

The Fearless Four. Chapter Five.

‘Vlad the inhaler?’ said the Messenger. ‘That’s bad. You think he has kidnapped the children’s parents?’

‘Mais Oui,’ replied Gaston. ‘And taken zem to ‘iz stronghold.’

Lily started to snivel.

‘Fifi!’ yelled Gaston over his shoulder. The girl who had been dancing alone glided over.

‘Oui, Gaston’ she said.

‘Ces enfants ont perdu leurs parents. Ammenes quelques choses,’ instructed Gaston.

‘Ah, les pauvres! Toute de suite,’ said the girl. She looked up at the Messenger from under her eyelashes and glided off to the kitchen. Gaston patted Lily on the back. As he was quite a strong man this felt to Lily like a hard thump; she was so surprised she stopped her snivelling.

‘Bien!’ cried Gaston.

‘Where is his stronghold?’ asked the Messenger. Fifi appeared at the table with four glistening strawberry tarts which she placed carefully in front of each of the children.

Their eyes stared. They set to immediately, suddenly realising how hungry they were.

‘Fifi,’ said Gaston. ‘La grande carte, s’il te plait.’ Fifi quickly returned with a large map on a roller. Gaston unrolled it on the table. It was a map of the Mediterranean.

‘Voila!’ he said, pointing at a dot on the Barbary Coast of North Africa. ‘Zat is where ‘e is. Ze stronghold is partly on ze land, partly in ze sea.’

‘H’m,’ said the Messenger.

‘Eh. Albert!’ shouted Gaston over his shoulder. Emily observed that he never turned his head when he wanted someone. A well-built young man, wearing a beret, a striped T-shirt, riding pants and black shiny boots, came over, pulled off his beret, bowed to the girls and pulled out a chair.

‘Quoi?’ he asked.

‘What do you know about Vald ze Inhaler’s stronghold? You ‘ave been zere, no?’

‘Indeed I have,’ said the young man, speaking with a British accent, much to the children’s surprise. ‘It’s frightfully strong, dashed difficult to get into and staffed by a lot of very hairy piratical chaps. Why?’

‘These children’s parents have been kidnapped by Vlad and, we suspect, taken there by him,’ said the Messenger.

‘Oh I say. Bad show,’ said the young man. ‘Going to get them out?’

‘Yes,’ replied the Messenger. ‘We need all the information you can give us about the place.’

‘Rightoh!’ said the young man. ‘20 foot high walls, two landward entrances, jolly heavy gates, one seaward entrance with iron chain stretched across, harbour inside walls where Vlad keeps his ships. Accomodation for his cut-throats, an armoury, and a palace for himself and his number two johnnie.’

‘Who’s that?’ asked the Messenger.

‘Peg-leg Le Foot. Desperate sort of fellow, bit fancy, totally untrustworthy, although jolly good company,’ replied the young man.

‘When ‘e was a lad, ‘e work for me,’ said Gaston. ‘But zen ‘e went off wiz my best silver watch. If you see ‘im, bring ‘im back to me!’

‘Certainly,’ replied the Messenger, amiably. ‘Gaston, you have been most helpful - as usual. The children and I are very grateful. We’d better be getting along now.’ Turning to the young man he said, ‘Care to join us?’

‘Would I!’ was the reply. ‘Except I have my tutorials to give. Can’t disappoint the young gentles, can I? Mess up their exam results. Well, I’m off too. Cheerio!’ And he bowed to the girls, gave Gaston a slap on the back, shook the Messenger’s hand and jogged off.

‘What does he do, Gaston?’ asked the Messenger.

‘Oh, ‘e is a professeur at Oxford. Poetry. I should nevair ‘ave paid for ‘im to get an education. A beeg mistake, ‘E was a good number two for me.’ Gaston dabbed his eye with a table napkin. ‘Is mother. Oh la la!’ The Messenger indicated to the children that they should leave and they all shook hands respectfully with Gaston.

‘Bonne route!’ he said. ‘Bring ze father ‘ere when you ‘ave got ‘im back. I would like to meet a man ‘oo won ze bank at Monte Carlo!’

They walked quickly through the town towards the sea and the Messenger’s cruiser.

‘Why is he called ‘Vlad the Inhaler?’ asked Bloodblade.

‘It is said that he suffers from asthma,’ replied the Messenger. Lily thought this news was most interesting as she had suffered from asthma when younger.

‘Does he have an inhaler?’ she asked.

‘Course he does, stupid!’ said Twinbade. ‘That’s why he’s called what he is. Obviously.’

‘Don’t be obstreperous,’ said Emily.

‘Is that another of those long words you learn every day?’ asked Bloodblade.

‘Yes, it is,’ she replied.

‘What’s today’s then?’ asked Lily.

‘Amphibious, she replied.

‘That gives me an idea,’ broke in the Messenger. ‘Well, come on. Look lively. We’ve got to get back to the ship before five o’clock.’

‘Five o’clock?’ queried Emily.

‘Yes,’ said the Messenger. ‘That’s our next transmogrification time.’ None of the children felt like asking exactly how transmogrification worked; they were too busy trying to keep up with the Messenger who was striding out, with a steely look in his eyes.

While the Messenger and the children had been at Gaston’s café, Mr. Million and Miss Schutzenfuffen had arrived at Beaulieu Railway Station and got off the TGV quickly, before it rushed back to Paris.

‘To the Gendarmerie!’ shouted Mr. Million. ‘I expect they’ll all be at lunch. It’s what the French do between twelve and two, confound it. But we must try.’ Miss Schutzenfuffen thought this French habit a good idea. She was now beginning to feel hungry as she got used to the idea of dashing around with Mr. Million looking for the missing children.

‘Aha!’ shouted Mr. Million. ‘Here we are!’ he said, pointing at the local Gendarmerie with its flag waving listlessly in the breeze. They went in and up to the counter where a large fat Sergeant was eating a large fat sandwich and reading an ‘Asterix’ comic.

‘Bong Jewer, Monsewer.’ said Mr. Million. The Sergeant wiped his mouth and said, ‘Jour, messieurs, dames.’

‘We are looking for some lost children,’ explained Mr. Million.

‘Ah, oui.’

‘English.’

‘Ah, oui.’

‘Four of them’

‘Ah, oui.’

‘Two girls, two boys.’

‘Ah, oui.’

‘Have they been seen?’

‘Ah, oui.’

‘Eh?’

‘Ah, non.’

‘Can you send out an alert for them?’

‘Ah, non.’

‘Eh?’

‘Ah, oui.’

‘Shall I empty your waste-paper basket over your head?’ said Mr. Million.

‘Ah, oui,’ replied the Sergeant.

‘I knew it!’ said Mr. Million, purple in the face. ‘He doesn’t understand a word! Come!’

And he dragged Miss Schutzenfuffen out of the Gendarmerie and down the street.

‘Foreign idiot,’ he grumbled. Miss Schutzenfuffen suppressed a giggle. They walked down to the beach, Mr. Million still grumbling and cursing. Miss Schutzenfuffen was just working up courage to suggest going for a lunch, when Mr. Million stopped, grabbing her arm tightly.

‘Ouch,’ said Miss Schutzenfuffen.

‘Look! That white cruiser! It’s the one we saw back at the island!’ exclaimed Mr.

Million. ‘Yes! That must be where they are! We have them!’ Miss Schutzenfuffen was blowing her nose at the time so she saw nothing because almost immediately, the white cruiser disappeared. It was gone! One minute it was there, and the next it had completely disappeared!

‘Miss Schutzenfuffen,’ said Mr. Million. ‘I think I had better go to a chemist and get some pills. There’s something wrong with my eyes.’

On the cruiser, the transmogrification was taking effect with its usual blinding white flash. The cruiser re-materialised on the other side of the Mediterranean. The children looked out of the port-holes into the very bright sunlight.

‘There,’ said the Messenger. ‘Do you see it? Vlad’s stronghold.’ And there it was. A huge wooden fortress just as Albert had described it. Squatting on the sea and the land, where the sun did not seem to shine.

‘Time to work out a plan of attack,’ said the Messenger.

