**Mid-Morning Tea**

Marion lifted the fine Limoges china cup to her lips and sipped the best Ceylon tea. It had been served with a plate of delicate triangles of toast topped with foie gras - a detail which showed that it was an English meal – mid-morning tea – but served in a French hotel.

Her time travelling mind reflected on the fact that it WAS still Ceylon, not Sri Lanka, where the fragrant tea came from. This was June of 1913. Ceylon was still one of those pink bits on the world map – one of the many subject countries of the British Empire. In Marion’s own time, such maps were only seen in museums and the world was a very different kind of place – politically, geographically, and in the serving of mid-morning tea, which wasn’t really done at the other end of the century.

The changes were coming, of course. Not so much to the serving of tea, at least not yet, but to the politics and geography. A terrible war was going to destroy all the certainties held by the people who made those maps. It was one of those things that made Marion give a little sigh even as she sat in calm, quiet places like this.

But the dark moment passed. The sun was shining from a blue Mediterranean sky and all was well. She looked around at a room that almost matched the great Panopticon of Gallifrey for splendour. She glanced up at the gently curved stained glass that met an oval ceiling of moulded plaster from which a fantastic chandelier hung.

It was called the Royal Lounge, and lesser royals of Europe had, indeed, already stayed there in the first season after the building was completed. It was democratic enough, though, to accept those less splendidly titled so long as they were rich enough.

Kristoph had always been rich enough, and he generally used a lordly title when they stayed anywhere on Earth where such things mattered.

As Lord and Lady de Leon they had often been guests at the Hotel Negresco on the Promenade des Anglaise in Nice, Marion's favourite Riviera town. The first time they came here she had been terribly over-awed by the grandeur of the luxury hotel built primarily for the rich English visitors for whom the Promenade outside was named. She had still been a shy orphan from Merseyside, then, still getting used to wearing clothes that were admired by fellow guests in such a place, still inclined to think of those guests as 'better' than she was.

But now she had walked among the titled aristocracy of many more than one world for more than a decade and she felt quite comfortable sitting under a chandelier originally commissioned for the Russian Tsar and ordering tea from the attendants wearing uniforms too grand for them to be simply called 'waiters'. She still said 'please' and 'thank you' to those attendants, which many guests born to wealth forgot to do, but she enjoyed being served that way and being at her leisure to enjoy what she had ordered.

She glanced around the fine room at the other guests taking tea at a little before eleven o’clock. Though such a thing was served at the Negresco for the benefit of the predominantly English visitors, there was a fair sprinkling of European aristocracy and one or two untitled but very rich American millionaires thrown into the mix.

She had made friends among the titled ladies. Some element of Power of Suggestion meant that they never wondered where Lord de Leon's country seat was and why they had never been invited to a weekend there. Marion occasionally slipped up about who was who in the social hierarchy, but the same Power of Suggestion covered her.

She could have socialised with any of those ladies, and perhaps she would, later. For now, she was happy to sit by herself, enjoying a very well-made pot of tea and absently half-listening to conversations that seemed so very similar to those she had in the Conservatory with her Gallifreyan friends.

Gossip was pretty much the same anywhere.

The sky she could see through all that magnificent glass was blue, of course. That was the reason she asked Kristoph to bring her to Earth regularly. She needed to look at blue skies every so often.

Yet, curiously, when she had sat here yesterday evening, listening to a jazz quartet entertaining guests before dinner, she had looked up at the yellow-orange sky of a Mediterranean sunset and thought it was reassuringly like the Gallifreyan sky.

She wasn’t sure what that said about her – probably that she was comfortably at home on her husband's world, and that was right and proper.

She raised her hand to attract one of the attendants. As she did so, to her surprise, a man sat down in the chair opposite her.

"Order more tea, Marion," he said. "Don't be scared. Everything is all right."

The attendant drew close. Marion had a few seconds to decide whether to say anything at all about the stranger. One sentence would be enough to have him thrown out of the hotel. A few more could have him arrested.

"May I have tea for two, please," she said. The attendant took the old pot and china away promptly. The stranger ate a slice of foie gras toast as if it was a perfectly normal thing to do.

Marion said nothing at all to the stranger until the new tea was brought. The attendant asked if she needed anything else. Again, it was a moment when she could have given the stranger away, but she simply thanked the attendant for his service and sent him away.

"If you intend anything untoward, you can see how quickly… with a mere wave of my hand… I can get people to come to my side. I don’t even have to upset the ambience of the Royal Lounge with a scream. So… who are you and how do you know my name?"

"I can't really answer either of those questions easily, but trust me… I know you have no reason to do so… but I wish that you would.”

"My husband is not far away," Marion added. Actually, Kristoph was playing tennis with the son of the present Duke of Devonshire, and well out of range of her loudest scream, but she played the bluff anyway. If this man knew who she was, then he knew who her husband was, and that alone was her chief protection from harm.

"I know," the stranger said. She looked at him carefully. He was broad shouldered but slim of hip, aged about forty-five by human standards, dressed in a light suit in a French cut suitable for the Riviera. Recognising such a 'cut' was something Marion, this many years since her first visit to the country, could do.

There was something else she could do.

"We're speaking to each other in Gallifreyan," she said. “You’re a Time Lord?”

“Yes.”

Marion thought about that for a moment.

“Gallifrey is a much smaller planet than Earth, but even so I don’t know everyone. There is no reason why I should know you… is there?”

“You don’t know me, Marion.”

“But you know me?”

“Yes.”

“When Kristoph was Lord High President a lot of people knew both of us…”

The stranger didn’t reply to that in words but nodded to concede the fact.

“Not every Time Lord wishes either of us well. Kristoph has enemies… political and… others. Why should I think that you’re a friend?”

“I wish you would,” the stranger said with an almost longing tone in his voice. “I really do wish it very much.”

“What is the matter?” Marion asked. “You’re worried about something. What is it?”

“I… can’t tell you that, either,” the stranger said. “For your own safety. But trust me…. Just for a little while. Everything will be all right.”

Marion looked at the stranger’s face. His expression matched the earnest tone of his voice.

For a Time Lord it was an expression surprisingly full of something like tenderness. When he reached out across the tea table and touched her hand, she didn’t stop him.

“Marion, say nothing for a few minutes. Do nothing. Don’t take your hand away. As long as I’m touching you I can maintain a shield of protection.”

“Protection… from… what… or whom?”

The stranger’s eyes flashed a warning. She kept still and quiet. Around her, curiously, everyone was still and quiet. The gossipy conversations had stopped, the clink of china cups on saucers had ceased. There was absolute silence and stillness.

She didn’t turn her head, but within her field of vision she could see Miss Annabel Sorensen, a vivacious young American heiress, frozen in the act of eating foie gras toast – her hand held near her mouth in a curious position, as if she was doing an impression of a duck.

Everyone was frozen.

Everyone except a strange man – one even stranger than the one holding Marion’s hand just now. He looked human at a casual glance, except his complexion was a bit too pale, his eyes a bit too red.

He was looking at each of the frozen hotel guests in turn, touching their faces with two very white fingers as if that was a way of scanning their minds, of identifying them.

The alien was looking for somebody – somebody he knew to be a guest at the Negresco.

Was it her? Marion wondered at first if that was a supremely conceited idea. Amongst all the titled and wealthy people in the hotel, why should she be the one being sought?

Well, because she was the only one who was a time traveller, of course. She was the only one that an alien whose skin looked newly tried on and not quite a proper fit would be interested in.

She was the only one under the protection of a Time Lord who was generating a ‘shield’ to prevent her being identified.

Yes, it was something to do with her, and despite the stranger’s assurances, despite the comfort she felt in the pressure of his hand on hers and the gentle look in his eyes, she was a little frightened.

The alien passed close by the table. Marion hardly dared breathe. Her stranger watched her face, almost as if he was viewing the Royal Lounge in the reflection in her eyes.

The alien didn’t pause anywhere near them. The shield disguised them completely. Marion watched as the alien turned away and began to walk out of the Lounge.

The stranger moved quickly, drawing something from his pocket that nobody on Earth in the twentieth century, not even the most imaginative science fiction writer, would have taken to be a weapon. He pointed one side of the palm sized glowing cube towards the alien’s retreating back and pressed the top. The white glow turned to red and a beam of light shot from the cube, enveloping the alien, whose body seemed to stretch like a piece of string as it was pulled back into the cube.

As the strange object turned from red to white again, and then the light faded altogether, the sounds and movement resumed around the Royal Lounge. Miss Annabel Sorensen’s duck impression finished as she ate her foie gras toast.

The stranger put the cube back into his pocket.

“It’s… the alien… it’s not dead… just… That’s a sort of portable prison…. bigger on the inside or something like that….”

“Something very like that,” the Stranger told her. “I will have to be going, soon, but…. If you don’t mind me finishing my tea first….”

Marion assented. She had a feeling the Stranger wouldn’t have explained anything more even if he stayed to lunch, afternoon tea snd dinner. She wasn’t meant to know what had happened, or why.

Nor was she meant to know who he was or why he had come to protect her from whatever harm had been intended.

Spending just a few quiet minutes with her seemed to be important to him, and Marion felt she couldn’t refuse him.

“Should I tell Kristoph what happened?” she asked him when he stood to leave. “Or would you prefer….”

“You shouldn’t have secrets from your husband,” the Stranger told her as his last, his parting word to her.

Later, having pre-dinner drinks on the terrace overlooking the Promenade des Anglaise, Marion related what had happened to Kristoph.

“I suppose it must have been some kind of kidnap attempt or some other way of getting to you, through me,” Marion said. “I thought about it all afternoon, and it must be that. I understand that there are people who would like to cause you trouble… your work for the Celestial Intervention Agency… or something to do with your presidency. It… goes with the territory. I can accept that.”

“I know,” Kristoph answered. “Still, I think I should do something to make up for having your favourite weekend holiday resort violated by the fallout from my chequered past. How about we don’t go back to Gallifrey for a little while, but spend some more time in pleasant and interesting parts of planet Earth?”

Marion looked at the red-gold Mediterranean sunset that was so very like the sky over the southern continent of Gallifrey.

“I could live with that,” she said. “Let’s think about where we could go over dinner.”

Kristoph was pleased that Marion fell in with the idea so readily. He was, glad, too, that she had attributed her adventure to something in HIS past.

When, in fact, the alien bounty hunter had been stalking her because of something in HER future.

The note in his pocket when he changed after the tennis had been signed over the Prydonian seal.

“Not for the first time, nor, I suspect, the last, my enemies are seeking to destroy me by trying to kill my mother before my birth. I have foiled one attempt today, but there may be more. Please take care of Marion, for all our sakes.”

Kristoph didn’t have to be told to take care of Marion. He had been doing that for a long time.

Being told to do so by his future son was a unique experience.

He wondered if he should be secretly pleased or worried that his son made the same sort of enemies he did.