**Arcalian Meteors**

Most of Gallifreyan society, for most of the time, lived their lives in daylight. Of course, there were evening entertainments – theatre, opera, balls and banquets, but they travelled to those by warm, comfortable cars and spent very little time under the night sky, even in the Capitol where the envirodome separated them from the elements.

There were exceptions to the rule, of course. There were the solstice fireworks parties, the displays bigger, louder, more spectacular than anything Marion de Loengbarrow ever saw on Earth – even the Millennium events she had seen in London, Sydney and New York on one spectacular TARDIS trip.

On those occasions the aristocrats of Gallifrey who were used to wearing silks and satins in warm rooms instead donned warm velvet gowns and thick cloaks and gathered under the cold stars of the Kasterborus system.

This night event was even rarer. A once in a century occasion. Dinner parties and luncheons in the Capitol for the past few weeks had been full of people reminiscing about the last time, and even the one before that.

Most of Marion’s friends remembered that she had never witnessed the Arcalian meteor storm before. They also, with some embarrassment, tried not to remember that this upcoming night would be her only chance, since the next occurrence was predicted to be ninety-seven years away.

It was, it seemed to her, a strange irony. She had seen Halleys Comet in the Earth sky four times, in four different centuries when she and Kristoph were courting. But time travel on Gallifrey, home of the Time Lords, custodians of the time vortex, was prohibited, not only by ferocious laws that dealt extreme penalties for infractions, but by physical barriers and protocols that prevented TARDISes, time rings or any other devices, from moving back or forward in time. The very people who controlled time travel in the twelve galaxies lived one day after another on their own world.

The reason for that, Kristoph had once explained, was to prevent corruption, political and civil, even assassinations planned in either the past or future. Only a few such incidents had been enough to convince the High Council of the necessity of such restrictions.

So, with some tact and understanding, Marion’s friends had discussed the outdoor gowns and cloaks they would wear on the night. The fabrics would be warm, but the styles would be infinitely varied. Marion had wondered why trouser suits and thermal coats were not considered appropriate, but apparently, cold night air was no excuse not to look glamorous.

Actually, thermal fabrics could look glamorous with the right couturier designing the gown. Marion, of course, had Rosanda, wife of the family butler, whose deft fingers often created dresses that were the envy of all her friends – and her rivals, too – which was always a bonus.

So she felt perfectly adequately dressed for the cold night air as well as stylishly dressed. Fashion aside, she was looking forward to going to the Great Observatory on the plain outside Athenica, the capital city of the southern continent, where an exclusive group of VIP guests were gathered to enjoy the astronomical phenomenon. Parties were taking place at the biggest houses all over the continent, where the storm could be seen clearly, but the Observatory was the place to see and be seen.

Of course, the de Loengbaerrow family were top of that exclusive list. Kristoph’s father, long retired from his post of Astronomer-General was still known as Professor de Lún to younger astronomers and revered by them all. His wife, Aineytta, who called him Mooney, even sometimes in front of his illustrious colleagues, was equally feted. And it went without saying that the rest of his family were on the ‘A-List’.

Which meant that Marion’s dress of dark orange fabric, sprinkled with constellations of diamonds, in emulation of the burnt orange night sky of Gallifrey, was appreciated first by Kristoph’s elegant aunt Thedera and his sister, Orianna, who brought her now six year old son, Orin, to see the meteor storm for the first time in his life. Lady Lily d’Alba accompanied her, dressed as she ever was, in dazzling white. Marion was pleased to meet them both.

She was even more delighted to meet Kristoph’s other sister. Renita rarely left her House of Contemplation. When she did it was a joy to all her family.

“Marion, my dear,” said the sweet lady encased from head to foot in pastel blue velvet, except for her gauzy veil. She embraced her sister-in-law fondly. Then she gave a soft gasp.

“I will keep your secret,” Renita whispered.

Marion suppressed a gasp, and said nothing in response to that.

Not yet.

Of course, the Lord High President, Malika Ducesci, and his wife, Talitha, were there. So, too, were Gold Usher and the Premier Cardinal and several other members of the High Council.

There was a grand buffet in the assembly hall and music from a string quartet before the main event. Dresses were admired, gossip exchanged. It wouldn’t be a social event amongst the Gallifreyan high born families without it.

Then, with De Lún at his side, the present Astronomer-General, a tall, dignified man called Solon D’Arcia, invited the assembled guests to follow him to the viewing court.

This was a wide, roofless circular space surrounded by glass walls that kept the wind off while allowing a three hundred and sixty degree view of the Southern Plain upon which the observatory had been built. Conventric rows of comfortable reclining seats had moulded cushions for looking up at the sky without neck strain.

It was quite warm in the seats. An underground heating system had been part of the design. All the same, warm cloaks were still necessary. Marion noticed her father in law making sure his wife and sister were both tucked under blankets, before taking his own seat. Most of the younger women put fashion first and eschewed such extra protection. Marion was perfectly comfortable in her thermal fabrics.

The string quartet had come outside with the guests and were playing soft music that seemed to float up into the dark, burnt orange sky with its silvery constellations sharp in a place where light pollution had never been permitted.

 Lying in her seat, Marion almost imagined that the stars were dancing to the music – an infinitely slow waltz across the universe.

Everyone watched, quietly. There was no need for chatter, now.

After a while, the southern borealis began to pick up the dance; green, yellow and red streaks starting from the horizon and reaching up to the zenith of the sky befote dissolving into the burnt orange of the northern horizon. The music now was more like a lively polka in time with the natural lights. Marion tried to recall the physics of ion bombardment in the atmosphere that caused the display and wondered how it was that the Gallifreyan Borealis covered so much of the sky. Then she gave up worrying about the science and enjoyed the beauty.

The borealis itself would be magnificent enough. But quite suddenly there was no need for music. A sharp whistling sound could be heard from high above, and a bright orange spotlight seemed to illuminate. It was followed by dozens more, some mere pinpricks, others like bright shards of irregular glass. All of the primary colours and many secondary and tertiary ones could be seen as the storm of light spread across the whole upturned bowl of the sky, and with it came the whistle, crackle and boom that was almost musical in itself, like the sound of fireworks, but the product of nature itself.

No wonder it was called a storm, not merely a shower. Marion had wondered about the term. The smaller events were common enough in the Gallifreyan sky, and from Mount Loeng House in the rural southern plains, they were easy to see. But they were silent, dignified, almost predictable.

This was something else.it was the sort of fury that created planets, and possibly destroyed them. If she didn’t know about the history of the Arcalian meteor cluster and its wholly trackable and predictable journey through the Kasterborus sector, she might have been a little afraid.

Instead, it was thrilling and majestic, cosmically glorious. Marion ran out of words to describe it and gave herself up to the sight and sound for the full hour and a half until it was over.

Compared to the gradual beginning, the end of the storm was quite sudden. The whistling sounds died away and the lights winked out. The borealis faded, too, though there was no connection between the two displays.

Slowly, one or two of the older people finding their joints creaking a little, the guests rose. There was a feeling amongst them all like coming up for air after being underwater for a long time.

 As they came back into the assembly room again, the conversation resumed. The subject matter was now all about meteors and their spectacular displays.

“Are they never dangerous?” Marion asked her father-in-law. “On Earth there have been meteors big enough to cause actual cataclysms.” She described the worldwide event that caused the demise of the dinosaurs and theories that dark events caused by meteors throwing ash into the atmosphere and covering the sun had occured many times in human history.This

“It has happened, here,” de Lún told her. The worst was many millennia ago when our own house was destroyed by a meteor strike. The inferno was seen all the way to the Capitol.”

“Did anyone die?” Marion asked.

“Fortunately, no. There was some advanced warning. Everyone had been evacuated. But it is the reason I specialised in astronomy when I graduated from the Academy.”

“You remember it?” It was one of those reminders to Marion that Gallifreyans lived so much longer lives than she could imagine.

“I do. My mother was very upset by the loss of the house. It was very beautiful. The present house replaced it - on the very same spot. We do have a superstition that such things don’t strike the same place twice. Scientifically, I don’t think it is true. But the odds are astronomical, so don’t let it spoil your sleep.”

“I won’t,” Marion promised. “But... Was there any event like the one that killed the dinosaurs on Earth?”

“Oh, yes. And it was almost certainly a global disaster caused by a comet or meteor strike. There are some sceptics who don’t believe it. But those of us of a scientific mind know the truth. Besides, there are archaeological proofs. Most of them are in difficult places to reach, in the Red Desert and other hostile places, and I rather think my son has preferred to show you the more accessible parts of our planet.”

“I’m sure I could manage some of the inaccessible places,” Marion told him. Though, she thought, not in the next few months.

Because Renita with her unique sensitivities was the only person, yet, who knew that she and Kristoph had returned from the Italian Tyrol four months ago with a secret.