

Back through the gateway

Chapter 1 Meldy Speaks Out

Meldy Wagley was running as fast as she could in an underground passage. Ahead was Princess Augustine, keeping pace and out in front were Meldy's three friends with torch beams bobbing around walls and cobweb festooned ceilings.

"They're coming!" she shouted.

But something was changing, she was slowing down. Try as she might, she couldn't keep up with the others. The floor was getting sticky and she was slowing, slowing down. Behind, the Princess's kidnappers were gaining and getting much too close. She tried to warn her friends but no sound would come.

She woke with a start, gasping for breath. Half in her dream, she sat up and looked over at her sisters but they weren't there. Within a second or two it came to her, she was not in their attic room at the Court Manteau's grand house. No more visiting the stables with her special friend Sophie, no more of Antoinette's musical evenings with her sisters playing and singing to Princess Augustine. No more watching guests arriving in horse drawn carriages. She was back in her own room but vivid images of the last few weeks were still churning round in her mind like brightly coloured clothes in a tumble drier.

Slowly, she drifted off only to be woken by footsteps in the corridor outside her room. Time to get up.

She was with the rest of the family at breakfast when her father had something to say. "You three have had an incredible experience. You're heroes in a world we've never heard of and you've been awarded titles and medals by an Emperor. We don't pretend to understand how it happened but we couldn't be more proud of you."

Her mother continued, "Yes, we are so proud of you. You three are amazing." Here the three sisters exchanged glances. "But," she continued, "you do know what you did must remain secret, don't you."

The twins, Kick and Popster, nodded in resignation. They understood the consequences of speaking about their adventures to friends. No one could possibly comprehend so they would be laughed at, called weird, ignored. They were at an important point in their studies and had missed a few weeks of school so they needed to catch up fast.

Meldy, a few years younger, was desperate to speak of nothing else. Surely her friends would want to know where she had been and what she had been doing. Her parents had claimed she was studying in France with her twin sisters so what was she to say?

“Mummy,” she asked, “what will I tell my friends when they ask about it? If I don’t say anything they won’t speak to me.”

“Of course they will darling. Tell them about the house you stayed in but pretend it’s in the South of France somewhere. Say it’s near Toulouse.”

“What about all the horses?”

“Tell them it doubled as a riding school.”

“I think,” added Mr Wagley, “they’ll want to tell you what they’ve been doing. Say something or other then quickly ask about their summers. Meldy, in my experience, people love to talk about themselves.”

“That’s true,” sighed Kick, “students in our class will be full of trips to tiger reserves in India or counting turtles in the Galapagos islands.”

“Oh no,” added Popster, “I forgot what’s her name was going out there. She’ll be full of it.”

“There you are,” replied Mrs Wagley, “ask her lots of questions. Tell her French schooling was no where near as interesting as counting finches and lizards. Show some genuine interest because that poor girl needs some attention after all she’s been through.”

Now Meldy was back at school. Her parents had been right. Her friend’s interest in her experiences had been short lived. Now they were full of their own holidays. Meldy listened with varying levels of interest but her mind kept wandering back to the Palace rescue and the look of gratitude on Princess Augustine’s face when she realised Meldy and her three friends were going to rescue her from captivity.

She thought about Emperor Napoleon the Tenth’s words as he presented her with her treasured medal. What had he said? Oh yes, it was ‘extraordinary bravery in rescuing the Princess’. That was not all. Her captors had thought the rescue was a professional job. In reality it was mainly her and her three brave friends. Her sisters had helped to get the Princess away to safety and they too had been honoured. They had all been given titles while breakfasting with a grateful Emperor. Her attention swung back to her classmate’s account of a camel ride in some desert somewhere. Normally she would have asked the camel’s name but she was thinking

about her friend Sophie whose sister had also been freed because of their efforts. She had been full of gratitude as well.

The camel was now at the top of the largest ever sand dune. ‘More sand, who cares!’ decided Meldy while her thoughts flipped back to the Emperor’s words. The police had interviewed her about the secret passage into the palace. “We need your help,” the Captain had said. She and Sophie had given them ‘valuable assistance’, the Emperor had then been freed and the Police Captain had been promoted to Commissioner because of that rescue.

Yes, she certainly had done something incredible. She was bursting to stop this boring story about camels on sand dunes. Absolutely bursting. If they didn’t believe her, she had the medal to prove it. Surely they would believe her then? However, this time she said nothing.

A few weeks passed by. Meldy had managed to keep quiet about her amazing adventures and all might have been well but for the next visit of Lady Pastena Drinktyre. She was a frequent visitor to the school and the head always made such a fuss when she appeared.

For weeks the students had been drilled in neatness, politeness and the importance of active participation in lessons. This was because Lady Pastena had a habit of waylaying students in corridors and subjecting them to snap quizzes. Woe betide anyone who could not answer. She would fire a withering stare and the attendant staff would fret that the next substantial donation could be reduced or even withheld.

When the big day approached, the school was cleaned and any grubby decoration was replaced. The smell of fresh paint hung in the corridors and wafted through the classrooms while the students applied themselves to their work. Well, most of them did. Meldy didn’t have a lot of respect for Lady Pastena anyway. Her friends called her Lady Putrid Dungheap and they would delight in whispering this nickname in your ear just as the Lady in question approached. Everyone knew she could not stand snickering students.

When the big day came, the lingering smell of fresh paint mixed with the aroma of expensive perfume as Lady Pastena stalked the corridors pouncing on randomly selected students.

“You there, what are you learning in your history lessons?” she might ask.

Meldy’s biology lesson had just finished and she drifted into the corridor behind her classmates. Her mind was still on breakfast with the Emperor when Lady Pastena pounced.

“What have you been learning in Biology?” she asked.

“Oh, I er, well...” replied Meldy.

“Disgraceful! Idle girl!” declared Lady Pastena.

“I’m sorry your Ladyship,” replied a quick thinking Meldy, “but I haven’t been feeling very well.”

“Oh,” she replied, “I suppose under such circumstances you can’t concentrate all the time but you must make sure you catch up!” The staff members behind her now relaxed. They thought this particular crisis had passed. Meldy was, after all, a good student. They had no inkling of what was to come.

“Your Ladyship,” asked Meldy, “were you made a Lady by the Queen?” She could see some worried looks reappearing on the faces of the attendant teachers.

“Well, no young lady. My husband was knighted for services to industry.”

Meldy should have thanked her and left it there but she pushed on. Lady Pastena had seemed quite sympathetic after all.

“Your Ladyship, I was made a Lady by the Emperor Napoleon the Tenth because I helped to rescue his daughter Princess Augustine.”

Lady Pastena’s mouth fell open to display a set of unusually perfect white teeth. “What on earth are you talking about?” she demanded.

Meldy could see the group of teachers moving in to fend her off. She could not stop now.

“It was in the Departement de Londres. That’s in a parallel world. Napoleon won at the battle of Waterloo there you know. I got the country’s highest honour, the Order of Napoleon the Second. And, it had Laurel Leaves!”

By this time, two teachers were shepherding her away.

“The Emperor,” she called out, “told me they don’t give Laurel leaves to just anybody!”

Lady Pastena, still open mouthed, watched as Meldy was hustled away down the corridor.

“Whatever next?” she asked herself. “I blame those Flicknet videos!”