

Chapter 12

*'Eh?', said Wil again. 'It loosely translates as 'broken fingers', my friends. Have a good weekend!' And with that, he was gone, slipping quietly through the door, the mysterious and dangerous JoJo on his arm.******

The next Monday, they all gathered again at the house as arranged. Nikolai and JoJo were nowhere to be seen, but Clara and Helga, Freddy, Hardy and Wil gathered outside the house at ten in the morning. It was cold, but bright. A great morning for being out in the open air. Wil had arrived on his bike, early. He had brought with him his cousin who was staying with them whilst his parents (Wil's Uncle Mick and Auntie Aretha) were on holiday. They called him Little Chris. His name was Chris, and he was a bit younger than them (and he was quite small). He was wearing a hooded top that was at least three sizes too big for him, and a baseball hat, which he always wore slightly off centre, half covering the left side of his head. 'So what are we doing?' Little Chris chirped in his little voice. Although he had met most of them before the previous summer, he didn't know them well. But then he was never shy in new company anyway. Most people liked him, even though his squeaky little voice and infectious energy could get on their nerves at times. His Mum and Dad had gone to Detroit for a few days, and they had promised that next year he could go with them. His dream was to go to America one day, but this time, he had been happy to stay at Wil's place for the week. They had talked on the phone and Wil had told him the story of the trip to Bruinlarroch and the people they had met there. The bumbling redhead, the spooky doctor, and the huge hairy man who had helped them. He also told him about the bus. Little Chris was excited by the prospects of today's treasure hunt and hide and seek. Wil had also told him about JoJo. Even more interesting. They all had their bikes, most of them some kind of BMX, apart from Helga who had a strange looking upright bike with large wheels and a basket at the front. In the basket she had put a canvas bag. It was stuffed completely full, and could not be done up. They could see food, what looked like a complete change of clothing, maps, and a large torch sticking out of the bag. She was obviously prepared for the worst.***** Hardy was late. He quite often was, but this morning he was already more than half an hour past the time they had agreed to meet, and there was no sign of him. Freddy had tried the walkie-talkie, but if he was in his house, it was often out of

range, and anyway there was never any guarantee that Hardy had actually switched it on. He tried again. 'Over, over, H1 come in, H1 come in...' Nothing, except a loud hissing and occasionally a loud booming sound. 'Listen to this,' Freddy called to Wil. They listened to the open channel on the radio again. 'Hiss, hiss, BOOM...hiss, hiss, BOOM', the sound went on. 'H1, do you read, do you read...' 'Yes, yes, yes, OK, BOOM, BOOM', came the reply suddenly. 'Hardy, you OK?', Freddy spoke, anxiously. 'I'm fine, mate, just trying to get the BOOM! bike started. See you in a minute. BOOM, BOOM. A few minutes later, they heard, coming from down the road, the familiar sound of Hardy's motorbike. 'Phut, phut, BOOM, hiss, phut, BOOM, BOOM, Pow!' He appeared round the corner. Under the helmet they could see he was both angry and embarrassed at keeping them waiting. But he was always the same. Even though he had a perfectly good bike at home, when there were others (other than his two key friends, Freddy and Wil) involved, he had to bring the 'motorbike'. It was a motorbike in name only, really, one of those small bikes with thick balloon tyres. Although they teased him about it, when it worked it was pretty cool, and could get up to a reasonable speed, even with two people on board. But it was temperamental, noisy, consumed huge amounts of oil, and sent enormous clouds of blue smoke into the environment. He could only really use it on private land, although he had made the short journey to the house on the road. A huge plume of smoke shot from the back of the bike as he stopped in front of them and turned off the engine. 'All

set?' he said in his usual businesslike manner. Freddy and Wil were helping to fix a problem with Clara's bike. Although they had tools in the house, on finding that there was a loose bolt close to the saddle, Helga had reached into her bike basket and proudly pulled out a full set of brand new bicycle tools, still in the packaging. 'We're only biking round the garden', whispered Wil to no-one in particular, reaching out and taking the set from her. 'Covering all the bases', she replied, illogically. Just then, as they stood debating the next move, there was an enormous flash of light. No noise. Just a flash which blinded them for a moment. Clara screamed in pain and confusion.

*****Several kilometres away, outside Nikolai's mansion, JoJo pulled on her black leather jacket. 'Thees weel teeach ze leetle Eeengleesh to teease my accent', she muttered to herself as she slipped a small package into the side of her jacket. She wrinkled her nose a little as she zipped up the pocket. *****They stood rubbing their eyes for several seconds. Hardy was the first to try to open his eyes. He looked around. Nothing apparently out of the ordinary. Almost at the same time, they all noticed a burnt patch on the grassy area on which they were standing. Embedded in the turf was a small black container, about the size of a small box of chocolates. The lid had come partially open, and a small green light could be glimpsed inside. On the top of the lid was a small sign, painted roughly in white letters, saying 'Open here'. Helpful. Hardy reached down and opened the top to its full extent. Inside was a small device with several small buttons along the side, and two large circular discs. They started turning. *****JoJo finished her preparations, inserting several more small packets into the rucksack which lay on the ground beside her. She stood up, and dusted off her jacket and trousers. 'Are you OK, my little French chum?', said Nikolai's familiar, aristocratic voice. They had spent the weekend preparing the grounds for their friends' unwitting adventure. 'OK, I am off now'. She climbed elegantly onto her scooter, both legs perched to one side of the saddle, and effortlessly started the engine. 'I will see you there'. And she was gone, purring off into the distance. *****They bent down to look more closely at the machine on the ground. Faint music was playing from it. Hardy held up his hand to the others. Everyone crouched around it, and listened. 'Dun, dun, dun-dun, dun dun, dun-dun, dun dun, dun dun...' The heavy bass line faded away and they heard a voice, familiar, but at the same time slightly menacing. Three times it repeated the statement, 'Your kingdom is under attack. Marauding French invaders from the South are at your gates. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to secure your lands. Use only natural defences. Victory will bring fame and great fortune upon you. Your first clue is in the secret

garden. Proceed on wheels at snail's pace. This tape will self-destruct in five seconds'. Five seconds after the third running of the tape, a wispy smoke started to waft from the box. Within a minute, before their very eyes, it had been destroyed, leaving only a brown scorch on the grass below it. 'Blimey, did you get all that?'. Freddy took charge, as Helga produced a clipboard from her basket and handed it to him. A pen was dangling off a string tied to a hole drilled in the corner. Freddy quickly noted down the main points of the message that he could remember. 'French invaders; secure the lands; natural defences; secret garden... anything else?' 'We have to go there on wheels, like a snail', added Clara. 'Victory will bring great fortune', Helga said, licking her lips slightly. 'Vive la revolution!', someone said quietly. 'Pardon', said Freddy, looking round the group. They all looked at each other. No-one said anything. In the distance they could hear the smooth whirring sound of a scooter's engine. 'Vive la revolution!' came the sound again, from the far distance. The time it was accompanied by a shrill Gallic cackle. *****