**Rodan and Le Chevalier**

Midnight Mass had been over for an hour, now. Every citizen of Parthenay in the Deux-Sèvres Department of France was safe and warm in his or her home and enjoying their Reveillon de Noel, the Christmas dinner with its traditional menu items. Even though it was now very late, the meal was expected to last for several hours, the food savoured as it should be. There was time for sleep later and the excitement of present giving in the morning.

“In England, before Oliver Cromwell banned fun at Christmas, the great houses would have feasting and dancing from midnight until dawn every night of the Twelve Days from Christmas Eve to Epiphany,” Kristoph pointed out as he savoured the smoked salmon and foie gras with baked mushrooms stuffed with smoked goat cheese that was the first course.

“Oh, don’t remind me,” Marion said cheerfully despite her words. “Remember our first Christmas together, when I was still a literature undergraduate at Hope University. We joined the revellers at Houghton Tower in Lancashire in 1585. William Shakespeare was there. He was between plays and feeling the financial pinch as well as writer’s block, so he ate and drank as if every night was his last meal.”

“There was a good deal of food to be had,” Kristoph noted.

“I found it quite exhausting partying every night,” Marion continued. “I actually got quite fed up of wearing a different gown every night. Especially when the gowns came with all those stiff layers of underskirts and a corset. And then being expected to do all those complicated dances like the Volta and Galliard.”

“But you looked magnificent, my dear,” Kristoph told her. “I was the envy of all the men.”

“I think that would be fun,” Rodan commented. “Twelve parties one after the other.”

“Then we will take you to an Elizabethan Christmas,” Kristoph told her. “But not yet. When you are old enough to wear a corset and whalebone underskirt, and can stay awake that long.”

“I can stay awake,” she protested.

“You didn’t have much of a nap yesterday afternoon,” Marion pointed out. “What with running out to play sled-riding down the hill with the other youngsters. I bet they’re all drooping by now, too.”

“But I am Gallifreyan,” Rodan argued. “I can regulate my body so that I am not tired.”

“Well, we shall see how you do tonight,” her grandfather, Arges Mielles told her. He wondered if such a promise from Lord de Lœngbǽrrow was a good idea. He had long given up the idea of Rodan being an ordinary Caretaker child, and he fully appreciated the opportunities to travel and broaden her experiences that being the foster child of an Oldblood patriarch afforded her. But this grand world of aristocratic partying sounded a little too much.

Rodan took that as a challenge and remained bright and alert through the turkey served with chestnut stuffing, roasted button mushrooms and tiny onions sautéed in white wine that she had peeled as well as the chestnuts before going off for sledding fun. She brought the cheese course to the table herself, having been the one who chose the selection, and as the dining room clock struck a quarter to three she enjoyed her slice of the buttercream sponge cake shaped like a yule log.

When the adults retired from the table to enjoy a glass of the cognac that had been part of their raffle prize, she had a glass of eggnog with just a trace of the liquor in it. She sipped it as she re-arranged the figures around the Crèche on the sideboard. She had put the baby Jesus figure into the stable straight after they got home from Midnight Mass and the shepherds had arrived before the Reveillon began. Now she added in all the other visitors to the scene according to French tradition. The sailor bought by her grandfather came first.

“Bethlehem IS a very long way from the sea,” she pointed out. “But so is our house on the southern plain. Le Marin might have been home on leave.”

Nobody disputed her logic. The adults watched as she positioned each of the hand carved wooden models of shopkeepers and tradesmen in the scene. The butcher, baker and chandler came together like a humbler version of the Three Wise men. Their gifts were more immediately practical, too.

“Candles to light the stable, of course. And bread and meat for the first Reveillon. And here is le laitier – the dairyman, bringing milk and butter and cheese.”

“There wasn’t a dairyman,” Marion remarked. “I didn’t buy one of those.”

“I bought some more,” Rodan answered. “Here’s the chocalatier and the pâtissier with sweet gifts.”

 “That is a very busy stable,” Arges remarked.

“Not everyone visits at the same time,” Rodan answered him with perfect logic. “Here is le chevalier. He is there to protect them.”

Chevalier literally translated as ‘horseman’, but it was more usually taken to mean a Knight with chivalric duties, and the figure that Rodan put in place looked very much like a medieval French knight, the sort that would have gone on the Crusades in defence of Christianity.

There was something else about the figure, though. Marion stood up from her comfortable armchair and more closely examined the Chevalier.

“It looks like you, Kristoph,” she said in surprise. “How did that happen?”

“Monsieur Dubois made it for me,” Rodan explained. “I told him I wanted it to look like my Père and he carved it especially. Père and grand-Père played boules with him last week, so he knew what he looked like.”

“It’s very good. Put him where he belongs in the group.”

Rodan put Le Chevalier just to the right of the stable and its honoured occupants, there to watch over them. The scene complete, she went to the sofa and curled up, surrounded by cushions and watched the candles flicker around the Crèche, the light playing on the wooden figures giving them almost an appearance of movement - even of life.

She didn’t go to sleep. Really, she didn’t. But the warmth and the quiet chat going on around her, the contentment that comes with good food, all lulled her until it was difficult to tell the difference between waking and sleeping.

The candle light brightened and encompassed her. When she blinked and looked again the crèche was not just a wooden model on the sideboard, but a real, live place. When she looked up, instead of the low ceiling of the living room, cold stars shone down from a velvet sky above a small village. Around her all was dark and quiet except one tiny shelter for animals made of stones piled upon each other and a roof of rough planks placed across. There, light was spilling out and a family were huddled together alongside the domestic beasts. A small fire near the doorless entrance gave a little warmth and protection against the wild creatures of the night.

At first, they were alone in the dark night, but after a while there were lights moving along the narrow streets, groups of people were coming to see the family, bringing gifts, small but useful things like kindling for the fire, food to eat, milk to drink, a blanket to wrap the baby, a shawl for the new mother. A sailor brought fruits that grew in distant lands.

Then the knight came on his horse. The simple people were afraid of him at first, but then they saw him get down from his horse and take off his helmet. He was a man, after all, and one with a kindness in his eyes that belied his stern and authoritative manner and bearing.

He didn’t bring a gift. Perhaps his being there was not intentional. Perhaps it was unlikely that a man of his great status would be bothered with such small things. But he did step inside that rough dwelling briefly. He spoke softly to the mother and reassuringly to the father. He knelt, his sword scabbard touching the straw covered floor, and removed one of his leather gloves before gently placing his hand on the baby’s forehead in a sort of blessing.

He stood and bowed his head to the family and then stepped outside. The villagers bowed to him as he replaced his gauntlet and began to fasten his helmet.

Then there were murmurs of consternation amongst the people. There were sounds of marching feet and the word ‘soldiers’ was repeated in fearful whispers.

There was no curfew in place, no law against being in the streets at night. All the same, nobody wanted to argue the point with soldiers.

The Chevalier mounted his horse and turned it into the middle of the narrow street. The foot soldiers when they came into view could not pass by unless he yielded.

He didn’t yield. Nor did he draw his sword, though his hand was at the hilt as warning to any man who felt equal to the challenge.

None of the soldiers did. They looked at the Chevalier for a long, tense moment, then they turned and marched away. The relief amongst the people was palpable. The Chevalier nodded as if he knew his work was done, then he turned his horse and rode away, passing a group of shepherds with wonder in their eyes who came towards the only source of light and warmth in the village.

Rodan sat up and looked around at the drawing room in the little house in France. Her own family were there. Her foster mother was sitting beside her, always ready to give her a reassuring hug even though she had long since faced the Untempered Schism and seen the truth of the whole of infinity and should not need such reassurance.

Her grandfather was there, sitting in an armchair by the fire, his eyes perhaps looking beyond the room at places and people he had seen on his voyages across space as the Gallifreyan equivalent of Le Marin.

Her father in every way except a blood tie had risen from his seat to pour more cognac. She looked at him carefully and framed a question that had occurred to her.

“If you WERE le Chevalier, would you protect them?” she asked.

Kristoph followed her gaze to the Crèche and smiled gently. It was the same expression the Chevalier in her dream had when he knelt before the baby.

“A vulnerable family in a place where those in power were their deadly enemy?” he said. “It would be a stain on my soul if I did not offer any help I could. But that stable and everything that occurred there and everything that happened afterwards, is a Fixed Point in time and space, perhaps one of the most inviolable Fixed Points anywhere in Creation. It is beyond my authority even as a Time Lord to change one moment of it.”

“I wish it wasn’t,” Rodan said. “Because of what King Herod did to the other children.”

“I agree with Rodan,” Marion added. “I read somewhere that the massacre of the Holy Innocents was not as terrible as the stories suggest. Bethlehem was only a very small place and there might not have been more than a dozen children of the age Herod ordered to be killed, not the hundreds of legend. But…”

Kristoph looked at his wife and nodded. He knew just what she was going to say next.

“Even one child mercilessly slain by a jealous tyrant is a terrible cruelty for the mother of that child,” she said. “As well as a tragedy of history.”

“It most certainly is,” Arges Mielles agreed.

“If le Chevalier COULD have done something, I know he would have, and that’s good enough for me,” Marion said, looking meaningfully at Kristoph.

“And me,” Rodan agreed before stifling a yawn.

“It is nearly five,” Kristoph said. “Even the strongest willed Elizabethan revellers were yawning by this time. They hid it behind fans and gloved hands, but they were tired. You can go to bed without fear of being thought of as weak.”

“I think I should like to go to sleep, now,” she admitted. “Then I can enjoy Christmas Day much more when I wake.”

Rodan stood and kissed each of the adults in turn and left the room. Marion yawned despite her best efforts. She, too, declared that she was ready for bed.

“Merry Christmas, my dear Marion,” Kristoph said as she kissed him goodnight. “Sleep in peace k owing that Le Chevalier protects all under this roof.”