**Wonders of Earth – Pamukkale**

Southern Anatolia, in the country that came to be called Turkey in the fullness of time, is known as the birthplace of Saint Nicholas – Father Christmas to the western world. It had been occupied at various times by the Greeks and Romans as well as the Hittites, Arameans, Assyrians, Hattians, Cimmerian and Scythians.

And all of those people had fully appreciated the same warm climate that brought tourists in the age of digital cameras and instant uploads. The Greeks and Romans had particularly enjoyed the place that Marion and Aineytta were admiring just now from a unique perspective.

Kristoph wasn’t admiring the view. He was paying close attention to the operation of the hot air balloon he had bought after enjoying the experience of non-powered flight in Egypt. He had talked enthusiastically about buying at least two more for the Camp School in the Red Desert. It would be an ideal way for the boys to explore the Dark Territory where the magnetic bedrock defied even TARDIS power, let alone ordinary mechanical contraptions.

The women had smiled knowingly at his enthusiasm and simply appreciated the joy of drifting above remarkable landscapes such as the one they were currently viewing.

“Pamukkale?” Aineytta had practiced saying the name several times before getting it right. The sound of the double ‘k’ had bewildered her at first.

“It means ‘Cotton Castle’ in Turkish,” Marion said. “I love that. I never really thought of Turkish people as whimsical or fanciful. Mostly in history or literature you hear of ‘vengeful Turks’ marauding over their borders and fighting their Christian neighbours in Eastern Europe. But the people who looked at this place from a distance saw a white outcrop like bales of raw cotton and called it ‘Cotton Castle’.”

They weren’t looking from a distance. They were directly above the ‘Cotton Castle’ viewing the series of terraced pools where clear water reflected the blue sky. The edges of the pools were a brilliant white that glittered in the sun and might have been mistaken for snow if the sun wasn’t shining so brightly.

“It’s called Travertine,” Marion said, recalling the details from the tourist guide book. “I’ve heard of it before, but not as a natural rock formation. We had travertine floor tiles in the kitchen of our house in Liverpool.”

“Imported from Italy, where they have large quarries of the stuff, not here where it is a protected resource,” Kristoph assured her. “And rather expensively, too.”

“A terrestrial sedimentary rock, formed by the precipitation of carbonate minerals from solution in ground and surface waters, and geothermally heated hot-springs,” Aineytta added, her memory for such details being even better than her daughter in law’s. “Which is all a scientific way of talking about something quite amazing. All the tiny grains of the mineral carried in the water forming such huge and magnificent features. Even by our counting of the years the time it took for each millimetre thin layer to form over the last until it made huge rock faces is difficult to contemplate.”

“We should visit Knaresborough,” Marion suggested. “It’s not a ‘Great Wonder of Earth’ in this way, but when you see teddy bears and socks, gloves, all sorts of ordinary things, turned to ‘stone’ in only a few years hanging in the limestone rich petrifying falls, you realise that nature can do ‘magic’.”

“I was thinking of the Yellowstone Park geothermal features to complement our visit to Pamukkale,” Kristoph remarked. “But Knaresborough is a fair alternative.”

“Knaresborough was good enough before I knew you were a time traveller from another world who could take me anywhere,” Marion reminded him. “Our first weekend together…. I put my hand in the wishing pool and wished I could be with you forever.”

“So did I,” Kristoph recalled.

“I think I should certainly see ‘Knaresborough’ as well as this Yellowstone place,” Aineytta decided once she had worked out how to pronounce Yorkshire place names with the alien ‘k’ sound in them. “Since it means so much to both of you. But let us not get ahead of ourselves. There is still so much more to see here. I absolutely refuse to leave before I have spent the afternoon actually bathing in those waters.”

Marion agreed wholeheartedly. She had a bathing costume beneath her sundress for that very purpose. Kristoph laughed and adjusted the very basic controls of the balloon so that it began to descend down the Cotton Castle hill to the lower part of the magnificent series of natural cascades. Here in the smaller pools where less environmental damage could be done, the public were permitted to bathe in the mineral rich, geothermally warmed water.

The arrival of the balloon was a source of interest to the tourists for a little while. Marion in a bathing costume that would have made her blush in her younger days when she was less certain about her body was of interest to some of the men, but when it was clear that she was accompanied by Kristoph, they found other things to look at. Tall and broad-shouldered, sun-bronzed and handsome in his own swim wear, he was not a man to be challenged.

There were spa baths on Gallifrey. The Capitol boasted several with natural geothermal heating. But they were private places for the elite classes, and usually segregated by gender. Aineytta had never bathed with men, other than her own husband in their own thermal pool at the Lodge. And she had never bathed with so many people. She was a little self-conscious at first, aware of many voices, many languages and accents from this uniquely diverse world. But gradually she began to realise that nobody was looking at her. Nobody knew her for an alien being from another world. Nobody even noticed that she was an older woman in a place frequented by younger sun seekers. Or if they did, they saw an older woman who could still wear nothing but a bathing costume and be subject to admiration.

“Papa will be jealous,” Kristoph told her as an older man walked past the pool where they were relaxing and looked at his mother for rather longer than he needed to. “You are attracting attention.”

“After a thousand years of marriage, a little jealousy is as good as a glass of invigorating herbal tea,” Aineytta answered.

“Mama, humans call that TMI… Too Much Information,” Kristoph scolded. Aineytta laughed and relaxed in the pool.

“I do believe there is something in this mineral enriched water that is akin to my invigorating herbal tea,” Aineytta said after a while. “I feel as if it is taking years off me.”

“I think you’re right,” Kristoph agreed.

“It IS very relaxing, like a long soak with Radox,” Marion said. “But… do you mean that it has a more extreme effect on both of you?”

“Yes,” Aineytta said. “Indeed, I think there is a very mild healing element. It reminds me of the Elixir that the Sisterhood of Karn guard so jealously.”

“The Sisterhood?” Marion was surprised to hear her mother in law talk of the highly skilled but devious sect who had caused so much distress to the family and to Gallifrey as a whole. “What elixir?”

“The Sisterhood have a life-giving elixir that they use to extend their own lives beyond even the limit of Time Lord regeneration. They guard it very jealously, and it is a key reason for their mistrust of our society. We HAVE in the past tried to take it from them. But I didn’t think my mother was involved in any of those plots.”

“I’m not. I know of the elixir by reputation. It can be used to aid a Time Lord in regeneration so it is certainly valuable. Any apothecary who could replicate it would be famed throughout Gallifrey.”

“And you think the minerals in the water of Pamukkale could do that?” Marion asked, curiously.

“No, the effect is too slight. Perhaps in extremely concentrated form, distilled a hundred, a thousand times. Even then, it might not have the same potency, and besides, I have no intention of exploiting a natural resource from another planet for our convenience.”

“We should ensure that other practitioners of the apothecarian arts do not hear of Pamukkale,” Kristoph decided. “We don’t need those with less scruples coming along and stealing the idea from you.”

“I hope not,” Marion added. “They have had so much trouble keeping this place unspoilt. The Turkish government even had two hotels demolished that were too close to the site and taking too much water from the table for their bathrooms and kitchens. That’s why most people come here on daytrips from the coastal tourist towns. There’s nowhere to stay near by.”

“Quite right, too,” Kristoph agreed. Then he laughed at a joke only he knew. His wife and mothers both looked at him curiously.

“I was just thinking… about the effect it has on us as a non-human species… and how much worse it might be for some other aliens. The Formali, for instance. They come from the Regulus cluster and have a cellular structure based on formic acid – the stuff that makes ant bites sting. If one of them were to lie down in a pool of water charged with dissolved calcium, an alikali, they would dissolve into a PH neutral liquid.”

Marion tries not to think about that too much. Instead images of school science and litmus paper filled her thoughts.

“Very basic science, of course,” Aineytta confirmed. “Alkali cancels out acid. I wonder if there is a species that is the reverse – their DNA based on an alkaloid which reacts to acid?”

“Oh, yes,” Kristoph answered, rather glad that they were speaking in Low – or conversational – Gallifreyan and unlikely to be overheard by any of the other bathers. “I’ve only rarely come across them – usually committing some crime, unfortunately. They’re rather an untrustworthy race. But the calcium based denizens of Raxacoricophalipatorius would be right at home here.”

Marion laughed. “There is no such place as Raxa… what you said.”

“There most certainly is. Unfortunately, if one of them chose Pamukkale for a holiday they would put off the other tourists. Firstly, they are at least seven-foot tall and five wide with pea green skin. Secondly, they have terrible breath. And thirdly, at the other end of their digestive system they have such frequent ‘gas exchange’ that they would turn these pools into Jacuzzi bubble baths.”

Marion still wasn’t sure if Kristoph was telling the truth. Neither was Aineytta. It didn’t matter. They laughed either way at the thought of the Pamukkale pools occupied by giant green aliens with bad breath and even less socially acceptable manners.

“Well, I’m glad none of them are around to spoil this afternoon,” Marion concluded. “I’m also glad that most of these people are going back to the coast in an hour or so. We’ll be able to explore the upper terraces in peace and see the way the travertine changes colour in the light of the setting sun. And tomorrow, I’d like to be awake before dawn to see the sun come up on the ruins of Roman Heiropolis above the springs.”

“Excellent plan,” Kristoph agreed. “In between, we can take the TARDIS to one of those coastal resorts and enjoy a dinner of traditional Anatolian cuisine – which is, I am assured – far more interesting than variations on the donner kebab usually associated with Turkey.”

“Even better,” Marion confirmed.