**Mask in Venice**

Marion and Aineytta stood on the balcony of their luxury hotel on the island of Giudecca, one of the one hundred and eighteen islands separated by lagoons and canals that made up the metropolis of Venice. Across the main lagoon in the dying light of the evening, they could see the distinctive campanile of San Marco in Saint Mark’s Square. They had visited those sites over the three days they had been in the city since arriving on the Orient Express and enjoyed them thoroughly.

This was their last night, and they were preparing for a special treat, but both of them had something on their mind that they wanted to discuss with Kristoph, first.

He suspected nothing as he came from the drawing room of their suite. He had nothing more on his mind than admiring the golden brown sunset and the gowns his wife and mother in law were wearing.

“Purple velvet suits you, mama,” he said, kissing her on the cheek. He was even more fulsome in his praise for Marion. Her gown was deep red taffeta with a black gauze overskirt. It was Empire style with a high waist and a strapless low neckline to emphasise the bosom. Red diamonds from the family collection and a long red feather fascinator finished the outfit. He remembered with pride how reluctant Marion had once been even to wear spaghetti straps without a shawl, but now she trusted gravity not to let her down.

She accepted the compliments, but she still had something on her mind and Aineytta shared her concerns.

“Kristoph,” his mother said. “Yet again we are staying in the most expensive hotel in the city. A hotel owned by the same company that owned the hotel at Machu Picchu and the one in Paris… and the train we travelled to Venice in. All the very height of luxury.”

“I wanted you both to enjoy the best. There are bigger hotels, with hundreds of identical rooms and identical service. I wanted better than that for you.”

“Yes, and we have enjoyed it,” Aineytta continued. “But Marion has not forgotten her childhood holidays in Welsh bed and breakfasts and I have not forgotten that I was once a housemaid, a lowly servant in your grandfather’s service. And we both want to know if this company pays its chambermaids and bellboys, waiters, receptionists, kitchen hands, fair wages considering how much we’re paying for their services.”

“Yes, they are,” Kristoph answered. “They DO pay above the average wage for the countries they own properties in. They want the best from their staff, so they pay better than others. You have to bear in mind, though, that a fair wage for an unskilled chambermaid or kitchen hand isn’t much different in a high end luxury hotel or a ‘budget’ Travelodge. It takes the same level of competence to make up a bed in either kind of hotel and the pay scale reflects that. What I pay for here is top of the market chefs, an on-site masseuse that you both employed this afternoon, the ONLY hotel with a swimming pool in the whole of Venice – ‘extras’ of that sort. And remember, also, that in every one of these hotels and the Orient Express, I have left generous tips for the staff who served us. I have NOT forgotten, mama, that you worked in a lowly position before my father fell in love with you. I have never taken anyone for granted, be it the girl who makes up my bed at home or the young man who carried our luggage to this suite.”

That settled the matter for both Marion and Aineytta. They accepted that they were not contributing to the exploitation of any employee of this luxury hotel chain. And now they could enjoy the evening entertainment.

Kristoph nodded and asked the women if they approved of his own outfit. It was an eighteenth century style waistcoat and tight below the knee trousers finished with white leggings. A long velvet coat, trimmed with gold embroidery completed the look.

Then he put on his mask. It was a full faced mask called a bauta in the tradition of Venetian masquerade. It was gold – or at least gold leaf on a lightweight resin base. Real gold was too heavy even for the most ostentatious of party goer.

The bauta was traditionally a mask worn by men. It had male features. For women there were several different kinds of mask. Aineytta was wearing a Colombina, named after the female character, Colombine, from the Commedia dell’arte. It was a ‘half mask’ covering the eyes and top of the nose, only. Hers was black velvet decorated with pearls and gold leaf and purple amethysts to match her gown.

Marion’s mask was the most elaborate of them all. It was a volto – a full face mask with feminine features in a creamy white enamel base with left upper and right lower quarters in gold leaf studded with tiny diamonds, the left lower quarter in multi-coloured enamel and the right upper quarter decorated with a gold inlaid line drawing of the Rialto bridge. Marion had chosen it because of the intricate detail and beauty and loved the effect when she put it on, though she had to admit it was a little claustrophobic. The holes for the eyes, mouth and nostrils were small. She had very little peripheral vision and she felt sometimes as if breathing was harder than it should be.

But she was looking forwards to the masked ball. It was a great way to finish their visit to Venice and their visit to Earth. They were going back to Gallifrey after this.

They headed downstairs, joined by other guests in elaborate period costumes. They gathered on the terrace beside the lagoon where champagne and food treats on silver platters were available.

But that was just the first part of the evening. Soon the guests boarded a fleet of motorised gondoliers, each seating a dozen passengers. They settled down under a velvet sky studded with stars and a crisp silvery crescent moon for a cruise around the lagoon and the Grand Canal.

In all the years they had been together, Kristoph had endeavoured to show Marion some of the most beautiful and most romantic of places in the universe, but few of them measured up to Venice at night. The lights from the dry parts of the city reflected off the water, but in the middle of the lagoon there was barely any light pollution to spoil the view of the constellations. Even Sagittarius, low in the southern sky, which contained Gallifrey’s own sun as part of the Archer’s bow, was clearly visible.

All of the landmarks of Venice were close at hand, of course. The Campanile was an easily recognisable marker for everyone, no matter how little they knew of the city. It was uplit in yellow light that highlighted its two-tone stonework.

“The first time I came here I was puzzled about why it seemed so familiar,” Marion commented. “Then when we went back to Liverpool I realised that I had seen that sort of architecture all over the north-west of England. The Victorians based the chimneys of their cotton mills and foundries on Italian designs. I’d seen them all my life around Birkenhead. The San Marco campanile was just the ‘original’. It looks so very much more beautiful in this setting than a Lancashire mill chimney, though.”

“Very beautiful,” Aineytta agreed. She turned from looking at the Campanile to a building on the other side of the lagoon. They had visited it by day, but, again, seeing it at night was remarkable. The white marble Palladian façade of the Basilica of San Giorgio Maggiore was spectacularly reflected in the moonlit water. Behind it was the thirteenth century Benedictine monastery and its own neo-classical campanile with a rounded spire to differentiate it from the squared one of San Marco.

“The original home of Veronese’s Wedding at Cana,” Marion remarked. “Our favourite painting in the Louvre – looted from here by Napoleon Boneparte.”

“I really don’t like that man,” Aineytta remarked. “He thoroughly deserved that frostbite in the Alps.”

Marion laughed behind her mask at Aineytta’s dismissal of a man who had held much of Europe under his tyrannic boots. But as the gondolier crossed the lagoon towards the Doge’s palace there was something of a swell on the water. She wasn’t usually subject to sea sickness, and this wasn’t technically the sea, anyway, but she felt thoroughly queasy. She pulled off her mask to let the breeze cool her face and closed her eyes until the gondolier passed onto the grand canal where the water was far calmer.

She breathed deeply and let the uncomfortable moment pass. She gave her attention to the ornate series of bridges and their history until they emerged at the far end of the canal and turned towards the place where the masked ball was to take place.

Marion was glad to step onto the terrace even if her legs still felt as if they were still on water. She steadied herself as she looked back across the lagoon towards the hotel on Giudecca Island, then turned to look at the historic building in front of her.

The Granaries of the Republic were built, as the name implied, to store wheat and rice imported into the city. In modern times when ready-made food could be imported easily they had lain empty and abandoned until they were bought by the same company that owned those luxury hotels and trains. While keeping faith with the history of Venice the Granaries were now a venue for weddings, conferences and parties. Marion overheard somebody saying that George Clooney had hired it for his wedding reception.

If that was so, then George had excellent taste. The spaces within the complex were beautifully appointed. In the Sala Tiziano where the evening banquet was served before the ball the walls were the historic brick of the granaries and the ceiling great wooden beams coloured by age, but crystal chandeliers cast warm light upon them while each table was set with long tapered candles in silver candelabras.

Marion recovered herself enough to enjoy the food which was prepared by top class chefs and ought to have been good enough for any Hollywood A. Lister’s wedding feast. Afterwards masks were donned again for dancing in the Sala Longhi. Aineytta, safely anonymous behind her Colombian mask thoroughly enjoyed that aspect of the evening, but Marion, after dancing only a few sets with Kristoph began to feel the closeness of the Volta mask too oppressive.

She escaped from the ballroom to the Terrazza Fundamenta where she could breathe freely. Under canopies there was complimentary coffee and a selection of desserts and fruit. Marion accepted a long glass of iced coffee and drank it at a quiet table near the water. She tried not looking at it too closely. It brought on that feeling of still being afloat, but she found the view back across to the islands of San Giorgio Maggiore and Giudecca charming and her head stopped spinning after a while.

“My dear, are you all right?” Aineytta came to sit with her, waving to a waiter to bring her coffee, too. “Kristoph said you were feeling a little unwell.”

“Nothing to worry about,” Marion assured her. She looked at the beautiful mask. “Very lovely workmanship, but I hated wearing it, really, and the ballroom was a bit hot.”

“Yes, it was. But… you were very tired in Paris, and you couldn’t eat properly on the Orient Express, and now tonight….”

Aineytta looked at her daughter-in-law critically and then nodded and smiled softly.

“Ahhh….”

“Yes,” Marion said with a wider smile. “The tiredness did worry Kristoph. That’s why we’ve not done much walking around Venice. But apart from that, and getting a bit sick crossing the lagoon, everything is fine. We were going to tell you, but… you know… it’s bad luck before the first trimester.”

“It’s very dangerous before the first trimester,” Aineytta remarked with the wisdom of a four times mother and as a herbalist who had helped many of her friends with the discomforting symptoms of pregnancy. “But it is wonderful news. I’m only surprised that Kristoph didn’t cut short this trip and take you straight home to Gallifrey.”

“It took a lot of forbearance on his part,” Marion admitted. “I shouldn’t be at all surprised if he confines me to our darkened bedroom like they did in sixteenth century, but at least I will have lots of fond memories of this time exploring the Wonders of Earth.”

“It has been a marvellous time,” Aineytta agreed. “But it will be good to go home again.”

“Home to Gallifrey, yes,” Marion said softly. She had wondered if she would feel that way after spending so much time on Earth, but there was no denying that Gallifrey was her home, and it was where she belonged, especially now, with a baby on the way.

Kristoph cane out of the ballroom, his golden mask in his hand. He ordered coffee and portions of a strawberry dessert done in a special Venetian style. Marion found that she did have an appetite for it, after all.

“I know your secret,” Aineytta told her son and grasped his hand fondly. Kristoph sat to eat his dessert and smiled wide enough for all three of them.