**Assassin in St Petersburg**

Marion looked critically at the copy of Lorenzo Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise at the entrance to the Kazan Cathedral in St. Petersburg. They had already been to the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco to see their copy. She had thought it a little 'gaudy', with the panels framed by a lead-blue paint.

These were better, but she had one primary thought, still.

"The bronze could do with polishing up a bit. Bronze shouldn't be all black like that."

"It must be due for a cleaning," Kristoph agreed as he pushed open the heavy doors.

Marion was pleasantly surprised as they stepped inside the cathedral. On the outside it looked like some of the most spectacular neo-classical edifices in Trafalgar Square. Inside, it was very distinctly Eastern Orthodox with gilded ceilings and brightly coloured iconography everywhere. It was a style of church Marion might have found a little strange and alien to her growing up in Merseyside with the English style of church interiors.

But that was before she really knew what 'alien' meant. Besides, she had visited the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and St. Mark' Basilica in Venice and seen what could be done with gilding and semi-precious stones when a creative imagination was given free rein and a limitless budget.

"There's a service starting, soon," Kristoph said as he noted the numbers of people starting to gather in the pews. "Do you want…"

"Oh, yes, let's stay," Marion answered. "I've not really had chance to enjoy a church service anywhere for a long time."

They found places near the back, watching the regular faithful people of St Petersburg taking their seats, most of them praying in soft murmurs as they waited for the service to begin.

When it did, Marion felt almost as if it were a religious ceremony on any far flung planet she had visited. Very little of the Eastern Orthodox Divine Liturgy resembled the modern Roman Catholic Mass she understood. Almost all of it was sung or chanted rather than spoken, and all of the congregation knew the responses without looking at any kind of book or sheet. There was far more kneeling and standing than she had ever experienced.

Even the Communion was different. She went up to the altar with the people, and found that this, where she expected to kneel at the rail, was one time when they stood. And instead of receiving bread and wine separately, a piece of bread soaked in æ cup of wine was served on a long handled golden spoon to each person in turn, an acolyte wiping the spoon between each communicant. That felt very strange, but she accepted this form of the rite because she was trying not to stand out as a stranger who hadn't actually been to a church service for a long time.

Even with so many reasons to be anxious, including some slight doubts about the hygiene of the spoon, she enjoyed the whole experience. She felt as if she was absorbing the unshakeable faith of the people around her.

She particularly noticed that many of the people were old enough to remember the Communist regime that banned religious worship and turned this cathedral and many others into museums and places of mere curiosity. They had kept their faith through hard times and now came to their cathedral freely.

No matter if the bronze doors needed shining up a bit. What was important happened inside this place, not on the threshold.

Marion felt uplifted by it all, and she was happy as she went outside with the sound of a Russian hymn still being played on the organ and the sunlight dazzling her eyes beyond the neoclassical pillars.

"Where now?" Kristoph asked. "What part of this beautiful city would you like to see this afternoon?"

"The Hermitage," Marion answered. "How can we not see that? Not only a wonderful piece of architecture and the second largest art museum in the world – after the Louvre, of course – but important in this country's turbulent history."

"Tragic history," Kristoph agreed. He stepped forward from the cathedral steps to summon one of the state registered taxis. "It's only a short way, but I don't want you to be tired."

Marion didn't feel tired, but Kristoph was right. She almost certainly would be exhausted if she tried walking too much.

Strangely, the first taxi Kristoph signalled to wasn't the one that stopped at the kerb of the wide, busy road. Instead another, near identical car, pulled up beside them, cutting the first one off. Marion saw the driver who had lost out on a fare give a rude gesture as he moved on.

"I understand there is something of a 'turf war' between the state registered taxis and 'independents' trying to get a foothold," Kristoph noted. "This will do as good as any other."

He held the door open and Marion climbed into the taxi. Kristoph sat beside her and gave their destination to the driver.

Everything seemed quite normal about the journey until they came to the turning onto the Embankment of the Neva River.

"Get down!" the driver said, half turning in his seat. As Kristoph pushed Marion down and covered her, the driver abandoned the turn onto the Embankment and instead sped onto the Palace Bridge. There was a cacophony of car horns and shouting that almost but not quite masked the sound of a high velocity projectile shattering the cab's windscreen.

"Stay down," the driver said as the car accelerated over the Bridge. There was another swerve and a sharp turn onto the opposite bank of the river, then everything seemed darker as the car squeezed down a side alley and stopped.

"Come on, quickly," the driver said. He got out of the car and urged Marion and Kristoph to follow him through a rough door of unpainted wood set into the wall beside the taxi.

“Oh!” Marion exclaimed as they stepped through the door into what she recognised as a TARDIS console room. She turned to the 'driver' and another 'oh' escaped from her lips. "It's you…. But…."

Kristoph was puzzled by that comment and looked from Marion to the young Time Lord who had acted so precipitously. Then he noticed something else. So did Marion.

"You're wounded," she said moving closer and reaching out to where he held his shoulder very stiffly. There was a spreading stain on the shirt near the collar.

"The bullet missed anything vital," he insisted. "Went straight through the shoulder. I'll be fine in a little while."

"But what was it all about?" Marion asked. "Why are YOU pretending to be a taxi driver in St. Petersburg and why was somebody shooting at you?"

"They were shooting at US," Kristoph contradicted. He noticed the young man opening his hand and dropping something on the floor. Kristoph bent and picked it up. Marion was stunned to see that it was a misshapen bullet with light Gallifreyan blood on it. The bullet that went straight through. "Not of Earth make. Migræn, I think. They…."

He looked at the young Time Lord who had been protecting him and his wife for several weeks, now. He stepped towards him, holding him up as he started to faint.

"Migræn bullets are coated with poison," Kristoph said as he helped the stricken man to lie down on a sofa and ripped away his shirt to reveal the bullet wound. "With such evil weapons they vanquished all their enemies on ordinary battlefields. Now they sell to mercenaries and assassins."

"You mean he's going to die?" Marion asked anxiously.

"Time Lords have slightly more resistance to the poison than other races, but it is going to be touch and go. Stay with him while I find a medical pack."

Marion sat by the young Time Lord as Kristoph hurried through an inner door.

"You're the one who was in the Negresco," she said. "You shielded me from that man…. The alien who was trying to kill Kristoph…."

"Yes… I was there." His voice was dry. He looked feverish. The wound in his shoulder was an ugly yellow-green colour, like something that had been festering for days when it had only been a few minutes since the terrible turn of events.

"I don't know what's going on," Marion said. "But I knew I was right to trust you. Now you trust us and lie there quietly. You're going to be all right."

The young Time Lord sighed wearily and said something Marion didn’t quite hear. He said it again and clutched her hand as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Kristoph hurried back with a medical kit. He first put a white cloth band around the patient’s forehead. It was impregnated with soothing ointments that would be directly absorbed into his skin and ease the fever the poison caused.

“The wound looks bad,” Marion said. “I can’t see how he could get better while it looks like that.”

“I’m dealing with it,” Kristoph promised. He took a small tube of thick, white liquid from the kit and poured it in the wound. “The poison stops the wound healing. Blood loss as well as poisoning of vital organs causes agonising death. But this neutralises the anti-coagulant and closes the wound.”

As Marion watched, the ugly wound closed and clean white flesh covered it over in only a few minutes. She allowed herself a small sigh of relief.

“There’s still poison in his system?”

“He’ll deal with that as any Time Lord does, forcing it out of his body. But it’ll take a little time.”

“He will be able to do that? He was so delirious…. He called me his mother.”

“A mother is what he needs,” Kristoph answered. “You be that for him. Keep on holding his hand. Let him know you’re there. His subconscious mind will do the rest.”

“Yes. I can do that.” Marion looked at the unconscious young Time Lord tenderly. “I don’t know him. But he knows us. Did the Celestial Intervention Agency send him as protection?”

“Something like that.”

“Has… he been with us the whole time…. At Grafenegg, Plitvice…. Florence….”

Marion paused and looked at Kristoph.

“The fight in that church….. That was him… protecting us?”

“It was. I didn’t see him in San Francisco, but I have every confidence he was watching out for us.”

“So… brave. And now he’s been hurt because he was doing his duty… to us.”

“To risk your life in protection of another is a noble calling... Far more noble than a mere assassin, even for the common good such as I swore to serve. He... is a better man than I am.”

“Then he must live,” Marion said with as much earnest as she had heard in Kristoph's words.

“He’s going to be all right.”

Kristoph was so sure of that she had to believe him, but her patient looked so ill. He was shivering as if with cold, yet his skin was hot and dry. He murmured words that she couldn’t understand.... And sometimes that word she DID understand.... Mother.

“Your mother is always with you,” Kristoph whispered to him when he called out once in such heartbreaking anguish and Marion clung ever tighter to his hand. “Every soldier knows that his mother is always with him.”

Then something started to happen that even startled Kristoph. Marion drew back, almost letting go of his hand before grasping it again.

The young Time Lord was very still and rigid and seemed to have stopped breathing, though Kristoph reassured her that it was not so. A golden aura surrounded him, and Marion saw faces superimposed on his features like near translucent masks. The faces were old, young, the complexions light and dark. Several times she was sure they were women’s faces.

“Is he... regenerating?” Marion asked. “Is that....”

“No,” Kristoph answered. “Regeneration doesn’t work that way. Besides... There have already been more than thirteen faces. Far more. No Time Lord can have this many regenerations... And not so rapidly.”

The ‘masks' were changing so often it was almost impossible to look at any one of them clearly. It was like a flick book cartoon or an early cinema picture flickering and jerking away.

Then it stopped. Kristoph was right. He hadn’t regenerated. The Time Lord opened his eyes in the same face. He looked up at Marion and smiled.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Are you all right, now?”

“Yes, I am. The poison is gone. It was absorbed by the...” He paused and frowned. “I’m not sure how to explain it. I was quite close to the point of no return.... It would have been either regeneration or more likely death. Then... I felt as if a thousand potential lives were pouring through me... Every person I COULD be in every regeneration. And every *in potentia* life drew off the pain and gave me strength in return.”

“I’ve never heard of that happening,” Kristoph said. “It’s as if the rules of regeneration were rewritten just for you.”

Kristoph put his hand on the young Time Lord's face and touched his mind briefly. “Yes... You still have your lives ahead of you. They haven’t been wasted in this one effort of recovery.”

“Good. Then we’d better all get on with what we have to do.”

He stood up, hardly looking like a man who had been on the edge of death a few minutes ago. He went to the console. “I’ll take you two to the Hermitage, then I need to get a fix on that assassin and deal with him.”

“There must be a coffee shop at the Hermitage,” Marion said. “Meet us there... After... After you do what you have to do. Then I’ll know you are all right. I need to know that. I don’t want to be wondering about you.... “

“I will do that.”

He spoke so solemnly then, as if meeting them was an additional *geas* on him. Kristoph felt he should lighten the mood for all of them.

“I only hope the Hermitage coffee is better than it was at the Uffizi. I found it very disappointing for the price.”