**Wonders of Earth – Machu Picchu**

Marion put down her long, cool drink and picked up the small device that resembled an asthma inhaler. It wasn’t any such thing. Anyone with those sort of breathing problems would be ill advised to come to a hotel that was two thousand metres above sea level. The device, made on Ventura where they had mountain ranges even higher than the Andes of Peru, actually drew in the thin air of the high altitude and concentrated it so that the oxygen content was normal and all the hazards of altitude sickness were minimised.

She certainly needed it. Even sitting here, relaxing in the hotel’s orchid garden, she felt short of breath from time to time. Yesterday when they had spent several hours exploring the Inca Citadel of Machu Picchu she had needed the extra oxygen regularly.

“Don’t forget to use your breather, Aineytta,” she said to her mother-in-law. “Neither of us are used to these altitudes. You shouldn’t try to do without it.”

“Quite right, my dear,” Aineytta answered, reaching for her own device. “I was forgetting. It is so relaxing and lovely here in the garden.”

Aineytta took a deep breath and sighed contentedly as she looked out across the magnificent vista that the hotel boasted of in its brochure. Mountains rose still higher than this elevated place and a deep ravine was in shadow beneath them. Over almost all the surface trees grew so densely that they were a sea of green as far as the eye could see.

More trees within sight than there were on the whole of Gallifrey. That had been Aineytta’s delighted summing up of the view.

Marion agreed about that, but she had found some of the other superlatives of this trip rather less enchanting. They had arrived by TARDIS three days ago at the little town of Ollantaytambo, where the height of the mountains around the little houses and hotels and tour operators had first astonished them. Marion had been equally astonished to see as many coaches and buses parked in the town square as she would expect to see in Liverpool on any given day.

She had been charmed by the bright blue Peru-Rail train with glass panels in the roof affording magnificent views of the mountains. But the frequency of the trains and how busy they were was surprising. She had imagined Machu Picchu as a lost world that was reached by only the hardiest souls after long days hiking in places no roads or railways had ever touched.

She had not expected to be transported from the train to a luxury hotel a stone’s throw from the great archaeological complex by one of a convoy of air conditioned minibuses.

The hotel itself astounded her when she discovered that even their more modest rooms were a thousand US dollars a night. She hardly dared look at what the two suites Kristoph had reserved cost. She reminded herself that her most exotic childhood holiday had been caravanning near Llandudno.

As pleasant as it was to sit in a garden surrounded by exotic plants after enjoying a massage and aromatherapy, this wasn’t really what she had expected when she suggested Machu Picchu as one of the wonders of Earth to show to Aineytta.

Most of the thousands of visitors to the mountain came on foot at least part of the way, bearing their backpacks on their shoulders, coating arms and legs with anti-mosquito cream and drinking coca tea to relieve the symptoms of altitude sickness.

Kristoph wasn’t having that. Not for his wife and mother. He insisted on them seeing Machu Picchu the luxury way with the least amount of exertion possible.

“I wonder how Kristoph is doing on his climbing day?” Aineytta mused.

Kristoph was doing very well, in fact. After spending a full day in the Inca citadel of Machu Picchu with his wife and mother, pondering over meditation walls and filled in pits that used to be still pools of water for the Inca seers to study the reflected stars in, he felt the need for a challenge. While the women enjoyed the relaxation that the stunningly overpriced hotel offered he had joined a group of serious climbers who had obtained a rare permit to climb the near vertical precipice on the opposite side of the mountain. Here were no clearly marked hiking routes and no ‘facilities’ of any sort. Here, a man could pit his wits against the basalt strata that had been thrust towards the heavens by prehistoric tectonic activity that brought the Nazca plate and the South American plate into such violent convergence.

As a man who had once lived by the adrenaline rush of a secret agent on dangerous missions, he needed the challenge. He had found the ordinary Machu Picchu experience just a little dull for all that it was presented as one of the great wonders of Earth. Except for the lack of handrails on any of the ancient and well-worn steps up and down the sacred places there was little to stretch him on the tourist sanctioned trail. The tour guide’s colourful narration of daily life in the Inca citadel, including ritual sacrifices, was fascinating only to those who didn’t have the means to go back in time and see the terrible magnificence as it was happening.

Well, in principle he did. Aside from the fact that the TARDIS was parked in Ollantaytambo railway station, both his wife and his mother had absolutely forbidden him to do so in case he ended up as one of the sacrifices. He reminded them of what the guide had said – that it would be the youngest of any group that would be sacrificed, and he was unlikely to be younger than anyone else. Still, they had insisted and he promised to concede to their wishes.

He was the eldest of this group of climbers. They had all been dubious at first about him joining them. The team leader, Andy, a Harvard graduate and serious mountain climber, had really not wanted him holding them back. He was the first to realise his mistake, and though he still insisted on calling him ‘Old Man’, it was with a new respect.

“Hey, Old Man, wait up, it’s not a race,” Andy called out to him. And the young man was right. There was no hurry to reach the top. He paused, safely attached to the vertiginous rock face by strong ropes and steel clips. The team leader came up beside him as he glanced around from that angle at a view that would make lesser men dizzy.

“Fantastic, isn’t it,” Andy said to him. “I was trying to imagine the cataclysm that created a sheer surface like this one. A whole section of the mountain must have cleaved away and collapsed.”

“The region is still tectonically unstable,” Kristoph pointed out. “But it must have been more so when this planet was young.”

“I was doing Everest in April 2015 when the earthquake hit the region,” Andy continued. “That was a challenge more than I bargained for.”

“Yes,” Kristoph agreed. “Perhaps this isn’t the time to recall that Machu Picchu straddles two major fault lines. But without such seismic activity those of us who enjoy these extreme sports wouldn’t have our challenges.”

“Well said, Old Man,” Andy responded with a grin. “Come on, let’s crack on to the top.”

Kristoph smiled and resumed his climb trying hard not to feel with every fibre of his being those ancient tensions deep in the rock that his hands were pressed against. It was a primal power of nature almost too great for a Time Lord mind to encompass.

“Not this week,” he whispered. “Not while my mother is visiting.”

Lunch was served in the garden. It was cracked crab and lobster salad. This was one reason why the hotel was so expensive. The coast was only a few hundred miles away, but a lot of those miles were vertical and there were parts of this region with no roads. The seafood had been brought here by almost as arduous a trek as the backpackers endured.

Marion looked up from her dessert, a local cold pudding called mazamorra morada, to see another of the guests in some distress. The lady was elegantly clothed in a cool summer dress and a wide brimmed hat and had placed her lunch order with the waiter, but she couldn’t resist reaching in a thoroughly inelegant way to scratch her ankles.

Marion reached into her handbag and then went to the suffering lady. She quietly passed her a small glass pot with instructions written in low Gallifreyan spiral glyphs.

“For the mosquito bites,” she said. “This is the best lotion ever made. My mother-in-law makes it from all natural ingredients.”

The lady murmured her thanks and took the pot. Marion went back to her seat in time for a long glass of iced coffee to finish her meal. Anieytta had chosen the traditional coca tea, a supposed cure for altitude sicknesses and also allegedly a mild stimulant that could also be used to make cocaine, though in much more concentrated form. Marion had tried it yesterday but found it too bitter tasting. Aineytta professed to liking the taste and vowed to purchase a box before the end of the visit. She thought her husband might enjoy a ‘mild stimulant’.

Neither Marion nor Kristoph had dared to comment about that!

“The mosquitoes are a bit of a nuisance,” Aineytta commented. “But my preparations seem to have worked.”

“The deterrent spray worked very well,” Marion admitted. “I only had one or two bites on my wrists where I hadn’t sprayed. The cream soothed them easily. No marks at all. It is a good thing we came by TARDIS, though. I don’t think they’d have let you bring your herbs through the airport. Though I suppose a country that cheerfully grows coca plants has nothing to complain about, really.”

“My recipes are much more efficacious than the weak preparations they provide in this hotel,” Aineytta said, ignoring the possibility that her ingredients were contraband. The unfortunately afflicted lady had applied the lotion and was looking much happier now, bearing up her claim.

Kristoph had sprayed himself liberally with his mother’s insect repellent, too. The tiny mosquitoes that plagued the human population of the Andes were not welcome on the expert climb. His companions had not had that advantage, though, and when they finally reached the top of the escarpment, he brought out another pot of the fragrant preparation and passed it around the group. Again, the young crowd, note of them older than thirty, gained a new respect for the ‘Old Man’.

“You’ve done this sort of thing a lot, then?” asked Robert, another Harvard graduate who thought himself an experienced climber.

“Quite a bit,” Kristoph answered. “This is my first time in the Andes, but I’ve spent a great deal of time in the Chinese Himalayas. I climbed Kawa Karpo some years ago.”

 “Really?” Andy expressed his surprise. “Isn’t that peak banned because of too many accidents?”

“Only since 1991,” Kristoph replied, knowing that these young men were only teenagers when the ban was put in place. He smiled knowingly as he recalled his trip to the mountain of the Warrior God. It had actually been two years ago in his own lifetime and nearly a hundred in temporal time. In the year 1927 by European dating and another complicated date by Chinese culture, he and Li had left Marion, Lily and Rodan enjoying the hospitality of the local mandarin while they satisfied their lust for challenges by climbing the unclimeable. They had never announced their achievement, of course. For one thing it would have been a historical anomaly. For another it would have upset the Buddhist locals who believed that the Warrior God would leave the mountain if Humans set foot on the peak.

Explaining that they were not Human would have been far too much trouble.

“It was far colder than here, no mosquitoes,” he said as the shorthand description of his experience. The young men laughed. Andy asked if he would like to join them climbing Huayna Picchu, the lesser known but equally challenging twin of Machu Picchu. Picchu meant ‘mountain’ in the native language of Quechua, making it a tautology to add the word ‘mountain’ after the names of the two peaks but causing confusion among tourists between Machu Picchu the mountain and Machu Picchu the Incan Citadel. The mountain climbers had no such problem. They really didn’t care about the Citadel that was easily reached by people with picnic lunches and video cameras.

“I think I might,” Kristoph replied with a smile. “My wife and mother have tickets for the equinoctial event – when the sun is directly above the Intihuatana stone at midday and appears to be ‘tied’ to the Earth. The legendsaround it are colourful, but the whole thing but merely a coincidence of planetary orbit. The ladies can enjoy that by themselves.”

The ladies had been discussing that very excursion with their new friend, Elisa Vandermann, the sufferer from mosquito bites. They were all going to see the equinox phenomenon. Marion was not so sure it was going to be very exciting. She compared it with the summer solstice lighting of the chamber within the passage tomb of Newgrange in Ireland or the sanctuary at Abu Simbel in Egypt, both of which she had seen in Kristoph’s company. The sun appearing to stand still was actually less impressive than that even in a place as magnificent as Machu Picchu.

“It’s all right,” Aineytta assured her when Elisa left their company in search of her complimentary aromatherapy pack and a fresh application of sunscreen. “I know this place feels too busy with people, and it isn’t quite what you expected, but I have found it quite enjoyable, and quite a remarkable example of your human ‘diversity’. I was having a remarkable time even from the train. After all, we don’t have those on Gallifrey. It’s all new and exciting to me.”

Marion was relieved. She had been very worried that her first attempt at showing Aineytta the wonders of Earth was going to fail miserably thanks to the blatant commercialism of the ‘sacred site’.

But it was all right, after all.

And she had left it to Kristoph to choose the next Wonder.