

Chapter 24 Staying with the Court Manteaus

During one of her regular briefings with the Empress, Commissioner Duplessis had stated the threat level to Meldy and her sisters was now much lower. Antoinette's mother, Madame Court Manteau, had invited them to stay in their grand house once again. This was where they had stayed on their first visit to the Departement de Londres.

Even though the risk to their freedom was considered to be low, they were taken from the palace in a closed carriage. It was possible there might still be remnants of the du Malcontent sister's supporters on the loose.

Monsieur Court Manteau had also asked Baron von Kùhlschrank to stay for a few days so he accompanied Nicky and the Wagley sisters in the carriage. Antoinette was already at home and Amelie had some final duties to attend to before following later.

"Lady Patrice, Lady Catherine," said the Baron, "I have wanted to ask you a question but it never seemed to be the right time. Where are you from?"

"England of course," they replied.

"This is what I have been led to believe," mused the Baron, "but I have to admit I am finding that increasingly difficult to accept. I have spent many months there and I have become familiar with English vocabulary, accents and many other aspects of their use of language. You, however, speak in a different way which has puzzled me. I asked myself, are you from North America or the Antipodes? I am not, of course, saying this by way of a challenge or with any negative intent. I am just curious. Very curious."

His four fellow passengers looked at each other. What should they say?

"Forgive me," he continued, "as I have said, I am curious. I have also discovered you all appeared in the Place de Napoleon but no one seems to know how you got there. There is no record of a border crossing which would of course exist if you came from England. It is almost as if you were deposited from outer space!"

Meldy's expression changed to one of surprise and the Baron noticed. He turned to look at Nicky who was sitting beside him. His expression was similar and he was looking across at Meldy as if to ask a silent question. It could have been, 'what do we say?'

The Baron continued, "then I hear that Monsieur Plinkoff has been discussing physics at the university, that is, one particular aspect of the subject. Their Instantaneous Matter Transportation machine. Of course I then wondered, why that particular machine?"

“He’s interested in Aliens,” ventured Kick, “and he used to run an alien investigation department in England. Maybe he thinks the machine has something to do with that.”

“Where was his department?”

“In England,” replied Popster.

“Lady Patrice, I have had many discussions with English government ministers and I have never heard of such a department.”

“It’s a secret,” said Meldy.

“Well if it is known to you it cannot be a well kept secret,” laughed the Baron. “Do not get me wrong. No disrespect is intended and whatever you tell me will be treated in the strictest confidence.”

Once again his fellow passengers exchanged glances.

“Another interesting fact has emerged,” he continued, “a palace staff member was patrolling the corridors late one night when he thought he heard voices. However, when he stopped to listen there was only one voice. Apparently it was Master Nicholas talking in his sleep.”

The three sisters looked at Nicky. What had he said?

“The words did not make much sense to him. Something about ‘when the gateway opens’ and ‘sitting under a tree’ and ‘waving at the camera’. There was more but he could not remember.

Nicky was embarrassed. “I can’t help it,” he cried, “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“That’s alright Nicky,” said Popster, “there’s no harm done.”

“It could have been any of us,” added Kick.

“I’m always talking in my sleep,” said Meldy.

“Of course Master Nicholas,” said the Baron, “there is no harm done. I would just like to hear about your world, wherever it is.”

“What do you mean, our world?” chorused the twins.

“Well, I am certain your world is somehow separate from our world. How, why and what I have no idea but honestly, I can think of no other explanation.”

“You are a secret agent!” cried Meldy.

“No, Lady Esmeralda, just an interested.....”

“With respect your excellency,” interjected Kick, “how can you expect us to be honest with you if you will not be honest with us? We will treat whatever you tell us in strictest confidence as well.”

“Ah,” said the Baron. “You have me there. You are very astute but of course I already know this.”

“Well your excellency?” asked Popster.

“Ah, here we are. I think we will have to continue this conversation at some other time.”

The carriage had arrived at the Court Manteau’s residence. With an echoing clatter from the horse’s hooves it passed through the entrance passageway and turned round in the yard behind the house. Madame Court Manteau, Antoinette and Sophie were there to greet them and the visitors were ushered through the house into the Grande Salle. This was the most impressive reception room in the house.

“Welcome to our home your excellency,” said Madame, “and welcome home Catherine, Patrice and Esmeralda. Also, welcome to Nicky who visits us for the first time. Welcome one and all.”

Nicky gaped as he surveyed the expansive room. He wandered over to the grand piano and Antoinette joined him. “It would please us all if your brother Eustace could be here to play for us,” she said.

Madame came over to speak to him. “Nicky, both Antoinette and Sophie have told me how hospitable you and your brother were on their recent visit to your home. I thank you and now we have a chance to return the favour.”

The Baron overheard Madame’s thanks and mused on the implications. ‘So, they have been to visit Nicholas at his home. His home is near to the three sister’s so they have probably been there via the Place de Napoleon. Perhaps I should investigate this square even further.’

Monsieur Court Manteau had just returned from the Bureau de Sanitaire and the Baron was invited to his office to discuss some subjects of mutual interest. After having refreshments the sisters were taken upstairs to the attic room where they had

spent many happy weeks on their first visit. Nicky was shown to a room on the same corridor.

Antoinette had some news. "Paul and Raoul will soon be here," she said, "so you will all be together again." Sure enough, they were dropped off and the whole party reassembled in the Grande Salle.

Madame had something to say. "We would like to hold a musical evening before Nicholas and the three sisters return to their own country. What does everyone think?"

Antoinette looked expectantly at Kick and Popster, hoping they would be in agreement. "I'm happy to play the piano again," said Kick. "I would like to sing again," said Popster. Antoinette brightened, she already knew which pieces she wanted to perform.

"Raoul and Paul," asked Madame, "would you like to sing as well?" They would. "Someone else wishes to participate," she added, "Baron von Kùhlschrank. I hear he is an excellent tenor so we must find him something suitable to show off his talents."

The twins looked at each other. They were both thinking the same thing. 'Did he tell Madame he was an excellent tenor? If he is, what else can he do or more to the point, what can he not do?'

That evening, while Kick and Popster were socialising downstairs, Meldy and the gang explored the attic. Some old clothes and especially an old uniform intrigued the boys although it was much too big for them. Meldy and Sophie were looking out of a window at the yard below when a man appeared leading one of the horses. She could tell at once he had a good relationship with this particular animal.

"Who's that?" asked Meldy.

"Oh, that is Emile. He is new."

Meldy watched as he led the horse across the yard. When he turned towards the house she caught a glimpse of his face.

"I've seen him before," she said.

"But he is new so you cannot have seen him."

"But I have. I know, it was in the warehouse with Myrtille the witch lady! He wasn't there for very long."

Nicky came over with Raoul and Paul.

“Who wasn’t there for very long?”

“That man down there. He was in the warehouse, I know he was.”

Now his face was hidden so they had to wait while he did another circuit. Georges the coachman went over to speak to him causing him to turn.

“Yes, I saw him too!” said Nicky.

“So did I,” added Paul.

“We must tell my parents,” said Sophie. They all trailed down to the Grand Salle where Kick was playing the piano. “Maman,” she said, “Meldy and the boys think Emile was helping Madame du Malcontent when they were kidnapped!”

Madame was shocked. “How did we miss this?” she asked. Baron von Kühlschrank, seeing her expression, came over to see what the problem was. When he heard about Emile, he immediately went across the room to Monsieur Court Manteau and told him.

“We must confront him,” he said. “I will telephone Commissioner Duplessis.” The Commissioner was off duty but the importance of the situation meant she was there within the hour. Emile was called in for an interview.

Once he was seated, she told him what Meldy and the boys had said. “That is correct, Madame Commissioner,” he replied. “I admit I did associate myself with them but we quarrelled. I said the du Malcontent sisters were not to be trusted and could never take over from the Emperor or his daughter. I left the warehouse before the children were released. I wanted to make a fresh start Madame Commissioner and I like to work with horses.”

Baron von Kühlschrank was watching him. He looked at his eyes and his hands, was he lying? He asked him a question.

“Did you assist when they kidnapped the children?”

“No your excellency. I was paid to do some work on the wagon. I drilled some holes and put in some wires. They told me the explosive charge would just spray some manure over the procession. Then they said a larger bomb was to be put in the wagon, one designed to cause death and injury. I said I wanted to leave and they said they would kill me if I told anyone or went to the police.”

“How did they intend to do that?” asked the Commissioner.

“Madame Commissioner, they said they had sympathisers everywhere, even in the police force. But Madame, I found out later that some were planning to kidnap the sisters Lady Catherine and Lady Patrice so that is why I rang the police station to warn you. I did not dare leave my name.”

“Commissioner,” asked the Baron, “was such warning received? You did of course ask me to keep an eye on them when they left the palace.”

“Yes, we did receive a call and we could easily check the call log...”

“Commissioner,” said the Baron, “perhaps Emile should take a lie detector test so we can clear this matter up.”

“Emile,” asked Monsieur Court Manteau, “do you agree to take this test? You have not been here very long but you have proved to be very useful in our stables. If you pass it will mean you did warn the police and we can express our gratitude because it was our daughter as well as the twins who were in that carriage when the kidnappers struck.”

“Thank you Monsieur and yes, I will take the test. I am sorry for my mistakes and want to make a fresh start. I called the police because I could not just sit back and watch the three Ladies put in danger.

“But for now,” said the Commissioner, “we will have to take you to the police station.”

Commissioner Duplessis then left with Emile. Meldy asked the Baron what would happen to him. He thought for a minute then said, “Lady Esmeralda, I think he is telling the truth but he did join in with Myrtille du Malcontent.”

“But you said he said he was sorry. Surely we should forgive him. And he likes horses, that must mean something.”

“Yes, maybe it does mean something.”

That night, Meldy lay awake listening to the sounds outside their window. Horses shuffled in their stalls and an owl hooted in one of the trees. The twins whispered to each other on their side of the room and the old house creaked and cracked as it cooled down after the warmth of the day.

‘I wonder what will happen to Emile,’ she thought. ‘He didn’t look as mean as the others and the Baron didn’t think he was lying.’

She dozed off for a bit then woke up again. 'The Empress is coming to the musical evening,' she thought, 'we'll ask her to help him. She'll know what to do.'

Next thing she knew it was morning.