or tell them he was still trying to get a meeting for the agriculture minister. But then the Chief of Protocol had no doubt already informed the Azalean

embassy in The Hague about the visit. The Azalean embassy would no doubt get in touch with the Dutch State Department for International Relations and they in turn would ask him. He would look foolish and uninformed, not at all on the ball, if his own headquarters would tell him about this major breakthrough. But was it really a breakthrough? What if this was a most devious Azalean ploy to force the Dutch to accept a very bad deal on cheese, he thought.

As the car neared the embassy, Paul Slagter had to solve an even more urgent problem: how should he conduct himself with his staff. He could not possibly admit that he did not have a clue what was going on. Of course I know what is going on, he told himself, I just need a few minutes to work out the pros and cons.

Beatrice looked up suddenly. The Ambassador realised he had said the last words out loud. He decided to find out what she thought of the whole thing. Maybe she understood what was going on.

'The pros and cons' he said with a smile. 'Now tell me, give me your views on what we just witnessed.'

'It was totally unexpected, wasn't it, this invitation for a State Visit?' Beatrice replied.

'Well, invitations for State Visits have to start somewhere, but how would you assess the position of our counterparts?'

'I thought we were just trying to get our agricultural minister to visit to discuss the cheese. I thought our relations were strained, you said so yourself, the other day.' Beatrice's remarks were a little bit too transparent for the Ambassador's taste. Too much simplicity: 'we did not get what we wanted.' She clearly implied that this development was a surprise and that, therefore, he was not in control. He'd have to nip in the bud this careless way of thinking.

'My dear, things are not always what they seem. We may have some problems with our hosts in some areas, but it is important to always

remain on speaking terms with them and to maintain good relations. We should never lose sight of the broader relationship' Slagter improvised.

'But weren't you surprised? I mean, a State Visit is something they only do when relations are excellent and ours are not really.'

'My dear, I am not that easily surprised. I think there is something for you to learn from this. This should help you in your career. I have of course kept in touch with a number of good friends within the Azalean administration over the last few months even when the cheese-dossier hit rock bottom. They have indicated - at the very highest level, you know - that they were as keen as we were to solve the issue' Slagter lied. There had been no high-level contacts at all as the Azaleans had simply refused to react to his requests for meetings. The session with Protocol had been the first time in months that Slagter had been allowed to speak to a senior official.

'But did not we send a telegram to headquarters two weeks ago telling them that the cheese problem was affecting our bilateral relations with them and it was getting more and more difficult to get access to our contacts and that we would be lucky if they would receive our agriculture minister at all?' Beatrice asked.

Damn the girl. She was being very bloody difficult. Not at all high flyer material.

'Listen, my dear girl. I think you are showing a little bit of rigidity here. We are involved in a process of ongoing negotiations, and it won't do to do a literary review of what it was we thought we said two weeks or two months ago. We have to respond to the evolving situation. Not that we let ourselves be guided by events. On the contrary, we very much set the agenda ourselves and today's meeting shows that we are perfectly capable of getting the opposition precisely where we want them to be.'

The girl clearly did not have the right attitude for sensitive diplomatic work. This bloody insistence that this was all unexpected, the endless questions. The suggestion that this was not precisely the desired outcome of utterly delicate negotiations carried out by him. The Ambassador became rather cross and continued: 'Now. I have asked you for your assessment and I want to have suggestions and solutions for our course of action. It is the easiest of things to ask questions, but I would prefer some answers. I am perfectly clear in my mind what the next step is going to be and I'd rather that you would concentrate on that. Please do understand that this job requires mental flexibility and agility. One has to be able to think on one's feet. Not for us the comfort of white papers and policy drafts and easy to understand political positions. I am afraid if you want that kind of comfort and certainty this may not be quite the job for you.'

Beatrice blushed. She did not understand why the Ambassador was suddenly angry with her. She had only asked how he would explain to headquarters that he had received the invitation for the State Visit, two weeks after he had cabled that one would be lucky if Agriculture would be received at all, even at junior level. She had only wanted to help, to point out that no-one in The Netherlands had requested a State Visit and that HQ would be quite surprised and would insist on a full explanation. They would obviously not be willing to make huge concessions on cheese in exchange for a State Visit they had never asked for. She also did not really understand what the Ambassador had just said.

The embassy was housed in a traditional Azalean building in the centre of a small park. The Ambassador’s car stopped briefly at the gates. The guard opened the gates and saluted. The car drove along the driveway and came to a halt in front of the majestic entrance.

The huge double doors were flanked by the national red, white and blue flags. Over its entrance the Dutch coat of arms, consisting of two roaring lions and the proud maxim *Difficile est saturam non scribere.*
'We'll have a staff meeting in ten minutes' the Ambassador said.

By the time the meeting started Paul Slagter thought he had reached a decision. The best thing was to listen to Egbert Vangolden, the Political counsellor and Vincent Wuisthof, the Trade counsellor. They always disagreed with one another but they would perhaps understand why their hosts had suddenly decided on a State Visit. It occurred to him that either one of them could have been talking to the Azalean government offcials without telling him. He would not be surprised at all if his own assistants had set him up. Not at all. Political was always going on about the State Visit he had 'organised' at a previous posting (the Ambassador knew that Egbert's main role had been to supervise the luggage vans) and how Visits By Senior Officials would put the embassy 'on the map.' Vincent's favourite line was that, seen from the host country, Holland was a political dwarf about the size of Monaco, but with worse weather and that the only serious interest anyone had was trade. The fact that Vincent came from an impeccable background and had divorced a German baroness made his statements even more unbearable. How would a State Visit help Trade? Vincent would get the King to carry a plate of cheese, if he thought it would boost exports. The Ambassador shuddered at such blasphemy. In addition to Trade and Political there was the Second Secretary, Beatrice. She had been present at his moment of weakness and confusion, well, at what appeared as weakness to the uninformed observer, so she was a force to be reckoned with. Slagter wondered what he would have to do to neutralise her.