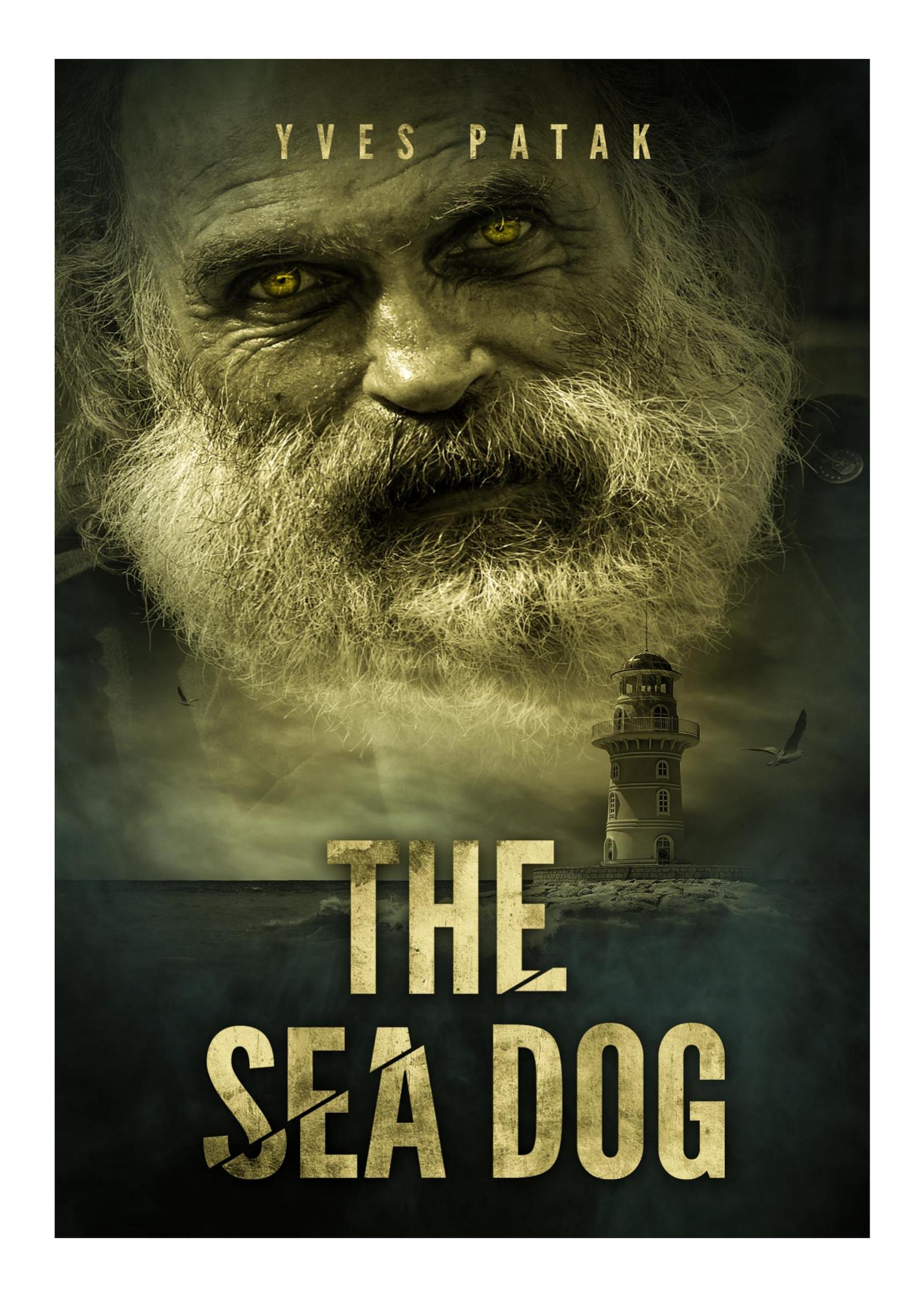


YVES PATAK



THE
SEA DOG

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About the author: Yves Patak, MD, physician and writer, sees himself as a modern Dr. Jekyll and Mister Hyde: psycho- and hypnotherapist by day, he spends his nights writing about the dark side of the human soul and the eerie entities between the dimensions.

Inspired by Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King, Patak's pet subject became the mystery thriller.

Published novels: Der Screener, Tödlicher Schatten, Ace Driller, Himmel und Hölle, Null Bock auf Karma, Gespräche mit Luzi (latter also translated into English and Spanish).

A bank of clouds hovered over the Old Port of Marseille — dark, sprawling thunderclouds gathering for the deluge to come. There was a breeze, filled with electricity and the sea's tangy smell, whirling dust and scraps of paper into eddies.

On the Digue du Large, on the outmost end of the harbor's wall, a teenage boy sat leaning against the lighthouse, hugging his muscular right leg, the scrawny and visibly shorter left one stretched out before him. For all of his life, Jerome's stunted left leg had been the chief cause for misery and anger.

Four inches ... four fucking inches to ruin one's life.

There were special surgeons, he'd heard. Operations that could extend his leg to proper length. But of course such marvels were not for the likes of him. Not for orphans and paupers, but for the rich. For the jet set and their spoilt bastard brats.

He extended his leg and looked at his worn-out sneakers. The left sole barely reached the right ankle. At times, he had wished to be a believer, so he could curse God for His cruelty, but in his most secret heart he knew God existed as little as private sector hospitals for orphans.

Just as little as justice.

Ever since he'd learned to walk — no, *hobble!* — Jerome's malformed limb and the consequent limp had made him a target for ridicule among his peers. 'Watch out, here comes the Hobblit!' they'd cry, or 'Run, guys, or you'll catch the limp-wimp virus!'

Hell is repetition, as Jerome once read, and that was the simple truth. Every day the boys would taunt him about his 'chicken bone leg' until he crept away, crimson with shame and fury. There was no point in running after them. The other kids made damn sure they didn't come within Jerome's reach when he was enraged. To compensate for his impaired leg, Jerome was pumping iron with a vengeance. His strong arms were fearful weapons, and on more than one occasion he had beaten the living daylights out of some foolish fellow who'd ventured too close.

He picked up a pebble and threw it into the sea. Life as a cripple was hell in the communal Orphanage de Saint Patrice on Rue Rabattu, near the commercial port. Most every day of his life he'd been dodging the poisonous arrows of mockery, and the constant malevolence of the other boys — for it was a gender segregation orphanage — had turned his heart into something that felt like a tight fist.

Naturally, the orphanage's warden and teachers showed no great interest in defending the scowling youngster, and the vicious circle took its course. Over the years, Jerome became a withdrawn, hostile boy with no friends — except maybe for Blaise, his room mate — and every morning he woke to the bleak knowledge that there was no future worth living for.

He stood and stretched his aching body. Like every day, he had limped all the way from the orphanage to the sea, over the Pont de la Pinède to the harbor wall, had slogged along the two miles to the wall's western tip. What was a one hour walk to a healthy person seemed like a marathon to Jerome, and yet he felt compelled to come here day after day, to the lighthouse, to this vantage point overlooking the Old Harbor, the ancient castle of Fort Saint-Jean with its tall watch tower at the harbor's entrance, the splendid Palais du Pharo, the magnificent Notre-Dame de la Garde basilica on top of the hill, the azure Mediterranean Sea — and the Islands of Marseille.

The old geezer's hunting grounds!

He flicked a dark lock of hair from his tan face, waiting for dusk to come. The harbor wall had been his safe haven for nearly two years, but now there was a new reason for his being here.

A new purpose.

He absently rubbed the small of his back. Due to his twisted posture, his back hurt day and night. The orphanage's funds only covered the most basic medical care, and there was no orthopedic help available to align his stunted leg. He crossed his arms, muscles bulging his shirtsleeves. There was a stone pine in the orphanage's back yard, a tall tree with a climbing rope. As a part of his daily workout, he would climb that rope up and down, up and down until the burning pain in his arms and hands became unbearable, erased his

misery. Now, at the age of fifteen, his thick arm muscles stood in blatant contrast to his emaciated left leg. Of course, each time he climbed the rope some of the boys would dance around the tree and chant *,big bad monkey, stupid as a donkey, bring me a banana!* And inevitably he'd race down the rope while they scattered, laughing and screaming like hyenas. Yes, those boys would scoff and sneer, but they kept their distance. And they had no idea that his muscles would play a major role in a completely new plan of action soon.

In his escape from this living hell.

Dusk had set in, painting the sky in shades of tangerine. Jerome took a sip of water from the bottle he'd brought along, watching the bottleneck access to the Old Port.

Any minute now.

As if on cue, a sleek sailing yacht cruised across the strait between the Pharo peninsula and the Digue du Large — a majestic three-masted ship.

What a beauty, Jerome thought as the yacht glided toward the open sea. *And sure as hell worth a goddamn fortune.*

As usual, the old sea dog who commanded the yacht didn't set sails, but calmly motored away toward the Frioul islands two miles to the southwest. *But which one is his target?* Jerome wondered. *Or is his secret destination somewhere beyond the islands?*

Squinting against the glare, he watched the yacht floating across the burning sea. The ship's name — La Najade — stood in tall black letters on the stern.

Ever since Jerome had seen the old sea dog standing on the yacht's polished deck he had smelled a rat. The geezer had the bearded, ragged face and clothes of a bum, which in itself was all right. But

could such a tramp be the proud owner of a yacht that had to cost at least ten million Euros? No way, José! Not in a million years.

The conclusion was easy. The sea dog must have gotten rich so quickly that he hadn't found the time to adapt his public appearance to his new wealth. And Jerome was determined to find the source of said riches — and to cut himself a decent slice of the cake.

For over a month, Jerome had been watching the sea dog. From the harbor wall. From the Old Port. Hell, he even attempted to follow him into town once or twice, but each time the old man had lost him, his long stork-like legs carrying him like seven-league-boots. After those failed attempts, Jerome didn't dare following the man anymore for fear of drawing his attention. Despite his age the sea dog was a daunting figure: tall and gaunt, gray eyes squinting out from beneath bushy white brows, the weather-beaten face a grim tangle of wrinkles and lines, the unkempt salt-and-pepper beard lending him a buccaneer-like appearance. The clothes he sported stood in stark contrast to his yacht's lavishness: an olive-green fisherman's vest, stained corduroy trousers, black rubber boots with frayed cuffs. The ‚Najade‘ and the old man matched like chalk and cheese, and Jerome vowed to himself to sniff out the sea dog's secret — or die trying.

There was one single computer with online access at the orphanage, and the waiting list for a half hour session was long. When at last Jerome booted up the computer and searched for the owner of ‚La Najade‘, all he found was an offshore company called *Pinctada Inc.* No name, no further information about the company's direction of trade.

Damn!

So Jerome began to question boat owners at the Old Port and hit the bull's eye straight off. A balding man reading *Le Figaro* on a cutter close to the Najade had a story to tell.

„The ole prince charming on that glam cruiser?“ He nodded. „People around here call him Père Braque. Although I suspect that on the quiet they call him lotsa other names.“

„Like what?“ Jerome prompted.

„Like stinkpot, smellfungus, piece of shit and such. Want a piece of advice? Steer clear of that guy.“

Jerome cocked his head. „Why, do you think he’s ... dangerous?“

The man on the cutter shrugged. „Guess he’s too old to be dangerous to a young lad like yourself, but you never know.“

„Strange.“ Jerome frowned at the Najade, which stood anchored mere twenty yards away. „I can’t believe such a grumpy old bum owns such a beaut!“

The man on the cutter lowered his voice. „Good question. Well, rumor has it this guy who walks around like a vagrant is one of the richest men in Marseille.“

„No joke!“ Jerome called out. „And what’s his biz?“

The man shook his head. „I have no idea. But between you and me and the gatepost, I’d bet it’s something shady ...“

Of course, there were hundreds of people with the surname Braque listed in Marseille’s phone directory and the Internet, and with no first name to go, Jerome faced another dead end.

Just you wait, old man ... I’ll get behind your little secret — and I’ll make you share the bounty!

What started out as a juvenile pipe dream turned into outright obsession. Every afternoon after school Jerome limped across the harbor wall and watched the Najade leave the Old Port right after dusk, watched it coast away on its south-west course until it shrank out of sight, a sleek, streamlined beauty melting into a crimson sunset. The yacht invariably headed in the general direction of the Frioul archipelago, toward the Île Pomègues, and came back around midnight.

Where the hell is he going?

Jerome knew the story about the Count of Monte Cristo, and he sure as hell wasn't the fool to believe in old wives' tales. There were no hidden treasures, neither on the Île d'If, nor on any other of the Frioul Islands. But there had to be *something* out there ... something closely linked to the old geezer's wealth!

There was a missing piece in the jigsaw. Jerome had no clue what Père Braque was doing during daytime. So the next day, Jerome skipped school to ramp up his surveillance.

He didn't have to wait long. At nine o'clock in the morning a telescopic bridge grew from the yacht's stern and the old sea dog stepped off the Najade, marched straight toward the city, a bulgy burlap slung over his shoulder. Jerome's heartbeat quickened. *That's it! Whatever is in that bag, it's linked to the man's fortune!*

One hour later, the old man came back, the duffel bag strangely slack this time. With long strides he moved along harbor and disappeared in the Najade's belly.

Jerome made up his mind.

He needed an associate, someone who could follow the man into the city, and the only person who came into question was Blaise. Did Jerome trust his sometimes quixotic roommate well and truly? Maybe. Did he have a choice? No siree. But there was a common bond. Just like himself, Blaise was an outcast, except that in his case it wasn't a physical handicap that made the boy a target for nasty attacks, but his fancy dream to become a medical doctor. *A physician, for Chrissake!* Most of the orphanage's children lived in the soul-numbing certainty that theirs was a bleak future as odd-job men at best, as vagrants or convicts at worst. Blaise's ambition to visit the Sorbonne in Paris and become a physician seemed like heresy, like an arrogant blow in their collective face, and they bullied him just like they bullied Jerome for his crippled leg and warped gait.

Thunder resounded from the west, startling Jerome out of his brooding. Noon had come, and the sky had turned a menacing purple. He gazed at the Najade, solidly anchored in its mooring, then scrambled to his feet and limped across the harbor wall. Lightning

ripped the sky apart, followed by an ear-shattering clap of thunder. Then the downpour came, a deluge, and the heavy drops stung Jerome's skin like cold pebbles. He didn't care. His mind was set on his plan.

Blaise listened to Jerome's plan without saying a word, his blue eyes intent. *Eager*, Jerome thought, assured by what he saw. He knew that behind Blaise's cherubic looks dwelled a sharp mind — a mind that understood that the bedrock for their escape from the orphanage was money.

Lots of it.

“So what's the plan, exactly?” Blaise asked. “I follow the old guy and then what?”

Jerome clicked his tongue. „Don't know. Guess we'll have to play it by ear.”

„Pretty vague.“

„Yep.“

A high five sealed the deal. While Blaise went downstairs to the tiny library to study, Jerome hit the pillow, dreaming of a new life in abundance.

There were no prefects at the Orphanage de Saint Patrice. It was child's play to steal away through the tall windows on the main floor at any time of day. The custodians and teachers didn't care much about their wards. Every year there were one or two runaways

reported, desperate kids who eventually were escorted back by the police and given hell by the principal — if they didn't end up dead or missing, that was.

The next morning Jerome and Blaise both cut school and headed for the Old Port. Like spies they stood behind a gas station on the Quai du Port and watched the *Najade*. Five minutes before nine o'clock the lights coming from the portholes under deck went out.

"He's making a move!" Blaise squinted at the yacht. „Right on time, just like you said!“

Jerome nodded, his expression grim. "You ready?"

"Anytime, buddy.“

A soft drone came from the *Najade*'s direction. The telescopic bridge came out, and Père Braque stalked ashore, duffel bag over his shoulder.

"Your turn!" Jerome whispered.

Blaise nodded. „Catch ya later!“

The boy who wanted to become a physician waited for a beat, then followed the old man into the city.

Keeping a safe distance, Blaise followed Père Braque through the maze of Marseille's old quarter. The narrow streets were crowded, and Blaise easily blended into the stream of passersby. A whiff of mixed odors tickled his nose, lavender and roses from the nearby flower market, rotting garbage and dog turds from the cobbled alleys.

Duffel bag over his shoulder, Père Braque strode forward like a man with a mission. The air was warm already, and soon sweat was running down Blaise's brow, stinging his eyes. *Where's he heading for?* The duffel bag lurching about on Braque's back clearly wasn't

empty, and Blaise felt a growing tingle of curiosity. What on earth was in that bag?

Blaise turned a corner — and recoiled. The old man stood before a jewelry store’s awning. Iron sliding shutters protected the display window and the door. There were no lights within the shop. *Still closed ... so what’s he doing there?* Blaise glanced at the glittering letters on the awning, letters made of fake pearls:

La Perle de Marseille

The sea dog rapped his knuckles against the shutters. A moment later, the door shutter rolled upward with a soft creak. Someone opened the door and Père Braque disappeared in the shop.

Strange, Blaise thought. From afar, he watched the dark store from behind a corner. He didn’t have to wait long. Ten minutes later, the old man emerged, duffel bag slung over his shoulder —only that this time the bag seemed empty again.

He’s selling something to the jeweler! Blaise concluded that the sea dog didn’t get paid in cash, but had the jeweler wire the money to some offshore account. *But what’s the merchandise he’s selling?*

With his long strides, the sea dog walked away, his grim expression seemingly unaltered, but underneath lay a gleam of ... what? Satisfaction?

Blaise thought hard and quick. Follow the man — or talk to the jeweler?

The jeweler!

He straightened his shoulders and knocked on the heavy door, grateful the shutter hadn’t come down again. The door opened and a squat, toad-like man gave him a suspicious once-over. Blaise flashed him his most charming smile.

“Bonjour M’sieur. My name’s Frédéric Dupont. I’m coming on behalf of our school, the Collège Foreville.”

”Sorry, boy, shop’s closed.“

Before the man could close the door again, Blaise held up his hands.

”M’sieur, please! Just one minute!“

”Why, is your school interested in pearls?“ The squat man — the owner, as Blaise assumed — was clearly impatient to get rid of his unsolicited visitor, all the while assessing if there was a deal in the air.

”Indeed, M’sieur. Our school conducts a project on pearls. Their history, manufacture and trade. Our teacher, Madame Truffeau, told us your shop is the finest place for pearls in all of Marseille. I was wondering if you would kindly share some of your knowledge, so I can write about it in our school’s magazine?“

The jeweler stroked his walrus moustache, appreciating the opportunity for free advertisement. He looked at his watch and sighed.

“All right, my young friend. Five minutes. And your teacher’s right, there’s no jeweler who knows more about the pearl trade than my humble self.” He chortled, amused by his own idiom, and waved Blaise in. He then waddled around the counter and put two manicured hands on the glass top. “All right — what is it exactly you want to know?“

”Everything!“

”That’s the spirit!“ The jeweler smiled, pleased. Soon he got carried away with a self-contented sermon on his noble business.

“How about a pearl’s value?“ Blaise prompted. “Could one say the bigger the better?“

The jeweler pursed his lips, considering the question. “Not necessarily. There are many factors, you see. The color, the smoothness, the provenience etcetera. But“ — he held up a chubby finger — ”I must admit that the most valuable pearls I currently have in store are the biggest and the best indeed. I daresay the finest pearls in the world!“

Unconcealed pride in those words. Blaise affected incredulity.

“The finest in the world? Jeez! Would it be possible to see one of those?”

The jeweler checked his watch once more. “I’m afraid they’re presently all being cleaned and prepared for being manufactured into jewelry of all kinds.”

“May I ask where those supreme pearls come from, M’sieur?”

“Don’t know much about the trade, do you?” A patronizing chortle. „There’s a gentleman who provides me with those pearls, and as you can guess, he wouldn’t let me in on his little secret, would he? Why, if I knew where he harvests those pearls, I wouldn’t need him anymore, would I?”

“Jeez, you’re right,” Blaise said sheepishly.

The jeweler lowered his voice. “Those pearls are as big as golf balls. That supplier of mine drives a hard bargain, and I have to balance out the pearls’ weight in gold.”

Blaise’s eyes widened. “Big as golf balls? You must be joking.”

„I never joke about my trade,” the jeweler deadpanned. ”This guy found himself a real cornucopia somewhere. I suspect he imports those pearls from the Far East, probably the Philippines.”

“Is that where the biggest pearls come from?” *Keep talking*, Blaise thought.

“Some of them,” the jeweler said. “The biggest pearls originate from a pearl oyster called *Pinctada Maxima*. A huge clam, weighs easily ten pounds. Produces pearls up to an inch in diameter. But my supplier’s pearls are bigger and shinier than any pearl ever produced by a *Pinctada*.”

Blaise decided to venture onto the thin ice. “Wouldn’t it be easy to find out where they come from?”

The jeweler shot Blaise a hard look. “Don’t you get funny ideas.” He bent over the counter, his pudgy hands on the glass. ”You’re young, but I can see you’re not an idiot, so let me give you a piece of advice: any business that involves a lot of money is *serious* business,

and those people who push the money around are tough as nails. If you try to follow someone like my supplier to his secret hunting grounds, you might find out the meaning of serious trouble.“

Blaise blinked. ”But M’sieur, what if that supplier dies? Then his secret just dies with him?“

A wounded expression came across the jeweler’s face. “Believe me, I’d give my right arm to find out where those masterpieces come from. They must stem from a variety of giant clam that normally does not produce pearls. There are pearl farmers all over the world searching for the right trigger substance to coax such clams into producing giant pearls.“ He shook his head. ”Seems like my supplier found the right stuff to fertilize the right clams.“

”But Madame Truffeau says you just need to place a grain of sand into a clam to stimulate it into pearl-making?“

A derisive huff from the jeweler. “Cock-and-bull. Nobody really knows what makes a clam produce pearls.“ He checked his watch once more. ”All right boy. Time to call it a day.“

“Thank you so much for your time, M’sieur!“

Blaise left the shop, his heart beating fast. Behind him, he heard the clatter of the metal shutter rolling down.

Later that day, the two boys sat behind the gas station on the Quai du Port again, watching the Najade.

“Giant pearls,” Jerome said, eyes glinting. ”Holy shit, I knew the old fart is the key to our new life!“

“You should’ve seen how the jeweler kept avoiding the geezer’s name!“

„Blaise, we must find his hunting grounds!“

„What if they’re in the Philippines?”

“They’re not.” Jerome’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Why would he leave for the Frioul Islands every damn evening? He’s hiding something out there!”

The blonde boy looked doubtful. „Maybe. Maybe not.“

„Blaise, if you wanna become a physician, we gotta get out of that fucking orphanage or die trying!”

“And you better believe it!”

Their hands connected in a high five. For a moment, they both gazed at the Old Port, each dwelling on his own thoughts.

Blaise threw a pebble into the sea. “The jeweler says those pearl traders can get real ugly.”

“Don’t worry.” Jerome flexed his arm muscles. „Rich or not, the old sea dog must be pushing seventy. Besides, we’ll tail him from a distance.”

“What if he’s got a gun?”

Jerome nodded at the coil of rope at his feet, a hundred yards of neatly wound up hemp. “We’ll be invisible.” He glanced at the setting sun, then got to his feet. „Let’s do it. The Najade will be leaving in half an hour.“

Jerome grabbed the heavy coil of rope, and they walked along the harbor, to a spot some fifty yards away from the Najade. A quick rock-paper-scissors, and each had his part assigned. When nobody seemed to be watching them, Blaise quickly stripped down to his underpants and glided into the murky water. Jerome handed him one end of the rope, and Blaise swam to the Najade, careful to stay underwater most of the time. When he reached the yacht’s stern, he quickly attached the rope on a metal loop right underneath the telescope plank. Then he swam back to Jerome, and they both waited for the Najade to leave.

„What if he looks back?” Blaise asked after a while.

“He won’t.” Jerome gave his friend a reassuring smile. “The old man is a routine guy. I’ve been watching him for a long time, and he never changes a tittle of his routine. Once the Najade is sea-borne, he never looks back.”

Blaise rolled his tongue inside his cheek. “What if he does this time?”

Jerome snorted. “He’ll haul you in, release a tirade. Rant some. So what? Hey, you’re just a kid getting up to some nonsense!”

Blaise mulled this over. “From your lips to God’s ears. Christ, I think he’s leaving!”

They both looked and saw the Najade as it left its mooring.

„Quick!“ Blaise urged. „Help me with the rope!“

Seconds later, the blonde boy slid into the water once more, the rope securely tied around his waist. As the yacht cruised toward the port’s exit, Jerome fed the rope into the water, until there were only then yards left.

„Easy now“, Jerome whispered. „Let it glide through your hands, but slowly, so you adapt to the yacht’s speed!“

Blaise looked up at him, his face painted crimson by the sunset. He nodded, then slid away, his hands around the rope.

The next day, there was one boy less sitting at the refectory’s long tables. By noon, Blaise was reported missing. Monsieur Dupont, principal of the orphanage, summoned Jerome to his office.

“All right, Jerome.“ Dupont steepled his fingers. „Blaise is your room mate. Any idea where he is?”

Jerome, nauseous with fear and guilt, kept a straight face. “Non, Monsieur.”

The principal frowned. "Seriously?"

„I really don't know, Monsieur.“ Jerome showed a concern he didn't have to fake. „He didn't tell me anything.“

Over the rim of his spectacles, the principal's pale eyes scrutinized the youth. "Let's assume he's decided to part company with us. Simply ran away. Would you tell me if you knew about it?"

"Oui, Monsieur."

The principal sighed and took off his glasses. "All right. Let me know if you hear something about him. Anything."

"Oui, Monsieur."

Back in the room he used to share with the missing boy, Jerome bit his lip.

Blaise ... where are you?

After school, Jerome spent the rest of the day on the harbor wall, torn between worry and anger. What should he do? Report their caper to the flics? And what exactly would he report? That they had planned on following an old man to his secret pearl breeding grounds, and that Blaise had gone missing in action? Jerome had an idea that he might go to jail for that.

He sat where he and Blaise had made their plans for a brighter future, listening to the waves' soft murmur, smelling the tangy smell of fish and seaweed. Gulls glided across the skies, screaming doom over the earth. Hours passed, and Jerome felt like screaming with helpless frustration. Had the rope snapped, and Blaise was at this moment swimming for his life? Or dead already, his corpse sinking to the bottom of the sea, blind eyes wide open?

A strange idea came across his mind. What if the sea dog had taken Blaise prisoner? The notion was crazy, but then again ...

I must find him, Jerome thought. Him and the pearls.

But he needed a new plan. Whatever happened, the rope might have been a crackpot idea in the first place. There had to be another way to tail the sea dog ...

The idea came in a flash. *No need for rope!* As the sun began to sink toward the horizon, he stood behind the gas station by the port. From afar, he watched the sea dog doing his tour of inspection on deck. When he'd ascertained that Père Braque wasn't looking his way, Jerome hobbled to the dock, a good twenty yards away from the Najade, took off his sneakers and slid into the water. With his clothes on, he swam toward the yacht bow with slow, powerful strokes. He looked up at the anchor's thick chain dangling from the hawsehole above. Holding on to the chain, hiding under the overhanging hull, he waited.

Twenty minutes passed. A hum came from within the bow, then the telltale rattle of the anchor chain being pulled in.

He let the chain glide through his hands until he saw the anchor rising up from the depth.

Now!

He let his hands glide from the chain to the anchor's center pole, careful not to have his fingers pulped by the heavy links. Then his feet found the metal fork, and he let himself being pulled toward the hawsehole, squatting, making himself as small as possible.

The Najade's powerful engines roared to life.

Slam-dunk!

Pictures of the climbing rope in the orphanage raced through his mind, and a rare grin lit up his face. He felt like a buccaneer, light-headed with excitement. Sitting on the anchor, it was impossible for the sea dog to spot him — still he had to hope nobody else would see him sitting on the anchor.

Nobody did.

Five minutes later the *Najade* had left the port and was seaborne, heading for the Frioul Islands.

Holding on to the center pole, Jerome wove a leg over each prong and sat on the anchor — far from comfortable, but all right. *Jesus ... I'm really doing this!* For the first time in his life, he was out on the open sea. Soon they coasted past the Île d'If, and in the distance he could make out the castle's silhouette. Straight ahead, the long chain of the Frioul Island stretched into the darkening sea like the back of a giant wale.

The *Najade* kept a steady southwestern course, cruising along the rocky shore. At the island's southern tip, the ship made a turn to the right, hugging the western coastline. *He's circling the Île Pomègues!* Jerome frowned at the wastelands before him. Nothing but rocks, stones, boulders and the occasional shrub. Not the place where one expected to find anything of value.

They kept cruising past innumerable bays and coves that all looked the same to Jerome. The island seemed perfectly unpopulated, a forbidding and barren territory. Suddenly the sound of the engines changed, dwindled down to a soft drone, and the yacht slowed down. Very alert now, Jerome glanced around. The cove they were entering was hook-shaped, with steep rock walls surrounding them. From the sea, the yacht was invisible. The sky had turned eggplant purple, and the moon's pale sickle floated over the jagged cliffs above them. In the gloom Jerome discerned an oblong flat rock protruding from the stony shore, forming a natural landing stage. With practiced skill the sea dog landed at the stone pier, then Jerome felt himself floating down towards the water's dark surface as the anchor came down, slowly, making it easy for him to glide off. Moving his arms and legs slowly, he swam close to the yacht's hull so the old man couldn't see him from the deck.

The engines stalled, the sudden silence startling. Carefully Jerome peeked around the stern and saw an extendable plank growing toward the natural jetty. *What wonders money can buy*, he marveled. Even with a fraction of the sea dog's fortune, he could fix his leg! Hadn't Blaise mentioned that modern surgery could make short bones grow longer now?

A soft crunching sound as the plank connected with the landing stage. Beyond the jetty, all Jerome could see in the dying daylight were pebbles, gravel and more rocks. Floating with his nose barely above the water, he saw Père Braque step onto the plank. Jerome held his breath. *Don't look this way!*

The sea dog stood and surveyed the black-and-purple sky, then stalked along the landing in his peculiar, long-legged gait and disappeared between two boulders. *He's going for his hiding place ... where he keeps the pearls!* Jerome's chest grew tight with excitement. Like an alligator he glided towards the landing, keeping only his eyes above the surface now. The thin moon and an armada of stars reflected on the shimmering sea. *When the old man's gone I'll do my own reaping*, Jerome thought. He lifted his nose over the surface to catch some air, then submerged again.

When the old man's gone.

The thought's ambiguity sent a shiver over his back. He reached the shore, crept out of the water and climbed up to the two monolith-like boulders between which the sea dog had disappeared. *What if he lies in wait for me?* He pushed away the doubts. His golden ticket to freedom and happiness was waiting somewhere beyond those rocks — and, with some luck, Blaise. Maybe wounded, unconscious ... *or chained up*, a cold in his head voice whispered.

Resolutely, he stepped between the boulders — and nearly fell into a gaping hole. *Oh my God!* There was a steep, narrow tunnel between the rocks, a duct that led vertically into the ground. There were shallow breaches hewn into the rock face, crafted by strong, laborious hands. Jerome held his breath, listening for the sea dog's footsteps or any noises from below. Nothing but silence, and the soft whisper of waves from the cove. For a long moment, he gazed into the dark shaft. Then he took a deep breath and climbed down, relying on his hands rather than his eyes. The breaches in the rock offered comfortable footing. With each step, Jerome's senses seemed to grow keener. He could hear his own breath echoing off the rocky walls around him, sensed his heart swell and contract in his chest, felt every tiny groove and furrow in the stone.

A soft drone from below. Jerome froze. The sound of a small engine. *A generator?* He kept climbing down at a snail's pace until he

felt flat solid stone under his feet. There was a faint light to his left — the cone-shaped silhouette of a man-high passageway leading through the bedrock. He reached out and felt his way through the subterranean channel. As he proceeded, the drone grew louder, the light brighter. Ahead the tunnel opened into a vast, natural cave over thirty yards wide. Jerome’s jaw dropped as he took in the sight. *A subterranean lagoon!* The cavern was brightly lit, its vaulted roof studded with sharp stalactites. Beneath the cave’s dome sprawled a horseshoe-shaped lagoon. In its center stood a tripod fitted with powerful spotlights, a black cable snaking off into a bulky yellow machine, a generator of some kind.

Peeking around the tunnel’s mouth into the cave, Jerome looked out for the sea dog. *Where is he?* He made one tentative step into the cave. The gravelly crunch of a shoe on rock made Jerome stop dead in his tracks. He swirled around — and found himself staring at something horribly sharp.

“Looks like I caught myself a little snoop,” a gruff voice said.

The sea dog stood in a gunslinger stance, bowlegs apart, aiming a handheld spear gun at the boy’s face. The deadly harpoon sitting in its groove glowed like polished quartz. Jerome opened his mouth but couldn’t utter a word. *If his finger twitches ...* It was all he could do not to wet himself. The sea dog’s faded gray eyes were watching him, the deeply creased face hostile. From the beard’s wild tangle a well-chewed toothpick protruded, making small circles around the corner of his mouth.

“Move on, snoop. Into the cave.”

From close up, Père Braque looked like an old, slightly crazed warrior who’d been toughened by age rather than worn. With sickening dismay Jerome realized that even without the spear gun the sea dog could probably subdue him easily. Hands raised, the boy walked into the cave.

”Kneel down,” the old man commanded. Jerome complied without missing a beat. The cave’s floor was rough and surprisingly cold. Père Braque kept the weapon trained on Jerome’s head.

“Come for the pearls, just like the other boy, aye?”

Jerome stared up at him in terror. “What did you do to –”

“Shut up!” the sea dog spat. “I’m the one asking questions!” He scrutinized the boy like a horse dealer assessing a sickly nag, toothpick rotating. “And the first question is: what am I gonna do with you? Fuckin’ gutter snipe like you can’t hold his fuckin’ tongue, unless I cut it right outa your trap.”

“Non, Monsieur!” Jerome cried, loathing the panicky pitch of his own voice. “I won’t say a word, cross my heart and hope to die! I haven’t seen *anything!*”

The old man removed his toothpick, spat on the floor and put the toothpick back into his mouth.

“You’re scared shitless, aye. Seems like I caught myself a yellow-bellied little sissy.” Braque’s gaze wandered over Jerome’s arm muscles. “I’m gonna ask you a few questions, urchin. If you lie to me, I’m gonna skewer you like a tuna fish. Tell me: do you want to be rich?”

Jerome felt his breath catch in his throat. He had no idea what to answer. *What if it’s a trick question?* If he said yes, the sea dog was apt to impale him because Jerome was a hazard to his secret. If he said no, he might shoot him for lying.

“Yes.” A hoarse whisper. “I want to be rich, real rich. But I swear –

“

“Shut your fuckin’ trap!” the sea dog said flatly. “I can see you got yourself a pair of strong arms.” He began to circle Jerome, a predator appraising a wounded animal. “Do you think you can work hard like a real man, urchin? Till your hands bleed and your arms feel like they gonna fall right off your shoulders?”

Jerome considered this for only a second. “Oui, Monsieur!”

The sea dog kept pacing. “Don’t get your hopes up too fast, snoop. I’m just thinkin’ aloud. Maybe I could use some help. An associate of sorts. I’m gettin’ old. Look at my hands.”

He lifted the hand not holding the spear gun. Gnarled and knotted, it still looked powerful enough to uproot a tree.

“Friggin’ arthritis is giving me hell. My days of pryin’ open clams are counted. But I sure as hell ain’t gonna give up this bounty till I kick the bucket.” Braque’s tone was dry. Businesslike. “So here’s the deal. Either I kill you right here and now and feed you to the fish. Or you become my odd-job man. I’ll make you work like a slave. I’ll do the trade, you take care of the clams. You get three percent the first year. Five the second. The moment you give away my secret, you’re shark-fodder.”

Clams, Jerome thought. For a moment, he couldn’t grasp the old man’s meaning. Then he realized the sea dog was not only offering him to spare his life, but throwing in a job for good measure.

“M’sieur, I ... hell, sure! I’m the strongest kid my age, I can crack open clams all day long!”

The sea dog shot him a hard look. “Then stop jabberin’ and get up. No time to waste.”

He motioned Jerome to the lagoon’s shore with his spear gun.

“Don’t forget, I’ll be watching you — even when you think I’m not around. Only because I give you a crack at this don’t mean I trust a fuckin’ little thief like you.”

Jerome lowered his head, a well-calculated gesture.

“I’d do anything to get out of the orphanage. Anything at all.”

The sea dog spat out his toothpick and pointed at the lagoon. “Look at the water.”

Jerome followed the sea dog’s finger. At first he saw nothing but the lagoon’s opaque water. A brownish crust of seaweed lined the shore, giving off a pungent smell. Then his eyes widened in wonder. There were hundreds of giant clams sitting on a large metal net suspended two feet under the lagoon’s calm surface. Some clams were as big as truck hubcaps, their hulls dull shades of silver and grey, their lips lined with rainbow-colored mantle tissue.

“Say hello to *Tridacna Gigantea*,” the sea dog said. “My success story is very simple. I brought the first clams from the Far East some twenty years ago. They feel surprisingly comfortable in our cooler waters. Those clams live up to a hundred years, and they’re fertile little suckers.”

The old man hunkered down by the shore, put down the spear gun and rolled up his sleeve. Jerome looked at the sea dog’s back, torn between fear and a crazy impulse. *I could push him into the water. Then shoot him with his own spear gun.* The thought was exhilarating, but a cool voice within told him to wait. *I need to know more about the pearls.*

Père Braque pulled a plastic bag from a pocket in his vest and extracted a small object. Then he unhooked a knife from his belt.

“These are the tools you’re gonna use.”

Jerome frowned. A wedge-shaped piece of wood and a short knife with a hook-shaped tip. He had no clue what he was looking at.

The sea dog let the wedge gyrate through his gnarled fingers like a magician. “When you approach them clams, they shut their traps, quick as lightnin’. They just suck in the mantle tissue and play dead. That’s when you start wrestling them. You open them up a tiny crack with the knife, trying not to hurt them. Then you push in the wedge.”

He allegorized a clam with one hand and pushed the wedge-shaped piece into the crack between his thumb and fingers. “Push it all the way in. All I need is a half-inch gap to put in the trigger substance.”

“Trigger substance?”

“The trigger substance is the key to my success. Big fuckin’ secret.” He spat again. “If I think I can trust you after, say, half a year, and if you work your scrawny ass off for me, I might let you in on it.” Père Braque squinted at Jerome, looking very much like a bearded old vulture now. “The trigger substance is the only thing that makes them clams produce *this*.” He reached into his vest and produced a small silken pouch. With great care he removed its content and held it up into the spotlights’ bright glare.

Spellbound, Jerome stared at what had to be the largest, most beautiful pearl in the world.

”Mon dieu, it’s bigger than a quail’s egg!“

A soft, mystifying aura seemed to radiate from the mother of pearl, an elusive hue of white, gold and damask rose.

The sea dog nodded, seemingly enjoying the boy’s stupefaction. “You better believe it. I inoculate ten clams every day. That’s all my hands can manage these days. Their closing muscle is amazingly strong. Hard work to pry’em open. And only ten to twenty percent of ‘em eventually produce such pearls. To prove yourself, you’re gonna open fifty-six clams for me today. Put them wedges into their traps. When you’re through, I’ll inoculate them.”

Jerome gaped at the sea dog, unable to speak. *He’s really serious about taking me on! Christ, I really hit the mother lode!*

The sea dog interrupted his train of thoughts. “Stop gawking and step on the net. It’s metal, and it’s sharp, so keep your shoes on.”

He handed the boy the clam knife and the bag with the wedges. Jerome stepped forward and put a tentative foot on the net, between two giant clams. In a second, the clams retracted their colorful mantles and shut their traps.

Jerome shifted his weight, felt the net arch down a few inches, then steady. He rolled up his sleeves, bent down and grabbed one of the closed clams, meaning to pull it up to work on its lid. The clam wouldn’t budge an inch.

”No dice!“ the sea dog said. ”Them suckers weigh up to eight hundred pounds. You gotta work them underwater.“

Jerome squatted down, the cool water bringing up goose bumps on his legs. He applied the knife on the clam’s mouth. The clam’s surface was rough, yet slick with sea slime. His hands kept slipping, the hard shell cutting into his soft skin. At last he managed to slip the tip of the knife in. He struggled to get the wedge in, trying to find the right angle. The sea dog thrust a new toothpick into the corner of his mouth

and watched the boy, his lined face unreadable. After endless minutes Jerome cried out in triumph.

“Gotcha!”

The sea dog approached and bent to the water’s surface for a closer look.

“Good enough for starters. Now go to work, I got some stuff to do on the Najade. I’ll be back in an hour or two. Don’t rest till you’re done. And don’t budge from the cave.” He paused, then deadpanned: „I got cameras.“

“Oui, Monsieur. I’ll be through before you’re back.”

The old man harrumphed. „Don’t bet on it, urchin.“

In the bright artificial light of the cave, Jerome soon lost all sense of time. His hands had gone numb in the cool water, which was a blessing. His fingers were badly cut, and each time he plunged his hands into the water, fine red tendrils spiraled away from his skin, tadpoles of blood.

He didn’t mind the scrapes. The elation of still being alive and the prospect of making real money was pure opium, making him feel invulnerable and immortal. With a preternatural effort he pushed the last wedge into the fifty-sixth clam. He dragged himself out of the water and sat down by the lagoon’s shore, exhaustion washing over him at last. His palms were a ragged map of crisscrossing cuts, as though he had been crunching glass with his bare hands. The pain was a nasty rodent, gnawing away at his hands, his back, his legs. A *baptism in blood and pain*. He thought of the sea dog and his mention of the trigger substance. *One day soon he’ll let me in on his secret — and then ...*

The thought of killing somebody was no novelty to Jerome. Frustration, hate and despair had kindled the idea of murder in him

before. But now, down in a cold cave on an island he had never set foot upon before, the thought made him strangely uneasy. *Could I really pull it off?* He pressed his lips together, jaw set. *Eat or be eaten. There's no real choice.* He scrambled to his feet and pushed his hands into the small of his back. There was a popping sound, and a sharp pain exploded in his right calf. For the fraction of a second he thought he'd torn a muscle. Then the pain bloomed into a hellish crimson flower, and he collapsed to the rocky ground, screaming in agony. He peered over his shoulder and saw the harpoon protruding from his calf. Blood oozed from the wound, tainting the bedrock. Nauseated with pain and shock he turned his head — and froze.

A few feet away stood, tall and gaunt, the sea dog. Deftly he reloaded the spear-gun and aimed once more.

“Wait!” Jerome began, then the second harpoon struck his thigh. He screamed and gasped for air. The old man reloaded and shot a third harpoon, then a fourth, left shoulder, right shoulder.

“Greed,” Braque said. “Man’s best motivator, ain’t it, urchin?” With two long strides the old man closed in and kicked Jerome in the side with vicious force. The boy rolled over, yelling, the harpoons drilling deeper into his flesh. Braque put a heavy boot on Jerome’s chest, watching the boy thrashing and screaming.

„Help! *Help!*“

The sea dog watched the blood trickling from Jerome’s wounds. With amazing suppleness he sat on the boy’s chest, produced a white handkerchief from his vest and carefully unfolded it beside Jerome’s head. The boy stared up at Père Braque in horror and disbelief.

“Don’t ... please don’t!” Panting, hardly able to breathe. “I ... I told you I won’t say a word!”

”I know you won’t. That’s why I’ll share my secret with you right now.“ He winked at the boy, his hand going for his utility belt. ”There’s only one thing in the world that will stimulate those clams into producing the mother of all pearls.”

Braque was holding a shiny chrome tool in his hand now, a tool only too familiar to Jerome.

“Human teeth,” he said. „Or, to be exact, the pulp. The tooth’s nectar.“

He grabbed the boy by the hair and yanked his head back. Jerome screamed, and in the same second the dentist pliers clamped down on his upper incisor. The old man pulled and twisted with eerie force. There was a grating sound as the tooth came free. He dropped the tooth onto the handkerchief and moved the pliers toward Jerome’s mouth again.

“Problem is,” Braque continued matter-of-factly, ”them teeth gotta be *live* teeth, understand? You can’t just dig up a body.“

Jerome pressed his lips together, half insane with pain and horror. The sea dog grabbed the harpoon in Jerome’s thigh and gave it a sharp twist. The boy’s mouth flew open, the scream echoing off the cave’s walls as the old man yanked out the second incisor.

”They gotta be *fresh*.“

He grabbed the spear once more, like a driver shifting gears, and the boy screeched like a banshee, bucking and flaying madly. Another tooth went.

“There’s some stuff in the pulp that seems to make the pearls happy.”

Shifting. Shrieking. Grating.

At long last, the world went dark for Jerome.

”Wake up!“

Something hard whacked Jerome across the face. He came to, his lips shriveled and sunk, the coppery taste of blood in his mouth. For a moment, he was completely disoriented. His gums were throbbing in time with his legs and shoulders, and he felt a strange lightheadedness.

He squinted through bloodshot eyes. Père Braque was still sitting on his chest, a skeletal incubus gazing down at him, smothering him.

“Did you ever wonder why I gave you fifty-six wedges? Well – between you and the little snoop I caught yesterday, there’s fifty-six teeth. I don’t count the wisdom teeth. Too bothersome to get them out.”

The old man grinned a creepy grin, and for the first time Jerome saw that all of his teeth were made of gold. Braque saw his look and tittered.

“Had to experiment a little on myself. Had to find out if the legend was true. As you can see, I can afford to buy back what I sacrificed.” He put the pliers next to the pile of teeth on the now blood-soaked cloth.

Jerome’s face had turned sickly pale. Waves of faintness came and went in ever-shorter intervals. *How much blood have I lost?* Through the red haze of pain he gazed at the sea dog’s wizened face. Père Braque looked scarily sane, like a grandfather who just taught his renitent grandson a lesson. *Maybe that was some kind of initiation ritual? To test my commitment to the cause?*

The old man seemed to read his thoughts.

“You know ... now that I’ve got your teeth, I might as well set you free. After all, you’d never find this cave again.” He nodded to himself, as if considering the option. “There’s only one more thing I need from you.”

“Anyfing... “ A slurred mutter. „*Anyfing!*“

Père Braque grabbed the boy’s shirt and tore it apart, exposing tan skin. “As you just learned, live human tooth pulp kindles them clams into producing giant pearls, all right. But there’s only one thing that gives those pearls that unique, that heavenly shine. One special treat.”

He pulled a large gutting knife from his utility belt.

“One delicacy the clams can’t do without.”

Jerome stared up at the sea dog's golden grin, feeling the knife's sharp tip beneath his ribcage.

“Fresh human liver ...”

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