



The Flying School of Adventurers

The Fire Tiger of Batavia · Vol. 1

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8+ / 144 pp.

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Sample translation: chapter 2

[...]

Guests from all over the world

Belle Pompadour sat in the passenger seat of the classic black sedan, the wind whipping around her ears as the car bombed down a narrow road at 100 miles per hour. Every now and then, she would sneak another peek at her new hairstyle. She had been to a hairdresser in London that morning and had a streak of her blonde hair dyed pink, and she still hadn't got used to it. She closed the mirror.

Her father's obstinacy was something else she would never get used to. The streets kept getting bumpier and narrower – but Pierre Pompadour flat out refused to use a sat nav.

'Papa,' she scolded him. 'Are you sure this is right? I haven't seen any street signs for quarter of an hour.' They hadn't even passed any houses, let alone people, for ages now. Pierre Pompadour grinned and put his foot down even harder on the gas pedal. Belle sighed and looked out of the window.

She was as nervous as if... as if... well, as if it were her first day at school. Her family had never had anything to do with the ACE before. The club had become aware of Belle after she had survived a week alone in the Sahara at the age of eight, following an ill-fated safari. She also spoke eight languages and had a passionate interest in ancient hieroglyphics. Despite all of this, Belle felt tense. Would she be able to keep up with all the incredibly talented people at the Academy?

Belle was well aware that most of the other students came from families who had been involved with the Adventure Club of Europe for centuries. Their ancestors had been part of incredible adventures: things like exhuming Egyptian Pharaohs, returning the last of the Tasmanian tigers to the wild or participating in the first unmanned circumnavigation of the moon (everyone on board had been female, which amused Belle no end...).

And what about her? Sure, she knew a lot about a lot of things and she had also won all of France's youth fencing tournaments. But was that enough?

There was a screeching of tyres as the old car swerved suddenly down a forest path.

‘Papa!’ yelled Belle, agitated.

‘Belle!’ answered her father with an almost patronising smile. ‘I’ve always managed to get wherever I wanted to go. That sort of new-fangled device just doesn’t fit with this car.’

Belle snorted. ‘If we get there late, then...’

Pierre Pompadour chewed on the ends of his moustache. The visibility had suddenly got much worse and he had to slow down to 75 miles per hour, which was slow for him. It grew foggier with each passing moment. Soon Belle could hardly see anything at all. And then they reached a dead end in front of an old windmill. Nothing beyond it but forest.

‘Are you sure that this is the Academy?’ asked Belle pointedly.

Pierre Pompadour didn’t respond. He just swung the steering wheel around, put his foot on the gas and raced off in the direction they had just come from.

Belle could have strangled him. How was it possible for a person to be so stubborn? They were probably farther away from Deep Fog Castle than they were from the moon! The fog made sense, mind you. But fog was more common in England than weekdays...

Belle was thrown to one side as her father made a turn into a tree-lined road. Honking, he overtook a dirt-encrusted four-by-four with a fold-out tent on the roof. He pushed his way past a shiny sports car. And, all of a sudden, they were there. As if from nowhere, the castle appeared out of the thick fog that gave it its name. Pierre Pompadour darted through the eight long metal legs of a beetle-like vehicle and onto the courtyard in front of the castle. The sedan braked abruptly, spitting gravel in all directions.

Pierre Pompadour held his watch under Belle’s nose. ‘3 o’clock, right on time!’

Belle immediately tore open the passenger door and leapt out of the car, her face crimson.

‘Thanks for the great driving, Papa!’ she said as she slammed the door. She stomped to the boot and pulled out her duffel bag. ‘Do you know something?’ she shouted to her father. ‘You can drive back without a sat nav too – and I mean right now. I want to enjoy the celebration. Without you.’

With that, she turned around and marched over to a bar table, where two teachers were serving cool drinks and traditional cucumber sandwiches.

‘Belle!’ her father called after her. ‘What’s the matter?’

But Belle didn’t turn around. A teacher who looked like a birch tree held out his tray to Belle. But her appetite was gone. All she wanted was to get to her room as quickly as possible.

The new arrivals had started to line up at the entrance to the castle. Belle followed suit and joined the back of the queue. An older, red-haired man with an equally red beard was standing next to the gate, greeting each person with a handshake. As she got closer, Belle saw that it was the teacher she had met at her interview a few months earlier.

Harold Godric McFinnegan was clearly not the tough, Indiana Jones type one might expect of an ACE adventurer. He reminded her more of a respectable professor with an air of old-English charm and class – even though he was, of course, a proud Scotsman, as Belle already knew. The teacher was wearing his usual three-piece tweed suit.

‘He doesn’t even take off his tie in the bath,’ claimed a student behind Belle.

When Belle reached the front of the queue, a bang that sounded like gunfire rang out from behind the turrets of Deep Fog Castle. Everyone looked up to see what was going on. A peculiar aircraft was swooping through the towers. It looked like an iron sausage with three fat pipes billowing black smoke. The thing looped around, stopped in mid-air with a screech of its brakes and lowered itself down to the ground. A hatch opened with a hiss and a family of four climbed out, father, mother and two boys. The younger of the two looked around, his face scarlet. The father took off his goggles and pushed his son over to McFinnegan.

‘Harold, how wonderful!’ the man called out in greeting. ‘Do you like my latest invention? It’s an O Boat. The O stands for ‘over’ – over land, over water, over clouds!’

McFinnegan nodded politely, but not effusively.

‘Allow me to introduce you to your new student,’ the pilot continued. ‘This is Oli!’

The boy looked down, mortified. ‘My name is Oliver!’ he complained in a squeaky voice. ‘The ‘i’ at the end is the diminutive form. But I’m not a budgie!’

‘Oliver Snyder, welcome,’ McFinnegan greeted the boy. ‘We’ve put you in the Machu Picchu room.’

Oliver’s father clapped his hands together. ‘Ah, marvellous! That was my pad – and your grandmother’s too!’ He laughed too loudly. ‘Machu Picchu, Oli, the legendary Inca city in the Andes. We were simply born for great things!’

Oliver Snyder rolled his eyes and reached for his bag.

Belle bit her bottom lip. Maybe she really had been too hard on her father. He might be embarrassing, but apparently it could be much, much worse...

In the middle of the park, an enormous elephant suddenly appeared from nowhere. On its back sat a 90-year-old woman with dark skin and snow-white hair. She was wearing more necklaces than Belle could count. On her shoulders, she was holding on tight to a girl, who was surveying the castle with wide eyes. An equally curious meerkat was peering out of her backpack.

‘Oni Amaka,’ murmured the teacher. ‘Seems to have inherited her great grandmother’s gift...’

The elephant wrapped her trunk around her rider and lowered her down cautiously next to a patch of peppermint. Oni clambered down the folds of thick skin as though she were descending a rope ladder. The meerkat cheered her on with loud screeches. The two of them had barely touched the ground when the outlines of the elephant started to blur, until she had completely disappeared.

Belle burst out laughing. The elephant had simply vanished! She looked around, but nobody else seemed to think that anything out of the ordinary had happened. Belle took a deep breath. On the one hand, the feeling that she wasn’t good enough to be at this school was greater than ever. On the other hand, she was desperate to hear the story of every single student.

Looking ahead of her again, she saw a woman standing next to the teacher. She had dark, shoulder-length hair and was dressed entirely in aristocratic black. Her red lipstick not only emphasised her beauty, it also gave her an air of mystery.

‘Belle Pompadour, welcome to Deep Fog Castle,’ she greeted Belle in French. Belle liked her immediately, and not just because she spoke French. ‘I am Catherine Noir, the President of the ACE. I think we have more in common than our nationality.’ She laughed enigmatically. Then she looked up at the castle. Behind one of the windows, Belle recognised Severin Maximov, the Director of the Academy, who had originally invited her.

‘Has our ghost hunter already spotted the phantom?’ murmured Noir to McFinnegan. Then, clearing her throat, she said, ‘So, once again, welcome. I’ll be in my office,’ she explained. ‘There are a few things I still need to prepare.’

Belle had absolutely no idea what any of this was about. She listened as McFinnegan explained how to get to her room, which was called Luxor, and then carried her duffel bag up the sweeping staircase to the first floor. When she laid eyes on her four-poster bed, Belle suddenly realised how tired she was, and she let herself fall back onto the thick mattress. Surely there was nothing wrong with having a little nap before the celebration. Perhaps she shouldn’t have sent her father home after all?

‘Whatever happens,’ murmured Belle into her pillow, ‘I won’t disappoint you or Mama.’

Then she fell into a deep sleep.