

CHAPTER ONE

This is a great story, and like a good many great stories before it, it begins with a teenage girl. It happened many years ago in Brugel¹, a country in Eastern Europe famous for all its old buildings². The girl's name is Ondine, she's seventeen, and she's in a dormitory at Psychic Summercamp with three other girls (who are asleep) and she's just woken with a jolt.

"Dammit, I failed astral projection," she sat up and pushed the covers away. The bed's throw rug fell to the floor, smothering the furry, black ferret that lay curled up on a patch of rug beneath.

"Melody, wake up," nudging the sleeping girl in the bunk above her, "What happened in the astral exam?"

It took Melody a few more nudges to wake up. When she did, she rubbed the sleep from her eyes and ate it, then stopped as she realised she had an audience.

"Ah, sorry," Melody looked embarrassed as she blinked herself awake, "What's going on, what time is it? The sun isn't even up." The psychic lessons didn't seem to have worked much on her either.

"Shh, you'll wake the others," Ondine said, "Now quick, what happened in the exam?"

"I...I don't know. I must have slept through it!" Melody's face crumpled and she made ready to cry, "I'm going to fail, aren't I?"

"This entire thing is a waste of time, and a waste of our summer holidays," Ondine whispered. As she looked around the room, she spotted the handle of her suitcase, poking out from under her bed. It gave her an idea. "I'm going to run away to home."

¹ One of the former Eastern Bloc counties. Famous for three things. It has the only hexagonal flag in the world. Its main export is Plütz, a vodka made from pears. It has never won the Eurovision Song Contest.

² Brugel was so insignificant during World War II that neither the allies nor the axis bothered to bomb it.

A great many girls of Ondine's age would love to run away from home, but Ondine was the other way around. She'd had it up to here (hold your hand at eyebrow level) with the whole thing and knew it was time to quit.

While Melody watched the door for teachers, Ondine packed up her clothes and her things and her gimgaws and doohickie whatsits and zipped the case closed.³

"What about Shambles?" Melody asked, looking at the sleeping ferret on the ground. "He's a sweet thing, and he's really taken to you."

That's how Ondine came to leave Psychic Summercamp on that warm summer's morning, with a ferret tucked under her vest and the scent of geraniums and lavender in her nostrils as she walked along the flower-studded footpath to the bus stop. The wind blew her brown hair in wild directions, whipping at her lips and eyes. There was nothing she could do to prevent it; she needed both hands to carry her heavy case. Not even a spare hand for Shambles, he merely hung on to her vest.

It wasn't until Ondine got off the bus and reached Venzelemma's crowded central train station that the ferret spoke.

"Thank gooniss for tha-, I need air," Shambles said with a deep Scottish accent, then wriggled free from Ondine's grasp and climbed onto her shoulder to get a better view, "Progress! The train'll be here in a minute. When we get tae yer hoose we can eet, I'm fair starven."

Ondine dropped her case on the platform in shock. Because make no mistake about it, this was definitely a man's voice coming from the black ferret's mouth. When she found a place to sit down, she hauled the ferret into her hands to have a good look at him, all the time wondering if she'd gone a bit ... funny.

³ This was during the enormous gimgaw craze, so everyone had them. You won't find them now though.