**Venice-Simplon**

Aineytta de Lœngbǽrrow woke to several unfamiliar but not unpleasant sensations. The first was the vibration of wheels on a track beneath her bed. Related to that was the reflected sunlight moving rapidly along the ceiling above her when she opened her eyes. The two were an indication that they were travelling at a great speed for a vehicle not equipped with turbo drives or any other advanced propulsion.

This was, she reminded herself, one of the luxury bedroom suites aboard a train called The Orient Express. She had learnt something of the history of the train that went by that name over a century of human history. She had even read the mystery novel set in the nineteen thirties that had made it so famous. There was a copy on the nightstand by her bed. She fully agreed that it was a pleasant way to travel from Paris to the city of Venice. In Marion’s firm opinion the train itself qualified as one of the Wonders of this planet Earth. She was not disputing that claim. She had thoroughly enjoyed the experience so far. Dinner last night not long after they had boarded at Gare de Lyon had been favourably comparable to any of the finest cuisine in the galaxy. Later they had been entertained by a singer and pianist in the bar and then retired to bed lulled by the swift movement of the train.

The third sensation that she was aware of as those memories passed through her mind was the smell of that peculiarly human drink called coffee which she was becoming accustomed to enjoying in the mornings on this extended visit to Earth. She sat up and reached for a complimentary dressing gown provided by the company that operated the train. She wrapped it around herself and put her feet into the matching complimentary slippers before crossing the soft carpeted floor to the breakfast table by the window where Marion was pouring coffee.

“I ordered the simple continental breakfast,” her daughter in law said to her. “Fruit, cereal, lots of toast. I don’t quite feel up to bacon and eggs.”

“Continental is perfectly fine,” Aineytta agreed. She noted that the breakfast table was set for two. She glanced towards the double bed in the luxury suite with what was described as a Venetian theme to the furnishings. It was empty. “Where is Kristoph?”

“He DOES have an appetite for a big cooked breakfast, but since the very thought turned my stomach he’s gone to eat it in the restaurant. He will probably meet up with that Hungarian physicist he was talking to last night in the bar car and forget about us entirely for a couple of hours. You know how it is. Whatever career they may have chosen, Gallifreyan men revert to science geeks whenever the subject comes up.”

“Having married Gallifrey’s foremost astronomer I fully understand the phenomenon,” Aineytta confirmed. “I have been forgotten for hours on end while Moony, Rassilon bless him, discussed black holes or neutron stars with some fellow ‘geek’ as you call them.”

They laughed together as women do when they are discussing men.

As they buttered toast and poured more coffee the train went briefly into a tunnel and emerged onto a line that hugged the side of a mountain. They looked out over a wide valley with snow-capped peaks in the distance that was enjoying the bright sunlight of the morning. Marion confirmed that they were in Switzerland, heading towards the Italian border.

“I never can quite get used to the way Humans divide themselves and their lands in that way. People from Switzerland are surely the same race as the French we were amongst yesterday and the Italians we shall meet later today, and as lovely as the scenery is out there, surely it isn’t exclusively Switz….”

“Swiss,” Marion automatically corrected. The collective nouns for people or things from individual nations constantly eluded Aineytta. Since they wouldn’t be in the country for more than a few hours, speeding across it to their destination, knowing that people from Switzerland were Swiss didn’t really matter, but she appreciated the correction anyway.

Given that they entered a country while they slept and would be leaving it by the time they had finished breakfast, Marion had to agree that the political divisions of Earth were unique among the inhabited planets of the world.

“We’re all the same Human ‘species’, anyway,” she confirmed. “But ‘race’ is more complicated on Earth than anywhere else. I do sometimes wonder what it would be like if we actually did have a united Earth government of some kind.”

She ate her toast and thought about it a little.

“It would probably be all right as long as the Americans weren’t in charge.”

Aineytta glanced at the logo on her dressing gown and smiled wryly.

“I think it more likely that the ‘Belmond Company’ might be in charge. We have stayed in three of their hotels around your world and they also own this train.”

“I didn’t realise until we came aboard that they own the Orient Express. They didn’t in the nineteen-thirties when Kristoph took me to Istanbul on the old route for our fifth wedding anniversary. But I don’t think they own as much of the world as you think. It’s just that Kristoph has been picking the most expensive luxury hotels possible, and that company are known worldwide for luxury. He’s spoiling us both.”

“He’s looking after you,” Aineytta told her. “He’s worried for your health. And I think he has reason to be. You do seem to be a little ‘peaky’, lately. I thought so when we were in Paris, and this morning, not wanting breakfast….”

“Oh, that’s nothing to worry about,” Marion assured her. “Just a little stomach upset. Besides, he can look after me without this sort of super luxury. I’d have slept just as comfortably in any of the standard class berths. This is all just super indulgence.”

“Kristoph probably hasn’t even thought about it that way. He was born and raised as an aristocrat, used to the best of everything. You and I have known a simpler life. We notice the difference more keenly.”

“That makes him seem such a snob. He isn’t really. Besides, from what I understand, when he was working as an assassin for the Celestial Intervention Agency he had to live without luxuries quite often.”

“I don’t like to think about those times,” Aineytta admitted. “I was relieved when he gave up that work and joined the diplomatic corps. It was never easy, as his mother, not knowing where he was or what danger he might be in. Thank Chaos he finally met you and decided that domestic life wasn’t such a bad thing.”

On the whole, Kristoph WAS happy with the quieter life that he enjoyed as Patriarch of the House of Lœngbǽrrow. But the training and long experience with the Celestial Intervention Agency were never completely subsumed. The instincts that had made him such a good agent were with him still.

Those instincts had been alerted last night as they have enjoyed the four-course dinner in the faithfully reproduced nineteen twenties style restaurant. No, not by Professor Ágoston with whom he had shared a long discussion about particle excitation, but another diner who had been sitting alone in the far corner of the restaurant. In the sort of old-fashioned spy story that invariably had scenes on cross-border European trains he would have passed for an agent of a foreign power.

In the political climate of the second decade of the twenty-first century, when Earth’s nations were as divided as they had ever been without actually being in open war with each other, and the only sign of global co-operation was the provision of luxury hospitality by one brand name, ‘foreign powers’ didn’t send out agents.

Instead they had what the newspapers of the time called ‘Lone Wolves’.

Kristoph actually understood the idea better than most Humans who were coming to terms with that kind of threat to their daily lives. He had pursued Lone Wolves with dangerously radical ideas but no particular mandate to carry them out across the universe.

He had neutralised those Wolves with an efficiency that surprised them – briefly.

Last night, he had been dining with his wife and mother and engaging in conversation with other passengers, both of which were good reasons to travel on a train like this instead of the instant arrival of the TARDIS. He had studied the Lone Wolf surreptitiously and judged that he didn’t need to act just yet. He could enjoy the Orient Express experience he had paid for.

But as he finished his ‘full breakfast’ in the Côte d’Azur restaurant car, he noticed the Lone Wolf attempting to look casual while acting furtive, a trick it took Celestial Intervention Agency recruits years to perfect and which was so very easy to recognise in the less adept.

Kristoph had learnt to do it centuries ago. The Lone Wolf wasn’t even aware that he was being followed to the luggage car. He didn’t know he was under surveillance as he broke the lock and gained access to the area that should have been off limits to passengers during the course of the journey.

As he opened the bag that had been cleverly slipped past all security checks at Gare de Lyon, he was finally aware of the presence of the man whispered of in shadowy places as The Executioner. He found himself propelled towards a grey cabinet with a Venice-Simplon Customs Cleared label on the side. He was astonished to find that the cabinet was, not only much bigger on the inside, but quite obviously NOT cleared by any customs official – at least not without a large measure of gentle Power of Suggestion.

“How old are you?” Kristoph asked the terrified young man who knelt on the TARDIS floor biting his own tongue in his distress. “I’m guessing nineteen, barely twenty. Hardly more than a child even by Earth standards.”

The Lone Wolf found words enough to object to the inference that he was unprepared for the task he had set himself and added a mantra in his own language meant to give him courage and resolve.

“God is Good?” Kriatoph queried. “That might be true. I sincerely hope it is for the sake of those who believe it to be so. Personally, I make a point of never arguing about theology. I just want to show you something.”

He pressed the door release and then brought the Lone Wolf to the threshold. Needless to say they were no longer in the luggage car of the Venice-Simplon Orient Express. The Lone Wolf looked at Earth from a view only a few well-trained astronauts had been able to enjoy at this stage in Human space exploration. Fear and bewilderment robbed him of the last ounce of resistance.

“I could give you a gentle push right now,” Kristoph said. “Or I could switch off the shield and let you get sucked out into the vacuum of space. But I didn’t bring you here for that, even though millions of people down there on Earth would probably applaud me for doing so. I just wanted you to see your planet from here – to see how very futile the divisions fostered by hate really are. There it is. Your world – the only one you have. One Human race living on it.”

The Lone Wolf looked. He noticed that they were in geo-stationary orbit above Europe. He noticed, even before Kristoph pointed it out, that there were no borderlines marking out individual countries. Europe merged into Asia without any line of demarcation except for mountain ranges.

He flinched as something – something other than his own body - was pushed out of the TARDIS door. It was the bag containing the suicide vest he had been planning to wear as the train crossed into Italy. There was a very brief, relatively small, explosion of light as the bag fell through the outer atmosphere.

“Venice is an interesting place,” Kristoph said as he closed the door. “Since the train is going there anyway, I suggest you spend a bit of time exploring it. See some art, some architecture. Think about what your species can achieve when they try. Think about what you REALLY want to do with your life. Maybe all this will fall on deaf ears. Maybe you’re still mad enough to believe that blowing up yourself and others achieves anything. If so, I can’t stop you. It’s not my job to stop you. But at least you won’t do it anywhere near my wife and mother.”

The Lone Wolf didn’t say anything, but Kristoph thought he MIGHT, just, have persuaded one young man to think twice about his political convictions.

The TARDIS easily found the Orient Express again, even though it had travelled many miles on its journey in the time they had been away. Kristoph let the young man go his own way. He, himself, went to the bar lounge and ordered a fresh pot of coffee while he sat in a comfortable upholstered chair with plenty of legroom for a tall man like himself. He admired the view of the Swiss Alps as the invisible political border turned them into the Italian Alps without any change in their physical appearance.

 A few minutes later, Aineytta and Marion came to join him. His mother was refreshed by a night’s sleep aboard one of the most famous trains in galactic history. Marion, after a less auspicious start to the morning, had enjoyed her light breakfast and was now ready to enjoy the scenery as they passed through northern Italy on the way to Venice.