

Chapter 15 A Visit to the Royal Chapel

Next morning, Raoul came with his friend Paul to a choir rehearsal at the Court Manteau residence. This was delayed so they started playing with Meldy and Sophie and what better place than a newly delivered straw stack? Soon Raoul, sitting on the top, chose to show off some of his knowledge.

"I bet you do not know what an ossuary is!" he said.

Not wishing to be shown up, Paul replied, "yes I do!"

"What is it then?"

"It is for keeping plates and bowls and ... things in."

"No, it is not. It is a room full of bones."

"Who would want a room full of bones?" asked Meldy.

"They should be buried, not kept in an oss ... an ossuary," suggested Sophie.

"An oss-u-arry. There is one underneath the chapel. It is full of skulls."

"Oh I know where that is, but how did you know about the bones?" asked Paul.

"I went down there," said Raoul. "I was not supposed to and it was really spooky. Now the chapel is open again we could go and have a look. I bet you dare not come!"

"I'll come!" cried Meldy, "skulls can't hurt you."

"There might be ghosts," said Sophie.

"My sisters will take us but we mustn't tell them what we're doing."

"We should take torches," added Paul, "it will be dark!"

Meldy managed to persuade Kick and Popster to take them all on the following day. "You'd better behave!" said Kick.

"We're not used to looking after four children," added Popster.

“We’ll be good. Raoul said we can visit and he wants to show us where they used to sing. You can wait outside, we won’t be long.”

They collected Raoul and Paul from Madame Delpierre’s on the way and took the omnibus south towards the palace and the river. It was a fine day so they sat upstairs. The four younger members of the party watched the scenery and the passing horses while the twins chatted. Once at the chapel they sat on a seat outside and let the four adventurers go in alone. Not many other people were there at that time so no one noticed the four slipping underneath a barrier to go down into the ossuary. It was dark so they switched on their torches. A wall of skulls with empty staring eye sockets greeted them.

“I’ve never seen so many bones!” whispered Meldy. She found talking made her a bit less scared.

“I wonder who they were?” whispered Sophie.

“Some are damaged. Look. They could have been in a battle,” suggested Raoul.

With skulls on one side and more bones on the other they crept to the end of the chamber.

“We should go back now,” said Paul. “We have seen them all!”

“There’s a door here,” whispered Meldy, “We could open it and have a look!”

Raoul took hold of the handle and pushed. “It is locked,” he said.

“You did not expect it to open did you?” laughed Paul.

They turned and wandered back down the row of skulls, peering into empty eye sockets and at jaws with decayed or missing teeth. Raoul stopped. He saw something thin and rusty sticking out from under the teeth of one particularly large skull. ‘I do not want to cause a skull avalanche!’ he thought as he gingerly eased it out.

“It is a key!” he whispered. The others came back to have a look.

“See if it fits the lock on the door,” suggested Meldy.

They wiped away the cobwebs then Raoul tried it in the keyhole.

“It does! Let us open the door and have a look,” he suggested. It creaked, looking as if it had been untouched for many centuries. They shone their torches into the gloom and could see what looked like a passageway.

“I wonder where it goes?” whispered Sophie.

“We could have a quick look,” replied Meldy.

The boys were also feeling adventurous. “That will not hurt,” agreed Paul.

“We will take the key in case they lock us in,” replied Raoul.

“Good idea,” said Meldy. “We don’t want to be trapped in there. The passage goes right and left, let’s go right.”

“Why not left?” asked Paul.

“Right sounds like it’s the ‘right’ way,” insisted Meldy.

They closed the door, Raoul pocketed the key and they headed off down the corridor. It was dusty and full of cobwebs but they continued undeterred.

“What do spiders do down here?” asked Sophie. “There are no flies.”

“They might want to eat us because they must be really hungry,” joked Paul.

“Or maybe they just eat each other,” replied Raoul.

They pressed on until they came to another door. “Shall we open it?” asked Raoul.

“Yes. I want to see what’s in there,” replied Meldy.

They opened the door a few millimetres but then it stopped. There was something on the other side. Something that was resisting their attempts to open it any further.

“It will not move,” said Raoul.

“Push harder,” suggested Meldy.

“Then help me push,” replied Raoul.

All four of them pushed. Suddenly there was a loud bang from the other side, the door swung open and they almost tumbled through. Also, a cloud of dust came billowing through the open doorway.

“Close it quick!” coughed Sophie, “I do not want to breathe all that dust!”

“I hope nobody heard,” said Paul.

They waited a few minutes but their curiosity got the better of them so they slowly reopened the door. The dust was not too bad so they carried on.

Now they were in a large multi vaulted space. The four of them had to step down then walk across a large flat piece of wood which had been leaning up against the other side of door. Meldy knew at once where they were as Kick had described it from the picture she had seen in the library.

“We’re underneath the palace,” she whispered. “This is the undercroft.”

“It is really big!” whispered Sophie.

All sorts of things were piled up by the pillars. Old furniture, crates, boxes, bicycles and lots of other interesting objects. They shone their torches around but there was no other sign of human life. Some mice scuttled away and there were lots of cobwebs but that was it. Not a place to linger, too cold and musty for that.

On further examination they noticed there was some order to the piles. There were passageways between which led in clearly defined directions at right angles to the main throughway.

“Let’s go down here,” suggested Meldy as she pointed to the right along one such passageway. The others followed until their route was barred. “Oh, it’s a wall,” she sighed. “Let’s try the other way.”

They retraced their steps, crossed the main throughway and approached the other side. There was something large and flat leaning up against that wall.

“Let us go back, we should not be down here,” said Sophie.

Meldy and Raoul peered behind the large wooden door-like object.

“There’s an open doorway!” whispered Raoul.

“Quick,” said Paul, “let us move this away and have a look.”

All four of them pushed and pulled as hard as they could. The object made a scraping sound as it moved on the stone floor.

“Again!” whispered Paul, “we are almost there!”

They cleared enough space and shone their torches into the gloom. Much to their surprise, there was a stairway leading up and round a corner. They stopped and stared.

“I wonder what is up there?” whispered Raoul.

“Let’s go and have a look,” said Meldy. They had come this far so she thought they should at least explore a bit more. “You were right, Sophie,” she continued, “you said there’d be a secret passage and we’ve found it!” They crept up the stairs. Once round the corner it led them straight up to a small landing. There were two doors, one on each side and a blank wall ahead of them.

“Shhh!” whispered Paul. “I hear voices!”

The four crowded onto the landing and listened. There was a woman’s voice and it sounded threatening.

“You will sign now!” it said.

“No, I will not!” replied another female voice.

“We have had enough of this nonsense,” said the first voice. “You sign or we will stop feeding you!”

“Then I will starve. I will never sign!”

Meldy and Sophie looked at each other in the torchlight. They recognised that voice.

“It’s the Princess,” whispered Meldy. “She’s in trouble!”

“Shhh!” whispered Sophie. They distinctly heard the sound of a door being slammed shut. Then silence.

“Should we call out?” whispered Meldy.

“Wait!” whispered Raoul. “Let us open the door and see what is on the other side.”

The door opened towards them but there was a ledge at the bottom so anyone entering the room beyond would have step up and over. There was something else blocking the entrance.

“It looks like the back of a painting,” whispered Paul.

Inside the room, Princess Augustine heard a noise coming from behind the wall so she went to listen.

“Who is there?” she whispered.

“Your highness, it is Sophie, with Esmeralda, Raoul and Paul!”

“There is a catch here,” said Raoul. He slid the bolt across and the picture swung away from the wall. They were face to face with the Princess.

“How did you get in there?” she asked.

“There’s a secret passage. We can get you out!” said Meldy.

“Where is my sister?” asked Sophie.

“She is not with me Sophie. They must have taken her somewhere else.”

“We must hurry,” said Meldy. “My sisters are waiting. They don’t know where we are.”

Raoul and Paul shone their torches down the stairs and hurried off. The Princess replaced the painting, closed the door, then went next while Sophie and Meldy shone their torches at her feet so she could see where she was going. Once in the undercroft they found their way back to the passageway door.

“Down here,” whispered Raoul. Just then he dropped his torch and when he picked it up it didn’t work.

“Leave it!” hissed Paul.

They found their way to the ossuary door and once back with the bones, the Princess stopped. “How am I going to get out of here? I might be recognised.”

“I’ll find my sisters. They’ll know what to do,” replied Meldy.

“We will stay with her royal highness,” said Raoul. “You go with Meldy, Sophie.”

The girls negotiated the stairs and peered out of the door into the chapel. The barrier was still there. The authorities obviously had not intended the ossuary to be on the visitor route.

Kick and Popster were inside the chapel. “We’ve been looking for you everywhere, where have you been?” asked Kick. “Where are the others?”

Meldy looked around then came really close and whispered, “come with us. We’ve got a secret!”

“Why are you whispering?” asked Kick, but something in their sister’s expression told them to follow rather than ask any more.

Meldy and Sophie waited till no one was looking then ducked under the barrier.

“You can’t go down there!” said Popster but it was too late. They had disappeared.

The twins followed. Meldy turned in order to light their way down the stairs.

“Where are you taking us?” asked Kick as she peered into the gloom.

“But it’s full of bones!” exclaimed Popster.

A familiar voice spoke to them from a particularly dark corner. “Catherine, Patrice, It is I, Augustine.”

“It can’t be,” replied Popster. “It is! Your Highness!”

“Your sister and her friends have rescued me, can you help us get out of here?”

“I think I noticed a cleaner’s cupboard upstairs,” said Kick, “there might be something we can use as a disguise. I’ll have a look.”

She disappeared up the stairs and soon returned with two overalls.

“I’ll have one and you have the other,” she said. The Princess had the twins tie up her hair then she produced her reading glasses and put them on.

“There’s a cap, put that on too,” said Kick.

“And walk with a stoop,” suggested Popster.

“No one has ever seen me like this,” she laughed.

“I’ll go out and see if the coast is clear,” said Kick. “Hopefully they won’t be checking identities. They weren’t when we came in.”

Kick peered out from underneath the barrier but no one was looking so she walked as casually as possible to the chapel entrance. She backed away into the shadows because now two guards were standing with their backs to her. Any attempt to get out could easily end in disaster because the Princess was sure to be apprehended.

Kick slid under the barrier and went back to the ossuary.

“We can’t get out. There are two guards at the exit. What do we do now?”

To be continued