

Testing Times - Day 2

On Wednesday, they were round at Hardy's house, and they had been watching Spain beat Russia 3-0 in the European Championships. Michael was wearing a full Barcelona football kit. They hadn't seen that before.

Freddy looked puzzled and thought to himself. *Two strange men speaking a foreign language, two packages on the training pitch, and now this. I'm going to ask him directly.* He took a couple of paces across the large room towards Michael. Michael moved away and stared whispering something to Hardy.

'What? Speak up!'

'I said, have you got a spushur casebook?' said Michael, slightly louder.

'What are you talking about?' said Clara brusquely as she entered the room. She was also completely clad in brand new Barcelona kit.

Two strange men, two packages...this is all beginning to add up, thought Freddy again.

'Ola!' said Michael quietly to Clara, who waved back.

Two strange men, two packages, speaking Spanish...this is all beginning to multiply and divide as well, thought Freddy grimly.

'OH! You want a Spanish phrasebook!' cried Hardy, finally hearing the message that Michael was trying to convey to him. Michael looked shamefacedly back.

Two strange men, two packages, Spanish phrasebooks...this is all beginning to add up, multiply, add up again, divide a couple of times, take the square root, and measure the perimeter! thought Freddy as the prospect of him losing his best player loomed ever larger.

After checking that nobody else was around and with a quick call across the hallway of 'follow me!', Hardy led them to a large door on the west side of the entrance hall.

(Unlike the rest of their houses, which were mostly tightly packed on Lancaster Road, in Hardy's house it made sense to speak of the 'west' side, and the 'north' entrance. The house seemed to have endless rooms and endless gardens, and this massive entrance hall where they were now standing patiently by the door, to which Hardy was now anxiously searching for the key).

Freddy was looking north towards the kitchen, Michael was admiring the badge on his new kit. Clara looked east out to the garden where they had established their base back last summer, whilst Jaz and Alec were in deep conversation about whether 'left' meant 'east' or 'west', and whether 'up' meant 'south' or 'north'.

Think about it!

'Do you have an atlas anywhere?' said Jaz to Hardy.

Hardy was just looking around him, north, south, east and west, apparently worried that someone might see them. He fumbled some more with the keys.

'I'm sure there'll be an atlas in here somewhere', he mumbled, 'ah, this is the one!' He inserted the key into the door.

There was a creaking sound as the door swung slowly open. It was the sort of sound you only really get in films where they want to make a door sound really squeaky and really scary. Only this was in real life. The door swung open with that kind of film-squeakiness, to reveal darkness beyond. Freddy thought he saw Hardy shudder slightly as he reached his hand into the blackness to search for a light.

As the lights popped into life, a cloud of dust descended from the ceiling. Hardy pushed away a cobweb from the doorway and led them in.

'Wow! This place is amazing!' said Clara looking around her.

'You never told us this was here...!' said Freddy.

'Well, to be honest, I didn't really know it was here until recently. I found these keys, see, and...well one of them just fitted the door'.

'So, we're not supposed to be in here?'

'We're only looking for a couple of books, right, then we'll go back outside'.

Freddy looked around the room. Dust, dust, and more dust. And more dust. And more.

And behind the dust, racks and racks and shelves and shelves of books. Hundreds, thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of books. Hardy scraped at one of the shelves.

'Look, here, this is what you need, come this way', he said.

Michael followed Hardy over towards the shelf marked *Travel*. Subconsciously nervous perhaps, the others followed, so that their footprints marked out a little track on the dusty floor.

Freddy coughed. 'It must be years since anyone came in here!'

'Well, my Grandad used to look after the books, and after he left, well, there was no-one to take any care of them, so we just sort of forgot about it'.

Freddy looked around again and breathed deeply to try to stop himself coughing. It was obvious that the room had been cared for at one time, because everything, as far as the eye could see, was neatly arranged. Books old, and books new, arranged in size order, some coloured books here, some older leather-bound books there, and some piles of papers in a corner. But everything just how it should be.

Everything looked old though, because of the fine covering of dirt and dust. And everything smelled old, the smell of leather, and the smell of age, like your attic or an old storage shed.

As Hardy removed one or two of the volumes, and the others crowded round to see what Michael had selected, two thoughts were occupying Freddy's mind.

The first thought was about how they could keep hold of Michael if a big club came calling for him. And maybe it was too late already.

The second thought occurred to him as he squinted into one of the corners. Why, he thought, when everyone is over there, when no-one has been in here for ages, then why...why... has someone or something scraped out in the dust the words,

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