

Chapter Seven

Bret, Kevin and Tanji emerged from the front doors of the grand Champagne house to find their chauffeur waiting for them. Their driver rushed to open the passenger doors to usher them inside the highly-polished Mercedes.

“Back to the airport?” Kevin enquired laconically as they clambered back into the car.

“Well, no,” Bret replied, slightly apologetically, “There are still a few lines of enquiry I want to follow up while we are in the area, and I’ve already booked a place for us to stay tonight.”

Kevin was not quite sure what to anticipate of the accommodation but the first sight of the hotel would definitely have exceeded any expectations he had set. After a drive of no more than ten minutes, the big Mercedes drew up at traffic lights alongside a high stuccoed wall capped with red clay tiles.

As the lights changed, the car turned sharply and swung through a pair of high wrought iron gates that stood open and along a driveway that lead to a well-maintained old building that must have been an extremely Grand Chateau in years past. The house and grounds had clearly been in place for several hundred years. It occurred to Kevin that this was exactly the kind of institution – well-established and centuries old – in which Bret and almost everyone else he had encountered from the Other World felt most comfortable.

The car swept up a wide straight driveway edged by carefully manicured lawns and exquisitely pruned shrubbery, and pulled into a turning circle in front of an extravagantly formed formal entrance. Even before they had managed to get out of the vehicle, someone in a uniform had rushed out and opened the doors of the Mercedes, while a second flunky efficiently whisked away their bags from the boot.

Bret emerged from the car and looked around, suddenly looking both relaxed and urbane – very much the image that Kevin remembered, and quite a contrast to the over-excited state he was exhibiting not half an hour before. He strolled into through the front door and into the lobby, followed by Kevin and Tanji in a state of some confusion. The entrance hall itself was equipped with the obligatory polished stone floor, tinkling fountain and faux marble columns that Kevin thought precisely matched the neighbourhood ambience.

After a very few moments of obsequious attention at the registration desk, Kevin and Tanji were ushered to a rather grand suite on the second floor, all three windows of which overlooked the entrance and driveway. As they approached their rooms, Bret waved at them casually before he was directed along a different corridor and out of sight.

“See you for dinner,” Bret called, “Downstairs, eight o’clock. Don’t be late.”

Kevin and Tanji spent a few moments exploring the rooms – a full examination would take rather longer – when there was a discreet tap on the door. Kevin opened it to admit yet another uniformed bellman with their luggage. He deposited the bags on the stand provided for this purpose, briefly explained the facilities of the room in immaculate English and then departed silently without, Kevin was pleased to note, any obvious attempt to solicit a tip.

Kevin was feeling slightly dishevelled after his unexpected and hurried departure that morning. He came to the conclusion that it would be best to take a shower and said so to Tanji. She, it seemed, had rather more definite ideas on the subject and practically pushed him into the shower cubical, which was more than big enough for two – which was just as well since she followed him in immediately.

They soaped each others bodies, Kevin enjoying the yielding softness of her breasts under his hands. They make love afterwards, facing the mirror, still dripping water, with her glorious breasts resting on a towel over the washbasin, and her reflected self panting and moaning and grinning back at him.

Afterwards, they collapsed on the bed, still damp. Kevin must have fallen deeply asleep almost immediately afterwards. He awoke in the luxurious embrace of the soft mattress and enveloping linen sheets. As he stirred, he became conscious of the sounds of the bath running and Tanji humming contentedly. Rising to his elbows, he could see Tanji wandering around the suite without a stitch of clothing. Through the window, he could see the reddening sun low in the sky.

“Hi, sleepy-head,” she called grinning cheekily.

He was about to reply in kind when the ringing phone made him jump. It was Bret, reminding him to dress for dinner.

At the appointed time – a good deal later than he would normally have taken his evening meal at home – Kevin stood at the suite door, holding it open for Tanji. They were so engrossed in looking at each other that he nearly bumped into Bret who was passing their door.

“That was well-timed,” Kevin said as they made their way downstairs to the dining room.

“Just luck,” Bret replied modestly.

The three were greeted by an immaculately turned-out *Maître d’Hôtel* at the entrance. By unspoken agreement, they declined the opportunity to take an *aperitif* in the bar beforehand, to Kevin’s relief; he was already beginning to feel quite hungry and sincerely hoped that food would soon be forthcoming. The *Maître d’Hôtel* immediately ushered them through to the main restaurant and guided them to their table.

The table itself was circular and set with four places, with crisply-starched napkins and a white linen tablecloth. It was set a little away from the others, in a corner of the high-ceilinged dining room, and partially screened by a large parlour palm and a folding room divider. A pair of slightly obsequious waiters assisted them with the chairs and napkins, and then presented leather-bound menus with a flourish.

Following the conventions of grand French restaurants, Kevin found himself holding a menu which included the prices while Tanji, who was sitting right next to him and being obviously a woman, received a menu without costs. Ever curious, Kevin peeked sideways across the table at Bret’s menu, which was – as he had anticipated – also the version which included the prices. He was privately highly amused – after all, Bret was biologically a woman and a shapeshifter, although today wearing the male appearance he usually adopted here in this world.

The menu itself was impenetrable as far as Kevin was concerned, set in a tiny crabbed typeface, and riddled with complex and archaic French. Feeling confused and slightly foolish, Kevin leant over to Tanji.

“Can you understand any of this?” he asked under his breath.

Tanji shook her head.

“Some of the words,” she replied, “But not enough to tell me what anything will actually taste like.”

“Shall I just order for us all?” Bret interjected, evidently having noticed the discomfort of his dinner companions.

Kevin nodded gratefully, both he and Tanji immediately closing their menus in some relief. He sat back to enjoy the experience, looking around the room at the other diners. Most of the tables were already occupied by guests dressed up in their finest attire, being served what seemed like a never-ending series of dainty dishes by an army of waiters.

In Kevin's admittedly very limited experience, restaurants of this class seemed to employ at least three grades of waiting staff: those who brought the food, those who cleared away the used dishes and those engaged entirely in a supervisory role. The last category, it seemed to him, only engaged with the diners to take the orders and to enquire if everything was satisfactory – the latter inevitably while the diners themselves had their mouths filled with food.

A member of the most senior grade of waiters approached their table. Unhesitatingly, Bret addressed him in apparently fluent French, ordering – as far as Kevin could tell – items from the menu for them all. The waiter nodded approval ingratiatingly while scribbling furiously in his notebook, then scurried off radiating an air of extreme unctuousness.

Bret must have ordered wine and sparkling water for them all as well, as bottles were opened and glasses were filled with polished efficiency by a separate squadron of staff. Given where they were and what they had been doing, Kevin was mildly curious that Bret had not ordered champagne. However, he did not feel he was able to contemplate such questions right at this moment. He suddenly realised that he was ravenously hungry – although not absolutely convinced that he could eat enough to justify the – no doubt – ruinous cost of the meal.

In less than three minutes, a procession of lower-rank waiters returned with the first of what would become a seemingly never-ending stream of tiny but extremely flavoursome dishes. Kevin tucked into the *amusant bouche* that had just been placed in front of him with gusto, eager to appreciate the kind of food that even an enthusiastic and moderately talented amateur cook like himself could not possibly attempt.

Kevin, who was dressed in his usual clothes – black jeans and a dark blue sweater – felt distinctly underdressed for the surroundings. The feeling worried him for quite some minutes, until he realised that it did not seem to be bothering either Bret or Tanji. The waiting staff was not paying the slightest attention either. Finally, he came to the conclusion that, as long as one did not smell too much or upset the other diners, then anyone willing to pay the no doubt exorbitant prices demanded here would be welcomed effusively.

He turned to Bret after the first couple of courses had been presented and consumed, another question already forming itself on his lips.

“Why are we here,” he asked, adding, “Impressive though this place is?”

Bret smiled at Kevin's perspicacity.

"We are to meet someone," he replied, indicating the empty place setting opposite, "Someone who is an old friend of my Mother's."

Bret was referring to the Ferryman, the leader of a secret faction in the interlocking governance that surrounded the crossing between the worlds. The Ferryman was the final arbiter of truth and justice in disputes over control and propriety, and appeared to be a hereditary post, being handed down from father to son, and indeed mother to daughter, over the millennia.

"Someone you knows about your, err, country?" Kevin asked in a hushed voice, leaning forward across the table and trying his best to be discreet.

"That's right," Bret replied, a tight smile crossing his face.

Just then, a well-dressed man approached, escorted by another one of the more senior grade of waiting staff. A tall man in late middle years, Kevin considered, now slightly running to fat, with an exceptionally flamboyant appearance. He wore a light grey linen suit with a tie and shirt in a contrast of pale colours that Kevin felt he could never have worked if he had donned the apparel himself.

He had a mane of grey hair covering his collar and ears, partially hiding his oversized facial features, including a particularly protuberant nose. All in all, a distinctly Gallic appearance, Kevin thought wryly, surprised only at the absence of a strong-smelling cigarette to complete the stereotypical façade.

Bret introduced the new arrival as Jean-Marc and beckoned him to the vacant place at their table.

"*Bonsoir, bonsoir,*" the newcomer boomed, reaching over the table elegantly to shake everyone's hand in turn – even Tanji's. Kevin noted that he made no move to embrace them or even to kiss Tanji's hand, which did not quite fit the characteristics he had imagined from the man's typecast appearance.

Kevin was the last to be introduced, and made some idiomatically polite reply in English. The grey-haired man looked sharply at him and said something to Bret in the language of Lyndesfarne.

"What did he say?" Kevin hissed to Tanji.

"He asked what you were doing here," she responded quietly, speaking almost directly into his ear, "He's just realised that you're not from my World."

Bret answered the Frenchman in English, sounding faintly irritated.

“Kevin is helping me with my enquiries, as is Tanji,” he replied, adding with noticeable emphasis, “I *am* here in an official capacity, you know.”

Jean-Marc deflated, looking slightly less pompous than before.

“Kevin is the designer of the New Bridge,” Bret continued patiently.

“Ah, yes,” the Frenchman said, suddenly smiling, “I have heard of you.”

He spoke in good educated English, with only the slightest hint of a French accent. Kevin nodded self-deprecatingly in response.

“And you may have heard that both Kevin and Tanji,” Bret indicated both of them with a wave of his hand, “Have helped us before with various enquiries?”

The Frenchman nodded slowly, now apparently reminded of their modest reputation.

“And so,” Bret concluded, “I have asked my friends to assist me once again in my present enquiries, which have led up to speak to you.”

“Well, yes, OK,” Jean-Marc stuttered, waving in the general direction of Kevin and Tanji, “But perhaps I should start by telling them some of the background.”