**The Darkest Night**

Kristoph was frantic in a way he had never known before. In a long lifetime of dangerous missions as a soldier, as a spy, as an assassin, even as a diplomat facing down warring enemies, he had always been calm, logical, methodical.

But faced with two women he loved, both in excruciating pain and dread of what might cone to them before the night was over, his hearts raced. His mind was feverish with horror and confusion, and he didn’t know what to do.

He had, at least, managed to bring Oriana from her room and place her in a hastily made side bed in the master bed chamber so that she could be looked after alongside Marion. Their two personal maids, along with a girl who worked in the palace, were bringing basins of cool water to bathe their foreheads, but none of them knew what else to do for two women going into premature labour at the same time.

Kristoph wasn’t sure, either. In desperation he ran from the bedroom suite. Outside in the corridor he grabbed the first palace servant he could find.

“My wife and my sister both need a doctor, at once,” he said. “They are pregnant and having unnatural pains. It isn’t their time, yet.”

“I cannot help, sir,” the servant answered. “The Second Queen is also in premature labour.”

“What?” Kristoph let the servant go. The man hurried away to whatever duties he was required to perform on such a night. Kristoph couldn’t even begin to process this new information and its long reaching implications.

He ran back to the room and reached out first for Marion, then Oriana. His sister had no tears, being pure Gallifreyan and without tear ducts, but her grief was obvious, all the same.

“I’m going to find help,” he said to her. “For both of you.”

He turned back to his wife and touched her stomach gently, seeing all too easily the dreadful trouble she was in. “I need to go, for a short while, sweetheart,” he told her. He touched her forehead and drew off some of the pain, cooling her fever and calming her obvious anxieties. He kissed her once on the cheek and told the maids to take care of her. Then he hurried to the side room where he had left his TARDIS during their stay in the Lukasan royal palace. He stepped into the gilded wardrobe and it quickly dematerialised.

He was gone no more than fifteen minutes according to the finely made clocks that adorned the walls of the Lukasan Palace. It had taken him slightly longer to make two stops in the only places he knew where help could be had.

Aineytta de Lœngbærrow went straight to her own daughter. She loved Marion dearly, but she understood Gallifreyan pregnancies better than human ones and could do better for Oriana.

A distinguished physician came to Marion’s side. She opened her weary eyes and looked at him. A bitter memory came back to her.

“Doctor Pederson,” she whispered. “He brought you… again.”

It was several years, now, since Kristoph had kidnapped the chief obstetrician from the galaxy famous hospital spaceship, the SS Marie Curie, to help with another tragic birth. The same kind man now quickly examined her.

“There was no need for coercion, this time,” he assured her. “But what happened, here? Two of you in the same terrible straits. And I understand another woman is also in labour within this building.”

“The Second Queen,” Marion answered. “But I think the King has his own doctors looking after her.”

“I should hope so. My team have enough on our plate with the two of you.”

The good doctor stepped back for a moment while one of the midwives he brought along with him on this errand of mercy gave Marion a strong analgesic against the pain and fever. He, himself, administered a drug that might stop the contractions and halt the premature labour if it were not already too late.

“It is called a tocolyctic,” he said as he injected the drug into her bloodstream using a twenty-fourth century needle-free method that worked by an advanced form of osmosis. Marion wouldn’t have cared if he had used a six-inch needle. All she wanted was for the contractions to stop and her baby to be safe. “It is a long shot. Dilation is very far advanced, but it is worth a try. At worst, it might slow things down a little and make for a safer delivery.”

“It’s too soon,” Marion insisted. She was no more than eleven months into the pregnancy. The baby needed much longer, yet.

Doctor Pederson smiled wryly. He dealt with many sorts of pregnancies aboard the hospital ship. He had even delivered some perfectly healthy eggs. But a Human woman bearing an alien baby that took over a year to gestate still amazed him.

“Why is this happening?” Marion asked in a rare quiet moment when her mind was clear. “Everything was fine for both of us. We stayed up late at the ball, but mostly we were sitting down and we only drank fruit juice. How….”

She cried out loud at the contraction that was too strong for the analgesic to mask and which defied the tocolyctic injection. When it was over, she continued with her question.

“How could this happen to both me and Oriana? We’re not… not the same. I’m human. She’s Gallifreyan. We shouldn’t both be like this. And… the Queen. She’s another species entirely. We shouldn’t all be affected.”

Kristoph had been thinking the very same thing. When another contraction had passed he let go of Marion’s hand. He stepped towards the other bed where his sister was fighting the same terrible fight. He kissed her gently on the cheek then turned to his mother with a grim expression.

“In your knowledge of plants… there must be many that will cause these… these symptoms.”

“Many… hundreds, even growing in our own garden on Gallifrey. Though such use is an abomination. I only know of them in order to AVOID their use in herbal preparations. I would never….”

“Nobody would ever think such a thing of you, mama,” he assured her. “But… I was not sick. Nor was any other man, nor any women who were not with child. At least that is my understanding from the palace servants. Are there plants that a whole dining room full of people might ingest, but the effects only be felt by pregnant women?”

“Most herbal abortifacients would induce sickness in anyone. Those you suggest… that have no effect on others… are rarer, but yes, quite possible. Kristoph… do you know what you are saying….”

“Yes, I do. Mama…. And it is treason and murder at the very least.”

“We may hope that the latter can be avoided,” Aineytta told her desperately worried son. She touched his forehead gently and tried to impart a little of that hope directly into his frantic mind.

“Thank you, mama,” he said in a quiet voice so unlike his usual strong, confident self.

He wanted to stay with Marion and Oriana, but there was nothing he could do for either of them. He went from the room again. He found palace guards with even less obvious roles in the crisis and ordered them to follow him to the kitchens.

There were people at work, there. Hundreds of table settings, pots and pans needed cleaning. The work was only part done.

“Stop!” he ordered with all the authority of his Time Lord ancestry. “Everyone stop working. Step away from the sinks. I want samples of every food served last night at the banquet, every drink. I want the plates, bowls, glasses and cutlery used at the top table sealed for testing. You….” He pointed to a serving girl who quailed under his gaze. “I want to see where every fresh herb, spice, leaf, flower head or seed used in the food preparation was grown.”

“In… in the kitchen garden, sir,” the girl answered tremulously. She glanced out of the window. It was still dark. “Now, sir?”

“Now,” Kristoph replied. The girl was still trembling as she pointed to the outer door. He followed her into the moonlit garden where many fresh ingredients for the gourmet meals were grown. He looked at the herbs, some of them wonderfully fragrant even by night when their flowers closed.

The trouble was, although he knew where to buy some of the deadliest poisons in the galaxy, and had done so when subtle methods of assassination were called for, he knew very little about the plants such things were derived from. He had no clear idea what he was looking for.

The best he could do was call for more palace guards to patrol the gardens and question anyone with no reason to be there.

But he had been away too long from his loved ones. He returned to the diplomatic quarters almost reluctantly, dreading what he would find there.

Marion was still enduring terrible agony. He was surprised to see Aineytta tending to her along with a human midwife. A virtual curtain that shimmered in the air had been set up around Oriana’s bed with a strong, clinical light shining through it.

“The contractions are coming too strong to be halted, but the child isn’t turned and there is distress. Doctor Pederson and his assistants are performing what he called an emergency caesarean section. I understand the principle of it, but it is beyond my skills. I am better able to help Marion at this late stage.”

“How is….” He couldn’t ask the question. Aineytta understood why.

“I’m sorry, my son. Your baby is not likely to survive. There has been too much harm done. His hearts are affected by the poison. I consulted your human doctor. He agreed with my diagnosis. I have counteracted the tocolyctic with herbs that will bring on the natural birth quickly rather than trying to halt it. It will be better for Marion to have the ordeal over soon.”

Kristoph understood. He only wished he didn’t. He sat by his wife and held her hand as she endured a painful and heart-wrenching hour to give birth to a child that was fated not to live.

The cruellest thing was that the baby looked perfect. He was too small and deathly pale, but he seemed to have nothing wrong with him at first glance. Marion held him as he breathed almost imperceptibly and made no sound at all. Kristoph held her, feeling as if his hands were too big and clumsy to touch the child.

“We have only minutes,” Marion whispered sadly. “He’s slipping away. His heartbeats aren’t right.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

He held them both until it was over. Aineytta stayed at their side. She, too, was heartbroken for her son and daughter-in-law and the hopes so cruelly dashed.

It was over very quietly. Marion sobbed and clung to the still body a little longer. Kristoph bowed his head in grief.

Then they all heard a baby cry out beyond the curtain. Not the tearful cry of a human child, but the first vocal breath of a Gallifreyan baby. Marion looked up and bit her lip to prevent more tears coming. Aineytta turned, then looked back at Kristoph, uncertainly.

“Go to Oriana, mama,” he said. “She needs you, too.”

Aineytta did so. Marion nodded with glassy eyes and an uncertain jumble of emotions. Yes, it was right that she should go to see her living grandchild. She couldn’t deny her that.

“Let me take our baby, now,” Kristoph said. “I will… make arrangements.”

“For… a funeral….”

“For an autopsy, first,” Kristoph told her. “This was not an accident or some terrible coincidence. It was murder. Our child….”

“Christophe,” Marion said. Kristoph looked at her for a long moment. “Remember when we were in France… that was what you were called by the old men you played boulles with. He… will be called Christophe.”

“Yes, he will,” Kristoph agreed. He took the little, helpless body from her and held it tenderly, whispering the name softly, before he stood and walked away. Marion laid her head on the pillow and cried softly again as she heard the sounds of Oriana’s baby nearby. The sound tugged at her heart, but she willed herself not to be bitter.

When he returned to the room, after making those sad arrangements, Kristoph was met by Doctor Pederson.

“I have duties on the hospital ship, of course,” the doctor said. “But I know you can get me back there in good time. Here… I think I and my colleagues all need to make a deposition of some kind... a written report. My expert opinion is that there has been wrongdoing in this place, with tragic results.”

“There has,” Kristoph answered gravely. “I have just heard that the Queen’s child was stillborn. Her doctors will make their reports, of course. Your testimony will be very necessary in addition to theirs. The truth must be known about what went on this night. Meanwhile, I will make arrangements for you and your team. You will need food and rest. You… already have my thanks for your work.”

There was much to be done, much to think of. Kristoph was tired, grieving, and also very angry that his family had fallen victim to some as yet unknown malice. He vowed to make sure the truth was discovered and the perpetrators of this evil act punished.

He only hoped he had the strength of will, of mind and body, to see it through. Just now that was something he doubted very much.