**Marion in the Dark**

Marion woke up and wondered where she was and why it was so completely dark in the room. She struggled for a few minutes to remember where she had been before going to bed.

They were on a planet. It was called Tempos Morges and it was on the far side of the Cassiopeia quadrant. Kristoph had been a diplomatic guest at the signing of a new, democratic constitution for the former dictatorship. The ceremony had been long, involving a lot of speeches interspersed with cheering and clapping and the singing of long arias about the Tempos revolutionary movement.

She had tried to disguise the fact that she had started to have a headache halfway through the fifth musical interlude. By the time the twenty-one-canon salute heralded the dawn of a new Tempos Republic it was a full on migraine. All twenty-one bursts of noise were agony.

But that had not been the end of it. After a short interlude to change clothes there had been a formal banquet and ball, none of which she had enjoyed because the headache had not fully dissipated. By the time she was able to make her excuses and go to bed in the suite made available to them in the new Presidential palace the headache was blindingly painful. She had struggled to get out of her evening gown and into a nightdress and literally crawled between the bedsheets.

But there had been some light in the room, then. There was a sliver of yellow electric glow under the door from the drawing room and faint silvery light from the window where one of the three moons was in crescent aspect. She could see shapes of furniture in the room.

Now she couldn’t see anything. There wasn’t even a pinprick of light from anywhere and she was as good as blind.

“Kristoph?” she called out and found her voice muffled as if the darkness swallowed it. Anyway, it was clear that he was not in the room with her. If he had been awake he would have answered her. If asleep she would have heard his breathing.

How long had she slept? It felt like a long time, but perhaps it was only an hour. The ball might still be going on. As one of the architects of the new democracy, a co-author of that Constitution, Kristoph was in demand from many quarters. Perhaps he had looked in on her while she slept and left unconcerned.

Perhaps there was nothing to worry about.

But the absolute darkness felt so very oppressive it was almost suffocating.

She reached out to find a bedside lamp, but there didn’t seem to be one. That was odd. She was sure there was a very elaborate glass-shaded lamp there earlier. She drew back her hand, afraid of knocking something so delicate over.

She put her hand back and felt around. Not only was there no lamp, but there didn’t seem to be a table, either.

She sat up and slid her legs out of the bed. Her feet touched the polished wooden floor, but she couldn’t find her slippers. Again, odd, but she didn’t worry. If she opened the door to the other room and let in some light it would be all right. She could find the table and the lamp and the slippers, and the bathroom door which was another consideration.

But where was the door? Surely it had been on the right-hand side of the bed, maybe three or four paces away. She had walked more than that and not touched either door or wall.

She stood still and reached out in front of her, finding only empty air. She took two more paces, then three more.

At last her fingertips connected with something solid. A wall. She moved closer and felt carefully. She moved to her right, expecting a door frame.

After ten paces more she still hadn’t reached the door. She stopped, pressing close to the wall. Perhaps she was wrong about where it was in relation to the bed. She could have found the wall on the other side of the door and walked away from it.

But surely the wall wasn’t that long? The room was no bigger than the one at home on Gallifrey. That was far larger than any room she had slept in before she married Kristoph, but not as big as this room seemed to be.

She edged back along the wall until she had gone at least as far as she had come, and then ten paces more.

Still no door frame.

She kept going, counting her footsteps, keeping constant contact with the wall. She could still see nothing and there was a silence as if her ears were full of cotton wool. She couldn’t even hear her own breathing.

There was no door, and no furniture against the wall. There should have been a dressing table with a huge mirror and a wardrobe. She had sat at the table putting on make-up and doing her hair earlier.

Unless this wasn’t the same room.

She stood still as the frightening possibility gripped her. Had somebody taken her from the suite to another room, one without doors, furniture, windows?

If so, why? Was she a prisoner, a hostage? Was this something political? Something to do with the independence movement?

It was possible, of course. But, still, there had to be a door even if it was a locked one. She would surely find it eventually.

But she couldn’t even find the end of the wall. After what seemed an eternity she stopped again and wondered just how big the room was.

There was no point in turning back, though. She had to keep going until she found a corner, then follow that. Sooner or later, at least, she would come back to the bed. The headboard was against one of the walls. From there she could try again to orientate herself.

But there wasn’t a corner. She stopped again, weary and troubled. It just wasn’t possible that an interior wall could go on forever.

And it didn’t. At last she found a corner. She felt around it carefully and turned ninety degrees. She carried on walking. Again, she was walking for an impossibly long time.

Then she found a curtain. She grasped the fabric and pulled it aside. She felt the cold hardness of glass behind it.

But she could see nothing, still. She ran her hands over the glass, feeling for a way to open it, but there was nothing but glass.

And she could see nothing. She couldn’t see the glass and she couldn’t see anything beyond it. There wasn’t even a pinprick of starlight.

Then a horrifying thought struck her.

Maybe the room wasn’t dark.

Maybe she was blind!

In her terror, she let go of the window and pressed her hands over her eyes. There was no pain, no reason to think there was anything wrong with her sight.

Was it possible that a room could be so dark that there wasn’t even the slightest shadow to be seen. Wasn’t it more likely that the room was fine but she was impaired?

Then she realised something else. She had moved away from the curtains, away from the wall. She reached out where she expected it to be but there was nothing but empty air. She moved a pace and tried again. Still nothing.

She moved the other way, but she still couldn’t find the wall or window, and now she wasn’t even completely sure which direction she was facing.

She didn’t seem to be anywhere. She turned and walked one way, then another, finding nothing but endless floor and empty air around her. The darkness was utterly oppressive. She felt it closing around her like a stifling blanket. Even when she cried out loud in fear it felt as if her voice was silenced at once.

“Where am I?” she tried to ask. “What’s happening to me?”

There was no answer. She was alone in the dark. There was nobody there to help her.

It was the loneliness that struck the deepest fear into her heart. She hadn’t been alone for a very long time. She had never really EVER been alone. In the foster homes that she was passed around like a parcel every few months she always shared a bedroom with another girl. The first time she had a room of her own was her first year at university when she was in student halls, and even then the walls were so thin she could always hear other students in the corridors or adjoining rooms. When Kristoph came into her life she had known warmth and companionship even in the darkest night. If she had woken in the morning in an empty bed it was usually because Kristoph was already up and about. A ring of the bell would bring a servant with breakfast.

There was always somebody around. There were always sounds of life somewhere around her.

But now it was dark and silent and she was frightened.

She sank down onto the floor in despair, too tired and frightened to take another step. The floor was solid. She could touch it. She could be sure about that, at least.

Until she felt gravity was altering around her. The floor no longer felt as if it was under her, supporting her. She was slipping away into the emptiness around her. She was falling through the endless darkness.

“Help!” she screamed. “Somebody help me. Kristoph… where are you?”

The darkness exploded into painfully bright light. Marion groaned in pain and screwed her eyes shut against the silvery specks that pricked at her eyeballs.

Then she felt cool, dampness on her face and a reassuring voice close by.

“Kristoph!” she whispered. “Where was I? Where did you find me?”

“You haven’t been anywhere,” Kristoph answered her. “You were asleep in your bed, not exactly peacefully, but perfectly safe.”

“What?” Marion opened her eyes fully. The pain had subsided along with the silvery specks and she was able to look up at the moulded plaster ceiling of the palatial bed chamber. She saw the sliver of moon shining through the window and the furniture she recognised from before she went to sleep.

“You were very distressed when I came into the room,” Kristoph said. “It was difficult to wake you without causing you a terrible shock.”

“I was dreaming? It felt so real. I really felt….”

She described the dark room and her bewildered attempt to make sense of it all. Kristoph continued to cool her face with the dampened cloth.

“It WAS just a dream, but brought on by illness. You were suffering from a local virus called Morges Influenza. It’s much like the human form of the disease, but in addition to all the usual symptoms, like the headaches you were suffering all day, it is known to induce hallucinations.”

“It felt so very real.”

“I understand that it does.”

“How long was I hallucinating?”

“About ten minutes. It is only just past midnight.”

“The reception is still going on?”

“Interminably so,” Kristoph admitted. “But it’s mostly just dancing, now, and I don’t really want to do that without you. I ordered a late supper for two and came up to see you.”

“Late supper sounds good,” Marion admitted. “Funny that, if I was really that sick not so long ago.”

“That’s the other thing about Morges Flu. It burns out within a half hour of the symptoms manifesting, and you probably created enough antibodies to see you through a drizzly winter in Liverpool, let alone our good clean snow-covered southern plain.”

“Well, that’s good news.” Marion sat up at the sound of a polite knock at the door. A butler brought the late supper. Kristoph picked up a book from the bedside table to make room for the tray.

“Ah,” he said as he glanced at the book title. “I think I see the origin of the hallucination. H.G. Wells’ Red Room… a story about a man who doesn’t believe in ghosts until he spends the night in a dark room where a candle won’t stay alight.”

“I didn’t read it,” Marion pointed out. “My headache was too bad for reading. I didn’t even realise that was what it was about. I thought Wells did science fiction.”

“Perhaps not the explanation, then. Never mind. It is all over now. Let’s enjoy our supper.”