

Chapter 11

The music reached a tremendous crescendo and stopped.

Silence.

They watched, fascinated, as the door handle slowly began to turn.

Helga gave another little whimper as the door handle turned to its full extent, and slowly the door started to open. Clara went over and sat with her.

Slowly, slowly, the door opened.

As it opened, the light around it faded slightly, and a few puffs of white smoke emerged from around the door frame. The handle, which had been red hot, visibly cooled down. Hardy rubbed his hands together.

As the door opened wide, the smoke billowed into the room. They watched and listened intently as it wafted over them. A shadowy figure appeared in silhouette in the doorway. Very quietly, they heard a voice say what sounded like,

'Tonight Matthew, I'm going to be... shobbalob...'

'Eh?' said Hardy, still vigorously rubbing his hands on the table.

Striding through the door, as Clara had expected, came the dashing figure of their greatest friend. Nicholai had arrived at last. He strode through the smoke and stood in front of them, the faint glow that they had seen at the door now surrounding him in an ethereal light.

Immediately the tension of the morning was gone.

Nicholai walked confidently round the room, high-fiving each of the boys, and with Clara and Helga, taking their right hands in his, and planting a delicate kiss upon the back of their hands.

'What a gentleman!', Clara almost said out loud. She stared up at him.

'My dear Clara, how long has it been?', he said in his rich deep voice, and then

'Helga, my princess, it must be weeks, *wie gehts, wie gehts?*'

Although Helga was not German, Nicholai was prone to these grand gestures, and always greeted her with something personal and teutonic. She too swooned before him, her head lolling on one side like an obedient puppy as he took her hand in his.

'Oh, I almost forgot,' he said suddenly as he finished embracing Freddy with an enormous bear-hug.

'Please may I introduce my dear friend...'

At this he swept his arm upwards in a grand gesture towards the doorway, which was now clear, although the smoke and light was still in evidence beyond. There was no-one there.

'Ah, it seems my companion has a touch of the nerves today, please bear with me'.

He moved elegantly towards the doorway, chassaying across the floor with his usual style and grace. He disappeared through the door briefly. The room was silent as they waited for what he was going to bring out.

From outside they could hear a female voice.

'No, no, I cannoot'. 'Absolooootlee I will noot' 'Oh pleeeze, no'

Then Nicholai's calming voice,

'Oh come, come, my dear, I assure you there is nothing to be afraid of'

With a flourish he reappeared, half dragging behind him a small girl, probably thirteen years old, but looking much younger. She was dressed in a blue and white stripey jumper, blue jeans, and she wore on her head a little felt hat. As they came through the doorway, some music in the distance started playing, as it had when Nicholai had appeared.

'Sheeee, may be the beauty or the beeeast, maybe the fameeeene or the feeeast, may be the one I lurve for everevermooooore....'

It stopped, and she stood beside Nicholai in the space which Clara had cleared earlier.

'My dear friends and esteemed colleagues', he began. Sometimes he really went over the top with his little formal touches, but none of them ever questioned him or criticised him or teased him about it. There was something about him (even though he was younger than most of them) which made them respect him, and which made them listen to what he had to say. But more of that later.

'My dear friends and esteemed colleagues, may I present to you one of our continental cousins, fresh from the land of cheese and Chirac....'

'What is he on today?', muttered Hardy with his usual cynical tone.

'Now, introduce yourself, friend'.

The girl looked down at the ground. She looked left and stared at the Arctic Monkeys poster on the wall. She looked up at the single bare light bulb which lit the dingy basement. She looked around at the assembled company.

'Oh come now, don't be shy'.

The girl cocked her head to one side, so that it was resting on her left shoulder. She lifted her eyes slightly, so that they were just visible through the fringe of dark hair that crept out from under her beret. Deep, brown, eyes.

'My nem', she began,

'ees JoJo, and I kurm frurm Or-lay-on'.

Hardy let out a grunt, trying to suppress a laugh. Freddy kicked him hard on the left shin.

'Owaaaggh', he yelled, half grimacing, half smirking.

Nicholai marched over to him and stood very close, face to face. Noses almost touching, although Nicholai was several centimetres shorter than Hardy, and several kilos lighter.

'Don't... mess with me'. He said it slowly, very deliberately. The statement was not open to question.

JoJo suddenly spoke, rapidly, like a volley from a machine gun.

'Ca na va vide non plus imbecile de la salutation et la piscine tu total plume de ma tante, hula oop!'

'Sorry', said Hardy quickly to both of them, surprised by the harshness in Nicholai's voice, and confused by the sophistication of JoJo's response. His Year Four French classes had not prepared him for such advanced comprehension. She spoke again.

'I am JoJo. You may reeemembare zat I veeseeted your skule last yeeear. Well, I 'ave reeturned. Bonjour tout le monde'.

'*Bonjour JoJo*', they all spoke, as one.

'We have set up a little game for you', Nicholai began. 'It is based around the well-known game of hide and seek, although we have invested it with a little Gallic flavour'.

'Eh?', said Wil, looking round the room to see if anyone had a clue as to what he was saying.

'A French game', Nicholai simplified his explanation.

'Around the garden and in the house, you will find a series of clues which will eventually lead you to a grand prize'.

'Great!, a treasure hunt'. Clara jumped up and down excitedly, span round twice, then lost her balance and fell over Helga, who was still sitting on the floor.

'There are two small differences from a normal treasure hunt', Nicholai continued,

'Firstly, the clues are in French, and secondly, JoJo will be trying to catch you'.

JoJo grinned for the first time. A sly, menacing little grin from under her fringe.

'Oh, I forgot something, JoJo has a black belt in the ancient French martial art of *casse doigtu*'.

'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.
