

Chapter 20 A trap is set

Baron Bruno von Kühlschrank had contacts in the City of Londres. These contacts told him about the arrest of the kidnappers and the release of Meldy and her friends. He wanted to speak to the children so he paid another visit to the palace and sat in one of the reception rooms while Amelie went to find them.

‘I must have an accurate description of Madame du Malcontent,’ he thought. ‘It is many years since we last met at my family’s summer residence.’

In skipped Sophie followed by Meldy and the boys. “Bonjour your Baronial Excellency!” said Meldy as she curtsied because Amelie had told her how important he was. “Are you going to marry Princess Augustine?” she asked, “she’s really wonderful you know, or perhaps you don’t. Well she is.”

“Lady Esmeralda,” he replied as he bowed, “it is my pleasure to meet you and to see you are looking so well after your ordeal.”

“Oh, it wasn’t an ordeal, it was fun. Nicky fooled them with his measles and moaning.”

“That was very brave of you all. I heard about your trick Master Nicholas and I still smile when I think of it. What made you choose that particular ruse?”

“I read it in a children’s story your Excellency,” he replied, “but Paul suggested the moaning.”

“Very well done all of you. Now, what can you tell me about your kidnappers?”

“Your Excellency,” said Raoul, “the witch lady was really scary!”

“This was Myrtille du Malcontent of course. What can you tell me about her?”

Between them, the gang members told him what they had told Commissioner Duplessis. He was particularly interested in her nervous habit of ring twisting.

“So she does this a lot? What was she doing or saying when you noticed?”

The children pondered. “Your Excellency,” said Paul, “she did it when she kidnapped me.”

“And me too,” said Raoul.

“She had this crazy look and she did it,” said Nicky, “she took us from the Place de Napoleon and we thought she was away with the fairies!” The Baron laughed heartily here.

“Yes,” said Meldy, “when she was going on about being Empress.”

“She said she wants to be Empress?”

“Yes your excellency,” replied Nicky, “she said the crowds will, er, something or other, when she’ll take her rightful place as Empress.”

“Master Nicholas. What will the crowds do? Cheer? Praise?”

“Acclaim! She said they’ll acclaim her!” cried Meldy, “and she was really scary.”

“Interesting. Did you notice anything else?”

“Your excellency,” said Paul, “they were drilling holes in a Bureau de Sanitaire wagon and Raoul said they should not have done it.”

“Yes,” added Raoul, “my Uncle worked there and he said they would never have done that.”

Baron von Kühlschrank’s expression changed. He sat back in his chair and smiled. “Thank you all for this information, you have been most helpful. When they told me a group of children had rescued Princess Augustine I did not believe them. Having met you all I can now see how the combination of your characters and personalities contributed to that rescue. A team effort as it were. I salute you all! With that he stood up and saluted. They bowed or curtsied in return.

After he had gone Meldy had something to say. “I like him. I hope he marries the Princess.”

“Isn’t he too old? He must be at least thirty!” said Sophie.

“Esmeralda,” said Amelie later, “I hope you were polite to the Baron.”

“Amelie, I called him his Baronial Excellency!”

“Esmeralda, you should not have done that!”

“But he liked it. He laughed. Will he marry Princess Augustine? I asked him but he didn’t answer.”

“Of course he did not. That is up to her. I think she must ask him because she will soon be Empress.”

“Will she get down on one knee? Or will she expect him to be on his knees before she asks him?”

“Esmeralda, I do not think she wishes to be married yet because she has a lot to do. She will need to find the money to improve our schools so the people will not want to see an expensive royal wedding when there are so many other things to do.”

“Will you go to university Amelie? Both my sisters want to go.”

“Maybe I will, maybe I will not. At the moment I have to look after you.”

“But I won’t be here for ever. I must go home after the coronation. Why don’t you come too?”

“I would like that.”

“You can stay with us or you could stay in Nicky’s tree house. You’d like it up there, It’s really big and there’s lots of room!”

“One day,” mused Amelie, “yes, one day I will go back. But you will soon forget me.”

“No I won’t ‘cos you’re wonderful! Even my sisters say so and they don’t say that about just anyone.”

“Well, I think you three are wonderful too.”

Meldy was hugging Amelie when the phone rang. “Well I have to work now,” she said as she wiped her eyes.

“Meldy,” said Popster, have you...”

“You’re not going to hug me again are you? It hurts!”

“Well you are our favourite sister and we hate to admit it but we were really worried about you and Nicky.”

“I’m your only other sister and we were quite safe.”

“We didn’t know that, did we. Now, have you any idea how Madame the witch lady knew you were in the square?”

“Oh,” said Kick, “they can’t have been waiting for you to arrive.”

“Why not?”

“Think about it Meldy. No one here knew you were coming so they would have had to have been there for weeks and weeks on the off chance you’d show up. That would have attracted attention. They would not have wanted that.”

“Oh, I see. Did they know Amelie had gone to get us? They could have done.”

“Possibly,” replied Kick, “but they would not have expected you straight away.”

“If they had expected you,” mused Popster, “it would have meant they knew about the gateway. Meldy, what did you and Nicky do when you arrived in the Place de Napoleon?”

“Well, I got up and told Nicky we’d arrived. He thought it was London and I said we have to wave at the camera and he asked why and I said....”

“You waved at the CCTV camera,” asked Kick, “to attract the attention of the police?”

“Yes, we had to get Nicky a.....”

“Yes of course, an Identity Card. I wonder, it is possible I suppose....”

“What?”

“There could be a spy in the police station.”

“But how would that work?” asked Popster. “They would have come for us as well.”

“How do we know they didn’t?”

“You’re right,” she replied, “Alain was waiting for us with two trusted police officers. The kidnappers could have realised and slunk back to their base.”

“Or, they could have followed us here. Remember, they wanted to kidnap us as well.”

“Then you could have seen Nicky’s spots,” said Meldy.

“Anyway,” said Kick, “we need to tell Commissioner Duplessis as soon as possible. They must catch that spy.”

Commissioner Duplessis was already in the palace discussing security with Princess Augustine when the twins explained their theory.

“Interesting,” she said. “However, I find it difficult to believe one of our officers would be sympathetic to Madame du Malcontent.”

“Of course Madame Commissioner,” replied the Princess, “but it is not impossible.”

“In that case we must set a trap for this spy if indeed there is one.”

“Why not,” mused the Princess, “take Ladies Catherine and Patrice to the Place de Napoleon and...”

“Your Highness,” interjected Kick, “please excuse the interruption but we do not have to go to the square. I saw a CCTV camera near the memorial to the Grand Armee which is much closer. We could go there.”

“Of course, your Highness,” said the Commissioner. “That is the perfect solution. They could go through the secret passage from here then appear in the memorial with no outward sign of how they got there.”

“Can we come too? Please?” asked Meldy. “I want to show Nicky the secret passage.”

“Well Esmeralda, it might be dangerous.”

“But if the spy sees us on his camera he’ll tell the witch lady. She can’t pass up the chance to catch us all can she!”

“Lady Esmeralda,” mused the Commissioner, “I think you are correct. What could be more natural than a group of young people ‘escaping’ from the confines of the palace for an adventure? They are unlikely to suspect a trap.”

“But we must not expose them to danger,” added the Princess.

“Your Highness, I have an elite group of trusted officers in reserve, the ones that guarded you during the recent time of crisis. I know they are itching for another assignment.”

“Then,” said the Princess, “let us proceed.”

There was a large undercroft under the palace that had once been part of a monastery. Now, standing in the aisles, a group of eleven were planning an operation

by torchlight. The group leader was summing up.

“We will proceed as discussed. Two officers will lead the way to the passage exit in the memorial to the Grande Armee. Lady Catherine will lead the targets followed by ladies Esmeralda and Sophie. Nicky will follow and Chevaliers Paul and Raoul will be behind him. Lady Patrice will follow at the back of the target group and two more officers will bring up the rear. At first, only the targets will leave the memorial. Lady Patrice will put this block in the door to stop it closing in case the targets need to re enter in a hurry.”

“Why cannot I be in front with the police officers?” asked Paul.

“You are a Chevalier,” replied the group leader, “and as such being a member of a team is important. It is logical for an older member to lead followed by her sister Lady Esmeralda.”

“Is that alright Paul?” asked Popster. “You have been in the tunnel before but Nicky hasn’t. It is important you keep an eye on him.”

“I’ll be alright,” replied Nicky but he wasn’t really sure. He hoped the spiders had all gone.

“We have a team outside as well,” continued the group leader. “If you are approached and sense danger, make as much noise as you can. Any questions? No? Then let us proceed.”

With torches lit they set off in single file through the door into the tunnel like passage. With echoing footsteps they pressed on past the door to the ossuary under the royal chapel. The spiders had proved more difficult to dislodge and their rebuilt webs glistened in the torchlight. Nicky did not like being watched by things with lots of eyes and eight legs but he plodded bravely on.

“The memorial is now above us,” said the leader. “I will go up to open the door and, as the last person out, Lady Patrice will place the block as we discussed. Remember, you are excited to be out by the river. You have felt confined locked up in the palace. Act happy!”

The door in the memorial swung open and daylight flooded in. Kick stepped gingerly out, checked around then signalled to the rest. Out they streamed, one after the other. Finally Popster blocked open the door and the group leader wished her luck.

The younger members scampered over to the riverside path while Kick and Popster, chatting away in an animated manner, ambled after them. Turning to look at some

of the buildings, one would point out a specific detail while the other would nod and ask questions. Popster had noticed the nearby camera which was initially pointing in the other direction but it had started to swing back on its pivot. Soon it would be aiming directly at them.

“Don’t look,” she whispered to Kick, “it’s about to point this way.”

The twins leant over the railings and watched the river traffic while the younger members of the target group ran back and forth. However, they never strayed very far from the memorial. A tourist boat approached and a commentator was talking about the palace.

“On the left you will see the Royal Palace. Her flag is flying so Princess Augustine is in residence. You will have heard the story of her rescue by some brave children and.... What a Surprise! If you look now you will see the English Wagley twins leaning over the railings. They were awarded our country’s highest honour for their part in her rescue.”

The passengers on the boat gave them a rousing cheer and the twins waved in acknowledgement. Meldy, wondering what the noise was about, came over to look and the others followed.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” said the guide, “we are indeed honoured! All the members of the rescue party are there!” He then proceeded to introduce all the children by name. There were even more cheers so the younger members waved in their turn.

“Well if that doesn’t alert the spy, nothing will!” whispered Popster.

To the left two more people leant over the railings looking at the boat. Both of them, male and female, looked young and fit. ‘I bet they’re undercover cops,’ thought Kick. An ice cream cart went by so they all had treats. The younger children stopped running around so as to enjoy this unexpected bonus.

“This is so super yummy!” exclaimed Nicky.

“I told you they’re better here,” replied Meldy.

Time passed. They could hear horse drawn traffic in the distance, no change there. People strolled up and down, enjoying the sun. The twins were beginning to question their spy theory when they heard another sound, the rumble of wagon wheels on nearby cobble stones. The sound came nearer. And nearer.

“This could be it,” whispered Kick. “Alright everyone, stroll towards the memorial. Don’t look at that wagon over there.” At that very instant the rear doors swung open and five men jumped out. They could hear the sound of boots running towards them.

“Step one,” said Kick, “look.” Seven pairs of eyes looked at the running men.

“Step two,” she said, “run!” They sprinted towards the memorial.

“Step three, shout and scream!” All of them complied but one man had grabbed hold of Paul’s collar. “Got you!” he cried.

Paul swung round and kicked out as hard as he could. “No you have not!” he replied.

A well aimed kick on the shins can be really painful as that particular man learnt to his cost. Four police officers burst out of the door in the memorial causing the would be kidnappers to falter. Realising it was a trap, they turned to run only to be met by even more officers coming from the other direction. The game was up. Their driver jumped onto his seat, grabbed the reins but was hauled back down by a pair of strong firm hands.

“There is no escape for you I think,” said the officer.

The six sullen men scowled at their targets while they made faces in return. Handcuffs were fastened and the crestfallen group was led away. An easy job had proved to be no such thing. Interrogation awaited followed by long prison sentences.

“Well done,” said the leader of the Police team. “It went exactly to plan. The attempt to grab Chevalier Paul’s collar was proof that they did not want your autographs. Lady Catherine, have you considered a career in the police force? You looked very calm throughout.”

“Well officer,” she replied, “I had complete confidence in you and your team!”

Later, Commissioner Duplessis stopped by the palace to speak to the twins.

“Ladies Catherine and Patrice, your theory has proved correct.”

“Well Madame Commissioner,” said Kick, “we guessed as much when those five men were chasing us.”

“Yes, of course. We made sure the camera operatives were watched and their actions noted. One had a system of alerting contacts close to Madame du Malcontent.”

“What did he, or she, hope to gain?” asked Popster.

“We are still questioning him. So far he is not saying much but he will talk eventually.”

“Perhaps he expects to be freed when the takeover comes?” mused Kick.

“Ha ha. Yes. The takeover. I think they will have a long wait based on their performance to date. My colleagues are still laughing about young Nicky’s measles trick. By the way, has he finally managed to wash all the ink off his face?”

“Yes,” laughed Popster, “but he didn’t like all the soap and scrubbing!”