

## GREENSLEEVES

Martha Whitworth, now known as Marta Witwurt, rose from the bent-over position necessary for pulling weeds. She stretched backward to be rewarded with the creak of vertebra returning to proper alignment. She could hear her coworker humming “Greensleeves,” one of the coworker’s favorite tunes taught to her by Marta. Casting her eyes skyward, Marta watched the scattered clouds that had increased since they’d started weeding.

*Maybe some rain coming in,* Marta thought. This time of year, the prevailing winds sucked moisture up from the great canyons separating the human-inhabited plateaus. Her only views of the oceans had been from orbit, which the aliens had shown her to convince her of what was otherwise unbelievable.

She glanced back at the now weedless rows of vegetables and flowers. Gardening had never been one of her hobbies. Being a surgeon, raising a family, and engaging in community activities (when she had time) more than filled her old life on Earth. Which was why she found the satisfaction of doing simple tasks like weeding a source of continual surprise.

“We’re almost done, Mama,” said Sonya, her blonde head staying focused on the next weed. “I think going to beat you!”

Marta smiled. The five-year-old’s row was at least as clean as Marta’s and more advanced by a good two feet—almost a full *churma*, by local measure. The last two rows of twelve. Her smile deepened and with a hint, but only a hint, of sadness at the memory of children and grandchildren lost to her. She had adjusted as much as possible to the impossible. What option was there? Certainly none, for anyone of her fortitude.

The collision, the airliner coming apart tens of thousands of feet above Colorado, waking in a cubical white room, learning of her coming fate, and the reality of awakening again, this time naked in a field on an alien planet had tested her in ways she could never have imagined. She did not dwell on those first months. There was no purpose. She believed then and now—it *is* what it *is*.

Then there was Sonya. Being given, without choice, the care of an infant precluded self-pity. She grudgingly acknowledged the aliens clever manipulating her physiology. When, after six sleep cycles, the aliens presented her with the baby, she also found her breasts swollen with milk. Her anger and frustration yielded in an instinctual response to the cry of hunger. From that point, they were linked as the aliens had intended. She still wondered whether they were that clever or were simply lucky. Otherwise, what would have happened to the infant?

“Now I *know* I’m going to win!” Sonya cried out.

Marta looked to see that her daughter was right. There was no way to catch her.

“Maybe not,” said Marta and began a furious assault on offending plant life. Sonya picked up the tune again, but at a livelier “Greensleeves” tempo than before. Marta joined in. Three minutes later, the victor was rewarded with a hug and a kiss.

“What a big girl you are, Sonya. And you work *so* hard. Mama’s proud of you. Now let’s pick up the weed piles.”

Sonya eagerly complied, and five minutes later they stood briefly to admire their work.

*I can understand my own satisfaction,* thought Marta. *There’s something satisfying about weeding. You see the result and know it’s a necessary job. I’m sorry I didn’t appreciate the effect back on Earth of a simple job well done. Then, every task seemingly had to be complex to be worthwhile.*

What Marta did *not* understand was a five-year-old's commitment to tasks like weed pulling, washing clothes, sweeping their house, or tending to the animals. Well . . . maybe the last one would have entranced some children, but not all. She wondered what it meant. Was the childrearing she had experienced and witnessed on Earth too coddling—or did how she was raising Sonya deprive her of play and childhood? Marta did not know the answer. What she *did* know was that Sonya was happy, empathetic, and inquisitive and showed signs of self-reliance. Marta accepted ongoing success without obsessing whether the results were due to her mothering or the random throw of the genetic dice.

The first raindrop fell as they tossed the last weed pile onto the compost heap. Marta looked up. Scattered clouds fled from a gray mass coming into view over the hills surrounding the valley. If the almost daily routine held fast, it would rain for half an hour and then clear.

“Let's get inside before we're too wet,” said Marta.

At the doorway, they paused to wash their bare feet. It was another of life's surprises for Marta to find walking barefoot almost sensuous, at least when her feet got hard enough those first months.

They were just inside the door and finishing drying their feet when braying from the nearby village rose like a wave. Marta had come to accept that “donkeys” had made it to Mirica, the planet's name. She did not know if they were *real* donkeys or slender mules, but the annoying braying fixed their identification for her. She always regreted it had not been horses. They were better looking and a hell of a lot quieter.

The braying continued and was joined by sounds of wheels and hooves.

“What's happening, Mama?” asked Sonya as she opened the front door to peek out.

Marta joined her. The rain had picked up but was still lighter than it would be in a few minutes. Her throat tightened as she listened. There were donkeys and wagons throughout the valley but usually singularly or in small groupings. This sounded like something larger. Their home was a hundred yards from the houses making up the bulk of the village of Tagel. They listened as the new sound added to villagers' voices, mostly excited but a few anxious. Moments later, the first pair of riders turned a corner and appeared.

She immediately recognized the livery colors of Lord Etullo. It had been a year and a half since she had risked revealing more than she'd wanted. The Amamor Valley and its five villages were distant from the main population centers of Purasia, the political entity the valley was part of. Such distance was usually fine with the people of the valley. There had been decades of peace, but too many memories remained of times of war and cruelty promulgated by Emperor Juhatro. The relief at Juhatro's death had been kept within most bosoms but was given expression when the new emperor was Jokamdo.

When Etullo's party had roared through Tagel the previous year, the lord had swerved his mount to avoid a child. The animal fell, the crash inflicting a severe break in the lord's lower leg. Marta had been summoned to do what she could. That was the source of conflict within her. She had been a retired surgeon in her first life. Such knowledge and talent were beyond Mirica's level of technology. In those first months on Mirica, Marta had naively used such knowledge automatically when lives were at risk. Her skills were so far beyond what was known and believed efficacious that she was labeled a demon. She and Sonya escaped, narrowly losing close pursuers only because they would not follow into one of the immense, deep, and dangerous canyons that crisscrossed Mirica. Fortitude or not, Marta still occasionally shuddered at the memory of the five days it had taken to reach the other side.

That was why she had resolved to find an out-of-the-way place to live—with enough people but not too many. She didn't want to risk raising fears again. When she reached Purasia, she skirted the cities and the larger towns until she found this remote, lovely valley. It had taken her a year before she felt comfortable enough to begin helping the local healers—men who in her estimation were essentially first-aiders and herbalists.

Lord Etullo's injury had been severe but not life-threatening. By the society's medical standards, the break of both lower leg bones and the severing of an artery mandated amputation. When she was called on by local healers to look at Etullo, she had warred within whether to attempt to treat him or take the easy route and simply acquiesce to what everyone else expected. Only later did she admit to herself that she had succumbed to a desire to use her skills and the challenge of the injury.

As far as she knew, she had saved Etullo's leg. She had warned him that it might be months before it was certain the crude steel screws she had used on the tibia and fibula bones would not be eventually rejected by his body. For months, she worried the operation's success would reveal too much. However, as time passed with no word, she had hoped to sink again into safe oblivion. Until today.

The first two riders in Etullo livery were followed by four more, then two coaches, each drawn by four—

Her eyes narrowed. The braying came only from the village. What she had first assumed were donkeys were either a different variety than she had seen previously or were a completely different equine. These were the same general shape but larger and sturdier-looking. More like Przewalski's horses she had seen in zoos. Her hope faded that whoever they were would keep going past Tagel. They turned from the road and came straight at her house.

"Go in the house, Sonya," Marta said. "Stay there while I talk with the strangers."

"But, Mama, I want to see."

"Go now, dear. This is grown-up business, and these different animals might be dangerous."

Sonya was dubious but went inside and straight to a window. She opened its wooden twin doors enough to peer outside.

The lead riders peeled away to one side to allow the carriages to stop in front of the house. Marta stood by her first impression of the different mounts—they emitted no braying but more like snorts with an occasional short bark. No. These were not donkeys.

The carriages were not ornate, as Marta had seen twice pass through the valley. These were obviously well made but sturdy. Out of the first carriage came a tall man. A man she recognized by the time he was ten feet from the carriage.

"Suhandro?" she questioned aloud. The man walking to her was Lord Etullo's companion, guard, or retainer. Whatever their relationship, it was long term and close, as judged by their interaction while in the valley. The man had initially been skeptical of the poorly attired woman in a nothing valley having enough medical knowledge to treat his lord. That opinion changed after he watched her perform what might otherwise be considered a miracle.

"Pak Marta Witwirt." Suhandro addressed her in the version of her name used on this planet.

His use of the honorific "pak" was not a surprise. By the time he and Etullo had left the valley, Suhandro had shifted from the common "pan" to "pak," signifying either someone of equal or higher status or someone of special respect. What did surprise her on this second encounter with Suhandro was his deep bow, followed by a one-legged kneel. Marta intuited the gesture had some special significance, but she had no idea what it was.

"I have come to ask a boon."

“Huh?” was her response.

*He’s asking me for a favor, Marta realized. And how do I get him off the ground? Is there some ritual involved?*

She was annoyed. Even after living within a foreign culture for these many years, she found too many aspects of life that grated on her. One was the caste system, thankfully not as entrenched in the valley as she had heard for other parts of Purasia. Another irksomeness was, for her, people’s groveling deference toward anyone of higher perceived standing. If it applied to others, it had to apply to her. She checked a snarl before she addressed Suhandro. In lieu of knowing the formal response, she defaulted to asking a question.

“What is it you would like of me, Pak Suhandro?”

He rose and brushed dirt off one knee.

“Actually, Pak Witwirt, I do not believe I previously exchanged my name. I am Suhandro Karsiluhmandan Dahrashamandi.”

*Like I’m going to call him that, thought Marta, even if I could pronounce it.*

There were syllables in the Seeba language that had thus far proved resistant to her mastering, though she came close enough to be thought speaking with an accent or a minor dialect.

“And let’s settle with Marta and Suhandro and forget the Pan/Pak stuff and the kneeling.”

He smiled, though it was strained as if reluctant.

“Still blunt, I see . . . Marta. But I am here to ask your help. It’s for my wife.”

“Your wife?”

“She is great with child, and the doctors in Duvelo tell me there is little chance of her or the child surviving. It is in the wrong position for birth, and labor is expected to start any day.”

*A breech position, thought Marta. The poor woman.*

The prognosis was grim, given Mirica’s state of medicine. On Earth, it had been the 1800s before surgical techniques and anesthesia were advanced enough for surgeons to operate, except when the mother was dead or dying and attempts were made to save the fetus. Marta estimated Mirica’s medicine as similar to about 1500 A.D. on Earth.

Marta had hesitated to help Lord Etullo, and here she was being asked for help again from the same people—at least, one of them.

“Does Lord Etullo know you’re here?”

“He suggested I come to you as soon as he learned of our distress. However, it was already on my mind.”

She sighed. If it was a breech position, there was no way she could not help. It was one thing to ignore those she might have helped when they were distant, but she assumed the wife was in one of the two carriages.

“I’ll have to examine her before I know if there’s anything I might do to help. Bring her inside to the room to the right once you enter my house.”

Part of the gold left by Etullo and Suhandro after she’d operated on the lord’s leg had gone to a new dwelling, equal in size and quality to the village chief’s. One difference was her basic treatment room with whatever instruments she had and any medications that were available, along with carefully arranged lanterns and mirrors to provide the amount of light she might need.

Suhandro whirled and strode quickly to the first carriage that he partly entered, one leg still on the ground. Orders were barked, outriders began dismounting, two men exited the second carriage, and Suhandro lifted a bundled form out of the first carriage. Marta could not make out

the wife's features, but she seemed small. Of course, Suhandro was a large man, probably six foot five by Marta's estimate, so the comparison could be deceiving.

When Marta entered their house, Sonya ran up to her.

"What's happening, Mama? Who are they?"

"They have a woman about to have a baby and there may be trouble. I will look to see if I can help."

"Can I watch the baby being born?"

Marta suppressed shaking her head. It had not been in her worldview to allow small children to watch childbirth on Earth, though she knew it was commonly done in some places, and there were arguments for it. However, Mirica was a different world, and the people were accustomed to a harsher life than most on Earth. Sonya had watched several births already, and Marta attributed the child's interest to reasons she did not obsess about understanding.

"We'll see, dear. I have to examine her first, and you can help by boiling water."

Having a five-year-old boil water would have threatened child protective services' intervention in California but was not unusual in the valley if the child was precocious enough—which Sonya was. However, Sonya's contribution was putting a large pot of water on an existing fire whose coals she would stoke. Marta or another adult would retrieve the hot water.

Suhandro thundered into the house.

"Where should I put Ashara!?"

Marta led him into the treatment room and pointed to a specially made table whose height could be adjusted. A thin cushion was covered by a heavy cloth waterproofed with two plant exudates and a clean white cloth that could be replaced as needed.

Suhandro laid his bundled wife on the table, stepped back, and looked at Marta.

Marta gestured. "Help me unwrap her so I can do an examination."

Thirty seconds later, Marta exclaimed, "Well, shit, Suhandro! What did you do? Rob a cradle?"

His blank expression reminded Marta she had spoken in English. The woman . . . girl, appeared no more than fourteen years old. Marta mumbled and cursed as she threw aside the coverings to get a closer look. From the abdomen's size, Marta could understand it might be a difficult birth for any mother this petite, even with the normal head-down position of the baby. In this case . . . Marta was worried.

A small hand gripped Marta's forearm.

"Can you save the baby?" said Ashara.

Marta looked at the pleading face etched in worry.

"I'm going to do what can, Ashara. I now have to examine you closely. Is that alright if I touch you everywhere?"

Ashara looked sharply at Suhandro.

"She's worried whether that's allowed. Only doctors have examined her so far. Of course . . . all doctors in Duvelo are men, as considered appropriate for the higher castes."

"And the lower castes have women midwives, I assume," snarled Marta.

Suhandro blinked and looked away briefly.

"That's the custom, but I've told Ashara that you are a special case."

He leaned over his wife and stroked her hair.

"It's all right, dearest. Pak Marta is a high caste doctor even if she is a woman."

*Well, thanks for shitty reference, thought Marta, but I guess that's a rousing one for this place.*

Then, for the first time, Marta noticed that two men from the second carriage had followed them into the room.

“And who are these two, Suhandro?” she said, dismissively waving to the men.

He indicated the slender man with piercing eyes.

“This is Uminum Wahyuni. He’s an inquisitor. Lord Etullo wants to know more about you. Inquisitor Wahyuni will talk with you later and with the villagers. This could have been done without your knowledge, but Lord Etullo wants you to know he has too much respect for you to do that.”

Marta felt a chill run from the back of her neck to her ankles.

“And what’s the purpose of the inquisitor?”

“Rest assured that he is serving Lord Etullo’s curiosity and whatever is reported is only for Lord Etullo’s ears. Inquisitors can serve the emperor, a lord, or another citizen. Wahyuni has served the Etullo house on many occasions.”

Suhandro turned to indicate the second man—perhaps fifty-five years old, with a full head of hair graying on the sides, a physique tottering between sturdy and portly, and a curious expression.

“This is Doctor Daram Jahsa. He is one of the more respected doctors in Duvelo. He was responsible for checking Lord Etullo’s leg injury after we returned to Duvelo. He was astounded by my description of how you saved the leg and has wanted to travel here to speak with you. Lord Etullo perceived you would have objected and forbade the visit. However, with my coming with Ashara, Doctor Jahsa prevailed in his request.”

Marta sighed, feeling as if life was getting out of her control . . . again.

“All right. That’s for later. Right now, the only thing important is Ashara. Before I continue, the inquisitor whatever’s his name needs to leave the room.”

“Of course,” said Wahyuni in a surprisingly high-pitched voice.

“Not you, Suhandro,” ordered Marta when Ashara’s husband started to follow the inquisitor. “You’re staying to give Ashara support and to help out as needed.”

“Uh . . . it’s unseemly for men other than doctors to be present.”

“Maybe in Duvelo, but here it’s Marta Witwirt who decides what’s seemly. So, you stay.”

*And if you’re going to get a child pregnant, thought Marta, then by God you’re going stay and see what happens.*

“And you, Jahsa, you can assist under my direction as long as you don’t get in the way. You can ask questions, and I’ll answer if I have time and can spare the attention.”

Jahsa’s face clouded over. Marta was sure he was outraged, but Suhandro gripped Jahsa’s shoulder, and the doctor subsided.

“All right,” said Marta, “now that we all understand, Jahsa, help me get her clothes off.”

They were down to the last few pieces when Marta discovered soaked clothing.

“When did her water break?” demanded Marta.

Suhandro and Jahsa appeared puzzled.

“Water. The fluid that comes out before a baby is born.”

“You mean the mambuneshuh to clean the path to the world?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. When did that happen?”

“Maybe an hour ago,” said Jahsa.

“What about contractions?”

“None yet, but they should start soon.”

“You should have said something earlier.”

Jahsa sniffed. "It's not something talked about."

Marta counted to ten. Then did it again before speaking slowly.

"Let. Us. Get. This. Straight. WHATEVER. The. Custom. I. Am. The. Doctor. In. This. Situation. EVERYTHING about a patient is to be shared with me."

She took a deep breath and waited for an explosive reaction from Jahsa. He just looked at Suhandro and shook his head.

"We understand, Pak Marta," said Suhandro.

Jahsa sighed.

"And I agree. The contractions could start any time," said Marta. "Let's finish with the clothes."

Once Ashara's clothes were discarded, Marta laid a cloth to cover the patient from the chin down.

"Ashara . . . I'm going to examine you now. Try to relax as much as possible. Tell me as soon as you feel a contraction starting."

"I understand," said Ashara. "My husband says you can work miracles. Please save my baby."

Marta patted Ashara's shoulder, then pulled the cloth up to below the swollen abdomen. "Raise and spread your knees, and I will work between them. Tell me if you start to feel any pain or contraction."

Marta threw a quick glance at Suhandro looking uncomfortable and Jahsa, disdainful. At first, Marta used her hands for an external exam and to palpitate the abdomen, then pulled on the girl's legs to move her closer to the table's end so Marta could sit and carry out a pelvic exam. When finished, she called on Suhandro to reposition his wife back to the center of the table. Marta did not realize she was frowning until Suhandro spoke.

"What is it, Pak Marta? Is it hopeless?"

"Wait. I have to check something."

She went to a drawer and pulled out a thin, leather tubular object about a forearm's length and with bronze cup-like fittings on each end, one four times the diameter of the other. She automatically put both hands on the larger fitting to warm it slightly.

"Ashara, I'm going to put this on your stomach. It may feel strange, but keep relaxing and don't move."

Marta placed the large fitting on Ashara's stomach and leaned to put her ear on the small fitting.

"What is this you're doing?" asked Jahsa. "Some kind of ritual?"

"Please be quiet," said Marta, keeping her ear to the object. "I'm trying to listen to the baby's heart."

"This is ludicrous, Suhandro. This woman is nothing more than any other charlatan pretending to use exotic rituals to convince us they know what they're doing."

Marta rose, flushed.

"Suhandro, what did I just finish saying about *who's* in charge here? Either get this idiot to shut up or get him out of the room. I need absolute quiet if I'm to hear anything."

Suhandro shifted uncomfortably and turned to Jahsa.

"Please. Do as she says."

Jahsa inhaled as if requiring more air for a speech that would follow, but Suhandro spoke again, this time less pleading and more commanding.

"Enough!"

Marta returned to the primitive stethoscope and listened, moved to a new position, listened again, and repeated it a dozen times.

“As I was beginning to suspect . . . there are two heartbeats.”

Marta leaned to look into Ashara’s face, which Marta now recognized was more like that of a sixteen- to seventeen-year-old. Still too young for babies, even without complications.

“You are carrying twins. Two babies. That’s why you’re so big. I’m going to take care of you, so try to rest while I talk to your husband.”

“You don’t expect us to believe this nonsense, do you?” asked Jahsa.

Marta debated throwing this man out of her treatment room or trying to educate him. Rationality triumphed over emotion.

“Come hear for yourself unless you’re afraid of learning something from a mere woman.”

Marta wasn’t sure whether Jahsa came forward on his own or if Suhandro’s hand on his back was determinative.

“The purpose of this instrument, let’s call it a stethoscope, is to allow hearing faint sounds. See this wider end? It is the same principle as when you cup your hands behind your ears to hear more.”

She mimed the action.

“The tube allows the sound to travel to your ear pressed to the other end of the stethoscope.”

Marta pulled down the top of her dress above her heart.

“Here. Listen to my heart with your ear and then use the stethoscope.”

Jahsa’s pursed lips looked as if he had been asked to suck on a turd, but he approached and did as directed . . . for about three seconds.

“All right, so I hear and feel your heart.”

She placed the stethoscope’s large end in the same position.

“Now listen with your ear to the small end.”

He was tentative in positioning his ear. That something was different this time was evident when his head pressed hard enough for Marta to brace to avoid stepping back.

He mumbled something Marta could not make out, then alternated between listening to hear her heart with his ear alone and then the stethoscope. After the fourth or fifth cycle, he stepped back.

“This is amazing. As you said. The sound is greatly amplified, just like cupping hands to ears. And it’s such a simple principle. Why haven’t we realized it before?”

“Some things are simple only after discovery,” said Marta. “But now use the stethoscope on Ashara’s abdomen and listen carefully.”

Twenty seconds later. “It’s faint, but it’s just Ashara’s heart I’m hearing, although the beat is not the same as your heart.”

“Move the stethoscope around to different positions of the baby.”

She watched as he tried position after position. About the fifteenth one, he said, “Strange. It comes and goes, depending on where I listen. Sometimes I’m sure I hear it, then it’s fainter, and other times the beat is wrong.”

Marta smiled. Jahsa might be an asshole, but he was evidently a rational asshole for this civilization. That meant there was hope.

“What if the times you’re hearing the heart clearest is when you’re nearest one of twins? Then, when the beat does not sound right, it’s because you’re equal distance from both hearts?”

His gaze tilted up as he considered. Seconds passed.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “That would explain it. But it doesn’t mean it’s true. There could be another explanation.”

*Hallelujah*, thought Marta. *He’s open to the possibility but wants proof. I may have to reevaluate this guy.*

“That’s true, but I’m proceeding on the assumption that that is the case with Ashara. I also found that I could touch a baby’s foot that is already at the entrance to the birth canal. Let’s step into the next room for a moment.”

Once there, they stood facing one another: Marta, Suhandro, and Jahsa.

“Ashara is carrying twins, and one of them is in breech position with a foot already at the top of the birth canal. If it were a single baby, we might be able to turn it, but not in this case. If we do nothing, she and the two babies will almost certainly die.”

“Then it’s the will of the gods,” said Jahsa, “though it may be possible to save one or both the babies if we cut them out now.”

Suhandro blanched, and Marta’s evaluation of him went up another notch. Despite her strong feelings about a man in his late thirties or forties getting a teenager pregnant, this was *not* her culture, and he obviously cared deeply for Ashara.

“When is the last time she has eaten and drunk anything?”

“Not for at least eight hours,” said Jahsa. “She couldn’t keep anything down, so we stopped trying to get her to eat or drink until we got here.”

“That’s good,” said Marta.

Actually, it was better than good. For what Marta was going to propose, on Earth it would generally be suggested not to eat eight hours before the procedure or drink no later than two hours before. Even then, a catheter might be inserted into the urethra to keep the bladder empty—a procedure Marta could not use in this situation, which was serious but she believed not critical.

“There is something we might do to save all of them,” she said, “but it’s something you may have trouble understanding or giving permission for.”

Jahsa smiled, which took years off his face.

“I’ll admit I was skeptical of Suhandro’s recount of your working on Lord Etullo’s leg, although the scars are supportive. Now, after seeing your stethoscope, I find myself both eager and apprehensive of what I suspect you’re about to recommend.”

“But you think there’s a chance to save them,” urged Suhandro.

“Yes, but I’ll have to operate on Ashara to remove the babies. This will require incisions in both her abdomen and the uterus.”

Marta would not have thought it possible, but Suhandro got paler.

“I understand that may save the babies,” said Jahsa, “but mothers almost always die, either during the procedure or afterward, even if it’s days or weeks.”

“They probably die for one of three reasons or a combination: shock from the pain, infection, and incorrect repair of the uterus. Doctor Jahsa, what is the usual procedure?”

She had unconsciously switched into professional mode.

“Well, sewing closed the initial incision is routine enough, but there’s nothing we can do about the incisions through the abdominal muscle and the uterus. There’s no way to remove the sutures.”

“There’s no need to worry about removing them if you use the right material. What I’ve found best is made from murylon gut lining. It is slowly broken down and absorbed by the body, as we’ve seen when using it to close surface wounds or in procedures like with Lord Etullo.”

“Ah,” said Jahsa. “That was a question I wanted to investigate. Some of my colleagues suggested there was magic involved in making the lord’s sutures slowly disappear.”

*Well, shit, thought Marta. That’s exactly what I’m afraid of. Getting accused of being a demon or witch or whatever.*

“I was dubious of the suggestion,” Jahsa said. “But I subsequently read an ancient text that claimed to use plant fibers that disappeared after a few months. But even that was for surface wounds.”

“It’s the same principle for internal,” said Marta. “The other problems are infections and shock. I assume you know of the morxtin extract for dulling pain.”

“Yes, but it’s not used for birthing procedures to avoid damaging the baby.”

“Do you have evidence of such damage?”

“Well . . . no, but that’s claimed in the most important medical treatises.”

“Well . . . they’re *wrong* as long as you’re careful, use the least amount possible, and do the procedure quickly. Speed is also important to lessen the chances of infection.”

In fact, infection was not as serious a problem as it had been on Earth at about the same level of technology as on Mirica. One of the positives to this planet was that most local microorganisms found terrestrial biology unappealing. Still . . . less infection potential was not none. However, Marta was not about to discourse on microorganisms that no one on Mirica knew existed.

“There are ways to reduce the chances of infection,” said Marta. “So, here’s what I propose. Morxtin extract will deaden the skin and abdominal muscles. It may or may not penetrate to the uterus. If not, another injection will be used on the uterus. One advantage here is that the procedure should be quick, compared to Lord Etullo’s, which took several hours. Once the babies are removed, the placenta comes next. Then, the incisions will be closed with sutures that dissolve within weeks. If it goes well, it will take no more than an hour and hopefully less.”

She finished and waited for their responses.

Suhandro looked at Jahsa.

“What do you think?”

Jahsa’s hands-up gesture reflected his uncertainty.

“I’m sorry, Suhandro. I can’t say I believe this is possible. It just goes against all my training and experience. On the other hand, if how you described Pak Marta’s operation on Lord Etullo is accurate, then I confess I would have said that was also impossible if you had asked my opinion at the time. I’ll also admit I’m less dismissive about Pak Marta now than before we arrived here.”

“Then what are my choices? If you can’t say whether Pak Marta can succeed in what she proposes, can you say what will happen if I don’t allow her to operate on Ashara?”

“Unfortunately, I think it almost certainly means Ashara and the baby or babies will die.”

“Then there really are no choices,” stated Suhandro, turning to Marta.

“Pak Marta, proceed and do all you can to save them.”

She nodded.

“Understand, Suhandro, that all operations have risk. Although I’m optimistic, there’s always the chance one or more of them will not survive.”

“If any do, it’s better than none. And I remember Lord Etullo being impressed with your honesty about the outcome of your treating him.”

He glanced at Jahsa.

“I mean no offense, but most doctors will not tell the truth to a patient or will try to assign blame elsewhere if necessary. Lord Etullo and I believe Pak Marta is honest in her evaluations and will do whatever her skills allow.”

He again addressed Marta.

“I leave them in your hands, Pak Marta. You are in command here. Command me.”

“I’ll need assistance. One of the other villages has a healer who helped the one time I performed this operation on a valley woman.”

She gestured to the Tagel village chief, Nando Sadaro, who stood aside and watched. He had come running when the visitors’ party stopped at Marta’s house.

“Nando, send someone to Seminang and tell Satrio Rafo he’s needed here quickly. He’s to bring his herbalist bag when he comes.”

“Can you ride?” Suhandro asked the village chief.

“Uh . . . yes, but not so much at my age.”

“Then you can use one of our mounts. I’ll have two men go with you to be sure you stay on the animal.”

Suhandro barked orders, and a minute later the three riders galloped west toward Seminang at the other end of the valley.

“All right,” said Marta, “we can get everything prepared so we can start as soon as Rafo gets here.”

She looked at Jahsa.

“I’ll take Suhandro’s word that you are a respected doctor. Even though I’ll be doing things you’ve never seen before, there might be moments when you would be useful. Are you willing to stand by and assist, if necessary?”

She was unsure how to interpret Jahsa’s expression, except it involved raised eyebrows and no immediate response. She was about to forget about him when he spoke.

“Pardon, but it was such an unusual request. Most doctors would hesitate to suggest they might need assistance from another doctor. Such help is usually provided by the doctor’s aides, if he has them.”

“Well, that’s a shitty attitude. There should be twenty doctors helping if that’s what it takes for the patient and if that many are available.”

Marta was remembering operating rooms with teams of doctors, nurses, and specialists for complex operations.

“I might agree, in principle,” said Jahsa, “but few other doctors would consent to either ask for help or agree if asked.”

“Well, I didn’t ask *them*, did I? I asked you.”

“Of course. I will be of whatever use you have of me. And to be honest, it will put me in the best position to observe everything you do.”

*That’s also the idea*, thought Marta. *The more I get this guy involved, the less likely he’s to believe there was any kind of magic, or whatever, involved.*

An hour later, they were ready. Ashara was white-faced but with teeth gritted in determination. Straps held her motionless. Suhandro stood behind her head at the narrow table’s end and, by Marta’s orders, would distract his wife during the procedure by stroking her head and talking to her if she were awake. Ashara had been given a mild herbal soporific known to Rafo. It would not put her to sleep, but the drowsiness would help keep her calm. Her entire body was cleaned with soap and water and allowed to dry on its own.

The table, the instruments, and all other materials were confined to a corner of the room that had been screened off and all surfaces scrubbed with soap. The four attendees, Marta, Rafo, Jahsa, and Suhandro, wore clean gowns, hair coverings, and masks. The men's reflexive resistance to "looking foolish" was countered by Marta's ultimatum that they either comply or leave the room. After that, no one had commented about washing his hands and forearms with soap and dipping them into a pot of what Marta estimated was 60 percent alcohol laced with an herbal preparation purported to have anti-infection properties. She had no proof of the herbs' efficacy, and the alcohol content was lower than ideal, but it was the best a local beer maker could do with several rounds of batch distillation.

Marta stood to Ashara's right to perform the operation: Rafo on the left to assist by providing a pair of hands as needed and obeying any orders given. Jahsa positioned himself next to Marta to observe and assist, which Marta hoped would not be needed. Two village women had been recruited to receive, clean, and swaddle the babies if Marta and Rafo were occupied with the operation. The women stood outside the screens, waiting with boiled water and clean cloths.

"Ashara, can you hear me?" Marta asked softly.

"Mmmmm . . . what?"

Ashara's eyes blinked, then closed.

"All right. She's as quiet as we dare make her with the soporific. Here we go."

Marta swabbed the girl's abdomen and adjacent skin with the alcohol/herb solution. She automatically went into surgeon mode as if still on Earth.

"Now I'll inject the morxtin extract."

The current version of a crude hypodermic was better than the one she'd used on Etullo, but Marta still winced slightly as she made the first injection at one end of the planned incision. Half of the drug was delivered after Marta punctured the skin, the other half given after she carefully pushed just into the uterine wall. She continued with three more injections—at the other end and above and below the planned incision.

"The first injection should already have taken hold. We'll wait two minutes for the others."

She looked around at three sets of eyes above masks. Rafo was attentive and calm. Jahsa was hard to read. Suhandro was sweating profusely.

*Okay, thought Marta. I've got to give this guy a break. He really cares for her, and he's in a helpless position, something probably rare for him.*

She counted off to herself. *One, one thousand. Two, one thousand . . .*

At three minutes, she picked up a scalpel-like instrument from a tray on a table extension to her left and took a deep breath.

"Here we go with a suprapubic incision."

The instrument was poised to begin when Jahsa asked a question.

"Why the incision there? Why not longitudinal with respect to the torso? That would allow more room to extract the infant or infants."

Marta bit back a curse and suppressed her first urge. It was a reasonable question, but it could have waited.

"The lower incision will have fewer potential complications resulting from the surgery. The uterus will also repair itself better and give her a better chance to later have children by normal vaginal delivery. It also allows a shorter incision. The incision you describe has more risk of uterus ruptures in future attempts at vaginal deliveries."

"How do you know this?"

"Ask questions later," she stated firmly. "From now on, keep quiet unless I ask something."

Ignoring any further interruptions from Jahsa, she turned again to Ashara.

“Again. Here we go with a suprapubic incision to expose the uterus.”

Her knife moved firmly, with a controlled motion. Rafo was ready with cloths to swab blood and irrigate with a sterile salt solution.

“A nice first cut, if I say so myself,” Marta murmured in English, pleased with herself and relaxing into a mode she’d had few opportunities to experience lately.

“Okay, Rafo, retract the incision sides slightly so I can access the uterus.”

The village healer did not hesitate as he would have done before these few years of experience with the strange woman who could perform miracles. With both hands, he teased apart the new opening.

“I can make out both babies from the shape of the uterus. It should be no problem keeping the next incision well away from each baby.”

Without volition, she began softly humming “Greensleeves.” Her habit of humming during surgeries had annoyed some colleagues on Earth, but most took it as a sign of confidence and competency. She did not do it every time, and the tunes varied, but she became famous, or infamous, for sessions when most of the surgical team were women and the lead surgeon hummed “Dancing Queen” by ABBA.

“There they are,” she said, after making the uterine incision. “Not too entangled with each other, but the one now has both feet at the top of the birth canal. There’s no way this birthing would have proceeded on its own. We’ll go with the other infant first.

“Rafo. Swab, irrigate fully, and a full retraction.”

Given where she was and Rafo’s lack of any formal training, she gave him credit for doing as well as could be expected and better than some who would have freaked out at the conditions. He did not hesitate and opened the incision enough for Marta to reach in and wiggle one infant away from the other.

“Ah!” came Jahsa’s exclamation as the child was held up from his mother’s body, the umbilical still connected. It was where a third pair of hands would be useful, and Marta had an inspiration.

“Jahsa. You can help. It will speed things up if Rafo stays with the incision, and you cut and tie off the umbilical cord.”

“Yes, yes!” was his enthusiastic response. Moments later, the first infant was free of the mother.

Marta held the small body with one hand and stroked the back with her other hand. The boy had not breathed yet. His slight spasm was followed by amniotic fluid being expelled from his mouth.

“Good boy. Let’s do a little more.”

Two more strokes from Marta prompted the expulsion of more fluid and then the child’s first inhalation. Seconds later came his first cry.

“All right, let’s get you cleaned up and move on to your sibling.”

Marta elbowed aside a screen overlap and handed the baby to a woman holding a cloth. Without speaking, she returned to Ashara and what she could now see was a baby girl. Having more room, she performed the next extraction faster. Marta didn’t need to speak. She hummed again while Jahsa cut the second umbilical. Marta began to worry when the child made no motion to breathe, and rubbing her back did not yield more amniotic fluid.

“Hold her upside down and slap her bottom,” offered Jahsa, breaking the silence order after noticing the child’s failure to breathe.

Marta agreed and held the girl's feet with one hand, then gave a moderate swat. It was a method with a long history but one that she knew had never been clinically tested. Having control groups of newborns was not ethically possible.

When the baby gave no response, Marta swatted twice more, both times firmly. With the second swat, the infant jerked and coughed out amniotic fluid. A series of short, gasping breaths followed, along with more clearing of the lungs. Marta reversed the child and rocked her gently as a loud squall erupted.

"There you go, little thing. Breathe in, and keep them lungs working."

She passed the girl through the screen for cleaning.

"I'll proceed to detach the placenta."

Her concentration was such that she did not notice the wide eyes of both Jahsa and Suhandro. Minutes later, she examined the delivered placenta to ensure no part was left. On Earth, the protocol would have been to wait a few minutes to account for excess bleeding or other complications and to observe the uterus beginning its initial stages of contracting back to its original form. But on Mirica, Marta believed the shortest intrusion into a body was more important.

"Closing now," was all she said as she proceeded to suture first the uterus and then the abdominal muscles and the epidermal layers, humming all the time.

When the final suture was in place, she stepped back to allow Rafo to swab clean and dry the girl's abdomen. Then she moved forward again to apply a bandage over the incision.

Marta leaned over to Ashara's face.

"How are you doing, Ashara?"

"Mmmmm."

The mother's eyes flickered open, shut, then opened wide.

"Ahg . . . my baby?"

"Is okay. We'll let you hold her as soon as you're more awake. Just close your eyes for now."

Ashara did as directed.

"All right," said Marta. "We can relax the aseptic conditions. Let's use the cloth under Ashara to move her onto a bed in the next room."

The four of them grabbed the cloth and walked the burden down the long direction of the table until they were clear, then moved toward the room's door.

"That tune you've been humming, Pak Marta," said Jahsa. "I'm curious about it."

Marta was focused on their getting through the narrow door and then turning down the hall. She only partly registered Jahsa's question and later did not remember that her answer was, "Just something to keep myself calm and focused on the patient. I sometimes think it also reassures others involved in the treatment, and maybe even the patient likes it."

When they reached the bed, they carefully walked the loaded cloth from the bed's bottom upward. Marta covered Ashara with a blanket.

"The cloth under her needs to be taken away, but it's not too soiled from the operation. We'll let her come back to full awareness so it will be easier to take it out from under her. Then we will give her the babies."

Marta felt a firm hand on her shoulder. She looked into Suhandro's face.

"I am forever indebted to you, Pak Marta. Or . . . I should more respectfully say Pak Doctor Witwirt.

"I don't think *Doctor* Jahsa would think too highly of that."

“*Doctor Jahsa* is unsure what to think,” said Jahsa. “Part of me is pulled toward tradition that women are not doctors and that proper procedures are long time tested. A perhaps greater part of me wonders whether what I’ve seen today is real. Another part . . . well . . . maybe that’s too many parts. But a corner of my mind is afraid to wonder if my title of doctor is appropriate since I do not know whether I could reproduce what I’ve seen today.

“Marta, whether you are a true doctor or not, I would appreciate sitting with you and going over the procedure in as much detail as possible while I write everything down. I also think I may have a few hundred other questions.”

She sighed, imagining her life becoming harder to stay as inconspicuous as possible.

“Of course, Doctor Jahsa. Let me clean up and stay around Ashara for the next hour or so, and then we can sit.”

Three days later, Suhandro’s party left to return to Duvelo. A blindingly happy Ashara held both infants in the first carriage, watched over by a proud and doting father and observed by Jahsa. Marta had spent tense hours answering questions and worrying that she had revealed too much. To her surprise, the inquisitor had asked her questions for only an hour, but villagers later reported thorough interrogations. These included especially intense sessions of both the inquisitor and Jahsa with Rafo and the valley’s other healers.

While the final loading of the carriages took place, Jahsa pulled her aside.

“Pak Marta, I do not know why you are hiding here in this remote valley. Based on what I’ve seen, and now that I believe every word of Suhandro’s account of your treating Lord Etullo, your place is in Duvelo. The capital is possibly too large a step since the medical community there is so large and self-important. But Duvelo would be easier, though not easy. There would be many who would feel threatened by traditions violated or their competence called into question, but many would come around quickly or eventually. In addition, I and Lord Etullo would be there to support you.

“Please give this serious thought. And please, do not consider this a threat. Some of the villagers believe you came to this valley to escape, but from what they do not know. Therefore, I will encourage Lord Etullo to let it be your decision. Whatever you decide, please do not flee again, if that has already happened before.

“Can we agree that in two months I will return, and we can talk again?”

Marta needed to say something, but she knew hours of serious contemplation lay ahead. Two months was enough time for that—no matter what she decided.

“I’ll still be here, Doctor Jahsa, and have a good trip back to your home.”

She stood and watched the riders and the two carriages head toward Tagel and the road to Duvelo. She was not sure, but as Jahsa climbed into his assigned carriage, she thought she heard him humming “Greensleeves.”

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One Mirica year later and thousands of miles away, another birthing was underway. Elizabeth Oglethorpe lay panting on a bed in their family’s home. Husband Daniel Oglethorpe kept track of the spacing of contractions and wiped his wife’s face with a damp cloth.

“Three minutes, Liza,” he said. “You’re getting close. Where’s the damn midwife!? I don’t trust what passes for any doctor that Samsul insists be present.”

Liza took a break from rhythmic breathing to sigh and attempt to calm a husband wanting to do more when there *was* nothing more. They shared most of their life, but this one task was hers alone.

Despite Dan's aversion to Mirica "doctors," she was as satisfied as she could be about Tobar Sofyan, the personal physician to Lord Samsul Lacharmad's family. Most pleasing was Sofyan volunteering that Liza's preferred midwife provide the primary assistance to the birth of their second child. He also commented on changes coming in his profession.

"I'll only help if there are serious complications, my Lady. There have been major advances in medicine this last half year. Not all of my colleagues are inclined to the new procedures, but they will soon change their views or be left out of the profession."

"And how do these changes relate to childbirth?" Liza had asked.

"The new procedures most widely being accepted are related to carrying out operations to have fewer infections, better recoveries, and less pain for the patient. A clear example is childbirth where the infant is in breech position. In the past, if the midwife could not turn the child, the chances of the mother's death and the death of, or major injury to, the child were extremely high. Now, with the new procedures, an operation gives both the mother and the child a good chance to survive and recover. The original doctor who brought writings of the new procedures said the birthing option was called a seeklection. Or something like that. He wasn't sure of the original pronunciation."

Dan had insisted on having a full explanation of the new procedures, which he gruffly admitted sounded far better than prior methods that he'd described as "something just short of butchery."

"But don't worry," Sofyan said. "Your midwife, Wahlea, tells me your first delivery was easy, and everything seems fine for this one."

"Wahlea will be there," said Liza. "It's going like it did with Chris, so there's maybe an hour before it gets serious."

Dan rocked on both feet. She could read his mind: stay with Liza in case the baby changed the schedule, or run off to find Wahlea. Before he could decide, Wahlea walked into the room, accompanied by a younger woman training to be a midwife.

"How is it going, dear?" said Wahlea, brushing aside her gray locks and taking one of Liza's hands.

"Dan says it's three minutes apart, and the contractions are getting stronger."

"Well, let's take a look."

"Have you been on your feet?" asked Wahlea, while first doing the exam herself and then letting the trainee repeat the exam.

"Yes, most of the last couple hours. Well . . . walking and occasional squatting, or on the ground either on all fours or kneeling and leaning into Dan."

"Good, good. Especially the squatting. You're a strong woman, Liza. I think we should have you on your feet for the rest of the time. Your husband can support you if necessary. Maybe walk ten steps, then squat while counting to twenty. Keep your feet apart to help stretch the pelvis."

An hour later, the contractions were coming faster. Wahlea led Liza to several layers of clean cloth on the floor and held her hands while Liza squatted.

"Husband," said Wahlea. "You've done this before. Kneel behind her, hold a shoulder with one hand, and stroke her back with the other. We'll support her from her front, and I'll receive the baby as it comes out."

Ten minutes later, Liza had a short break between contractions and first became aware of Doctor Sofyan humming. The tune was familiar.

Between puffs, she turned her head to the side and asked in English over her shoulder, “Dan, doesn’t that sound familiar?”

“What?”

“Open your ears, you oaf! What Sofyan is humming!”

Despite his concern, he grinned. Fortunately, she could not see it. He was accustomed to Liza’s sharp tongue on occasion and constantly amazed how the complete package that was his wife could be hot-tempered, kind, brazen, and feminine.

He listened. Wahlea picked up the tune, then the midwife trainee.

“Ah,” said Dan. “Yeah. I think it sounds sort of like ‘Greensleeves.’”

After a series of puffs, Liza said, “No, I recognize it. It’s similar to the Christmas song ‘What Child Is This?’”

“Well, it’s just a similar sequence of notes.”

More puffs. “Similar, my ass. It’s *too* close! It’s ‘What Child Is This?’”

“Highly unlikely. That would mean it came from Earth, which, in turn, means it came from another survivor.”

More puffs. “I tell you, it’s ‘What Child Is This?!’”

“Well, we can talk about it later. Actually, we may both be right. The lyrics to ‘What Child Is This?’ were written in the middle 1800s and set to the tune of ‘Greensleeves,’ a traditional English folk song. That makes it somewhat inappropriate because ‘Greensleeves’ is thought to refer to—”

“God damn it, give a lecture later! I’M KINDA BUSY RIGHT NOW!”

“Here it comes!” exclaimed Wahlea.

An hour later, Liza held a baby girl to her breast. No milk was flowing yet, but the reflexes of mother and child were operational.

The renditions of ‘Greensleeves’ or ‘What Child Is This?’ had died away to only the trainee continuing, with occasional corrections by Wahlea.

“So, where did this tune come from?” Liza asked Wahlea.

Sofyan jumped in to answer.

“It’s associated with the new procedures. At least, that’s my understanding. The doctor who brought the procedures’ descriptions is supposed to have said that the tune should be used at the same time. He assumed it was an incantation, but he could not say to what god or gods. After confirming some of the amazing procedures, most doctors have taken to humming the tune either because they *believe* it necessary or they’re uncertain enough to do it just in case.”

“The midwives and healers have also taken it up,” said Wahlea, “when tending to any patient and not just at births.”

“Where was new doctor from?” asked Dan.

“I forget whether any place specific is known. Just somewhere west.”

“I still think it’s ‘What Child Is This?’” said Liza, smiling and nodding down to the child nuzzling a nipple. “So, I think we should name her after Christmas.”

“Well . . . our son is already Christopher . . . Chris. Doesn’t that kinda make the names too much alike?”

“Poo. I want to name her Christine, and we can call her Chrissy.”

He'd had in mind "Alice" for *Alice in Wonderland*, but "Chrissy" was fine. He saw no point in arguing if he knew he would lose.