**Wonders Of Earth – Holi**

Aineytta de Loengbaerrow leaned on the balcony of the hotel and looked out over the city below. It was quite the busiest city she had ever seen, even now as the sun was starting to go down. The streets were, if anything, busier than they had been in the morning when they had explored the main tourist ‘sites' of the city of Delhi.

Crowds were something Aineytta wasn’t used to. She had been raised on the plains and lived much of her married life on a rural estate. Even the Capitol was a refined and quiet city. There was nothing like Delhi with its teeming masses on Gallifrey.

She liked it. Exploring the streets, the market places, the places where all kinds of fragrant and often excitedly spiced foods were sold in the open air were fascinating.

There were some breathtakingly beautiful respites from the crowds in the many places of worship in the city. Despite having no concept of religion in her own culture Aineytta appreciated the deeply spiritual nature of the Muslim and Hindu temples and the Sikh Gurudwaras.

Marion came out to the balcony. She looked down at the crowds swarming through the street in more or less the same direction.

“They’re all heading to the park for the Holika bonfire,” Marion said. “They’ll be starting after dark.”

“I was reading the legends in a little book earlier,” Aineytta said. “Holika was an evil woman who tried to lure her pure, devout nephew to his death but was instead burnt herself.”

“Prahlada,” Marion said. “I read about his father, King Hiranyakashipu. He defied Vishnu and demanded to be worshipped as a god himself. He had been given a blessing that meant he could not be killed by night or by day, inside or outside and by any weapon forged by human hand. So Vishnu came to him as half man, half lion, brought him to the doorstep of his house at twilight and killed him with his lion’s claw.”

“We have some legends like that in Gallifreyan custom,” Aineytta noted. “I think it was an ancestor of Lord Ravenswode who was said to have been killed by a spearhead made from the leg bone of a leonate after a prophetess had said that no weapon of metal, stone or wood could ever pierce his flesh.”

“Lord Ravenswode doesn’t like that one,” said Kristoph, joining them on the balcony. “Which is a very good reason to tell it as often as possible.”

“Oh, I agree,” Marion laughed. “The Hiranyakashipu legend is very impressive, though. Caught three ways by Vishnu.”

“That’s what happens when you defy a god,” Kristoph conceded. “And rightly so.” He looked at the streets below in their deepening shadows as the twilight that had thwarted Hiranyakashipu crept over the city. The sky was a russet red to the west and darkening shades of blue towards the zenith.

He could feel the excitement of the people on this festival night like a kaleidoscope of patterns in his mind. Indeed, the gestalt sense of joy was so strong that even the most powerful telepath among the greatest of Time Lords couldn’t have picked out an individual thought from among them.

“Well,” he said. “I hope you've remembered that Holi is a time when class distinctions are set aside. Even people staying in air conditioned five star hotels will be jostled as they try to get a good view of the bonfire.”

“I think we can manage,” Marion said for both of the women. They had dressed simply with no expensive jewellery and just a small amount of local currency in their handbags. Kristoph was wearing a blue shalwar kameez style loose pants and overshirt as worn by all classes of Indian men, only the quality of fabric distinguishing a bank manager from a road sweeper. He, too, was not planning to bring anything that could be taken by an opportunistic thief. He was not suggesting, of course, that the Delhi crowds were any less honest than any other crowd, but it WAS a crowd and there were always some individuals who would take advantage.

Marion almost wanted to change her mind as they joined the throng. She was thoroughly jostled as she had not been for a long time. The noise was deafening and the streets were stiflingly warm. But Kristoph was right. This was not something where they could arrive by taxi and be escorted to grandstand seats. It was all about being a part of the crowd.

It was a little less stifling but still crowded on the public park. Kristoph secured a little space near the crash barrier that kept the crowds back from the prepared bonfire and created an area for the religious rite that was a part of it all.

Atop the carefully stacked pyramid of firewood was an effigy of Holika, the terrible woman of legend. Looking at it Marion was reminded of Guy Fawkes on many a bonfire night in Birkenhead park during her childhood.

This wasn’t very much different in many respects. Instead of the smell of hot potatoes and parched peas and the stickiness of treacle toffee in her pocket and a cold November nip in the air, there were smells of exotic food with names she couldn’t pronounce on a balmy Indian night.

The fire was lit by a man wearing a fireproof coat and as it took hold a line of Hindu holy men in colourful silk clothes circled it, chanting their invocations to Vishnu and many other gods of that polytheistic religion. Marion could understand their words if she chose, but she preferred not to. It was enough to listen to the evocative syllables being intoned. She felt their meaning instinctively, in her soul.

And it was a good meaning. Light and purity triumphed over darkness and treachery in the legends and in the blessings of Holika, just as they should do.

They returned late to the hotel with the fragrances of wood smoke and exotic incenses clinging to their hair and skin. Kristoph ordered a late supper in their suite before bed. The glow of fires that had not yet died down reddened the sky beyond the wide windows and there were sounds of people still enjoying themselves in the streets, though noise didn’t stop anyone sleeping after a long busy day and the promise of a longer one tomorrow.

Because this was Holi itself, the Festival of Colour, renowned throughout the world for its noisy exuberance.

They started out after a late breakfast. Kristoph again plumped for the salwar kameez in light cotton. On his advice, Marion and Aineytta were wearing feminine versions of the same outfit with a little embroidery around the edges.

The hotel forecourt with a watered green lawn was a quiet sanctuary, but the noise of celebration reached them all the same, and as soon as they stepped into the street properly they were a part of it all.

They were made a part of it by a barrage of multi-coloured balloons that burst above them and showered their hair and faces with brightly coloured water. For a moment, the thrower of the missiles looked aghast. They were clean, well dressed foreigners who had just come from an expensive hotel. But Kristoph simply smiled and walked up to the young man. He brought his hand from a small bag in his pocket and smeared neon bright green powder on the assailant’s face. It went with the dozen colours already there.

He returned to the ladies and carefully streaked their faces with the green. It was a natural plant dye bought in the market. They had bags of it in their own pockets but had been a little shy about how to get started in what was an unusually rowdy activity for them.

Once they were ‘marked’ it was all right. As they moved through the streets thronged with revellers, the air throbbing with the sounds of traditional music that was heavy on the bass beat and redolent with the smells of street food, they joyfully gave and received the colours in the form of dry powder thrown or smeared and coloured water sprayed liberally.

Aineytta enjoyed it all thoroughly. She was old enough, even by Gallifreyan standards, to be called ‘venerable’ and ‘sage’ by younger people, but right now she felt as if she was a girl of a hundred and fifty again dancing around the maiden pole at one of the spring festivals celebrated by the rural Caretaker classes.

She felt young, even in the company of her son and daughter in law whose existence told her that she was not young. She was enjoying herself with the complete abandonment of inhibition that everyone around her took for granted at Holi.

There was more than that, though. It was uninhibited, it was rowdy, raucous, but there was something else. These were ‘modern’ people who drove cars and used computers, but this wasn’t just an empty tradition left over from an earlier time. There was real belief in the reason for the festival. They believed that this was a day for forgiving old resentments and arguments and for being forgiven. For one long moment Aineytta focussed on two people, a man and a woman, who had spoken to each other bitterly a few days ago. Now, they huddled in the doorway of a shop and hugged each other, paint covered faces so close together they exchanged sticky colours. Holi had brought them resolution to their difficulties.

We could all do with something like this, Aineytta thought. A time when people can forgive each other.

Not, she added to herself, involving this much mess. Imagine if we did this in the Capitol. What would Gold Ussher think? What would Gold Ussher look like with his face and robes covered in wet paint?

The idea made her laugh out loud but everybody around her was laughing, so there was no reason to feel self-conscious about it. She laughed again and turned to accept a shower of bright yellow powder over her hair from a complete stranger.

She turned back in time to catch a boy trying to put his hand in her pocket. He might have been looking for spare colours. More likely he was hoping for money.

He got a very mild slap on the wrist and a smile.

“You’re forgiven,” Aineytta said. “Now run along and don’t give me reason to have to forgive you again.”

The boy ran away. Aineytta was still smiling. There were always people like that in any crowd. If she concentrated she could probably identify a few more, perhaps less readily forgiven than the child. She preferred not to. The mood of the crowd in general was the joyful, happy one that she was glad to embrace.

She was aware that she had lost Marion and Kristoph. That was all right. They had fully expected to get separated in the city-wide street party. When she was ready to go back to the hotel she knew where it was.

She enjoyed the festival for another hour by herself. She purchased some of the very spicy and tasty food and a drink with crushed ice in it. The drink looked innocent and tasted of fruit, but she suspected it was in need of some forgiveness for its sins. They didn’t affect her, of course. Even if they had, she knew how to expel noxious or intoxicating substances from her body. She let it stimulate her just about enough to join in an impromptu dance to the beat of a traditional drum. It was a dance that reminded her of rural festivals on Gallifrey in her youth rather than the balls she attended in taffeta gowns in her adulthood.

As the afternoon wore on, she gradually wound through the crowds back to the hotel. The sudden quiet and calm of the foyer was surprising. She wiped her feet on a mat that had been specially placed at the door and accepted a complimentary towel before heading to the lift.

When she stepped into the suite she gave a moan of horror. What had happened while she was enjoying herself? She hurried to the plush sofa where Marion was lying with cushions under her head. Kristoph was bathing her face with a damp cloth. He had changed his clothes and washed but there was still some residual paint in his hair.

“It’s all right,” Kristoph assured her. “Nothing to worry about – at least not much. We bought some cold drinks after the spicy snacks. Nobody told us that they were laced with something the locals call ‘bhang’.”

“They call it marij… marijuana in Liverpool and arrest people for poss… possessing it,” Marion added in a slurred voice tinged with a slight giggle despite an inability to raise her head from the pillow.

“Ah!” Aineytta decided not to mention making the same mistake. “In Peru it was the coca tea! Perhaps our next trip might be to somewhere that people don’t indulge in natural plant stimulants?”

“I’ll try to find such a place,” Kristoph promised. “Meanwhile I think we all need showers and a little rest before a more dignified appearance in the hotel restaurant for dinner.”

“A very good idea,” Aineytta agreed, though she was happy enough to remember letting go of dignity for a few hours and reliving a youth she thought she had forgotten.