

# Xoliday II

Four Euros Only

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with

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To Ian Fleming, inspirational father of spy novellists,  
and to Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus 'Amadeus' Mozart  
whose silly name belies an incomparable genius.



# Chapter 1

## The Spy who Loathed Me

You will take the Eurostar to Lille on the morning of Sunday 23rd June 2002. Proceed to ‘Le Palais de la Bière’ where you will meet Agent Supermodel, with plans for the next stage. For identification purposes, Supermodel will be carrying a copy of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, dated 20th February 2002. You should also learn German. There is no need for you to know more now.

### 1.1 Preface

As Shakespeare once wrote, “Some are born to travel, some achieve travel and others have holidays thrust upon them.” Or words to that effect. I’m a little wary of beginning a book with a quote from the Bard, but I thought this false one strangely apt under the circumstances. Indeed, these were particularly strange circumstances, entirely devised by Ian ‘N’ Bentham, my good friend and sometime (platonic) travelling partner. I will endeavour to explain them to you as best I can, though I fear that the pages of this book could never do justice to such a daring tale.

My mission was a secret one, known only to a select handful of people amongst whom I was not included. The only instructions I had been given were those at the head of this chapter; other than those few brief words, my imminent mission was a complete mystery to me.

So you can imagine my trepidation as I awoke on the morning of the 23rd June 2002, at around 6am, packed and ready to embark on the first stage of what was to become known as the second ever official **Xoliday**. This was to be a journey of mind-expanding magnitude. A fast-paced trans-continental expedition whose thrills and pleasures would be matched only by the senseless audacity of its puns.

So, returning to the Bard, this very tale is now to become the two hours’ traffic of our stage, or rather these pages. Read on and open your imagination to a clandestine world of intrigue, suspicion and murder. Except without the murder.

### 1.2 The Mission Begins

The early morning sun was now shining down with full force as I set off towards the station on my trusty old mountain bike. It was a somewhat understated start for a spy thriller but it seemed the best option at the time, uncluttered as I was by the rigours of a truly hectic timetable. By now James Bond would have already destroyed a large and unnecessarily flammable building and slept with at least two loose but attractive women. He would also be driving a decidedly beefed-up Mercedes or Porsche I suspect, complete with machine-guns and surface-to-air missile launchers. I trundled onwards, the rusting chain on my aging two-wheeled transport just clinging narrowly on to its oft-threatened life.

The sun was climbing over downtown Cambridge, gently silhouetting those familiar silver spires against a background of rich, vibrant greenery and gently rolling hills. The unnaturally deep blue of the Cambridge sky hung overhead, dotted here and there by faint wisps of nascent clouds. I was hoping that this would not mean inclement weather for the first leg of my intrepid journey, reassured by a somewhat encouraging forecast the previous night.

Cambridge is refreshingly empty this early in the morning. The tourists who normally fill the streets in their thousands are largely still in bed, except for a few Germans laying out towels in front of King's College Chapel. Thanks to the lack of traffic, my route to the railway station was largely unhindered and hence I arrived there in good time, carefully securing my bike to an empty rack and striding confidently towards the ticket machine.

In direct contrast to the town itself, Cambridge *station* is never empty. It's a strange claim, but whatever the hour of the day or night there's always a selection of people standing around with briefcases staring wistfully into the distance, waiting for their chariot to arrive and whisk them off into their exciting lives as insurance salesmen, quantitative analysts or bird catchers. It really makes one wonder what their home lives must be like to make this a plausible alternative. Maybe that will be me in a few years' time - I could well believe it. However, I could never see myself really as the type of person to live a carefully regimented life.

For example, I'm not one for checking timetables, even when engaged on such a critical mission as this. As I scanned the board for imminent departures I realised that I'd annoyingly just missed one train to London, and the next one was leaving in 45 minutes time. Actually, the next train left in 24 minutes but, despite its 21 minute advantage was still timetabled to arrive in King's Cross 16 minutes later. This of course meant that at some point during the journey, the later train would have to pass straight through the earlier one. Clearly Central Trains still have a long way to go if they want to solve their many safety-related problems. On the positive side, at least this minor setback allowed me the luxury of a few minutes to collect my thoughts and ponder the journey that lay ahead.

This mission was getting increasingly interesting with every passing moment. I'd done badly planned holidays before, but this was something different. This was a very well planned holiday, it's just that I hadn't been in on any of the plans. Where was I going? All I had been given was a two line email the previous evening from an agent who identified himself only as 'Grandmaster'. It read like this;

Welcome Agent Genius

You are now in the mystic world of Xoliday. Venture forth. Have a good laugh.

Grandmaster

I'm not sure exactly what this all entailed. I knew I was going to Lille and that I was to meet somebody there identified only as Agent Supermodel. I didn't know who they were going to be, or if they would be joining me for the remainder of the mission. I didn't know how much they would have been told, what instructions they would have for the next stage, or even if they would speak English. In 24 hours' time I could be practically anywhere in Western Europe, and I was just hoping that it wouldn't be Manchester.

Catching a later train from Cambridge was slightly worrying. I'd deliberately left a sizeable margin for error, but I wasn't sure if it was going to be enough now that I was wasting so much time sitting on a bench pondering the insanity of my present predicament. All it was going to take was a delay on the London train, or problems in the underground and I could well miss my connection. I was due to leave London on the Eurostar at 10:22am. The thought of getting to Waterloo late was weighing heavily on my mind. I began to wonder if Wellington had thought the same thing. I'm not sure how the history of Europe would have proceeded if he'd relied on British Rail and missed his connection. I suspect the complaint "I have a Frenchman to defeat just South of Brussels" would have fallen on deaf ears.

The journey to London has already been extensively documented in my account of the first ever Xoliday. I'm delighted to announce that in the intervening nine months very little has changed. Except, of course, that the route map now reads even more like a disaster catalogue, thanks to the sickening ineptitude of Railtrack and its cronies. "Welcome to the 0815 service to London King's Cross. This train will call at Potter's Bar, Hatfield, Pompeii, Tunguska, Krakatoa, Baghdad and London King's Cross. Estimated time of arrival - never."

The only other difference on the London route was the season. Previously I had been travelling in September when the vibrant colours of spring and summer had more or less subsided. Now, however, fields of golden barley stood flanked by borders of rich crimson poppies, swaying gently in an early morning breeze and bathed in the invigorating summer sun. I was almost sad to leave England behind, now that the weather had finally decided to cheer up a bit. The summer so far had been mostly

disappointing, and it was set to return that way in the near future. My only consolation was that the majority of Europe was currently being massaged by a large high-pressure area which had sent temperatures as far north as Berlin into the high thirties celsius which, in fahrenheit, is rather hot.

As the train staggered ever onwards I was more than looking forward to transferring to the slick, finely tuned continental railways for the remainder of my journey. Depending of course on where my mission took me, that was. I was beginning to entertain vague fears of shivering inside the chicken compartment of a trans-Siberian express or clinging desperately onto the outside of the 0954 service from Delhi to Bombay, hurtling through Northern India dodging sniper fire from Kashmiri separatists. If either of these was to be my destination then I would soon find myself embarrassingly badly prepared.

In the interests of travelling light, I had packed virtually no clothes whatsoever, except the essentials, which meant that I was rather relying on good fortune to deliver me to the end of my travels in a vaguely sanitary form. Just one accident with a sewer outlet and my chances of running off into the sunset with a scantily-clad female secret agent as the end credits rolled would be totally scuppered. I had decided not to bring any shaving kit either, which meant that I was destined to grow steadily hairier as the week progressed, further hampering any amorous diversions.

The train thundered gracelessly into King's Cross at 9:12am. This was beginning to verge on 'cutting things a bit fine', but I still had a good chance to make my connection. I dashed out onto the platform and through the station, dodging early-morning tourists, and to the underground. "What are so many tourists doing out of bed at such an early hour?" I thought to myself. "Holidays are meant to be enjoyed. They're not supposed to be a form of punishment." That was to be mildly prophetic, as I would discover in a few days' time.

Fortunately my ticket allowed me to transfer between London Terminals on arrival, which saved me a few minutes of queuing. I jogged over towards the entry gates, and then ran back to the map on the wall when I realised I had no idea where I was going. This always happens to me. One of these days I'll memorise the tube map, or at least get a copy sewn into the inside of my favourite jacket. Apart from being a useful diversion, it would make me almost totally invincible at "Mornington Crescent".

I scanned the map, looking for the location of my destination. I'd been to London so many times now that it only took me half a minute to find King's Cross. However, Waterloo was completely new to me so I was stuck there for some time browsing through the mesmerising coloured lines one by one until my eyes came to rest on a large black circle which was, counterintuitively, at the southern end of the Northern line.

My destination acquired, I rushed back over to the ticket barrier, slipped through and began yet another trip underneath the bustling streets of our fine capital city, choosing possibly the worst route imaginable whose only apparent benefit was that it meant that I could travel all the way on lines of the same colour. Somewhere up above me, my secretive master was devising the second stage of my mission, liasing with agents from around the world and trying his best to ensure that plans would proceed smoothly until I arrived at my intended destination, at a location known only to him. Fortunately he was unaware that his most trusted agent was currently busy being inept only a few miles from his office.

For the first time in my entire life I got lucky with underground trains, walking straight on to the two connections and arriving at Waterloo at the remarkably early time of 9:35am. Despite my fears, I now had plenty of time to waste in the terminal building, glad to have arrived safely and unhindered by my navigational ineptitude. I passed through customs, briefly conversing with an official who was intrigued by my hand-held GPS set. "What on earth's that?" he enquired. I smiled back knowingly, wondering how best to extricate myself from this one. "It's a GPS device," I explained. "Government issue. Top secret." The guard nodded in tacit approval. "Does it shoot laser beams or something?" I shook my head. "I don't think so. But I have been fooled before." Fortunately I was allowed to proceed.

I was vaguely amused by the idea of having a gadgetmaster. I suppose seeing as 'Q' is already taken, he/she would logically be assigned the letter 'R'. That would lead to many comic exchanges such as the following;

Customs Official: What's this device? Is it yours?

Me: No, it's R's

Customs Official: Oh I dunno, it looks rather good...

It always amuses me that the customs officials disallow the tiniest, inoffensive objects from carry on luggage. I had a pair of nail scissors confiscated last time I was flying into the states. Then, and this is the good part, as soon as you are through the security checks they immediately sell you vast quantities of bloody murder weapons without batting an eyelid. Just look through duty free - a good bottle of brandy could be smashed to provide a large number of razor-sharp glass shards, as well as a quantity of volatile chemicals. I sometimes wonder if the security check isn't just a façade, or else that, given the inevitability of terrorist attacks, they felt that it might be a good idea to fleece potential hijackers for a bit of money first.

One thing I couldn't help noticing in the terminal building was that I had much less luggage than absolutely everyone else. Even the business travellers. I suppose that was a giveaway that I was some sort of spy. When do you ever see James Bond carrying luggage? Never. But yet he never seems to wear the same outfit twice. Very suspicious. That was a talent I was yet to acquire. I suspect he recycles his pants.

One of the most impressive things about London Waterloo Eurostar Terminal is the acoustics. Not that it's particularly resonant to normal conversation, but that as soon as a train arrives above, the entire building thunders as if a vast alien warship has just positioned itself directly above, the roar of its engines only barely masking the sound of a thousand deadly laser cannons whirring into action. My imagination, I hoped, would play an important part of this journey. As ever with any account I write, any concept of 'reality' should be taken very much with a healthy-sized dose of caution. Veteran readers of my travel writing will understand, I'm sure. Truth is indeed often stranger than fiction, but that doesn't mean that it can't be improved from time to time by a little creative embellishment.

The call to board the train rang out shortly after 10am. The barriers opened and a large queue of passengers rapidly formed. I sat and watched for a while, analysing in great detail the people standing before me, my companions for the upcoming 2 hour journey. Grandmaster had said nothing about the threat of counter-espionage, but I thought it best to keep a low profile, and to inspect my fellow passengers with a certain deal of care and suspicion. And in many cases with extreme prejudice too. None of them looked particularly threatening, though often it's the quietest ones - the ones whom you least suspect - who turn out to be the bloodthirsty killers. Or so I'd been told.

I took my seat next to a suspicious German gentleman who left shortly after I sat down to find a seat of his own in the largely-empty carriage. I half-wondered if he had planted some sort of listening device or tracking beacon in my luggage without my noticing, but a quick search revealed nothing. I could check more carefully that night, wherever I ended up. For now, it was time to get back to learning some German, writing notes on my journey so far, and sitting back and enjoying the scenery as my brand-new Eurostar train shuffled indignantly out of Waterloo station and into the neighbouring London suburbs, gradually wending its way into the Surrey countryside and clear of the bustling metropolis. I couldn't help but notice that, for a brand new high-speed train, it wasn't moving particularly fast. In fact it was proceeding at a speed comparable to that of a high-speed jet fighter which had been switched off and strapped to the back of a Ford Cortina.

I took a few moments to remind myself of the rules of Xoliday. Their importance was of utmost importance as non-compliance could well result in serious injury, death or even worse.

#### The Rules of Xoliday

1. You must never talk about Xoliday
2. You must NEVER talk about Xoliday
3. There is *no* rule 3
4. Nah pooftahs

I hoped that, by adhering to these simple rules I would soon find myself successfully meeting agent Supermodel at *Le Palais de la Bière* and the next stage of my holiday would become apparent. Meanwhile, the Eurostar chugged steadily across Kent towards the terminal outside Folkestone, making extensive use of its rather softly-sprung suspension. We passed the place where a train crash had nearly killed Charles Dickens in 1865, proof that Railtrack today is only living up to past expectations.

After a lengthy tour of the South English countryside, we entered the tunnel at exactly 11:35 and were informed by our annoyingly trilingual train manager that the crossing would take exactly twenty

minutes.

The journey through the tunnel was understandably boring (no pun intended) and uninspirational. Except, of course, for the thought that we had fifty metres of water above our heads at any one time, meaning that if the roof collapsed we would be immediately subjected to six times atmospheric pressure, collapsing our ear drums and sinusses, crushing our lungs and killing us extremely painfully over the course of five or six excruciating seconds of intense agony. But other than that, nothing really sprang to mind.

### 1.3 Bonjour la France

We popped out on the continental side of the tunnel exactly twenty minutes after we had entered, give or take a few seconds. I was relieved that the train manager, who was British, has not only guessed this correctly, but also that he had managed to convey this information as fluently as I could detect in English, French and Flemish. However, my pride was soon quashed as soon as we entered the French railway system and the train immediately accelerated rather noticeably, more than doubling its speed over the course of a few miles. It was then that it became embarrassingly apparent that the only reason why we had been moving so slowly thus far was because the British railway system simply couldn't handle anything more.

So off we sped toward Lille, through the picturesque French countryside, which bore such an uncanny resemblance to Kent that, if it weren't for the fact that we were still accelerating and must by now have been rapidly approaching the speed of light, I would have been extremely doubtful as to whether we had actually crossed under the channel at all.

The train surged into the heart of Northern France. I cast my mind back three seasons to the last time I had set foot on the hallowed Gallic soil. Back then I was working alongside my old friend Ian 'N' Bentham, renowned philosopher, accountant and sometime mathematician. That had been a truly fruitful mission, and in many ways I considered it as training for my present situation. Soon I would require all the French that I had learned over the years in order to ensure the success of the mission by whatever means necessary.

It was quite a relief to arrive in one piece at Lille and step off the train with all my internal organs still intact. The train screeched surreptitiously into the station, grinding subtly to a halt with a silent cacophony of muffled screeching. I gathered my belongings and stepped off onto the platform, finally having arrived at my destination for that day.

It was to my great surprise that we didn't encounter any semblance of a customs check whatsoever. I was allowed to wander freely into the heart of the terminal utterly unhindered, which perhaps seemed slightly unsettling, given the important nature of my mission. Whatever it was. The *Gare Lille Europe* was a rather modern building, as one would expect, overlooking a large open square and a particularly sizeable road bridge, which lead directly into the town centre. I passed through the commercial area, bought myself a bottle of mineral water from a vending machine and walked straight out into the French sunshine on a warm summer's day.

My first task was to locate Agent Supermodel. In order to do that, I was going to have to take some bearings and navigate toward the location of the rendez-vous point. After scouting the immediate perimeter, alert for any possible enemy presence, I walked into the square outside the station and fired up the GPS kit. This was the first time I'd really been able to test out the sophisticated device, and I was just hoping that it would work as expected because without it, my navigation would have to rely on less accurate methods. Like guesswork.

The display flickered into life, and after a few seconds I was presented with the satellite acquisition screen. A number of signal bars sprung up towards the bottom of the display, and soon I found myself watching as, one by one, a selection of satellites became locked in. Soon I was ready to navigate with a reasonable accuracy, so I marked a waypoint at this station, and then began to walk along the square, carefully noting the bearing that I was taking.

If my mental map was correct I needed to walk south-west. This appeared to lie along the route of the main street into town, so I followed it, tucking my GPS receiver into my shirt so as not to arouse suspicion from any nearby enemy agents. I scanned the crowds, trying to pick out anyone likely to cause me trouble, but fortunately my path remained unchallenged. Clearly the enemy were waiting to make their move later on. Still, I kept my wits about me and navigated towards Lille's other main train

station, the *Gare Lille Flandres*. I had been told that the café in which I would acquire my first contact was nearby, so I carefully examined every building in the area for any sign, no matter how slight, that I might be nearing my intended rendez-vous. Of course, all this time I was aware that I could be under surveillance from any one of a number of unsavoury characters. I glanced surreptitiously around me, evaluating every passer-by with an eye of suspicion and trepidation.

The road west lead me towards the central station, passing round the side and scanning a large selection of cafés and restaurants on my way. No sign. This was getting slightly worrying - I had been told that the café was obvious, but my careful scouting had revealed no potential leads. I decided that it might be a good idea to locate a map of the area, and to this end I checked out a local book shop, but was unable to find anything of a suitable size or detail level. I returned to the outside world, scanning the square for one last time. This is when I noticed, in enormous neon letters, the sign "*Le Palais de la Bière*". Sitting in front of it, carrying a copy of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, as per my instructions, was my contact.

Supermodel certainly lived up to the name. I decided to move in for a closer look as I hadn't yet been spotted, so I crossed the street as anonymously as I could and took a few photos of the café for future reference. Supermodel was, by my reckoning a little under six feet tall with blonde hair far longer than it had any right to be. Two deep blue eyes shone seductively from behind a copy of the *SdZ*, masking a lightly tanned complexion and a gentle, enticing smile. Once more I found myself sartorially challenged by this clearly superior operative, evidently possessing considerable style and sophistication. I cautiously approached.

Supermodel raised an eyebrow and caught sight of me approaching from a few yards away. I smiled nervously and walked forward, timidly offering my hand by means of greeting. "Harves!" I began, "well this is a surprise." It wasn't exactly what I was expecting. My naive, phallocratic assumptions had lead me to conclude incorrectly that Supermodel would be female. But then again, Grandmaster was always going to be one step ahead of me. Predictability gets an agent killed.

I exchanged greetings with my opposite number, and together we sat down to reminisce over pleasant times past. Supermodel reached into his bulging luggage and pulled out a large anonymous parcel which he proceeded to pass over to me, glancing furtively over his shoulder as he did so.

"This is from Grandmaster," he began. "It's addressed to you. I was told that you should open the envelope first."

I picked up the parcel and turned it over gently, unsure of its contents. It was rather weighty and I half-expected some sort of booby trap device, but at this point I accepted that my own imagination was running away again. Taped to the front of the parcel was a thin white envelope addressed to "Agent Genius," scribbled in slightly untidy, reassuringly humane handwriting. The irony of both of our names was not lost on me. Supermodel was anything but, and anyone who had seen me trying to navigate my way through the Underground earlier would have found my pseudonym decidedly inaccurate. By this point all that I knew about Agent Grandmaster was that he was almost certainly crap at chess.

I timidly opened the envelope, and found a single sheet of paper inside. Cautiously, and looking around me for any suspicious characters, I unfolded it and read its contents. It was our first contact from Agent Grandmaster, and it was to spell the future of our mission.

London

20th February 2002

Agent Genius

If you are reading this then you must by now be in contact with Agent Supermodel. Congratulations: You have completed the easiest part of the mission. Supermodel was originally just going to pass you some instructions, then leave you to it, but he has kindly agreed to accompany you on the next phase of your mission. I trust you will find this a most enormous hindrance.

Two invaluable items are contained within this package. I am sure you will see fit to make use of these in the near future. Please find enclosed:

A squeaky new 2002 rail map of Europe. A well-thumbed but uselessly annotated copy of the Thomas Cook European Rail Timetable (Advance Planner for Summer 2002 edition).

I trust you will accept the lack of explanation for my absence - I have some urgent business to attend to but will see you very soon. I further trust that you and Supermodel will enjoy yourselves for the nonce.

In the meantime, here are your instructions:

Proceed to Paris this afternoon with Agent Supermodel. I recommend the TGV running hourly from *Lille Flandres*, which you will find à peu près opposite *Le Palais* where you should currently be sitting. Find somewhere to stay for 2 nights. Nothing too lavish - no need to give the game away so early in proceedings.

Tomorrow at 11:45am, go and meet Agent Provocatrice at the café *Le Flore en l'Île* behind *Notre Dame de Paris*. You should find it on the corner of the *Quai d'Orléans* and the *rue Genu du Bellay*, at the end of the *Pont St Louis*. Provocatrice will be looking forward greatly to seeing you.

In searching out Provocatrice, you will doubtless recognise the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* dated as per this letter. Do keep your copy. It will be useful later in proceedings.

A votre service,

Grandmaster

## 1.4 Insubordination

Supermodel and I both read the letter carefully, making sure that we memorised every word. Grandmaster was leading us away from our suspected path. Supermodel had been told just as much as I had, so we were both completely in the dark about our intended destination. To take my mind off the mission briefly I ordered a Capuccino in my best Spanish accent “Un Capuccino por favor”. Then I grimaced. Wrong country. My recent undercover work in Mexico had taught me a number of bad habits. One of them was speaking Spanish. Another was drinking *piña coladas*. I was going to have to snap out of those as soon as possible, as the *piña colada* is not the drink of choice for a top secret agent.

We paid up at the café, ready to head off into the heart of Lille in order to search out some suitable location in which to eat lunch and discuss the next stage of our mission. Judging by the size of Supermodel’s luggage I guessed that he’d not managed to pack anywhere near as efficiently as I had. This conjured up images of compartments filled entirely with shoes in slightly different shades of beige. Rather than risk opening such a Pandora’s Box, I offered to stow away the books that we had acquired from Grandmaster in my own backpack for the time being. Supermodel and I arose from our comfortable seats, and then we slipped quietly away from our public meeting place and into the backstreets nearby. We were glad to get away from the hectic carnage of French road traffic, and into the picturesque backstreets of yet another beautiful little provincial town.

I decided to strike up a conversation with my new companion. Now was the best time to assert myself in the relationship and to determine the hierarchy that was going to persist for the remainder of our journey.

"So tell me, Supermodel," I began, "what brings you to Lille?"

There was a hushed silence for a while as my partner mulled over a suitable response, not knowing how much of his mission he was permitted to divulge. "Grandmaster signed me up a few months ago," he continued, "all top secret, you understand. I hope you realise that I could never have spoken to you about it. The mission is too important."

I nodded in agreement, "I fully understand. You did what you had to. I never suspected a thing."

"I'm an experienced undercover operative, Agent Genius. I have extensive training on how to lie convincingly, distort the truth and deceive."

"Ahhh yes," I replied, vague recollections beginning to form in my mind, "How did the Law conversion course go?"

I think I hit a raw nerve there. Supermodel was reluctant to divulge any more information. "Let's just say that I won't be changing jobs just yet."

He had said enough. I fear I had begun to tread that fine line between inquisitive and irritating. I changed the subject.

"I've been thinking about the mission, Supermodel."

My fellow agent stopped and looked around, furtively. "We mustn't discuss that in public, you understand?"

I nodded, acknowledging his suggestion. "Then I should probably not use your code name," I added. Supermodel nodded. He carefully checked the alley, glancing each way several times before whispering back, "You should call me Harves. That is much easier, agreed?"

"Very well," I replied, pleased to dispense with formalities.

Supermodel looked around once more, then spoke to me in a hushed tone. "And what should I call you?" he asked.

I smiled, holding out my hand once more in manner of a greeting, and replying in a calm, baritone voice, "You may call me Xol. Just Xol."

After a short pause, Supermodel took my hand and shook it campily. "Well met, Xol. I'm sure it will be a pleasure working with you. I've heard a lot of your previous missions."

I smiled. "All is not what it seems in this game, Harves. Bear that in mind. Reputation means very little when you're in a death struggle with a mountain lion or strapped to the outside of a cargo plane at 30,000 feet."

"I see."

"Judge me by my deeds, Harves, as I will to you. We should work well together, but I think you should let me lead, at least for now. Things would be easier that way."

Supermodel reluctantly agreed. The ice had been broken, and the hierarchy had been ascertained. Now it was time for me to take charge of this mission and start running it my way.

"I have a plan, Harves," I began, not sure how my partner would take my proposition. "We still don't know if we can trust Grandmaster. He's just sent us both into the heart of France without a word of explanation. He told us to meet at Lille which, on the outside at least looks like a rather pleasant town. And now he wants us to proceed immediately to Paris. It doesn't make sense."

Supermodel frowned. I explained my reasons. "If Grandmaster wants us to meet Provocatrice in the morning then we might just as well catch an early train tomorrow and we'll have plenty of time. On the other hand, if he's planning trouble for us on the route then, well..."

"Grandmaster? Cause trouble?"

"Trust no-one, Harves. Trust no-one."

I decided to leave it at that. I could tell by the look in his eyes that Supermodel was beginning to come round to my way of thinking. After all, the rules were just guidelines. It seemed that the most important thing would be to meet up with Provocatrice, and a quick glance at the timetable showed that we could catch the train at 9am the following morning and still arrive at the rendez-vous with plenty of time to carry out a thorough security search and set up watch from a suitable location.

We decided to sit down at a quaint pavement café overlooking the market and discuss our options. Supermodel had been in Lille for a few hours already, so had taken the trouble of carefully exploring the streets and alleyways in order to locate potential trouble spots and likely escape routes. He had found this café in a nicely secluded part of town with an ample view of our surroundings and few opportunities for anyone to eavesdrop on our conversation. He had done a good job. The food wasn't half bad either.

A *carafe* of local wine accompanied our meal nicely, smoothing the conversation between two oth-

erwise over-serious secret agents and easing tensions slightly. I let Supermodel order the wine. He gesticulated vaguely in the direction of the menu, muttering something about a “peeshay de van”. The waiter seemed confused. “You are aware that this wine is white?” Harves nodded, replying with a customary “Oui.” We’d both ordered red meat. I knew I couldn’t leave such an inexperienced agent to handle anything relating to culinary protocol. The waiter wandered off disgruntled, and we sat back, our cover comprehensively blown. I clearly had a difficult week ahead of me.

Supermodel had conceded that I, being the veteran of the pair, should be allowed somewhat of a leadership rôle, a decision aided in a large way by my greater proficiency with the local dialect. I had been in intensive language training just a few months earlier with my good friend and sometime political commentator, Ian ‘N’ Bentham. Supermodel, however, seemed to have been spending far too much time learning how to order expensive wines and fancy quiches rather than concentrating on the task at hand. I was beginning to wonder if, as Grandmaster had suggested, he might prove to be rather of a hindrance to the mission. That same thought was weighing on my mind again - why would Grandmaster provide me with a partner of no obvious skill or relevance and of such dubious external virtue? Was Grandmaster actually trying to sabotage my mission? It was an uneasy thought, masked only hazily by a few rather pleasant glasses of the local plonk.

We paid up and left our quaint luncheon spot, returning once more to the streets of Lille, eager to make the most of our day of leisure. Our first task would be to ensure that we could book a ticket for the following morning’s TGV journey, and then we could find a cheap hotel in which to spend the night. The thought of sleeping in the same room as Supermodel was not a particularly enticing one, though I accepted that I could do little now to alleviate the trouble that this would likely cause. My best course of action would be to ignore his petty mumblings as much as possible, and to endeavour to get as much sleep as possible. Our next few days were likely to be extremely challenging, both physically and mentally, and we needed to be on top form if we were to come through this mission alive.

We returned to the *Gare Lille Flandres*, hoping to book ourselves onto a suitable TGV for the following morning. Unfortunately, despite my best efforts I was unable to do so - the main ticket office was closed, and the only open kiosks were just selling tickets for immediate travel. It was an unfortunate state of affairs. The lady behind the counter explained carefully to me that I could not book a TGV ticket that afternoon, but that I could try over at the *Gare Lille Europe* instead and try to catch the Eurostar. Failing that, I should return in the morning with my fingers crossed and be prepared to beg.

Supermodel was complaining about the weight of his luggage, so without further ado we decided to go and check into a hotel for the night. We found a suitable place just a few hundred yards from the station, and I enquired about availability. We were in luck - they had free double rooms, and I had successfully managed to communicate my desire to have extremely separate beds if at all possible. We also asked about sightseeing opportunities so that we could further our cover as “two smart, educated, heterosexual young gentlemen touring round Northern France for a week.” I think we managed to convince our host, so were presented with a variety of leaflets with various suggested outings for the remainder of the afternoon. We thanked her profusely, dumped our belongings off in our perfectly adequate room, and headed off into town.

## 1.5 A Clash of Cultures

As the heat of the afternoon sun began to wane, we ventured out of the confines of our hotel and into the bustling city streets of Lille. It was nearing half-past four, and we still had several errands to run before we could safely settle down for a lengthy evening meal. First on our list was the *Gare Lille Europe* where we hoped to be able to book a ticket through to Paris for the morning. The angular modern architecture of the station nestled surprisingly well into its more elderly environs, a fact which was not lost on my more aesthetically-oriented travelling companion.

Our travel enquiries proved fruitless, with nothing but Eurostar tickets going to Paris, and those remarkably difficult to come by. We accepted that the best bet would be simply to turn up to the mainline station early in the morning and hope for the best. It was a slightly worrying plan as we were relying rather more than I would have liked on the efficiency of the French railways, and indeed on the TGV we wished to catch not being already full.

Despite these hesitations, we left the Eurostar terminal, and headed back into the city in the direction of the *Musée des Beaux Arts*. Supermodel had been raving about this particular attraction for some

time now, and I felt that his enthusiasm might not be entirely unjustified. A little navigation soon delivered us to the impressive museum building, the *Place de la République* outside filled with local residents and tourists alike, admiring the splendour of the neo-classical architecture around them.

To further enhance our cover story, we decided to visit the museum itself. Supermodel had heard rumours of a substantial collection of 17th Century Flemish masterworks within, and we were both keen to investigate. We only had 50 minutes left until closing time however, so we paid our money and headed up the stairs towards the gallery at great speed.

I feel it's necessary to take some time out to explain my views on art. Now, I have never really studied art, and I would be the first to confess that I know very little of it. I could probably recognise a Picasso, but I certainly wouldn't be able to tell you anything about it. Nor would I particularly enjoy it. This is due to a phenomenon that I call "Artistic myopia". This is the method by which modern artists try to wrap their work up in so many layers of abstraction and misdirection that, at the end, they succeed only in creating an utter nonsense which means something only to them, and absolutely nothing to anyone but the most dedicated and pretentious critic. By doing so they miss the whole point of art - not that it is primarily a means of expression for them alone, but rather that it should be openly comprehensible and pleasurable to others. Or at least, if they plan to spend taxpayers' money to display it.

You can argue forever on how to define art. At one end of the scale you can just say that anything that conveys a message is art. I don't like that - it lumps Rave music in the same league as *La Traviata*. But the other end of the scale is thoroughly vague - where do you draw the line? So I'm forced to conclude two things. Firstly, almost everything is art, even faulty light fittings, dirty beds and bifurcated farmyard animals. Secondly, most art is bollocks.

Fortunately the *Musée des Beaux Arts* in Lille lived up to its name. From the first room we entered our eyes were filled with images of wonder and delight. The museum was founded in the early 19th Century by none other than Napoleon Bonaparte, our favourite diminutive military hero and dedicated art aficionado. It is rated as probably the second greatest gallery in the whole of France, after the *Louvre* in Paris. The highlight of the first room was Van Dyck's magnificent work "Descent of Christ from the Cross," a sublime piece which mirrors the earlier altar piece of his teacher, Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), and demonstrates a superb mastery of the influence of light and colour so characteristic of the Flemish school. Interestingly, it is almost entirely impossible to write about fine art without sounding like you're half-way up your own arse.

The following corridors and galleries took us through a rich tapestry of 17th Century works, leading through the 19th and 20th Centuries with works by Monet and Goya amongst many others. Harves, ever the aesthete, knew infinitely more about all this than I did, but was more than happy to fill me in on the details. There was no doubt about it, Agent Supermodel was a dubious field operative, but a damn fine art critic. I bowed to his superior knowledge and tailed along behind him, pretending to understand everything he said, and nodding at unsuitable moments.

We left the museum, fully dosed up on culture and ready to visit a place of cold savagery once more. I refer to the Citadel of Lille, though the epithet goes equally well for the French road system which we were forced to navigate on our route. Fortunately, the main street beside the *Place de la République* lead us all the way to the outer region of the Citadel, allowing us to infiltrate the crowds with ease and carry out some military reconnaissance.

The Citadel itself is a large pentagonal structure, defended from all sides by sturdy, ten-foot thick walls. It was originally completed in 1670 at the order of Louis XIV and under the skilled guidance of Sébastien le Prêtre de Vauban (1633-1707), a brilliant military engineer. Louis was a little worried about the Spanish presence in the Netherlands to the north, as they had been pillaging rather a lot of French villages, stealing French women and overfishing in the North sea. The citadel was designed to form the heart of a defensive line stretching all across to the channel on the west, hopefully keeping out his greasy neighbours whilst simultaneously affording to the people of Northern France a certain degree of justified security. Vauban, a veteran of over 50 sieges, knew numerous tricks for breaking through defences, so ensured that the Citadel at Lille would be impervious to all of them. Amongst these measures were a wide moat, thick, angular walls and a battalion of American tourists complete with baseball caps. He also defended it with a large number of heavy cannon and riflemen, essentially anchoring the city of Lille as an impregnable stronghold.

The parks around the citadel were full of fairground attractions, presumably not contemporary with

the stronghold itself. We decided to bypass these and head for the military heart of the building, through the famous main gate and into the sun-drenched courtyard. A large number of soldiers were scattered throughout the compound, together with tourists, townsfolk and miscellaneous military personnel. Clearly, and to our great fortune, we had stumbled upon some sort of open day where the Citadel had been opened up to the general public. We decided to make the best of this and scout out the entire base. The French are supposed to be on our side, but you never can be too careful.

Many items of military equipment caught our eyes, including a rather impressive anti-aircraft gun, operated by a jubilant twelve-year old boy. Close by, dozens of French soldiers were busy serving alcoholic beverages to small children, and laughing with each other about the World Cup and their favourite footballers such as Denis Papin. Heartened that Europe's security was in such good hands, we left the inner courtyard and scouted the perimeter of the installation for a while before heading back to the park to grab a quick drink and relax on a bench next to a particularly calming water feature.

Supermodel and I sat for a while amidst a garden of fragrant blooms and delicate foliage befitting to our mission. We spent some time trying to work out who our next contact might be. This "Agent Provocatrice" sounded extremely interesting, and we were both intrigued to work out where the next stage of our journey would be taking us. So far our trip had been most amusing, but there was so much more to come. We knew that we would be spending the next night in Paris, but after that we could be going literally anywhere. Well, perhaps not *literally* anywhere, but certainly a large number of places.

One clue that we gleaned from our very limited information was that the fact we were told to get two nights' accommodation for ourselves hinted that Provocatrice would not be accompanying us for the next leg of our journey. Supermodel had a contact in Paris whom he had met several times before, and indeed with whom he had spent many pleasant hours discussing philosophy and theology. It was possible that this same contact could well be the elusive Provocatrice, but we were really none the wiser for this inference. Nor did we have any means of finding out other than just sitting back and waiting for the meeting to arrive.

The afternoon almost over, we decided to leave the Citadel and wander back into town. Supermodel wanted to visit the Cathedral and I suggested that we wandered in that direction, and then sat down at a pavement café for a while. This seemed to meet with his approval, so we set off towards the centre of town once more, leaving behind our secretive military operations and returning to our elaborate cover rôles.

The Cathedral in Lille is a peculiar building, consisting of a highly ornate nave, dating from the middle of the 19th Century, and an extremely modern façade to the west, completed just in time for the millennium in 2000. Such is the efficiency of the French construction industry. It is a particularly strange juxtaposition of styles, spanning almost 150 years of architectural nuances, and I must admit it wasn't really to my taste. However, it appeared to have attracted a number of skateboarders and one guy with a hockey stick and ball who reminded me rather too much of a scene in a certain Bond film which involved rather more pain than I considered desirable.

We positioned ourselves in a quaint pavement café just to one side of the Cathedral, affording as pleasant a view as could be expected of the rather unimaginative façade. We ordered a couple of drinks, and sat down to a brief discussion about the mission ahead. Still we couldn't ascertain the identity of our mysterious contact in Paris. We decided to leave it a mystery - hoping instead that by disobeying Grandmaster's orders we hadn't already utterly failed at the mission for which we had been so carefully hand-picked.

It was getting late and dinner was calling. We decided to heed its siren song, heading back towards the centre of town where a variety of pavement restaurants could be found. We plumped for the one with the fewest free seats, following Supermodel's logic that "The one with the most customers probably serves the best food." Of course, an alternative interpretation might be that "the one with the fewest free seats probably has the slowest service." Still, when it came to ordering food, Harves seemed to have the whole deal rather well sorted, so I left him to it. The waiter offered us a choice of two tables. Harves wandered over to one, and then returned, muttering to me "that one's not bad, but it's surrounded by English tourists. Let's take this one instead." We sat down, only to be greeted with the familiar (to me at least) feeling of understanding rather too much of the conversation on the table next to us. Fortunately this time, for a change, the *faux pas* was not mine. English tourists, it seems, just like KGB snipers, only ever appear when you least want them.

So we settled down to a perfectly pleasant meal of unidentified components. Half of the food consisted of regional specialities, most of which were Flemish, so it was rather difficult to decipher exactly what it was we were gleefully tucking in to. Anyway, whatever it was tasted rather good. So

good in fact that I had a sorbet to finish with. Together, Supermodel and I spent three hours at the restaurant, chatting about the mission, our experiences of the day, our hopes and expectations for the following week, theology, politics, art, philosophy and, last but not least, the appalling state of our respective love lives. Being a secret agent may well be a glamorous, sexy job, but it certainly makes it difficult to hold down a meaningful long-term relationship.

So we wandered back to our hotel room, merry but not utterly incapacitated, ready to collapse into our separate beds and sleep off the excesses of the day in peace and comfort. It was now after 11pm, and we knew that we would have to catch a train the following morning at 9am. That meant getting to the station early to make sure we could get a ticket, which meant getting up at 7am. This was not a particularly enticing thought, but at least it stopped us from chatting long into the night about matters of a philosophical nature.

We eventually settled down at around 11:30, tired but also excited and a little apprehensive. Tired because it had been a long day, and we had packed an enormous amount into it. Excited because we were about to travel south towards Paris, and meet Agent Provocatrice with plans for the next stage of our journey. Apprehensive because, if we cocked this bit up then our operation would be a complete and utter failure and we would only have ourselves to blame for it.

And on that thought, I drifted into a deep and unjustifiably comfortable sleep.

# Chapter 2

## Girl, Denied

### 2.1 Cutting it Fine

I lay in the hazy state between waking and sleeping, half-conscious of the unfamiliar hotel room around me and a vague high-pitched beeping forcefully entering my left ear. The world around me suddenly sprung sharply into focus and I reached over to my bedside cabinet to switch off my alarm clock. It must have been early because I found it remarkably difficult to open my eyes. I sat up and slowly shifted out of bed. Harves was still pretending to be asleep, so I wandered over to the bathroom and flicked on the light. A hazy figure began to form in the mirror and it gradually began to sharpen into focus. I looked away - mornings don't bring out the best in me.

I showered briefly, glad that the water hadn't followed the example of practically everything else in France and gone on strike. Sometimes I wonder if it's something in the air. Or maybe the air itself. I could imagine the headlines on the news. "French Oxygen molecules have announced a three-day general strike today over working conditions. They demand an increased shareholding in French air, which is currently largely monopolised by molecular Nitrogen. Lawyers defending  $O_2$  suggest that people attempt to hold their breath for 72 hours or learn to photosynthesise."

Showers are often a great place to think. They're certainly much better than libraries. For a start, you don't have to wear any clothes. And if that wasn't good enough, then you can sing to your heart's content as well. At this time in the morning, I doubted Supermodel's desire to hear a rallying selection of Mozart's finest baritone arias, so I managed to restrain myself. However, I did get ample chance to consider the day ahead of us, and to go over a few bits of vocabulary that I thought I might require over the next 24 hours. Most notably, the phrase "*Il faut que j'arrive avant onze heures parce que je dois rencontrer un agent secret à onze heures quarante-cinq.*" (I must arrive before 11 o'clock because I have to meet a secret agent at 11:45). I only hoped that I would be able to convey the urgency of this request.

I stepped out of the bathroom to see Harves snoozing like a large and very hairy baby, clinging on to his duvet as if his life depended on it. Supermodel was rumoured to enjoy his sleep, a fact that was becoming all too apparent to me. I called over to him, informing him that the shower was free and that I had no intention whatsoever of waiting for him if we began to run late. Slowly he stirred, throwing me a venomous glance, and then sluggishly rolling to one side of the bed before plummeting off the edge and onto the floor with a cold thud. He lay there, wrapped up like a six-foot long, humanoid caterpillar in a duvet. I kicked him and he struggled to his feet once more, hopping gracelessly into the bathroom. I glanced at my watch. We had to leave within 30 minutes ideally. That was okay - we had plenty of time.

Twenty minutes later the shower was still running. I was beginning to wonder if Harves had done a runner and left through the window. I called out that perhaps he might want to move slightly more quickly or else we wouldn't be able to catch our train. Only I didn't put it quite so politely. "Yes, I'm almost ready," he called out, the flow of water from the shower stopping abruptly and a couple of heavy thuds marking his watery descent onto the bathroom floor.

Five minutes later, after a period coincidentally long enough to allow a substantial application of makeup, the door finally opened and Harves staggered out, dripping water on the carpet and with only a flannel to preserve his dignity. I averted my gaze, allowing my companion ample time to cover his discretions with clothing and comb his flowing mane before we both turned to packing our belongings

and finally set off out of our room to embark on our second day of espionage.

We conducted one last idiot-check, designed not to search for idiots, but rather to verify that we hadn't left anything really obvious behind. If our instructions were to fall into the hands of the enemy then our entire mission could have been heavily compromised.

Lille was already alive, even at this early hour. A number of shops were beginning to open their doors to passing townsfolk, and we soon realised that the acquisition of a decent breakfast would not pose any real problems to us. However, the main problem we faced was getting a ticket to Paris. It was now a little after 8am, and the TGV left on the hour, every hour. If we caught the train at 9am then that would leave us ample time. The train at 10am would get us in for 11 o'clock, cutting it a little finer, but still acceptable. Anything later than that and we would be in deep trouble.

We walked into the main station building, ambling over towards the ticket kiosk. This time they all seemed to be in full working order, so I chose the one with the cutest assistant, adjusted my bow-tie and stepped forward. Three minutes later, I was the proud (and rather relieved) owner of two second-class TGV tickets from Lille to Paris, leaving at 9am and arriving at *Paris Gare du Nord* around 10:02. I handed one of them to Harves, and we stepped out of the line, making our way to the departures board. "Well that wasn't too hard," I began, rather pleased with my performance. "Apparently the 10 o'clock service was full, so it's a good job we arrived early."

In fact, although we didn't know it then, we had managed to get two of the last tickets on the TGV, sitting in the very end carriage with only at most a dozen people behind us. If we'd arrived five minutes later we might not have been so lucky, meaning that we would have been stranded in Lille until 11am, we wouldn't have got to Paris until midday, and by the time we arrived at the planned rendez-vous, agent Provocatrice would almost certainly have aborted the mission. This was called "cutting it fine," and being on the good side of it gave one a rather pleasant sense of risk and achievement. It was hardly "dangling-one-handed-from-a-precipice-avoiding-machine-gun-fire" levels of excitement, but we were taking this whole mission one step at a time. As I set off to buy breakfast, I knew that our chance to throw ourselves bravely into the path of danger would probably lie only just round the corner.

Just round the corner I found a lovely little *patisserie*, which served me with the requisite *croissants*, *pains au chocolat* and a couple of bottles of mineral water. For some reason the lady behind the counter gave me an extra croissant for free. I'm not sure if that was because she was about to close and she didn't want to see them wasted, or else perhaps because she was so annoyed with English people unable to order food in French that she was overjoyed at finally being able to speak in her native tongue. Of course, it could have been my suave, sophisticated attire and mellifluous baritone voice, but something lead me to believe that perhaps that really *did* only happen in the movies.

Our train, or rather the train which was about to become ours, in the sense that its services were to be loaned to us temporarily, pulled into the station shortly after 8:40am. Harves and I had seen it arrive so made our way to that platform before the departures board had time to update. Consequently we managed to get ahead of much of the crowd, and soon found ourselves sitting comfortably, slightly separated, in the last cabin of the last coach in the 9am service to Paris.

So this was it - we were finally leaving Lille. We had spent a very enjoyable few hours wandering through its picturesque streets, and it was a bit of a shame to see it go, but the mission took top priority. Most importantly, we both knew that the next step towards our destination lay in Paris. And with it, surely a whole array of new, captivating experiences.

As the TGV trundled out of the station, I glanced across at Harves, who was sitting over the other side of the central aisle, past a particularly outrageously dressed French gentleman. Together we tucked into our *croissants*, preparing ourselves for the journey ahead. The train accelerated into the countryside of Northern France, before long speeding up until the passing trees and fields were merging into a hazy, indistinct blur.

I fought fatigue, and watched on as France slid before me, the fields now seemed little more than the a kaleidoscope of colour before my eyes, and bridges overhead passed like the fluttering of a black wing. There was a feeling of a helpless headlong motion, and the horrible anticipation of an imminent smash, just like on British Rail. I saw trees shrinking and changing like puffs of vapour, now brown, now green; they spread, shivered, shrunk and passed away.

Presently, as I went on, still gaining velocity, the palpitation of night and day merged into one continuous greyness; the sky took on a wonderful deepness of blue, a splendid luminous colour like that of early twilight; the jerking sun became a streak of fire, a brilliant arch, in space; the moon a fainter

fluctuating band; and I could see nothing of the stars, save now and then a brighter circle flickering in the blue.

Then we began to slow. I could feel my body pulling gently forwards as the train drew near its destination. All around me, my fellow passengers were packing away their various papers and belongings into their bags, folding them away neatly into leather satchels and dark briefcases. I looked around the cabin, my eyes blinking to adjust to the dim light, somehow fainter than it had been just a few minutes before. Paris seemed quieter, almost sleepy. We pulled into the station, our short journey at its end, but there was something altogether strange about the ambience of the place. I couldn't quite put my finger on it for a while.

And then it suddenly dawned on me - it was all in black and white.

## 2.2 Paris

Supermodel and I stepped down from the train, the smell of soot immediately entering our tired lungs. My partner coughed violently as we staggered out onto the platform, the bustling crowds pushing past us, hurrying to leave for the excitement of city life outside. As I glanced over my shoulder I noticed that our TGV was now sporting a smoke-stack and elaborate wrought-iron window decorations. I turned to my travelling companion, and shrugged my shoulders. "Well bugger me," I began, "we've travelled through time!"

Harves seemed perplexed. "How the hell did that happen?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I have absolutely no idea. Let's hope it doesn't stay like this for too long or we might find ourselves under occupation."

I glanced across at a well-dressed city gentleman reading a copy of *le Monde*. The headline rather amusingly read "Magne gagne le tour". I scratched my head for a few moments, then turned to Harves with a broad smile. "We're in 1931, Harves. That's Antonin Magne, the French cyclist. He won the Tour de France after taking the lead in the Pau-Luchon stage, if I recall correctly."

Harves frowned. "But didn't he also win in 1934, leading right the way from Charleville?"

"Damnit Harves, I think you're right. He edged out Guiseppe Martano of Italy by a little over 13 minutes, if memory serves."

"Exactly," continued my partner, "but if you look closely at the picture on the front of the paper, you'll notice that the gentleman handing him the medal is none other than Paul Doumer, who was elected President in May 1931, I believe, and assassinated the following year. You can tell it's him by the unfeasibly large moustache and comedy beard."

"Meaning," I interjected, "that we must be in July 1931!"

"Exactly."

"Excellent work, Harves."

"Not at all."

Perhaps he *did* have his uses after all.

So we now knew exactly where, and *when* we were. It was now a matter of crossing Paris to make a rendez-vous with an agent who was not meant to arrive for almost 71 years. We could only hope that he had suffered a similar comedy time-travelling fate.

Paris of the 1930s was a cosmopolitan place, dotted with businessmen in their finery, strolling across the pleasantly quiet cobbled streets. All about stood young ladies with elaborate hats milling around in floral dresses, all in every imaginable shade of grey. A light grey sky overhead was lit with pale white sunlight, bathing the drab streets with monochromatic light. A handful of young *garçons* darted between the crowds, drawing the occasional angry exclamation from the more elderly city gents. Harves and I were both decidedly conscious of our distinctly unusual dress code, drawing a number of disapproving stares from many people we passed. Very few knew exactly what to think of us, crowding our path to get a look at the newly arrived strangers. I kept my camera well-hidden, not fancying the prospect of explaining CCD technology in French to a people who had not yet discovered television.

Before too long the crowds began to die down, having presumably convinced themselves that Harves and I were little more than eccentric English gents visiting our French neighbours on business. We shuffled nervously towards the road and crossed over onto the other side, eager to avoid too much unwanted attention. Of course, the thing about attention is that it isn't *all* unwanted. I caught the

glance of a pretty young French girl as she smiled in my direction, her face bright and pure, seemingly untainted by the thick, dusty air in which she lived. She shone out from the crowd, her dark brown eyes staring into mine, then shying away, a speck of colour in a monochrome scene, a brief smile acknowledging the fleeting encounter. She passed us by and was soon lost in the bustling crowds. I could only begin to wonder what stories could have ensued were I to have pursued her.

I dreamt of the tales she could tell me of pre-war France; what amazing experiences she had lived through; what tempestuous times she had known. I could tell her much of the future, of space flight; of computers and television; of international travel and worldwide communication. I could tell her of the great advances in science and industry which had shaped the world of the twenty-first century. I could attempt to explain the global village in which I lived, the luxuries that we had discovered, and the society that had developed as a result. I could tell her so much that was yet to happen, but yet there would be one lingering thorn. In only eight short years, her country was to suffer immeasurable damage and loss during the second world war. For five years her beloved capital would be under enemy occupation. I knew that I would not be able to tell her of that. What little she knew now. What a great secret I had to withhold.

As we strode through the streets of Paris, we noticed a sign advertising hotel services. We stepped out of the flow of pedestrians, and shuffled cautiously over to the front door, peering through into the dusty, dimly-lit foyer beyond. I pushed the door firmly and it swung inwards with a creak, opening into a cramped lobby dotted with a number of scruffily-dressed French workmen, chatting amongst themselves in their own guttural dialect. As Harves and I strode into the hall, the conversations stopped, and all faces turned to stare in our direction. Silence fell as the door to the outside world closed behind us and the noise of the street was cut off once more, leaving us with an uncomfortable stillness broken only by an almighty sneeze from my travelling partner.

I cautiously approached the counter, smiling to the few workmen dotted along the corridor, politely nodding at them in turn. Behind the gnarled wooden table stood a short, stumpy man in his early fifties, as far as I could tell. Time had not treated him well; his hair was greasy and black; his skin seemed rough and dirty, stained by a lifetime of Paris air. I coughed politely and launched into my opening introduction, announcing us as two English gentlemen searching for accommodation in Paris for one night. My accent immediately relaxed the situation, the Hotel manager smiled understandingly towards us as we stood uneasily before him. Harves glanced round, exchanging another round of smiles and nods with the assembled onlookers.

"Ahhh," began the amused receptionist, "you are Eengleesh? So thees is waiy you dress like ze .. how you say?" He paused for a minute, trying to summon the vocabulary, then turning to one of the workers and mumbled "comment dire 'singe' en Anglais?" He was met with an assortment of frowning and shoulder-shrugging. After a brief moment, he lifted his shoulders, said nothing, and handed me a form to fill in. "Bof!" I said, with a broad smile. The hotel manager looked back at me and frowned. "Quoi?" he replied, "watt durs zees meen, 'bof'?"

I turned to supermodel, who was busy trying to suppress a giggle.

"Erm... "

I began, "it's like... erm... c'est un ... "

Words rarely fail me, even in French, but I found myself staggering to explain this one. Still, I managed after a minute or so, and the hotel manager let out a boisterous laugh, which infectiously spread to his friends. Before long, the entire hotel was filled with the sound of guffawing, punctuated with the occasional "bof! j'aime bien ça!" One by one they all declared their intent to assimilate the word 'bof' into their daily conversation.

So that was it. That was how it all started. I felt proud that I had helped in some small way to enlarge the vocabulary of one of the most beautiful languages in the world. If I'm remembered for anything when I die, I'd like it to be that. Of course, if I couldn't find any way of getting back out of France then I would probably be dying rather horribly in about eight years' time.

The hotel manager took a brief look at the form that I had filled in, smiling once or twice at the spelling. "Ah!" he began, slipping back into terrible English, "You arr from Cambreej". I nodded. "I 'ave been zere."

"Très bien!" I replied sarcastically, hardly wanting to get dragged into a discussion about the merits of the English university system. Especially at a time in which my two most important reasons for attending it, namely women and astrophysics, had not yet been admitted or invented respectively. Fortunately the point was not pressed any further, but a bill was handed over, with the princely sum

of twenty francs to be paid. I turned to Harves. "Of course, there is just one problem with our current predicament," I began, sensing the inevitability of our impending embarrassment. I drew out my wallet, trying to work out a way to explain the concept of the 'Euro' in French. It was hard enough in English. Fortunately I was stopped by my host, "Il ne faut pas payer maintenant," he began, explaining that I could pay in the morning if I wished. I let out a sigh of relief, still unsure of how this problem was to be resolved, but safe in the knowledge that at least I had time to think of a solution.

"Do you think he'll accept credit cards?" joked Supermodel.

"I don't think plastic has been invented yet," I replied.

We picked up our bags, took the room key and made our way upstairs to our rather dingy little room. Somewhere in the background I could hear a male voice call out "Monkey, c'est vrai?" followed by another round of general hilarity. I ignored it.

The staircase wound its way upwards, creaking at every step. Between the levels, the passageways were lit with oil lamps, flickering gently in the still, damp air of the poorly-maintained corridors. After a few moments of fumbling around in the dark, we eventually found our room, turned the key in the lock and swung the door wide open. It was hardly the height of luxury, especially thanks to the fact that it clearly hadn't been cleaned yet. I dropped my bags onto the first bed, conscious of the fact that several odds and ends had yet to be removed after the previous visitor. From the presence of a jacket in the cupboard and a handful of discarded toiletries on the tabletop, I guessed that the previous occupant had left rather quickly. We only hoped that he had done so for a non-scary reason.

The maid was soon to rush into our room, apologetic for the state of the furniture. She did a brief double-take at the sight of our clothes, but soon gathered herself together and began to strip the beds. She asked if we wanted to stay and lock the door ourselves, but we decided that we trusted her. She looked the trustworthy sort, early-forties perhaps with a kind yet distinctly worried expression, presumably overworked from a long day of cleaning and dusting. We began to wonder just why she had been left on her own cleaning so many rooms as the manager and his friends sat around in the hall drinking wine and saying "bof" to each other over and over again amidst howls of inebriated laughter.

We decided that our belongings seemed safe in that room. Our friends downstairs seemed in no state to go stealing things, and we ensured that we took all of our most valuable possessions with us. We would need both the GPS and the camera for our forthcoming rendez-vous, and I always make a habit of carrying my passport with me wherever possible. And as for our money - we took it with us anyway, not that it would be of any great use. "I'm not sure how we're going to pay for our metro ticket," pondered Harves. We stopped suddenly, both about to ask exactly the same question. I was first. "It *has* been built by now, hasn't it?"

Harves shrugged his shoulders. "Must have been. Surely."

I nodded. Of course it had. It was our only chance of getting into town in time for our rendez-vous. I took a brief glance down towards my digital watch. Now *that* would take some explaining too. The time was 10:43am. We had almost exactly an hour to make our way to the rendez-vous point and meet up with agent Provocatrice. Whomever he was. Whenever he was.

We strode down into the lobby, past a throng of hysterical Frenchmen, and out into the street. Once more, all heads turned to look at us, and our unusual attire. "It's OK," I began in my best French accent, "we're English." There was a collective sigh of recognition, and all faces turned away from us and back to the perilously uneven pavement in front of them. I paced down the street back towards the *Gare du Nord*, and Harves followed shortly behind, narrowly avoiding a number of extremely large moustaches as they passed by at an uncomfortably close range.

Much to our relief, and indeed much to our great surprise, the metro had not only been built, but had also been opened to the public for over thirty years. Of course, the modern protocol would almost certainly not be applicable to our current era, so we decided just to follow everyone else and hope that we could pass off a couple of Euro cents as authentic period currency. We approached the barrier with great trepidation, unsure of what we were supposed to do but carefully observing the people in front of us as they handed over coins to the guard standing by the entrance gate. Fortunately he didn't seem to be paying much attention to the coins he was receiving, so I just fumbled around in my wallet for some 20 cent pieces and dropped them into his palm, hurrying through before he noticed. Now *that* would be something to explain to the superintendent.

Fortunately we seemed to have got away with our transgression. We quickly walked over to the

stairs, trying not to look behind us so as to avoid extra attention. We began to walk downwards as quickly as we could, swerving through the crowds. In fact, we managed to get most of the way down to the platform before a whistle sounded behind us and a commotion stirred up towards the entrance gate. We began to move more quickly through the crowd, trying to get out of sight before the cold hand of the law descended upon us. My heart started to race: this would be one for the diary. The fracas grew as we threaded past a number of bemused French commuters, trying not to make ourselves any more obvious than we already were.

As soon as we reached the platform below, Supermodel and I quickly dashed to the end, hiding ourselves behind a pillar adorned with advertisements for some kind of revolting hair gel. The sound of whistling had grown closer and a few people had already tried to clear an empty circle around us, half-fearing that we might have been the target of the law's displeasure. I could hear myself breathing heavily, adrenalin surging through my tired body.

At that moment the familiar screeching of wheels heralded the arrival of a train into the station and we jumped on, quickly hiding ourselves amongst a crowd of startled Parisians, unaware of the drama unfolding on the platform outside. I stared at the train doors, willing them to close. I found myself muttering under my breath, "close, damn you! Close!" They remained open as the policemen outside began making their way down the platform searching behind the pillars and peering into every carriage. My heart was beginning to beat furiously. "Close!" I called out, slightly too loudly. Then I suddenly realised. "Fermez!" There was no use talking to them in English.

There was a whining of gears and suddenly the doors slammed shut just as a particularly red-faced young policeman arrived at our carriage and began to beat on the window with a clenched fist. My heart was racing as we moved slowly out of the station, leaving the illegalities of *Paris Gare du Nord* well and truly behind us. We set off down the line, a murmur of intrigue spreading through the carriage as to the identity of the two mysterious strangers. Just as we were reaching the end of the platform and entering the tunnel, I spied a girl stepping off the stairs and threading out through the crowds, her rich brown eyes catching mine for just one fleeting second before I was gone into the darkness, torn apart once more by fate and time.

I sat down and suggested to Supermodel that he did the same. We had several stops to make before we arrived at our destination: *Cité* and the Cathedral of *Notre Dame*. We had aroused enough suspicion now that we had begun to speak in English, and I thought it best that we just sat down and tried to ignore as much of it as possible. Before long, new passengers would get on and old ones would alight, and we would have blended seamlessly into the crowd. Well, except for my shorts and hiking sandals, that is – they would stand out a mile. There was something to be said for discretion, and we hadn't really managed to work out what it was yet.

The journey was not a particularly pleasant one, the harsh, dirty air of the city above concentrated even more down in the subways, accentuated by the exhaust fumes of a hundred train engines, pumping out their vile chemicals into the impure, stagnant air. This was further degraded by the cigarette smoke of a dozen members of the French *intelligentsia*, browsing through *Molière* and *Sartre* whilst coughing out billowing clouds of carcinogens from their artistically-styled pipes. In addition to all this, the lack of any air conditioning meant that the temperature in the train carriage was climbing towards uncomfortable levels.

We arrived at *Cité* about twenty minutes later, and not one moment too soon. Clearly the staff at our destination had not yet been alerted to our presence as the security was non-existent. We wandered as quickly as we could out of the subway and into the bright, grey sunshine. Ignoring the now-familiar attention that we received from the assembled Parisians, we strode out of the station and towards the main street on the island, taking a couple of left turns, past the *Sainte-Chapelle* and into the *Place de Notre Dame* in front of the famous cathedral. The mighty *Seine* was flowing past with unchallenged splendour, providing a powerful backdrop for the next stage of our mission.

Supermodel grabbed my arm and stopped me in my tracks. "So, we've managed to get to Notre Dame. What next?"

"Well we search out this café and set up an observation post." I clearly wasn't too convincing, looking anxiously around for any sort of navigation point. "Of course, we need to find it first."

Supermodel pointed to one side of the cathedral with a worrying degree of confidence. "It's that way," he said, "or at least I think it is." Seeing as I knew no better, we decided to walk in that direction, passing through the crowds of tourists admiring the exquisite gothic masterpiece and for the

first time that day, really beginning to fit in with the ambience of the place. In just seventy years' time, this beautiful sanctuary would be swarming with American tourists complaining about how small everything was. I didn't envy the people of Paris, coming to terms with that one.

Our designated meeting place was rather cunningly located just over the other side of the *Pont St. Louis*, behind the cathedral, as dictated in our letter from Grandmaster. As we still had a few minutes left before the meeting, Supermodel and I decided to observe the café from a distance, positioning ourselves in a wonderful grey rose garden just across the river. The heat of the morning sun was beating down on us now, the light-grey sky above unblemished by clouds in any direction. It was a picture of true serenity. I only hoped that our contact would be able to meet us because, without a meeting here there would be no way whatsoever of returning to the 21st century, and the next stage of our journey would remain a mystery. In just ten minutes, everything would suddenly become clear. We waited, watched, and hoped.

## 2.3 Contact?

The view from the rose garden was not ideal. Our line of sight was disturbed by a large stone wall in front of the café which obscured all but the top halves of every single patron. In addition, at that range it was highly unlikely that we would be able to identify anyone who came to sit down, whether or not they were carrying a copy of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* detailing events that were not to happen for another seventy years.

We sat and waited for another few minutes. Harves had gone off to explore the area of the rose garden, so I kept an eye on the café. Hardly had he left when I noticed a particularly suspicious figure walking over from the nearby street and taking a seat out on a table to one corner of the pavement area. I strained my eyes to see if I could tell what he was carrying. It seemed to me that he had something under his arm. Whatever it was, he soon opened it out and began reading it. It certainly looked like a newspaper to me, but I couldn't be too sure. I waited for a few minutes for Harves to return, then left him on lookout duty as I slipped out of the garden and over to the bridge, walking half way across it before taking out my camera, pointing it towards the café on full zoom, and taking a single, carefully disguised shot.

I quickly ran back to the end of the bridge where Harves was waiting. Careful to hide our futuristic technology from the passing Parisians, we fired up the display, selected the most recent photo and zoomed in as much as we could. I passed the camera over to Harves, who strained for a few moments trying to pick out the figure in the frame. "Do you know him?" I asked. Harves shook his head. "I don't know. I can't tell. We need to get closer."

This was getting risky. I offered a plan. "Well, perhaps we should just approach him. If he is Provocatrice then we'll be able to find out how to get out of this mess."

"And if he's not?"

"Then we order a coffee and leave."

"And how do we find out? We can't just ask him."

"We check what he's reading. How many people around here do you think own a copy of a German paper from the 21st Century?"

Harves nodded. "OK then. You first."

I hid away my camera, concealing it carefully under my jacket. Together we began to cross over the bridge towards the café on the other side. We got ever closer, and the mysterious man began to look up over the top of his paper directly towards us. I glanced at Harves, "do you think he's spotted us?"

"He's probably just staring at our clothes. Like everyone else."

I was doubtful.

We approached the café and headed for a seat next to the mysterious gentleman. Now that we had approached a little closer, we could pick out his facial features much better. We could also pick out his clothes - he seemed to be dressed remarkably authentically, blending in skillfully with the costume of the time. He wore a charcoal, herringboned suit with padded shoulders, tapered wrists and peaked lapels. Underneath was a white checked shirt, tucked neatly into stylishly tailored trousers. Quite a contrast to Supermodel and me. A smile covered my companion's face. He reached out his hand and walked straight towards the mysterious stranger, who had now dropped his paper, and was grinning straight back at us. "Jacques-Michael!" Harves greeted our contact warmly. I did the same.

"Supermodel!" he exclaimed in a slightly dubious Swiss accent, "How are you my old friend?" "Not too bad," he replied, pondering for a moment before adding, "except that we appear to be stuck in the 1930s."

Provocatrice laughed. "Oh never mind that," he joked. "Grandmaster told me all about your . . . misfortune. Fortunately he was able to get to me before our mission was aborted. He told me that the reason you never showed up in Paris was because you'd accidentally stumbled across a time warp and ended up in pre-war France. He sent me back here to get you."

Harves nodded. "Oh, I see. How convenient."

"Indeed," continued our contact, "though I must admit it took me a long time to get used to the accent and the clothes. I've been here for almost a month now, solely for this one meeting. It is indeed fortuitous that we were able to meet so easily."

"Yes," I smiled, "I see you're fitting in slightly better than we are!"

There was a pause. Supermodel apologised, "Sorry, I forgot to introduce my companion, Xol. Agent Genius as you know him. He is the principal agent on this mission."

"I see," smiled Provocatrice, knowingly, "so it is you who should be reading this letter."

Provocatrice handed me a small, anonymous white envelope, addressed as before to 'Agent Genius' only. "There was a parcel too," he began, "but that's in the future. It won't arrive for another 71 years, unfortunately."

"Damned next day delivery."

"Indeed."

I slit open the letter just as the waitress came over towards our table and tried to take our orders. Hurriedly I stuffed the letter into a pocket, and asked for a couple of white coffees to get rid of the waitress while I was reading the classified document. She smiled at me, glanced at my shorts, expertly managed to fight the desire to laugh then dis-appeared back into the shop. I was left to pull my mission briefing out of my pocket once more, and carefully read its contents. It was from Grandmaster again.

London

20th February 2002

Agent Genius

So you have managed a successful rendez-vous with Agent Provocatrice! Do give him my regards. You must, of course, pay the bill for him. Must show our Continental brethren that we too can still be gentlemen. The expenses are chargeable to me of course.

I fear you may be having endless trouble persuading Supermodel to be anywhere at the right time, get onto the right transport, meet the right people, or get out of bed before noon. This may just turn out to be good training for the more hazardous phases still to come.

Unlike your previous package, this one does not include anything useful. To answer a question you put to me recently though, I have enclosed a present for you. I'm sure you and Supermodel will find it stimulating conversation, as will I when I join you.

As before, I trust you will accept the lack of explanation for my absence - additional urgent business to attend to. But will see you very soon. I further trust that you and Supermodel will enjoy yourselves as the mission progresses.

In the meantime, here are your instructions:

Enjoy the sights of Paris this afternoon, because tomorrow, you leave for Germany. Proceed together to Koblenz (leaving Provocatrice to go back into hiding). I suggest you take the EC57 08:54 - 12:44 from timetable 390 and connect with RE22013 13:11 - 15:43 from timetable 915. It does involve leaving early but you might need a little time to complete the next step.

Beware of my timetable suggestions since they are from the provisional timetable only. On arrival, find somewhere to stay. 2 nights again. "*Zimmer frei*" if you recall.

Tomorrow at 2:30pm, meet Agent Übermensch at the point where the rivers meet. It's the most distinctive spot in town. As for Übermensch, you'll find he's slightly over six feet tall, dark haired and smoothly handsome. This time you will recognise him only because he will be reading a copy of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, dated as per this letter. The two of you should carry Supermodel's copy of the SdZ to identify yourselves.

Toujours à votre service,

Grandmaster

I handed the letter to Supermodel, who browsed through it too, turning his nose up indignantly at the reference to his own ineptitude, an accusation that I now knew to be utterly false.

Finally, once all three agents had read the letter's contents, I turned to Provocatrice and said what was on my mind. "Of course, this letter all seems to presume that we can get back to the 21st Century, doesn't it?"

Provocatrice smiled. "Oh, don't worry yourselves about that too much. I have it fully under control." He beamed a very broad grin that made me wonder exactly what he had planned for us. As agent Grandmaster was behind this all I could only guess that it would be extremely annoying.

We drank up in the café and then wandered across to the *Île de la Cité* again. From there we took a different exit into the 5th *arrondissement*, where Provocatrice said he had managed to rent a flat for the duration of the mission. "So then," he turned to me, "you've probably never seen Paris in the 1930s, have you?" I confessed I hadn't, being rather new to this whole time-travel lark. "Well allow me to show you around then!" beamed our fellow agent. "You're not going to be here for much longer, after all."

We turned off the river front, and headed up into the backstreets, winding through old pre-war Paris. Now that we had an authentically-dressed gentleman accompanying us we drew far fewer stares, though the locals still seemed reluctant to accept us fully. Understandable, I suppose, given the unusual nature of our clothing, and the even stranger nature of our conversation. We wandered along the streets discussing our mission openly, secure in the knowledge that virtually nobody in 1930s France would understand English, and those who did wouldn't have a clue what we were talking about.

The backstreets of the *cinquième* were dainty, quaint and attractive in their own special way. We began to climb uphill, towards the *École Polytechnique* for which this region was so well known on top of the *Montagne St. Genèviève*. We stopped off at a fantastic little church, Supermodel being overly keen to indulge his rather disturbing penchant for all things religious, especially buildings. Fortunately on this occasion his sense of direction was admirable, as the church possessed a rather superb side-chapel with an acoustic more resonant than nearly anything else I've ever heard. The thought of performing a Palestrina mass in there was very tempting indeed, though of course essentially futile.

We left the church in order to return to Agent Provocatrice's Parisian hideout via the dramatic *Panthéon*, built by Louis XV, or rather his subjects, as the result of a particularly inaccurate doctor. Louis was suffering with a terrible illness and vowed that, should he survive, he would erect a monument to the glory of Saint Genèviève on the spot where the ruined abbey-church now stood. He got better, and hence the Panthéon was born. Of course, if you were a member of the French religious hierarchy, you would have probably paid the King's doctor to exaggerate his symptoms just to induce this kind of vow, and the resultant religious devotion that it would cause.

Sadly, it all backfired when the Revolutionary government decided in their infinite wisdom to rededicate the monument to the glory of the heroes of France, turning it into a mausoleum shortly after its completion in 1789. As for Louis XV, well he died in 1774, never able to see his creation and leaving France in such an unstable state that his successor, the imaginatively-named Louis XVI was to be beheaded for it 19 years later.

Moving onwards, we arrived eventually at Provocatrice's flat, sneaking in through the heavy wooden door and into the dimly-lit passage beyond. "Come with me," he spoke, softly. "Be careful of the steps - they're slippery." He was right. Some comedian had apparently covered them with grease. That made the ascent particularly treacherous, with us tripping over at every available moment until eventually we managed to arrive at the top, sliding headfirst into the door to Provocatrice's hideout.

"Come inside," our contact grinned, turning the key slowly in the lock. "Of course, I apologise for the state of the room, but I have been rather busy lately." The key clicked in the lock, and the door swung open, revealing a narrow corridor which lead through into a tiny room lined with all manner of books and gadgets. "My other companion is not here," our contact began, "He's a theoretical physicist." I wondered if this mysterious roommate might have been the one to develop the time-travelling device. Provocatrice seemingly knew what I was wondering and immediately corrected me. "Don't think that *we* invented the time travel device, Agent Genius. Oh no, this is a power far beyond even our technical expertise."

I raised an eyebrow. "Then who made it?"

Provocatrice shrugged his shoulders. "No idea."

"What?" I wasn't sure I understood.

"We've absolutely no idea what causes it, but all we know is that it happens, and we believe we can control it. Oh, and it only seems to affect certain people."

"*Certain people*? Like us?"

"It would appear so."

Provocatrice was fiddling around with a computer which had initially not seemed particularly out of place on his desk, but which was now beginning to worry me by its very presence.

"So how did that get here?" I asked.

"Hmm...?" Provocatrice was not really paying attention. He was frantically typing away on the keyboard.

"How did you get that computer through?" I asked again.

"Oh, that. I'm not really sure. I just got back one day and there it was."

"Did that not worry you?"

Provocatrice thought for a few moments. "No, not really. Hey, why don't why play the piano for a minute while I try to get through to command."

"You can contact Grandmaster from here?"

"Not sure. There's one sure way to find out, though."

I decided to take Provocatrice's advice and lifted the lid of the luxuriously polished upright standing in one corner of the room, next to the bookcases and immediately in front of the window. I hit a few notes, and they resounded perfectly between the narrow walls and high, stuccoed ceiling. I pulled out a book of Beethoven sonatas from the bookshelf and began to play, quickly losing myself in the music I had grown to love so dearly. Supermodel was busy stumbling about the flat, eventually falling onto the sofa, and deciding that it would be best if he stayed there for the time being. Outside, a group of builders took a break from their strenuous morning of tea-drinking to listen in on what must rank amongst the least poignant renditions of the *Pathétique* sonata ever to assault the streets of Paris.

Meanwhile, Provocatrice was typing away furiously. He seemed to have fired up an internet browser and, unless I was very much mistaken, he had managed to find the page for the French railway system.

I glanced over my shoulder, then stopped playing and stood up from the piano stool. I approached the computer and looked over Jacques-Michael's padded shoulders. "That *is* the internet, isn't it?" I asked, trying to ignore the stupidity of the question. "Only," and this was the hard part, "Only it hasn't been invented yet."

"Yes," replied Provocatrice, "strange, isn't it?"

My brain was beginning to hurt. "I mean, there's no way whatsoever that a computer in 1931, ignoring the obvious logistical problems posed by its mere existence for one moment, could hook up to the internet when not only is there no internet, but there's not even a working phone system."

Provocatrice nodded, cunningly avoiding an answer.

Supermodel threw in his two-centimes. “Perhaps it’s another manifestation of that time warp.”  
“Yes,” agreed Provocatrice, “it would seem to be.”

I returned to the piano, knowing only that Beethoven would hurt my head far less than time travel. Incidentally, the same could be said for a full frontal lobotomy.

A few moments later, Provocatrice had hung up the modem, and turned round to us with a broad smile on his face. “I think I know how to get you back to the 21st Century,” he beamed. “But it’s going to involve a spot of lunch.”

## 2.4 Back to the Future (TM)

The concept of lunch in 1930s Paris had not really entered my mind thus far. We had eaten our last meal in Lille earlier that morning, or rather in a little over 70 years, 11 months time. We had no money, and we certainly didn’t have the requisite knowledge to find a decent eatery in such an unusual place. Jacques-Michael was careful not to say anything about the method he had managed to calculate to get us back to the 21st Century, but I could tell from the look on his face that it was extremely cunning.

The *cinquième* is known as the Latin quarter, as I was told. This is not because it’s full of South American babes as I was sadly to discover, but rather because, just like with its linguistic eponym, it was extremely difficult to work out which bits went where. There were rather a lot of roads all criss-crossing about the place, mostly lined with pavement cafés and patisseries, but none of them obviously different to the others. If I were asked now to draw a map of the place I would have no idea how it all fitted together. Fortunately I was with an experienced operative who had spent much of his life studying the French capital, and the local knowledge that this brought gave him a far better chance of finding a decent lunch than either Supermodel or I would have had on our own.

We took a table in a particularly crowded establishment, once more bowing to Supermodel’s first theory of restaurants. We decided to eat only a light lunch, not wanting to stretch Provocatrice’s budget more than it could manage. We were unable to pay for his food, lacking the necessary currency, but I felt sure Grandmaster would have understood. We ate well, with my two companions finishing off rather bravely with a *tiramisù* which was certainly rather large and, I’m reliably informed, most excellent.

Our meal finished, we returned to the flat with our fellow agent, eager to discover how he had decided to return us home. We were beginning to suspect that the requirement of lunch was just so that he could pluck up the courage to tell us of his most ridiculous plans for the next stage of our trip. He was certainly keeping rather quiet about it all.

Jacques-Michael opened the door to his flat once more, and we stepped in from the street. The staircase was still glistening from a generous covering of lubricant, and I could just about perceive a number of painful dents in the fragile plaster work on either side. Harves and I shuffled out of the way as the door was firmly shut, plunging us once more into the dim lamplight. Provocatrice pulled out a key and opened up his mail box. He was looking for something important, but he wasn’t sure it was there. He fumbled through a pile of mail, scanning each one in turn, then replacing them in the box. “That’s unfortunate,” he mumbled, seemingly embarrassed, “I was hoping our luncheon break would have given them enough time. We might have to make this one up as we go along then.”

I had hoped that he was going to sound slightly more confident than that. I decided to ask him what his plans were, as this was beginning to seem all the more ludicrous with every passing minute. I took a deep breath first. “So what were you looking for?”

“The Republic.”

“What?”

“Plato. Grandmaster suggested you learn about Socratic Dialogue.”

I frowned. “I’m sorry. Is this relevant?”

“It is if you want to return to 2002, yes.”

“I see,” I lied. “How?”

Provocatrice took a deep breath. “Well, it seems to me that you’re currently caught in a field of pure anti-logic.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, everything that has happened to you today is totally impossible, right?”

“Well yes, of course.” I sounded unconvinced.

“I mean, time travel is impossible. Even if it were possible, then there’s no way anyone could have followed you in time and met you as I did. Even if that were possible then there’s no way whatsoever

that I could have managed to bring you back here and connect to the internet. It just doesn't make sense."

I scratched my head again. This wasn't making much sense either. Supermodel chimed in once more, "Are you suggesting that this isn't really happening?"

Provocatrice shook his head, "not quite. All I'm suggesting is that anyone with a fully functional, logical brain could not possibly experience such a fundamentally *illogical* sequence of events. It just wouldn't make sense."

"Well...it doesn't exactly..."

Provocatrice smiled. "Then the transformation is beginning. All we need to do now is verse you fully in Socratic Dialogue and you'll be back to the future, so to speak, in no time at all. No pun intended."

"Was that a pun?"

"I'm not sure."

So Supermodel and I sat down for a few minutes becoming acquainted with the fundamentals of Socratic dialogue, and before long we were fully versed in logic and proof, eagerly debating with each other about the concept of time travel.

"Of course," began Provocatrice, "to debate the fundamental paradoxes of time travel really involves Socratic method, which is a different kettle of fish altogether."

I frowned. "Why is that?"

"Well," began my friend, "because Socratic dialogue merely involves ascertaining the nature of things - what something *is* as opposed to what it *is not*, whereas Socratic method is a process by which one discovers contradictions in one's attempted definitions of universals."

Harves raised his hand. "Well, why don't we debate the question 'what is time'?" he asked.

"An excellent idea," agreed Provocatrice, warmly. So we began.

Gradually, as the process evolved, I felt my world shifting back around me. The building remained the same, but its fittings changed; the light dimmed and then brightened, slowly at first, but then gradually faster and faster as the minutes progressed. The sun rose in its daily course, and then set, plunging us into darkness with predictable regularity. Then it rose again, accelerating through its circular path with every second. At first people would pass us and walk right up the stairs without noticing us, but now their motion was so rapid that I could barely distinguish their ghostly forms. Soon the passing of the seasons became as a blur to me; first spring heralded the brief warmth of summer; then followed a sharp descent into the harsh winter cold.

And as we continued our dialogue, trapped in an ethereal void of our own, a bubble in time, we slowly began to understand the nature of time travel. We were coming to a consensus, driven by the pure cold logic of a long dead Greek dude. As we passed through technicolour and into the vivid world of the here and now, slowly our vision began to return to us as whites and greys now blossomed into rich golden yellows and vivid greens. And as we approached a final agreement on the nature of time, passing of the seasons slowed down and the blur of the cycle of day and night had all but halted until at last I proclaimed, "So that is our final decision. Time is a form that the mind projects upon the external things in themselves."

And with that, the world returned and we found ourselves sitting in the lobby of Jacques-Michael's flat, rather pleased with ourselves, and ready to set off on the next stage of our exciting journey. I turned to my host. "Well, thanks for your help."

"It was a pleasure. Whenever you're popping by, don't hesitate to drop in."

"I'll remember that."

I turned to Agent Supermodel. "I think it's about time we left."

Supermodel nodded, so we wandered out of the door, and into the street. We firmly shook the hand of Agent Provocatrice then, on his advice, headed off down the road to the RER station, turning once to wave goodbye.

"Well that was pretty weird," I laughed, turning to Supermodel. "I never thought I'd be travelling through time."

Supermodel frowned. "What on earth are you talking about, Xol?"

Now it was my turn to act confused. "You mean...you don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"We were in Paris."

"We still are."

I looked around myself. "Good point. But no, what I mean is that we were in Paris seventy-one years

ago.”

“What, in a previous life?”

“No, just now.”

“I think you need to get some sleep.”

I think he was right. My brain was beginning to hurt again.

## 2.5 Butch Paris

Our confusingly ambiguous temporal adventures now well behind us, we strode cheerily down the road towards the Seine and, just before we reached it and drowned, we struck off right and headed down a set of stairs into a metro station which formed one end of the rather efficient RER line between the City and the *Gare du Nord*. The RER is a suburban rail service, designed largely to serve the outer regions of Paris, but conveniently offering a far more speedy route between some of the more important tourist hotspots without having to stop off a dozen times on the way.

We had several hours to kill that afternoon, and we decided that the best way to go about doing so was to wander round *Montmartre* and the *Sacré Coeur*, one of Paris’s most beautiful locations, perched delicately on top of a rather prominent hill to the north of town. Finding it would be a piece of cake. After all, now we were back in the 21st Century my GPS system would work again, and besides, there weren’t that many hills in Paris and this was a biggie.

So Harves and I piled out of a metro train near the base of the hill and decided to pursue the tried-and-trusted technique known to scientists as conjugate gradient method. I had never fully tested this particular algorithm in real life, but this gave me an ideal opportunity. The theory is simple: In order to find the top of a hill when blinded, first start off in one direction until either you hit a building, or you start going back down again. Next, turn through ninety degrees and follow that direction uphill until *that* route starts going back down (or until you reach another building). Continue doing this until you reach the top, and you can’t fail. Of course, you might end up walking through some particularly dodgy districts, as we were to discover. Still, at least we made it in the end.

*Montmartre* is a truly special place. It’s probably my favourite spot in all of Paris. Not only does it boast the delicate white-stoned basilica of the *Sacré Coeur* (sacred heart) but it also hosts the *place des artistes* (artists’ square) nearby. This particular location is beginning to outgrow its original purpose now - it’s become hideously commercialised. Still, if you wander round you can find some remarkable works of art amongst other slightly sub-standard displays. The bit that makes me laugh most is the portrait painting. If you’re paying fifty Euros for a portrait then you don’t want it to contain all your blemishes and your less attractive idiosyncrasies. Consequently the square is filled with portraits of many women who, judging by a few of the paintings I witnessed, would have been more than happy with the results.

Leaving the artists’ square behind, we wandered back to the basilica. This is a relatively modern building, completed in 1910 after 34 years of construction work. It was built along the Romano-Byzantine theme of Paul Abadie, whose design won from a field of 78 competitors. It’s easy to see why; the architecture is superb, with one large central dome flanked by four, smaller spires beside it. The internal decorations are not the most impressive I’ve ever seen, but that doesn’t particularly matter as the external appearance is so striking.

After a brief tour around the inside, we decided that it would be rather funny to climb up to the top of the dome and have a panoramic view of Paris. Of course, it was also the idea place for a Bond-esque high-rise fight scene. Fortunately there was even a legal way of accomplishing this, the basilica having been built with tourists in mind. We handed over our hard-earned cash and climbed the several-hundred steps to the summit. I started off trying to count every single one, and then lost track when I was distracted by a particularly amusing pigeon.

The view from the top of the dome was fantastic. Though the building was not particularly high, it was certainly high enough to make any fall undeniably painful, to the degree of almost-certain death. This was not helped by barriers which were placed approximately at the same height as my centre of mass, thereby affording rather a neat little pivot.

When I was a child I never suffered from vertigo one little bit. I used to climb trees in high winds and hang on without even the slightest regard to personal safety. Now that I’ve grown a bit older, wiser and taller I have become slightly more wary of heights, and more importantly, my rapid descent from them. I was once told by a friend of mine exactly what vertigo was. He has it so bad that he can’t sleep

on the top in bunk beds. He said that, to him, it wasn't that the heights were intrinsically scary, it was the prospect of throwing himself off them that made him frightened. You know when you think about something for so long that you actually do it by accident? Well he was afraid that, when he stood next to a ledge, he might accidentally jump to his doom, not realising what that would entail.

Seems strange? Well I have a particularly vivid imagination (as you have no doubt discovered) and I spent about 45 minutes up that dome imagining myself jumping off in various different ways, and I just couldn't stop it. I imagined rooftop fights, collapsing walkways, ultra-extreme rooftop skiing lessons. I imagined everything - and every time I forced myself to take a step backwards just in case I accidentally decided to give it a go. I've talked to other people about this and they seem to be largely split on the matter. Half of them see some degree of truth in what I say, and the other half think I'm certifiably insane.

I really wish I could control my own mind. You know when people tell you that the best way to send yourself to sleep is to "count sheep jumping over a fence?" Well I've tried that several times and I haven't managed to get one safely to the other side yet. It just wakes me up as a whole line of willing ovines impale themselves on barbed wire, slam into wooden planks or launch themselves into orbit. One made it once, but lost several limbs in the process. Sometimes I wonder who's really running the show up there, because it certainly isn't me.

As we descended from our high-altitude panoramic sightseeing, Harves and I decided to wander over to the front of the basilica and get some sun for a few minutes. It was a gorgeous day, and the grass looked ever so inviting, despite the ankle-high fence running round the side of it. As there were no signs (and a large number of people already sunning themselves on the *pelouses*), I decided to interpret that barrier as a fence for keeping the grass from escaping rather than for prohibiting the access of a few tired pedestrians. Or perhaps it was a clever security device to keep out inquisitive gnomes.

I sat down on the suspiciously damp grass, reclining my head and finally taking the weight off my tired back. It was a great relief finally to be able to rest for a while, after such a hectic day. I lazed there in the sun for quite some time, hardly believing the strange events that I had so recently experienced. I was glad that there would be no more dashing around for quite some time, hoping that we would be able to take the evening slowly, relaxing in a pavement café somewhere. That was the plan anyway. Of course, as I had learned to expect, things rarely actually happened like that in reality.

So, as a suitable plot device, we decided to go and visit the *Place de la Bastille* and wander round there on the off-chance that we might find somewhere to eat. Harves seemed to have a rather extensive knowledge of all things gastronomical in Paris, and I took him at his word. We slowly descended from the hill on which we found ourselves, and located the nearest metro station. From there we jumped on a suitable train going in the direction of *La Bastille*, and predictably hopped off as soon as we arrived. It was remarkably reassuring that everything was now in colour again as otherwise that would have made navigating the metro map considerably more difficult.

We arrived at our destination around 6:40pm. I remember that time particularly as it was to become rather important in the following hour. The exit of the metro station landed us right next to the famous *Opéra de la Bastille* so, just out of curiosity we decided to peer in through the windows and see what was on. Everything was closed inside, but of course there were numerous posters advertising the schedule for the summer. We looked down the list and then across to the relevant entry. I raised my eyebrows. "Apparently they're doing 'The Barber of Seville' here tonight. I wonder if they've got any tickets left." I stepped along and peered through the next window. I could see a number of closed ticket kiosks, in front of one of which was the sign "Barber of Seville - Sold Out!". I clicked my fingers. "Damnit. Just our luck."

Supermodel had spotted another poster slightly further along. "Hey, they're doing 'The Magic Flute' at the *Opéra Garnier*. What about that?"

I glanced back through the window. "Sold out too. All of the next four performances."

"That's annoying."

We left the windows and wandered back round to the front. Harves was looking inquisitive. Normally that meant something bad was about to happen. He pointed to the security personnel at the door. "Could you ask them if there are any returns for sale?" he wondered, presumably requiring me to do the translation.

"Nope," I replied, concisely.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know the French for 'return'. Unless I ask if they have an 'aller-retour', but I don't

think that will help.”

“Pity.”

I could tell by the tone of voice he used that Supermodel wasn’t entirely convinced. He hadn’t given up yet, and I had a horrible feeling that there was still a leading rôle in this evening’s entertainment for me. I tried to put him off doing anything rash by being uncharacteristically realistic.

“Do you think they might have some tickets left at the Garnier?”

“No, I shouldn’t think so,” I replied.

“I bet they do.”

“Well, they *were* sold out for the rest of the month.”

“Yes, but they might have some tickets put aside for last minute sales. That’s what they do in Covent Garden.”

It seemed possible, but I wasn’t convinced that I would be able to work out how to ask, so I continued being negative. “I bet they don’t have any. Or at least, if they do then we’re probably too late.”

“It’s worth a try. We’ve got nothing to lose. We could at least ask in here instead.”

He had a point. Not a very good one, but it was more than I could muster. We wandered towards the main doors, and managed to scrape through security. The guard had a long, disapproving glance at my shorts, but after that morning’s fictional sartorial debacle I was more than used to that by now. We successfully arrived on the inside, and glanced over towards the ticket booths which had just opened at seven o’clock, half an hour before the performance. We had spent rather a lot of time deliberating our choices and had consequently wasted at least twenty minutes of queuing time. Of course, considering the opera was sold out, it wasn’t immediately obvious what we would be queuing for.

I decided to ask one of the gentlemen at the front of the queue, who had just walked away from a ticket booth with a suspiciously ticket-shaped object in his hand. “Are there any tickets left?” I asked. Or at least I hope that’s what I asked as my French was still not quite up to speed. “Oui,” he replied, “go and queue up over there.” He pointed (in French) to the end of the queue which now snaked past the ticket booth and off into the distance. I thanked him, and wandered with Harves towards the back of the line where a number of surprisingly well-dressed people were clearly trying to buy last minute tickets for their wives and girlfriends. With my not inconsiderable knowledge of women, that struck me as a risky and distinctly foolhardy enterprise and one that could well end in a significant amount of pain.

One young girl approached us and informed us, in an accent that I couldn’t quite discern but which might have been Australian, that there was a small kiosk round the corner which sold very last-minute tickets for students, if we were willing to take the chance. Apparently it was rather pot-luck, and we risked walking away empty handed. However, occasionally one got something rather good. Of course, the embarrassment of turning up in the Royal box wearing shorts, sandals and T-shirt probably didn’t quite balance the thrill of getting in to see a bit of Rossini for a fiver.

We stood in line there for a minute or two before Harves spotted the cast lists on the wall, and wandered off to search through them. I watched as he checked through a string of names, and then glanced over to the other side of the poster, his face suddenly turning a sort of off-white colour before he turned round and ran back to me. “Damnit. Barbara Bonney’s Pamina.”

“Excuse me?”

“Barbara Bonney is singing Pamina at the Opera Garnier.”

I pondered the situation for a while. “That’s pretty annoying, huh?”

“Yes, you could say that.”

There followed a silence just long enough for me to realise the hideous proposition that Harves was about to make, but not long enough for me to think of a clever way to get out of it.

“Do you think we could make it?”

I looked at my watch. “Harves, we have precisely twenty-five minutes to travel half-way across central Paris.”

“It’s not impossible. I know the way.”

“And when we get there, we almost certainly won’t get a ticket anyway.”

“We probably won’t get one here. And besides, Rossini sucks.”

“This is lunacy.”

“This is Barbara Bonney as Pamina.”

“Shut up Harves, you’re beginning to make sense.”

Slowly, and much to my displeasure, I was beginning to come round to his idea and just thirty seconds later we found ourselves jogging along beside the Opera house, towards the nearest metro station.

"Twenty-three minutes" I called out. Harves ignored me.

We ran down into the metro station as quickly as we could, identified the correct line and sprinted towards the platform. For the second time in two days I was exceptionally lucky with the trains - one was waiting for us at the station, and almost as soon as we jumped on board, the doors closed and we began to crawl off on its journey.

"Come on! Come on!" yelled Harves, taking this far too seriously.

We pulled out of *Bastille* and into the darkness of the metro system. Less than a minute passed, and we found ourselves at the next stop. Agent Supermodel was stamping his feet like a child and checking his watch every five seconds. "Twenty one minutes, Harves," I called out. He nodded, a pained expression filling his face. "We can make it."

Several more stations passed by, and then we found ourselves changing train once more onto a different line. This time we weren't quite so lucky, but clearly the god of public transport (I imagine him being forty-something, bespectacled, buck teeth, slightly greasy, dark hair and wearing a macintosh, if it helps) was smiling on us that day as a train arrived less than a minute later. We jumped on board, drawing a number of stares from a particularly laid-back crowd of French commuters. For the second time that day I began to will the doors to close as quickly as possible, but this time they didn't even obey me when I asked them nicely in French. Things always take a very long time to happen when you're in a hurry. Like writing a thesis, as I will probably discover in September.

We shot underneath Paris at breakneck speed. Harves kept both eyes fixed on his watch, mentally trying to wind the hands back. We had 12 minutes to go as we pulled into *Opéra*, and sprinted out of the train, running towards the exit as fast as we could go. Running in sandals, especially with a large amount of expensive electronic equipment round your neck, is not a pleasant experience. Harves began to lose me through the crowds, expertly dodging between babies in prams and men carrying large boxes of priceless glassware in surprisingly fragile cardboard boxes. I didn't want to take the risk, so dropped behind, making sure I kept an eye on my fellow agent from a distance, confident that even if he made it before me, he wouldn't know how to ask for a ticket anyway.

Soon we found ourselves in the square in front of the luxurious façade of the *Opéra Garnier*. I couldn't help but tell the obvious joke, under my breath;

Q: Why did we run half way across Paris to see Barbara Bonney at the Opéra Garnier?

A: Because she's worth it.

Or was that Loréal? I can never remember those sorts of things.

We ran up the step, past a large crowd of people who all looked like they'd been to the Opera Garnier looking for cheap-price last minute tickets but failed. I rushed inside, asked for directions to the ticket counter, and then set off on the necessary bearing. We had nine minutes to spare. Harves and I ran into the ticket sales room, clearly out of breath and sweating like pigs. A rather lengthy queue of well-dressed opera attendees turned in unison to watch us and frowned unappreciatively at our behaviour. The queue did not look good. I couldn't help but conclude that we'd run through the Paris subway system in record time only to discover that our brave quest had been a failure. There would be no Mozart for us tonight.

Incidentally, there was one ticket left, and it cost a hundred quid.

## 2.6 The Long Walk Home

Dejected, upset, and downright bemused by our cross-Paris sprint, we decided that the best thing to do to take our minds off our dismal failure was to go for a wander and laugh at some designer clothes shops. We also needed food - that was remarkably important. And drink. It was beginning to get near dinner time, and we really didn't know where we were going to find any. We set off towards the south, in the direction of the Seine and the *Palais de la Louvre*. Right outside the palace was the *Jardin des Tuilleries*. That was to be our next stop.

On the way however, we passed next to some of the most pretentious clothes shops we had ever seen. Next to these stood some of the rather expensive-looking four- and five-star hotels in which James Bond would almost certainly have been staying were this mission allocated to him instead of us. I couldn't

help but wonder why vast amounts of government money were wasted on housing top secret agents in conspicuously opulent accommodation. If the average super-villain wanted to know whether he was being followed by M15, he just had to check out the presidential suite at the neighbouring Hilton, and ask the staff on front desk if it was occupied by a smart, well-dressed man with an upperclass English accent who seemed to take home a different girl every night, few of whom ever returned. If it was, then he could just chuck a few hand-grenades through the door and his problems would be over.

Down the road from the *Opéra* is the *Place Vendôme*. Now this is a large square which serves no other purpose than to house a stupefying collection of ludicrously expensive top-level fashion houses. Each of them is lavishly decorated in a mind-numbing variety of colours, arranged by some hideously over-valued modern artist into an indecipherable mess of pompous silliness. Harves was not impressed. "Place Vendome?" he scoffed, "More like 'Place de *up its own arse*'." I tended to agree. We continued southward, finally arriving at the *jardin* and trying to order a ludicrously overpriced can of lemonade from a particularly inefficient café.

Harves walked up to the counter to order our drinks, and the assistant told him to sit back down again while he fetched a waiter. Then he called across to the other side of the bar to where a decidedly unimpressed young man was standing, trying to ignore the customers. This waiter shuffled in our direction, took our order, wrote it down and then walked over to the first man, telling him what we wanted. Two minutes later our drinks arrived, which is approximately one minute and fifty seconds later than they would have arrived if we'd just been able to order across the counter like anywhere sensible. And then they seemed most unamused when we didn't tip them. France has a lot to learn if they want to be taken a bit more seriously by the rest of the world.

Ten minutes later, and suitably refreshed, we stood up and began to wander through the gardens and towards a bridge that we had seen earlier. This stretched over the Seine, leading to the 6th *arrondissement* on the other side. We had decided to walk through towards the 5th, where Harves claimed he knew of a few good restaurants from the previous times he had come to visit agent Provocatrice. So we left the gardens behind, and crossed back over the majestic river at the very heart of old Paris, finally nearing a decent bit of food. And to this day I still don't know what a *tuillerie* is.

I'm a fairly trusting sort of guy, so when someone tells me that they know where to find some good restaurants I believe them. This was one such occasion. Agent Supermodel had so far excelled himself with his ability to search out a decent place to eat in the most unusual of locations, so I had no reason whatsoever to doubt him. Thirty minutes later, however, I was beginning to wonder quite where he was leading me, and where exactly these alleged restaurants were to be found. Fifteen minutes after that, having still not located anywhere particularly suitable, it was beginning to get quite serious.

"The problem is that it's Monday," Harves complained.

"Why is that a problem?"

"The French and Italians have this thing about Mondays."

"What sort of a thing?"

"Well, they don't like working on Mondays much."

I was beginning to sense a pattern here. My recent travels to Italy had taught me that the Italians didn't much like working on any day ending in a 'y'. Clearly this particular work ethic (or lack thereof) had spread northwards and westwards.

"What's the matter?" I enquired, "Two days of weekend not enough for them?"

Harves shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. It's just the way things are around here. Which is a pity because there are usually dozens of cafés in this area which do fantastic food but they all appear to be closed."

"What about that one?" I enquired, pointing across the street.

"That's a furniture shop."

I looked again. He was right. "Oh yeah."

Harves looked left and right, peered down a few side streets, and then pointed in one seemingly arbitrary direction, adding "Let's go this way. I remember two great places down here."

They were both shut.

We eventually found one rather crowded place on the side of a small square, which served me a particularly fine roast duck, and some kind of potato-themed dish for Harves. It wasn't anything exceptional and, as I explained to my fellow agent, I was beginning to look forward to Germany where they

served sensible-sized portions of food which consisted of several colossal slabs of meat and a nominal side-helping of vegetables. None of this 'quiche' and 'flan' nonsense. I was a real man and real men eat unhealthily large steaks. Harves nibbled delicately on a stem of asparagus, evidently unsure about whether at least to pretend to agree.

We caught a metro train back to our hotel a little later that night, arriving back shortly after ten pm. It was still early, but we had several things to do before we went to bed, namely searching out the route to the *Gare de l'Est*, from which our train was to leave early the following morning, and also writing up the exploits of the day in our now rapidly-expanding diary.

As I sat down, pen in hand, to record the day's events, I couldn't help wondering exactly what to write about my mysterious journey through time that had so confused me earlier on. Harves wasn't much use as he was still denying that it had ever happened. I was beginning to wonder if he was right. I decided that I would be better off if I just wrote the day up as if it had all taken place in 2002. That way Harves would be content, and I would remain unhassled by mysterious men in white coats with friendly, back-fastening jackets.

When I finally lay down and closed my eyes, I slipped into an uneasy sleep haunted by the apparition of a slender, well-dressed young lady walking past me in a dusty, crowded street. All I remembered was her seductive smile and the deep, chestnut brown of her eyes.

## Chapter 3

# The Schwarzwald is not Enough

### 3.1 Io sono nel treno

Today was the second early start in as many days, and I still hadn't got the hang of it. Once more, I was the only one to stir as the alarm went off, so I lumbered in the shower first, granting agent Supermodel a few more minutes of much-needed beauty sleep.

So today was the day we finally left France. Initially I had expected to be well on my way through Germany by now, so our first letter telling us to stay in Paris for two days came as rather of a surprise. Now we suspected that we would be moving after Koblenz through to Berlin, or perhaps even to Leipzig. For now, Grandmaster was evidently keen to keep us guessing, which at least maintained a certain level of mission security, even if it was beginning to prove rather annoying.

I stumbled out of the shower, once more prodding my fellow secret agent sharply in the back in an attempt to rouse him from his slumber. He stirred gradually, and turned over to stare hazily in my direction, his eyes sporting larger bags than an elephant who was going on holiday for a month without access to a launderette.

Harves slowly fell out of bed, and smiled vaguely in my direction.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked

"No," I replied, "I made a few mistakes."

He ignored me and stumbled into the bathroom, firmly shutting the door behind.

Twenty-five minutes later, and rather like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, Supermodel reappeared, resplendent in his morning finery. I had already packed my bags, so I sat back and waited for my room mate to get his belongings in order, a process which was tending to take rather longer each day because of the increasingly chaotic nature of his packing.

Our belongings finally stowed away in their rightful places, we wandered off into the morning sun, waving a last goodbye to our comedy hotel manager, still laughing uncontrollably seventy years on. I glanced at my watch: it was ten to eight. We had an hour to get some breakfast, head to the *Gare de l'Est*, buy our tickets and find the required train. Thanks to our late-night reconnaissance we now knew the exact directions to the station, so this was hopefully not going to prove too problematic.

We left the hotel and walked confidently down the streets of Paris, stopping off briefly to buy a large number of breakfast *croissants en route*, and then continuing to our nearby destination, ten minutes' walk away from our hotel. This was to be our last task on French soil, we presumed, and after this we were heading towards Germany where language barriers would become significantly more of a problem. I strode up to the ticket kiosk, ordered two single tickets to Koblenz and crossed my fingers.

Now, this could have gone horribly wrong in any one of five possible ways.

1. I didn't know what 'Koblenz' was in French. It could have been completely different.
2. There might have been several towns with the same name.
3. The ticket might have been ludicrously expensive.
4. There might have been no tickets left for our desired service.
5. The desired service might not even have existed.

As it happened, the French for Koblenz was something like ‘Coblens’, and I managed to get my point across. Fortunately it wasn’t too expensive, though it was certainly going to make a significant dent in our bank accounts. As I was later to discover, there was a second town called Koblenz in northern Austria, so it’s a good job we got the right one. The lady suggested, against Grandmaster’s orders, that we changed at Mannheim instead of Saarbrücken. I didn’t particularly want to argue with her so I agreed, and we booked ourselves onto that service. Finally, we had two tickets for the second major stage of our journey, and in a few hours’ time we would be well on our way to the German border. What better time to have a celebratory *croissant*?

We now had thirty minutes to spare, so we took a seat in the corner of a large café and pulled out the rail map with which Grandmaster had provided us just two days earlier. I located Koblenz and Saarbrücken, and before long managed to find Mannheim. The route we had been forced to take was slightly longer, but allowed us an extremely scenic trip right along the Rhine valley on the way in, which we suspected would be rather beautiful. Things had actually worked out well, or so it seemed. This was going to be an extremely relaxing day.

It was rush hour in Paris, and every few minutes a commuter train would arrive at one of the platforms, unleashing a flood of smartly-dressed business executives in increasing stages of tardiness. As the clock drew ever closer to nine, the speed with which these white-collar workers exited the train increased noticeably until some of them were actually sprinting across towards the metro lines. Harves and I preferred to lay back and take things easy; let life pass us by. We were voyeurs. Not in the dodgy late-night, binoculars-behind-the-privet-hedge sense, but in the more socially acceptable, philanthropic manner. We enjoyed watching ordinary people run their ordinary lives. Except, of course, that there is no such thing as an ‘ordinary person’ or an ‘ordinary life’. Any one of these red-faced smartly-dressed Parisians could have been a counter-agent, sent to observe us. We kept our wits about us, what little we had. I put mine in my left jacket pocket.

We boarded our train at a quarter to nine. It was a German train, immaculately clean and sporting a smooth, efficient looking paint job. To me, the train said “in this country, we *care* about our passengers.” Of course it didn’t actually *speak* to me as it was only a train, but that’s probably what it would have said if it could. Like Thomas the Tank Engine or something. That made me think...

Thomas the Tank Engine was excited as he had a new friend in the station, come to visit from overseas. It was a brand new engine, smartly dressed in his summer paint with the letters “DB” down the side in a large red box. Thomas chuffed over to the siding where the visitor was waiting, and cheerily tooted on his whistle. “Hello there!” he chirped, playfully.

“Hello,” came the reply, “I am Günter, ze German engine.”

Annie and Clarabel giggled, “hello Günter. Welcome to England.”

Günter tried his best to force a smile, but he clearly wasn’t happy. Gordon the Big Express Engine chugged merrily over and also offered a warm welcome. “Hello there, stranger,” he began, “and who might you be?”

Thomas interrupted, keen to impress. “This is Günter. He’s on loan from Deutsche Bundesbahn. Apparently he had been complaining about the conditions in Germany so they thought they’d send him over here for a bit of a shock.”

Günter began to sob into a hankiechief. “How do you do it? How do you survive in zees country? It’s terrible.”

“Oh,” laughed Gordon, “you sort of get used to it.”

“But nothing vorks here! Nobody cares about you! Zey just leave you to fall apart. Zey run you on dangerous tracks vizout any sort of safety checks. Zey don’t seem to give a damn vezer you make it on time or not, so long as you earn zem some money.”

“I think that’s a bit harsh,” began Gordon before Percy pulled into the station and joined in.

“Oh I’m not so sure,” said the young green engine, “do you remember what happened to Cecil the Slightly-Short-Sighted Engine? As far as I know he’s still rusting away in that siding at Birmingham New Street.”

“Oh yes,” said Clarabel, “and then there was that terrible tragedy with Nigel the Not-Particularly-Well-Balanced Engine on the East Coast Main Line. We can’t forget that.”

“Not to mention Stuart the Slightly-Racist engine,” added Annie. “They put him on the Slough to Brixton route.”

Thomas agreed. “And then there was Sam the Schizophrenic engines. They were both just fine before they were put on the Cambridge to Kings-Cross route.”

"The one that reads like a disaster catalogue?" asked Gordon.

"Yes, that's the one."

Gordon was beginning to understand his colleagues' arguments. "Actually, you're right. I'd never really thought about it before. I haven't been cleaned out since last February and there's a rather suspicious smell coming from my boiler."

"See vat I mean?" choked Günter, sniffing uncontrollably with sorrow. "It doesn't have to be like zis. In Germany zey care about ze rail service. Zey look after ze trains and zey clean zem regularly. Zey even run zem on time."

Gordon laughed, "you'll be telling me they renovate the tracks next!"

Thomas had an idea. "Why don't we all move to the continent? Just think about it - proper working conditions, kind treatment, satisfied customers. It would be like a dream. We could sneak through the channel tunnel with Carol the Cleverly-Trilingual Eurostar engine."

"Yes!" cried Percy, "that's a brilliant idea. They would never know."

So it was decided. That night they all crept carefully out of the station, motored on over to Folkestone and headed over to the continent for a life of luxury abroad. The next morning the fat controller woke from his slumber around midday only to discover all of his trusted engines gone, and a big note which read;

Dear Mr. Controller

Gone to Europe with Günter.

Never coming back.

Love,

Thomas the Tank Engine and friends.

P.S. Lose some weight.

If only trains could talk; what tales they would have to tell.

This one seemed distinctly lacking in humanoid features, which was probably a relief. We jumped on, then shuffled down the carriages until we managed to secure a few seats facing the direction of travel. One thing that we had noticed so far is that trains on the continent seem to run a sufficient number of carriages to accommodate all their passengers, which was yet another luxury to which I was predictably unaccustomed. There were a few 6-man cabins on this train, of the type you normally only ever see on spy films and Rolo adverts, but they all seemed to be occupied by at most two people desperately trying to give the impression that none of the other seats were free.

We sat down, arranged our belongings in a way so as to minimise the possibility of anyone wanting to sit near us, and then relaxed into our comfortable German train seats. Before too long, Harves was asleep and I was trying to check out the girl about six rows down from us who looked easily cute enough to be an enemy spy. She had long blonde hair with streaks of red, deep blue eyes and a particularly athletic figure. If she was indeed an enemy agent then I was hoping that this holiday was going to follow the rule-of-Bond, which states that there are always three women with whom the lead secret agent sleeps. The first one dies (sorry, Harves), the third one ends up being his great love at the end of the film (just after something very large explodes, if you avoid the obvious innuendo), but the second one is always some sort of beautiful enemy agent who lures him into bed, totally fails to kill him and ends up dying in an unfortunately painful way. Now, with just one *tiny* alteration, that could be a great way to proceed.

We rode onwards through the beautiful, hilly forests of the Ardennes towards the fast-running waters of the Moselle. Paris now comfortably far behind, we found ourselves once more in a particularly pleasant, undeniably English landscape, bathed in the warmth of a golden summer sun which had been afforded the distinctly un-English luxury of a cloud-free sky in which to shine. We sped through wide meadows, lush green woodland and picturesque villages. I kept an eye on the sun, making sure that

it didn't do its old time-travel trick again. Fortunately my now logically-programmed mind prevented anything particularly silly from happening to us for quite some time. Or so I hoped.

Our thoughts were interrupted momentarily by the all-too-familiar ringing of a mobile phone further down the corridor. Much to my amusement, a girl answered it and proceeded to yell "Je suis dans le train" into the handset. Some things are universal - they work in every language. This particular incident was to form part of a decidedly silly idea that I was to have in five days' time.

After nearly three hours of travel, we finally arrived at our first main stop, Metz. Here the train split in two, apparently on purpose unlike with British trains. One half went to Luxembourg whilst the other headed on East towards Germany. Much as I would have loved to visit one of the most pointless countries in Europe, I felt that now was perhaps not the time. We had taken enough liberties already with Grandmaster's plan, and we couldn't risk any more. Fortunately we had chosen to sit on the correct half of the train, and a few minutes later we parted ways and set off back in the direction from whence we came, which annoyingly meant that we were now facing backwards. This was rather scary as it meant that Germany could quite easily sneak up on us from behind when we least expected it.

In what was possibly the least rigorous customs check ever, a group of three French men and one woman got on the train at Metz, wandered down the carriage vaguely glancing at each of us and finally leaving at the next stop. No passport check of course - we're all brothers now. And sisters. These were great times; when a secret agent could travel at will throughout continental Europe without fear of arrest or interception. I couldn't help but think that it took away some of the romance of the job, but I suppose anything that made the mission more likely to succeed was a welcome improvement.

Harves was still out like a Cambridge Organ Scholar (which can be read at least two different ways), so it was rather difficult to gauge what he thought. Grandmaster had been right when he mentioned my fellow agent's sleeping problem. Well, I suppose it wasn't really a problem - he didn't seem to have any trouble at all actually sleeping, it was the remaining awake bit inbetween that he found so difficult. I decided to leave him there, snoozing gently, as I knew that he would need all the energy he could muster as soon as we arrived in Germany.

The border was fast approaching, or perhaps it had already passed. It was difficult to tell. I looked out of the window, trying to see if I could spot any changes in the countryside, but it didn't *look* German. It was only a few minutes later at 12:50 when we pulled into Saarbrücken that we could definitely be sure that we had left France behind for what we hoped would be a fascinating few days of espionage in Koblenz. Here we encountered more customs officials, in the form of two German security guards wandering down the carriage in near silence, carefully eyeing each passenger in turn and then ignoring them just as their French colleagues had done before.

Finally, and with no further trouble, they were gone, leaving Agent Supermodel and me breathing a heavy sigh of relief. Actually, he was still asleep, so I breathed one on his behalf. The border had been successfully breached, but the hardest stage was yet to come. We were now in Germany, and we suspected that the perfectly bilingual train announcer who was currently telling us all about the journey ahead in German and English, was unlikely to be a representative example of his fellow countrymen. Last time I had visited Germany I certainly don't remember many people speaking English. Perhaps it had changed. Either way, I felt sure that I was going to have to resort to my meagre command of the German language, so I thought that the least I could do was to try to finish the 'Teach yourself German' book I had brought with me. The current chapter was all about buying houses in Bavaria, which struck me as slightly unnecessary, but I persevered because the following chapter was tantalisingly entitled "what to do when things go wrong in Germany" and I felt that this was likely to prove far more useful.

Our train set off again, leaving behind Saarbrücken and whatever mysteries it might have contained. The rest of our route headed mainly East towards Mannheim where would need to change onto the service heading in a northwesterly direction through the Rhine valley. We wanted to stay around here in this particularly pretty area, but knew that our mission drew us ever northwards. Whatever plans Grandmaster had laid out, they hinged on us being in Koblenz the following afternoon, and we couldn't risk missing our rendez-vous. We were only slightly perturbed when the train manager announced that we had just arrived at Hamburg. Feeling that this might have been slightly out of our way, we checked our map to reveal that we were at *Homburg* instead. That was a close one.

The train surged ever onwards through Kaiserslautern and Neustadt. The rolling hills about us were ideal for an ambush, so we kept our eyes well and truly open just in case the enemy tried to attack. I

couldn't help but notice that the cute girl down the cabin was now on her own, the strange middle-aged man she had previously been talking to having just wandered down the carriage, presumably in the direction of the restaurant car. I noticed her pull her bag down from the luggage rack, take something out, and then replace the heavy suitcase. I couldn't help but wonder if we were to see some hideous but strangely kinky murder about to happen upon her partner's return. I kept an eye on the mysterious young lady, but nothing apparently came of her suspicious activities.

After having told you so much about the greatness of German trains, it should come as no surprise whatsoever to you that, after a journey of a little over five hours, we pulled into Mannheim just twenty seconds late. Now *that* is a service.

## 3.2 Das Rheingold

Mannheim city didn't look particularly impressive from the train – another fairly generic industrial German town, rebuilt presumably after a comprehensive thrashing at the end of the last war. However, the station was a culinary delight, stacked to the brim with restaurants, fast-food counters and bakeries providing pretty much every nourishment we could ever have desired. It was nearing a quarter past two now, and we hadn't yet eaten lunch. As we had a spare fifteen minutes, we bought a handful of sandwiches and a few quality German pastries. My fellow agent seemed to be particularly enthusiastic about this last part. We also grabbed a couple of bottles of water, paid up and wandered back to the platform.

This was the first time I'd done a European trip through more than one country since the Euro was introduced. It was a particularly strange feeling being able to enter a different country, speak in a different foreign language (albeit rather poorly) and yet still pay in the same currency. The Euro was really beginning to excite me. I don't understand the complex economic arguments about interest rates, and I probably never will, but at grass-roots level, for the intrepid traveller, it was definitely a good thing.

Lots of people seem to be definitely against the Euro, for whatever reasons, and many others seem to be in favour. Now it strikes me that most people have utterly simplistic arguments for their particular views. On one side there's the old-fashioned tweed-suited ex-RAF grandfather who thinks that we should keep the pound because it's a good British currency, damnit, and it's what got us through the war. On the other side you get the wide-eyed sun-seeking travellers who don't really understand economics, but think that it would be a great idea to have a single currency throughout all the English-speaking club 18-30 resorts that they currently patronise (in every sense of the word).

I think I'm closer to the latter viewpoint, in that I certainly see the many benefits of the Euro without really understanding its drawbacks, but at least I accept that I don't really have a clue what the arguments for and against are, and I suspect that nobody really understands them fully. I have friends who are brilliant economists and have utterly convincing arguments for both sides – not even they can decide which is best. So why does the government think that opening this up to a public referendum might be a good thing? I want the future of my country decided by half a dozen grey-bearded Professors who have spent their entire distinguished academic careers studying European economic theory, rather than a few tabloid editors on Fleet Street who make most of their decisions based on cup size.

Sorry - rant over. I felt that such an opportunity shouldn't be passed up. Which is comparable to the feeling that Harves and I now entertained, having walked out from a bewildering array of catering establishments with enough lunch not only to feed us, but also the cameraman, sound recorder and director if they were feeling a little peckish. We sat down on the platform to eat our mystery food - not having the real ability to translate German sandwich fillings yet (there wasn't a chapter about that in my book), we decided instead to pick a few at random and take pot luck. It proved rather successful, though I'm still not exactly sure what I ate. It certainly involved egg, mayonnaise and salami of some sort.

We left Mannheim at 14:29 exactly, just as predicted by the timetable, except a rather disappointing fifty seconds late. We rather luckily managed to take over a single 6-man cabin, which allowed us rather more space to spread out our belongings, just like those awful selfish people on the previous train. Of course, until we pulled out of the station, we kept our fingers crossed that nobody would try to enter the cabin and disturb our privacy.

It was at times like these that I often remembered the story of the last time I was travelling by

train around Europe and we were in a similar situation, in which we came up with the most ingenious solution. It was my friend Dave's idea, based on the fact that whenever we wandered along a corridor trying to find seats, we always walked straight past any cabins with skinheads in. We decided that the best idea then would be somehow to manufacture a set of inflatable skinheads, which could be placed at random throughout our cabin, thus strongly dissuading any further passengers from joining us for light conversation. It was a theory I had never managed to test, but I feel sure that it would work. At very least, people wouldn't want to share a cabin with anyone mental enough to go to such lengths to remain alone. The only potential problem was that we might attract further skinheads to join us, and they would probably get rather annoyed when our inflatable versions didn't seem particularly interested in right-wing politics.

We headed off northwards towards the Rhine valley, sadly lamenting the absence of our short-haired friends. Mannheim was soon no more than a large, concrete memory, and so we headed off to the north towards Frankfurt and Mainz. At each stop I thought about deploying the skinheads, and left the door wide enough open so that passers-by could hear the pair of us laughing loudly and talking in English. Presumably any self-respecting German traveller would wish to avoid any such cabin with extreme prejudice. Or so we hoped. Fortunately we remained undisturbed.

We continued through the German countryside, beginning to find things far more amusing than we had any right to do. Germany is an extremely funny country, and I often believe that it suffers from the phenomenon I like to call 'maths lesson humour amplification'. This may sound rather counterintuitive, but it's actually quite a logical effect. Maths lessons, being so unimaginably tedious and, in most cases, strict and silent, were the perfect place to amplify humour by many orders of magnitude. Even the dullest, least amusing things suddenly became side-splittingly hilarious. During the upper sixth I lost count of the number of times I found myself in excruciating pain in maths lessons from laughing too much. I actually began to wonder if it was possible to die from laughter - I'm sure I came pretty close on a few occasions. And what made everything all the more funny was the fact that we weren't *allowed* to laugh. Many other situations are very similar. Amongst them, dinners at my Gran's house, sermons in Corpus Chapel and very bad films in the cinema.

So why is Germany so funny? Well it's really quite simple. The one thing that we'd most noticed since our arrival, and it was only now that I had been able to identify it, was that nobody was really laughing. Germans are the first to admit that their entire country seems fundamentally lacking in a collective sense of humour, which is probably fairly understandable if you consider what they've been through recently. But that's the point - in a country which never finds things funny, absolutely everything suddenly becomes fantastically amusing. The language, the food, the clothes (especially the clothes) and the customs. It's all top-level comedy. They had absolutely nobody to tell them "You can't call a company *that* - it's ridiculous," or "that word's *far* too long to be taken seriously," or "you can't eat something which looks like *that*." No humour police, as it were. Now *there* was an interesting proposition.

We had a feeling that we were going to have a particularly silly time in Germany and there was nothing we could do about it except sit back and laugh. Just as we were leaving Frankfurt airport in a particularly large outbreak of the giggles, a siren started up on the station, and Supermodel's comment that it was probably the "humour alarm" only served to worsen the situation.

After twenty minutes or so, we entered a particularly long tunnel and, to our great horror, slowly began to grind to a standstill. Harves and I looked at each other with a slightly worried expression. We tried to peer out of the window, waiting for the knockout gas to be fired into our cabin, rendering us unconscious so that the evil bad guys could cart us off to their headquarters. I was sure I could pick out a sign on the wall of the tunnel, and I strained to read it. I suspect it said something along the lines of "you can run, but you can't hide." Anyway, whatever the problem, our train soon managed to shift back out into the open country air, and after a few more minutes was back on track, so to speak, for our destination, due to arrive in a little over two hours.

The station of Mainz marked the beginning of the Rhineland for us, which was rather thoughtful. After this we soon dived into the richly cultivated valley, decked on either side with vineyards and luscious woodland, dotted every few miles with a startlingly attractive selection of villages nestling harmoniously into the dramatic valley sides. The Rhine is indeed a very powerful river, having provided a great artery through the centre of the Germanic empire for so many centuries, now populated by

numerous barges carrying thousands of tonnes of materials up and down between the factories of the south, and the port of Rotterdam in Holland to the north west.

It is easy to see, looking out over such majestic scenery, what inspired Wagner's great operatic masterpieces based on this region. However, having said that, I still could only think of one tune, and that was Mendelssohn's "Hebrides Overture". I'm not sure why, but somehow it really captured the moment for me. Harves disagreed with me completely for a while until I began to whistle the main theme and then he couldn't get the tune out of his head either. I made a note of that, resolving to make use of this weakness in future.

We kept an eye out all along the valley, half expecting to see enemy gun emplacements along the hillsides to either side. Clearly the Germans hadn't expected us to arrive quite so soon as the great artillery batteries lay silent, their operators presumably more inclined to relaxing in the gorgeous summer sunshine.

As we began to near Koblenz the valley sides were starting to flatten out slightly, and Supermodel and I were keeping our fingers crossed that we would not have travelled this far through some of the most beautiful scenery in Europe just to be dumped off in some hideous industrial monstrosity. It was now 16:12 and, just as we pulled into the station, we took a careful look out of the window. Koblenz seemed rather pretty, but, as with most towns, though more often meals, the proof of the pudding was in the eating.

Koblenz's pudding was a very large sherry trifle with loads of cream and extra cherries on top. And we were given particularly large spoons.

### 3.3 Deutschland Über Alles

We stepped out of the train in Koblenz on a particularly gorgeous summer's day. The skies were bluer than Picasso's paintings in the period 1901 - 1905, and the landscape was significantly greener than a CFC-free fridge made entirely from recycled, biodegradable materials and running on solar power.

Our most imminent task was to orient ourselves to the town. My German would suffer its first important outing here, and we felt that the best place to achieve that would be at the Tourist Information office on the other side of the station. With that target in mind, we strolled off at top speed and soon found ourselves faced with a bewildering array of leaflets advertising virtually every imaginable tourist destination along the Rhine valley and in the town of Koblenz itself. Supermodel had already struck up a conversation with the particularly attractive girls behind the counter, a fact aided by their near-perfect command of the English language, and his alluring pseudo-intellectual façade. He was handed a selection of maps of the town, detailing the important landmarks and the best hotels. One of them also passed him a slip of paper on which was what looked like a name and phone number. Why is it that the attractive, wise, kind, thoughtful, witty, intelligent and classy guys get all the girls? That strikes me as being incredibly unfair.

The lack of top-of-the-range 5-star luxury resorts would probably have gone significantly more sadly lamented to a more experienced operative. We, however, were glad to find the cheapest place available. Normally in such situations I am reluctant to visit the kind of hotels who advertise in subways, but this was an exception. So far Koblenz had seemed like a particularly pleasant place, and I felt pretty sure that it wasn't likely to put a foot wrong in the foreseeable future. We risked everything and headed off in the direction of a small hotel which seemed, from the poster we had seen at least, to offer remarkably affordable rooms in a convenient location.

Keen to drop off our bags which were, at least on average, rather heavy, we decided to check in as soon as possible. Our hotel of choice seemed to be a perfectly pleasant location with ample security and extremely friendly staff. We weren't quite sure if the elderly gentleman behind the counter spoke English, so we did everything in German as much as possible. I had discovered that German people preferred that, and were more than willing to speak in their native tongue if foreigners seemed keen to learn. Of course, this particular gentleman, as I was later to discover, spoke my own language better than I did. He must have been laughing on the inside.

We obtained a nice double room for slightly more than we had previously expected, but still at a decent price, inclusive of breakfast. The room seemed perfectly suitable so we dropped off most of our luggage, freshened up and set off for a tour of our new base of operations. This was a completely new location for both of us, neither Supermodel or I ever having visited Koblenz before. One thing that did

raise our eyebrows was the advertised 'Beethovens Mutters Haus' on the other side of the Rhine. We wondered if Grandmaster had planned for us to go on a Beethoven tour after this, with our distinct proximity to Bonn. Surely sending us to the birthplace of the great composer's mother was too much of a coincidence for it just to be a lucky fluke? Maybe a particularly nefarious arch-criminal was planning some kind of destructive super-weapon based on Ludwig's late string quartets.

Either way, we left the hotel to go exploring, and before too long we found ourselves walking alongside the Rhine amidst attractive floral gardens, admiring the sheer beauty of this location, and trying to ignore the raucous tooting of car horns in the background which seemed to hint that Germany had just won their semi-final World Cup fixture against South Korea. I remember the guard on the train announcing something about it, but I hadn't quite picked out what he had said. Judging by the cars touring along the main road just a few yards away with German flags draped from the windows, sounding their horns loudly and incessantly, I think it was now pretty conclusive.

So, our spirits were lifted momentarily by the beauty of this new location, and also by a statue which appeared to show a man tripping over an eagle, yet remained unquenched by the increasingly irritating German victory celebrations. In an act of minimal defiance, we headed along the side of the Rhine and towards the place where the two rivers, Father Rhine and Mother Mosel, met at a place called the *Deutsches Eck*. As far as I can tell, this translates to the 'German Corner', though Alta-vista's *Babelfish* service insists that it means "German hit a corner," which is admittedly more dramatic, if utterly wrong.

On the way there, we passed a quaint church which Supermodel felt compelled to investigate. On the front was a notice about how something had happened to the building in 1943, and since then something else had happened. My vocabulary wasn't quite up to translating those two verbs, but I could make a wild stab in the dark. A feeling of immense guilt swept over me, as it was to do many times over the subsequent 36 hours, as I thought of all the buildings that had been destroyed in the final few years of the Second World War. There would have been many people alive in Koblenz who remembered what the old church was like. I found myself saying "sorry about that. Bit of an accident really." Then I would look around furtively and whisper under my breath, "it was the Americans."

Koblenz is located at one of the most attractive and dramatic points along the entire Rhine valley. At the point where these two mighty rivers merge into one, the people of the town have erected a large monument to Kaiser Wilhelm I, to replace one accidentally destroyed by American soldiers in the second world war, who were probably aiming at Berlin. This monument stands 37 metres tall, and depicts the Kaiser on a horse, flanked by a mysterious, half naked woman. I can only assume that there is a deep, meaningful reason behind this as all my attempts at explanation have been rather more disturbing.

It was the perfect scenario for a meeting. In less than a day's time, we would be contacting agent Übermensch here, with instructions for the next stage on our mission. There were several decent vantage points from which we could observe the *Eck*, most notably the fortress of *Ehrenbreitstein*, which overlooked the city from the top of a hill nearby, just the other side of the Rhine. That would no doubt prove a sensible destination for the following morning, allowing us to scout out the proposed meeting place before our contact arrived.

Our surroundings sufficiently well explored, we decided to go wandering into the town. The route in passed dangerously close to a large group of noisy, drunk football fans who would no doubt have been extremely amused to find out that we were English. They might have worked it out had they decided to look in our direction, but fortunately they didn't appear to possess a great deal of logic. If they had then they might have realised, for example, that the vast majority of people in Koblenz didn't appear to give a damn about the World Cup, and were getting pretty annoyed with the endless chorus of car horns and rowdy singing. Our one consolation was that, if this were England, we would have been in the middle of a war zone by now.

As an attempt to get away from the noise, Agent Supermodel and I decided to wander along the Mosel towards the old town. This route was particularly pretty, decorated with many floral displays and flanked by the mighty river on one side and a string of cafés on the other. We found one that looked ideal for dinner, so we decided to go wandering for an hour or two and then return when we had worked up an appetite. The night, after all, was yet young. In fact, it hadn't quite been born yet. It was a sort-of foetal night at the stage where it still looked like an amphibian.

I followed Supermodel into the old town, wandering up a set of uneven stone steps into a narrow, ornamentally decorated alleyway. This same then opened out into a series of roads, some cobbled and others paved, which weaved through the centre of the old part of town, joining together several attrac-

tive churches and a more than generous helping of pavement cafés. Much to Supermodel's displeasure, we appeared to have arrived too late to be allowed access to the various churches that we found in the town centre. I could see the sadness welling up in his eyes and sensed him fighting back the tears. "Never mind, old friend," I began, hoping to get his spirits back up, "there's always wine."

Just what that particularly warm afternoon really required was a nice, chilled Riesling. To appease my partner we found a café right next to one of the churches, and I allowed him to gaze towards the stained glass windows as we waited for our drinks to arrive. We ordered two glasses of the Rhine valley's top plonk, and sat back to savour every drop of that fantastic beverage. It was a perfect occasion – the weather was beautiful, the surroundings were extremely decorative, even the air was fresh and clean, unlike that in Paris. The town was far more open, allowing space to breathe and ample room to relax and watch the world go by. It was my kind of place. I think Supermodel enjoyed it too. In fact, he enjoyed it so much that he got carried away and developed a craving for exotic food.

"What's the German for olives?" he asked me, inquisitively.

"No idea," I replied. "I've not got to the chapter on bar snacks yet."

"I'll just ask. She'll understand."

"I doubt it."

"It's worth a try. Everyone speaks English." Supermodel called over to the waitress, who wandered over to our table. "Could we get some olives please?" he asked, his polite tone attempting to mirror the fact that he hadn't even tried to stumble through in German.

I cringed. I hate it when people speak English in foreign countries, no matter how keen they seem to oblige.

"Certainly sir," the waitress replied, "would you like them plain, or marinated in olive oil and vinegar with chilis and herbs?"

Harves smiled. "That sounds great. Thank you. I mean 'danke'."

The waitress nodded and wandered off. I shook my head in disbelief.

"Well that does it Harves, I don't think we're likely to have any language problems here, then." I was beginning to get slightly annoyed that I'd bothered with the book, though I always feel much more secure when I have the language to fall back on. Hopefully I would need it for real soon enough.

"It's so embarrassing, isn't it?"

Supermodel was right. In England I'm considered somewhat of a linguist because I speak a few foreign languages well enough to order meals and purchase tacky souvenirs. In Germany or Holland I would be considered illiterate if I spoke fewer than three to complete fluency.

It's a great shame that Britain doesn't make more of its enviable position in Europe, its diverse internal cultures and its numerous historical ties to become some sort of ambassador between Europe and the world. Of course, to do so we would have to do something about our complete ineptitude when it comes to languages. It really is a national embarrassment, and it's also a fantastic opportunity going to waste. There's a great chance for Britain to take a leading rôle in international politics, but instead we sit back and let Belgians tell us what shape our bananas are allowed to be. What a shame.

It was nearing dinner time, and after a pleasant half an hour sipping wine in that pretty little square, we decided that we should perhaps wander back to the river front and try out the restaurant we had seen earlier. Of course this meant braving the hordes of jubilant football fans, but it was a risk worth taking. They appeared to be accumulating in the direction of the *Eck* so we stayed a few hundred yards upstream (and upwind), locating a particularly attractive terrace restaurant along the banks of the Mosel.

As if in direct contradiction to all our previous experiences, our waitress at this place didn't appear to speak English and I was forced to cope with my rather limited German. Still, it was certainly enough to order some water, a bottle of wine and a menu while we sat back, relaxed and enjoyed the view. The waitress was very kind, speaking rather rapidly but at least trying to help us to understand as much as possible. She provided us with a menu and a particularly entertaining written English translation of at least part of it which appeared to correspond approximately to my own feeble attempts. As we were now in Germany, we ordered *Schnitzels*, which are approximately large, spicy breadcrumbed slabs of pork served with a nominal salad and chips. The waitress wandered off to prepare our order, so Supermodel and I relaxed into our comfortable chairs and soaked up the atmosphere.

One thing that we were finding extremely difficult to understand was how utterly perfect Koblenz had turned out to be for a spy thriller. The location was about as dramatic as one could ever expect, with the two great rivers surging together at the very point where we had planned to meet our next contact. We couldn't help but admire the symbolism - Father Rhine was rather like me; strong, burly and majestic, tending to surge rather than flow. Mother Mosel was Harves, being slightly smaller, a little camp and significantly dirtier.

The town itself was extremely pleasant, being of a comfortable size to walk across but yet still brimming with personality. The surrounding scenery was particularly suitable, with the valley sides rising up majestically towards the north and east, lifting the fortress, perhaps half a mile away, right up against the skyline, jutting powerfully from the side of the hilltop. Most importantly, we had left behind the bustling eagerness of Paris for somewhere which far more closely suited our relaxed, unhurried style of living.

As the sun started to set behind Koblenz's ornate spires, a warm red glow filled the sky, stretching out from the horizon up into the deep blue above. I tucked into my *Zigeunerschnitzel*, hardly believing the fantastic place in which we found ourselves and lamenting the fact that Supermodel was neither cute nor female enough to merit such a romantic evening. Often I wonder if romantic occasions aren't rationed, rather like potatoes were during the war. You've only got a certain number to use in your lifetime, and once you've used them all then they're gone forever. If that is the case then I'd like to complain in the strongest possible terms about the number of these I managed to waste over the course of one week with a stubby male theologian. I demand compensation.

We lazed around in that restaurant, watching the sun disappear behind the fractured western skyline amidst a blanket of crimson and gold. Yet again we had managed to spend well over two hours eating dinner, and we hadn't even tried dessert yet. Supermodel was rather fond of his desserts, and I was to learn that he prided himself on trying as many of them as possible in every country he visited. It was drawing late and we decided that we should probably go for one last walk before heading back to our hotel. It was Supermodel's turn to pay so he asked for the bill and then tried to hand over his credit card to a rather bewildered waitress. Much to our dismay, she shook her head and handed it back, indicating that they couldn't accept it. It struck us as rather strange that one of the foremost economies in Europe seemed to be reluctant to accept plastic bearing in mind that almost every shop in England, no matter how tiny, was practically forced to do so. Of course, the most pressing concern was that we didn't have enough money to pay for the meal in cash.

As with most of the disasters that befell us over the course of our brief mission, it was of course my task to attempt to rectify the problem. Fortunately I could remember the German for 'cash machine', though I doubt I pronounced it correctly, and I asked the waitress if she could direct me towards the nearest. Sadly she explained that she didn't live locally, so she didn't know. However, she kindly offered to ask the people on the next table for us, and did so, returning a minute or two later with a middle-aged German lady who proceeded to direct me through the town in a manner not at all in agreement with what my 'teach yourself' book had taught me she was likely to say.

If I had been more organised, I could have brought the book with me and pointed to it, asking her to speak like she was supposed to. Sadly, I was instead forced to pick out the occasional word that seemed important - I could tell these because she would repeat them several times if I frowned deeply enough - and armed with these waypoints, and a vague impression of the actions I was to perform at each location, thanks to her alcohol-enhanced hand signals, I set off out of the restaurant, up a side road and towards the town.

I hadn't really been given a decent chance to explore Koblenz, and I was only slightly worried that the first chance I got was to be late at night wandering through a strange town without the slightest idea where I was heading, searching for a cash machine which, judging by the length of time the lady had to speak to communicate the directions to me, was probably in Switzerland. Once again I resorted to a mathematical technique, and decided to follow the yuppie gradient, judging that, in a town which seemed so reluctant to accept plastic, most rich young professionals would probably hang around a source of money. All I needed to do was to ascertain the average price of clothing in any one area, and head towards the places where that was highest. It couldn't fail unless I accidentally got sucked into a local maximum such as a posh winebar or a small province of Italy.

Miraculously, and I still don't exactly know how this happened, I managed to walk towards the commercial district of Koblenz almost without missing a turning. It seemed rather empty, though a few signs for *Geldautomat* reassured me that I was in the right place. I walked up to the first such

sign and tried to open the door. Germans don't tend to go in for the dodgy British habit of leaving cash machines out in the street - they prefer to hide them behind doors. However, these are the kind of doors that can only be activated by a card swipe. I'm always a bit wary of swiping my credit card through anything as there's always a chance that it will charge you for it. I expected to see a statement on my bill the following month saying "Door entrance - 20 quid". I hesitantly swiped my card through and the door LED flashed red. I'm not sure what that meant so I tried again, wondering if there was a neon sign just out of view above my head with the word "English - Please lynch" and a big red arrow pointing downwards.

Fortunately, shortly before the third time I tried to gain access I saw the enormous sign beside the door informing me of how to orient my card before swiping. This minor problem overcome I was immediately admitted entrance to the cash machine, and proceeded to stride over, insert my card, type in my details and demand some cash. I waited. And waited some more. This was beginning to bode rather badly. I couldn't afford to lose my card. After thirty seconds, the machine beeped up "I'm sorry - we can't give you any money at the moment." I tried again, but this time asked for less money. Same message. "Why not?" I asked, to no avail. "Warum nicht?" That didn't work either. I tried typing it into the keyboard but a large red light started flashing so I decided that it might be time to leave.

This was intensely annoying. I removed my card, left the bank and walked purposefully along to the next set of cash machines. Hopefully this one would work. Same problem with the door (I learn very slowly). Hesitantly, I punched in my personal details once more (height, weight, age, sex, favourite colour) and I was allowed access to my money. This time I decided to err on the side of safety and asked for the smallest quantity I could. This one waited for even longer before telling me to remove my card and wait. There was a grinding sound, followed by a beeping sound, a scraping sound and a sound that reminded me of a lawnmower. I crossed my fingers and hoped that I had finally struck Euros. It was my lucky day - a wad of shiny new notes was thrust in my face, and I grabbed them and ran. I had taken rather too long to find the cash machine and no doubt my fellow agent would be waiting at the restaurant wondering where I had got to. Of course I wasn't entirely sure how to get back to him, but I figured that heading in the direction of the river would probably be a good start.

I walked as quickly as I could in the direction of our meal. Back on our table, Harves was busily laughing and trying as best as he could to communicate with our waitress that I would be returning shortly and that I wasn't half the man I used to be, and that he thought that *he* should really be running this mission instead. Fortunately she didn't understand a word or else our mission might have been endangered. Not that she would have believed him anyway. I sprinted into view a few moments later, triumphantly clutching a handful of multicoloured notes which I handed over to the waitress as soon as I arrived.

"Well," I puffed, out of breath, "that was fun."

"So you found the ATM then?"

"No, actually I bumped into this old lady who just happened to have a large wad of cash in her bag, so I beat her to the ground, stole the bag, kicked her poodle in the head and ran off."

"No need to be sarcastic with me."

"On the contrary Harves, there is *enormous* need. It's the only thing that's persuading me to cling on to my miserable existence."

Supermodel fluttered his eyelids and turned away. I collected my change, left a large, apologetic tip and strode off towards the water's edge, met a few moments later by Supermodel, who had decided to tag along.

We walked back towards the *Eck* along the side of the Mosel. The sun had set now and it was becoming darker with every passing moment, rather like Michael Jackson doesn't. The air was rather warm, but a gentle night breeze flowed in from the waters, cooling our sun-drenched skin. The *Eck* was quieter now, the crowds of tourists having mostly left. The large groups of football fans were now far too drunk to drive anywhere, too dizzy to wave their flags and too tired to sing. It was a perfect evening, and we used this as one last opportunity to scout our meeting place before the fateful contact was to be made the following day.

We climbed the base of the statue, peering out from the ledge beneath Kaiser Wilhelm's horse, over the Rhine and the Mosel. For a few moments we just watched in silence, hardly daring to speak and break the tranquil serenity of that moonlit scene. It was Harves who spoke first, commenting again on what an ideal location we had found. "And who do you think *Übermensch* might be?" he continued, confused by Grandmaster's mixed hints. I shrugged my shoulders, knowing that my best guess would be little more than that, a wild stab in the dark.

"I suppose it might be some friend of Grandmaster's," I proposed, "though I don't know of any other possible agents posted out here."

"He hinted that we wouldn't recognise this particular agent, though. Maybe it is someone unknown to us."

"In that case it's of the utmost importance that we make the rendez-vous exactly as we were told, and we bring along the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*."

"Agreed. It could be just about anyone. We should treat our contact with the utmost suspicion."

Silence descended again, broken by the occasional shrill bird call and the gently lapping of the Rhine against its concrete banks. "Shall we wander back?" I suggested.

Harves nodded. "Sounds like a good idea."

We descended from the statue and began to walk back towards our hotel along the banks of the Rhine.

"So, where next?" I asked, interested to see what my partner thought of the mission prospects.

"Well, initially I thought Leipzig, but now I reckon Bonn. After all, there is a definite Beethoven theme developing. They do river cruises down the Rhine from here, and I'm sure that would be a tremendous end to the mission. Ample opportunity for speedboat chases, underwater fight scenes, crocodiles, anacondas ..."

"You're getting carried away again Harves."

"Sorry."

"However, I think I agree with you. Bonn sounds like the most likely destination. I've been there once before, back in '96. Of course in those days I was just a junior field operative with a significantly smaller budget."

"Yes, that's right. None of this poncing around in two-star hotels, eating in pavement cafés drinking Riesling."

"No, in those days we had to work hard. We had to slum in youth hostels and eat McDonald's hamburgers. They were hard times."

We paused for a moment, then Harves spoke once more, with an air of suspicion, "was that a Yorkshire accent?"

"I don't know, Supermodel, I just don't know. I think it's just one of those things."

Often explanations are best left like that.

When we arrived back at the hotel, we found a telegram from HQ. It read;

Urgent request. Check email before meeting tomorrow. Good luck. Grandmaster.

Clearly our future wasn't nearly as well organised as we had previously thought. We began to wonder what mysterious incident had caused Grandmaster to alter his plans. Clearly it was something so secretive that he couldn't tell us over the telegram. We returned to our rooms, full of suspicion and intrigue. Koblenz would reveal a great number of secrets and we couldn't wait to find out what they were.

Whatever our destiny, only time would tell. Tomorrow we could afford a short lie-in, but the morning was to present us with two distinctly tricky tasks. Firstly, we were going to need to find an internet café somewhere in this sleepy, historic town or else our entire mission might well become a complete failure. Secondly, and perhaps most dangerously, we were going to infiltrate the fortress of *Ehrenbreitstein* armed only with a limited German vocabulary, a fist full of Euros and significant designer stubble.

Now *that* never happened to the other guy.

## Chapter 4

# On Her Majesty's Scary Chairlift

### 4.1 Perhaps it's this one?

As I rose from my slumber once more, sunny Koblenz greeted us with a warm, blue-sky-filled, football-fan-free smile. It was just what a secret agent wanted first thing in the morning when such a complicated day lay ahead. The burden of international espionage was growing with every new sunrise, and today was just another step up the ladder. Our tasks were twofold - firstly find somewhere to check email in order to receive new commands from Grandmaster. Secondly, meet agent Übermensch at 2:30pm at the *Deutsches Eck*.

Of course, being agents of not inconsiderable style, Supermodel and I had planned a little extra entertainment to keep us on our toes. As soon as we had successfully located an Internet Café and fully studied our new orders, we planned to head over the river by ferry and infiltrate the fortress which dominated the hillside to the East of Koblenz. It was a difficult task, but we knew that we were up to the challenge. Well ... *I* was up to the challenge - Supermodel was still in bed. I gave him a good prod and he reluctantly stirred, promising to spend less time in the shower that morning. Forty-five minutes later, we left the room and headed downstairs for breakfast.

German breakfasts are fantastic. Rarely do they eat cereal - preferring instead to eat bread with either jam and butter, or else cheese and ham. It seems strange to an Englishman to eat meat for breakfast, except in the 'fried and dripping with fat' sense. However, the Germans love it. And why not? Breakfast is supposed to be the most important meal of the day so one should endeavour at least to make something wholesome of it.

Breakfast was perfectly adequate, and I washed down a couple of rolls with a mug of coffee, prepared for us by the hotel owner. Upon speaking to her I immediately noticed that she spoke fluent English, with what appeared to be a South African accent. I also noticed that she spoke English to the man behind the counter too, whom I presumed to be her husband, and another similar-looking lady, whom I presumed to be her sister. I didn't venture to enquire too much about their family relations, preferring instead to ask the whereabouts of an Internet Café where we could get hold of Grandmaster's latest plans.

The directions proved relatively simple, consisting of two distinct elements; "Go straight down the road outside" and "turn into the square at the end". Not even the greatest simpleton in the world could get that wrong. Sadly, *being* the greatest simpleton in the world, my initial assumption was false, and therefore Harves and I soon found ourselves meandering around totally the wrong square, trying to search out shops with names that sounded like they might involve the internet. Most of these turned out to be selling pants.

Eventually, and fighting against our inbuilt male desire to struggle on regardless, we reluctantly decided to check the map and managed to get some directions from the roads around us. We had omitted to follow the main road right to the end, so we soon put that right and before too long found ourselves in the *correct* square, standing outside a rather small internet café, ready to enter. Of course it was at this point that I realised that not only had I never used an internet café before, but also that I had absolutely no idea how to find out how to do so in German. I didn't even know the word for 'computer'. I felt that this might prove a hindrance.

So I approached the counter, understandably nervous - a trait made all the more evident due to the unnecessarily attractive Chinese girl who arrived to serve me. I must admit I do have a strong

fondness for people of slightly exotic appearance. I recently learned that I inherited that from my Dad. Fortunately, faced with such emotional dilemmas, I somehow managed to muddle together a sentence which, though not exactly eloquent, succeeded in getting across the desired message. A minute later I finally managed to work out how to use the obscure user interface they had set up and I was on my way. My task was to access the top-secret government email account with which I had been supplied shortly before the beginning of my journey. I had been given a contact address for Grandmaster too, in case anything went horribly wrong. I hoped I would never need to make use of it, though it was a much appreciated safety-net in case of disaster.

I finally managed to access the high-security email account, typing in my top-secret access key and entering the ultra-terrorist-proof, encrypted secure connection. I switched to the inbox and noticed two new emails; the first from Grandmaster and the second from another unknown email account. Leaving Grandmaster's message on the backburner for a minute, I clicked on this intriguing second message. It popped up on my monitor and I began to browse through.

Date: Tue, 25 Jul 2002 11:35:12  
From: FunGrrrl4158@HNSAC.com  
To: Agent Genius <xoliday@hotmail.com>  
Subject: Pictures of Me

Hey there! Me and my girlfriends got together to take some hot pictures. You can see them on my web page at <http://www.hotnakedsecretagentchicks.com>. Membership is just \$5.00 per month and you get access to over 8Gb of top quality pictures, video and more!!!!

We're waiting for you and our clothes are coming off!

Cindy xxx

I wondered if this was some sort of secret code, designed by Grandmaster to communicate information to his field operatives in the most efficient manner possible. A quick glance at the web page in question did not immediately suggest any particularly obvious communications, though they could have been highly encrypted. They must have been using pretty strong encryption if that was the case. I decided to move on to Grandmaster's email, partly because I thought it might be more instructive, and partly because the cute girl behind the counter was giving me nasty looks.

Date: Tue, 25 Jun 2002 23:18:13 +0100  
From: Grandmaster <address withheld>  
To: Agent Genius <xoliday@hotmail.com>  
Subject: Urgent Message

Dear Genius and Supermodel

Urgent message. Übermensch believes his cover has been compromised and so has opted for a slight change to the meeting format, as follows:

As instructed by Provocatrice, you will meet Übermensch at 1430 at the point where the rivers meet in K\*\*\*\*\*. Now note he will be carrying a copy of the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* from 26.06.2002 rather than 20.02.2002. This is to throw them off his trail. Once you've met, take him out for a drink; or at least for *Kaffee und Kuche*.

Try to refrain from asking him where I am now. Remember, if you are captured, it is better that you know as little as possible and are not incriminated by anything anyone could extract from you by whatever means they might be prepared to use. And finally, do try at least to greet him in German!

I wish you courage for the next phase of your mission and promise as faithfully as ever to see you perhaps sooner than you now expect, once my urgent business is resolved.

If you need to contact me, feel free to use this address, but copy in <address deleted for reasons of national security>.

A votre secret service,

Grandmaster

Supermodel and I both breathed a sigh of relief as we read through Grandmaster's communication. At least it wasn't of great importance to the mission, and left us with plenty of time to spend the rest of the morning and early afternoon scouting out the sights around Koblenz. The whereabouts of our reclusive master would soon be known, we felt, and we were looking forward to unmasking this elusive character.

As a first task, we felt it necessary to take a closer look at Beethoven's Mother's House, still worried about the imminent threat of a musical-themed terrorist attack. Getting to the house, however, involved crossing over the Rhine, and that meant taking a ferry from the docks alongside the river banks. We left the internet café, paying for our excesses, and then headed off to the east in search of a suitable cross-fluvial transport.

Our map had a ferry service labelled on it, crossing from a point on the Rhine just south of where the sides of the great hill-fort began. I was keen to make rapid progress, but my fellow agent seemed more interested in the local architecture and the cake shops than anything else. Having convinced him that we could return to those later, I managed to drag him away and marched resolutely towards the river banks, where we were quick to locate our next mode of transport.

The ferry was not a particularly formal service. It set off from a surprisingly understated pier on our side of the river, struggled against the powerful, surging Rhine for the short crossing, and then returned in a similar fashion. Currently it was moored on the bank opposite, clearly waiting for passengers willing to risk the journey across. Fortunately we did not have too long to wait before the flimsy little craft set off once more on the return journey, fighting at full throttle against the surging currents, angled almost entirely into the river flow and just edging across gradually until it swung perilously in to the pier, tied firmly by a series of ropes. After a few moments, the driver appeared, pushed open the gates and let off the three pale-faced passengers, shaking with terror.

The ticket counter appeared to consist of one large German man with a bag full of money, which was hardly what we were expecting. Supermodel and I handed over our 1 Euro 20 cents each and scrambled on board. We couldn't help but notice that, for a vessel with an alleged capacity of a hundred or so people, there was only the two of us willing to take the gamble. My mind suddenly turned to thoughts of what would happen if the boat's over-stressed engine suddenly gave out in mid-river. We'd be half-way to Bonn before anyone could catch up with us. Not that Bonn's a nasty place, but the prospect of being late for our rendez-vous that afternoon was not a pleasant one.

The ferry eventually left the river bank, once more fighting its way across the mighty Rhine. It crossed in an arc, first winning its battle against the raging torrents, and then slowly beginning to cede its grasp and bow to the undeniable might of a couple of million tonnes of water with gravity on their side. We reached the far bank with pinpoint precision, much to my great relief, a few short minutes later. Before long Supermodel and I had alighted from our trusty craft and were walking up the far bank of the Rhine towards this one small city district which had managed to establish itself in a small alcove in the valley sides, comfortably separated from the industrial and touristic heart of the city.

We couldn't help noticing one small series of plaques on one wall next to the river with dates on them. These marked the years of the great floods in this region. The most recent were in 1993 and 1995, with the first of the two being the more serious. With a river like the Rhine, you really *don't* want it to flood. The current water level was at least three metres beneath the banks. We were standing on the banks, and the line for the 1993 flood was several metres above our heads. From the pictures of the flood that I remembered seeing at some point that morning, I knew that the entire *Deutsches Eck* had

been covered with water, right up to the base of the statue of Kaiser Wilhelm. It must have flooded practically all the riverbank properties in the old part of the city. I remembered the chaos caused in Cambridge last year when the Cam had flooded quite considerably. But this was the *Rhine*. This was a *real* river. The damage must have been enormous.

It was in these rather wet surroundings a little over 250 years ago in 1746 that the mother of one of the greatest minds in all of classical music had been born. Maria Magdalena van Beethoven, née Keverich, was the daughter of Heinrich Keverich, a cook at the electoral palace of Ehrenbreitstein. She was by all accounts a gentle, kind woman, though the strain of her life which seemed to include giving birth at a rather excessive rate, soon took a toll on her. Beethoven had seven siblings in all, only two of whom (his younger brothers Caspar Anton Carl and Nikolaus Johann) survived to adulthood.

Upon his mother's death in 1787, the young Ludwig was understandably devastated. In a letter to his lawyer dated October of that year, the 16 year-old wrote "She was to me such a good, loving mother, and my best friend." Ludwig's father Johann van Beethoven, by contrast, was rumoured to be somewhat of a git. He drank heavily on occasion and pimped his eldest son as a child prodigy, the "new Mozart", a charge which the young Ludwig seemed unable to fulfill. By that time, the courts of Europe were fairly pissed off with an endless stream of five year-olds who were better than them at everything, so one by one they moved him on. Johann, seemingly displeased with his son's performance, decided to instruct him in composition so that he could make a decent income out of him that way instead.

Ludwig, on the other hand, had different ideas. Following his father's breakdown a few years after Maria's untimely death, Ludwig took over as head of the family and the rest, so they say, is history.

Harves and I rather wanted to locate this particular house, though our map was distinctly low resolution, and we spent some time completely unable to find it. This area of Koblenz was packed full of winding back-streets and steep, hillside drives leading to dead ends and congregations of builders digging up the pavement. We wasted half an hour examining various old houses in that district, wondering if we had walked past the place and it was particularly uninspirational, or if perhaps, by some fluke, we had merely failed to spot it. I even found a signpost leading rather ambiguously down towards one area which we had already scouted at least twice. Needless to say I met with no more luck the third time either.

I was beginning to lose count of the number of times we had stared in through windows to be met with disapproving gazes from the house owners who were understandably annoyed at the intrusion. We decided that we must have walked past it by now, so we just set off back towards the base of the fortress, eager to continue on our morning's task. We were just walking out into one small square when I stopped still, grabbed Supermodel's shoulder and pointed to a sign on the side of a well-camouflaged yellow building, hidden by a selection of scaffolding and large signs saying "Beware - hole!" in German. Just beyond them were more signs saying "Beware - 'Beware Hole' sign!", and then further signs saying exactly the same thing in an amusingly recursive manner, lined up down the side of the road. The building in question was labelled "Beethovens Mutters Haus", and appeared to be closed.

We approached the front door, eager to take a peek inside. There was a button on the front which said something in German and mentioned Beethoven, so we pressed it for a laugh. Several seconds later, the door opened, and we were presented with the surprising face of a rather bored, short middle-aged lady who seemed all of a sudden extremely pleased to see us. Apparently the Beethovens-Mutters-Haus doesn't get many visitors and I can only presume that most of the people who rang on the doorbell were kids who did it for a dare. Can't imagine why. Anyway, she decided to tell us all about the place in rapidfire German before allowing us to wander off on our own and explore the exhibits that had been so carefully prepared for our browsing pleasure.

Now, the museum was not exactly monumental in its scale, nor jaw-dropping in its grandeur, but it did seem to include a number of exhibits that were at least of reasonable interest to two aficionados such as ourselves. It also had the benefit of being completely free and having the occasional English translation provided for us, though usually on the least interesting exhibits. There would be a scrap of paper saying "A sheet of manuscript paper like those that the young Ludwig would have used to compose his first sonatas, if he had been born two hundred years later." Next to that would be a jewel-encrusted ceremonial dagger with ominous blood stains and a glowing satanic rune, together with a two page German document detailing its horrific, gruesome history, and a little plaque next to it in English saying "knife." Such is the penalty for not properly learning how to speak the language.

We left the museum after half an hour, having learnt all that we felt we ever needed to know about

Beethoven's mother, and much more besides. Now it was time to wander up to the fortress on the hillside above and take a good look at our designated meeting spot from a suitable vantage point. Of course, we were going to infiltrate the fortress unarmed and, slightly more disturbingly, running frighteningly low on cash.

If we weren't a bit more careful then we were going to have to miss lunch. If we missed lunch then Supermodel would get upset. And if Supermodel were to get upset then ... well, I didn't want to contemplate the possibilities.

## 4.2 Up, up and away

The sheer sides of the Ehrenbreitstein ridge soared up before us, climbing into the deep cerulean sky and concealing the great fortress above. The warm, summer sun beating down on us did nothing to aid stamina, and we knew that our survival would survive on that very quantity. Somewhere up above, behind the rocky crags, stood the end of the first great stage of our mission. The infiltration would be dangerous, possibly fatal, but we knew that we had to take that risk so that the future safety and prosperity of Europe could be assured.

A gnarled old oak sign lead us through the streets of that once-fearless village which, a long time ago, had stood for so many proud, noble virtues but which now found itself under the grip of a foul curse, seemingly without hope of a cure.

Legends told of a secret entrance to the fortress which would help us to avoid detection along the well-patrolled road, and instead to soar above the heads of the guards far below. Entrance to this mythical chairlift was highly guarded, and the gatekeeper would only allow those of a sound mind to enter after crossing his palm with a significant quantity of gold. Worse still, the entrance to this chairlift was guarded by a terrifying monster, the floor of whose cave was rumoured to be littered with the remains of many great adventurers.

We trod carefully through the village, noting the direction our path took us in case we were required to retrace our steps later on that day. The path veered from the busy roads, and soon we found ourselves scrambling uphill at a sharp angle, weaving through the backstreets of the town and out into the savage wilderness beyond. The path soon wore away until we were crawling up a harsh, gravelly incline towards a wooded platform ahead. Amidst the trees we could just pick out the dark, rocky entrance to some kind of dark, foreboding tunnel burrowing its way into the cliff face.

As we scrambled onwards, the enormity of our predicament became clear. These were dangerous woods, not the sort of place we should have been walking through at any time, but with the present situation we knew that we would need all of our many years of training in order to survive. Harves nervously clutched at his revolver, playing with the safety. I could hear his heart pounding inside his chest, his heavy breathing betraying his superficially calm façade. All around, shadows danced mischievously and the heady smell of fresh pine needles began to give way to something altogether more sinister.

Ahead of us lay the mouth to the caves which lead to the secret entrance to the fortress. A dilapidated old wooden sign near the entrance told us we were on the right track. The plumes of smoke emanating from within hinted that perhaps we might want to reconsider. Deep within the darkness, something stirred, awoken by our clumsy approach. There was a deep whistling of air from the tunnels, accompanied by a foul, stale odour and the sound of a large creature shuffling around. We took guard and I drew my Walther PPK, loaded and primed, pointed directly at the cave mouth. We stood, silently waiting for a chance to fire.

Suddenly, two deep red eyes lit up inside the cave mouth. They were large, but not nearly as large as I had expected. Around them I could barely pick out the form of a narrow, reptilian head. Harves took aim and I lifted my gun ready to silence the beast. Then another two eyes appeared, and a third. Before long there were six pairs of eyes all staring in our direction. Harves stepped backwards, then glanced over at me. "Keep focussed," I called out, "don't fire until it attacks." Harves stepped round to one side, his gun pointing ever inwards towards our mystery assailant.

With a great roar, the beast lunged forwards, lurching into the open on its four powerful legs. The eyes were all part of one body, a great muscular beast with a powerful, leonine torso and six reptilian heads on scaly, colubrine necks. Each head writhed like a serpent preparing to strike. One turned to face Harves, then struck out, gnashing towards him with its razor-sharp teeth. Harves dived backwards, narrowly avoiding the vicious attack and letting off a wayward shot from his pistol. The bullet took a

ricochet off the cliff face with a loud thunderclap and a shower of sparks. The beast stepped back a few paces, then turned all six heads towards my partner. This was my chance. I emptied six shots into the creature's body and it reeled in shock, thick black blood flowing out onto the dirty forest floor.

I pulled the trigger once more, a dull click telling me that my luck was running low. The beast turned away from my partner and began to snarl in my direction, darting its heads towards me with a series of deep, guttural roars. I threw my gun to the side, reached over my shoulder and drew my trusty katana. This fine weapon had been gifted to me by a great swordmaster on one of my trips to the orient. The blade was a work of art, fashioned from one perfect piece of steel over many weeks of expert labour, repeatedly beaten out into a sharp edge, and then refolded five hundred times. Its handle bore the name of its last master, killed in his sleep by a mysterious assassin. I did not want to follow in his footsteps. I held the blade out before me as the creature struck once more. Swiftly, I side-stepped the vicious attack, and sliced with my sword. The blade struck flesh, severing one head clean from its neck with a gush of black blood. The creature roared and staggered back in shock. I had made my mark.

Agent Supermodel took this opportunity to counter-attack. Drawing his gun he loosed another three bullets into the creature's hide, and another into one of the heads that had strayed too close to his vicious firing zone. Yet again the creature let out a blood-curdling scream. We had it scared. Harves fired his one last remaining bullet as I charged towards the beast, sword aloft. Supermodel dropped his pistol and pulled out a shotgun from his bag. He stepped back, loaded both barrels, took aim and loosed a barrage of shot into the creature's exposed side. I sliced with my fine blade once more, severing another head, and then a third. Only two heads remained in action, and the creature was beginning to retreat into the tunnel, a stream of blood marking its swift exit. Harves had reloaded his shotgun once more, so loosed two more barrels into the darkness, finally ending our opponent with a loud, reverberating echo. Then all fell silent as the great beast slumped to the cave side and collapsed, dead on the cold, hard rocks.

"Good shooting, Harves," I complimented my associate.

"Not bad yourself," he replied, impressed by my mastery of the sword.

"I like to practise," I answered, "but there is no answer to cold, hard steel."

I felt Supermodel appreciated this more than I could perhaps understand. I sheathed my sword, and Supermodel packed away his heavy weaponry. Together, we collected our pistols, reloaded, and headed off towards the cave entrance, stepping carefully past the lifeless body of our defeated foe. We left the tropical jungle behind us and began to head into the darkness beyond, lighting a torch with which to illuminate the crudely hewn tunnel walls.

The passageway continued well into the heart of the cliff, snaking through the deep brown rock and towards our destination on the other side. A goblin raiding party ambushed us half-way through, but they were quickly dispatched with a salvo of bullets from our trusty firearms. Looting their corpses we found nothing but a few mouldy loaves of bread and a single copper coin. We would need more than that if we were to gain entrance to the fortress stronghold high above our heads. We strode onwards through the caverns, our torch light flickering gently in the subterranean breeze, bringing the harsh tunnel walls to life with a series of shadow demons, dancing ever in front of us, never daring to draw towards our light. In every shadow hid a pair of mischievous eyes, wide open and ready to pounce. We hurried our pace, aiming to make it through the tunnel as quickly as possible, unsure of what lay within its deepest, darkest depths.

Before too long, a gentle light up ahead heralded our return to the outside world. We kept our pistols ready, just in case, but all seemed safe for the time being. It was almost too quiet, the sudden serenity of the outside world a drastic contrast to our recent, violent encounters. We kept aware as we stepped out into the bright, midday sunshine, scanning the trees for any sign of movement. A sudden shaking of the branches above us revealed a lone chaffinch, rapidly brought down in a cloud of feathers by a slightly over-zealous shot from Harves' firearm. I frowned in his direction, then lowered my weapon. We were nearing the chairlift and I could tell. A sign hastily painted on the wall beside us showed us which way to proceed. We headed up the stone steps beside us and soon found ourselves climbing beside the steep walls of the Ehrenbreitstein ridge, rising towards tree-top level.

A few steps later the vista opened up and we saw our destination before us - the toll booth which marked the entrance to the chairlift. One lone guard stood inside the cabin, accompanied by a second to the far side of a metal turnstile. I checked out their prices. The list of fares was on one wall together with the exchange rate between gold pieces and major world currencies.

I timidly approached the counter, holding out a single note. The following conversation took place

entirely in German. Some artistic licence has been applied to the exact wording.

I cleared my throat and began. "Are you the guardian of the chairlift?"  
The man behind the counter looked up towards me, his eyes clearly checking out the two slightly scruffy agents stood before him.  
"Indeed I am," he replied in a deep, gravelly voice. "What is it to you?"  
"We would like two return tickets please," I mumbled.  
He looked around once more, noticing the patches of black blood on our clothing. "So, you have defeated the guardian Hydra of the tunnels?"  
I nodded. "Yes we have."  
"You must be brave warriors indeed."  
"Well it was nothing, really."  
"That beast has been the death of many a brave adventurer."  
"Well its reign of terror is over."  
"So it appears, at least for the time being. So where is your money?"

I cautiously handed over the required fare, then looked back at Harves who was removing a piece of spleen from his hair. The man behind the counter thrust two tickets in my direction, then returned to his desk without a further word. I rejoined agent Supermodel, and together we walked over, through the turnstile and towards the guard the other side. He examined our tickets, and then pointed to two numbered circles on the floor, telling us to stand inside them. We obliged, and two seconds later we found ourselves scooped up from behind by a crude wooden platform, our simple safety harness swung into place, providing the only protection we had against a dangerous plummet into the pits of oblivion below. Overhead, the skies were full of black shapes, like birds but larger. We reloaded our pistols, ready for another battle with death. As our chairlift climbed up towards the clouds above, we noticed that all of the other seats had flags behind them, of different nationalities. Harves glanced behind us to check our own.

"You'll never believe which flag we've got!" he laughed.  
I checked. It was a Union Jack. "Nice to know they've sent out the cavalry then." National pride kicked in. This was our chairlift, and this was our mission: a mission of the British government in whose honourable service we found ourselves. We were going to get into this fortress one way or another, regardless of the half-dozen or so pterodactyls swooping down from above and the substantial number of zombies with bows and arrows blocking our way ahead. We began to let fire with our trusted weaponry, felling a couple of the winged beasts before a rain of arrows from up ahead forced us to take cover. One of the missiles rebounded off the pole which was currently holding us to the cable above. I turned my attention to the archers in front, taking aim and felling two of them before running out of bullets once more. I stopped to reload as Harves felled another of the flying beasts above. The great creature plummeted down from its lofty heights, bounced off our safety cables and dropped into the treetops far below. Our chair shook as the heavy beast's impact struck home, and we clung on for our lives. This was going to be a choppy ride.

We reached the top in the nick of time, our ammunition running low and two prehistoric creatures circling overhead. I had managed to fell most of the zombies, and the remainder were rapidly silenced by my sword as soon as we landed. The chairlift whirled round, and Harves and I made our way across the platform towards the castle entrance. The stone walls of Ehrenbreitstein fortress now loomed right above us, its hallowed secrets just a few minutes away. We sheathed our weapons and stopped to catch our breath. With a loud 'ping', a glowing shield sign appeared above my partner's head, spinning slowly. Harves stood still in fright. "What the hell's that."

"I think it means you've got enough experience to level up."  
"Oh right." Harves thought for a while. "To do *what*?!"

## 4.3 In the Line of Fire

Ehrenbreitstein fortress was built around 1,000 years ago, occupying a vital strategic spot overlooking the two most important rivers in this part of Europe. It was much enlarged and fortified throughout the 18th century and held for a short while by the French in the revolutionary wars. It was largely used as a defensive outpost, its heavily fortified inner court defended by fifteen-foot thick walls and batteries

of cannon and riflemen.

The most obvious thing that one first notices at Ehrenbreitstein is the fantastic view. At a height of 387 feet, it commands a most impressive vista over the town of Koblenz and the nearby Rhine and Mosel valley areas. Now it hosts a small museum which appeared to be largely concerned with the history of automobile transport, and also a couple of cafés and a Youth Hostel which must find itself amongst the most beautiful, in terms of location, in the world.

We took a short tour around the fortress, picking up a leaflet and wandering around under our own steam between the points of interest. At this point it was more of a matter of imagination, seeing the rows of cannon and riflemen and the gun implacements guarding the rivers below. A sizeable stage was being set up for a series of performances of Verdi's large-scale opera *Aida*, which was beginning in just a few days' time. The awe-inspiring light and sound display would have fitted just perfectly into those austere surroundings, a perfect compliment for the tragedy to unfold.

We didn't have a lot of time to spend at the fortress, so decided that we ought to stop off for lunch as soon as possible. We chose a table right next to the edge, overlooking the *Eck* where our rendez-vous would take place in just a couple of hours. We couldn't help but notice that the meeting point was only 600 metres away which, I'm reliably informed, is approximately the maximum distance at which a trained sniper could make an accurate head shot. By choosing such an open meeting place, Grandmaster had put us right in harm's way. Once again, feelings of doubt began to creep into my mind. Just who was this mysterious Grandmaster, and why did he apparently want our mission to fail?

In order to tackle this problem head on, Supermodel and I both ordered bowls of spaghetti and glasses of chilled local wine. We did this in honour of the great Beethoven who ordered a case of *Rüdesheim* wine from Mainz on his deathbed only for them to arrive when he was in no fit state to drink them, prompting his (alleged) last words "Pity - too late!" Nice of him to offer those in English, I thought. Anyway, we drank a toast to Ludwig and his long-suffering mother. I'd like to think she would have been proud of her son's achievements if she had ever been able to hear them. On that point I suppose she managed no worse than he did.

Ehrenbreitstein was indeed a fantastic place, but we had a mission to complete, so headed back down the hill at 1pm, once more making use of the scary chairlift and once more (as if by magic) finding one with a Union Jack flag stuck to the back. It's almost more scary going down because you can actually see how high up you are. It's an absolutely fantastic feeling, being suspended a hundred feet in the air with only a flimsy wooden stick to stop you from jumping. I began to think about my theory of vertigo again, gingerly playing with the security bar, then forced myself to stop.

We reached the base of the lift safely, with a refreshing lack of attacking mythological creatures. Our journey back through the tunnel of death held fewer fears this time as we knew that the tunnel's vicious guardian had been slain. Rather thoughtfully, someone had not only cleared up all the mess, but they'd also installed a set of electric lights to help us to see better. I think that just goes to show that the council can get things done really quickly if they want to.

Next time your local council informs you that it's going to take half a year for them to fill in the gaping potholes in your road, just tell them to think about the poor guys over in Germany. I wondered how many government documents were lying around on in-trays throughout the country with apologies like the following;

Dear madam,

The council would like to apologise for the delay in fixing a broken drainpipe on your house at number 73 GoetheStrasse. Sadly, we have recently been overrun recently by a horde of blood-sucking vampires and consequently are suffering a slight staff shortage. Your patience in this matter would be deeply appreciated.

Yours, Head of Maintenance

encl: wooden stake

Or this one...

Dear sir,

I regret to inform you that we have been unable to carry out the required repair to the sewer system in WilhelmStrasse as we have discovered a portal leading

to the outer circle of Hell, and the legions of demon warriors have been playing havoc with our maintenance schedule. Rest assured we are doing all that we can to solve this problem. However, we apologise for any inconvenience this might cause in the meantime.

Yours, Head of Maintenance

Legends form an enormous part of Germanic culture. The history of Germany is dotted with examples of heroic myths which have captivated the minds and imaginations of generations. Among them are such heroes as Siegfried and Tännhauser, whose struggle against overpowering odds almost always ends with their untimely death at the hands of someone decidedly more powerful. Harves and I were glad to have played at least a small part in such a great cultural experience, and we hope that the myth of our great deed will be retold through the ages until one day, maybe in a thousand years' time, people will tell of the story of the great warrior-king Kollin who killed a fifteen-headed Hydra with his bare hands, aided by his large-breasted and scantily-clad Queen Harvea, to be sung by a particularly attractive young soprano with a very large voice and a winged helmet.

Hopefully these legends would not then tell about how, shortly afterwards, Kollin was slain by an evil sorcerer and the world was all-but destroyed by a large-scale performance of Beethoven's late string quartets played at half speed, relentlessly *fortissimo*. Which reminded me - we had to get back to the *Eck* for the meeting.

We arrived at the dock a little before 2pm, catching the ferry a few minutes later and reaching the other side of the mighty Rhine (my personal river) at 2:09 precisely. I'm not entirely sure why I remember that particular time, but sometimes you don't remember the interesting bits. Anyway, we bade farewell to the half-naked erotic dancers, put our clothes back on and finished off the last of the champagne, wandering back on to the pier and up the steps to the river bank, where we made a particularly stupid decision.

The previous day we had noticed a large castle on the route into town, but we hadn't actually got round to investigating it. Now we had 21 minutes before our meeting, which was surely enough time to go and have a quick peek, wasn't it? We doubled back on ourselves and wandered towards the castle entrance. Actually, it was more of a palace than a castle, but that's beside the point. It was also surrounded by a large wall and a significant body of woodland, presumably to deter the unprepared. In an astounding coincidence, Harves found *himself* a little unprepared, so dashed off into the bushes while I strolled on through a slightly suspicious path into the trees. It didn't look like it had been cleared for years, presumably due to some suspicious mythological beast. (We apologise that we've not been able to clear your woodland paths recently. This has been due to a large pack of werewolves feeding on the souls of the living in the vicinity. Silver daggers are being forged as we speak and we hope to get your foliage under control in the very near future.) How much more difficult things would be in a fantasy world.

The branches were beginning to close in from every side as I made my way carefully along this narrow woodland path. To the right, the magnificent palace began to poke through the concealing undergrowth, so I scrambled up one steep, muddy slope and found myself standing on the lawns in front of an enormous set of pillars and a brilliant white building which they were pretending to hold up. I decided to return to where I had left agent Supermodel in order to inform him of this magnificent sight. I stumbled back down the bank and fought my way through the undergrowth, but he was nowhere to be found. He had vanished.

At this point all manner of thoughts were flowing through my mind. Had he been abducted? Had he been killed and taken away from me (as per the Rule of Bond)? Were there evil assassins lurking in the woods at this moment, waiting to pounce? Maybe, and this was the most interesting option, he had double-crossed me and headed off on his own. Perhaps I was just a decoy agent on a fake mission, where all along agent Supermodel was the focus of attention. Maybe it was all one elaborate setup in order to strand me in hostile territory without so much as a *Bratwurst* for comfort. I quickly discarded such thoughts and began to make my way back round in the opposite direction to see if I could make contact with my fellow agent once again. I let out a call like an owl in case he was within earshot, but I met with no reply.

Thirty yards further on, I was accosted by an owl who wanted to know what all the fuss was about and why I needed to know the way to the station.

I made my way carefully towards the palace along the allotted route. As I neared the great white structure I glanced out over the flower-beds and lawns, but I could see nothing of Supermodel. I crept out into the open, ever ready to defend myself from all manner of ineffective assassins. Everything was quiet except for a middle-aged German couple who were walking through the lawns pretending to ignore me. I kept my distance, and walked past them, turning a corner towards the famous statue of Father Rhine and Mother Mosel, which was hidden away in a small rose garden behind a series of concealing hedges.

I took a photo for reconnaissance purposes, only to be greeted with a familiar call from behind. Supermodel was standing at the base of the stairs, looking slightly disturbed.

“Ready to go to the meeting, Xol?” he asked.

I ran over and checked the back of his neck, relieved by the lack of any abnormality. “Supermodel, it really is you. I was beginning to think that you had been abducted.”

I didn’t want to share my other thoughts with him in case it altered our relationship slightly. We were getting along just fine at the moment without questioning our mutual trust at such a fragile moment. Supermodel smiled, “I just went off wandering. Sorry about that. I think we should probably get to the *Eck*.”

I looked at my watch. It was 2:25pm. I cursed loudly, then began to walk back out of the palace grounds. Supermodel followed at a comfortable distance, looking around to make sure that we weren’t being followed.

We guessed that the journey to the *Eck* would probably take around five minutes, but it soon became apparent that this was an underestimate. The river bank walk that we had now strolled along so many times was actually deceptively long, and we found ourselves increasing our pace steadily over the course of the next five minutes until we accepted the fact that we were going to be late. This was particularly annoying as we knew that this agent was unknown to us, so he would be getting a little anxious at our absence.

The statue loomed overhead. We had previously planned to climb it and survey the scene prior to the meeting, but now we were late, I arranged for Supermodel to walk into the open square holding his *Süddeutsche Zeitung* conspicuously whilst I climbed the steps and tried to get an aerial view. We had expected our contact to be sitting on the benches right at the corner, but there was nobody there other than an elderly man and a few jovial children. It could have been a particularly good disguise, but they would have needed to be very small and Grandmaster had told us that our contact was a little over six feet tall.

I separated from Supermodel, turning to climb the steps towards the monument. I couldn’t help noticing a young man around his late twenties, generously camouflaged with a significant quantity of designer stubble, rising from his seat and walking over in my direction. I was slightly suspicious because of the woman walking a few paces behind him. I had been told of only one agent. I glanced down and he was carrying the *SdZ*, so I approached him, unsure of what to say. “Guten tag,” he began, “are you Agent Supermodel?”

I grinned. “No, I am Agent Genius. Supermodel is the one over there waving a newspaper in front of that old lady.”

“Oh I see. Well, I am *Übermensch*. Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise,” I replied, taking my time to examine my contact more closely.

He was, as Grandmaster had said, ruggedly handsome, standing slightly over six feet tall. He had short, black hair and a muscular physique which was on open display thanks to the grey vest he was wearing which looked like it had seen a fair number of life-or-death struggles in its time. *Übermensch* was clearly a superior operative, and lived up to the name. Grandmaster had done well again. Supermodel had spotted us by now, and was returning to the statue at top speed.

*Übermensch* beckoned for his accomplice to step forwards. She was a rather attractive young brunette, also in her late twenties, with long, flowing hair and a well-tanned complexion. She was wearing a sleeveless floral dress which I suspected might not have been government issue as it didn’t look like it had much space in which to conceal deadly weaponry. *Übermensch* did the introductions. “This is my accomplice, agent *Maitresse*.” I shook her firmly by the hand. Supermodel sprinted up the stairs, introducing himself and waving his *SdZ* around a few more times for dramatic effect.

“I have a letter for you, agent Genius,” boomed *Übermensch* in a deep theatrical voice, full of

machismo. His accent was difficult to place. I discovered later that this was because his first language was Romansh, being a native of Switzerland. He was currently undercover in a nearby town, posing as an out-of-work actor in order to sneak into a production of a particularly dramatic play. It all sounded slightly predictable - if I had been an enemy spy I'm sure I would have spotted that one straight away, but perhaps I was missing the subtlety.

I cautiously opened the letter, watching the eyes of those around me as I did so. Übermensch grinned. "Where do you think you are going next?" he asked. I really had no idea.

"We think perhaps Bonn next, but after that we don't know."

"Bonn?!" Übermensch found this most amusing. "Why would you want to go there?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Well clearly it isn't the Beethoven theme then. Maybe Leipzig? or Berlin?"

Übermensch laughed once more. "Not even close. Wrong country."

Supermodel and I stood stunned, looking at each other in shock. All our guesses had been completely wrong. So where were we going then? I pulled out the slip of paper and began to read.

London

20th February 2002

Agent Genius

Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome to Koblenz! You must by now have made contact with Agent Übermensch which is frightfully enterprising of you. I trust that Übermensch is the consummate secret agent and helpfully saying nothing. As with Provocatrice, do give him my regards and pay the bill when you find yourselves somewhere to have a drink.

There are no additional items in this package. This letter, and your now-intimate acquaintance with the German language, should suffice.

As always, I trust you will accept the lack of explanation for my absence - yet more urgent business to attend to. But will see you very soon. I trust that you and Supermodel are happily engaged in a fulsome Platonic dialectic arising from the provided entertainment.

In the meantime, here are your instructions:

Spend the rest of today in the sunny pleasures of the Rhineland. I should warn that you might like to get an early night. Tomorrow, you will make your way to Salzburg. That's Salzburg Austria in case you are feeling especially American at this juncture.

Again I have a recommendation for you. I would take the EC115 from timetables 910 and 930. It's the only direct train, running 0821 - 1455. It's an early start, but the South beckons you ever onwards. When you arrive in Salzburg, find a web café and take instructions by e-mail.

Presque entièrement à votre service,

Grandmaster

So that was it. We were going to Austria. We'd not guessed *that* one. Quite what awaited us in that ancient historic town we didn't know, though I had developed rather a fondness for it the last time I had spent some time there many years ago.

We wandered off with our two fellow agents, heading in towards the old part of town. Übermensch knew Koblenz well, so he steered us in the right direction, helped somewhat by Supermodel's desire for some kind of pudding. We soon found ourselves in one of the central squares, seated at a rather crowded café and ordering the most enormous ice creams that we had ever seen. Koblenz got better with every passing minute.

Over our mid-afternoon snack we chatted about our lives, our missions (well, the non-classified ones) and the journey so far. We were unsure what level of clearance Übermensch had obtained so we decided that the best option would be to fill him in on some of the details up to that stage, and our expectations

for the future. We remained deliberately sketchy in order to protect mission security. We didn't even mention Grandmaster until Übermensch noted that he'd been on a mission with him in South Africa a few years back. Harves and I looked at each other, impressed.

"So you've met him then?" I enquired.

"Yes, that's right," replied Übermensch.

"What's he like?"

"Oh, you know," he began, avoiding the question, "I'm sure that's classified information."

"You can't tell us anything?"

"Well, not really. I suppose I can tell you a bit about him from our African mission."

Supermodel and I listened eagerly as Übermensch spun a list of heroic tales involving lions, cheetahs, crocodiles and coyotes, together with a whole string of other dangerous wild animals. Grandmaster had battled them all single-handedly, without a sieve, and returned alive. Grandmaster had boated down white-water rapids, narrowly avoiding almost certain death. Grandmaster had nearly been trampled by elephants, only to survive intact. Grandmaster had been a particularly cunning secret agent and, though his days as a field operative were now over, Übermensch felt sure that this mysterious character would make a damned fine boss. This legendary operative may well have given up the lure of the wild for a desk job, a flat in London and a stack of cash, but Übermensch felt sure that somewhere, lurking beneath that calm, drab exterior lay beating the heart of a hero and the soul of a mythical warrior.

Somewhere off in the distance I vaguely managed to pick out a sound that I can only describe as rather like a twelve year old trying to do an impression of a wolf. Somewhere, a long way away, a status report lay unfinished on a cold wooden desk. Behind it, a door was slowly closing as a dark figure swept out and towards a date with history, his expensive shoes glistening in the pale moonlight.

## 4.4 Reconnaissance

Übermensch admitted that he didn't have much time to spend with us in Koblenz. His mission now complete, he had to return into hiding and assume his original cover rôle as soon as possible. We spent a few more minutes with him and his lovely accomplice before bidding them farewell and good luck, returning to the streets of Koblenz to do a little sight-seeing.

It was just after 4pm, and Supermodel was beginning to develop an intense desire to visit some churches. There were two places in particular that we had missed the previous day so we headed towards them, exploring each in turn. Yet again they both had plaques on the doors detailing when they were built, when they were flattened in the war and when they were rebuilt. One church had a large selection of nasty modern art detailing the horrors of the holocaust - a sobering reminder that only sixty years ago Koblenz was not quite the model of beauty and tranquility that we saw today.

Our visits to the old part of town continued with a tour of the narrow alleyways which threaded through the beautiful old buildings of the historic quarter, connecting the various squares with one another in an intricate maze of architectural discovery. Every so often we bumped into a group of American tourists being shown around by native guides, pointing out the few bits of masonry that the allies had failed to destroy. At one point Supermodel pulled out his phone, calling into it "Hello? Bomber command? You've missed a bit." Fortunately he was careful enough to do so at a low enough volume to avoid the wrath of the man with a huge Alsatian dog just round the corner.

One of the things that we had really wanted to do at this location was take a river cruise. Now we had previously thought that we would be going to Bonn, perhaps on the river, so we didn't get round to planning one, but now we knew that we would be taking the train to Salzburg the following day we knew that we only had one opportunity left, so we decided to go for it. We made our way to the docks and began to stroll along, checking out the cruises on offer.

It was now getting fairly late in the afternoon so we had missed all of the long-range outings. However, one ship was still moored beside the river banks, offering hour-long cruises up and down the rivers for a perfectly reasonable price. We considered it worth the money, so stepped aboard, ready for the next departure in just a few short minutes. I made sure that my pockets were secure, not wanting to lose my wallet out of the back into the fast-flowing water. Harves decided to take his shoes off, presumably expecting that fewer people would sit near us if he did. Whether it was true or not, we managed to get some good seats towards the bow of the boat, sitting on sun-drenched wooden benches

and clinging on for dear life to a narrow metal rail. Spending some more time out in the sun was particularly pleasant for me, but I was beginning to get worried about my fellow agent who was turning a little red. Actually, that's probably an understatement – he looked like rhubarb. Except without the leaves. Or the green bits.

Shortly before we left, I spotted a long train on the other side of the Rhine. It was carrying a long line of tanks towards the South, past the fortress of Ehrenbreitstein. This was most disturbing, and I consulted with Supermodel who suggested we took a number of surveillance photos to show to Grandmaster on our return. For whatever reason, the enemy looked as if they were amassing a large amount of weaponry in the region, and possibly taking it to the south in the direction of Austria. I wondered if it was therefore a coincidence that Grandmaster had planned to send us in that direction. Perhaps he had initially intended to send us North along the Rhine, but at the last minute we had been diverted south.

Our boat journey took us up the Rhine first of all, fighting against the surging waters as we slowly edged back in the direction of the Palace and the statue of a man tripping over an eagle. Our guide explained that the marks along the river banks gave us the distance from its source in lake Constance, with every 100m being marked with a large numeral, every 500m marked with a cross and every kilometre marked with a large sign denoting the distance in round figures. Of course, the guide was speaking in German, so I only picked out a limited selection of the remainder of the tour, but I'm sure it was very interesting. I translated as much as I could for Supermodel, but I suspect he was happy enough to watch the scenery go by and to listen to the calming sound of the waters lapping at the sides of the boat. I wonder if perhaps he had spotted something down in the depths. Just then I could have sworn I heard an announcement over the radio. "We apologise for the late running of the cruise service today. This is due to a ninety-foot long giant squid terrorising small vessels in the Koblenz area. We assure you everything will return to normal as soon as possible."

After travelling a mile or so upstream, we turned back and glided down with the flow of the Rhine, past the *Eck* and towards the industrial part of town. This was the part that we had first seen from the summit of Ehrenbreitstein fortress, having previously been unaware of its existence. On the left stood a selection of houses which had something to do with canoes, from what I could translate.

A few miles downstream was a small island in the middle of the river, connected to the town on either side by a couple of narrow road bridges. The island was dotted with several timber-framed houses, and the beaches along its sides were populated by a number of sunbathers and lunatics swimming in the fast-flowing waters. We were told that during the great flood of 1993, this entire island was underwater and that the flood waters reached up to the windows of most of the houses. I could barely imagine it then, but that must have been a terrible time for the residents of Koblenz. The Rhine was a great Father alright, helping in times of need and building up the town's economy, but sometimes Fathers can take away as well as give. For example, Darth Vader.

We began to return upstream, stopping at a selection of carefully-chosen piers to pick up other passengers on our route. It wasn't immediately clear if these passengers were also in it for the tour or if they were just friends of the boat captain's who needed to get upstream. Either way, they sat around us, watching the waters flow by as we surged up, back towards the *Eck*.

This time we took the westward branch, and headed up the Mosel. This was slightly smaller than its significantly more powerful spouse, though it was still a mighty river in its own right. A half-mile or so upstream was another island, acting as a mid-span point for two bridges which stretched across the bubbling waters, connecting the new town with the old. We couldn't help but notice that those two bridges were both built in a particularly strange style – one half was old and the other new. Though we couldn't really understand what our guide was saying, we suspected that this was because the other halves had been destroyed by allied bombers in the war. With every hour a picture was beginning to grow in our minds of the utter destruction that Koblenz had suffered. It was all the more miraculous that such a beautiful city had been almost entirely rebuilt in just fifty-seven years. Koblenz was a living testament to the power of hope through adversity.

Our boat trip finished shortly after we left the Mosel. It had been money well spent, and we both felt that we had gained some valuable insights into the town around us. Supermodel had also turned an ever more hilarious deep-red colour and was in danger of finding himself badly sunburnt in the morning. Fortunately now the sun's strength was waning and the cool evening breeze began to waft across from the water, taking away the heat and bringing a little more comfort for the hours ahead. This had been

the hottest day so far, definitely in the high twenties. The sky remained blue throughout, though the weather forecast for the next 24 hours was increasing cloud across western Europe.

Talking of the following 24 hours, we knew that we were spending a large number of them on a train heading for Salzburg, and that would mean that we were going to miss lunch. Supermodel suggested that we headed for a local bakery and collected a number of suitable cakes to get us through the taxing times ahead. To this end, we returned to the town, walking back along the now-familiar route through the old quarter and towards the nearest cake shop.

At this point I'm forced to admit that my brain was not built to work in a buyer's economy. I'm always afraid to complain about things because, well, there's no shortage of people who have it worse. If I get a faulty piece of equipment I always spend ages trying to make it work before I decide whether it's worth the effort going back to complain. I very rarely enter shops just to browse as I always feel a bit threatened by sales assistants who are out to make as much money as possible. Maximising returns means maximising throughput and getting rid of penniless wasters like me as quickly as common courtesy allows.

Supermodel is quite the opposite. He comes from a culture where the customer is always right. The Japanese have a saying "*o-kyakusama wa kamisama desu*" (the customer is God). Supermodel is the kind of person to adhere to this school of thought wholeheartedly. He led me through a series of bakeries, entering each one, scouring the trays of delicacies, grabbing the attention of a number of smiling girls behind the counter and then thanking them and leaving without buying a sausage. Or even a tart.

It came as a great relief when we finally stumbled upon a quality cake shop which appeared to sell exactly what we (read: he) wanted and finally he parted with some of his hard-earned cash and bought a number of amusing almond cakes and chocolate slices. It was a hard sell, and Supermodel was not the kind of customer you wanted to mess with. He'd been trained for several years by the Shaolin monks, and was consequently highly proficient in all manner of unarmed fighting techniques. He was also an expert in far-eastern mysticism and many sources claimed that he was capable of summoning bolts of lightning with his bare hands. That had yet to be proven.

Our forthcoming mealtime dilemma now well and truly moved into the 'sorted' pile, we headed off for one last wander round the few parts of the old town that we had missed, passing by one particularly interesting totem-pole like sculpture detailing the history of Koblenz in a series of highly-ornate stages. It started way back in Roman times when Koblenz was a small fortified settlement on the Rhine, all the way up to the present post-war epoch with Koblenz obtaining its modern position as a *large* fortified settlement on the Rhine. It's amazing how things change over two thousand years.

It was beginning to draw alarmingly close to evening. We were not hungry yet, but suspected, thanks to our largely predictable metabolic processes, that we might be in another hour or so, so we headed off towards the banks of the Rhine and wandered back down our now-familiar route to the south. We were planning to eat a meal at the riverside restaurant that we had seen the previous night, just past the turning to our hotel. It looked like a rather plush joint and we felt sure that we would be able to get a decent meal there, without paying too much over the odds. It was our last night in this perfect little town, so we felt that this was a necessary expenditure.

As one last treat on the way, we stopped off at a café overlooking the river so that I could order a large *Hefeweisen* and we could both relax in comfort as life, like the river, passed us by. We discussed our mission, our lives, our friends, our hopes and fears for the future. Most importantly we discussed just why, despite all my prior indications to the contrary, Germany had turned into a complete babe fest as soon as we arrived.

We sat there for at least half an hour, watching the good people of Koblenz walk, cycle and in some cases roll by. I couldn't help thinking about how much more difficult this way of life would be if legions of zombies were roaming the streets, eating people's brains. Or even if a Tyrannosaurus Rex had been released from a top-secret research lab and was currently terrorising the city, crushing anything it could get its massive, powerful jaws round.

We left the café, still pondering a few unanswered questions. Some of them were serious, but some of them were remarkably silly. We weren't entirely sure just why Grandmaster had sent us here. We didn't know what our plans were going to be in Salzburg. And perhaps most disturbingly, we *still* didn't know why there was a statue of a man tripping over an eagle alongside the path up ahead.

We arrived at the restaurant a little later, taking a seat beside a most beautifully maintained border of rose bushes of every size and colour. Between us we managed to finish what was to be our last local

*Rheinhessen* wine, and most delicious it was too. We ate some particularly tasty food and discussed all manner of ridiculous topics. I was really beginning to like Supermodel, as a fellow agent. His knowledge was second-to-none, and he certainly knew his stuff when it came to matters theological or artistic. I still couldn't really tell what his impression of me was - he was far too good at concealing his innermost thoughts. This was a top-ranking agent, and my initial fears about Grandmaster's integrity having landed me with such an incompetent buffoon were now beginning to subside.

We left the restaurant a little before 11pm, arriving back at the hotel shortly after. After I had scrawled a few notes on our day's adventures, we began to set our thoughts to the following morning. One thing was certain: we were going to have to arise early if we wanted to catch our train. With significant complaining, I set the alarm for 7am, knowing that this would be a most painful hour at which to awake, but accepting the mission took priority over everything.

As I was about to head to bed, there was a loud beeping sound coming from Supermodel's general direction. He fumbled around in his bag and eventually pulled out a mobile phone, flicking open the cover and lifting the device up to his ear. I heard a gentle female voice the other end as Supermodel listened intently. He sensed that I was listening in, so turned until he was facing me and smiled. "I'm in Koblenz," he hollered into the microphone. "I'm on a mission. Can I call you back?" There was a moment's silence followed by another short burst of dialogue and then the line went dead. Supermodel replaced the phone into his luggage, smiled at me once more and went to bed without another word. I lay back trying to get to sleep as another line of imaginary sheep lined up for a series of nasty accidents.

Hundreds of miles away, a mysterious figure lay uneasily in bed. The call of the wild was drawing him away once more. This was to be one final mission; one last chance to explore the world outside his restrictive office walls. Two plane tickets rested on his bedside table. Beside them sat an alarm, primed to wake him in the small hours of the morning. This was going to be a long night - his mind was alive with excitement because the following day he would be meeting two of Britain's top secret agents, and they didn't even know it yet. He closed his eyes once more, willing himself to sleep. Beside his bed, a dark pair of shoes lay waiting.



## Chapter 5

# From Prussia with Harves

### 5.1 The Mullet of Death

When you're in the middle of a particularly amusing battle between cute secret agent women (from the website mentioned in the previous chapter) and a large number of escaped bloodthirsty lions, the last thing you want to hear is a loud beeping sound. Sometimes it means that there is a large bomb in need of disarming, or perhaps that you're being attacked by a microwave oven, or else that a Securicor van is about to reverse in your direction. However, in this case it signified that my alarm clock was going off and that I really ought to wake up and get out of bed as soon as possible.

I love thinking about dreams. Some people claim that they never remember what they dream about, or else that they remember for a short while and then forget almost immediately. I think that this is because dreams are inherently very illogical, and it becomes extremely difficult to fit them into our logical minds. They exist in short-term memory for a fleeting moment and then after you actually try to think about them, they vanish just like a trip back to 1930s Paris. Annoyingly you only ever remember what you were dreaming when you wake up which means that for every weird dream you experience, there are another dozen or so that you slept right through. Dream analysis would give such a fascinating insight into our world – I would love to watch a tape of all my dreams every morning after I woke up. Perhaps only the highlights – I'm not sure I could be bothered to sit through the boring bits between the fight scenes.

Another fantastic feeling is what happens when you're *really* tired, like when you've gone for 35 hours without sleep. If you sit down somewhere reasonably noisy or uncomfortable, you find yourself dozing off for a minute or so at a time, then waking again as you become aware to some change in your environment. This process just continues over and over again, slipping uncontrollably between waking and dreaming, never really knowing which is which. Of course, because you only ever sleep for a short while, your brain doesn't get a chance to delve into some really weird dreaming, and your thoughts are almost always related to what you were thinking just before you nodded off. This just means that one minute everything is perfectly logical, and another minute something weird happens, but at the time you never really question what's happening – it all seems to make perfect sense. Dreams are strange things.

One last thing that interests me is the way we recognise people and places in our dreams. When you wake up from a dream, try to remember who was in it with you, or where you were. Often you'll find yourself saying "well, there were five other people with me, all of whom were close friends, but I can't remember who they were." More interestingly, as often happens to me, "I was at home, except that it wasn't really my home because there was an extra flight of stairs in the lounge, and my bedroom was in a different place, and the kitchen had doubled in size, and we had a large barn out the back with a nuclear missile silo." So why did I think those people were my friends when I couldn't remember any of their faces? Why did I think this was my home when everything was in the wrong place?

The brain has two separate sections dealing with recognition and emotional response. Fire up the latter without the former and you get just the problem above - you feel that people are close friends and that you're in a familiar place when in fact the truth is quite different. It's a fascinating area of study. There are documented cases of people in whom one of these two areas is not functioning properly after some head injury. Either they see people familiar to them and feel that they should recognise them but don't (like their own children) or else they recognise people but feel no emotional attachment and

therefore presume that their closest relatives have all been replaced with imposters.

This will all become relevant later on, trust me. In the meantime...

Breakfast was a more sober affair this morning. We ate our fill as quickly as possible, then headed swiftly off towards the station, bidding farewell to our friendly hosts and promising to return if ever our work took us in this direction again. Supermodel appeared to have recovered from his lobster impression of the previous day, his face now back to a more usual shade of pink. It was very early in the morning, a time when most people were on the way to work, so we were both utterly knackered – a fact not helped by the fast-approaching nightmare of having to buy a ticket to Salzburg in a foreign language. As usual, the one ticket sales assistant I approached would almost certainly not speak English, and I would be forced to fumble through in German. It was actually more of a matter of pride now – I was going to speak their language damnit and there was nothing they could do about it. Including, it appeared, understand what I was trying to say.

Just as I feared, my chosen salesperson did indeed appear not to be able to speak English. Or at least, I started off in German and he was perfectly happy to oblige. I ordered the tickets to Salzburg and just nodded and said ‘ja’ to everything I didn’t understand. I reckon the affirmative is the correct answer about seventy percent of the time, just from a psychological perspective. People will, especially when talking to foreigners, generally try to ask questions in the most positive way. They will try to say “you want second class, I presume?” and will generally avoid saying “You don’t want to travel in the back with the chickens, do you?” instead. For that minority of questions to which the correct answer is ‘nein’, you can normally gauge that you cocked up by the puzzled response of the person to whom you are talking. Therefore I had no problems whatsoever just saying ‘ja’ to everything this man asked, smiling nicely and handing over my credit card. The tickets came to 100 Euros, which I thought was fairly cheap. I paid up and we both buggered off and went to sit on the platform before anything bad happened.

Just to make sure, I decided (as I often do) to check the tickets. They were rather posh, as all continental tickets tend to be. As far as I knew you didn’t have to stamp tickets before entering the train, as you do in France. For some reason we had two tickets, one saying ‘single to Salzburg’ and another saying ‘supplement’. I had no idea what the second was for, but I couldn’t help noticing that this was the only one that said “2 adults” in the top right hand corner. The main ticket just said “1 adult”. I thought that this might be a problem, so told Harves to wait on the platform while I ran back to the ticket office. Clearly whatever that bloke behind the counter had said to me, one of the questions must have been “I take it that guy standing like a lemon behind you is just there for decoration?”

It was about twelve minutes before the train was due to depart. It hadn’t yet arrived, but I knew that it would certainly be leaving on time as continental trains tend always to do so. I ran back through the crowds of school children and towards the ticket office, queuing for a minute before one counter was free. In the background I could hear the relentless ticking of a clock on the office wall. As one customer left, I ran over to the lady behind the free counter and attempted to explain the problem in German. “Here is two adults, but here is only one” I said, fluently. “But,” and here was the best bit, “we are two adults. And we want to go to Salzburg.” My command of the language was growing by the day. I would be moving on to elementary conversation next, and then it would *really* get fun.

The lady frowned, took my tickets, frowned again, looked at me, squinted, tried to work out where the other passenger might be, shrugged her shoulders and began typing on her computer. Another screen sprung into view, displaying a different price. She typed this one into her calculator, subtracted what I had already paid, and showed me the answer. I owed another fifty Euros. Now that was more like the sort of price I was expecting to pay, but it was mildly annoying having to sort this kind of problem out. Clearly the ticket sales staff were also wondering just what they were supposed to be doing out of bed this early in the morning.

I finally managed to acquire my new ticket and, glancing only briefly at it, I dashed off in the direction of my lone partner, hoping that he hadn’t wandered off aimlessly in the meantime. I finally reached the platform, sat down on the bench next to Supermodel, and pulled out the tickets. “That’s better,” I puffed, out of breath, “everything is sorted.” There was a train standing on the platform, so we both jumped on and tried to find ourselves a seating compartment. Once more, all of these were occupied by single people lying across numerous seats, trying to protect themselves from the outside world by pretending to be asleep. The market for inflatable skinheads would be large, but the customers would mostly be bastards.

We managed to find ourselves a small half-cabin in the next carriage. This was a set of four seats, half separated from the outside world by a glass screen, but not provided with a door of any kind. This meant that we could maintain the illusion of separation whilst still remaining in contact with our fellow passengers, rather like the opposite of the present Labour government. We sat down, collapsing into our seats and placing our bags opposite so as to deter anyone else from entering our cosy little alcove. The train was large and particularly spacious with enormous windows, presumably designed to afford the best possible view of the Austrian alps on the way through. I glanced at our tickets once more, just to make sure. They looked right, with two adults stamped on the top right corner. I couldn't help but notice that we also seemed to have got a return ticket for no apparent reason. It was particularly strange, but I didn't mention it to Supermodel in case he complained. I can't possibly believe that we actually *paid* for a return, so I can only assume that the lady who sorted out my ticket problem gave us one by mistake. A stroke of luck, if only we needed it.

The train set off a few minutes late, around 8:25. This particularly surprised us as we were so used to everything running on time. The train manager did try to explain what the problem was (fluently in German and English) but it didn't make much sense in either language. Still, we didn't mind as we were heading back through the Rhine valley and some of the most beautiful scenery in all of Germany was about to fly past our window. Sad though we both were to leave Koblenz, there was an undeniable sense of satisfaction to head off on what we expected would be the last leg of our journey. We felt sure that Grandmaster wasn't going to send us anywhere after Salzburg, though I wouldn't have been particularly surprised if we were met in Austria by a map of Prague and a book of "Teach Yourself Czech." Grandmaster clearly had some faith in my linguistic abilities, but I hoped that he would manage to resist.

This particular train had a very scary ticket inspector on board. She possessed a particularly loud voice, and a manner that would have made a lesser man tremble in his boots. Supermodel tried to cower behind his luggage, but I lured him out with the promise of a slice of almond cake. We were especially glad to pass inspection, our ticket dutifully stamped with the date and time and returned to us without any form of complaint or suspicion.

I decided to pull out the rail map that Grandmaster had kindly given us in Lille. We were unsure of the exact relative positions of Koblenz and Salzburg and reckoned that it would be a good idea to work out the route that we were going to be taking. Sure enough, a large section of the line was marked in green, meaning that it was a particularly scenic route. We were heading south, back through Mainz and towards Stuttgart. After that we would follow the side of the Bavarian alps and into Austria through the mountains. Salzburg lay just the other side.

It was at this point that I glanced over towards our cabin wall and noticed that two of the seats in our little den had been reserved. I picked up a route-map from the chair opposite, and began to read through the names on our journey. One of the chairs had been reserved from a station in the mountains after Salzburg, which didn't worry us at all. However, the other (and in fact the one on which I was sitting) had been reserved from Ulm. So now came the dilemma - whether to move and be safe, but risk the mystery seat-booker being a total babe, or to stay and perhaps have to move, but risk sitting opposite the most comical weirdo ever born. It was indeed a difficult choice, but fortunately we had a few hours before we would have to make it. As we followed the banks of the Rhine we noticed another handful of enemy fortresses, reminding ourselves that there were more important things at stake in this mission than our own selfish desires.

The highlight of the next two hours was our arrival at, and subsequent departure from the town of Worms. Now this was a particularly amusing location, and apparently had some not-inconsiderable religious history behind it too. Supermodel explained to me about how this was the place where Martin Luther appeared before the Imperial Diet to defend his "radical" teachings against the Catholic church. I wasn't sure what the Imperial Diet actually was, but judging by the sculptures I had seen earlier that year in Rome I suspected that it involved a large amount of red meat. The impressive cathedral at Worms still stands, largely untouched by the allied bombing raids, though most of the rest of the town was comprehensively levelled. This was becoming somewhat of a recurring theme.

When we were nearing Ulm, we decided not to risk occupying the reserved seats, so we moved into the next block of four seats which had recently been vacated at Stuttgart. Rather amusingly, before we arrived at Ulm, an elderly couple decided to take our place, sitting in the seats that we had just vacated. Well...at least it wasn't our problem any more. Supermodel was particularly annoyed as he now felt sure that Miss Germany would occupy the seats that would have been directly opposite us,

affording us a most pleasant view. I still felt sceptical. He argued that men don't reserve seats as they like to make things up as they go along. I argued that cute women don't reserve seats because there's almost always a surplus of men more than happy to give up theirs in return for a smile, a wink and a bit of gratitude.

The carriage was beginning to fill up. Supermodel and I were sharing amusing comments about our surroundings with alarming regularity as we had now begun to enter the 'funny stage'. Now that we were surrounded by rather stern, elderly Germans, we knew that we weren't allowed to find anything funny any more, so (as previously explained) everything became side-splittingly hilarious. This wasn't helped at all by the old man in the next carriage along who insisted on wearing a pair of moleskin *Lederhosen*. All he needed now, we felt, was a cap with a feather in it and he would have looked the part. Of course we couldn't laugh in his face as it would have done nothing for Anglo-German relations, but this only served to amplify the humour even more. Harves made a particularly insightful comment about humour, noting that it was not much of a surprise that the Eastern front in the first world war was such a bloody place to be - Germany and Russia, the two most humourless nations on Earth, facing each other over a field of mud with absolutely nothing better to do than shoot guns at things. A slaughter seemed almost unavoidable.

So with much trepidation, and in great discomfort thanks to a number of particularly sharp wise-cracks from my partner, we screeched into Ulm. We were both eager to see who would come into the reserved seat, and just hoped that it wouldn't be anyone funny because we were really in rather a lot of pain already. We found ourselves holding our breath, examining every person to enter the carriage, wondering if they would stop and sit down. One by one they looked towards us, looked away and walked through. Maybe the mysterious passenger from Ulm would not turn up. We dared not speak, staring intently at the door.

Just as the train was about to set off, the door swung open one last time. A man stepped through, dressed in Denim with the sort of T-shirt that said "please don't talk to me - I'm not very interesting." He had a large moustache blatantly stolen from a 17th century period dress production and a small goatee beard which made him look like a cross between a computer scientist and a Hell's Angel. But to top off the image, the *coup de grâce* as it were, he sported perhaps the most incredible mullet I have ever seen in my entire life. His hair was short at the front and sides, then hung over the back of his head, dangling down well beneath shoulder-height, with a few tangled straggles poking out to the sides.

I began to laugh, quietly at first, but soon I was really fighting to keep it in. Harves was slowly turning bright red and I truly feared that he was about to explode. This character strode over to where the reserved ticket had been placed, noticed the old man sitting on the chair, then sat down just over the other side of the aisle. This was the mystery seat-booker. I was having difficulty breathing. I felt as if my ribs were about to break through the surface of my skin and puncture major arteries. My whole neck was in spasm and my eyes were watering in gushing torrents. I couldn't take it for much longer - it was going to kill me. I had to look away and close my eyes, thinking of Britain.

That one decision might well have saved my life. I never knew it was possible to die of laughter, but if Harves and I had stayed in our previous seats and that guy had sat opposite us, I feel I would certainly have been in intensive care within minutes. Our decision to move had saved our lives. Harves had temporarily passed out, but he came round a few minutes later, his face still bright red and his breathing decidedly erratic. We had survived what must have been the only near-fatal hair-related incident in the history of time (excepting Sampson), and now we were safe to continue on our journey. All we had to do was to look forwards and resist the temptation to turn around. The mullet was always going to be there - we knew the dangers. We had survived the first test - now we could sit back, munch on our almond cakes and chocolate slices and enjoy the scenery.

## 5.2 Porn

Germany slowly passed us by like a particularly subtle reference to Goethe. Time was drawing on, and our train was beginning to run uncharacteristically late. In fact, the delay was around half an hour by that point. That was so unusual that we began to suspect that perhaps there might be some sort of sinister mind behind it all, pulling the strings and setting us up for a showdown en route.

After an hour or two, Harves and I had managed to recover from the mullet, and were now breathing normally once again. We were passing through another particularly scenic part of Bavaria which made us think about Britain once more.

"Don't you find it embarrassing?" I asked.

"What's that?" replied Harves.

"Well, all of these gorgeous little villages, which are probably twinned with somewhere totally inappropriate in England."

Harves chuckled. "Yes, can you imagine it? Some beautiful town in the centre of France twinned with Dudley."

"Can you just see the expression on their face as they step off the coach for the first time? It would be worth a million pounds."

"Well it could be worse," he offered thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?" I asked, unsure of how anything could be worse than finding that you're twinned with Dudley.

"Well just imagine it. 'Vienna, twinned with Smethwick'. That one fills me with dread."

I laughed out loud, drawing a few stares from our fellow passengers.

"The most inappropriate twinning commission in Europe. It would be so much fun to work on it. Just think of the chaos you could cause."

Supermodel was right. I giggled to myself for a while. "Welcome to Aix-en-Provence, twinned with the picturesque English village of Oldham."

Harves didn't want to be outdone, so offered another "The people of Henley-on-Thames would like to welcome our visitors from the beautiful Russian city of Smolensk."

"Venice twinned with Düsseldorf"

"Rome twinned with Baghdad."

I had to concede defeat - that painful feeling in my chest had returned and I feared that I couldn't survive another fit of laughter.

By two o'clock we had arrived at the mountains. The weather, having changed from sunny to overcast during our trip through Germany, was beginning to clear up once more now that we were nearing the Austrian border. We overheard the man in the cabin next to us, who clearly was neither English nor German, but spoke to the conductor in English with a strange foreign accent. He was in trouble because he had a ticket for a station on the route between our penultimate station and Salzburg. However, it turned out that we were not stopping there so his ticket was not valid. That was particularly annoying for him as he was supposed to be meeting someone there, apparently. The conductor made him pay for the extension to Salzburg, which was fair enough, leaving him somehow to get back in the reverse direction to wherever it was he was supposed to be.

Of course, the real embarrassment came when we passed straight through the station in which he was hoping to descend, and stopped just a few yards outside for some unspecified reason. It really wouldn't have been much trouble just to open the doors and let this one guy out, would it? It is this attention to rules that makes Germany the country it is today - one of Europe's most solid economic powers. Anyway, this disoriented traveller was forced to sit back and enjoy the ride, which to be fair was rather pretty. I can only assume that he managed to get to his destination eventually, but he clearly hadn't even the tiniest command of the German language so it was going to be interesting.

Anyway, we had now crossed the Austrian border, and in just a few minutes we would be arriving at Salzburg. Towering mountains rose up from either side of the track, looming over us in an incredibly patronising manner. The scenery was the best yet - dramatic rocky cliff-faces flanked by huge swathes of woodland on either side. In the background I could just spot the snow-capped peaks of Switzerland, and knew that it would only be a few short minutes before we stepped off the train at our long-awaited destination.

Supermodel was getting understandably excited, never having visited Salzburg before. I was hardly an expert on the town, having visited it twice but staying only for one night on each occasion. Still, though it was a small town, there was much to see. Actually it wasn't that small - that was just my impression from the first time I had visited. In fact, it stretched out a deceptively long way, being home to approximately 150,000 people, which makes it 50% larger than Cambridge. However, the *really* interesting bits were all concentrated in the old historic quarter around the river Salzach which flowed through its central regions. Only this one body of water separated the heart of the old town from the sprawling metropolis beyond.

Of course, Salzburg means only one thing to most people, and that thing is 'Mozart'. It is his birthplace, though Wolfgang himself often admitted that he hated the place. This was probably because the town in the 18th Century was a dirty place, and also partly because he associated it with bad

memories of stingy Prince Archbishops and a childhood spent mostly on the road performing like a circus animal at his father's request.

We pulled into the station at half past three, thirty-five minutes late. We never did understand what caused the delay, but we had a feeling that it was just going to remain a mystery. Hopefully it wouldn't interfere with our plans too much. (Deutsche Bundesbahn would like to apologise for the delay of the 1455 service to Salzburg, which was caused by an attack of the demon Cthulu. We regret any convenience this may have caused.)

Salzburg may well be famous for Mozart, but its other claim to fame is the *Sound of Music* experience. Now I must admit at this point that I've never seen the film and I find most of the music from it rather irritating. I'm perhaps not the best qualified person to ask about the whole tour, but I'm reliably informed that Salzburg is somewhat of an epicentre for this particular phenomenon. Everywhere you look there are "Sound of Music Tour" posters, "Sound of Music Mugs", "Sound of Music Guidebooks". My only relief is that it takes one's thoughts for a moment away from Mozart chocolates.

Having battled our way through the crowds of "Sound of Music Tour" salespeople, our first task was to check our email for further orders from Grandmaster, so I left Supermodel to wander off in search of a map while I strode across the square outside the station, past the bus depot and over to the internet café opposite. I paid for 15 minutes, logged in using the password provided, and fired up my email account with a quick glance over my shoulder. Sure enough there was one new message, from Grandmaster. It was the final details for our imminent meeting;

Dear Genius

Welcome to Salzburg. I hope the weather is as good where you are as it is where I am. Greetings also to Supermodel.

The next part of your mission is perhaps the most dangerous but rewarding to date. Proceed immediately to the Mozart *Wohnhaus*. Note that this is *NOT* the same as the Mozart *Geburtshaus*.

From there, cross the square and enter the Mirabell gardens. Do not enter the gardens from any other angle. You are part of an intricate pincer movement towards contact with my next agent. The consequences of failing in this part of the task are unimaginably grave.

Walk along past the fountain and then dogleg left. Continue towards the winged horse, then mount the steps. At the very top you will find a naked girl waiting for you. Stay a while and admire her.

Agent Dominatrice will make contact with you there. As usual, you will recognise a particular issue of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Dominatrice possesses instructions for your subsequent moves.

Apologies as always for my continued absence. I will be with you as soon as urgent business allows.

A votre service comme d'habitude

Grandmaster

The instructions were complicated, so I wrote them down on a piece of paper lest I forgot them at an inopportune moment. I logged out of the secure email client, collected my belongings and headed back out of the internet café in the direction of the station. Supermodel was walking towards me with a selection of pamphlets and maps which I suspected would cover almost any of his possible whims.

"So did you receive instructions?" he asked, approaching me with a broad smile.

"Yes I did. I have committed them to memory," I lied.

"Excellent work. Let's set off. Which way?"

"South-west. Mirabell Gardens. I suggest we head for the river and follow it round. That way we can't go wrong."

Supermodel agreed, so I pulled out my GPS kit, acquired a satellite lock, and began to navigate across towards the river to our west. As we walked through the streets, we couldn't help but notice a suspiciously large proportion of the shops in this district were either red or pink, and had names suggesting that they might be involved in rather lewd practices. Most of these names were translated into outrageously dodgy English, such as "Love House Shop" and "Red Heart Sexy Leather Store". Many of them had opaque front windows so it was rather difficult to tell what was going on inside. Some offered "videos with private cubicles." Presumably these were to allow the clients some degree of privacy when writing their reviews. Being in Salzburg I pondered for a while the possibility of wandering in and asking if they had "The Sound of Music." I wasn't sure about the Austrian sense of humour – perhaps it wasn't worth the risk.

We began to enter some slightly emptier back streets. In Austria, as with Germany, you very rarely feel threatened in such places at any time of day. There are some areas in France, or even in England, which are lined with sex shops and you wouldn't go down there unless you were packing some pretty serious weaponry. However, this was not the same. The streets of Salzburg were largely populated by students recreating the Status Quo look from the early 80s and old men wearing lederhosen, neither of which filled us with a particular sense of dread. Side-splitting hysteria yes; dread no.

Finding the river was not very demanding, despite the fact that my GPS set was not working particularly well in such narrow, cramped streets. Once we set off along the river-side path, the situation improved a great deal, and we were able to navigate rather efficiently towards our intended destination. Of course, by now it was largely trivial. We just needed to head along the riverbank until we reached a large bridge, then bear left, cross the square and follow our directions from Grandmaster. It was a fail-safe plan. We were building up with excitement that soon we would finally be in contact with the man who had lead us on this wild goose chase around Europe, and moreover the rather intriguing agent Dominatrice. An unhealthy image was forming in my mind, probably thanks to the name of the shop I had just passed. I snapped out of it, instead setting my mind well and truly back on the task at hand.

A few minutes later, with our anticipation really beginning to rise, we arrived opposite Mozart's *Wohnhaus*, which was the great composer's residence in Salzburg during the years he spent in the city following his return in 1779. Crossing the square, we headed for the Mirabell gardens where Grandmaster had instructed us to enter. The gardens were fully in bloom, carpeted with pastel shades along with more vibrant reds and pinks of a myriad roses and carnations. In the centre was a large fountain, providing ample entertainment for a number of playful children. We headed towards this landmark and I followed Grandmaster's orders, swinging around to my left and following the path in that direction as specified.

Our route was blocked by a brass band which looked, and sounded distinctly American. At our dramatic entrance it fired up into a triumphal march which we could only assume was Grandmaster's special way of welcoming us to Austria. As a particular treat for me, he had added in a number of scantily-clad dancing girls too. I could feel a tear welling up in the corner of my eye – he had thought of everything. I made my way past the musicians, and headed off down the path in the direction of the winged horse as per our instructions. In the distance I could pick out a flight of stairs and a statue at the top. That looked like the arranged meeting point, so I sped up slightly, looking around me in the hope that I might spot our contact before she (or he) spotted us. I thought I saw some sunlight glistening off a metal buckle behind a wall to my left, but it might just have been my imagination.

Supermodel and I strode forwards, heading towards the winged horse which formed an attractive water feature to this corner of the gardens. Supermodel had set off slightly further ahead, presumable eager to reach the naked woman before I did. I increased my pace, catching him at the bottom of the steps and climbing up together towards the bronze statue now just a short distance in front of us. I was still looking around, trying to detect anyone following us, but to no avail. Dominatrice was clearly a skilled secret agent, knowing exactly how to entice a contact into a closely-knit web of surveillance without any risk of detection. At this point I knew that I was almost certainly being watched, possibly by a network of security cameras and satellite imaging systems. Aware of the risks, I began to mount the final few steps to the top of the gardens, and Supermodel and I stepped out into the lawn at the top. In front of us was the naked girl about whom we had been warned, splendidly sculpted but rather disappointingly inactive, surrounded by a sea of gold and green flora. We took a seat on a nearby bench, holding out our *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

A few moments later, a slender, curvaceous figure began to climb the steps towards us. She was dressed in fine Italian designer clothes, wearing a pair of stylish sunglasses which expertly complimented

her long, silky dark hair. Beneath her flowing dress she wore a pair of long, thigh-length leather boots which rung out as they struck the stone steps beneath. Soon I was transfixed and the only sound I could hear was that gentle tapping of her boots and somewhere in the distance a medley of old film themes arranged tastefully for brass band. This mysterious beauty approached us, her smooth, luscious hair dancing in the wind as she floated over towards us with the graceful stride of her long, athletic legs and a seductive swinging of her shapely hips.

I grabbed the *SdZ*, pushing Supermodel to one side. The stunning stranger approached us and smiled politely in my direction with her full red lips. My knees began to tremble as I held out my newspaper, stuttering a few words by means of introduction. "Hello there...erm...well...I'm ...erm...Genius. Agent Genius, that is. I presume that you're ...err...you're..."

"I am agent Dominatrice," she said with a voice of pure velvet. "Grandmaster has sent me to collect you. He will be meeting you in a few minutes, but first we must find a secure location in which to meet."

She glanced over at my sidekick, who had rolled up into a ball behind me and was busy giggling to himself.

"I take it that ..." she pointed in Supermodel's direction, "*individual* is agent Supermodel."

Harves unrolled himself, scrambled to his feet, dusted himself off and offered out his hand. Dominatrice stared at him, pushing her sunglasses down towards the end of her nose and peering over the top. Harves retracted his hand slowly and took a nervous step backwards. I tried to take control of the situation.

"So let's find a suitable place to meet."

Dominatrice looked all around her, examining the people nearby. Then she stepped back a few paces and walked round to the other side of the statue, looking first left, then right, and then straight upwards. Finally she walked back towards me, the corner of her mouth upturning slightly giving the first hint of a smile. "This will do just fine." With that, she pulled a mobile phone out of her pocket, flicked open the keypad, and spoke into the microphone. "Grandmaster, this is Dominatrice. Zero on my location." She flicked the keypad closed again, replaced the handset in her pocket and took a couple of steps backwards.

Suddenly there was a bright flash beside agent Dominatrice, and we found ourselves staggering backwards as a column of light shot down from the sky and illuminated the entire garden. This column grew until I had to avert my eyes, the light reaching an almost blinding intensity. As the beam began to dim, I managed to watch through half-closed eyelids as bolts of lightning darted from within, surging into the surrounding ground. Suddenly I felt a gentle breeze on my arms as a swirling cone of wind began to form which gradually built up into a great vortex, glowing with pure energy. Bright crackles of white light shot forth, striking the ground and scorching the dry, dusty earth. The light died down once more and the tempest abated. I watched on in amazement as the figure of a man began to appear. First the shoes, then a rather expensive pair of trousers and a delicate white suit. Finally the face came into view, smoothly handsome, clean shaven and sporting a fashionable pair of dark glasses. Suddenly the swirling vortex calmed, then vanished leaving no trace of its existence. I stopped, staring in silence at the figure before me, hardly believing my eyes.

"I am Grandmaster."

I scratched my head, then offered a hand to welcome my mysterious puppetmaster. The man who had guided me all across Europe, always one step ahead of me; the man who had planned this entire mission, these reconnaissance photos, the agents whom I had met along the way. Now it suddenly all made sense. Every piece of the puzzle slotted firmly into place. I shook Grandmaster firmly by the hand.

"Ian, my old friend. Good to see you."

"Xol, my faithful agent and sometime Butler. It is indeed a pleasure. You've already met Claire, I take it?" He gestured towards Dominatrice, embracing her in a thoroughly unsuitable fashion.

Now the puzzle was solved. Grandmaster had been unmasked.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"What, pull Dominatrice?"

"No, the spectacular entrance?"

“Oh that? That was nothing,” he dismissed, nonchalantly.

“Nothing? When did you learn how to teleport?!”

Grandmaster pulled out a copy of *The Republic* and waved it in my face. Suddenly I snapped back to reality. I’d done it again.

## 5.3 The Master Plan

I was eager to share the details of our mission with Grandmaster. He had planned this whole trip for us to intricate detail, and I was keen to show him that we had followed his orders to the letter. Well, not quite to the letter, but certainly to the word. Or two. Maybe to the sentence. Well, to the general gist of the phrase at least.

Grandmaster was eager to hear of our adventures, though his network of spies had informed him of most of our actions. Keen to relax for a few minutes, we decided to walk back through the gardens in the direction of an ice cream parlour towards the entrance where Grandmaster had promised to buy us all something to eat while we discussed the remainder of our assignment. We had finally met our enigmatic leder, but the mission was by no means over yet.

We took a seat in the shade beneath the kind leaves of a spacious elm tree. Grandmaster and Dominatrice told of how they had made the journey into Salzburg airport that very morning so that they would have enough time to scout out the area before arranging a place to meet. They were interested in our journey and our manifold adventures around Europe. Grandmaster was especially interested by the photo I showed him of troop movements around Koblenz, though he was still reluctant to share the confidential details with me.

However, between them, Grandmaster and Dominatrice *did* share our mission briefing for the following few days. It was an ambitious programme and we doubted whether we could fit it all in. Tonight was reasonably free, allowing us a certain amount of leisure to explore our new surroundings and to blend into the tourist scene, so to speak. Tomorrow would start with a tour of the town, possibly taking in a few of the major landmarks, and anything that we required to see indoors. By all accounts the weather forecast was not at all good for the next 24 hours so we were glad to have plenty to do under shelter. The following night we had been booked into an opera production at the Marionette theatre in Salzburg. Grandmaster insisted that this would be a worthwhile occasion during which to wind down before the real action began.

Then came the really big news. The reason why we had come to Salzburg after all. Saturday morning we were going to carry out the most ambitious mission so far – we were going to the *Kehlsteinhaus*, the infamous “Eagle’s Nest”. Legend told of a mountain lodge built high in the peaks above the tiny German village of Berchtesgaden. This was the place gifted to none other than Adolf Hitler on his 50th birthday by the high-ranking officers of the Nazi Party. He had used it for only 7 years before he met his untimely end, but it still remained perched high on a rocky crag, overlooking the valleys beneath, just waiting for a new master to take over. And that master was to be us.

Now that we knew the sketchy outline of our mission it was possible to fill in the details slightly more precisely. We examined our map, discovering that the best route to Berchtesgaden was a bus service which ran direct from Salzburg and followed the beautiful mountain paths through the alps for thirty miles or so to our destination. After that we would make our way up towards the *Kehlsteinhaus* via Obersalzberg, utilising civilian transport as far as possible until we reached the upper level beneath the summit where the remainder of our ascent would force us to rely rather more on our own initiative. Once at the top, we would overcome the guards, establish a secure perimeter and raise the Union Jack on top of the mountains. It was indeed a daring mission, but we did not doubt our courage and conviction to succeed.

Grandmaster had taken the liberty of purchasing return plane tickets for the Sunday, flying us back to England in the late afternoon should all go to plan the previous day. It served as a fine indication of his faith in us as secret agents that we would be able to carry out our mission with the utmost reliability and professionalism. He even suggested that we might be able to make it back to Salzburg for a concert in the castle that evening, if all went well.

For now we had more important tasks to which to attend. Grandmaster and Dominatrice had already secured a comfortable luxury suite in Salzburg’s finest hotel for the few nights of our stay here. Supermodel and I, not being on the same budget scale couldn’t afford such opulent quarters so were forced to search out somewhere a little cheaper. This had the added bonus of throwing any

less persistent enemies off our scent, as they would expect us no doubt to be staying in the five-star accommodation with our superiors.

We managed to find an ideal place, right opposite a church of Saint Sebastian, the pious Roman soldier martyred in the third century for his Christian faith. The emperor Diocletian ordered Sebastian pierced by arrows, but somehow Sebastian pulled through and recovered, only to be beaten to death a short while later. He is known as the patron saint of archers, which strikes me as being about as sensible as making Saint Lawrence the patron of barbeques, but there you go.

This place opposite the church was a hostel which appropriately described it as for “junger fuchs.” This was ideal, as that’s just what Harves and I were, given a certain liberty with the pronunciation. Anyway, we booked ourselves in, getting a good deal on a triple room for 48 Euros per night. This seemed rather cheap to us so we took it straight away. We didn’t really need a triple room, but on such missions you never knew when you were going to get lucky. Besides, they didn’t have any double rooms left and I didn’t fancy sharing a single with anyone so openly camp.

We dumped off our bags, and then headed back into the street. It had been some time since I last visited Salzburg, so by means of reacquainting myself with the place we decided to wander over towards the old quarter and walk around the beautiful old street, searching out street musicians and marvelling and the most cunningly hidden *McDonalds* in the entire world.

The streets were full of tourists from every country imaginable, and some not imaginable at all such as Switzerland. The old quarter of town is full of churches and monasteries, which turned agent Supermodel into a man possessed as he ran between the spires, eager to see within. We even found the café in which the young Mozart would eat and drink with his parents of an evening, allegedly. Just to spite him, I ordered a *Hefeweizen* and drank it with great pleasure. He might have been able to play half a dozen instruments and compose entire symphonies by the age of ten, but at least the little git couldn’t get served in a pub. And I bet I could kick his arse in a fight. I took another sip and calmed down.

Mozart’s café of choice was oppressively floral, and after a while even Supermodel agreed that perhaps a slightly more masculine location might be preferable. We set off once more, striding through the streets past all manner of horses, carts and the pair somehow joined together. The main square smelled of faeces thanks to its equine inhabitants so we decided to enter a nearby church instead which, if I remembered correctly, had a rather impressive altar display surrounded by golden clouds rising up towards the dome overhead, flanked by cherubs and beams of sunlight piercing through. It was fantastic in a sort of Victorian sense, ludicrously over-the-top and utterly tasteless, but somehow pleasant in the same way.

Claire was not at all impressed by all this vulgar ornamentation, being a bit of a puritan herself. She was the kind of person who complained at the slightest unnecessary frivolity – whether it be an ornate candlestick holder or a towering ten-foot tall Virgin Mary with intricately-carved gold-lined robes and a hand sculpted baby Jesus made entirely from platinum. I myself tended just to sit back and enjoy the humour. Harves was much further the other way - he was high on adrenaline now, rushing round between the shrines, breathing heavily and pushing Japanese tourists out of the way.

I sat in the front pew, watching Claire storming round in disgust as Harves dashed excitedly from one confessional to the next. Grandmaster walked over and sat down next to me, relaxing on the hard wooden seats and letting out a long, relaxed sigh. I turned to him and smiled politely. Grandmaster clearly had other things on his mind. He was watching agent Supermodel barge past a crowd of American tourists and trying to climb up the railings in front of a shrine. “Can’t you keep him under control?” I shook my head. “He’s been like this all week. Put him anywhere near a patisserie or a religious building and he’s a man possessed.”

“Well I did warn you. I said that he might be a hindrance. I trust he wasn’t *too* bad.”

I thought for a few minutes, thinking back over all the times Harves had helped me out. I thought of the fight with the Hydra, the time travelling experience, the many restaurant occasions where he had translated the menu. I thought of all the times he had amused me on the long train journeys, and the countless discussions we had enjoyed about philosophy and theology. I weighed up everything carefully, the good and the bad, then summed it all up and smiled back in Grandmaster’s direction. “Yes, he’s been a total git.”

We left the church, the skies now obviously darker and threatening to rain any minute. We had wandered round much of the old town, and only a few back streets remained, so we began to make our

way across towards the centre of town, keeping a close eye on the heavens in case of rain or apocalypse. Either one would cause a fair few problems, and at least one of them would throw our plans for the next few days into chaos.

As we crossed back over the Salzach, the heavens began to open. Fortunately only rain came out, the four horsemen presumably still not suitably tanked up for armageddon. We made a dash for a nearby pavement café and stood under its friendly umbrellas waiting for the downpour to abate slightly. This was a real beast of a storm, with the rainfall rapidly becoming torrential, beating down on the ground like a hailstorm, driving the confused tourists in every direction, desperately seeking shelter of some sort or another. I was beginning to wonder if perhaps I hadn't been too hasty about that whole apocalypse thing.

As the waters began to subside, we sent Harves out (rather like a dove) to search for a dry piece of land. He came back a few moments later, so we followed his directions, and walked alongside the row of shops which lead back in the direction of the hotels. It was still raining slightly, but it was warm enough for me not to care. We were going to have to expect this kind of weather the following day, so now was as good a time as any to get used to it.

As it was nearing dinner time, we headed towards a restaurant that we had just passed which looked rather inviting due to its fantastic medieval decorative theme. The pavement seats were rather damp, so we headed inside and they opened up a new wing just for the four of us, the heavy oak door swinging open to reveal a large banqueting hall complete with chandeliers. We had much fun ordering our food and a rather overpriced bottle of wine, which we were more than happy to gulp down together. I also got yet another *Hefeweizen*, determined to make our first night in Salzburg a jolly occasion despite the torrential downpour outside.

Though costly, the meal was extremely tasty. We got the impression that Salzburg was one of those places where you really *had* to spend money to enjoy yourself, rather like Las Vegas, Cancun or Glyndebourne. Everything seemed to be geared up towards the tourist element, and the process of fleecing them for as much money as possible. I suppose on that charge it isn't anywhere near in the same league as the Yucatan coast where you can pay twenty-five quid for a bottle of sun lotion. In fact, thinking about it, we were only paying English prices, it's just that they seemed rather steep after getting away with spending much less for so long. Previously we'd been able to get a meal for pretty much 1 pound = 1 Euro conversion from Cambridge prices; now it was more like 1.5. Well, that wasn't much of a hardship.

Our meal lasted several hours. Grandmaster and Dominatrice seemed more than happy to fit in with the continental way of doing things, which we decided might be a good idea under the circumstances. Long meal times were definitely the way forward. The British don't know how to enjoy their food – they could learn a lot from looking abroad. Ditto for wine.

The rain returned in bursts as we were eating our meal. We spent rather a long time in there, but made the most of it, eating everything on the menu. I even finished with a large lemon sorbet, which is certainly amongst my favourite desserts these days. Consequently, by the time we left to wander back to our hotels, the skies had cleared and Salzburg was once more bathed in the pale glow of the moon. Ian and Claire had suffered a very early start that morning, and Ian admitted he wasn't feeling too well, so they decided to head off to bed. We arranged to meet the following morning at 10 am outside their hotel.

Harves and I went back to our rooms, but as the night was yet young we decided to dump our stuff and head off on a shadowy walk through the back streets, discussing at great length our terribly unfortunate lives back home. We spoke of love, life and laundry. We discussed matters of a religious nature, our motivations, our convictions, our wants and desires. As we walked through the narrow alleyways of that part of town we discussed why there was a door with a red heart-shaped light on the front and a sign saying "House of Love." We pondered the mysteries of the universe, the deepest conundrums of the cosmos and the life of the world to come.

And finally we found ourselves standing side by side on a thin bridge over the Salzach, watching the waters surge by underneath, and contemplating what the next few days would hold in store for us. Judging by the enormous speakers being set up on the next bridge along, we felt fairly sure that it would involve a great deal of noise. It would also include a not-insignificant quantity of Mozart too.

As we wandered back towards our hotel for the night, unsure of how the future might work out, we wandered past a particularly interesting set of steps leading away from the road and up towards the ridge above. After thirty yards or so it turned sharply to the left and continued out of sight behind a row of shops in front. It looked intriguing, and we made a note to investigate this further the following

day.

We returned to our room a little after 11:15, tired from our lengthy day of travel and ready to relax into a comfortable bed for an undisturbed night of sleep. We shut both of the bedroom windows, closed the curtains, turned off the lights and lay back, ready to fall into a slumber. Sadly the soundproofing for our room left a little to be desired and, just as had happened to me many times before in cheap accommodation, I was kept awake for some time by the noise of people milling around outside the window. Even though we were three floors up, the sound still carried surprisingly well into our room. I'm usually a very light sleeper and even the softest sound will wake me.

Bearing in mind my discussion about dreams at the head of this chapter, I wasn't quite sure what to think when I awoke well after midnight to the sound of a tuneful tenor aria being sung at operatic volume in the street outside. Salzburg even has musical drunkards. What will they think of next?

# Chapter 6

## Thunderbell

### 6.1 Rainy Day Women

**DONG!**

There was something particularly unusual about Salzburg on a Friday morning. I couldn't quite work out what it was. It was still early, but yet I was wide awake. In fact I was in that state between waking and sleeping when you don't want to look at your alarm clock because opening your eyes too much will wake you up fully. I wasn't quite su-

**DONG!**

Yes, there was definitely something wrong. I still couldn't put my finger on it. My mind was beginning to whirr into action - I could remember being in Salzburg. I remembered booking into the ho-

**DONG!**

I lost my train of thought temporarily. Against my better instincts I rolled over to see if Harves was awake. He wasn't. Or at least he was pretending not to be. I rolled back into a comfortable position and tried to fall asleep again. One thing was for sure, it was far too early to be -

**DONG!**

It was beginning to get futile. There was no way I was going to be able to fight this. My mind was slowly waking up and I knew that it was going to get rather difficult to fight it. I went against all I had ever learned and glanced across at my alarm clock. It was 7 am. Why was I awake at this rid-

**DONG!**

**DONG!**

**DONG!**

**DONG!**

**DONG!**

Suddenly it sank in. The church opposite. The beautiful church of Saint Sebastian. We had ventured inside twice the previous day and both times they were having mass. They were clearly on one permanent mass cycle. They must have really been holy in there.

**DONG!**

**DONG!**

I mean, what were they doing having mass this ridiculously early in the morning? Or was it just the clock? I lay back and waited for a few minutes and the bells did not repeat. It must just have been the chime for seven o'clock. I lay back and tried to fall asleep. Irritatingly, Harves had found us

a place opposite a church at approximately the same height as the bell tower. Absolutely typical. I lay back, resisted the urge to think of sheep jumping fences and by some miracle managed to fall back asleep.

**DONG!**

I glanced over at my clock. 7:15. I waited for another few minutes and the bell did not repeat. I must have dreamed it.

**DONG!**  
**DONG!**

I don't think I dreamed it that time. It was now 7:30. I must have managed a few more minutes of sleep, but I couldn't be sure. I was in that strange state once more when I was nodding off for a few minutes then being woken up almost immediately.

**DONG!**  
**DONG!**  
**DONG!**

7:45. I definitely didn't dream that one. This was getting ridiculous. There was no way I was going to get any more sleep, so I just accepted the fact, and decided to rest my head on the pillow for a while.

**DONG!**

"Oh sod off!"

I wasn't sure if I'd actually yelled that or if I'd just dreamed it. Harves wasn't stirring so I hoped the latter. I lay half-awake trying to work out what I was going to do that day, and what amazing sights I was hoping to visit. We had a day of relaxation before the big mission tomorrow, and I wanted to make the most of it. There was no way that I could pass up on an opportunity to look round Salzburg with three great friends when only two whole days remained of our adventure. There were so many places I had hoped to see and so little time.

It was then that I became acutely aware of a second sound between the DONGs. A much more even sound, almost like a gentle thundering or a shimmering of delicate violence. I pondered this new sound for a while, trying to work out what it might be, but not qu-

**DONG!**

I lay back for a few more minutes. In just a short while I would probably get myself out of bed and actually wake up properly. We were meeting Ian and Claire at 10am and we had to find breakfast somewhere. Before then I needed time to get my belongings in order and jump into the shower.

Shower? Why was that word so resonant? There was something about it. Something decidedly relevant. I lay back for a few minutes, pondering it and also pondering the strange new noise outside before I finally managed to put the two together. I rolled out of bed and walked over to the window, gingerly peeling open one of the curtains and peeking through. "Bollocks," I cursed. Now I'm sure I said that out loud. Harves stirred, then grabbed his duvet a little tighter and fell back asleep. "I can't believe it's raining."

**DONG!**

Actually, it didn't come as much of a surprise to me. The weather forecast was not at all good. The nice bloke on CNN had suggested that it might be rather wet throughout central Europe for the next few days, in that short 30-second break that they took every hour to look at events outside America. BBC weather had said that Salzburg would be the recipient of three long days of rain, when I looked it up on the internet the previous day, after receiving Grandmaster's message. All in all it wasn't looking good. Normally when BBC weather says it's going to rain I break out the barbeque, but this time it actually seemed to be in agreement with reality for the first time in many years.

I straightened out my bed and wandered over in the direction of the shower. Harves was not stirring, so I jumped in first. This wasn't one of those en-suite places – there was one shower per floor and you just had to hope that there wasn't a party of ten wanting to use it before you. Fortunately we appeared to be the only ones around so I managed to squeeze in and quickly wash in the cramped surroundings, returning to our room a short while later to find Harves, rather like a deciduous tree as the warmth of spring descends, beginning to show signs of life, though admittedly not photosynthesis.

**DONG!**

A short while later, Harves had managed to fight his way into the shower, and he reappeared after an uncomfortably long absence once more wrapped in the smallest towel available. The distant giggling of sex-crazed females could just be discerned, peeking through their keyholes at my muscular partner.

We left the hotel around 9:20 am. It was indeed raining fairly hard so we dashed along the street to the nearby café and grabbed a table there ready for breakfast. The owner seemed to be of middle-eastern origin, and spoke English rather well so we enquired about the weather. "Well," he began, "it looks bad right now. Rain for the whole day." I let out a disheartened sigh.

"Tomorrow will be dry but overcast, and then Sunday will be hot and sunny again." Now this sounded more promising than BBC weather. I trusted this man far more because, and this isn't a particularly scientific justification, but he sort of seemed as if he knew what he was talking about. We needed to meet more people like this man - he could have come in useful many times.

We ate a perfectly satisfactory breakfast of rolls and jam, and then headed off in the direction of Ian and Claire's luxury hotel complex. As we neared the lobby, the ultra-modern façade rose in front of us in a towering, imposing manner. The front door was decorated with gold leaf, ornately folded into a rose-flower pattern and dotted with rubies. I pushed the door open, stepping into the cavernous, ornately stuccoed lobby, the roof rising well above us on huge, towering marble pillars. In the centre of the room a colossal glass chandelier hung down, filling the entire place with a fractured cascade of light.

We nodded politely at the receptionist, and made our way through towards the dining area, fighting our way past a pile of Michelin stars. The restaurant was plush and luxurious, decorated in a baroque fashion and containing a number of renaissance Italian masterworks placed carefully around the walls. Enormous, delicately traced windows opened up to the streets outside, allowing bright cascades of light into the room, illuminating the eighteenth century mahogany dining tables and the pure silver cutlery placed precisely on each.

Supermodel and I could barely speak. We peered round the room until our eyes rested on Ian and Claire, sitting at one table to our right, being waited on by a series of immaculately dressed waiters and waitresses, sipping a chilled glass of Bollinger R.D. and tucking into a plate piled high with rich *charcuterie*, caviar and fresh berries. Ian waved in our general direction and Harves and I cautiously approached, conscious of our increasing levels of facial hair and my untidy shorts and sandals. As we approached, I could just pick out a smartly dressed dwarf kneeling beside Ian's legs and polishing his bright, shiny black shoes.

We felt slightly too dirty to sit down on any of the Louis XIV walnut chairs. We discussed the day ahead with our superiors as they tucked into their absurdly opulent meals. As it was raining, our first task would be to obtain another umbrella. Supermodel, being the consummate secret agent, had managed to bring one of his own but, he being decidedly effeminate, it was rather petite. We had to obtain a suitable rain-shield, and Grandmaster needed a selection of drugs to get him through the day. Whatever ailment had begun to afflict him, it was having a most undesirable effect. I was beginning to wonder if he hadn't caught the very rare "Barry White's Disease," and if so, then perhaps he might want to follow shortly behind me singing a variety of love ballads so that I would suddenly become swamped with female attention.

Their breakfast finished, Grandmaster and Dominatrice followed us to the lobby where we discussed our plans. We had decided to book ahead for a concert at the castle the following night, so we did that through the receptionist at the hotel. Having planned our entertainment for the following few days, we wandered out into the rain. For the short walk over to the umbrella shop, the hotel kindly provided Ian and Claire with a pair of butlers equipped with designer umbrellas to protect them from the downpour. Harves had his tiny umbrella, so I just struggled on as best I could, getting steadily damper.

Five minutes later Grandmaster had managed to acquire a selection of throat sweets and a large umbrella for him and his consort, so I walked beside them in the pouring rain, chatting about the

day ahead and our plans for a series of entertainments indoors. On our way downhill towards the river, we noticed the passageway that Supermodel and I had spotted the previous night, disappearing mysteriously into the hills. We resolved to explore that further, though decided to wait until later on in the day. For now we just wanted to head towards the old part of town and the first stop in our great historical tour – the place where, on January 27th 1756, one of the world’s greatest ever composers was brought into the world.

We were going to visit the beginning of a legend; Mozarts Geburtshaus.

## 6.2 Mozart - Git? A Short Essay.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart may sound like a particularly embarrassing name, but it’s not half as bad as his real one. He was christened “Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart,” which is not only a bit of a mouthful, but also sounds like a bacterium. Quite what possessed his father Leopold to come up with such a tongue-twister will probably remain a mystery, but we can thank our lucky stars that young Johannes decided to ditch half of his name and be known as Wolfgang for the majority of his career.

When one visits the birthplace of one of the world’s greatest ever musical geniuses, one cannot help but marvel at how someone so young could achieve so very much. This was a child who could pick out tunes on the piano at the age of three, and by five he was writing simple keyboard minuets. In one of the many presentation cases on show, beautifully preserved, is a copy of young Wolfgang’s earliest publications; a series of sonatas for violin and piano that he composed at the age of seven. When I was seven I had barely started playing the violin and I could probably just about remember what the strings were called. I also thought Transformers were cool.

I wonder what Wolfgang missed out on as a child. He never really had time for a proper education as he was spending all his juvenile years running round the world at his father’s call, performing before Europe’s most powerful leaders, playing far too many instruments and composing entire operas by the age of eleven. At eleven I had just started secondary school and had developed a taste for Bonsai. I could pick out a few simple tunes on the piano and I *still* thought transformers were cool.

Mozart had a pretty hectic early life. He spent a great deal of time touring Europe and writing operas on commission. By the age of sixteen, he had written twenty-five symphonies and his first few quartets. He had also written a few more operas for good measure. At the age of sixteen I was just taking my GCSEs and I played second violin for the Staffordshire county youth orchestra. Mozart was playing before the high court of Bavaria and in the Palace at Schönbrunn, Vienna before central Europe’s most powerful political figures. I, however, *still* thought transformers were cool.

By the time Mozart was twenty, he had written his five famous violin concertos, none of which I can play even now. He had written several fine masses for the Salzburg court chapel, and yet another two operas. Oh, and a few more symphonies too. By this time I had visited Salzburg twice and I was becoming intensely irritated by the boy genius. I had sung at least one of his masses, but hadn’t yet got round to writing any of my own. And, incidentally, I was on the look out for a copy of “*Transformers the Movie*” because I considered it a cinematic masterpiece.

Mozart married at the tender age of 26, a feat which I still have a distant chance of beating, though I doubt it. In the following six years he went on to write a dozen piano concertos, become a freemason and create three of the greatest operas of all time. He continued writing up until his death, having been commissioned by an unknown stranger to write a *Requiem Mass*; a work which was to rank among Wolfgang’s greatest achievements, though much was left to be completed by his student Sussmayer who very rarely gets any credit whatsoever. Wolfgang, so testifies his sister-in-law, Sophie, was composing right up until his death, lying on his deathbed and dictating the *requiem* to his perplexed student. Mozart’s last opera, *The Magic Flute*, went on to great financial success, though young Wolfgang sadly did not live to see it, dying in poverty just after midnight on the 5th December 1791 aged just 35 years. One can only guess at what he would have written should he have remained alive for just another few months.

The boy genius had been working hard from cradle to grave, without a single moment to sit back and savour his own talents. He spent the majority of his life, except for a short period of prosperity in Salzburg, writing and performing just so that he could earn enough money to feed and clothe himself, his beloved wife Constanze and his numerous children, only two of whom survived to adulthood. Without lucrative recording deals and world wide album sales, even someone of Wolfgang’s incomparable genius

struggled to make ends meet.

There will likely never again be another Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart - he was a product of an age where music was everywhere. *Proper* music. He was the result of a system which allowed the rich and famous to spend vast quantities of their subjects' money on lavish concert halls just for their own artistic pleasure. He was the fruit of a world which still allowed people to dream about aesthetic pleasures without stressing over bills, tax return forms and insurance payments. He was a member through birth of a culture in which the rich had everything and the poor had nothing, so they were forced to dream because it was the only way they had of escaping destitution.

Mozart is much maligned, mainly by those who think that the larger an orchestra or the more melancholy the music, the better the composer. Artistic pretensions have a lot to answer for in classical music. For one thing they have helped to deflect the attentions of 'ordinary' people away from the classical world and towards other forms of entertainment - that very deflection is now coming back to haunt critics and musicians alike as dwindling audiences bear testament to the years of inaccessible modern neo-classicism in the public broadcasting services.

Sometimes people ask me why I detest modern music so much - why I can't stand to watch scores of talentless teenagers soaking up millions of pounds on their international careers by looking attractive and mentioning sex a lot. Well part of the reason is a young man in Vienna, Austria, dying of exhaustion at the age of 35 because he has spent his entire life creating the greatest music ever written; that unparalleled genius serving only to buy him enough food for his family to live on and a simple commoner's grave.

So, in conclusion, no I don't think Mozart was a complete git: I wouldn't have lived his life for all the money in the world.

## 6.3 The Residenz

After leaving Mozart's birthplace, we were forced by Supermodel (who else?) to visit some of the few churches that we had not yet seen. Salzburg seems to have rather a number of religious buildings, being covered with churches, monasteries and chapels. You can hardly walk ten yards down the street without tripping over an altar of some kind or other. Outside it was still raining gently, though it appeared to have calmed down slightly since the early morning. We spent as little time as possible in the open so that we could remain at least superficially dry.

By the time we had explored all the obviously visible churches in the greater Salzburg area, it was time for lunch, so we returned to the *café Tomaselli*, Mozart's favourite haunt, to grab some of their famous omelettes. These were rather tasty, but slightly expensive to compensate. I suppose that was only to be expected in such a touristic spot - I began to wonder just how Mozart himself was able to afford it in his time. It seemed that just about everyone was making money out of Mozart except for Mozart himself.

After finishing our omelettes, we managed to flag down a waitress with a large platter full of cakes and ate a splendid selection of those for dessert.

Outside, the rain was still pouring down, with the occasional break for a few minutes before the clouds opened again. Just opposite the café was the *Residenz* of the Prince Archbishops of Salzburg; an enormous 17th century palace built to house the town's ruling élite and to serve as a showcase for their incredible wealth. Given the opulence evident in this particular location, it seems rather strange to me that after the death of the beneficent Prince-Archbishop Sigismund, Count Schrattenbach, his successor Hieronymous, Count Colloredo, seemed not to be able to find enough cash to provide slightly more generously for the young Mozart. Pawning off one of the ornate chairs would probably serve to pay for a year's wages in 18th century Austria.

The Residenz had two levels opened to the public. The court rooms were the living quarters for the Prince Archbishops, and also the areas where they would entertain their equally well-to-do guests of an evening. Many of Mozart's works were probably first played in those rooms, and indeed there was a rehearsal underway for that night's performance of a slightly earlier 18th Century opera, presumably of the type that would have influenced young Wolfgang whilst he was crawling around his playpen as a child.

The following rooms saw all manner of exquisite decorations, from Rottmayr's large-scale ceiling paintings to a selection of fantastically ornate clocks, which were definitely my favourites. We couldn't help but notice that the state rooms were being closed behind us by an overzealous caretaker - apparently

we were the last guests in the place and it was shutting early for the concert rehearsals. In some sense this was slightly annoying because we felt that we were being pushed round slightly more rapidly than we would otherwise have liked, but looking on the bright side - if we had arrived five minutes later we might have been refused admittance.

After the state rooms, we climbed up to the second level and looked round the gallery. The first few rooms were showing a special exhibition all about tulips, and there were some of the most beautiful still life paintings I've seen for a long time. Incidentally, the German for 'still-life' (stilleben) is one of the few non-Welsh words that I know with four consecutive 'l's.

The remainder of the gallery was impressive but not particularly remarkable with the exception of two Rubens and a Rembrandt, carefully shielded from the light behind a large screen of opaque glass with just one tiny window in the front. It seems such a shame that these works of art are so fragile that they need to be protected in this way. Of course, these days we can't just phone up the guy and get another one.

So this leads me onto another interesting question. If I were to get a Rembrandt and copy it stroke for stroke, producing a duplicate that was exactly identical to the original in every way, what would it be worth? A fraction of the value of the original. Why is that? Well, to buy the original you're paying for the history. You're paying for the name of the guy whose brush made those fantastic colours come to life. But are you really? I mean, how can you appreciate the history of a painting? Is that what art is for? To view a painting as a piece of history might be interesting, even instructive, but essentially it is missing the true value of the art - that the image itself should have something to say on its own. So I say "leave the art collectors to pick up their original Rembrandts and Vermeers - I'll buy copies and be just as happy. What's more, my insurance bill will be much lower. And it won't matter if I spill blackcurrant juice on them."

We left the Residenz after a lengthy perusal of its artistic treasures, returning back to Supermodel's beloved church hunt. There was one small chapel over to one corner of the old part of town that we had not seen earlier and it looked rather intriguing from the outside. Supermodel, like a religious bloodhound, had already caught the scent of the incense, so we followed his nose and headed off to the East, eager to get this last visit over with as soon as possible.

This particular church was possibly the most tasteless yet, covered from top to bottom with gold and silver candlesticks, paintings, frescos, elaborate gilded carvings all along the nave. Claire was fuming with rage, and it was all we could do to stop her from tearing the place down with her bare hands. Supermodel was in his element again, eager to make the most of this particularly ornate religious experience. I found myself caught in no-man's land, unsure of exactly what I thought on this issue, but unable to make up my mind either way.

We had just come from the home of Salzburg's ruling elite, supposedly a pious religious few who were close to the hierarchy of the Catholic church. But if they were so religious, why did they have such a luxurious place in which to live? Didn't Jesus once say "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." There wasn't very much meek about owning a palace with 180 rooms. In fact, I seem to remember him also saying "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." So what was with the ornate gilded chandeliers? Why were we standing in a church practically carpeted with gold which dedicated to a man who said that riches were a bad thing and who spent his entire teaching life with little more than a cloak and a staff to his name? I was beginning to come round to Claire's point of view, but there were a great many arguments for the other side too. Most notably, the fact that nobody really *owned* all that gold - it didn't belong to the people who worshipped there, so in that sense it wasn't really *riches* at all.

Ian was still suffering from his failing health, so we decided to stop off for a mug of tea and discuss the evening ahead of us. The marionette performance was later that night, starting at 7:30pm, so we were going to wait until afterwards to eat dinner. However, in the meantime we felt that we ought at least to grab a snack shortly beforehand. Ian had decided to wander back to the hotel and rest for a while, so we agreed to meet up a little before 7pm outside the place where Harves and I were staying, that being the closer of the two hotels to the theatre.

In the meantime, we had sole access to Dominatrice, so took her for a romantic whistlestop tour for three around Salzburg's old quarter, exploring many fascinating places before returning over the river and ending up (thanks to Supermodel) at a chapel near Mozart's *Wohnhaus*. Supermodel and I decided that now would be an ideal time to go exploring up the secret alleyway that we had discovered the previous night which lead up the hill near our hotel. Dominatrice didn't fancy tackling that one in

six-inch high-heeled leather boots, so we left her to return to her beloved invalid and we two fit, healthy gents headed off up the rather steep incline into the unknown. There's no accounting for taste.

The path lead up at a steep angle towards the sharp left turn we had seen the previous night. On this corner was a set of sculptures detailing one of the stations of the cross and my theologically-trained partner was able to fill me in on the exact significance. The path headed up to the left for another fifty yards or so, passing another two such sets of sculptures and underneath an overhanging building which stretched across the entire path. It appeared to be a house, and just the other side was a small car though quite how it had managed to make its way that far up such a steep hill we couldn't begin to guess. That was a particularly strange place to put a house we both felt, though it was certainly a talking point. It would be an interesting one for the estate agent to explain away. **“An ideal location set back from the town's commercial district with a breathtaking view over the rooftops of Salzburg.”**

Once we had passed underneath and climbed a few more yards we could see right inside this man's living room, though there was no sign of him at that point. The proximity to the decidedly strongly-themed pathside decoration might also unsettle the less pious first-time buyers. **“Perfect for voyeurs or the religiously-inclined.”**

Further up the hill were several more sculptures, each detailing increasingly obscure religious events with which I was not particularly familiar. Towards the top of the path was a separate set of steps leading up to a large cross, surrounded by a small ornamental garden. To the right, the path forked off towards a series of observation posts over the city. Up ahead, past the fork, stood a large monastery complete with bell tower.

I glanced at my watch. We were meeting Ian and Claire in 50 minutes' time, and we needed to get some slightly more respectable clothes by that point. That left us with about 40 minutes to explore around the hillside and then ample time to return to our hotel and freshen up before going out for the night. There looked like plenty to do, so we climbed the last few feet to the junction and decided on a plan.

In a resounding break with tradition, I managed to persuade Supermodel to head off to the observation platform first before we investigated the chapel. As we turned the corner, a fantastic view opened up to our right hand side, looking out over the rooftops of Salzburg right the way across the historic quarter to the Castle in the distance. A number of tourists had also made the trek up to the summit and were standing around the railings, peering out over the river below. There was some kind of event taking place on the Salzach. Whatever it was, we suspected that perhaps it involved the very large speakers that had been pouring out loud film-score-esque music for the last hour or two at top volume.

The music was hard to describe. At first listen it was reasonably pleasant, but then it became apparent that there was only one theme and it just repeated on loop every thirty seconds. Rather like the score for the movie *Titanic*, and the several CDs of practically identical variations that it spawned which must have made James Horner an absolute fortune. But at what price? He'll wake up screaming that panpipe tune for the rest of his life.

The music appeared to be playing over the river towards several crowds of onlookers, all peering into the murky waters below. In order to get a better idea of what was going on, Supermodel and I walked round the edge of the outcrop to a second observation post slightly further along which commanded a perfect aerial view of the entire debacle. The river's waters had swollen quite significantly since the previous night with the banks now covered where previously the concrete sides were visible. All along the river bank were hundreds of tourists who had braved the drizzle to watch several teams of men in canoes paddle across the raging waters. We weren't entirely sure what this was all about, and watched it for several minutes, utterly perplexed.

Unable to make up our minds, we left the observation point and headed uphill again to the monastery. This was a reasonably modest-sized building painted pastel yellow, which allowed it to blend in at least a little to the hilltop foliage around. As we arrived a stream of people had just left the chapel and were moving through to a side door, escorted by a monk (or at least a very convincing impersonator) in a habit. Harves and I waited for a few moments as these tourists (or so we thought) wandered through and out of sight, and then we entered through the west door.

The chapel itself was not overly large, and possessed a locked metal fence of some sort which separated the congregation from the entrance hall at the back, presumably some way of preventing rabble like myself from taking part in any ceremony which required personal cleanliness. We looked around for a minute, and then frowned as the crowd of people we had seen before suddenly appeared

into the nave from a side door and began to take their seats patiently on the other side of the fence from us. So as not to appear too conspicuous, we took a seat to one side, and watched as one of the group stood up and introduced the congregation to the guy who had just appeared in the organ loft, and another selection of a dozen or so students either side of him.

As we sat down, a kindly member of the audience passed a programme through the bars to us, and suddenly we realised that we were about to take part in an organ recital by students from a nearby music school. It looked like this was part of some assessment for them, though it wasn't clear what rôle we were to play in the proceedings. Anyway, we sat down and listened as the first student muddled his way through a couple of Bach preludes on the pleasant, though not overly well-tuned organ.

It was getting late, so as soon as this student stood to accept his applause, Harves and I attempted to leave. Another lady was sitting confused at the back of the chapel, so I passed her the sheet that we had been given and then made my way to the exit. That mysterious organist will probably never know who the two anonymous supporters were whom he managed to gain that afternoon. I hope he passed – that would at least make me feel that my visit there had achieved some sort of good.

We returned to the base of the hill at a leisurely pace, having left a little over ten minutes to return home, wash briefly and put on some more suitable clothes for our evening's musical entertainment. We returned to the hotel, dumped off our unnecessary baggage, wrote up the day so far in my trusted diary, and changed into some trousers. I wasn't entirely sure what the protocol was in Salzburg, but I didn't want to risk missing the performance because I couldn't be bothered to dress properly. Grandmaster had gone to so much trouble to book us into this fascinating evening's entertainment that I would feel rather guilty if I had disappointed him.

**DONG!**

That would be the bells again. Must have been seven o'clock.

## 6.4 Nice Harem

Ian arrived, suitably drugged-up, with Claire firmly attached to his arm. They had both gone to far more trouble than either myself or Harves as they had not only decided to wear smart clothes, but were also significantly less hairy in the facial sense. We had a horrible feeling that the staff at the theatre might well be wondering why such a well-dressed upper-class couple had deemed it necessary to drag a pair of down-and-outs in off the streets for an evening of Mozart. Surely they would have been better advised just to feed us up and let us go.

As the opera was not due to finish until nearly ten o'clock, we first grabbed a selection of cakes from a nearby bakery and ate them as we walked over towards the theatre. None of us really knew what to expect – Grandmaster had been told about the Marionette theatre by an acquaintance back in London, but neither he nor Dominatrice had ever seen it in person. The poignant symbolism was not lost on us - one man (or woman) behind the scenes controlling the lives, the thoughts and the very actions of another; sending them where the puppeteer wants; making them do what the puppeteer desires; making them say what the puppeteer needs them to say. For the last five days this had been our lives; this had been Supermodel and me, running around at the mysterious behest of an unknown superior. Grandmaster was the puppeteer.

The theatre was a small affair, decorated in typical classical style with ornate stucco on the ceiling and a selection of old marionettes in boxes round the side, all of whom were dressed far more classily than I was. Just in case we sparked an incident, I let Ian pick up the tickets. He did so with a particularly well-honed German accent and more than a little bit of style and panache. Before long we were the proud recipients of a selection of entrance passes to a production of Mozart's *opera buffa* (comic opera) "Die Entführung aus dem Serail" (The abduction from the Seraglio).

This opera was written by Mozart in 1782 at the age of 26. It received its première just three weeks before he married his sweetheart Constanze Weber, after whom the lead Soprano (Konstanza) is named. It is full of romance and gaeity, bursting with joyous humour quite uncharacteristic of the court of the Prince Archbishop in which Mozart worked, which was one of the most formal in all of Europe. I think that perhaps the whole opera might have served a slightly more controversial purpose as an allegory for Mozart's own life at the time. He, the proud nobleman tenor (oxymoron) Belmonte wooing his sweetheart away from the clutches of the ambiguously evil Selim Pasha despite the protestations of

Pasha's henchman Osmin.

Was the sweetheart supposed to represent Constanze, or did it perhaps serve as a clever metaphor for Mozart's recent happiness, taken from him by the Prince Archbishop Count Colloredo and now snatched back on the eve of his wedding day? If so then it was one that his employer was unlikely to spot. Even more controversially, perhaps the mischievous overseer Osmin was supposed to represent Colloredo, and Pasha, Osmin's boss, first seen as a tyrant and then showing his capacity for forgiveness, might have referred to *his* boss; a higher power altogether.

I believe a quote from section 1.5 paragraph 7 is particularly apt at this point.

The performance of the Salzburg Marionette Theatre was nothing short of miraculous. The humanity and emotion they managed to breathe into those puppets was really something rather special. Normally I get worried in operas lest the performers forget their lines; here I knew that the music was all going to be perfect as it was recorded beforehand, so I could sit back and listen to an outstanding musical performance of an opera that was completely new to me, whilst constantly being amazed by the sheer skill and ability of the half-dozen or so puppeteers in the rafters above.

I'm very rarely left speechless, but the scenes in which the heroes Belmonte and Konstanza embrace with the most lifelike passion and intricate choreography took my breath away. The theatre was far from packed out, which was not by any means a reflection of the quality of the performance that we had seen. By the end of the show I truly believed that these intricate marionettes were real people, with real feelings and a real human zest for life. I'm glad I didn't see the puppets afterwards because I think that watching them lying lifelessly in a box would probably have been a rather difficult experience to accept.

I urge you if you take absolutely nothing else from this book, please take this one piece of advice: If you go to Salzburg, make sure you see an opera at the Marionette theatre. If you take a second piece of advice, make it this: whenever you have an opportunity to change your life for the better, don't sit back and try to maximise your chances of success, or worry about what might go wrong - just go for it: you never know what might happen. (You might end up on a wacky holiday, for example.) If you have time for a third piece of advice: Always wear sandals on holiday - that way you need never pack any socks.

Our evening's entertainment over we walked back in the direction of our hotels, keen to get a decent meal before the restaurants closed for the evening. We found a place just a little way along from the Church of St Sebastian (which appeared to have a mass going on) and sat down in a side alcove near the door, dining on a fantastic selection of food at a perfectly reasonable price. One thing I was going to miss on my return to England was the continental food - especially the German and Austrian menus. Another thing that I was going to miss was struggling along with a less-than-satisfactory command of the German language, trying to make myself understood. The waitress at this particular restaurant seemed to speak English rather well, but she occasionally replied in German when we attempted to speak to her in her native tongue. Of course, whenever we did this, we gave her free reign to speak as quickly as possible in reply.

I think that a lot of English-speaking people are put off from learning foreign languages because as soon as they try to make an effort, they are spoken back to at high speed and with far more complicated vocabulary than that to which they are accustomed. Most people just give up and realise that their best chance of getting a message across is to speak in English and hope that the language barrier is a bit lower in that direction. Of course, what we should be doing is distributing language textbooks around Europe to all the foreigners, and telling them how they should be speaking so that whenever English people try to ask them questions, the replies they receive are readily understood.

Despite the occasional language problem, our meal was extremely enjoyable, and it almost seemed a shame to leave at ten to midnight when Grandmaster had decided that a bit of sleep would put him in good stead for the following day. We hadn't really thought about the mission since the previous afternoon. Tomorrow was the biggie - we were going to assault the *Eagle's Nest*, and we were going to have to do so without mentioning ... *you-know-who*. Germans are still a little touchy about that whole subject, understandably, so every reference to ... *him* had to be well and truly encoded. The *you-who-which* party was a similar no-go-area, as was the *you-know-what* (especially the second one).

This was the culmination of the entire mission - the single day which would determine whether our week-long tour had been a success or a failure. We were going to have to use all the skills that we had learned over the week and make sure that we got them right. We had learned how to speak

German, how to navigate on public transport, how to order food and drink and how to communicate with the natives without arousing suspicion. We would need all of these skills if we wanted to survive the following 24 hours.

As we headed out of the restaurant, we spotted a group of people wandering down the street with headphones. “Probably on the Sound of Music Tour,” chirped Supermodel. He put on an effeminate voice and mimicked the guide from the *Residenz*. “This is stop 4,592: The Church of Saint Sebastian. Sebastian is the Patron Saint of archers. If you go inside the chances are they’ll be having mass. Directly opposite you can see a Hostel for Young Fuc...”

We got back to our room a little before midnight, having agreed to meet the following day at Grandmaster’s hotel around 10am. The skies were now clear, the rain having stopped some time during our experience in the marionette theatre. We were hoping that this would bode well for our imminent mission, which would require rather good weather if we were to take full advantage of the views from the summit.

We set the alarm for 8:30am again, and we had to be wide awake and ready to travel by 10. This meant that we were going to need a good, comfortable night’s sleep if we were going to have any chance whatsoever of being on top form the following day. After briefly writing up my mission log, I settled into bed, Supermodel already having done so a few minutes previously. I relaxed, laying my head on the pillow and closing my eyes. There was a background of noise outside from a few groups of late-night tourists, but I felt that I was going to be able to sleep right through them. After the early awakening that morning and a full day of sightseeing, I was tired enough to drift almost immediately into a gentle slumber, relaxed and comfortable. In fact, it was almost too good to be true and something inevitably had to go wrong. Three guesses as to what.

**DONG!**

Bugger.

# Chapter 7

## A View to Ogle

### 7.1 Stage One

I woke to another salvo of bell ringing which kept me on the verge of sleep for almost an hour and a half before I dragged myself out of bed at 8:40 am. Outside, the good people of St Sebastian were lining up for mass, and inside I was beginning to gather my thoughts ready for the day ahead. Supermodel was asleep, preparing his finely-tuned body in his own inimitable way.

Today was the day; the focus of the entire mission. We had scouted all round Western Europe, photographing all sorts of covert enemy installations. We had gathered information for Grandmaster from a number of different sources, all of which pointed to one place - one nexus of evil in the mountains outside Salzburg. We were going to storm the *Kehlsteinhaus* and put an end its menace once and for all. All round Europe a tempest was gathering, and its focus stood up in the hills above Berchtesgaden. Our enemies were many, but we were courageous – we had no fear. Except perhaps for Supermodel, who had only just done his nails.

The weather outside looked rather promising, just as the man in the breakfast café had told us the previous morning. It was partly overcast, but here and there a few rays of sun poked through. Most importantly, it was dry. I breathed a relieved sigh, glad that at least the weather had worked in our favour. Leaving my fellow secret agent to sleep for another few minutes, I wandered out towards the bathroom, showered and returned, packing together my belongings in a neat pile beside my bed. Harves was stirring, so I told him there was a basilica in the shower and he jumped to his feet, sprinting in the direction of the bathroom.

Half an hour later we were both prepared to set out on our mission, hardly sure whether we would return alive to see our beloved homeland again. I left a note saying that if I were to die then all my earthly belongings should be taken and sold, with the money passed on to my faithful partner in espionage who had been with me through all the hard times; my friend through thick and thin to whom I owed more than I could ever repay. I signed it ‘Harves’.

We ate breakfast at a new place just opposite Ian and Claire’s hotel. This was a small bakery with a café to one side staffed by a particularly overworked young girl who looked like she’d been woken up by the holy people of St. Sebastian at an unholy hour too. This was a most impressive breakfast, with a sizable bowl of bread, jam, cheese and ham together with a pot of coffee, all for a very reasonable price. Our numerous morning preparations had left us running slightly late, so it was now slightly after ten o’clock and the minute hand was creeping ever onwards. We sat next to the window so that we could get a good view of our friends as they emerged from their luxurious accommodation.

It was around 10:15 when we finally paid up and left. I had spotted Grandmaster leaving the hotel a while earlier so I dashed across the street to tell him that we were just finishing off and we would be with him shortly. Grandmaster looked at his watch disapprovingly, unsure of how any of his top agents could possibly be so carefree with the timing on such an important mission. He also didn’t seem to be particularly impressed by my dress-code, considering it thoroughly inappropriate for the task in hand.

“Are you wearing *those* up to the Eagle’s Nest?”

“Yes sir, is that a problem?”

“Well, I would consider T-shirt and shorts slightly inappropriate given the rather gruelling nature of

the operation we are about to undertake.”

“I tried to buy some camouflage gear,” I began, by means of an explanation.

“What happened?”

“I couldn’t find any.”

Grandmaster frowned. Well *I* thought it was funny.

By the time Supermodel and I had finished, and we had met up again with our superiors, it was almost 10:25 and we decided to head straight for the bus station at top speed in order to catch the next service in the direction of Berchtesgaden. We had no idea how often these services ran, and for all we knew there might only have been two per day. If we had missed the morning service then the mission would be in great danger of cancellation. Either that or we would have had to take the more lengthy train journey instead which would have wasted us at least an hour each way.

Considering the great importance of our mission, we were being rather haphazard about the whole affair. We had also neglected to discover which bus stop we were supposed to use, opting for the most likely target which was on the west side of the central business district, a few minutes’ walk through the town centre away from our hotel.

This was a part of town that we hadn’t yet visited, and just as expected it wasn’t long before we got well and truly lost, chasing around back streets for a bus station which didn’t appear to exist. At least, not where the map said it did. We weren’t even sure if this was the right part of town, so the chances of us finding a bus that just happened to be going to an obscure little German village just over the border were fairly slim. Nonetheless, we spent at least ten minutes scouring the area for some kind of ticket kiosk or information point from which we could obtain the required directions.

Thanks to the lack of suitable authority figures we were reduced to exploring the streets, walking from each bus-stop to the next just hoping that we would find one going in the right direction. (Bus that is, not bus stop. I don’t think *they* move.) It was by a stroke of luck that I managed to spot one solitary sign which mentioned our desired destination about half way down. I checked up towards the timetable, crossing my fingers. Sure enough, there was a bus every hour or so, and it was about thirty minutes until the next one at 11:19. This gave us time to try to find out how to buy a ticket. It also gave Harves a chance to dash into the church he had just spotted over the other side of the road.

We decided that the best plan, given our slightly limited mission time, was to ask a passer by how the bus system in Salzburg actually worked. The task inevitably fell to Grandmaster, whose command of the German language ranked far more highly than any of us mere underlings. We decided that the kind of person who was most likely to know the answer was the kind who was already sitting down in a bus stop and looked like a native. We found a suitable victim, a middle-aged lady with frizzy blonde hair who looked like one of the ‘Golden Girls’ after a detox treatment. Grandmaster started up the conversation and I wandered over to help. Between us we managed to ascertain that we could buy a ticket actually on the bus, and that there wasn’t a ticket office anyway, so that was our only option.

Armed with a certain new-found confidence, we returned to the bus stop, ready to tackle the world of Austrian travel. First, of course, we left Harves to shoot off on his ecclesiastical diversion while the more relaxed amongst us sauntered leisurely over towards the square in front of the church, stopping to admire on our way a “Sound of Music” cow standing by the side of the pavement.

Now this was a truly marvellous spectacle. The “Sound of Music Cow” was one of the most hideous pieces of advertising gimmickery that I have ever seen. It was really milking an attraction for all it was worth, clearly beefing up the publicity for the tourist season. I considered taking the bull by the horns and putting a stop to this bovine nonsense, but I had udder things to do. Besides, my calves were hurting from all that walking, and I think I had managed to graze my ankle. ENOUGH!!

It would have made such a great steal. Could you imagine carrying a six-foot long cow through the streets of Salzburg screaming “The hills are alive with the sound of moooooo-sic!”? I’m not sure if we would have been able to get the cow through the public transport system without arousing any suspicions, but the sheer brilliance of leaving such a work of art on the top of the white peaks above Obersalzberg were so enormously alluring that I had to be physically restrained to stop me from trying.

After the cow, we headed after Supermodel into the church. This *had* to be the last one in this part of town - we’d seen so many of the things that I could barely believe that there was an atheist in the whole of western Austria. This church was another catholic place, and Claire was already firing up her temper preparing to be annoyed. Fortunately she was actually pleasantly surprised by the simplistic décor inside and, after a little gentle coaxing, put the grenades back in her pocket without even priming

them. Score one for the high church.

It was ten past eleven and we didn't want to risk missing the bus, so we headed out of the church and back over to the bus stop, standing by the side of the road and waiting for the required number to appear from round the corner. It's always difficult to know what the protocol is in a foreign country. Sometimes the bus will stop whenever it sees potential passengers; sometimes you actually have to actively flag it down. In many places in South America, buses will only stop when held at gunpoint and even then it had better be a damn big gun.

So still unsure of the protocol, I waited until our chosen transport arrived, and stuck my hand right out into the road, narrowly avoiding a volkswagen which swerved to avoid me and careered dangerously close to the "Sound of Music" cow, the driver swearing and tooting the horn loudly. The bus slowed down, turned in towards the lay-by and pulled up alongside us, swinging the doors open in front of me. As I was first I took it upon myself to do the ticket-purchasing, so approached the driver, asked for four returns to Berchtesgaden and then handed over the princely sum of 28 Euros, overwhelmed that not only had the driver understood my primitive attempts at communication, but had actually appeared to do so without too much physical pain.

The bus was surprisingly luxurious, and almost entirely empty, with the four of us being practically the only passengers for the few miles through Salzburg and out towards the border. The alps were beginning to close in on every side and we kept our eyes fixed to the windows as a series of dramatic peaks came into view, and then slid behind even more dramatic peaks slightly closer by. Mountain ranges are great – they're amongst my favourite places on Earth. I don't think there are any feelings more impressive, more breathtaking or more inspirational than sitting on top of a mountain surveying the Earth beneath you, spreading out like a patchwork quilt dotted with tiny Lilliputian villages and winding alpine roads.

In my experience, only two places come close. They are; diving coral reefs in the Caribbean in warm, crystal clear waters teeming with colourful fish and a variety of exotic sea creatures; and sitting on top of a hill, especially one with a fort, in somewhere like Exmoor, Oxfordshire or Northumbria, overlooking a ripe late-summer panorama with a brisk evening breeze blowing through the valleys and a dotted landscape of rich green copses pierced by stone spires and plumes of smoke, spiralling into a soft, blue sky. Especially when accompanied by an attractive young lady and a large bottle of Chardonnay.

So I guess these three represent the three universal goals of any enlightened soul – firstly the aspirations of dramatic greatness that we all entertain from time to time; secondly the joy of learning and discovery that motivates us to *achieve* rather than to waste our lives in ignorance; and finally the pleasure of familiarity, comfort, accomplishment and relaxation towards which we all strive in some way or another.

The Alps are magnificent all year round and in the summer they are perhaps at their most dramatic as they show such a fantastic contrast. At their feet the land is bathed in warm summer sun, the rolling foothills and rocky crags casting dramatic shadows across the lower slopes. Further up the greenery begins to die out and is overtaken by a more barren landscape of scree slopes, jagged cliffs and low-lying vegetation. Finally, towards the summit, the frosty, snow-capped peak which reminds us of winter and shows what an enormous range of temperatures and climates these mountains endure, even in the space of a few miles from base to peak. Normally winter seems so far away from the heat of summer, but mountains remind us that it's actually right on our doorstep, just a mind's throw away.

The most amazing thing about the alps is that a few hundred million years ago they didn't exist. They were formed as the African and Eurasian tectonic plates slowly smashed into each other over the course of millions of years, crumpling up behind as the great forces involved folded the very rock into the mountain ranges we see today. This is another one of those arguments between knowledge and curiosity. Which is better - to marvel in childlike curiosity about the forces of nature, always wondering what it is, guessing but never actually seeking to discover; or alternatively, finding out how things work, what causes them and why, and then marvelling at the process itself and the magnificent wonders that it creates. Mountain ranges are one such subject. Many people, especially those of the far east, used to worship mountains, seeing them as sleeping dragons and volcanos as restless spirits to be placated and revered. That strikes me as rather good fun, even though I know it to be incorrect.

Some people would say that living in ignorance is never a good thing; that by learning how mountains are formed you are unquestionably better off; that we have no place in this world for people who refuse to learn about or accept reality. Those people become scientists and mathematicians. Other people would say that we are much better off just sitting back and marvelling at such things because then we

are using our capacity for awe and wonder – that desire to dream which motivates us to enjoy life for its own sake without requiring to deconstruct things into their component parts, demystifying the world at every opportunity. Those people become artists, poets and musicians.

The thing is that I find myself right in the middle of this argument, which is annoying because there really is no middle ground. Science fascinates me – I love knowing how the Universe works, or at least pretending to. However, I often look back in much sadness at the times, now lost, when I would dream of little green men on the moon, aliens in my friend's fields late at night and lost civilisations under the Earth. I know that ignorance is a bad thing, but I can't help feeling that if Jules Verne had been well versed in modern geology and physics then the world would have been robbed of a number of great literary works.

All this day dreaming managed to pass the forty minutes or so on the way to Berchtesgaden. We arrived at the bus stop a little after midday, quickly heading over to the kiosk where we investigated the cost of a ticket right up to the summit, or at least as near as humanly possible. For the bargain price of 15 Euros each we managed to get ourselves complete tickets which included the return bus journey up the side of the perilous mountain, plus the journey up on *you-know-who's* secret lift, and entrance to the house at the summit.

It was a good deal, and the ticket salesman told us that our bus was preparing to depart from the other side of the bus depot. There was something about him - everything he said, though all in German, was really easy to understand. He was one of those people who knew how hard it was for foreigners to speak German, knew which bits were tough and also had a good, clear speaking voice. Ian and I both remarked on it afterwards – it was one of the first times since I had arrived in Austria that I hadn't needed anything repeated – we both understood perfectly first time. Someone must have given him a copy of the textbook.

So we strolled across the bus station towards the vehicle that was to take us the first stage up towards the summit. This was it - the point of no return. The mission was about to begin and we knew that it was going to be one of the most amazing days of our lives. We jumped on board, finding four seats close together and looking round at each other, anxious but excited.

The doors slowly closed behind us and our new bus began to pull away from the station at Berchtesgaden towards the steep mountain road. I glanced over towards Grandmaster and smiled. Finally the mission was underway.

## 7.2 Infiltration

The mountain road from Berchtesgaden up into the lofty peaks was a lot steeper than we had expected. Our rusty old bus lurched uncomfortably through the wooded mountain trail, swerving to avoid potholes, skidding on the gravel-strewn road and veering perilously close to the edge on a number of heart-stopping occasions. We found ourselves shuffling nervously in the back, uneasily glancing over our shoulders as the precipice edged closer every few moments and we once again held our stomachs high in our chests. In this sort of situation it was most difficult to adhere to the task at hand and to prepare our equipment for the upcoming assault.

I had donned my survival gear, opting for the controversial semi-covered uniform – rough, combat trousers cut off at the knee, leaving my calves open to the elements on the mountain top. I found that this offered a certain ease of movement and freedom which might just give me the edge if it came to clifftop struggles. Grandmaster had opted for the more traditional casual wear, sporting tough designer trousers and a fine all-weather combat shirt. Supermodel was putting the finishing touches to his primrose evening gown with delicate satin tracery. He had managed to convince himself that it nicely complimented his .30 air-cooled Browning machine gun. I had my Walther PPK, whilst Grandmaster preferred the German military P-38. Dominatrice had a harsh-looking black leather whip and was busy kitting up in matching uniform.

Together we were a force to be reckoned with, a group of heroes the like of which had never before been seen on German soil. We were like a kind of militant wing of the Village People. We were armed to the teeth (or thighs in Dominatrice's case) and ready to take our fight to the highest battleground in Europe. Supermodel was struggling with his platform shoes, and cursed loudly as a particularly deep pothole caused him to ladder his tights.

Through the trees to our right hand side, we caught the occasional glimpse of the valley as it opened

up beneath us. The rocky scree slopes above Berchtesgaden rose up beside us and the sun above beat down on our nimble transport, disappearing for a few moments between the trees and then reappearing the other side yet brighter still. Just a few miles up this narrow road lay Obersalzberg, our last outpost before the summit and the place where we hoped to commission another suitable transport for the last few miles up to the top. We were also looking for a few supplies, our finely tuned bodies needing sustenance before we attempted such a dangerous and strenuous mission.

Our transport was a nervous place. We sat towards the back, nervously shifting around as the other passengers gave us distinctive stares. Especially towards Supermodel, whose outrageously frilly dress was sufficiently low-cut to allow a few straggly chest hairs to poke through uninvited. I couldn't help asking myself why *he* had to be Mr Pink. There's always one but, from what I've heard, it's rarely quite so voluntary.

Obersalzberg arrived ahead of us fifteen minutes after leaving base camp. A small bus station stood next to a wooden cabin which housed the only place to eat at this altitude in the alps outside *Piz Gloria*, and we all know what happened to *that*. We stepped cautiously off the bus, taking care to collect all of our belongings together before we left. I strapped a line of grenades to my belt, then tucked them in under my T-shirt. I didn't want to draw attention to myself. Supermodel shuffled over, awkwardly hobbling along in his sequined platforms and struggling with a pair of Dame Edna glasses shaped like stars and emblazoned with bright Union Jack stripes. We were bound to fit right in.

We wandered over towards the bar area, conscious that a number of eyes were staring in our direction. I went first, flanked by Dominatrice who was holding her whip nervously. I pushed open the heavy pine doors, and strode in. As we stepped out of the cold mountain air and into the warm restaurant area, the background hum of conversation suddenly died, and the bar became almost silent except for the creaking of leather, the clapping of Supermodel's shoes and, somewhere in the background, the sound of Mary Schneider yodelling Ketèlbey's immortal "In a Monastery Garden."

Dominatrice walked over to the bar and lifted her whip to her side, folding it gently in her hands before speaking to the bartender in a smooth, seductive voice, lightly tinged with a persuasive German accent. "Well hello there. We're looking for a place to sit down and drink some hot cocoa." She pouted her lips and fluttered her eyelids towards the trembling gentleman. "Do you think you could help us?" She eyed him up and down, winking suggestively as he tried to control his pulse rate.

The bartender stood perfectly silent, his heart visibly pounding inside his chest and his knees beginning to shake violently beneath the counter. He grabbed the cash register to steady himself, accidentally punching up a bill for seven million euros in the process. As he gasped for breath, he managed to pull one hand away from his support for long enough to point in the direction of the nearest free table before collapsing to the floor in a quivering mess.

Dominatrice slid away from the bar and floated over towards the vacant table. Grandmaster followed her and I dragged Supermodel along in their general direction. We sat down carefully on the hard, wooden seats, Supermodel ever determined to protect his delicate posterior. Gradually the distant yodelling was once more masked by the increasing hum of a couple of dozen German tourists discussing the state of European politics over many large mugs of *Weissbier*.

Shortly afterwards our cocoa arrived, delivered by a sweet young German girl who was mostly immune to Dominatrice's charms. I tried a seductive wink, but I'm not sure that it worked quite as intended as she nearly spilled cocoa on Supermodel's dress. That would have made him very angry, and one thing you don't want to do to an obsessive transvestite with a .30 air-cooled machine gun was to make him angry. That could have lead to a lot of bloodshed very quickly.

We finished off our cocoa, eager to drink up in time to catch the next bus in the direction of the summit. A troop carrier was leaving in just ten minutes and we were determined to be on it, knowing that this might be our only chance to make it to the *Kehlsteinhaus* by lunchtime. We were about to signal in the direction of the waitress and shout *Zahlen bitte* when the door to the bar swung open and all of a sudden everything went quiet again. Mary Schneider had moved on to the "William Tell Overture," which was totally inappropriate for the mood. Three gentlemen walked in, dressed neatly in SS uniforms, walking swiftly to the bar. The bartender began to quiver slightly this time, though noticeably less than he had done with Dominatrice. The head of the three soldiers turned to address the bar, speaking to us in English, but with a suspicious German accent. I couldn't help but notice that he had a scar down the left side of his face and had stolen Patrick Moore's monocle.

"Ve have reason to believe zat zere are Breeteesh special forces in zis area."

The bar went even more silent than silent. Mary Schneider moved into a more sombre mood, turning her prodigious vocal talents to the second movement of Beethoven's "Eroica" symphony.

The soldier began to wander in our general direction, "Have any of you people seen zese Englischer spies?" He stared directly towards us. I held a mug of cocoa up towards my mouth as Supermodel struggled to conceal his heavy weaponry. The soldier approached us.

"Because, if you have seen zese people zen ve would like to know." He smiled in Supermodel's direction. "Very much."

We froze to the spot, holding our breath and fingering the triggers on our pistols. I was preparing to fight my way out, hoping that my friends would back me up. Grandmaster held my arm back and shook his head. The soldier turned and wandered back to the bar, gathering his companions and turning towards the barman. "I presume zat you have not seen zese people?"

Dominatrice glanced in his direction and winked towards him. The barman collapsed behind the counter. Peering over the top, the head SS soldier stared down at the quivering wreck and yelled down to him "Zere will be very severe konsek...consequici...conseckieneces if zis is the case."

He turned and walked away, the four of us all staring back away from them towards an elk's head on the wall. The soldiers walked towards the door, turning for one last time to salute to the assembled public. "Hail ...*you-know-who*!" called out the leader. The patrons replied accordingly. The soldiers turned back and walked out into the street. We let out a sigh of relief.

Grandmaster sighed. "That was too close. We need to set off now up towards the *Kehlsteinhaus*. Come with me."

We walked out back towards the entrance. Dominatrice handed a twenty Euro note over the counter, dropping it down in the direction of the barman. "Thanks," she called out, "keep the change."

Outside it was spitting with rain slightly, the clouds having covered the skies and hidden the sun temporarily from our view. The SS soldiers were gathering in one area of the main square, away from the bus station. By the side of the main passenger area stood an old armoured troop carrier, revving its engines and ready to head off up the steep slope to the summit. We ran over and jumped on board, once again deflecting the stares of a number of rather suspicious German soldiers, lined up along the sides of the vehicle carrying K98K Mauser rifles by their sides and dressed in military grey. One by one we nodded to them, smiling uncomfortably and fighting our way to the back of the bus where we managed to squeeze into the four remaining seats.

This was going to be an uncomfortable journey, not helped by the imminent prospect of a bloodbath as soon as we reached the summit. We were ready to go, and the driver had just taken his foot off the brake when there was a call from outside the bus in a dodgy German accent. "Vait for us." The three SS soldiers ran across the courtyard and towards the bus, jumping on and standing near the front. Damn – that was not what we needed. We had to avoid getting spotted.

The SS officers scanned the bus, and then seemingly satisfied, sat down near the front, pushing aside a number of lesser soldiers to gain some space. The leader stood up at the front, clutching a microphone ready to tell us all about our enemy's mission. That was a stroke of luck.

We set off once more up the steep slope towards the summit. The track was even more rough in this section and we found ourselves thrown around several times as we veered up the rough mountain track. The SS soldier began to speak. "Ve are now going towards ze summit where ve vill be able to see ze Kehlsteinhaus."

I heard one of the German soldiers muttering to his friend, "Ze *what*?"

"He means ze Eagle's Nest."

"Oh, right."

The SS guy continued. "Now, zees is ze place vich vas given to Herr...*you-know-who* as a present on his fiftieth birthday from ze ...*you-know-which* party. It stands at a height of 1834 metres above sea level, and from ze top you can see ze entire region as far as ze town of Salzburg to ze NorthEast and ze Scharitzkehl Valley and *Königssee*, (vich means 'King's Sea') lake to ze NorthVest."

We were taking in the details. It was all rather fascinating. Supermodel was peering out of the window, admiring the most astounding views from what must have been Europe's most impressive alpine road.

The SS soldier continued to tell us all about the house, the route and the surrounding area. He then

proceeded to detail all major troop movements in and around the summit for the following 24 hours, a fact that Grandmaster was all too pleased to write down. It seemed like our mission was, so far at least, going according to plan.

We reached the summit twenty minutes later. The transporter stopped in a large concrete car park just 124 metres short of the summit. As we were getting off, one of the soldiers who had been sitting in front of us wished us good luck for our mission, so we shook hands and exchanged a few non-fatal pleasantries before stepping out onto the tarmac in the cold, harsh mountain air.

Grandmaster felt the cold more than any of the rest of us. He had dressed totally inappropriately, failing to bring a jacket for the top as he claimed that he “didn’t realise it would be so cold.” I pointed across to the snow on neighbouring peaks at approximately the same altitude, but I don’t think he was particularly impressed. In order to survive the mission, he headed over to the nearest supply shop, and ordered an army fleece, emblazoned with a large black Eagle, the *you-know-which* party cross and the motto “Ze Kehlsteinhaus Patrol - Defending *You-Know-Who* From Ze Britischer Scum.” With this cunning disguise I began to wonder if we might be able to sneak in unnoticed. After all, the soldiers had been remarkably friendly and it seemed a terrible waste to have to blow them all to tiny little pieces now that we were getting on so well.

Supermodel was running around the car park with his machine gun, pretending to kill people with it. He looked like he was extremely eager to give it a try, so I smiled gently to him, pointed at my watch and held up five fingers, mouthing the words “Five minutes” to him. Hopefully that would placate him for a while. Dominatrice was warming up her whip, taking out a few pigeons who had decided to stray too close to the car park wall, stunning them with one strike, and then slicing them cleanly in half with a second. She was not a woman to mess with. As Grandmaster returned from the army stores, I waved goodbye to a few friendly soldiers who were just heading off into the tunnel which lead to the lift up into the *Kehlsteinhaus*. What nice people.

We met at the edge of the platform, gazing over a breathtaking view to the North. Before us the valleys opened out into a rolling panorama of greens and browns, dotted with tiny villages and sapphire-blue lakes, together with a number of winding streams and rivers which all flowed off towards the plains of the North. Grandmaster turned round to watch as the last of the soldiers entered the tunnel and, checking that there was nobody left to oppose us, gave the order to spring into action.

We ran towards the tunnel mouth, peering round the edge as the soldiers marched into the distance, singing joyfully and discussing football. The acoustic of the tunnel amplified their voices, reverberating with their every step. Outside all was calm, so we sat and waited as the soldiers finally turned the corner at the end and disappeared into the small room from which the lift to the summit was due to leave. I drew my Walther PPK, flicked the safety, held it firmly in my hand and advanced. Grandmaster followed me, soon overtaking as we edged along the rock-lined corridor, the tunnel lights flickering eerily as we proceeded. In the distance we could just hear the sound of lift doors closing and the laughter of the soldiers ahead disappearing as the heavy brass elevator began to make its way upwards.

Now that we were on our own again, Grandmaster and I decided that it would be an ideal opportunity to burst into song. Brave heroes often burst into song shortly before committing mass murder, see for example the fine figure of Radames in Verdi’s “*Aida*”, or Ferrando and Guglielmo, proud warriors in Mozart’s “*Così fan Tutte*.” Admittedly they didn’t *really* go to war, but they at least pretended to, which wasn’t too far from our current predicament.

We decided to perform a rousing rendition of Beethoven’s great Choral Symphony, a piece which made at least two of us slightly reminiscent of a past holiday in France. We sang about how nice it would be if all men could become brothers and stop killing each other. Supermodel sharpened his combat knife, then replaced it in his garter. After the Beethoven, we launched into the “*Tuba mirum*” from Mozart’s requiem, a piece which we found far more suitable for the occasion.

The trumpet mighty blast shall send,  
through all the regions of the dead,  
to summon all before the throne.

That was much more like it. Screw Coppola and his “Ride of the Valkyries” scene from *Apocalypse Now*, this was a *real* battle song. The music resounded throughout the entire tunnel, echoing even after we had finished for at least five seconds. We walked on through the rocky passageway, and before too

long arrived at the room at the end, turning the corner then stopping in our path. There before us was an elderly German officer in full uniform, flanked by two young soldiers, wielding semi-automatic weapons. "To the floor!" I yelled as Grandmaster fell back behind the door, and Dominatrice and Supermodel took a step back for cover. I rolled across the doorway as the soldiers opened fire, a hail of bullets fizzling past my head, and bouncing around the tunnel beyond. I fired off two shots from my trusty firearm, felling one of the soldiers before I managed to get to some cover.

The salvo of machine gun fire continued for a few seconds, and then it stopped. I could hear two men talking in broken English, "Zese must be ze Britischer soldiers. Ve must kill zem and Herr... erm... unser... Der *you-know-what* will be pleased."

I hid behind a marble pillar, breathing heavily. Several pints of adrenalin were surging through my body and I could feel my legs trembling. This was a *real* battle scenario. I could see by the look in his eyes that Supermodel had the situation covered. He was fumbling for a hand grenade from his suspenders, pulling one out and preparing to throw it. I called out "No!" in his direction. We couldn't risk damaging the lift. That was our only way in.

I looked at Grandmaster, smiled, nodded and lifted up my firearm. I counted down from three to one on my hands, and then we dived into the entrance way, letting loose another barrage of lead. We were met with return fire, and then the room fell silent. I dived to the floor, and Grandmaster collapsed beside me, clutching his shoulder. One of the stray bullets had struck him and lodged itself in his flesh. Blood was pouring out onto his clothing and he was clearly in some pain. I applied some pressure to stop the bleeding and began to prepare an emergency dressing. Supermodel peered round the corner, then walked out, examining the scene. All the guards lay dead. He approached each of them and poked them with the end of his gun. They lay still. He walked over and examined the lift, trying to work out how the controls should be operated.

At that moment there was a scream as Dominatrice reached for her trusty whip. The officer had not quite been killed and was making a grab for his gun. Dominatrice cracked her whip and knocked the weapon out of the officer's hands, cracking it a second time and wrapping the leather cord round her opponent's neck. After a brief struggle, the officer finally breathed his last, and Dominatrice released her grip. "Good job Dom," called out Grandmaster, "well spotted!" Supermodel thanked her, then returned to where I was tending to Grandmaster, easing the flow of blood around the wound.

Supermodel pushed me out of the way, rolling up his frilly sleeves and beginning to rub his hands together furiously. "I saw this on TV," he stated, confidentially, "it can cure anything."

"Supermodel, that was Karate Kid," I replied, disappointedly. "You're not Mr Miyagi."

"Aha!" he proudly continued, "but you forget my training. I have studied under the great Shaolin masters."

"Bollocks have you."

"Have faith my friend. This will work, trust me."

Supermodel had finished rubbing his hands together and they were glowing red hot. It looked painful, but I didn't want to interpose, so I sat back as he lowered his hands towards Grandmaster's shoulder and began to apply some pressure. Grandmaster flinched and grimaced, trying to ignore the pain as Supermodel pulled out the offending bullet and sealed the wound behind. Right before my eyes, the skin healed up over the top of Grandmaster's shoulder, and the flow of blood ceased. After another minute, the scar had all but vanished, and the shoulder was clean. Two minutes after that, Supermodel had managed to press and dry-clean Grandmaster's expensive shirt, after patching up the bullet hole and stitching in an extra kevlar layer to prevent any further mishaps. He stepped back and gave a wide, punchable grin.

"Told you so."

I shook my head. "Sometimes Harves you can be a complete arse."

We returned to our feet, gathered our weapons and approached the elevator, pressing the only button, marked "Up" and then waiting for the doors to open, our weapons primed on the entrance. As we waited I glanced over towards the strangled German officer. I frowned – there was something familiar about that face, but I couldn't quite place it.

Slowly, the brass cage of the elevator came into view, and the frosted glass doors opened up, revealing a large, luxuriously decorated lift cabin with a lever at one side. This sophisticated control panel appeared to have two direction arrows on it, pointing up and down. Sitting on a chair beside this was a small spotty fifteen year old child dressed in full army uniform. Supermodel raised his gun, and I urged

him to lower it.

“Not now, my friend. There has already been too much bloodshed.”

Supermodel reluctantly agreed. The boy stopped quaking and turned to us with a puzzled expression.

“So then Gentlemen,” he began, “which floor?”

“How many are there?” I asked.

“Two,” came the reply.

“And we’re on one of them?” enquired Grandmaster.

“That’s right.”

“So there really isn’t much of a choice, is there?” added Dominatrice.

“Sorry, no. But I have to ask. I’m new to the job you see.”

“Right.” I looked at the lift operator. “Work experience is it?”

“Yeah.”

“What a bitch. They always give you the worst jobs, huh?”

“Tell me about it.”

I sympathised with the young lad. He had signed up expecting to be working in McDonalds but instead he ends up operating the lift in the mountaintop retreat of the most evil dictatorship Europe has ever known. Doesn’t strike me as particularly fair.

“Going up,” called our driver. “The journey will last approximately thirty seconds. Please hold on to something firm.” I grabbed Supermodel’s biceps. The doors shut in front of us and the lift began its slow journey upwards into the summit and the inevitable conflict above. It was then that I suddenly remembered where I had seen that German officer before – he was the guy from the Eurostar six days ago. The one who had moved from his seat after I sat down. I began to think through all the suspicious people I had met over the last few days, wondering who was going to turn up. This would certainly be an interesting conclusion to our mission.

## 7.3 Showdown

The lift trundled upwards deceptively slowly. The journey, so we were told by our uncomfortably nervous guide, was 124 metres, the lift having been constructed in 1938 by Dr. Alfred Reinhardt and a crew of nearly 800 men, following an original design by Professor Roderich Fick. We drummed our fingers on the brass fittings and Supermodel nervously played with the barrel of his twenty kilo assault rifle. Our guide continued with his programmed speech, finally arriving at the summit, wishing us a good day, and pressing the button for the door release.

We jumped to the side, hiding behind the doors as they opened. Grandmaster frowned at the kid, not particularly impressed by the way he had just gone ahead and blown our cover like that. Supermodel hoisted up the machine gun into firing position, and we stepped out into the hall, our suspicions immediately aroused by the fact that it was so particularly empty. Not a single guard. We could just hear the sound of cheering coming from round the corner, through a pair of solid oak doors with panes of frosted glass obscuring our view into the heart of the building. Grandmaster beckoned me on. “Let’s come back there later. Secure the perimeter first.” It was a wise choice.

I edged down the corridor, leading the way with my trusty pistol. Dominatrice and Grandmaster checked the luxurious toilets on the way (individually) while Supermodel and I stood guard outside. On their return we moved through towards the troops’ quarters where Dominatrice dispatched another pigeon with a skillful crack of her whip. Yet another empty room. We began to make our way outside towards the patio, edging out into the sunshine and what must rank amongst the most beautiful views in the world. Right before us was a voluptuous female figure dressed entirely in lycra, carrying a wooden staff and a net and beckoning in my general direction. The mountains weren’t bad either.

Once more I stepped forward, racking my brains for where I had seen this beauty before. She pulled off her rubber mask, revealing flowing strawberry blonde hair with a hint of red. Then I remembered her – it was the girl from the train to Mannheim. I held up my gun again, walking towards her nervously, beginning to wonder just who would turn up from the other early chapters.

There didn’t seem to be anyone else around, so I approached the mysterious young lady and soon got within ten feet before she chuckled the net at me and started whacking me with her stick. I struggled at first, trying to get free, but then began to enjoy it so I just sat back and thought of England. Dominatrice had other ideas, charging forward with her whip, knocking the staff out of my assailant’s

hands and diving into hand-to-hand combat with an ear-splitting banshee wail.

I scrambled free out of the net, my legs and torso slightly sore but my libido firing on all cylinders. Fumbling around on the ground, I grabbed my Walther PPK once more, stepped back and enjoyed the fight as Dominatrice traded blows with our new foe. Just as it was getting exciting, the door behind us swung open and out poured a dozen or so fully armed soldiers with machine guns. Supermodel was forced to open fire and kill most of them. He laughed out loud as he sprayed the whole area with a hail of death and destruction, shattering most of the picnic tables that had been so carefully laid around the patio, and scaring off a couple of American tourists who had been enjoying a swift G&T to one side. Grandmaster and I added in some firepower, but soon Supermodel had the situation under control, with a small pile of soldiers resting against the door and the words “Hasta la Vista, Darlings,” emblazoned on the wall with bullet holes.

Meanwhile, Dominatrice and the sexy girl from the train were fighting in what could only be described as an eminently marketable way. As soon as one seemed to be getting the upper hand then the other would roll out of the way and plant a nasty kick in the shins with her heels. Fortunately, Dominatrice had extremely large heels, so soon her opponent began to tire, and we could sense that our ally was gaining the upper hand. Grandmaster raised his pistol, ready to fire but unwilling to risk hitting his beloved. We stood back while the fight progressed and finally Dominatrice emerged victorious, finishing off her opponent with a vicious slice of her fingernails and a swift kick in the stomach. Harves shot off another hail of bullets, a wide-eyed grin emerging which was almost too large to fit on his face.

At that moment the doors burst open again and a second group of soldiers charged through. We loosed another barrage of fire, and then piled the bodies up beside the door. I managed to stop Supermodel from charging inside, preferring instead to spend some time scouting the rocks overlooking our current location. We scrambled away from the main building as the reinforcements began to charge out, leaving their secure cover and blundering into the wide open patio, weapons pointed randomly towards the sky and the ground directly in front of us. We ran away, bullets spraying in all directions except directly at us. Supermodel snagged his heels on a rock, so was forced to abandon them, hiding behind a wall until he could replace them with his more standard army-issue boots.

The fight was going wrong. We were now heavily outnumbered behind, and there was no way forward except through the mountains. We had the advantage of height, but no way of capitalising on it. We managed to find an easily-defended spot amidst some rocks, which afforded a fantastic view out towards the *Kehlsteinhaus* below, and allowed us to take potshots at the enemy as they poked their heads round the corner of the building.

Grandmaster and I stood guard whilst Dominatrice put her hair back in order and Supermodel headed off over the rocks behind us into the distance in a manner not unlike that of a mountain goat. His ancient Shaolin training had taught him many things, but one message that his old master had made him learn right from the beginning was that sitting cross-legged among some rocks at the top of a mountain was *never* a bad thing. Supermodel dis-appeared into the distance, his pink dress only barely visible amidst the rocky outcrops as he followed the path back towards the snow-capped peaks beyond.

Back at the defensive post, we just sat and waited, guarding the approach and hoping that Supermodel would return soon, and when he did he would have the most amazing plan ever to be heard since Columbus said “I know, why don’t we try to discover where all those crap sitcoms come from?”

Twenty minutes later, Supermodel returned, his mind comprehensively cleared and his body and spirit both at one with nature. He picked up his heavy weaponry again, gingerly playing with the safety as he explained his cunning plan. Point by point he described to us how he was planning on launching a three-pronged attack with complicated distractions on all sides and air-strikes and all sorts. It culminated with a great showdown when he summoned the Chi of nature and destroyed the entire building below us with a lightning bolt which he was to conjure with his bare hands. His master plan finally laid bare, the rest of us looked at each other, then back at our friend, dressed from head to toe in a pink frock and suspenders, then over towards the crowd of heavily armed guards just thirty yards away from us surrounding the *Kehlsteinhaus* from all sides. We were all thinking the same thing, but I think Grandmaster put it most succinctly;

“Harves, that’s a crap idea. Let’s surrender.”

That was the quickest decision we ever made.

Grandmaster took one of his handkerchiefs and tied it to the end of Supermodel's beloved machine gun, waving it high above the rocks for our enemy to see. There was a murmur from the crowd, and then a single voice rang out from the *Kehlsteinhaus*, "If you wish to surrender, you must drop your weapons and come forward viz your hands up." It was the SS colonel. We did as he said, leaving our weapons on the floor and carefully poking our head round the corner, stepping slowly down the rocky mountain path, hands held way above our heads. The *Kehlsteinhaus* stood before us, perched on the narrowest of ridges, and overlooking the most breathtaking backdrop imaginable. To either side, steep rocky cliffs fell off towards the valley below, and all around us rose craggy peaks blanketed with white snow, the chill wind flowing around them and toward our exposed location, causing us to shiver as we made our way down towards our captors.

One by one we were bundled off, handcuffed, searched and slapped about a bit. Supermodel was especially strongly chastised for his rôle in the slaughter, receiving a very stern telling off and having his hair ruffled by a particularly irate officer. Dominatrice tried on the charms, but even her persuasive, usually irresistible gaze seemed unable to draw a response. "Damnit," she cursed, "they must be gay." "Yeah," I replied, "'cause there's no other possible explanation."

Dominatrice gave me a stern look that seemed to say "I deeply resent that slanderous use of sarcasm, but I don't want to look at you too harshly in case you enjoy it."

Grandmaster called us to order. "Come now, we have been captured fairly. I believe it is traditional for the condemned to be offered one last meal before their execution."

"Execution?" said the head SS officer, surprised. "Ja, actually zat is a pretty good idea. Ve hadn't zought of zat."

Grandmaster slapped his forehead and was immediately restrained. The SS officer wandered off muttering to himself, "Ja, execution. Must write zat down. And to zink I was going to let zem go."

We were marched into the main hallway again, where we waved across to the boy in the lift. He waved back, unsure of what to do. "Thanks for the ride," I called across. "Catch you later."

The boy nodded, acknowledging my friendly patter before returning to his homework.

We were lead towards the large oak doors that we had seen earlier. Behind these there was still some kind of party going on (presumably the *you-know-which* party). The doors were swung open, and we were dutifully marched in at gun point, being lead towards the main octagon room in which a number of Gestapo officers were enjoying a rather large meal, gathered around a heavy wooden table and gorging themselves on *Schnitzels* and *Weissbier*. We were prodded forward, towards the head of the table where a large wooden chair stood, its back facing us obscuring its occupant. I glanced across at Grandmaster, then back to Supermodel and Dominatrice. So this was it. This was our meeting with ... *you-know-who*. We stepped forwards, our knees shaking. Supermodel tidied up his hair a bit and sorted out his fake breasts. The chair swung around and we were presented with a face that I had hoped I would never see again. A face so horrific that just the merest glimpse of the hair was enough to kill a grown man.

"It's *you*?!"

Before us sat the most inappropriately-dressed maniacal tyrant in the history of tyrant-ism. He was wearing tight leather trousers and a frayed denim jacket, underneath which was a T-shirt that said "Please don't talk to me - I'm not very interesting, though I'm trying to look scary instead." He sported the most amazing facial hair, direct from a poor historical drama series, and to top it all off, the most dramatic, fluvial mullet ever seen in this or any other fictitious military account. It was the Mullet Man from the train. His mullet had grown now so that it was hanging right down his back, poking out to one side as he leaned back on his comfortable chair and grinned a wide, Schnitzel-filled smile in my direction. "Ahhh, Agent Genius. Glad you could finally join us. And Agent Supermodel as well I see."

Supermodel gasped. I could tell by the way he was looking that he was trying to fight back a giggle. Mullet Man turned to Grandmaster. "And unless I am very much mistaken, which I never am, you must be agent Grandmaster." Grandmaster nodded, biting his lower lip in a technique finely honed over a great many bad sermons.

Supermodel was going that same rhubarb colour that he managed when he got sunburned in Koblenz. Dominatrice growled towards our captor who tried to wink seductively back but got it terribly wrong. "And this ... *very* attractive lady must be Dominatrice."

Dominatrice was furious. "*Nobody* calls me that!" she yelled at the top of her voice, struggling

free from her captor before being forcibly restrained by four burly SS officers, straining to prevent her scalping our slimy arch nemesis. Supermodel was turning away – he was having serious difficulty stifling a laugh and I was beginning to chew a hole in my tongue from biting so hard.

“So,” began Mullet, “will you join me for one last meal before you are ... how do you say? *Removed* from this story?”

I nodded, unable to open my mouth lest a roar of laughter came out. I stepped forward and took a seat at the table next to our stylistically-challenged enemy. Supermodel sat beside me and Grandmaster and Dominatrice next to him. Grandmaster had taken to hiding his mouth behind the top of his fleece to disguise the unavoidable smile. I was looking down towards my feet. Our host seemed slightly suspicious.

“Is there something ... funny?” he asked in an accent that clearly showed that there was. I shook my head. Supermodel looked away. My ribs were beginning to hurt again and I was getting back to that horrible stage when it felt like my entire body was about to tear in half if I didn’t let out a chuckle soon. I glanced towards our captor, then away again, narrowly avoiding a burst of hysteria.

“So then,” he continued, “enjoy your meal. It will be your last.” He followed that with a slightly lacklustre burst of maniacal laughter which completely failed to add any drama whatsoever to the atmosphere. Fortunately for us, four plates of finest Schnitzels arrived and were placed in front of us together with a *Weissbier* for me, and wussy fruit juice drinks for my less overtly-butch friends. We tucked in, eager to get as much food in our mouths as possible to stop the smiles from appearing quite so obvious. We were all concentrating on our food, not daring to look to one side, fearing that we might burst into hysterics at an inopportune moment.

We scoffed down our meal under the watchful gaze of Mullet man. He didn’t say anything as we ate, preferring to watch us with a slightly disturbing stare. He seemed rather confused that we were gulping down our last meal at such speed, but we were all by this time in quite a lot of discomfort, and we felt that we needed to get this over with before it got any worse.

One by one we finished up our last meals, turning to our captor and anticipating a short tyrannical speech. Mullet man rose to his feet, flicking his hair behind his head as he stood, drawing a stifled giggle from Supermodel. He frowned in our direction, walking over behind us and beginning to speak. “I am most disappointed with you, my friends. I had expected more. Is this honestly the best that your country could provide? Two nerds, a tart and a prostitute?”

Supermodel didn’t take kindly to that particular epithet, though he was forcibly restrained by a couple of guards and pushed down into his seat.

“Now now Agent Supermodel. You must learn to control your temper.”

Supermodel said nothing – he had just caught a glimpse of the Mullet in a mirror and was biting his lip again.

“You will all follow me to the balcony where you will be shot and thrown off the cliff into the valley below.”

We stood cautiously from our seats, avoiding our captor’s eyes and wandering off in the direction of the door to which we were being lead. One of the guards swung open the door and pushed us out into the chilly mountain air once more, standing now on the edge of a thousand-foot drop into the rocky scree-slopes below. Mullet man walked out after us, drawing a pistol from his holster and stepping towards my partner. “Agent Supermodel,” he began, “you will be the first to die. Do you have any last words before you go?”

Supermodel turned to his captor, looked down at the pistol, back up via the terrible T-shirt and ill-fitting denim jacket, and back to the hair. He stopped at the hair – that was his mistake. He opened his mouth ready to talk about the good times and the bad, his loves and his regrets in life, his family and friends and the people he had met. He almost had a speech prepared, but unfortunately it was all to go to waste because the second he opened his mouth he burst into peals of roaring laughter.

Mullet man stared in disbelief as Supermodel collapsed into a sobbing mess on the floor, screaming out half an hour of painfully subdued hysteria. It was contagious – I joined in. I couldn’t contain myself any more. I *had* to laugh. Grandmaster and Dominatrice gave in to their temptations and joined us in a roar of uncontrollable guffawing. We stood there, holding on to the hand rails for support, pointing and laughing out loud. Laughing at this man who personified absolutely everything that we had found funny about the entire trip. This was the accumulated result of so many days of stored-up humour and we just couldn’t contain it.

Mullet man was growing angry. He raised his pistol ready to execute my friend, but Supermodel had other ideas. He grabbed the pistol, slamming our captor's hand on the railings and sending the weapon spiralling off the cliff-side into the valley below. I joined in the fight as Grandmaster and Dominatrice kicked the other guards off the edge and slammed shut the door back into the great dining hall. This was it – the fight was beginning. We had Mullet man just where we wanted him, except that we could still see him and the laughter thus caused was heavily impairing our fighting ability.

Supermodel launched into a flurry of slaps, delicately tapping our opponent on either cheek in turn before being hurled back by the Mullet's superior strength. I lurched forward into the *melée* but I was in too much pain and immediately fell to the floor in convulsions of laughter. Mullet man stood over us, his hair dangling down over his shoulders in one scraggly mess. I couldn't take it any more – I had to close my eyes and wait for the end. This was surely it – this was where I died. I grimaced, expecting the final painful blow to come but I felt nothing. Then there was a cracking sound, a cry of anguish and a thud. I cautiously opened one eye and looked out on the balcony. Mullet man was lying on the floor, unconscious. Standing behind him was a thirty-five year old woman dressed in a black cloak, carrying a large plank of wood with which she had clearly just struck our enemy right on the hair.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked.

"My name is Maria," she replied. "Maria Magdalena Keverich."

"Oh bloody hell."

Rescued by Beethoven's mother. Now *that* was a story to tell.

Supermodel looked down with pity at the pathetic, unconscious figure before us. "Shall we kill him?" he asked, innocently.

Grandmaster shook his head. "No – let him go. He has suffered enough already. Let's hope that this lesson will send him back on the path towards a decent, law-abiding life."

"Oh come on," protested my partner, "at least let me remove the mullet then. It's probably controlling him."

Grandmaster nodded in tacit approval, so we wasted no time ceremoniously slicing all our assailant's hair off and chucking it over the cliff, then proceeding along the ledge, the door behind us ready to burst with the sheer weight of SS officers eager to get through. Fortunately there was another way back to the lift, and we followed Frau van Beethoven as far as we could round the balcony before we climbed up a ladder to the floor above. Behind us we could hear in the distance that the door had splintered into tiny fragments and the soldiers were hot on our heels. We hurried upwards, soon finding ourselves back in the long corridor which lead to the lift. "Go on without me," our mysterious historical guide urged us, "I can handle these brutes."

"But if you stay here then surely that will change the life of one of the greatest composers ever to walk the face of the Earth?"

"What?"

"Your son, Ludwig. He is a genius."

"Ludwig? Dirty little sod. More trouble than he's worth. I'll give him a good clip round the earhole when I see him next."

"You can't do that!"

"I certainly can. Spends all his time practising that damn piano when he should be out playing football with his friends. Keeps going on about how we don't understand him."

"But he single-handedly revolutionises the entire musical scene in Europe, ushering in a new era of symphonic romanticism."

"Well he doesn't eat his greens, and he's a naughty little boy so I'll give him a good smacking. Now you run along - I'll sort this lot out."

She lifted up her plank of wood and charged back towards the balcony with a loud roar that sounded like she meant business.

"Thank you!" I called, but it was to no avail, my feeble cry lost amidst a blood-curdling scream and a succession of loud thwacking noises.

Secure in the knowledge that Frau van Beethoven could look after herself, we piled a few bookcases up against the door through which we had just come and ran back to the lift entrance, pressing the button furiously. The sound of soldiers could be heard from inside the dining area, so we pushed a

heavy cupboard up against that door too as we waited for the lift to arrive.

Suddenly the familiar shape of the brass elevator rose into view, and the doors opened. We stepped forward, ready to run inside, but were immediately stopped in our tracks. Standing in the heavy metal cage was a familiar figure, dressed in full SS uniform. It was our friend from the cocoa bar, and he was holding a gun to the head of the lift operator. We took a step forward but were immediately forced to halt.

“One step further and I vill kill zis poor, innocent little boy vere he stands.”

Damn he was playing on our conscience. The lift operator was trembling and trying to struggle against his captor, but to no avail. I could tell by the look in his eyes that he was *really* regretting this whole work experience thing and he didn’t really *care* how good it was going to look on his CV.

Supermodel was growing angry. He rolled up his sleeves again, and I could tell that something silly was about to happen. He started rubbing his hands together furiously, then began to chant a selection of ancient incantations. Grandmaster and Dominatrice wisely took a few steps back, and I followed suit. The SS colonel held up his pistol towards Supermodel and called out towards him, “Vatever you are trying to do, stop it right now or I vill shoot you in ze head.”

Supermodel didn’t appear to be paying much attention. Grandmaster was now walking backwards at a fairly rapid pace, averting his eyes and urging Dominatrice to do the same.

“Vere are you going?” The SS colonel’s cries were in vain. I averted my vision as Supermodel’s hand-waving began to reach a climax and he thrust out his fingers towards the alarmed officer, bolts of brilliant white lightning streaking forth and surging into the colonel’s body, hurling him back against the elevator wall with a loud bang and a satisfying fizzling sound. The young lad fell to one side, quivering in shock as Supermodel stood with a wide grin on his face, rolling his sleeves back down again and striding forward into the lift.

“Told you so.”

Now I never expected *that*. “Harves, why didn’t you *tell* us you could do that?”

“I tried to but you never believed me.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

Supermodel examined the charred remains of our evil opponent, then stretched out a hand towards the trembling young lad who was cowering at one side of the lift.

“Don’t worry, my friend. It’s all safe now.” He smiled a devious smile. “That’s what you get for messing with Agent Supermodel.”

Grandmaster and Dominatrice returned, congratulating my partner in espionage, and piling into the lift. I joined them, hardly believing what I had just seen and suspecting that perhaps my old Greek friend might have had something to do with it. Back in the corridor a large commotion had broken out as the soldiers had almost smashed through our barricade. Grandmaster turned to the lift boy and spoke to him in a slightly urgent tone. “I think we’d better get back down now, don’t you.” The young lad nodded and reached for the door-closing lever, pulling it just as a large crash signalled that the soldiers had finally breached the dining room door, and a series of further crashes indicating that Frau van Beethoven had caught up with them. The doors slammed shut and the lift began its slow descent into the earth, the sound of gunfire above soon lost amidst a grinding of gears and the heavy breathing of very tired group of secret agents.

We reached the bottom a few moments later, bidding goodbye to our faithful lift operator and wishing him good luck in his upcoming high-school history assignment. The doors slid open, and we wandered out into the entrance hall of the tunnel system, heading out into the long entrance tunnel and making our way towards the outside world. Ian had begun to sing a bit of Rachmaninov vespers with a loud bottom B-flat in it, and I was at the back of the group, slowly falling back, thinking about the mission that we had just undertaken. Somewhere behind me I thought I could hear someone calling my name. I turned round, frowning and searching for any sign of movement. There was nobody, but I thought I could just discern a faint glowing coming from the lift entrance room. I watched as my friends continued down the tunnel, and then I doubled back, returning in the direction from which we

had come. Sure enough, I heard my name called again, and this time I was sure of it. I quickened my pace and turned once more into the room, cautiously peering round the corner.

Right before me was a smartly dressed young man, wearing a red, velvet suit and a frilly white cravate. I recognised the face and took a step back in amazement. “Hello Agent Genius,” came the voice, tinged with a slight Austrian accent, “I am Mozart.”

## 7.4 The Voyage Home

It was several minutes later that I finally arrived back outside to the great relief of my three fellow secret agents. The sun was beating down once more, though a large dark cloud was heading over in our direction and we didn’t particularly want to be caught underneath it when it decided to lose some of its watery cargo. Grandmaster seemed anxious, asking as to my tardiness.

“Where did you get to Xol?” he asked, conspicuously worried.

“Oh, nowhere,” I answered, avoiding the question. “I met up with an old friend.”

“Anyone we know?”

“No, not really. Well, maybe by reputation.”

“And what did he say?”

“I’ll tell you some other time.”

What I’d been told was to remain a secret for a while at least. I wasn’t entirely sure what I had seen or heard back in the tunnels, but it certainly did have an effect on me. It gave me some ideas – and these were not the sort of ideas that I could have thought of all by myself. Herr Mozart had told me many things, but one simple message stuck in my mind – it was a piece of advice that he had given me and a little bit of inspiration that he made sure that I heard. For now, it was my secret.

The world around us seemed somewhat different now that we had returned to normality. Supermodel had miraculously changed out of his ballgown and was now wearing far more suitable mountainwear. Grandmaster’s fleece no longer looked quite so military, and Dominatrice was back to civilian clothes, more’s the pity. I couldn’t help but wonder just how much of my ridiculous adventure had actually happened and how much had been entirely in my mind. By the overabundance of American tourists who had now appeared at the summit car park, I feared that perhaps the majority of it had been fictional, but still somewhere in my head I retained the fond memories of a successful mission and a great time had by all.

We headed over towards one of the buses which was due to take us down to the base camp at Berchtesgaden via Obersalzberg. The troop carriers had been replaced with brand new civilian buses covered with pictures of large mountain eagles and spectacular views of valleys and lakes as seen from the summit. We hopped on board, eager to get back down to civilisation and return to Salzburg, our base of operations, for that evening’s concert in the castle.

One thing that was troubling me was that we had met one character from each day of the mission – the old German man from the Eurostar on Sunday, the girl from the train on Tuesday and Beethoven’s mother on Wednesday. We had also met Mullet man from Thursday and I think I’d shared a few words with Mozart from Friday. But that left one day – Monday. We hadn’t yet seen anyone from Paris, and now that the mission was over and I had returned to reality, it seemed unlikely that we ever would. That seemed strange and grated rather with my perfectionist tendencies. I put the thought to the back of my mind, and we continued off down the mountain, admiring our last view of the fantastic alpine scenery and heading off towards Obersalzberg and our final bus down to the valley below.

We arrived at Obersalzberg in relative conversational sobriety, not really daring to talk about our visit, nor to discuss the rest of the day ahead. We were all pretty tired after such an eventful morning and afternoon, and more than anything else we just wanted to make sure we got back to Salzburg in time for the evening’s concert at the castle. We changed buses, heading back down the side of the mountain on a slightly less packed coach, taking a more complicated route down towards the valley below, and setting back through Berchtesgaden towards the bus stop from which we would catch our last carriage home.

In an annoying failure of timetabling, we had just missed one of the buses, and they only ran every fifty minutes. Instead of wasting our time, we decided to wander back over towards the river which ran through that sleepy mountain town, and we sat around for a few minutes on the grass. The river was particularly fascinating – at the point where a tributary joined you could tell that there was an intense difference in colour with the water flowing from up the valley being a misty aquamarine, almost unnaturally blue, joining with the more traditionally clear waters from the valley side. Hovering around the rocky rapids was a small yellow balloon, presumably marking the location of a particularly misdirected salmon trying to migrate upstream.

Also along the river bank were a number of fishermen, casting their lines into the chilly waters in the hope of catching something to take home for their evening meals. I have only ever tried fishing once, but I never really got the hang of it. I think it's one of those sports, like cricket, which aren't really about what you do, it's more the long relaxing breaks between the times when you do it that count.

"I once went fishing," began Grandmaster in his reminiscent voice. "Back in South Africa, along a river infested with crocodiles and deadly snakes."

"Really?" I enquired, feigning interest.

"Yes indeed. Except we didn't use maggots for bait, we used rump steak on meathooks."

"Catch anything?"

"Malaria."

"Bummer."

Africa is a harsh continent, that's for sure. Supermodel didn't seem to be particularly impressed.

"I've been fishing too," he chirped.

"What happened?"

"I killed a mirror carp. Seven years bad karma."

It seemed fitting, somehow. I decided not to continue the conversation as it was getting too silly.

We spent several minutes down by the riverside, admiring the strangely blue water before heading off back over the main road, and up into the old parts of town. We felt that exploring was the thing to do, and we were the people to do it, so we headed off uphill in search of adventure. Of course, all we found was a church, so we lost Supermodel for another few minutes while the rest of us admired the beautifully-kept graveyard. The weather was playing tricks on us at that point, occasionally clouding over and plunging the entire valley into darkness, and then the next moment bathing us in roasting hot sunshine. We were getting confused by this so decided to head back towards the bus station, eager to catch the next service if at all possible.

We arrived back at the bus station five minutes before the 16:30 service was due to depart, hanging around for quite some time before I decided to go over and check the timetable once more. There written in clear letters was the time '16:30'. I checked my watch - it was now 16:40. Written above this time were two words which I wasn't sure exactly how to translate. I called over to Grandmaster, "What does '*ausser*' mean?"

I could see by the look on Grandmaster's face that it wasn't good.

"Except."

"Oh right. And '*Samstags*' means Saturdays, right?"

My three companions let out a dejected sigh. Annoyingly we had just missed the previous bus, leaving us with one hour forty minutes to wait instead of the fifty that we thought was bad enough. We were faced with the prospect of another forty minutes in Berchtesgaden, bringing us ever closer to the time by which we felt we ought to have been back in Salzburg. There was only one solution, and that was shopping. Actually, there were three solutions, but the pubs were closed and we couldn't find an internet café.

Forty minutes go pretty fast when you're browsing through dodgy German tourist shops. All manner of amusing magazines caught our eyes, especially a particularly large and uncensored section of rather dodgy ones located slightly irresponsibly at child's eye-height. I also found a selection of amusing comics and a number of English language newspapers which allowed me to catch up on the last week's events. It's strange how easily I can cut myself off from news and current affairs when stranded in a foreign country. I guess the majority of it is not particularly cheery so I don't have much difficulty in doing so, but all the same it's often a real surprise finding out what's been going on in the world in my absence. Every time I return to England I expect to find the Houses of Parliament overrun by pugnacious lower

primates and to find Nelson's column half-submerged in sand. Often I'm at least partly correct.

We finally caught the bus back at 17:20, returning along the quiet German mountain roads towards Salzburg. Just before the Austrian border we picked up a large crowd of German hikers who had been walking in the mountains and all appeared to be kitted out in the top of the range high-tech hiking gear that always seems, to me at least, to void the whole point of the exercise. Surely you go out walking to get away from the modern, technological world? Well, at least I do.

The forty minute journey back to Salzburg seemed to last slightly longer. I was tired and it was all I could do to stop my head from smacking into the seat in front as I nodded off. I was actually fairly grateful to arrive back home and stumble towards my hotel room without colliding with anything. Supermodel and I went our own separate way, bidding a temporary goodbye to Ian and Claire as we returned to freshen up and change into more suitable clothes for the evening's entertainment. As we parted ways, Grandmaster had a few words to say about our successful mission and the remainder of our trip.

"Well done, my fellow agents. I know that we have worked hard, battled much danger and fought a great many adversaries to achieve this victory, but it is ours now and it can not be taken away from us. We have been to the Eagle's Nest, and returned alive. For that we must all be extremely thankful. We have less than twenty-four hours left in this country, so I suggest that we now enjoy ourselves, for tomorrow we return to Blighty and a hero's welcome. The mission is a success. I congratulate you all."

Grandmaster had summed up all of our thoughts about the day. The *Kehlsteinhaus* was now secure, free to open as a tourist attraction and raise money for worthy causes for many years to come. It was now run by a non-profit organisation, the proceeds going to needy charities in what seemed to be a particularly fitting rôle for such a potentially destructive location. I was impressed by the whole place, from the organisation of the public transport to the overwhelming beauty of the building itself and its most breathtaking location.

As I researched the history of the *Kehlsteinhaus* before writing this chapter, I learned one thing that made me laugh more than anything else so far. After all that effort, and the immense feats of engineering that went into building such an unavoidably memorable present, it turns out that Hitler was afraid of heights.

## 7.5 Concerto

After writing up our day's exploits in my diary, and freshening up ready for the evening's musical adventure, I relaxed back on my bed, thinking over the events of that day. Many exciting things had happened to us in Berchtesgaden, and we had enjoyed the most fantastic experience up in the mountains. True, my imagination had rather run away with itself once more, but at least it had done so in a reasonably dramatic fashion.

Harves and I waited for some time for our friends to return. We had agreed to meet them out to the front of our hotel, and fortunately there was a fantastic view of the route so we just sat by the window and waited as they proceeded to cut it increasingly finer with every passing minute. The concert began at 8pm, and it was almost seven o'clock before Grandmaster and Dominatrice showed up beneath our window, calling up and wondering what light it might have been which from our window was in the process of breaking. I called down that it was Harves, and that we would be with them in a few short moments.

Shortly afterwards, as advertised, we appeared at the bottom of the steps and walked out into the gentle evening sun, greeting our friends and heading off together in the direction of the castle. Of course, now that we really didn't want fine weather we naturally got it. The journey up to the castle was a fairly long one and it was also rather steep. The path lead up the side of Salzburg's tallest hill, and winded back and forth with alarming regularity, seemingly steepening and becoming more treacherous with every step.

By the time we arrived at the top, it fell to Grandmaster to explain to the ticket controller that 'we did not have to pay the entrance fee because we had already purchased tickets for the concert later that evening. However, we didn't have the tickets yet because we had paid for them by credit card over the phone and we were picking them up at the summit.' The guard shrugged his shoulders and let us through, clearly not giving a damn what our explanation was so long as we had a reasonable go at explaining it. I congratulated Grandmaster on his linguistic prowess and we continued up towards the

castle gates, the path steepening yet again.

I was beginning to wonder exactly how an approaching enemy would feel when assaulting such a formidable stronghold. The sides were steep enough for us to climb, but we weren't burdened down with heavy armour and weaponry, and we had the advantage of not being pelted with rocks and a cloud of sharpened pointy metal things. Siege warfare must have been a fascinating and highly scary passtime. Just thinking about the suffering that such people were forced to endure made me realise how lucky I was not having to worry about having boiling oil poured over me when I was least expecting it.

We arrived inside the castle some time later on, after having successfully navigated the complicated series of entrance tunnels and courtyards which lead to the main halls. At one point we were forced to split up and search individually for the way to proceed. We were eventually called on by Supermodel who claimed to have found the way forward. Of course, what he had really discovered was a chapel. Fortunately it was closed, so we dragged him onwards and, by a stroke of luck eventually stumbled across a sign leading to the concert hall.

The concert took place in the one of the late 15th Century state rooms, the *Fürstenzimmer*, which was decorated in plush period furniture and commanded a fantastic view of the entire city from its panoramic windows. On stage were just a handful of music stands, together with a piano and a variety of rather familiar-looking music. The concert hall was packed out with an audience eager to hear some of the most well-known chamber music of the 18th and 19th centuries, dominated of course by the works of a certain young lad in the court of the Prince Archbishops in the late 1700s.

Of course one can't put on a concert like that without playing *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. Though far from Mozart's *chef-d'oeuvre*, it certainly possesses a certain simple charm and is without doubt a delight to play. The orchestra of seven rather talented string players performed admirably, drawing a rapturous round of applause as the final chords were played. To end the first half they played one of young Wolfgang's earlier piano concertos which, if you remember from chapter 6, he wrote shortly after getting married to his beloved Constanze. This was a concerto that I really hadn't heard before, but it was well played, the slightly eccentric soloist not giving the best performance ever of the piece, but certainly drawing far more out of the string players. I couldn't help but think that perhaps they were all getting rather fed up with *Eine Kleine* after countless hundreds of performances.

The interval lasted twenty minutes and gave us a good chance to peer out of the window over the city. The sun was now setting and the old quarter of the town was bathed in an almost supernatural orange glow. We returned to our seats expecting something special in the second half, and I feel sure that we got it. The opening piece was a divertimento, one that I knew but had never performed. It was played exceptionally well with the tricky string passages not posing any real problems to an extremely talented violin section. I couldn't help but notice the lead second violin whom I had spotted before, but who was now beginning to shine in these difficult passages, rising to a level above those around her with a remarkably well-refined technique that I suspected should have taken her slightly further up the musical ladder. I also noticed her because of her particularly attractive physique, her long dark hair and her bronzed complexion which were so characteristic that I felt that I had almost certainly seen them somewhere before.

The second half was finished up with a delightful pair of Dvorák waltzes and, as an encore, the Brahms Hungarian Dance, all of which required a selection of technical fireworks which allowed the top quality musicians to shine once more. As they left the stage I caught one more glimpse of the mysterious second violinist, her hair flowing in a gust of air from the window behind, those deep, brown eyes peering towards me with a subtle warmth and an all-knowing wisdom. Then I knew exactly where we had met before, and I cast my mind back to a chance encounter in 1930s Paris. I wondered what might have happened if I had chased up that opportunity. I wasn't even sure if it had happened, but now I knew that it was more than just an illogical fantasy.

She disappeared before I got a chance to find out her name. I decided not to pursue the musicians into their rehearsal rooms, and instead walked back out of the concert hall with my three friends, trekking down the hill once more with Supermodel while Ian and Claire took the posh funicular. At the bottom we met up again with almost impeccable timing. A handful of musicians were wandering out of the station and off into the night. One by one I counted all the members of the orchestra, except one. Ian and Claire walked over towards me, and I asked them if they had seen her. Apparently she had left earlier and I had missed her, now hidden away somewhere in the old city streets. That had been my last chance, and now it had floated away for the final time.

The night was getting on and we all needed our sleep, so we headed back towards the hotels, through the beautifully floodlit town. I looked back towards the castle in the distance, standing proudly over the picturesque Salzburg streets below. I was beginning to see why they felt it was worth defending now. Tomorrow was to be our last day in Salzburg, and I was only just beginning to get back into the feeling of the place, being at home in its old, windy streets.

For a change, we ate Italian food that night. It was late, we weren't particularly hungry and it was the only place open. It gave us the chance to consider many complicated issues from the modern world's many problems, and also to discuss the successful mission and the plans for our last day in Salzburg. It also gave Dominatrice ample time to explain to Supermodel and I that the most attractive thing about men – the one thing that she noticed before anything else, and the most important trait to get right if you wanted to look good, was the shoes. I didn't quite follow the logic behind that claim. It went something like this;

“Any man who spends enough money to buy good shoes is clearly the kind of guy who really cares for you because he wants to look his best.”

The most obvious counter to that is that “any man who spends all his money on shoes clearly has serious issues and you don't want to touch him with a ten foot pole.”

I glanced at Grandmaster's feet. He was wearing his usual immaculately presented footwear, highly polished and sparkling like black marble. Then I glanced down at my sandals, and across at the place where my girlfriend would be sitting (instead of Supermodel) if only I had one. I began to wonder if there was perhaps some degree of truth in Dominatrice's words.

We wandered back to our respective hotels a little after 11:30, eager to get one last night's sleep before our final day in Salzburg. After washing and changing, I wrote up my diary and then returned to bed, turning off the light switch and settling down to a deep sleep. One thing was bothering me though. I turned over to where Supermodel would have been if only I could have seen him. “Supermodel?”

He groaned.

“What do you think about what Claire said?”

“What?”

“All that about shoes.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yes. It *was* bollocks, wasn't it?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Goodnight, Supermodel.”

I'm glad he managed to put my mind at rest on that. Otherwise I wouldn't have managed to get for quite some time and several hours of ovine violence didn't really take my fancy that night. Besides, I wanted to be ready and awake for 7am the following morning when the bells would start up again.



## Chapter 8

# The Leaving Delights

### 8.1 Der Vogelfänger

We woke a little after half past eight. My head was throbbing for some reason, though I couldn't quite work out why. I had all manner of strange visions spinning round in my mind, relics from our previous adventures. The bells across the street were in full peel, ringing out across the town to announce, for those few people who hadn't yet managed to work out the obvious pattern, that yet another mass was taking place inside. Surprisingly, the weather was gorgeous, just as the strangely prescient waiter in the breakfast bar two days ago had said it would be. Harves and I struggled out of bed for the last time in Salzburg, washing and changing before packing our many belongings. We checked out of our hotel after conducting another idiot sweep and carrying all of our weighty luggage with us for the last stage on our journey.

It was a Sunday morning so we knew that it would be extremely difficult to find somewhere to eat. Austria is a particularly strict country in many ways, so we had to walk quite some distance before we found a café serving breakfast and morning coffee. Of course, being a Sunday and this one place having somewhat of a monopoly we had to pay 'conscience tax', which was supposed to make up for the fact that the managers, by opening their establishment and trading on the Sabbath, would surely burn for eternity in the fires of Hell. Conscience tax, in this case, was about a 100% mark-up.

While we were eating, Supermodel and I decided to conduct a shoe census, after Claire's comment of the previous night. Strangely, out of the thirty-something men in our survey walking past us that dormant Sunday morning, only a handful, four or five I think, were wearing anything that could be described as 'impressive' footwear. A large number were wearing socks and sandals, some of whom had girls by their side which tended to completely invalidate all of my esteemed friend's predictions.

We met up with Ian and Claire a little later that morning, leaving our bags at their hotel in the safe room for the remainder of the day while we wandered around the last few places that we had not yet seen in Salzburg. In particular I was interested in the prospect of eating lunch at the clifftop restaurant which overlooked the city from the west. I had eaten there before and, despite the overabundance of wasps, I had enjoyed it thoroughly. It seemed like a perfectly fitting end to a delightful holiday.

Before heading off for lunch though, we decided that it might be a good idea actually to wait until *lunchtime*, instead deciding to wander back up to the monastery that Supermodel and I had seen before, and show Ian and Claire the impressive panorama from the summit. This would serve two equally important purposes; firstly, we could get some exercise before lunch and secondly we could use the telescopes along the cliff face to spy on the cliff-top café opposite and see if it looked open. That would save us a potentially wasted journey.

Ian was still suffering from the rather nasty cold that had been plaguing him for the entire journey. Consequently the trip up the steep hillside path was not particularly pleasant for him, preferring to take it at a more leisurely pace. Fortunately, this suited Supermodel and me just fine. We shared a decidedly relaxed, some might even say 'idle', view of life. We both enjoyed watching the world go past before us, sitting back and letting time and fate take their best shots and somehow always bouncing back for more. This holiday had been hectic at times, but it had also given us a great deal of time to put our feet up, relax and enjoy ourselves. We had shared a number of great conversations, many laughter-filled moments and more than our fair quota of fine food and drink.

The view from the clifftop was great, as ever. On such a sunny day, Salzburg really looked fantastic, the sunlight glistening off the Salzach as it frothed and bubbled through the city centre, dividing the old from the new. In the distance I could just about pick up the clifftop café that I was after, so I put a 50 cent piece in the nearest telescope and took a peek. Sure enough the sunshades were out and I could identify a number of people sitting down on the tables which commanded such a fantastic panoramic view of Salzburg's old city. As I scanned the telescope round I could just about spot the room in which we had listened to that wonderful concert the night before. I spun round some more, intending to see if I could find the *Eagle's Nest* in the distance, but my money ran out. Pity.

After meandering around the hilltop for half an hour or so, we decided to wander back down. Our initial attempt to find a cunning secret route failed miserably so we elected to return the way we had come, rejoining the street five minutes later, now obviously a bit busier and with slightly more shops opened for business once again. The street that is, not us. The tourists were beginning to flock in their masses, so we decided that it would be a good idea to head over to the opposite ridge and see if we could find a way up to the top somehow. We had read about some kind of lift service, and there looked like a narrow, decidedly unsafe lift system sticking out of the rockface, so we headed for that and began to search around.

After a great deal of exploration in totally the wrong place, we eventually found the lift entrance. I don't know what we were looking at earlier, but it most certainly was *not* the lift. This was instead recessed along a short tunnel inside the cliff face. It was a modern installation, with a politely multilingual operator standing beside the finely polished brass doors, eager to welcome us in, take our money and transport us to the top. The fare was cheap; certainly better than trekking all the way round to the other entrance over towards the castle, and climbing the mile or so to the summit in the sweltering summer heat. The lift was comfortable, rising the few hundred feet to the summit, and then opening out into another modern building, clearly not *quite* finished yet. We cautiously stepped out at the top, left to wander into the summer sun and explore the hilltop upon which we now found ourselves.

It was not quite lunchtime yet so we spent half an hour wandering through the neatly forested hilltop area, dotted here and there with small houses and expensive hotels with private chapels. We spent a further half an hour being lost and unable to find any directions whatsoever to the café that we had so clearly seen from the other side of the valley just an hour and a half ago. Fortunately we had much to talk about, so we walked around the pretty country lanes, admiring the views and laughing at inappropriate road signs depicting dodgy old men leading small children off into shady woodland paths. I'm still not sure what exactly that was supposed to represent, but I suspect it was probably sponsored by Werthers Originals.

We found the café eventually, taking a seat on the last table overlooking the city. We had arrived just in the nick of time – just a few minutes later and we might not have been able to grab such a beautiful location. We were running low on cash again, and not wanting to risk a repeat of the Koblenz ATM fiasco, we decided instead to watch our expenditure and make sure that we only ate what we could afford. Fortunately, we had ample cash for a fine meal of local specialities, with one of the most amazing views in all of Europe.

On our way down, we decided to sing a variety of suitable opera arias from our favourite Mozart works. After Dominatrice had performed a beautiful rendition of "*Voi che sapete*" and Harves had muddled through the Queen of the Night's aria from the Magic Flute, it fell to Ian and myself to sing something profound, and the only aria that we could think of was the Birdcatcher's song from *The Magic Flute*. We sang this joyfully for the first few lines, until neither of us could remember the words, and then just continued humming and adding the occasional syllable whenever we could remember one. Supermodel was not at all impressed. "Can't you think of anything else?" he asked. We couldn't.

Sadly we were totally unable to think of any other Mozart arias for bass. I tried "Non più andrai" from *Le Nozze*, but it somehow ended up as the birdcatcher's aria. Ian tried to sing a few excerpts from "Don Giovanni", but one by one they all ended up as "*Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja...*". Now we'd even got Harves with it – he couldn't think of anything else either and it was really beginning to annoy him. It became the day's theme as we managed to infiltrate it into every single piece that we could think of. It was driving Harves quite insane, a fact made all the more comic by the fact that now even *he* couldn't think of anything else.

So we returned to town-level down a rather pretty little woodland path and a steep set of steps which lead to a courtyard which we had twice before dismissed as ‘obviously’ not being a route up to the hillside. Back through the old town we strode, merrily humming *Der Vogelfänger* at a volume just sufficient to stop Supermodel from thinking of anything else. It was beginning to cause a certain amount of internecine friction, so we stopped for a short while, but soon recommenced, unable to find any other tune sufficiently memorable to trump it.

We returned to the new part of town over a different bridge, getting a fantastic view back up the river towards the mountains in the distance. Somewhere hidden in those peaks was the *Eagle’s Nest*, now bathed in the mid-afternoon sun, swarming with American tourists and stormtroopers trying to work out exactly what had happened that fateful June afternoon.

So only one thing remained for us in Salzburg, and this was the visit that we had been putting off for quite some time – Mozart’s *Wohnhaus* – his rather plush residence in the city for the time when the Prince Archbishop appeared to like him, and was willing to pay to prove it. This had now been turned into a museum, and it marked the very end of our journey of discovery. One last step before we headed off home.

And what a step it was. Mozart’s family had lived in this building for the seven years between 1773 and 1780, before resigning from the employ of the new Prince Archbishop, the unsavoury Count Colloredo, and moving to Vienna. It consists of a number of fascinating exhibits, ranging from early 18th century harpsichords of the type Mozart would have played, through to artistic representations of the young Wolfgang and his sister Nannerl.

In one room was a special video presentation of Mozart’s life on the road, touring around Europe for so many years without a proper place to call home. I felt the same. Secret agents live an itinerant life, hardly able to find a place in which to settle down and mix with ‘ordinary’ people. I was beginning to wonder how much longer I could last in this way, just dashing between destinations, not knowing what I would find. I could just count myself lucky that when I got there I wasn’t forced to play virtuoso piano pieces in front of assembled world leaders.

The best bit about the whole museum was the way they played such fantastic music through our headsets in every room. The samples ranged from early keyboard works right the way to the powerful Requiem mass that was to prove young Wolfgang’s last ever commission. They spanned the entire life of a young lad who, more than anything else, wanted to relax, settle down and enjoy the world’s most beautiful music. The only difference between him and me is that he was actually *writing* it. Oh, and I still find Transformers cool, even to this day.

## 8.2 Endgame

As we left the *Wohnhaus*, the weather seemed to cheer up just that little bit more to make us extra annoyed to be leaving such a beautiful city. It was about time we returned to the hotel, gathered our bags and made our way over to the airport, which lay on the other side of town past the outcrop of rock on which we had so recently eaten a most splendid lunch.

We returned to Ian and Claire’s hotel, sad to see the last of it, but not quite so sad as Ian and Claire themselves seemed to be at leaving behind such a luxuriously palatial residence. We gathered our bags, bade farewell to the receptionist who had been so helpful over the last few days, and then walked outside to find the first taxi we could which would take us to the airport. Ian did the talking, and before too long we found ourselves squeezed into a brand new Mercedes, our bags safely stowed away in the boot, heading off to the west in the direction of one of Europe’s most picturesque *Flughafens*.

Salzburg airport is located in the middle of a rather large, flat area (as is apparently necessary) surrounded on most sides by towering alpine peaks whose grandeur gives the whole place something of a dramatic ambience. We checked in to our flight, rather relieved that our bookings had been accepted and that Grandmaster didn’t have one last trick up his sleeve. Half of me was expecting him to say, “Oh, didn’t I tell you? Claire and I are flying home, but I’ve got you two booked on a flight to Estonia. Hope you brought some warm clothes. Here’s a phrase book.”

We had an hour before we were due to check in, so we headed to the terrace café overlooking the main runway. This must have one of the most fantastic views of any airport café in Europe, affording breathtaking panoramas over the alps around, and the town of Salzburg spreading out by their feet.

The slight elevation gave us that extra height that we needed to feel truly above the shops and houses of the surrounding town, and lifted us dramatically into the skies, looking down on the land through which we had just travelled.

Somewhere over in the distance lay Koblenz and the dramatic confluence of the Rhine and Mosel. To the Northwest lay Paris and the many strange people whom we had met there on our travels. Then to the north of that was the city of Lille, in which I had first met up with agent Supermodel just one short week ago. What a lot had happened in that one week! What fantastic adventures we had experienced in those seven short days which now seemed to stretch for an eternity behind us.

Supermodel was still trying to trump the *Vogelfänger* but failing miserably. Occasionally Ian and I would hum another aria just to take his mind off it for a short while, but we inevitably returned to that familiar old tune every single time. It was indeed a weakness – I had been right all those days ago on the train to Koblenz. I was glad that none of our more devious counter-agents had discovered this or else our travels could have turned out very differently indeed.

To take our mind off the tune, we decided to buy some tea and a slice of cake. A glance through the menu quickly told us that it was going to be close. None of us had any notes left, and we had pretty much all managed to spend our last remaining coins on tacky souvenirs. Ian emptied his wallet, followed by Claire and Harves. We were a bit short. I delved into my pockets, eager to help. “How much do we need?” I enquired eagerly.

Ian glanced over at the menu, did a quick calculation and then replied in his smooth baritone voice, “Four euros only.”

I looked down at the small collection of coins in my wallet, piling them up in order of increasing size. “I think I can just about manage that,” I grinned, glad to be of service.

We relaxed, sitting back down as Grandmaster wandered over and bought the required refreshments. Now was not a time for melancholic reminiscing, so I wandered off to the toilet instead. I do most of my best thinking on the toilet for some reason. That, and in bed at night before I go to sleep. In fact, I’m just presuming I don’t think well when asleep, but I guess I don’t ever remember it. Except occasionally I suppose when I dream and a whole kaleidoscope of ideas floods through my mind. I’d like to think that my dreams inspire a lot of my work. It’s probably true – though not in the same way as Giuseppe Tartini or Martin Luther King. Still, it’s a fun thing to think about.

I had a few inspirational moments that afternoon, mostly related to a certain conversation that I think I had the previous day back at the *Kehlsteinhaus*. I say I *think* I had it because, of course, it couldn’t possibly have really taken place. But then I had a memory of the conversation so I must at least have discussed it with myself. You don’t just invent conversations. Anyway, this was a particularly interesting conversation, and it had given me some unusually ludicrous ideas.

I decided to leave my three friends sitting around the table, laughing amongst themselves whilst I wandered over to the balcony, looking out over the airport below. Thousands of tunes were flying around in my head, and very few of them involved birdcatchers. I could just hear the chatting dying down a little behind me and the scraping of a chair signalling that one of my friends had decided to join me in my musing.

Grandmaster walked over to me, rested on the railings and let out a troubled sigh. “We’re not getting any younger, are we Xol?” His voice seemed to have a certain degree of resignation to it.

“Well no,” I replied, “of course not, but that’s a blessing, surely?”

“A blessing?”

“Well yes. Just think back a few years. When we were students none of this would have been possible. None of these luxurious hotels; no top-secret journeys round Europe; no expensive meals at top restaurants.”

“True, but then again when you get to my age, none of these things really mean much to you any more. When you’ve been round the world, seen many dangerous places, met fascinating people, fought lions in the plains of Africa without so much as a sieve to protect you, somehow the life of a pen-pushing desk worker seems rather ... well ... bland.”

“But Supermodel and I singlehandedly killed a Hydra. We travelled in time. Together the four of us stormed Hitler’s secretive mountain hideout. Surely that’s exciting, isn’t it?”

“Well yes, I suppose it is.”

“Don’t you remember our trip round Europe last September? The fantastic adventures we had?”

"Yes vaguely. Didn't we write a book about that?"

"I believe we did Sir, yes."

"Well, I suppose that was rather fun."

"That's right. Well this one has been even better. And what's more, I think that we might well write a book about this one too."

Grandmaster stared at me and held his hands up to the sky, a look of horror crossing his face.

"Oh hell," he said, "not again!"

"Oh yes," I replied. "But that's not all."

Grandmaster shook his head, not really wanting to hear what I had to say.

"You know when we were leaving the *Kehlsteinhaus* yesterday and I was delayed in the tunnel for a while?"

"Yes, you never did tell me why that was. Something about an old friend."

"That's right. It was Mozart."

Grandmaster coughed into his Earl Grey. "It was *whom*?"

"Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. I kid you not – he was dressed up just like in the paintings. And do you know what he told me?"

Grandmaster shook his head. "I'm sure I won't guess."

"He told me to write an opera. About this whole adventure."

"An *opera*?"

"Yep. An opera *buffa*, with loads of comedy characters and special guest appearances and all that stuff. Do you think I should?"

Grandmaster laughed out loud. "You know what, Xol, I think you're going to write one anyway, aren't you?"

I nodded. "I just wanted to know if it was silly enough to be worth my time."

"I think you can safely assume that it is."

We went quiet again. I returned to my tunes, the first few bars of an overture beginning to form themselves into a coherent pattern in my head. I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Alright Xol," chirped Supermodel. I nodded. "What are you thinking about?"

Grandmaster interjected, "He's going to write an opera about this whole trip."

Supermodel laughed. "What, *all* of it?"

I shook my head. "Just the funny bits."

"Cool. Can I be a countertenor?" Supermodel seemed excited.

"I'd already planned on that, yes."

"Well let me know when it's done – I'd be interested to hear it."

"Rest assured it will be most silly. But I've got to write the book first."

Grandmaster chimed in, "you've got at least a month to do that."

"That's true. It should be enough. Except for that little thesis thing."

"Oh sod it!" Supermodel stated indignantly. "Some things in life are more important."

I think he was right. You know, some things in life *are* more important than others. We humans have to prioritise - you can't do everything all at once. Sometimes you make the right decisions, and sometimes you make the wrong ones. Often you make the wrong decisions, but you time it so that you get away with it. I was more than familiar with that. Sometimes you make the right ones, but just too late. In a way that's the most painful time of all. Harves and I had made some decisions over the last eight days that we regretted, but we had made many more that turned out so perfectly that they enhanced our experience beyond our wildest dreams.

So we were returning home after a truly memorable experience. A thousand miles away, a hero's welcome awaited us. Back in Salzburg, Grandmaster was proud of the way his top operatives had performed on such a strenuous mission. He had decided to allow us a month's paid leave to relax and regain our strength ready for the next death-defying European tour. Out of interest, he turned to each of us in turn and asked us what we planned to do. He asked Supermodel first.

"Well," began my gallant companion, "I think that I'm going to relax at home, maybe take in a few churches, do my nails, eat some cakes. The usual really. I just need time to take a breather and enjoy myself now that this mission is over."

“Fair enough,” replied our Boss, turning to me. I was lost in my own thoughts, planning how I would spend July back in Cambridge with so many things on my mind that I was planning to do. I sighed and stretched back in my chair, mulling it over in my mind.

“Well,” I began, “I think I’m going to have to spend most of the month writing up this book. That’s going to take quite some time.”

“A very noble effort,” he replied, glad that the story of our heroic deeds would not go untold. “And was there anything else?”

I pondered it for a few more moments, thinking back over all the experiences that I had enjoyed over the last week, desperately trying to organise them all in my cluttered subconscious. I thought back over my journey, and then to Paris. One thought lodged in my mind. “Well sir,” I began hesitantly, “there is one other thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve got to go see about a girl.”

I got no reply except for a broad, knowing smile and a gentle recognition. Grandmaster knew me all too well, and for that I pity him. I promised that I would write the book of our journey and I would give him a chance to read it. I also promised that it would be truthful down to the last detail, faithfully recreating the experience of a Xoliday for those who have not yet had the good fortune to take part in one. So maybe I’ve let him down a bit there, but I always reckon that a good story is never diminished by a little poetic licence.

The sad thing about stories is that at some point they always have to end, and I’m afraid that I’m beginning to run out of words. Usually the last few paragraphs are more difficult to write than the hundred pages that have come before – this book is certainly no exception. The essence of Xoliday is very difficult to capture on paper – I think that perhaps the only way to understand it is by experiencing one first hand. I hope that I have at least begun to give you a taste of the fabulous adventures that we enjoyed, in my own special way.

In those short eight days we had accomplished so much, but now we were glad to sit back and relax, safe in the knowledge that Europe had finally been rescued from the grip of a silly and particularly hairy evil.

Somewhere in the distance, a lonely figure stood amidst the snow-capped peaks, surveying the valleys below him. He had escaped his attackers, but at what cost? His fabled mane now lay strewn over a hundred acres of mountain pasture, lost forever. His mind was in torment, planning how he would make his devious return to power. Gradually a wicked smile crossed his face, and soon it burst into deep, maniacal laughter which echoed from that mountain-top and around the valleys and hills before him. He would plunge Europe into total darkness, amplifying its misery until all would kneel before his mighty hair, serving him for all eternity.

Suddenly he felt a sharp tap on his right shoulder. He span round with a deep growl to see an elderly figure before him with grey hair stretching right down to his waist and a white toga wrapped loosely around his darkly-tanned chest. He was holding something in his right hand; a book of some kind. Slowly the stranger lifted the heavy tome towards his shaven adversary, waving it in front of his face before striking him sharply round the head and sending him crashing to the rocky floor.

The robed visitor called out in a suspicious Greek accent, “Next time, read this first!”

And with that, he vanished in a puff of logic.

The End

# Chapter 9

## Appendices

### 9.1 Geldfänger - Grandmaster's Tale

#### The Abyss

It was getting out of hand. No matter where one looked, decline was there and plain to see. Steep decline. We stood to protect a rare and precious friend. In the face of overwhelming evidence, we had to conclude that our delicate companion might not be able to survive the heat of the seasons to come, and certainly not alone. All the signs were there that something needed to be done. Something dramatic. And something soon.

#### The Rationale

For those of you little versed in the intricacies of international affairs, I fear this will make less than a great deal of sense. Allow me, then, to recap so we are on common ground. Beginning from last year we were finding ourselves on shaky territory, especially after the much-vaunted Oxfordshire trip had turned up nothing unexpected. The subsequent French excursion did much to stem the flow, but there was no way the situation could be addressed in a single sharp blow. With the tide against us, a few days of cathedrals and croissants provided a much needed tonic. But it could do little to further the cause beyond the immediate few months. A strategic solution was clearly required, reaching out further. One might almost say reaching deeper. Somehow, somewhere, the very roots of this square had to be circled. Or perhaps that should be encircled. A delicate, focussed operation would be needed to strike at the very heart of the crisis.

#### The Summit

It was with this in mind that a summit meeting became evidently and immediately imperative – as you will by now understand, at least to an extent. These sessions are always pleasant in so many ways: The stimulating debate, the schnitzel, the intense physical training, and the agreeably health-giving chill of the mountain air which accompanies the experience. And so it was that in the month of \*\*\* the brotherhood <sup>1</sup> congregated, and judged itself quorate. What was to be done? How could the requisite information be gathered? The debate ranged widely. It became clear that tackling this alone would pose unacceptable risks to my safety. The scale was simply too great.

After several days of prolonged altitude training and intense discussions, the determination was made. With all the submissions in hand, I, Grandmaster, took full responsibility. I took together the multifarious threads and wove them into an intricate, delicate, daring plan. If any voyage could bring about a real, enduring change, this was to be the first bold step on that thousand mile journey. This would not be an excursion, nor a trip; no mere expedition. I was decreeing a course of action so important, so utterly vital, that it would become known by a name all its own; it was to be a mission.

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<sup>1</sup>The nature of this organisation must necessarily remain vague.

## The Outline

You will see immediately that this was to be a grand operation. Not as geographically diverse as some previous escapades, nor as temporally extended, nor yet encountering the same variety of vicious fauna. But still a challenge to the very heart of the terrible state from which our aforementioned friend needed rescuing. And so to the detail. The plan was to carry out a European mission. It would be a cross-border, international, multi-lingual assault. Assistance would be needed from colleagues across the continent, some of whom had lain dormant for years awaiting such an occasion. But those key questions still bit back, time and again: Who? Who did we have who possessed the very greatest integrity? The most complete skills? The most adaptable mental apparatus? It was a demanding scenario. I summoned up all the contacts available to me, evaluating – one might say weighing – every known fragment of information. In the final reckoning, there was only one option: We would have to gamble everything on the one they call, ‘Genius’.

## The Agent

For a mission, one needs an agent. Genius was just such an animal. He had been sleeping quietly in the English countryside, near Cambridge, for a period of years. His chief diversion was the occasional raising of his head above the metaphorical parapet by playing the role of butler to a certain gentleman of the same nationality. He was an agent possessed of remarkable practical ability, endowed with linguistic prowess, and gifted with a usefully surreal sense of humour. His unextraordinary appearance was a further asset, his powerfully lithe physique being hidden secretively well to the south of an unassuming face.

Genius was my man. I made contact by the time-honoured methods of those in our circles. Genius readily accepted the mission proposal, instantly grasping the excellent potential of the scheme. The only drawback for him was the utter secrecy. His instructions were to learn German, then proceed to Lille to meet a man with a copy of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, dated 20/02/2002. Being far too professional to gripe over limited information, Genius went straight to work. He became fluent in the German tongue in a matter of days, thus fractionally increasing his vast pool of languages. With no further ado, Genius was ready to roll.

## The Team

Even a man of Genius’ calibre needs backup. And the sensitivity of the present quest necessitated much secrecy. So somewhere along the way he would need to meet others who would guide him onwards, help to gather information, report on his progress, and ensure the ultimate success of the mission. To this end, I arranged various ports of call along the way. It was impossible to expose myself to some of these situations, so instead I called upon the services of some highly trusted individuals. Bring on Supermodel, Provocatrice, Übermensch and Dominatrice.

Each had a suitable cover. Supermodel, who was to travel onwards with Genius, had a background in theology and beautiful blue eyes to offset his wavy blonde hair. Provocatrice played the role of café intellectual to perfection, and Übermensch had retired from some of his more exotic missions to work on stage. Dominatrice was also a lover of the arts, but preferred more practical employment just far enough from the heart of government to avoid suspicion. Each was primed; all were ready.

## The Mission

The travellers’ tales I shall leave in the capable hands of Genius himself. I reserve the right to comment only that it was a pleasure teaching him both the basic principles of time travel, and the very practical uses to which one can put the works of Plato. If nothing else, the mission had been of great educational value.

## The Outcome

We spoke earlier of a reckoning. And once the dust had settled, that was precisely the scrutiny the mission would have to endure. So at the day of judgement, how did our onslaught really measure up? Genius had been home barely three weeks when he let slip the immortal words “Es ist vollbracht.” What beautiful words, and what a laudable sentiment. After preliminary investigation, I can confirm that much valuable work has been done. Our friend is less endangered than could possibly have been the case had we not engaged in these perilous exploits. And that is result enough.

But, if I may be permitted to quote the good book again, to say “the warfare is accomplished” would, I fear, be premature. On our thousand mile journey we have taken that single step. And make no mistake; that step was wholeheartedly in the right direction. But the journey is a long one. The rest will not be history until we arrive in the future <sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Or as Plato might have said, ‘Watch this space!’

## 9.2 Octo ... Octa ... Octi ... Damn it - Dominatrice's Tale

I'm sure most of you think that being the girl in a spy movie is the easy bit. All you do, after all, is be seduced by good-looking spies, show absolutely no ability to discern between the good guys and the bad guys and swoon backwards onto beds in a becoming manner. It often annoys me that so many people have these terrible misconceptions about what can be a dangerous and taxing occupation. We are not all blonde bombshells who are merely in the plot for decorative purposes. Some of us hold the key to the whole mystery, and some of us are the only ones who truly recognise the dangers that are abroad.

I was first recruited to the hedonistic world of international espionage one rainy winter's evening when I was a bright young thing with nothing better to do with my time than attend endless drinks parties. I could say that I was an innocent, deceived by my recruiting agent and heartlessly led into a world of trickery and danger, but that would be to underestimate my steely resolve and my desire to prove my abilities in the most testing of arenas. I was ready for the challenge, and after over four years of careful training and preparation I was sent on my first mission.

I knew - as did others - that there were two other recruits to the cause, both of them picked from the fertile pool that is Cambridge University, who were also being tried on their first mission at this time. And I knew - as did others - that they were to become involved in a complex web of agents across Europe (Provocatrice and Übermensch are the only two I am at liberty to disclose at this time). However, I also knew how the paths of these two Cambridge virgins would meet the paths of our experienced continental agents, and more to the point I knew the identity of Grand Master and had access to the very highest levels of mission planning. I was to play a vital part in the exercise, the true nature of which has still not been fully revealed.

Throughout the planning stages of the mission, one decision was left untaken; my code name. During my training years I had been known simply as "Librarian", a code name often assigned to agents showing particular promise and dedication. However, I was fully aware that a Bond girl needs a more striking and assertive code name than that. Having discussed this with the very top levels of mission planning, it was decided that the code name "Dominatrice" would best fit my abilities and the part I was to play.

In order to live my cover to the full, I went out immediately and bought knee-high leather boots, a long Italian leather coat and designer sun glasses. I thought that these should allow me to command respect without attracting too much attention to myself. I also, of course, invested in a whip. You never know when such a thing might come in handy.

I was attending a media party with many of our political masters the night I was due to make contact with Agent Grand Master, and so the hour was late before I pulled on my leather boots and descended the steps to the flat where I had been told to rendezvous, in a quiet side street in west London. It was an innocuous-looking place, and I realised at once that I was dealing with a consummate professional. I was going to have to perform to the very best of my abilities if I was to impress on this mission.

I entered, of course, by picking the lock. No Bond girl of any worth ever just knocks and waits to be allowed to enter. I found myself in a dark passage way, pressed up against some coats. I closed the door quietly behind me, wary of being disturbed by some well-meaning passer-by wondering why the door had been left open. There was a light at the end of the passage, and there was the sound of a Beethoven symphony playing. I knew from having studied the case notes I had been given that Beethoven was a signature theme for Agent Grand Master, and so I was sure I was in the right place. I passed a door on my right. I pushed it open gently and observed a bedroom. Splendid. We might be needing that later. I continued on down the passage way, eventually reaching a sitting room. My trained eye took in the doorway to the kitchen beyond, and doors leading to a garden. Always make a note of all the exits.

Sitting on a sofa, lying back engrossed in the Beethoven, was Agent Grand Master himself. He was a fine figure of a man, but that hardly mattered. A Bond girl must remain utterly professional at all times. I walked over to him and after we had got the pleasantries out of the way (I had a vodka martini, since you ask) we finalised our arrangements for the morning, which I was horrified to hear involved getting up very early in order to fly out to Salzburg. However, I had been trained to remember the priorities of a mission at all times and never to let the petty considerations of my own comfort distract me. With this in mind, I bent over to undo the buttons of his shirt, imagining the cameras panning away to a view of the whole room, until the scene was considered too raunchy for family viewing and there was a cut to a glimpse of us prudishly covered up in bed afterwards. However, Grand Master laid his hand over mine, and whispered in my ear

“Really, Dominatrice, we’ve got to get up awfully early tomorrow. Maybe we should just get some sleep?”

This was not how I had imagined the world of international espionage, but I was unwilling to jeopardise the success of the mission, so I agreed, determined not to be slighted again.

We were awoken the next morning at a perfectly indecent hour by an insistent beeping which told us we had no time to make up for the puritanism of the previous evening or we would miss our flight. After a mad dash across London we checked in with minutes to spare and found ourselves aboard our flight to Salzburg.

An enemy agent tried to disable us on the flight, but in true Bond girl cold-hearted style I threw an elderly lady in his path, causing us to have to wait on the runway in Salzburg whilst she was carried off in an ambulance. People sometimes ask me if I feel guilty about the suffering I cause innocent people who get inadvertently caught up in missions, but I’m afraid the cause has to take precedence over the discomfort of individuals.

Having landed, our first task was to find our hotel. This successfully completed, I thought that now was finally the time to seduce my mysterious master and discover the secrets behind the mission. Unfortunately, he had other ideas and insisted that we find an internet café to enable him to send final instructions to the two agents who even as we typed were speeding their way across Europe, unaware what was to befall them.

I did spare a thought for them. Espionage virgins as was I, but not trusted to the same extent with the details of the mission, not party to the fine intricacies of the plan and not aware of the real nature of the cause, and the importance it had for European civilisation. However, I knew too that we had all been given tasks in this mission which suited our abilities, and I trusted Grand Master, and the other agents of whom I as yet knew so little, to have assigned us our rightful duties.

If I had had any doubts about this, they were banished when I set eyes on the two agents we were to meet. It had been arranged that I would make first contact with them, and make sure that the way was clear for Grand Master to appear. I sat in the cover of some bushes, watching the place in front of the naked girl in the Mirabell gardens where Agents Genius and Supermodel were due to arrive.

I watched with some disdain as a rather shabby couple ascended the steps. There was a man with short dark hair wearing shorts, a t-shirt and sandals. Slightly in front of him was another individual, 5’10”, blonde, blue-eyed but hardly making the most of these natural advantages. I was somewhat dismayed when, having gawped a while at the statue, they sat down on a bench and got out a copy of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. This was our signal. They were the agents I was to meet.

They were hardly the suave, dinner-jacketed and carefully spruced spies I had expected. I got out my binoculars and trained them on the front page of the newspaper, in case they were just two scruffy Austrians, who happened to be reading the *Süddeutsche*. I would hate to jeopardise the mission by making contact with the wrong people. Particularly these wrong people. But there was no doubt. The date on the front page was the 2nd February 2002. The only reason anyone could have for reading a five month old copy of a newspaper was in order to make contact with Grand Master.

I approached them and tried to hide my disdain as I introduced myself and arranged the final meeting. The dark-haired agent, who I quickly discovered was Agent Genius, was clearly the one with whom to do business. Agent Supermodel merely giggled and looked in a pocket mirror. I began to doubt the wisdom of Grand Master in having chosen these agents for such a delicate operation. Who knew what valuable pieces of information they had let slip during their journey? What indiscretions they had committed with our fellow agents? Or, worse, into what disrepute they had dragged the very name of our cause and service?

To my dismay, Grand Master did not seem to share my concerns. After appearing in his usual extravagant manner he greeted the agents with seemingly genuine warmth, and took us all for an ice cream in the gardens.

I watched our two new colleagues closely. Agent Genius, although hardly keeping up the dress standards usually associated with our noble profession, did not concern me greatly. Agent Supermodel, on the other hand, was behaving very strangely. Eventually, I concluded that there were two credible options to be considered. The first was that Agent Grand Master had picked an imbecile to be a part of our mission. This seemed so unlikely as to be discounted at once. The second was that Agent Supermodel was an enemy agent who had slyly won the trust of Agent Genius and was, even as we enjoyed a rather fine example of Austrian cuisine, plotting to kill us and abort our mission. Something had to be done.

Over the next day I did everything I could to “lose” Agent Supermodel. As I have already implied, Bond girls are a resourceful bunch, and I summoned up all my knowledge of the dark arts of spying in order to resolve this difficulty. Firstly, I tried to tempt Agent Supermodel with promises of cake, hoping to lure this snake in the grass away from Agents Grand Master and Genius so that I could commit an act of lasting damage.

I failed. This Agent was more cunning under that bimbo exterior than I had realised. Supermodel remained stuck to Agent Genius like a limpet so that it was impossible to part them. I had to think again, and during a tour of Salzburg I tried to push Supermodel out of the windows of the Mozart Geburtshaus, I tried to fool Supermodel into following me to an entirely fictional *Mozart Geburgervan* (anything was worth a try). I even tried to push Supermodel into every church we passed in the hope that either Agents Grand Master and Genius would become so bored that they would leave Supermodel behind, or that they would simply not notice Supermodel’s absence.

In all this I failed. I realised that something far more daring was going to be necessary. Continually I had under-estimated Supermodel’s intelligence and skill. Rather than following my directions and responding to my suggestions, Supermodel had managed to out-wit me without giving our companions any reason to believe that we were being accompanied by anything more intelligent than a clone of Victoria Beckham on a bad day.

I decided that there was only one thing left for me to do. I was going to have to seduce Grand Master and make him so bewitched by my spell that he agreed to play a part in us “losing” Supermodel, however much he had once trusted that agent. Despite frivolous distractions such as having to go to an opera I tried my utmost to bring Grand Master to a position of submission, but he told me that the following day was the climax of our mission, and that he needed to concentrate his mind on the delicate operation we were to enact. Where’s a real James Bond when you need one?

The following day dawned fairly clear; perfect conditions for our ascent to the *Kehlsteinhaus*. I watched Supermodel carefully as we boarded an innocent looking bus for our trip to Berchtesgaden. There were so many ways we could be sabotaged. The bus took a road out of Salzburg, and a large vehicle travelling towards us at speed could easily kill us all. Supermodel suggested as we passed a precarious looking cable car going up a hillside that we should stop on the way back and take it. I was immediately suspicious. A cable car is a an easy place to trap people. Our mission would not be truly complete until we returned to Salzburg, and so the plan could be to sabotage us on our return, when we were within a hair’s breadth of triumph.

Alternatively, as we boarded a second bus and took a series of winding mountain roads up into freezing clouds, it would be easy for someone to push the bus over the side. An accident like that would kill all those on board and would surely be put down to driver error.

I had under-estimated Supermodel again, however. There was something far more subtle in hand. We did complete our mission at the *Kehlsteinhaus*, and despite nearly persuading Agents Grand Master and Genius that Supermodel had got lost, or fallen off the side of the mountain, or merely defected back to the other side, the darkest of Agents reappeared, innocently claiming to have been for a stroll along the path.

Even I was finding myself sucked in by this honest and open façade. But I knew that this was the time that I had to be most careful. Supermodel was playing a clever game with us, and if I, the only one of us who really suspected, was fooled, none of us would have any chance of escape.

I did decide, however, that this was not the mission to expose Supermodel’s true colours. We had completed our task, Grand Master, Genius and I, and why Supermodel’s masters had allowed us to do that I did not know. But they had, and so I knew that Supermodel was playing a longer game. This will not be the last mission we will share, and so I am sure that at some point in the future that curvaceous, 5’10” blonde figure will reappear and again endanger the cause. For the time being, the peril has passed somewhat, and our network of agents across Europe is safe. I am now concentrating on my continually frustrated efforts to seduce Grand Master and further my career at the very highest levels of mission planning. But be sure, I will not forget the lessons I have learned, and when Supermodel next makes contact, I will be ready and waiting.

### 9.3 Licentious Tackle - Supermodel's Tale

Supermodel has completely failed to write anything, despite having more than ten weeks in which to do so... \*sigh\* You just can't get the staff any more.