**Thoughts on Pompeii**

Marion and Hillary were enjoying a late breakfast that might easily become an early lunch. There was no good reason why not. They were comfortably seated on the terrace of their luxury hotel looking out over the Bay of Naples, the island of Capri shimmering in the azure distance. A wide parasol kept the glare of the sun from their complexions while they were enjoying the warmth of an Italian summer cooled only slightly by a breeze coming over the Aegean.

They didn’t feel in any way ashamed of rising late from their beds this morning. It was justified by their nocturnal activities last night.

 After a short journey around the bay by luxury coach, it was just before midnight, long after ordinary daytime visitors had departed, when the small, exclusive party of people who could afford four star hotel suites arrived at the UNESCO Heritage site, the ancient city of Pompeii, lost to the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 72. It was listed as one of the top ten places to see around Naples, and the more exclusive night tour highly recommended.

They certainly had the full VIP treatment such as the Gallifreyan-Haollstromnian party had been accustomed to on their Italian sojourn, though foot-saving transport around the site, like the Roman Segways, were not available. Nor was anyone showing off their status in silk satin opera dresses or glittering high heels. Coats and strong flat shoes were necessary for the chill of an Italian night and the rough pathways of the archaeological wonder.

There were volcanos in the less populated parts of Gallifrey and Haollstrom had an area much like the Pacific ocean‘s ‘Ring of Fire’ that was constantly in tectonic flux, so the extra-terrestrial visitors fully understood what had occurred in this place nearly two thousand years ago. That it was a tourist attraction was something of a puzzle to them. They were equally puzzled and a little offended by the way the disaster area was almost gleefully presented by their official guide.

“I really would think he could be a little more respectful when speaking of the deaths of up to sixteen thousand people in one terrible day,” Talitha had said as they walked from one part of the site to another under white floodlights that made it almost as bright as day, but without the yellow warmth of the sun that would have made it feel less ‘alien’ even to the aliens in the group. “On Gallifrey we would mourn such a disaster.”

Avery Ferron, who was still unused to being equal to the aristocrats he was employed to protect, agreed fully with the wife of the Lord High President before remembering his social place and blushing endearingly.

“I… suppose… on Gallifrey…. something that happened about two thousand years ago is still within living memory of the oldest Time Lords,” Marion considered. “For humans… it is so far back that they feel less emotional.” She wasn’t sure that actually made sense, but she knew plenty of Time Lords who were far older than two thousand years old. For them, ancient human history must be practically current affairs.

“Distance in time should not dull the tragedy,” Hillary commented. “Talitha is right. I have visited places where deaths have occurred in historical times, and they are places of solemn contemplation and reverence. Here… it is a ‘jolly outing’.”

All of her companions were criticising her world, but Marion knew they were quite right. The way Pompeii was presented to visitors DID lack solemnity.

All four of them had hated the place where the ‘bodies’ were displayed. Not actual bodies as the guide emphasised more than once, seeing the worried expressions of almost all the visitors. They were casts made by pouring liquid plaster into the hollow places where the bodies had lain under the ash and lava for many centuries. The guide went into a great deal of detail about how archaeologists in the last century had discovered that it was possible to do that, revealing a great deal about how the eruption had killed so many, so quickly.

But the agony and despair was just too well captured in the pathetic figures. It was hard not to think of these plaster casts as real people. It didn’t matter whether it was ash or lava that had engulfed them, or if poison gas had choked them first. It was a dreadful death any way it was presented, and men, women and children had all been struck down.

“The dog was the worst,” Hillary said about that gruesome display. “It was CHAINED. It couldn’t run away. It never had a chance.”

Marion said nothing. She had been trying to put that particular image from her mind.

“It might just be how I understood the translation,” Ferron had said after another uncomfortable silence. “But I thought he didn’t even say ‘bodies’. He talked about the plaster filling the voids where ‘organic matter’ had decayed.”

The others looked at him. Each had heard the Italian guide in their own language, translated by the TARDIS.

“That IS what he said,” Marion answered him after a few minutes thinking about the words and how the full meaning might be changed in translation. “The TARDIS was more humane, more compassionate, than the tour guide.”

They all thought about that for a long, silent minute and liked the implication less every moment.

Of course, the reason the guides were so unemotional was that, to them and the archaeologists working on the site every day, this was a fascinating insight into Roman life, with discoveries all the time that added to the understanding of the ancient empire. The scientific and historical endeavour had apparently left them inured to the human story.

But understanding didn’t mean agreeing with that way of looking at the ruined city of Pompeii.

The most recent discovery on the site, so the guide said as the tour continued, was the almost intact thermopolium. This, the visitors were told, was the ancient Roman equivalent of a fast food restaurant. Only the richest houses, maybe a dozen of those excavated, were found to have had ovens, leading the historians to suggest that all classes of citizens, from the meanest manual labourers to skilled artisans might have bought hot food in this thermopolium. Attention was drawn to some still remarkably bright frescoes illustrating the food. Some round images had led many people to think that the Pompeii residents ate pizza, though the more sensible historians insisted that the pictures were of flat bread and olives.

Most of the visitors thought this was an amusing anecdote, and reminded each other that Naples was the birthplace of pizza, after all. But Marion knew her friends weren’t enjoying any of it. They found no particular fascination in the small, roofless houses of working class Pompeii citizens or the elaborate mosaic floors in the rich villas of the elite class. They were left cold by the public baths where yet more mosaics had been carefully unearthed by patient archaeologists. They didn’t even snigger at the public toilets that were virtually intact after so long beneath the solidified ash.

In short, they were glad when the two hour tour was over and they returned to the coffee shop near the coach park for refreshments. They didn’t buy any postcards, not even those showing magnificent tessellations or the alleged pizzas. They drank fine Italian coffee because it was gone two o’clock in the morning and the fragrant breeze off the Aegean was becoming an uncomfortably chilly wind. After that, they were glad to get back on the coach and return to the hotel, their mood only slightly revived by the beauty of a silvery moonpath over the Bay of Naples.

Marion had slept heavily, but, to her relief, without dreaming. The brunch in the pleasant sunshine was cheering her up. Hillary, too, was happily displaying her flamboyant side in a bright red and yellow sundress with a ribbon bedecked wide-brimmed hat and was rather salaciously watching other brunch eaters – male and female - who looked single. If she chose, neither gender would be immune to her Haollstromnian pheromones.

But the revival of spirits was halted abruptly by the arrival of Avery Ferron. His face was pale and his eyes wide with shock.

“Madam…. Sir….” He gulped, forgetting in his distress that Hillary was currently also a madam. “Lady Talitha… I think she is ill. I… I brought a tea tray to her room, but I cannot wake her.”

Marion and Hillary both stood at once and hurried after him back into the hotel. If Talitha WAS sick, then what could they do? She couldn’t be seen by a Human physician, neither the one available to hotel guests, nor in any local hospital. An emergency TARDIS could be summoned, but how would it look to Kristoph and Malika if their wives could not safely go on a holiday without them?

They found Talitha in her queen-sized bed. The fine, Indian cotton sheets were twisted about her body and she lay in an awkward position as if she had collapsed from a seizure. Her face was pale and waxy yet her body was damp with perspiration.

And she could not be roused in any ordinary way.

Hillary took her hand and held it gently. As a Haollstromnian she was telepathic, just like her Time Lord friends. But reaching into Talitha’s mind was proving difficult.

“Her thoughts are all enclosed as if a shell has formed around them. All I can sense is a lot of heat and noise.”

She looked around at Avery Ferron who had stayed by the door. “Come here. You will have to do it. Your mind is a closer match.”

“Me?” Avery Ferron was astonished. “But… I cannot… She is the wife of the Lord High President. I cannot look into her mind….”

“If you care for her, for Malika, who trusted you with her protection….” Marion told him. “Forget protocol, forget Oldblood and rank. Come and do what you can.”

Marion had been wife of the President when Avery Ferron joined the elite Presidential guard. Her command had to be obeyed. He stepped forward and took Talitha’s hand from Hillary’s. Marion brought a chair and sat him in it as he closed his eyes and went into a semi-trance in order to reach towards Talitha’s mind.

“Ohhh….” He said after a while. “Oh, my poor lady.” He opened his eyes and looked at Hillary and Marion. “She has touched, somehow, that great tragedy we learned of last night. She is going through all that despair and pain... As if she was there, herself.”

“It affected her so deeply as that?” Marion asked. “Oh, what were we thinking, going on such a trip’?”

“There’s nothing gained by hindsight like that,” Hillary told her.

“No…. But …” Marion shook herself. “Avery…. Can you… I’ve seen Kristoph do it… not take away the memory, but… blur it… make it seem less important.”

“Yes… I have been trained in that skill,” Avery Ferron answered. “For when we have to…. Well, it doesn’t matter why. I CAN do it. But….”

“Avery, if you say once more that you’re not worthy of examining a high born lady’s mind, I will… I’ll…. I’ll have Hillary marry you, so that you ARE an aristocrat, and have no excuse.”

Despite her worry, Hillary flashed her most predatory smile, and perhaps a dose of pheromone. Avery gulped so hard his Adam’s Apple almost fell into his chest.

“Blur the memory of Pompeii, as if it was boring and she had lost interest,” Marion said. “But try to enhance the loveliness of coming around the bay in the moonlight. Because it really WAS lovely. If we’d just taken a moonlight drive it would have been the sweetest of memories. Put that there instead.”

Avery nodded and closed his eyes again. Hillary and Marion looked at his face, then at Talitha’s.

It took a little while, but slowly Talitha’s anxious face softened and she began to breathe more easily, as if in ordinary sleep. At last Avery let go of her hand and said he thought he had done it.

“All right,” Marion said. “You two both push off, now, or she’ll wonder what you’re doing in her room. Get a nice brunch on a tray sent up. I’ll wait with her.”

Hillary took Avery by the arm, suggesting drinks at the bar and a light lunch on the terrace. A few minutes later a beautifully presented meal was delivered to the suite and Marion gently woke Talitha to enjoy it.

“I slept so long!” Talitha exclaimed. “I must have been more tired than I thought. That place we visited was odd. But I did enjoy coning back in the coach – the moon over the bay. Beautiful.”

“It’s a lovely view,” Marion agreed. “Though my favourite Italian seascape is at Villa Cimbrone, where we’re going at the weekend.”

“Isn’t it a wonder to HAVE a favourite seascape,” Talitha said. “I’ve travelled so little before this, I never imagined having enough experiences of looking at the sea to have a favourite.”

“Cimbrone will be your favourite, too, then,” Marion assured her. “But Hillary is so worn out by last night, I don’t think we’ll have any view today except the hotel terrace.”

“That’s lovely, too,” Talitha said. “We must get Avery to sit with us. He’s too anxious to look after us all the time. He’s not meant to be our butler.”

“I agree,” Marion told her. “That will be our mission for today. Making Avery relax.”