**Strawberries**

A small wooden hut at the side of a country road in East Lancashire inexplicably disappeared into thin air with a storm of noise that disturbed a pair of wood pigeons in the nearby field.

It returned a few moments later and a few feet to the left, obscuring a sign advertising ‘pick your own strawberries, gooseberries and tomatoes.’

The door opened and Kristoph stepped out of his TARDIS holding something small in the palm of his hand. He bent down and placed the two snails on the ground under the hedge.

“There you go, little fellows,” he said. “You’re much better off there than in space. Besides, you’d cause all sorts of trouble at the Transduction Barrier. Your DNA is almost identical to a really unpleasant race of gastropods who like conquering planets and sucking them dry.”

There was, of course, no response from the snails. Kristoph stepped back into his TARDIS and closed the door. This time the dematerialisation was successful.

He smiled wryly as he set the course back to Gallifrey. Foodstuffs were all very well. Marion had been bringing tea bags and chocolate biscuits home for years. But the two snails hitching a lift on his basket of fresh strawberries really would have caused chaos. If they had slipped past the Transduction Barrier scan they might have gone on to destroy the garden at Mount Lœng House that was unprepared for Earth gastropods. They might have outbred the indigenous forms and upset the very balance of nature on the whole of the southern continent.

Of course, it might not be as bad as that, but he wasn’t taking any chances.

He looked at the snail free basket full of fresh strawberries, picked from the plants by his own hands. There was a pint of cream in an insulated tub, too.

All that effort was for Marion. For the past few weeks she had been unable face anything for breakfast except fresh strawberries and cream from cow’s milk. She had come to dislike the synthetic cream used on Gallifrey. Only the real thing would do.

And he was happy to make so much effort. She was pregnant, and nothing was too good for her in these early months when her body was still adapting.

There were far too many strawberries in the basket even for a pregnant lady’s breakfast. The rest would make a strawberry mousse that she would enjoy at teatime. Dinner would start with tomato soup. That was another of her food choices. After that anything would do, but the tomato soup was a must.

He liked tomato soup, and even if he didn’t, he would gladly eat it every night for the next twelve months if it was what Marion wanted.

He was happily confident of getting home before Marion woke. The breakfast she craved would be at her bedside.

But as he approached the Transduction Barrier an alarm sounded and a clipped voice over the communications array warned him to prepare to be boarded.

“Boarded?” Kristoph responded angrily. “Do you know who I am?”

“Yes, sir,” the voice responded with a tone that was somewhat apologetic and deferential, but at the same time unmoving.

Which was as it should be, he admitted. As irksome as it was, even a former Lord High President was not above the law, even the pettifogging civil law of the Transduction Barrier Enforcement Department of the Gallifreyan Civil Service.

Irksome and unnecessary. Kristoph waited impatiently to be boarded. He expected a shuttle to connect with the TARDIS door. He was surprised to see a figure materialising directly on board.

He was dressed as a senior officer of the Chancellery Guard with an unnecessarily elaborate plume on his helmet and extra embossing on his breastplate. He swept off the helmet respectfully as soon as he was fully materialised but his side arm holster was unfastened and, for all the toy soldier look of the Chancellery Guard uniform, he was a fully trained and professional enforcer of the law.

“Please stand away from the console, sir,” said the officer after identifying himself as Commander Ingresse. “Despite your high status I must insist on your full co-operation in this matter.”

“I will decide what measure of co-operation you receive,” Kristoph answered, meeting the determined eye of the commander with the full force of his Oldblood heritage. It had only limited effect. The Commander was, as he should be, instructed to treat everyone alike, Oldblood former Lord High Presidents included. “What is the meaning of this intrusion?”

“I am investigating a smuggling operation,” he replied. “Contraband is being brought past the Transduction Barrier….”

“Contraband?” Kristoph glanced at the basket of strawberries. “Check your records. I obtained a permit for the fruit… for personal use, only.”

“This is not about fruit,” the Commander responded. He placed a device on the console which automatically turned on the internal environmental monitor. It began scanning each room in the TARDIS. Kristoph noticed that the scan was not for lifeforms, but he was not allowed close enough to see what parameters had been set. “The matter is serious. Please stand back and do not try to distract me while I scan this capsule. It is a type thirty, is it not?”

“Thirty-five.”

“Then it contains a zero room that will not show on my scan? You will need to open it.”

“I need to see some sort of warrant before you will be permitted to conduct a physical search of my TARDIS,” Kristoph answered. “And I would STILL like to know what this is about? If it isn’t strawberries and cream then what ARE you looking for?”

 “I cannot divulge that information while a search is in progress,” the Commander answered. He looked at the scanner as his instrument beeped. “The general scan has produced negative results. Now I must insist on seeing the zero room. It is the one place in your TARDIS… in any TARDIS I should say… that no scan will penetrate….”

“And I still maintain I should see some kind of warrant, first.”

“Sir… you will need to speak to the Castellan about that. I am acting under his orders.”

“I will do that,” Kristoph responded. He stepped towards the communications console despite being warned away and contacted the Castellan’s office by secure video-phone. “Pól Braxietel and his wife dined at my house last week. He liked the tomato soup.”

“Tomato soup… whatever that is… has nothing to do with this matter. Nor does your friendship with my superior. Nobody is above suspicion, and your frequent short trips offworld have been flagged as worthy of investigation.”

“By whom?” Kristoph asked irritably. The Castellan himself was unavailable to speak to him. His office was manned by a junior officer who could not say where his superior was. “Pól is well aware of the reason for my offworld activities. I do not believe he gave you the order to search my craft.”

“Sir….” Commander Ingresse was struggling to maintain his position of authority with or without his helmet of office on his head. His expression was fixed as he tried to avoid directly answering the question implied in Kristoph’s accusation.

What WAS going on and who was behind it?

“Very well,” he decided. “I will escort you to the zero room, and once you have seen it contains nothing ‘contraband’ you will leave my TARDIS.”

“Your escort is not required,” the Commander tried to say.

“Oh, yes it is,” Kristoph insisted. “Do you think I’ve never heard of planted evidence?”

The Commander’s expression suggested that he had never heard of such a thing, but Kristoph was not swayed. Before he set off to the zero room, deep in the bowels of the TARDIS, he engaged the full anti-transmat shield.

“Just in case anyone else feels like beaming aboard while I’m busy,” he said. “Come on. Let’s get this over with. But just remember, I am doing this simply to expedite your removal from my TARDIS. I am in no way a ‘suspect’ in this matter of contraband, whatever you might say, and anything less than full courtesy will not be tolerated.”

“Yes, sir,” the Commander replied. It was a curious situation for him. His rank usually gave him an advantage over suspects. Even innocent citizens merely ‘helping with inquiries’ tended to be nervous of him.

But that wasn’t the case here. If anything he was the one at the disadvantage. He wondered briefly what he would do if there WAS contraband in the zero room of this TARDIS. Would he have the nerve to arrest the former Lord High President – a president who, according to barrack hall gossip had skills learnt well outside the diplomatic corps.

Not for the first time, he wondered if obeying the instruction to keep this investigation low key, bringing no men with him, was a good idea. What if de Lœngbærrow chose not to ‘come quietly’? Easy access to his sidearm did nothing to assure him of his chances in that case.

They reached the zero room by a route that seemed more than a little circuitous, but the Commander felt in no way capable of asking if there was a quicker way. Finally, the door was opened on a large, bright room with a faintly floral smell in the air and a sense of total calm that, momentarily at least, dispelled the Commander’s anxieties.

He scanned the empty room just in case there was anything cloaked by perception filters.

There was nothing.

“Now, I think I should like an apology for the intrusion and an explanation of why it was necessary,” Kristoph said. The Commander looked as if he was ready for the apology, at least. The explanation was clearly in the purview of a higher-ranking member of the security services.

Then the alarm he had set rang through the TARDIS corridors. Kristoph gave an angry glance at the Commander before turning and running towards the concealed turbo lift at the end of a short corridor. The Commander just managed to reach it before the doors closed. He had suddenly realised he didn’t know how to get back to the console room without guidance.

“I… don’t know... what’s going on,” he stammered.

“I think I believe you,” Kristoph answered. “But that doesn’t alter the fact that my TARDIS has been infiltrated a second time. Who can override a maximum anti-transmat shield?”

That question was answered as he entered the console room. The Castellan, his personal friend and the Commander’s immediate superior, was there. So, inexplicably, was Malika Dúccesci, his successor as Lord High President. The Presidential Code could override any protocol. Anti-transmat shields were simple enough with that knowledge.

But why?

“You may go,” the Castellan told the Commander. “Your duty is done.”

The Commander looked surprised by that curt dismissal as much as he was by the presence of the President as well as the Castellan. But orders were orders. He bowed to all three of the other men in the room then pressed the recall button on his personal transmat and vanished from the TARDIS.

“You are owed explanations, my friend,” Dúccesci told him. “I felt they might be better coming from me.”

“I am here to convey my apologies… and to make sure my Commander is unharmed by the experience,” Braxietel added. “He is a good man, but I wasn’t sure how you would react to the implied insult….”

“My training in the Celestial Intervention Agency taught me to rise above mere ‘insults’, especially by men doing their duty and following orders. The apology can wait until I have explanations.”

“In recent months Gallifrey has been plagued by the distribution of what I believe is called – on other worlds – a recreational drug’,” Dúccesci began. “You may not be aware of the problem. You were away on your extended trip to Earth when the problem began, and have not been in the Capitol since your return. This substance called ‘Jex’ causes the user to lose all sense of proprietary and personal responsibility. We have had members of the Civil Service corrupting files, tearing up paperwork, falling about their desks in hysterics. Yesterday in Committee, a Councillor stood on the table and began to remove his robes.”

“A Councillor has been using this drug?”

“We have endeavoured to keep his name from becoming common gossip. Fortunately, it is too expensive for the Caretakers to buy or we might have widespread civil disobedience. As it is, social order is threatened. We must take every step to prevent this drug reaching Gallifrey.”

“And you suspected me?” Kristoph asked.

“No,” Castellan Braxietel said immediately. “No… not for a moment. But your TARDIS was one of two capsules regularly travelling outside the Transduction Barrier….”

“So you were being thorough?”

“No… we were being clever,” Dúccesci answered him. “At least we hoped we were. Stopping your TARDIS and making a show of searching it… was a ploy. We wanted the pilot of the other craft to think he had been undetected. We wanted him to be over-confident.”

“And it worked,” Braxietel continued. “He left his automatic detection system on as he crossed the Barrier. We were able to trace his intended materialisation point, allowing us to arrest those waiting for the contraband to arrive, while his capsule was diverted to the security zone. The operation has been a success. The supply of ‘Jex’ has been cut off.”

“You COULD have let me in on what was happening,” Kristoph pointed out. “Surely neither of you imagined I could not be trusted.”

“The drug trafficker… is known to you. It is your sister Oriana’s brother-in-law.”

“Known to me?” Kristoph smiled wryly. “Only just. If my sister were not married into the Lesage family. I doubt I would ever socialise with any of them. I certainly wouldn’t do business with them, legitimate or otherwise. If you really believe I would forewarn any fool member of that family who had dabbled in illegal activity then neither of you deserve to eat tomato soup at my table again.”

Two of the most powerful men on Gallifrey looked abashed. There were heartsfelt apologies. Kristoph accepted them because, despite everything they were both friends and because he didn’t want to wasteland more time.

“I may forgive you,” he said before they departed. “But if these strawberries are not in perfect condition when I get home, Marion may not. You have come between a pregnant lady and her breakfast – a very dangerous place, indeed.”