**Lockdown – II**

The fourteen days of the quarantine had passed pleasantly enough. The ‘room of requirement’ provided ersatz scenery to enjoy. They tended to breakfast in the Uffizi café but with a variety of scenery to look at that wasn’t to be found in the real Florence. In the evenings they enjoyed a Caribbean beach. There were other places with beaches, of course, such as the famous waterfronts of Rio, but Marion preferred them with the excitement of people milling around. They didn’t feel the same empty of their crowds.

Her favourite lunchtime place was the hotel on the Amalfi coast where, a few years ago, she had become friends with the writer, Edward Morgan Forster. Sitting there, peacefully, reading one of Mr Forster’s novels, was delightful. She never quite forgot that it was make believe, but it was real enough to take her mind off the nagging worry that lay at the back of her mind.

She talked to Aineytta by videophone every day, as well as Lily D’Alba, Talitha Dúccesci and Mia Reidluum. All of them were concerned about the quarantine. The lack of information about what was happening troubled them all.

It made Kristoph angry. What was the use of all their Time Lord power in this crisis? He asked the question rhetorically. He asked it of Marion, scarcely expecting her to have any answer. He demanded it of Malika Dúccesci and other senior members of the High Council.

He got no answers. They were as much in the dark as he was. There was still no clear news from either Karn or Polafrey.

The last morning came, and Kristoph obtained permission to pass through the Transduction Barrier. He programmed the TARDIS to go straight to the Dower House. Though she was looking forward to her own home, Marion made no complaint. She wanted to see Aineytta as much as Kristoph did.

But before he had set the drive control he was aware of a subtle sound and a vibration. Another TARDIS had docked with his.

“That had better not be any sort of customs inspection,” Kristoph growled angrily. “I still have diplomatic status.”

It wasn’t. When the door opened Marion was the first to call out in relief as Remonte de Lœngbǽrrow stepped inside. The two brothers embraced fondly but manfully.

“I’ve heard some odd rumours,” Remonte said. “And came to find out what’s going on.”

‘Rumours?” Kristoph echoed. “Of… the quarantine?”

“Not exactly, though that comes into it.”

In… what way?”

“I’m not absolutely sure,” Remonte had to admit. “But I think we could find out. I have my diplomatic credentials. You have the prestige of a former president. Between us we ought to be able to get to the bottom of it.”

“Yesss….” Kristoph agreed. “But I think we need to be subtle about it. My TARDIS is expected to pass through the Transduction Barrier shortly.”

“Mine is shielded. They don’t know I’m here, yet,” Remonte said. “It won’t be long. We have a few minutes to decide what to do.”

“I’ve decided,” Kristoph answered. He went to the console and made an adjustment. “Marion, I’ve set the TARDIS to take you to the Dower House.”

“Take… me… on my own?”

‘You can tell mama the good news that everyone is alive and well on Ventura,” he said. “And that Remonte and I will be with her as soon as possible.”

“Yes… I can do that,” Marion assured him. “But…. What are you two going to be doing?”

“That depends on what we find out. But don’t you worry. That’s the main thing.”

“I won’t,” Marion promised. She hugged Kristoph briefly, then stood back as he followed his brother into the other TARDIS. The doors closed. She felt a jolt as the two craft separated, then she heard the dematerialisation sound and got ready to arrive, at last, back on Gallifrey. She felt more than a little apprehensive. She had never travelled in the TARDIS alone, before. When she heard a message from the Transduction Barrier Controller she panicked momentarily.

“Where is the registered pilot of the craft?” the voice asked imperiously.

“None of your business,” Marion replied with an extra layer of the same imperiousness that she never would have dared, once. But after all, she had been wife to the Lord High President for several years, and this was STILL a presidential TARDIS.

The Controller apparently realised all of that. The TARDIS began to move again. Marion grasped the console until it stopped again. She reached for the door release, but it opened automatically before she touched it.

Warm yellow-orange daylight spilled through the door and a strong scent of roses. Marion stepped out into the Dower House Garden.

A moment later she was wrapped in a hug from Aineytta. It was a moment more before her mother-in-law remembered that humans couldn’t recycle their breathing and released her.

“Where is Kristoph?” asked her father-in-law who had nothing against hugs but thought his wife had cornered the market on this occasion.

“He… and Remonte… have gone to Polafrey… to find out what’s going on,” Marion answered.

“Remonte….” Aineytta gasped in relief and surprise.

“Come and sit down and explain,” the elder Lord de Lœngbǽrrow, usually known in his own garden as Mooney said.

She explained as much as she knew. It wasn’t much, in truth. She at least was able to tell Aineytta and Mooney that their other son and his wife and child were alive and well. That was a relief to them. But what was it that Remonte had found out and why had he and Kristoph gone investigating?

“It is unusual for Remonte to go off investigating anything,” Mooney commented. “He’s the quiet one. Kristoph is the one who always has to get stuck into everything.”

“They both have Lœngbǽrrow blood,” Aineytta pointed out. “If they see something wrong, they’ll go after it, both of them. But I wonder what it is they think is going on?”

None of them had any clear answer to that question, and speculation was useless. They drank herbal tea and talked of other things for the afternoon.

It was evening and they had retreated to the drawing room of the Dower House before they heard the sound of a TARDIS materialising in the hall. There was a moment of anxiety before the door opened and the butler announced Kristoph and Remonte.

Remonte was fallen upon at once by his mother. His father waited to shake him by the hand. The butler quietly prepared drinks for the new arrivals before some semblance of peace and normality was reached.

“What happened?” Marion asked when the men were seated comfortably. “Is the plague over?”

“There never WAS a plague in the sense we were told it was,” Kristoph answered. “There was an outbreak amongst the miners on Polafrey of something similar to the human disease called scarlet fever. It spread very rapidly, as it would in the close knit mining communities with extended families. The children suffered very badly. It is a rather miserable disease, I understand.”

“I don’t know much about it,” Marion admitted. “It used to be bad in Victorian times, maybe a bit later into the twentieth century, but with antibiotics it’s not really a bad thing any more.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” Aineytta said, and since she was the most skilled apothecary on the southern continent that was a firm pronouncement.

“Nobody had,” Remonte commented. “And nobody had any immunity to it, which is why so many suffered. But….”

“Nobody died?” Marion asked.

“Not of the disease,” Kristoph confirmed. “Three people died of old age in the past month, nothing to do with anything but the fact that even we aren’t immortal. Some children needed hospital treatment because of the outbreak. They were terribly sick, but they have recovered. Nobody is dead, and the disease has run its course, burnt out.”

“So the quarantine is lifted?” Mooney asked.

“There was never a need for a quarantine,” Kristoph answered. “A strict screening of travellers from Polafrey and Karn along with a comprehensive vaccination programme would have been enough. There was no need to impose anything on travellers from outside our system, and no need for the wall of silence and misinformation.”

“Then why...”

“Why… because the miners of Polafrey were deliberately infected,” Remote snapped.

“What!” Everyone was shocked, including the butler who had stepped in with a tray of sandwiches for the new arrivals.

“Sir… it can’t be true?” he gasped. “I have family on Polafrey. Many people in my village do. There has been so much worry….”

“I am sorry for that,” Remonte said. “It was all quite unnecessary. The illness, the lockdown, the lies that were told.”

“But why?” Aineytta asked. “Why would anyone…”

“A scientist called Draven, working on the orbital scientific station,” Remonte said, referring to the space station on the edge of the Gallifreyan solar system where many important projects were completed in security and secrecy. “He developed a pathogen. He… intended…. And this is not a pretty idea, I’m afraid…. He designed a biological weapon against other races.”

“No!” The elder Lord de Lœngbǽrrow exploded in uncharacteristic anger. “That is… what was he thinking. We have never used such a weapon against others. We never shall… not while I have two beating hearts.”

“Nor I,” Kristoph vowed. “It is certainly not why I fought a war in my youth. That very idea is outrageous enough. But he decided to find out, first, if Gallifreyans had natural immunity to it. He allowed the people in the mining communities to be infected.”

This time it was Aineytta who was outraged.

“This man… used the ordinary, hard-working miners and their families, their children… as… as….”

There was no animal on Gallifrey comparable to a guinea pig, and no concept of the word as an expendable life in experiments. Aineytta couldn’t finish her sentence, but everyone understood what she wanted to say.

“We are only fortunate that the disease had relatively mild symptoms,” Remonte said. “And that the people who were sick almost certainly will have developed immunity. But the crime is undeniable.”

“He has been arrested,” Kristoph added. “The Celestial Intervention Agency sent their men for him… and the governor of Polarfrey and Karn.”

“What did he do?” Marion asked.

“He conspired to cover the whole thing up. He created false figures about fatalities as well as a report pointing to the disease coming from outside our system. That was why the wholesale lockdown was put in place.”

“Why would the governor….” Mooney began, then understanding showed in his face. “Draven… Zex Draven… brother of Assiri Draven… the Governor.”

“Exactly so.”

“How… evil…. How… UNGALLIFREYAN,” Aineytta declared, her mind still trying to get around the full scale of the thing.

“If I thought for one moment it WAS Gallifreyan, I would denounce our race entirely,” Kristoph said. “In addition to criminal charges against them both, there will be an inquiry into how Draven was able to carry out his experiments on a government funded station without any ethical oversight,” Kristoph added. “Dúccesci has ordered it. This damages him politically, of course. He accepted the false reports too easily. There will be awkward questions for him.”

“He won’t lose the presidency, will he?” Marion asked anxiously. That was an aspect of the affair she had not expected. And it was the investigation by Kristoph and Remonte that brought this trouble to him. That was an unhappy thought.

“Maleka has more allies than enemies in the Panopticon,” Kristoph calculated. “It will be uncomfortable for him, but he should survive.”

“One thing will help him,” the Elder Lord said. “Getting a good man in place as Governor to replace that treacherous fool.”

“That’s something I wanted to mention,” Remonte said. “I need to talk to Rika, of course. But Dúccesci asked me if I would consider the post. My reputation as ambassador to Venturi stands me in good stead. It would be seen as a good decision by him… and….”

“I would be able to see little Remy much more often…” Aineytta mentioned. That was the most important part of it for her.

“I should love to see Rika, too,” Marion admitted. “But Ventura is so lovely. Polafrey really doesn’t compare.”

“It is our home system, though,” Remonte pointed out. “We’ve been in exile too long, perhaps.”

“It must be your decision, son,” his father told him. “But I think you can see your family approves of the idea.”

“There will be much to do,” Remonte admitted. “I made it clear to Dúccesci that I won’t cover up anything. Everybody must know what happened and why. Especially the Caretaker classes. They must not be lied to.”

The Elder Lord de Lœngbǽrrow, drawing on a long line of aristocracy that required his emeritus title, nodded in agreement and turned to his butler.

“Caolin,” I want you to have an extra day off, tomorrow. Go to your village and tell everyone you know, everyone you meet, what you have heard in this room. Especially tell anyone planning to travel to other villages or to the Capitol in the near future.”

“Yes, my Lord,” the butler answered.

“Marion and I have dozens of lunches and soirées in the next few weeks,” Aineytta said with a smile. “We shall have one definite topic of conversation.”

“That should ensure every lady in Gallifreyan high society knows,” Kristoph noted. “And their husbands will find out from them. There certainly won’t be a cover up.”

“Then we can forget about it all for this evening and enjoy having both our sons together under this roof. And later, Marion and I can plan some social occasions that Rika will enjoy.”

The men all smiled indulgently. They knew that Aineytta was no social butterfly with thoughts only of gossipy parties, but this was her way of moving on from what had been a distressing time with a thoroughly shocking outcome for all of Gallifrey. Marion was glad to collude with her in planning happier occasions.