

The Château de Chanteloire's Great Hall had witnessed many spectacular historic moments across the centuries--including the bloody, ninth-century altercation between King Louis the Pious and his renegade son, Lothar--and was closed to a general public unaware of its existence. This because it was known only to its current owner, Comte Lucien de Rubempré and his centuries-old pals Mordecai and Arnaud, for whom a return to past glories was always "*à disposition*," as he put it.

The size of an average tennis court and refurbished in largely Renaissance style, the hall could seat forty-eight guests on turquoise velvet covered, high-backed chairs ranged along two mahogany tables each stretching the length of the polished-pine floor fifty feet below the beamed ceiling from which hung candle-lit chandeliers on silver and gold chains. Further illumination was provided by sconces on the gilt-varnished walls. In short, it was a place fit for royalty to impress their neighbours. Also a place for them to eat and drink to excess, canoodle, plot, and fight. Little wonder, with *their* humble origins, that Noddy, Meryl, Knobby, Rodney, Anthea, Rollo and Ernie should have been gobsmacked when ushered into it by an unctuous Comte Lucien.

"Holy shit!" said Knobby, for example.

But, accustomed to such surroundings, Mordy and Arnaud just smiled and took their seats--Arnaud's on a special dog chair--around the end of one of the immense tables laid out for this evening's small party.

"Join us, chaps and chapesses, *do*," said Mordy waving an inviting arm at those still clustered at the doorway staring into a room the like of which they had never seen.

And, one by one, they did. Sitting carefully in case they knocked over one of the crystal goblets set before them, or besmirched any of the gleaming silverware laid out for the entrée of spit-roasted quail and then a main course of wild boar stewed in a sauce of tomatoes and red wine, which would soon be placed before them by three maids in white blousons with purple velvet *jupes*.

"Just take it easy and *relax*," Mordy advised. "It's only a junket after all."

"*Rauf, rauf*," said Arnaud, who would be served his dinner in a special pewter bowl, on which was inscribed in gold letters: *Chien*.

"But first a toast," Mordy said, standing on his chair and raising his goblet of Pouilly-Fumé while the maids hurried to fill their guests' glasses with local Loire reds, whites, and rosés of their choice.

Noddy, Knobby, and Ernie said they'd rather have a beer, thank you very much, but Mordy wasn't having any of that.

"When in Rome," he said.

"We're not *in* Rome," said Noddy.

"Manner of speaking, *mon ami*. *Do* try a drop of the Pouilly-Fumé. Put hairs on your chest. I can assure you it is of the finest quality."

So Noddy, Knobby, and Ernie did as advised, while Rodney, Rollo, Anthea, and Meryl went for an assortment of Pinots, Chardonnays, and Rosés d'Anjou.

"Jolly dee," Mordy said when all the glasses were brimming and everybody was standing expectantly at his or her place. "So, here's to us all!"

"Us all!" chorused the crews of both the Deux Chevaux and the Range Rover Vogue Sport, swigging at their goblets.

"But *especially* to Noddy and Meryl without whom this celebration would never have taken place," Mordy added, addressing the pair sitting next to him.

"Noddy and Meryl!" echoed around the vast space, and then bounced back off the fifty-foot ceiling.

“So now sit and enjoy,” said Mordy. “And, while you eat, you may expect a little in-house entertainment,” he added, replacing his goblet on the tablecloth and pointing to the far end of the hall, where a screen of cinematic dimensions was sliding incongruously into place.

“Porno?” said Noddy, who’d liked the Pouilly-Fumé so much he had already had his glass refilled twice by Françoise, the prettiest of the maids.

“One way of looking at it, old man. You will see...you will see. Now *do* pay these little quail chappies the attention they deserve, eh?”

“*Rauf, rauf,*” said Arnaud, licking at his bowl.

“Prob’bly won’t be till we’re well past the boar and onto dessert the PM will speak to us,” Mordy added.

“PM of France?” said Rodney Snipes, already the worse for wear after three goblets of Pinot noir.

“Of Great *Britain, mon vieux*. Who will shortly be joining us with news I am sure will interest you.”

“*Biffo?*” said Rodney.

“The same. Sources tell me he is about to make the speech of his life.”

“And we’ll see it?”

“In all its glory,” said Mordy, investigating a quail with his fork. “Meantime, eat and enjoy. Eh, Arnaud?”

“*Rauf, rauf,*” said Arnaud, tucking into his *hors d’oeuvres*.

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And astonished indeed were the members of the party, when, over coffee, Courvoisier and a French version of After Eight Mint Chocolate Thins called *Après Huit Menthe Chocolat Maigres*, the huge screen came to life to reveal the reading room of Number 10 Downing Street, where, behind a red-leather topped desk, sat the prime minister looking craven. He was flanked by foreign secretary Chalkie, and Professor Mireille McFife who had been headhunted from her recent *agent provocateur* role with offers of wealth and status beyond her wildest whims in exchange for a “polished” simultaneous French interpretation of Biffo’s words on this most “axial” of occasions. On the desk before them sat an apple and blackberry pie marked, in red capital letters: HUMBLE.

Chalkie had argued long and hard with Biffo not to be so damned *literal* about an idea that had only been a *metaphor* for God’s sake. A mere rhetorical device! But would he listen? Fat chance. Nothing better than a visual aid, Biffo had argued. As any teacher worth his salt would tell you.

“Might as well eat the bally thing in full view and make my meaning clear to even the dimmest in the queendom,” he’d insisted to Chalkie, who’d succumbed in despair when the PM added, “Reduces the chances of having to eat one’s *words* later, eh?”

“Woz the pie for? And why’z it got writing on it?” asked Noddy, who had inside him a whole bottle of Pouilly-Fumé, along with four quails, two helpings of wild boar, three vanilla crème brûlés, and two glasses of Courvoisier.

“Shhhh!” said Mordy. “The show’s about to start.”

And, sure enough, the sidelights in 10 Downing Street’s Reading Room were dimmed, and the only beam remaining played across Biffo’s puffy face as the TV director called for action.

“My fellow citizens,” the prime minister began, looking as serious as he was able and hoping to strike from the outset the francophone note suggested by Professor McFife when prepping him for his speech.

“Remember how good de Gaulle was on TV,” she’d told him. “First politician to use the medium to his advantage. Years before the Yanks!”

“*Mes concitoyens*,” she now simultaneously interpreted for her international audience, batting her mascaraed lashes at the cameras and hoping she’d ever so soon be able to quit her post at the University of Aberdeen to become a major player on the world stage--and be paid more.

“I sit here before you a chastened leader,” Biffo read from the scrap of paper in his shaking hand before dropping his notes, reaching for the pie marked HUMBLE, cutting himself a slice, and licking at the icing sugar topping, while Chalkie fiddled with his Old Etonian tie and stared off.

“Knobheads,” said Knobby, who’d eaten and drunk twice as much as his brother on the argument he was twice as *big* as him, and therefore needed twice as much sustenance.

“Shhhh!” said Meryl, who was peering at the screen and cocking her ears as the maudlin spiel moved through its early stages.

Biffo was faux-weeping now, while *chewing* on the pie marked HUMBLE.

“Woz ’e *on* about?” asked Rodney, who’d eaten and drunk the same amount as Knobby.

“Shhhhhhh!” said Anthea, who’d barely eaten or drunk. “He’s saying he’s sorry.”

“That’s what *all* politicians say when they’re in a hole without a ladder,” said Rollo. “‘Sorry.’ As if that fixed *everything*!”

But when Biffo, now gagging on his pie, offered to Patrice du Poncée his “sincere” apologies, and to the “hero vampires” an amnesty and safe passage home, the ancient baronial hall echoed with jubilation. Fists punched in the air. Hoots. Claps. Cheers. The whole nine yards.

And when--at the climax of the speech shortly before clutching his stomach, belching, and having to be supported off-stage by Chalkie and Mireille--Biffo offered the “hero vampires and their helpers” recognition of their “bravery” in the form of CBEs, MBEs, OBEs, and even KBEs, the jubilation redoubled.

“Right on, Biffo, lad!” chortled Noddy, for example. “*Sir* Noddy and *Sir* Knobby. How about *that* for a giggle?” he added only moments before both he and Knobby fell off their turquoise velvet covered chairs and banged their heads on the terrazzo-tiled floor.

Rodney and Ernie stared at the screen in disbelief, while Meryl and Anthea, after helping Noddy and Knobby back to their feet, hugged again.

Mordy and Arnaud merely exchanged knowing glances, one elvish, one canine, but both pleased at yet another mission well on its way to a successful conclusion.

The only fly in the ointment was Rollo, who commented dourly, “And if we say no?”

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But nobody was in the mood for such sour grapes, and Rollo’s--albeit pertinent--question was quickly drowned out by the entrance into the hall of a band of strolling musicians playing bagpipes, hurdy-gurdies, and drums while warbling ancient French ballads.

“C’mon, chaps, let’s *dance*!” cried Mordy whisking an excited Arnaud from his chair, and, in the centre aisle between the tables, performing an idiosyncratic gavotte with Arnaud standing on his hind legs and waving his forepaws in the air.

At first the British were reluctant to join in, but once Meryl had thrown a jug of water over Noddy, and the two of them entered a complex routine somewhere between a Harlem shuffle and a jive, the mood caught. Even Knobby, who’d never

danced with a girl in his life but was now too pissed to care, asked Anthea if she would do him the honour--and, to his astonishment, she *did*. Which left Rodney, Ernie, and Rollo as the wallflowers. But once Françoise, Thérèse, and Chantal (the maids) took their hands, they too were gavotting like there was no tomorrow.

Well, Rodney, Thérèse, Ernie, and Chantal were. Rollo apologised to Françoise after a few ill-judged steps, but was happy enough for her to sit on his knee while he discussed with her in Franglais the merits and demerits of accepting the PM's pardon and accepting a gong. And, for a maid, Françoise was astonishingly insightful. But then she was a *French* maid, who, as Rollo was soon to discover, was working well below her pay grade what with her Sorbonne *maîtrise* and everything.