

The Fearless Four. Chapter Four.

‘Just so.’ said the Messenger. ‘Beaulieu sur Mer.’

‘But how did we get here?’ cried the children.

‘I told you. Transmogrification,’ he replied.

‘Well, what is transockification?’ asked Twinblade.

‘It’s a way of getting from here to there without doing a lot of travelling time,’ said the Messenger, peering out of the port-hole.

‘How does it work?’ asked Emily, ‘Is it space travel or something?’

‘Not exactly,’ said the Messenger. ‘Can any of you see your parents’ cruiser?’

The children peered out of the port-hole. They looked puzzled.

‘Right,’ said the Messenger. ‘Everybody up on deck. We’ll find them.’

Up on deck the children ran about, looking at all the other cruisers. There were many, bobbing gently on the waters of the bay and glinting in the sunshine.

‘I don’t understand this,’ said Bloodblade. ‘They’re not here. Where are they?’

‘Ooh’, cried Lily, ‘What’s happened to them?’

‘Nothing’s happened to them,’ replied Emily. ‘Don’t worry. They’re here somewhere.’

Ginger appeared, looking worried.

‘Have you located the cruiser, Ginger?’ asked the Messenger.

‘No, sir,’ he replied. ‘It was here, but then it disappeared. And I can’t get any radio contact’.

‘Oh no’, said Lily, sniffing a bit. ‘They’re lost somewhere’.

‘H’m’, said the Messenger. ‘Then we had better go and enquire in the town. We’ll split up and get it done more quickly. Emily and Twin do the High Street, Blue and Lily the beach. I’ll do the big hotels. Ginger, keep searching.’

They got into the rowing boat at the back of the Messenger’s cruiser and rowed to the beach. They asked at every shop in the High Street, from the dubious antiques shop at one end to the posh baker’s at the other, if anyone had seen Monsieur and Madame Fearless recently. They did the same in the beach cafes and even climbed the light-house to ask the light-house keeper. And the Messenger checked with the head-porters in the big hotels. Back on the cruiser they compared notes over a cup of tea and digestive biscuits. Always the answer had been the same: Yes, they were here, so nice to see them again, tres gentils comme toujours, but had not been seen for a week at least, go and ask at the Mairie and the Gendarmerie, let us all know what happens, ‘Courage’, mes enfants, and similar kindness. Lily was tearful.

‘Oh, Lily, do stop snivelling’ said Twin.

‘Be quiet, Twinblade,’ admonished Emily.

‘What are we going to do, sir’ asked Bloodblade of the Messenger.

‘I shall have to make some further enquiries.’

‘Where, sir?’

‘In the underworld.’

‘Oooh,’ said the children. And then thought a bit.

‘But why the underworld?’ asked Emily. ‘It sounds dangerous.’

‘Not because I fear your parents have met with a misadventure in the underworld, but because my friend Gaston le Ventre knows most of what goes on around here.’

'Ooh, can we come?' asked Bloodblade.

'Of course. They're your parents and Gaston is not known to eat children.'

'Oh, oh,' said Lily.

They went back to Beaulieu and they all squeezed into the biggest taxi they could find.

'Gaston's place, please' said the Messenger.

'Eh?' asked the driver.

'Gaston's place.'

'I don't like going there, Monsieur'.

'Oh, look. You just take us there and drop us off. You don't have to wait for us.'

'Sacre Bleu, I should hope not!' said the driver. 'But I do not like it.'

'Don't worry,' said the Messenger, 'I'll tell Gaston that you are not to be bothered in any way.'

'Bon. Merci, Monsieur. But, you know, there are nasty people there.'

'Yes, I know. Many of them are my friends,' the Messenger informed him.

The driver turned round in astonishment to look at him and nearly drove into a dustbin lorry.

'Sacre Bleu,' he said again and drove all the way shaking his head. They went down some side roads and then more side roads and then smaller roads and it seemed to be getting darker, so close were the roofs of the houses to each other. Eventually they arrived outside a large café with a bright neon sign flashing on and off. It read GASTON'S. The street was badly lit and hardly any sunlight came through. They all got out of the taxi and stood on the pavement. It was quiet and there was nobody about.

'Bonjour, Schtoupf. Ca va?', said the Messenger. Out of the shadows came a large hunched figure. It was tucking a knife back into its shirt and grinning.

'Bonjour, Chef,' it said. 'Ow are you? In good form?'

'All the better for seeing you, Schtoupf. When are you going to come and join my team?'

'Hah!', said Schtoupf. 'Non merci! I like it here.' He looked confidentially at the Messenger and winked. The door to the café opened and out stepped a man with an extremely fat belly.

'Alors, Messenger! You trying to steal my men, again?' said the man.

'Gaston' said the Messenger, 'I am happy to see you. You look well. And you know Schtoupf would never leave you. He's too much enamoured of your sister.'

'Ah, Fifi,' said Gaston. 'She is something, that one. But she don't think of Schtoupf. Pas du tout. Only dancing. 'Ave you come'ere to sell these children?'

'Oh, oh,' cried Lily.

'Don't worry, Lily, he's only joking,' said the Messenger, kindly.

'Come in and 'ave an absinthe, mon ami,' said Gaston. 'I 'ave a nice little red wine for the children.' They walked into the café. The noise was deafening, cigarette smoke wreathed the air, a band was playing a loud paso doble, some couples were dancing energetically, all the customers seemed to be talking at once. A dark girl dancing on her own waved to the Messenger. A waiter smiled and bowed and showed them to a table. As though by magic he produced a bottle of absinthe, a carafe of water, six glasses and a bottle of wine.

'Try zis wine, mes enfants,' said Gaston, leaning forward with difficulty because of his

huge stomach and then handing the bottle to the waiter. The waiter poured the drinks. The Messenger took up the carafe and poured a good quantity of water into each of the children's glasses.

'Must keep a clear head,' he said with a smile.

'You 'ave come to see me wiz a problem, mon ami?' asked Gaston.

'Yes,' replied the Messenger, 'These children have lost their parents. Who are normally at Beaulieu this time of year. Their parents are nowhere to be found but we know they were here a week ago.'

'Ah. Not good to lose ze parents,' observed Gaston. At a table at the back of the café an argument had started. Two red-faced men were shouting at each other. Suddenly they pulled out knives and started circling round, spitting and jabbing their knives at each other. Nobody paid any attention, except Gaston.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'It is ze absinthe. It is too strong for some.' He walked over to the fighting men and stood by them, his hands on his hips. The fighting men suddenly noticed him standing there and faltered. Then they stopped fighting. They put their knives away and sat down. 'Pardon, Gaston,' one of them said. The other added, 'Oui, oui. Pardon, Monsieur.' Gaston nodded his head and left them.

'Whew!' said Bloodblade.

'Alors,' said Gaston, 'What is the name of the children's parents?'

'Fearless' replied the Messenger.

'Comment? What?' said Gaston leaning forward as much as his belly would allow.

'I see that means something to you,' said the Messenger.

'Nom d'une pipe!' shouted Gaston. 'Monsieur Fearless is ze man who broke ze bank at Monte Carlo!'

'What's he mean, sir?' asked Emily, excitedly.

'It means your father won a great deal of money at the Casino,' replied the Messenger.

'Is that why he comes here?' he asked.

'Oh yes,' said Bloodblade, 'But usually he loses. Mummy gets very angry.'

'So, Gaston,' said the Messenger. 'Monsieur Fearless wins a lot of money and then he disappears. Curious, isn't it?'

'Maybe not so much, mon ami.' said Gaston, looking serious.

'Ah,' said the Messenger. 'You see, children, Gaston knows everything. What are you thinking, old friend?'

'It was a week ago when 'e break ze bank. At zat time we'ad an unusual visitor to this area.'

'Do I know him?' asked the Messenger.

'Oh, oui. You know 'im. Ze filthy pirate, Vlad ze Inhaler!' Suddenly at the mention of that name the café went completely quiet. Some customers were getting out of their seats and producing knives. Others were rolling up their shirt sleeves and looking fierce.

'Non, non! Rien!' shouted Gaston. Everybody relaxed and went back to their cards and drinking and talking.

'Vlad the Inhaler,' said the Messenger. 'That's bad.'

