

## Chapter 23. A Visit to the Prison

Towards the end of her visit to the university, the Empress was shown the Instantaneous Matter Transportation Machine in the physics department. She knew this machine was responsible for the accidental arrival of the Wagley sisters in her country. While there, Kick and Popster found an opportunity to speak to Alain. "The professor has told me the equipment is functioning normally," he said. "You will be able to return home at any time."

"We know we have to go back," sighed Kick, "but we have really enjoyed our time here."

"We certainly have," added Popster. "I think we will have to kidnap Meldy to take her home!"

Alain laughed. "You will all be missed. By the way, I have had a request from Monsieur Plinkoff. He wishes to return to your world for one month."

"We know all about that," said Kick. "He's needed to provide important evidence that will help one of Meldy's friends."

"He mentioned Sir Desward and Lady Pastena?"

"That's right. She helped Meldy at her school so Meldy came here to fetch Monsieur Plinkoff. She wanted to help. You know, as in one good turn deserves another."

"She must have spent a lot of time in your woods waiting for the gateway to open."

"Yes," said Popster. "She was that determined to come."

"She even managed to persuade her friend Nicholas to join her?"

"Yes," laughed Kick, "but I don't think he needed much encouragement!"

"I think your little sister can be very determined."

'You have no idea!' thought the twins.

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Later, Amelie was sorting out a few things with Meldy when Baron von Kùhlschrank's name was mentioned.

"He is to visit the prison before he leaves," said Amelie.

“Can we go too? We can take Sophie ‘cos she wants to see the witch ladies.”

“Esmeralda, I do not think that is a good idea.”

“Why?”

“Prisons are not nice places. Also there are many unpleasant people locked up there.”

“Antoinette’s brother Antoine would have been put in prison if he came back from England. He wasn’t unpleasant.”

“You are right. There was a bad law that put a lot of innocent people in there as well. All they did was cross our border with England. Now that law has been repealed.”

“Are there other bad laws as well?”

“There could be but I am not sure which ones.”

“So some of the prisoners might be nice?”

“Yes but there are others like the du Malcontent sisters. I do not think they are very nice.”

“Myrtille the witch wasn’t. She was mean. I know Sophie wants to see her, she told me so.”

“We can ask the Empress, she might give permission.”

“Will you come too, Amelie?”

“Well, I do not think...”

“Please? We like you ‘cos you’re nice and you can look after us when we’re there. You want to see the witch don’t you?”

“I suppose I am curious.”

“That’s brilliant! Can Nicky come too? Paul and Raoul are going home so I don’t think they’ll be here.”

Permission was sought, and given, for Amelie to take the three friends to the prison. They went with Baron von Kühlschrank who had arranged a meeting with the governor. He had been invited by the prison authorities because he could provide some insight into the tricks and ploys that the sisters could use to escape.

Once inside the prison, doors clanged shut and bolts were shot. The Baron went off for his meeting while Amelie and the three friends were taken along a corridor lined with securely closed cell doors. They could hear sounds from behind some of these.

“I do not like it in here,” whispered Sophie, “I will behave so they do not lock me up!”

“They won’t put you in here Sophie,” replied Nicky, “anyway, if they did we’ll come and rescue you, won’t we Meldy.”

“Here is Myrtille du Malcontent’s cell,” said their guide. “Number B40.”

“It should be B666!” said Meldy, “isn’t that an evil number or something?”

The guide opened an inspection hatch and put a small step by the door so the children could look in. Sophie was first to see the unfortunate occupant.

“Who are you?” came a voice from within.

“I am Sophie Court Manteau,” she replied in a confident voice. “You kidnapped my friends.”

“Ha! Yes I did. Too bad I did not manage to get you as well. Where is Esmeralda?”

“She is here with us.”

“Let me see her.” Meldy replaced Sophie at the hatch.

“So you have come to gloat?”

“No. I have come to show you to my friend Sophie. I told her all about you but she still wanted to see you.”

“And what did you tell her?”

“I said I thought you were mean and looked like a witch.”

“Well I do look like a witch, and I am mean as well. Satisfied? Now go away and leave me alone!”

“You’re not really bad are you. You look more sad than bad.”

“Sad, bad, bad, sad. Who cares. One thing is certain, when I get out I will come looking for you and then we can discuss it further!”

“Well you won’t find me. Soon I’m going a long way away and I’m taking Nicky with me.”

“Oh yes, spotty Nicky. That was clever, really clever. Too bad I employed a load of incompetents, next time I will not make the same mistake.”

Nicky climbed up in Meldy’s place. “Hello nasty witch lady,” he said.

“So the spots washed off did they? Too bad. If I had been a witch I could have made them permanent.”

“Goodbye nasty witch lady. I hope you don’t enjoy your time in prison!”

There was some hissing and complaining from inside the cell but they left her to it. Maxine was in cell B44 and they peeped at her sitting in a corner reading.

Sophie was first to have a look.

“Hello little girl,” she said, “What is your name?”

“Sophie.”

“Have you come to help me?”

“No but they said you looked like your sister and you do.”

“But I am not like her, she is mean and nasty. I am not like that. She forced me to do what I did, I did not want to do it!”

“But you did, did you not?”

“Let me have a look,” said Nicky.

“Yes,” he said once he had peered through the hatch, “you are like your sister.”

“What is your name?”

“Nicky.”

“You look like a nice boy Nicky. Can you help me? I will tell them everything they need to know about Myrtille, and then there is Mathilde. She is really nasty. I will tell them all about her as well.”

“Let me have a look,” said Meldy.

“You are Esmeralda are you not?” said Maxine when she saw Meldy looking through the hatch, “I saw you in the parade. Myrtille insisted I be there to recognise you all. She might be in prison now but when she gets out...”

“Why did she want to kidnap us?”

“That is just her way. She is always angry. She wakes up like that and she never stops. Anger, anger, anger. You do not know what it is like living with someone like that.”

“No I do not but you could have gone to the police instead of trying to kidnap my sisters.”

“I did not want to kidnap them, I wanted to escape from those men with their vicious swords. She told them to keep an eye on me.”

“But my sisters said...”

“They were always watching me. I could have been killed. Your sisters looked very kind, I know they would have understood.”

“Baron von Kühlschrank said we can’t trust you.”

“Oh Bruno likes to have his little joke. We know each other very well. Will you do something for me?”

“Well...”

“Will you? Please?” she said with a tremor in her voice, “there is no one else to help me.” Here she turned and seemed to be wiping away a tear.

“Alright.”

“Ask him to come and see me. You will do that will you not? You are just as nice as your sisters.”

“I must go now.”

“You will ask him?”

“Yes.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise.”

The hatch was closed and Amelie took her charges back to meet Baron von Kühlschrank.

“I would not trust that woman,” she said.

Meldy was silent while Nicky and Sophie chatted. Eventually, she asked the Baron a question.

“Baron von Kühlschrank?”

“Yes Lady Esmeralda?”

“Will you go and see Maxine du Malcontent?”

“Why should I do that?”

“Well she’s sorry for what she did and she seems nice and not like her sister and...”

“Esmeralda, I regret to say it is all part of her game. She should be on stage or in films because she is a very good actor. I could tell you stories that, well, I could tell you stories. I have seen what she is capable of with my own eyes and she is definitely not to be trusted.”

“But she was crying...”

“I am sorry Lady Esmeralda. It can be distressing to see someone who is in that condition but ask Lady Antoinette and your sisters. They will tell you how vicious she was.”

“But she said the men with swords forced her to do it. She could have wanted to escape.”

“That is not what I saw. She blocked a wheel on the carriage to stop it moving. If she had really wanted to get away from them she would not have done that.”

“But she seemed to be sorry. Don’t we forgive people when they are sorry?”

“Sometimes. If she cooperates with the police, if she gives them any valuable information, then maybe they will reduce her sentence. However, the court must decide. Attempted kidnap is a serious crime and she could still be a threat to the Empress.”

“So Amelie was right. She said she wouldn’t trust her one millimetre.”

“Amelie is very wise.”

“Myrtille told us she should have been Empress instead of Princess Augustine. Why did she say that?”

“She comes from what was a noble family but her and her sisters have done a lot to destroy its reputation. They have all been in prison before and now they are back once again. I hope, Esmeralda, that you do not meet their older sister Mathilde. She is the nastiest of the lot and fortunately she is in prison in my country. She is so nasty that flowers wilt when she enters a room!”

“But that can’t be true. Can it?”

“And a wasp would die if it stung her.”

“You’re making that up. Aren’t you?”

“Esmeralda, all wasps die eventually. So they will die if they sting and they will die if they do not sting.”

Meldy laughed. Sophie asked what was funny.

“Sophie, do not ask Mathilde du Malcontent to your house. She’ll kill all the flowers and the wasps will die!”

Sophie looked to the Baron for confirmation. He smiled but said nothing.