

The Last Crypt

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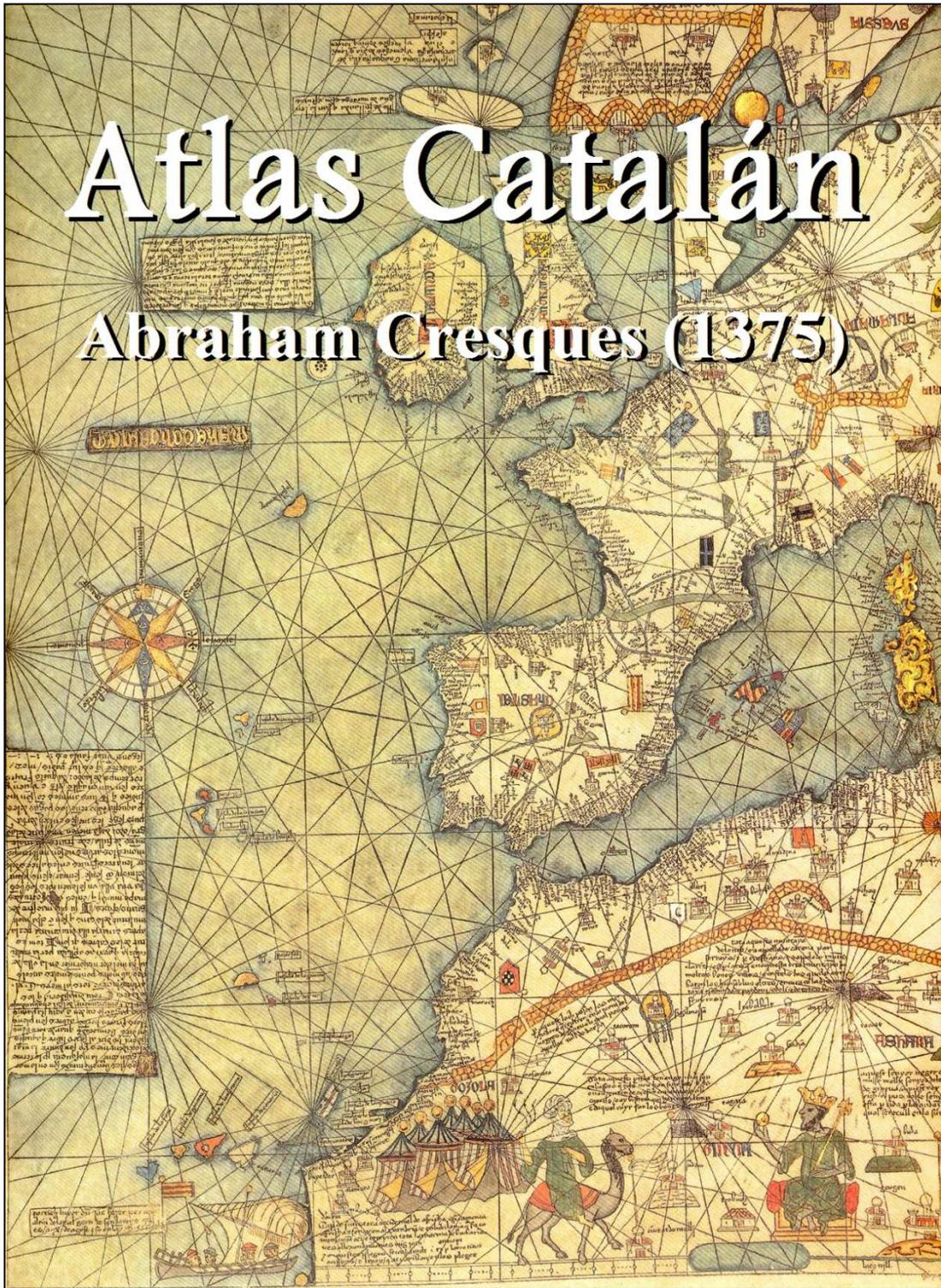
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I believed myself in an adventure, yet it was real life.

Joseph Conrad

Atlas Catalán

Abraham Cresques (1375)



Foreword

Before you continue and dive into the story, let me invite you to read some words written by Arturo Pérez-Reverte as a foreword to this book. I suggest you keep them in mind before reading on.

“So let me fill my pipe. Light your cigars. Get comfortable and hear if you please, what I am about to say. And remember above all, that nothing I tell you can be considered with equanimity from the outside. This means that for certain things it is necessary to make a pact in advance. In adventure novels, the reader must be able to include himself in the plot. To participate in the event and live through the characters.

Not good to be too smart or skeptical. If a reader is unable to engage his imagination, to commit and establish a link, no matter how crafty and subtle, he had better not try. One approaches a novel, particularly an adventure one, as Catholics approach Communion or a gambler a poker game: in a state of grace and ready to play according to the rules. Therefore, among the many possible kinds, divisions and subdivisions, readers are basically divided into two groups: those who are in, and those who remain outside.”

Arturo Pérez-Reverte

Captain Ahab's Doubloon

And now, yes. Without more to say ... let the adventure begin!

The Storm

“Trice that mainsail!” bellowed a voice above the raging storm. “Secure those ropes!”

Without replying, several men scrambled fearlessly up the rigging, ignoring the huge waves that swept the deck, ready to reef the canvas before the wind which at this point was blowing at more than sixty knots, damaged or, worse still, completely shattered the ship’s only mast.

Brother Juan Calabona witnessed the scene from the stern castle, much against the Captain’s order. At the mercy of the elements, he was trying not to get dragged off by the next wave, but he would much rather be out on deck than down in the bilge enduring the filthy stench of vomit and urine.

He could hardly believe what he saw. What just hours before had seemed to him a proud ship was now being rocked mercilessly by mountains of dark water striking from all sides, tearing at ropes and shattering wood and bones. A thin rain hurled against those on deck, stinging like needles where the skin was unprotected. Two steps away, which could well have been two leagues, Captain Villeneuve squinted into the walls of water and foam, trying to guess where the rest of the fleet was. He was signalling with his free hand toward an impossible spot, and crying out instructions to the First Mate, who kept nodding without understanding half of what he was being told. Meanwhile, Juan Calabona, soaking wet and holding on to the gangway with all his might, wondered whether it might be the Lord’s will that his journey would end there.

It was eight weeks since they had left La Rochelle under cover of night. Eighteen cogs, between sixty and ninety feet long, had set sail with their valuable cargo cramming the holds, so much so that, it had been necessary to remove the ballast rocks to make room for it. They had needed twenty-two days to reach the Canaries, the “Islands of Fortune”. At one of the

most westerly, called La Gomera, they had replenished their stocks of water, fruit and vegetables. They had been sailing for twenty-five, twenty-six or twenty-seven days; who was counting. The water, already putrefied, had been rationed to one single bowl at sunset. The vegetables lasted one week and even the dried meat, maggot ridden, was just a savoury memory. The room for supplies on board had been reduced to its uttermost limit, so that if God did not prevent it by showing them land in the next few days, they would be a crew of ghosts navigating to the other world.

But those were worries Brother Juan had had hours before.

“Brother Juan!”

He opened his eyes to find the Bosun’s soaking face inches away from his own, yelling.

“Go bellow deck!” he cried again, raising his voice above the roar of the wind. “It is very dangerous out here!”

The Friar shook his head, at which the Bosun replied with an inaudible curse and, after hesitating briefly, he shrugged his shoulders and turned to face the storm once more.

Juan Calabona then proceeded to sit down on the planks and passing one arm around the gangway light he managed to hold his hands together over his chest, in prayer. Not the right posture, nor the right place but, indeed, the right time to do so.

He noticed then that his precious ring, which he had sacrificed so much to earn, danced on his finger. He had thinned so much that he had to tie his trousers with a cord, reflecting as in a mirror, the emaciated figures of his travelling companions. He became aware that he might lose the symbol which gave meaning to his existence. That was even more frightening than the storm, so he opened a small pouch he carried around his neck and put in the object that identified him as the last hope of The Order, and which, by one of the many inscrutable paths of Divine Providence, had driven him to be on that early November night praying for his life in the midst of a hurricane.

With eyes shut, he strove to withdraw from the whirl that surrounded him and prayed to God for his soul and those of the unfortunate men who were fighting for their lives in that hell of wind and water. He heard, or rather felt in his gut, a frightful splintering sound of death beneath his feet, and knew that the robust cog, designed to withstand the worst gales of the North Sea, had said enough. Deadly wounded, she would never reach her destination.

1

I had just reached the surface and still had the regulator in my mouth when I heard Jack yelling at me. He was leaning over the yacht's bow, holding the anchor cable with both hands.

"Ulysses! The anchor has got caught again. Go back down and release it, will you."

"You've got to be kidding me! Again?"

Reluctantly, I put the regulator back in my mouth with my right hand, while with my left I pulled the air device on my life-vest, and slowly sank back into the warm waters.

"*Bloody hell!*" I thought as I went down. "This can't be happening. Five minutes to decompress properly and now I have to go down again and resurface fast because of the damned anchor. Never in my life have I seen one that gets caught so much, every day! I must tell Jack: me or the anchor. There's no room enough for both on this boat."

I looked around until I saw the taut white line that joined the shadow of the *Martini's Law* to the reef, nine yards below. I leaned toward the bottom and propelled myself to the spot where I guessed the end of the cable was, anxious to get the job done.

A moment later I was beside the anchor, over an enormous mass of live coral. Even under the fading light of a tropical early evening, filtered by tons of water, it appeared in all its magnificence. The structures of bright red, yellow, white and purple polyps were all manner of shapes.

Above, below and all around, a myriad small fish of such unique electric blue swirled in a restless cloud without seeming intimidated by as many much bigger fish. There was a

solitary huge barracuda, which wandered the reef much as a cowboy would his ranch, watching the cattle grow fat. Curious as they all are, it observed me casually from the side.

I swore and a burst of bubbles rose from my mouthpiece. One of the flukes of the blasted anchor had, strangely enough, pierced a coral piece. I pulled hard, but with the sand and seaweed I was upsetting, I could not see clearly why on earth I was unable to remove something that had gone in by itself.

I paused long enough to check my air supply. After forty-five minutes of guiding customers and this new plunge, I had about sixty atmospheres. I calculated that, at this depth, there were only three minutes left before I reached the limit level of pressure of my tank. Then I would have to start thinking about going back to the surface.

Impatiently, I pulled the knife I carried on my leg out of its sheath, intending to tear the whole reef apart if necessary. I tried driving it through the coral around the fluke and was surprised at its hardness, as well as its shape, when I looked more closely. It seemed that the fluke had gone through a hole just a couple of inches wide. I had never seen anything like it before, and I was sorry I needed to break it to release the stupid anchor I hated so much. But I had no choice. So I struck at the coral again and again with all the strength I was capable of under water.

“What the...?” I wondered, shocked to find that the knife bounced back with a keen vibration.

Where before there was coral, now appeared a layer of a hard, green substance, showing that what I had hit was coral only on the surface. The anchor had got caught in a rusty iron ring, covered with a rugged layer of living coral.

It took me a few seconds to take in what I was seeing. But there was no mistaking it, I was facing a piece built by man which, judging by the thick covering of coral, had been down there for a long time. “Maybe it will even turn out to be valuable,” I thought.

Then, suddenly, I realized that I was nine yards deep and running out of oxygen, and the anchor was still stuck stubbornly in the reef. I checked my air supply once more and grimaced when I saw the needle of the pressure gauge pointed at the red numerals. I had to act swiftly.

If I went up without releasing the anchor, Jack would be furious, and next he would come down himself, discovering the curious iron ring. Yet, even though I could manage to free it, I would still have to come back another day in order to investigate, and that would force me to explain what I intended to do so that my boss would bring me again.

I looked at the ring, the cable and the anchor, and then at the knife in my right hand. I grinned under my mask.

“Sorry Jack, but I had no choice. I was running out of air,” I explained once I was back on board, handing him the cut off cable and trying to hide my delight. “But don’t worry, we can come back tomorrow and I’ll go down and fetch it. I know exactly where it is.”

“You’d better,” replied Jack, arms akimbo, trying to accept that his one-thousand dollar anchor was not on board with him.

Just after sunrise the next day, indifferent to the cool breeze of the early morning on this Caribbean island north of Honduras, I was waiting anxiously on board the yacht at the dock of Utila. Hidden among my stuff I had a bag with a hammer and a pike, which I put under a towel with the tanks. When a yawning Jack arrived we barely greeted each other with a grunt and left immediately.

Forgetting all safety rules, I dived alone in search of the anchor, while my boss tried to make up for a drunken, sleepless night. I found it easily and began at once to strike at the reef with the spike, dying to discover what the coral was hiding under its rugged surface. It took quite an effort, but once the anchor was free, I could see that the ring was part of a rounded piece of about eight inches in diameter. It continued and widened as I broke the surrounding coral. Gradually it took shape until with one final blow it lay uncovered and free. To my amazement, I was holding something in the shape of a bell of some twelve inches tall by slightly less in width.

As excited as the time I stole a chocolate bar at a supermarket when I was twelve, I put the piece in the cloth bag I had brought with me and swam back to surface inflating my life-vest to compensate for the extra weight. After making sure that Jack was nowhere in sight on the deck, I tied the bag to the lower rung of the stern ladder, just below water, and descended again. This time, I attached the anchor to a retrieving balloon that I filled with air. It shot up to the surface breaking it like a huge red jelly-fish with a fit of the hiccups.

I emerged a moment later at the yacht’s bow, shouting at the top of my voice, aware of my boss’s hangover.

“Come on, Jack! Give me a hand! Hell man, it’s your anchor!”

“Stop shouting, I’m not deaf,” muttered Jack, eyes reddened and half-closed, as he leaned over the gunwale.

I pulled the balloon to the ladder and helped Jack lift it on board, together with the anchor. But I made such a fuss that, between my complaints and his hangover, he would never have seen the black cloth bag tied under his boat even if it had held a piano.

As soon as I was out of the water, he started the engine and made for shore at full speed while I recovered my small treasure and put it away in the tool compartment.

I was sitting at the bow, with the taste of salt in the air on my face, feeling happy to have smuggled the piece aboard without raising any suspicion. I was satisfied with myself and my little Machiavellian plan: I had been the instigator of the previous night's binge, being fully aware that the robust Australian who had hired me six months before would be in no fit state in the morning.

As we neared the island, I could see through the coconut palms the rusty roofs of the wooden huts, painted in the pastel shades I found so attractive. Many of them exhibited the red flag with the white stripe that credited them as diving centers, as these had become the main economic activity on that small island of Garifuna fishermen. Ten years ago, when I came for the first time, there were only two of these businesses in Utila. There was one street, one bar, one coffee shop, one rudimentary disco and only one automobile that had not many places to go to. Yet, today, once it had become known that the biggest coral reef of the hemisphere surrounded the island, thousands of divers from all over the world came each year to swim in its waters. And yet, although this allowed me to work as a diving instructor in a most paradisiacal spot, deep down inside I yearned for the peace and quiet lost to a questionable prosperity.

I proceeded to unload my equipment the moment we reached the dock. As soon as I was alone, I took the cloth-bag out of its hiding place and, trying to appear relaxed, slung it on my shoulder and walked to the bungalow where I was staying. Once there, I took the piece out and looked at it in the light of day.

The bits of metal I could see had a greenish shade. The rest was a layer of whitish coral stuck to the surface which, although disfiguring the object's silhouette, left no doubt as to it being some kind of bell. Why I had found it, lodged inside a coral reef in the middle of the Caribbean, seemed to me an intriguing enigma.

Eight months might not seem like much time but I never used to stay so long in one place. I had been wandering all over the world, working as a diving instructor most of the time, but taking whatever came my way if there was need. At an age when most men have acquired a home, a car, a wife and a couple of kids, I still had not settled down. I had become fond of

traveling in my earliest youth and since then, I had found it impossible to contemplate a life different to the one I led. I will not deny that, at times, I had doubts and even seriously questioned whether what I was doing had any meaning at all. But then I would go down to the beach, which I made sure was never far, and inhale the smell of the sea, listening to the waves and watching the leaves of the coconut trees reflecting the light of the tropical sun. It was the same scene in different places: the Caribbean, the Red Sea, Zanzibar or Thailand, but I always reached the same conclusion: I would never change this life full of beauty and excitement for all the houses in the world with a garden and a dog.

Utila was beginning to oppress me. For days I had been thinking about a change of scenery. Now that the diving season was coming to an end, it would not hurt Jack if I deprived him of one of his instructors. Besides, the atmosphere at the diving center was growing restless day by day, doubtless for the decline in customers. Therefore, it was not hard to decide to take a holiday and return to my native San Francisco, where I could see friends, family and as a bonus, find out more about my intriguing discovery.

I packed my scant belongings in a knapsack, carefully wrapping the heavy bell in an old sweater. I would have to pay for extra weight on the plane, apart from the fact that if I were caught at customs carrying an archaeological relic, I could easily spend a long time enjoying the well-known hospitality of the Honduran jails. Yet, I was willing to take the risk.

What I could not even begin to imagine at that moment, as I smuggled the piece along with my diving equipment, was all the adventures and dangers that decision would lead me to.

2

A week later, I landed at Barcelona's El Prat Airport. The cab dropped me off in front of my apartment on Paris Street, right in the middle of the Eixample neighborhood. It was a small unassuming penthouse with big windows and a terrace, with two plastic deck chairs yellowed by the sun, one bedroom, a bathroom, a living room and a kitchen which could be described as "cozy". The place seemed designed to scale for my tiny grandmother who had left it to me when she died... As I am over six feet tall I never felt completely at ease there, but what with the times and the small rent I paid, I could well be happy.

I left my bag on the couch and, without turning the lights on, I went to the fridge. As I was about to open the door, I remembered I had no electricity, water, gas, nor of course, food. With a shrug I went to the bedroom and threw myself across the bed, exhausted from jet lag and tourist class seats.

I woke up hours later. Although my inner clock told me it was only two in the afternoon, the sun was already setting over the other terraces and evening would soon arrive. Looking at the red and purple light coming through the window, I was trying to decide whether to take a shower or go to the Chinese restaurant across the street when I remembered again that I had no water. At this point my stomach grumbled angrily and decided for me.

I gulped down some chicken and noodles as I went over what I had to do the following day: visit my mother, to say hello and use her shower, see about getting my services back, and also decide what steps to take next in order to find out the story of that sunken bell. I would have to get up early, in spite of the remaining effects of the hour-zone change, if I

wanted to do at least half of the things on the list. So, after a short walk to stretch my legs, I went home to pick up a book about treasure hunters that I had left half-read, took a couple of sleeping pills and went to bed to dream of pirates and sunken steeples.

“Ulysses, dear! When did you arrive? Why didn’t you tell me? I would have picked you up at the airport! But, come in, son, come in, don’t stand in the door. My goodness, you are tanned!” she cried without pausing to breathe. She was close to sixty and wore a bright-colored dress. Her hair was chestnut with blond highlights and she wore glasses with thick black frames, like a secretary.

“Hi, Mom. I’m happy to see you,” I managed to say, hugging her closely, as soon as she let me. “How’s everything going here?”

“Oh, pretty much like always. Yet, if I should have died, you wouldn’t have known. It’s been three months without a phone call.”

“I’m sorry, but you know I don’t like to call. Besides, I only deal with women my own age,” I added teasingly. “After all, I do have a reputation to uphold.”

“What a gremlin I have! I always knew I should have adopted that nice Chinese boy.”

“But he might have eaten the dog.”

“Maybe. But at least he would’ve called to say how it was.”

Once the usual interrogation was over and while my mother prepared a hamburger with French fries, I took a long shower. It was always a pleasure to come home after a long stay abroad.

The whole family had moved from Santa Monica, where I was born, to my father’s home city. A good work offer and the wish to return led him to persuade my Californian mother to trade in the Pacific for the Mediterranean. Sunset Boulevard for Las Ramblas and roast chicken for *paella*. She was delighted, but it took me almost a year to get over the move. More or less the time it took me to adapt to a very different way of life. Thank God I spoke the language! I started dating an attractive native girl and discovered the interesting nightlife of a dynamic, creative city which, after the Olympics, had become one of the best places in the world to live. With time, adapting gave way to fondness, and now this city was my home. Even though I had spent the last few years wandering the globe, Picasso, Dalí, García Márquez, George Orwell and Gaudí had lived in this cosmopolitan Mediterranean city. So when I felt homesick I always returned to Barcelona. Although no matter how long I had lived outside the United States I was still Californian from head to toe. (And not only because my passport said so.)

“I see you’re still painting,” I commented, looking at the pictures that covered every wall in the house.

“Oh, yes. And I’m having an exhibition with some friends,” she replied proudly from the kitchen.

“An exhibition? Of what?”

“Don’t be funny. When I sell a painting, I’ll rub the check on your nose.”

“Really, Mom, I’m very happy for you. See? I’m laughing! Ha ha!”

“One more word and you can forget about that hamburger.”

“Okay, okay, I quit. When is the exhibition?”

“We haven’t decided on a date yet, but it’ll probably be in a month or so.”

“Well, good luck to you...” And in case I might lose my lunch, I added, “Not that I think you need it, though.”

After I had told her briefly about my last months in Utila, avoiding any mention of my discovery, and while I ate my lunch, it was my mother’s turn to bring me up to date with all the gossip about her and her friends. This included the juiciest details of those who were still married. Her world was like a secret society in which widows and divorcées tried to push those who, according to them, were still enslaved by men into the happy life of singlehood. After listening for over an hour, more out of love than interest, I gave her the bag with all my dirty clothes and left her with a kiss and a hug. I had a lot of things to do, I said, and would return the next day so she could continue telling me about her friend Lola’s divorce, and to pick up my clean clothes.

I was about to leave when I thought of something and called from the doorway.

“Hey, Mom, by the way, you wouldn’t have Professor Castillo’s phone number around; would you?”

“His number? Don’t know. Don’t think so. Why do you want it?” she answered. Her expression had changed to that of someone who might well have smelled a rotten egg.

“I need to ask him something, so I need to contact him.”

“I can’t think what you could ask that old slob, if it isn’t about dust and cobwebs,” she said with disdain.

“Come on, Mom. It’s important.”

“Okay. I’ll look around, in the garbage, most likely, which is where it should be.” She agreed with a wave of her hand that made it clear she would look for it very reluctantly.

“Thanks, Mom. See you tomorrow.” I closed the door behind me.

Too late, I remembered my mother's dislike of Professor Castillo. She was convinced that my father's obsession with archaeological myths in the last years of his life was a consequence of his friendship with the professor. She blamed him for infecting my father with his madness and monopolizing his attention till the day he died. And the truth is that my father's figure remains in my memory linked to that of Doc, as I used to call him. And that I almost have more memories of my father smiling happily with him than with my mother.

I spent the rest of the day turning my penthouse back into an inhabitable place. In the evening, still by candlelight, I took the relic out of the tub with ammonia I had left it in when I had arrived the day before. Carefully, with the help of an ice pick and a brush, I began to remove the mass of dead coral covering the metal which, once the ammonia had done its job, came off quite easily.

Methodically, I shelled layer after layer until, way past midnight, I managed to leave it clean but for a green crust I was not sure that I should scrape off. The piece now revealed itself clearly as a bell. It had two stripes around its middle, and between them, there were symbols or faded markings, which at that hour, I found impossible to study any further. Overcome by sleep, I decided to call it a day and go to bed. But as I was ready to blow the candles out, I stood by the table to look at it one more time.

Under the wavering light, the bell shed a ghostly reflection of its past, as if trying desperately to explain a terrible story in a language I could not understand.

By early evening of the following day, I already had electricity and water, and even Professor Castillo's phone number, which my mother had finally given to me. I went down to the phone booth on the corner and dialed his number.

"Hello?" A firm voice answered from the other end.

"Hello? Professor Castillo?"

"Speaking. Who is it?"

"It's Ulysses Vidal."

"Ulysses?" he asked with exaggerated surprise.

"That's right. How are you, Doc?"

"Great, great!" he replied excitedly. "And you? It's been so long since I last heard from you! Are you in Barcelona?"

"Yup, arrived a few days ago. Listen, I'd like to meet you ... if possible."

"Of course, my boy, of course! Why wouldn't it be possible? Name the day."

"Is tomorrow too soon?"

“It will have to be in the evening. Want to come by my house?”

“Thanks, but I’d rather you come to mine. There’s something I want to show you.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I’m not sure, exactly. That’s why I’d like you to see it.”

“Still living in your grandma’s place?”

“Still here, for now. Is six okay?”

“I’ll be there,” he confirmed. And after a pause, he added: “It must be very old.”

“What do you mean?”

“Whatever it is you want to show me must be very old, if you need the opinion of a retired, boring Medieval History teacher.”

My next calls were empty and frustrating attempts to arrange a meeting with some of my old friends. “Too much work at the office,” “My car’s being fixed,” “It’s really bad for me this week,” were some of the lame excuses I was offered. Yet, I could not blame them, the three were married, had too many commitments, and mortgages to pay for the next thirty years. This was one of those times when I felt terribly lonely. Friends I had less and less in common with and a world I felt more estranged from every day, a world I had stopped fitting into a long time ago. It was as if everybody else knew something I did not, something which was essential to know in order to belong.

But, what could I do? If you are not intent on having a family and you do not put too much value on property or recognition, you discover that many attitudes lose their meaning. Perhaps, as a woman once told me, I was stuck in my twenties, still trying to live out dreams, and a voluntary prisoner of the concept *Carpe Diem*.

Perhaps.

But the truth is I would not exchange my life for any other. Although at the moment, I was feeling quite sorry for myself as I wandered over to *El Náufrago*, my favorite bar in the old quarter, to drown my soul in blue gin, and perhaps find another drifter, beautifully curved, to hold onto for the night on that gloomy end of a September evening.

Every time I returned to Barcelona I felt more like an alien in my own city. The people appeared more concentrated on themselves, the streets felt colder, the children quieter. I always ended up in the Latin and Arab Quarters. Here the people talk loudly in the middle of the street, but they greet each other in passing and look at you in the eye when you pass them on the sidewalk. There I felt completely at ease. More at home at an Algerian café than in a Starbucks (although all I can say in Arabic is “good morning”). I guess this is due to the long

seasons spent in faraway countries where people were kind to me, and although I was a foreigner they never made me feel that way.

On my way to the bar I ate a lamb kebab, something I had become addicted to when in Egypt. In the alleys around the cathedral there floated the notes of Paco De Lucía's *Entre Dos Aguas*. Slowly, I headed to my nocturnal date with lady Blue Bombay Dry Gin.

I woke up late. Hungover and alone, after all. And until I took a cold shower (I still did not have any gas) I could not put my neurons back to work. As I dried myself in front of the mirror I reflected that, in spite of the circles under my eyes, I did not look all that bad. Without being too muscular I was in good shape. Due to all the sun, my complexion was an attractive dark-brown and, although I was far from looking like Brad Pitt, my experience had proven that some women did find me attractive. This on occasions allowed me to enjoy company whenever I felt like navigating on skin; although that had not been the case this time.

After a while, wondering whether to have breakfast or lunch at this hour of the morning or afternoon, depending on how one looked at it, I was standing in front of the kitchen cupboard. I was looking at a jar of peanut butter in one hand, and a can of chili-beans in the other, trying to decide which appealed to me more. In the end it was my sweet tooth that got the better of me, and so I found myself smearing peanut butter on crackers as I leaned over the living-room table, contemplating the green shades of the little bell that stood on it. This small object made everything else in the room appear trivial, mundane and perishable.

Right on time, the intercom buzzed and two minutes later, there was a sharp knock on the door. To be honest, my hand was a little unsteady as I opened it. I had not seen Doc, face to face, in many years, almost since the accident, and although our conversation the day before had been reassuring, I did not know what to expect after ignoring him for so long.

My doubts evaporated as soon as I opened the door.

Facing me was the familiar figure of my father's old friend. Somewhat shorter and with whiter hair than I remembered but otherwise the same: receding chin, open smile and big blue eyes behind tortoise-shell glasses. I was even sure that the powerful muscles he used to sport would be as firm as ever under the inevitable checkered shirt and woolen jacket.

"Ulysses!" he bellowed, crushing me in a bear hug. "I'm so happy to see you again!"

"Me too, Doc," I replied, out of breath. "But if you don't let go, it'll be the last time."

He laughed wholeheartedly, but he did not let go for a few seconds more. Then he stepped back to look at me.

“Either you’ve grown or I’ve shrunk,” he observed. “You’re taller.”

“And what have you done to your hair? Did you dye it white to look more respectable? If that’s the case, it’s not working.”

“Look who’s talking. God knows what sort of money you must have spent on UV machines to be so tanned. And I bet it’s not working with the ladies, either.”

We both laughed, happy to meet again and continue with the easy bantering we used to share, as if almost ten years had not passed since we had last seen each other at my father’s funeral.

We went into the living-room and for about an hour we caught up on our respective lives. I found out that he had tired of teaching, had opted for an early retirement and now divided his time between going to the gym and writing a most boring (he himself admitted to it) essay on the Mediterranean commercial expansion of the Kingdom of Aragon in the sixteenth century. He did not really believe he would ever publish it, but it kept him busy.

I listed the many places I had been to and what I had done in each one of them. When I got to Utila, I told him briefly about my find.

“Is that it, on the table?” he asked, pointing at the piece which was hidden under a red towel.

I nodded.

“You do like drama! Let’s see what we have here.” He removed the towel and the next moment, amazement showed on his face.

“What do you think?” I asked after a whole minute had passed without a word from him.

“It’s a bell.”

“Oh, great. Thank goodness you came. All this time I was thinking it was a clarinet!”

“It’s a bell,” he repeated, ignoring the sarcasm. “A bronze bell.”

“What I wonder is how a bronze bell would end up at the bottom of the Caribbean Sea. Never heard of any steeple right in the middle of a coral reef.”

“No, it is not part of any church. This bell comes from a ship.”

“Since when do ships have bells?”

“Not so many nowadays. But most had one on the bridge.” Stroking the surface with his fingertips, he added: “And this one, by its shape and the layer of rust that covers it, must be very, very old. I’d like to date it, but it would be difficult.”

“Perhaps the inscription could help.”

“Inscription? What inscription?”

“The one on the bell. If you weren’t as blind as a mole, you would’ve seen it, here, between the two stripes.”

“Oh, I see! If you’ll let me take it to the University, I can decipher it in a couple of days,” he cried, clutching my arm with his left hand.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Why not? It’s the best tip to follow if we want to know its origin.”

“It won’t be necessary because I’ve already deciphered it myself.”

“How? You can barely guess what’s written on it.”

“Easy, with paper and pencil,” I replied, amused by his puzzlement. I took a sheet of scratched paper out of my pocket and handed it to him. On it could be clearly read two words in Latin.

“Are you kidding me?” he said almost in a whisper, as he looked at the paper in his hands over and over again.

“No way, Doc. I traced it this morning, although I don’t know what it means. You know my Latin is no good.”

Professor Castillo turned in his chair and stared at me over his glasses for a long time.

“Ulysses, will you swear to me that this isn’t some kind of joke?”

This time it was me who stared at him, wondering at his lack of trust. A drop of sweat ran down his forehead and I thought I could detect a faint tremor on his lips. I had never seen him like that.

“Ulysses, on this bell is written *MILITES TEMPLI*”

“Yeah. So?”

“So, that’s impossible.”

“It might be impossible but there it is.”

And are you sure that you dug it up from the coral, off the coast of Honduras?”

“Of course I’m sure!” I was beginning to be upset by his doubts. “Here’s the proof, isn’t it?” I pointed at it with both hands. “It even has some bits of coral still attached to it!”

“But, don’t you see, Ulysses?”

“No, and I really don’t understand your skepticism. An ancient ship sunk and I found its bell. There are dozens of sunken ships in that area. Maybe with a bit of luck there’s something of more value down there and, if I am the first to find it, maybe I’ll make me some money.”

“No, Ulysses. It’s much more than that. You may have made one of the greatest discoveries in history.”

Now it was my turn to be left speechless.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the fact that *MILITES TEMPLI* was the common name given to the Order of the Poor Soldiers of Christ, better known as the Templars.”

“Okay, so we’re talking about a Templar shipwreck. So?”

“What do you mean, *so*?” he protested, upset by the fact that his words had so little effect on me. “Don’t you know your history?”

“I know who the Templars were!” I said, slightly offended. “But I can’t see why you find it impossible to believe that they could be the owners of that ship.”

“What is incredible is not *who*, but *when*.

Now I was utterly bewildered. I did not understand, and I raised my brows in mute interrogation.

“Ulysses, the Order of the Temple was created in the year 1118 to protect the routes of the pilgrims to the Sacred Land...”

I raised my hand. “Excuse me, will you come to the point?”

Professor Castillo blinked, slightly unsettled by my interruption. It took him a minute to react.

“To sum up,” he proceeded, “the Order accumulated so much wealth and power that Philip IV of France and Pope Clement V, driven by greed, conspired to take all their belongings from the Templars, under cover of some ridiculous accusations of sacrilege. Consequently, all its members were persecuted and imprisoned, or even murdered in September of *Thir-teen-se-ven*! In this way, to put a swift, brutal end to the Order of the Temple. So you see, the biggest, most powerful institution of the Middle Ages was destroyed then, forever.”

The professor pronounced these last words like an epitaph, and his brow knitted when he saw that his words did not impress me as much as he must have wanted.

“For God’s sake, Ulysses!” he thundered, raising his hands above his head. “Can’t you see? Don’t you even remember when America was discovered?”

“Of course I know!” I replied angrily. “October Twelve of Fourteen-Ninety ... Jesus! It’s not possible!”

3

I had been looking at the menu for a while without paying any attention to it and when the Chinese waiter returned for the second time, I still had no idea of what I wanted to have for dinner.

“Have you decided yet?” he asked, slightly impatient.

“Ummm ... well, yes, I’ll have the chicken with cashew nuts and water to drink,” I said. The menu was still open in my hands but I had seen nothing of the words. “And you, Doc?”

“Me, what?” he replied with surprise, raising his eyes from the menu he had been holding upside down all this time.

“What are you having for dinner?” I pointed at the waiter with my eye brows.

“Oh, that! I’d like salad and water, please.”

It was clear that we both had our minds back at the penthouse across the street. We had agreed to go out to eat in order to relax a little after our unexpected discovery. But we still had a knot in our stomachs and had barely looked at each other since we left my place. In the end I was the one who started on the subject again.

“Suppose that someone had found that bell in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, and decided to put it on their ship?” I ventured.

He discarded the notion with a wave of his hand. “I don’t think so. A ship’s bell was its symbol. They didn’t just use any bell they came across. “And if someone had forged that bell two hundred years later but copying the Templars’ motto?” I insisted.

“And why would they do such a thing? The Templars, as I already told you, were disbanded after a trial where they were accused of sodomy and worshipping the devil. Do you really believe anybody would use their name as a symbol of a ship? It would be as smart as jogging in Central Park made up to look like Bin Laden.”

“Okay, okay! I’m just trying to find weak points in our reasoning. A short while ago it was you who kept saying *It’s impossible! It’s absolutely impossible!* Before we start dancing on the table, I just want to make sure we’re not overlooking anything.”

“I’ve been going over and over it myself, ever since you showed me the bell, but I don’t see how we can be mistaken. The more I think of it, the more sure I am that my analysis is correct.”

“Well then, assuming we’re right, what shall we do next? Do we tell the Press? Scholars? The Guinness Book of Records?”

“Not a soul, for the moment. We only have a rusty old bell and your word. If we speak now we’ll only be labelled as frauds. And even if someone did believe us, they’d try to steal all the glory for themselves. Trust me, even the most honorable researcher would sell his own mother for a discovery like this one.”

“Then what do you suggest? That we not tell anybody?”

“That’s right. We should search the archives for information about the Templars and their knowledge of navigation, and try to find any proof that might sustain our theory. Then, when we’re ready, we can present it to certain academic circles and see how they react.”

“Yeah, wonderful. But I’ve got a better idea. What we need is more proof, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, why don’t we go to Utila and get it ourselves?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean to get in the water and search. I know the area where I found the bell, and nothing stops us from going there and doing a little poking of our own to see what turns up.”

“Are you kidding? An archeological digging of such importance cannot consist of *poking a little*. It must be done after a thorough documentary preparation and under the strictest supervision by the best experts in the world. I’m talking about years of planning and more years of field work.”

“Oh, I see,” I said, rubbing my chin. “And all this research, if it should take place, would you be directing it? Or watching on Cable TV on *Deep Sea Detectives*? As you yourself just confessed, competition is fierce in your field. Do you honestly believe we would be allowed to even appear on the credits at the end of the film?”

“Well ... the truth is, it would be difficult to participate in such a big undertaking,” he admitted, looking down at a dish of salad we had not even seen arriving. “I imagine that sooner or later they would elbow us out.”

“And you think that’s fair?”

“Well...” he said without much certainty, “what’s really important is the discovery in itself, not who discovered it. Surely, the people who do the job will be better than I am and better prepared.”

“Are you really serious?”

“No, not really ... Oh, Jesus, I don’t know...” he said doubtfully. “But anyway, we don’t have the means, nor the necessary permits. We couldn’t do anything even if we wanted to.”

“Not us alone. But I know someone who does have the means. And as for the permits in Honduras ... well, there are many ways of getting those.”

“And who’s this someone who can help us?”

“It’s a man called John Hutch. I met him several years ago, when I was looking for a job in Florida. And what’s more interesting is that he owns a company called *Hutch Marine Explorations* that recovers sunken ships.”

“Are you talking about a treasure hunter? You don’t want to involve the University but you’re willing to involve a treasure hunter?”

“Exactly. A treasure hunter with a ship equipped with the latest technology to discover sunken vessels. With a good staff of specialists in recovery and more than ten years of experience. He is, undoubtedly, the best in his field, and we’d save ourselves a good deal of paperwork.”

“And you trust him?”

“Absolutely not! But we’d sign a contract and make sure we took our share of glory. The only drawback—I sighed, staring at the Chinese bread—is that treasure hunters, as you call them, only have one motive, money. And I’m not so sure that fame and prestige would be stimulating enough for Mr. Hutch to join our little adventure. We might have to make something up, convince him that he may find gold and jewels under that reef. I’m sure you can think of something that sounds authentic, and with your resumé and venerable air, I can convince him that it is true.”

The professor smiled under his glasses and settled himself in his chair with evident satisfaction.

“My dear Ulysses, that, fortunately, won’t be necessary.”

“And may I ask why not?” I was surprised at his smug attitude. “People like Mr. Hutch only respond to gold.”

“It won’t be necessary, my friend, because that story already exists.”

“How? What story?”

“The story you want me to make up,” he said with a growing smile, “about gold and jewels buried under the reef, inside a ship belonging to the Order of the Temple. Haven’t you ever heard about the lost treasure of the Templars?”

4

The night before I had been unable to get him to say anything else. After he left me in suspense about the Templar treasure, he had clammed up and kept the conversation limited to chit-chat. His last words on the subject had been: “Tomorrow. My home. First thing in the morning.” So here I was, in front of his house, at nine a.m. after a sleepless night because of him. As a small revenge I had been ringing his doorbell for quite a while.

“Ulysses?” asked a distorted voice.

“It’s the pick-up service for retired teachers.” I disguised my voice. “We have been informed you have one.”

“Come on up.”

With a buzz, the heavy latticed door clicked open and with a shove I walked into the downstairs hall. Dark as a cave, like so many old buildings, it had an old concierge desk under the stairs and, way in the background, as if ashamed of its archaic mechanism, the elevator lurked in the shadows, suggesting it would be better to take the stairs.

Even so, I gathered my courage and got in. Guessing at the numbers, as they were practically worn away from use, I pushed what I hoped was the right button. It wasn’t. It turned out the elevator only got as far as the fourth floor and I had to walk up to the last level. Here I finally rang the bell beside an old wooden door on which a small plate read: EDUARDO CASTILLO, PROFESSOR OF MEDIEVAL HISTORY. I would have paid to see the owner of that plate appear dressed in an old robe and swearing like a sailor for

disturbing him so noisily. But instead, the man who opened the door was looking remarkably cool.

“Boy you look awful!” he said, noticing the circles under my eyes. “Didn’t you sleep well?” he asked ironically guessing at the reason why.

“No, it’s my everyday makeup.”

We went straight to the living room and I realised I had never been in his house before. He had frequently visited my parents’ house and even mine, but this was the first time I had set foot in his. The inside of the flat was just as one would imagine the home of a bachelor retired history professor. Old-fashioned furniture, walls that had been last papered when colour TV was invented and the ugliest looking lamp hanging from the ceiling. But most of all, books. It was literally a house of books. On wall-to-wall shelves and up to the ceiling, in book cases, piled on chairs, on tables and on the floor. Books everywhere. Of every size and type. But the majority were classic hardcovers in leather or cloth with the pages lovingly sewn together and the unmistakeable smell of old paper which sometimes said more than the words they contained. Facing me, an elegantly framed map of the world of six-by-ten feet occupied a good part of the wall. This was unexpected in the home of a man who, I believed, had never traveled any more than was strictly necessary.

“Care for anything to drink?” he asked as he invited me to one of his armchairs.

“No, thanks. I already had breakfast.”

“O.K. Then, let’s get working.” He sat down. “I was going to tell you about the legend of the Templar treasure, right? How about we start with a little history?”

“If it can’t be avoided...”

“Don’t worry, it won’t hurt.” He rested his elbows on the arms of his chair and clasped his hands together. “Let’s see. As I told you last night, the Order of the Poor Soldiers of Christ was founded in 1118 by a French knight named Hugh de Payens with the honourable intention of protecting Christian pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land from the hordes of bandits that filled the roads to Jerusalem. It was a monastic-military order. That is, monks who, instead of copying manuscripts or tending herb gardens, went about on horseback, in full armor and brandishing swords. A great novelty at the time which lent them the unconditional support of the Church and granted them a prestige that did nothing but grow in the two following centuries.”

“Wait a sec, Professor,” I interrupted. “If they were monks, how come they were allowed to carry weapons and kill with them? Isn’t there something in the Bible regarding *ye shall not kill* and all that?”

“You’re absolutely right. And in fact, the Pope’s support to the Order brought about no small fuss among the theologians of the time who had to somehow justify a religious band that went all over Judea cutting throats. But the Church, highly skilled in these matters, established in the letter *De laudibus novae militiae* that although it was better not to spill human blood, not even that of the infidels, if there should be no other way to defend oneself against them, it would not be a sin to take the sword in the name of Christ. Anyway, what’s most surprising is the renown the Order acquired in the first ten years of its existence, given that there were only nine men to carry out their highway-police work.”

“Only nine?”

“Well, yes. And furthermore, it seems that they didn’t often go beyond the walls of the city. After swearing their vows of chastity, poverty and obedience before the Christian King of Jerusalem Baldwin II, he granted them the privilege of setting up their general quarters in the explanade of the temple, right over the site of the ruins of the Temple of Solomon, where they remained most of their time. This is why they became popularly known as the Templars. So, as I was saying, during their first years they didn’t do much for the pilgrims. Instead, as rumor had it at the time, they threw themselves into a feverish archeological search of what would have been the cellars of the ancient Jewish temple. There, according to legend, were hidden the most valuable relics of the Israelites, such as: the seven-branched golden candelabrum called the Menorah, Solomon’s Table or the famous Ark of the Covenant.”

“And, did they find them?” I leaned forward in my chair.

“Hmmm. Nobody knows for sure. As I told you, it’s all rumors and legends. But it is quite intriguing that a few years later Hugh de Payens, accompanied by several knights, set out on a secret trip to Paris carrying a mysterious box of great proportions. From that moment on the Order enjoyed what today would be called a “boom” becoming, in a very short time, the most important institution of the Middle Ages. It even surpassed any European state of that time in power and wealth.

“But how could they go from being only nine soldier-monks under a vow of poverty to something as big and powerful as you say? I don’t see it.”

“Well, that’s part of the mystery involving the Templars. In fact there are those who suggest that there is only one place where they could have gotten together all the gold and silver they needed to finance themselves. And this place was no other than America.”

“Then it was true! We have proof!”

“Not so fast, stranger,” he replied. “That is no proof. It might be, and your bell seems to confirm the fact that the Templars were roaming the American coasts, but it’s a big leap to

demonstrating that their riches were due to the import of gold and silver from the Americas.” He paused and continued, “Besides, I truly believe they didn’t need it. They made huge amounts of money acting as bankers on an international scale.”

“Oh, yeah, of course. If they set up a bank ... that would explain everything.”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly a bank. But thanks to the donations from the most pious kings and noblemen, they accumulated a pretty good amount of favors and castles all along the Old Continent and so, they introduced the concept of a bill of exchange, payable at any of the posts under their command. That meant if a merchant or a nobleman wished to travel, say from Burgos to Milan, he needn’t carry all his money on him, for the risk of being assaulted on the way. What he did was entrust it to the Templars in exchange for a document, with which, on arrival at his destination, he could retrieve said money. Therefore, between all the donations they received and skillful economic management, they became a sort of multinational with vast resources and great influence. They even made loans to kings and princes which, paradoxically, meant their demise.”

“Elaborate, please,” I urged, more and more interested in the subject.

“It so happened that in 1291, St John of Acre, the last Christian bastion in the Holy Land, fell into the hands of the Saracens. This meant a tremendous blow to the prestige of the Templars as they lost their *raison d’être* as protectors of the Holy Places and of the pilgrims that came to them. In consequence, without this aura of invincible warriors, defendants of Christianity, they also lost the favor and admiration of the clergy and nobility of Europe. Of the Order of the Poor Soldiers of Christ nothing remained but the name and, of course, they had long ago ceased being poor. The enormous gains they accumulated after two centuries of prosperous business provoked the envy and greed of kings like the French Philip IV the Handsome. He was an ambitious, machiavellian, ruined monarch who was probably looking greedily from his palace across to the home quarters of the Order of the Temple in Paris, a sort of medieval Fort Knox where they kept all their wealth in gold and precious stones.”

“Don’t say any more. That’s when he plotted with the Pope and arrested all the Templars.”

“Exactly,” he confirmed, pleased. “On September 14, 1307, under false accusations he ordered the arrest of all the members of the Order, including the Grand Meister Jacques de Molay. He confiscated all the possessions the Order had in France and assaulted the Mother House of the Temple, certain of obtaining all the gold it held in the cellars.”

“And wasn’t it so?”

“The only thing Philip IV got was a huge surprise. Although his soldiers searched every inch of the building, they found not a *sou*.”

“Then ... what happened to all that gold?”

“Nobody knows. It simply vanished.” He underlined his last words with his hand as a magician would do to make a rabbit disappear in a hat.

It took me a few minutes to take in all the information, my gaze wandering over the bookshelves, and when I had my thoughts in order I addressed my friend again.

“To be honest, Professor,” I said disappointedly, “although the story you’ve just told me is really impressive, I can’t see the link between the missing gold and our little bronze bell. The truth is, I don’t see how we can convince Hutch with such a weak argument.”

The professor was looking at me fixedly. He seemed to be expecting me to say just that.

“You see, Ulysses,” he continued slowly, sitting back more comfortably in his chair, “the story doesn’t end there.”

“And you call me melodramatic!” I replied in mock anger. “Are you going to tell me everything or do I have to wait until tomorrow!”

He chuckled, pleased to have teased me, and proceeded with the tale.

“After capturing all the Templars in France, the king ordered them to be tortured, hoping one of them would reveal the hiding place of the Order’s treasure. But whether for loyalty to the Order or because they didn’t know, in spite of the terrible tests they were put to, they all kept a vow of silence.” Here he made a pause, took off his glasses slowly and while he cleaned them with his handkerchief he added, “All except one.”

“I think you’ve read too many thrillers, Professor, and you’re making me nervous with so much pausing.”

“I’m getting there ... but let me enjoy the moment. I’m having such a good time.”

I gave up, sat back and indicated he could continue when he wished.

“You see, there was a member of the Order, by name Jean du Chalon,—he stood up and went to the window—who, after being tortured, confessed to having witnessed the complete withdrawal of the accumulated funds from the cellars of the House on the day prior to their massive arrest. According to his words, fifty knights watched over the treasure as it was transported from Paris to the port of La Rochelle, on the west coast of France, which, coincidentally was under Templar command. There, according to his explanation, the treasure was loaded on eighteen ships which set out on an unknown course.” Looking distractedly

toward the street below he added, "And nothing more was ever heard of that fleet nor of the riches it carried."

I let a whole minute go by, chewing on what I had just heard until I hesitantly asked, "So, do you then think the bell I found in Utila belongs to one of the ships in that fleet?"

"I don't just think so, Ulysses." Turning from the window, he added, "I'm certain of it."

“Well, the bait is set,” I said, as I clicked on the “send” icon. “Now all we have to do is wait for his answer.”

“Are you sure it wouldn’t have been better to phone him?” asked the professor.

“No, it wouldn’t. It isn’t easy to locate a man like John Hutch, much less explain such an incredible story to him over the phone. I’m sure he checks his email every day and what we’ve written will certainly arouse his curiosity.”

“I do hope so.”

We had walked into his studio an hour before and I had been surprised to find it a spacious room, minimally decorated. An LCD TV hung on the wall like a painting and in the middle of a huge functional-style desk there was the latest computer equipment: scanner, printer and flat screen monitor.

“Wow, Professor! You’re definitely full of surprises. I’d never have thought you a fan of the latest technology.”

“Well,” he said smugly, “we all have our little vices. But don’t you tell anybody, I must keep up appearances.”

We could do nothing for the next few hours until we got an answer, probably in the afternoon. So I decided to satisfy my curiosity by asking the professor to tell me more about the Templars and their mythical treasure.

“Why would you be so sure that this bell belongs to one of the ships that carried the treasure? Couldn’t it be from a prior trip?”

“Oh yes, of course it’s possible, but unlikely. Although I’m convinced that the Temple cartographers knew of the existence of the American continent, I doubt there was fluid traffic between the Old and the New continents. If they had made too many transoceanic crossings they would eventually have been discovered. Some sailor would’ve blabbed or some English, Castilian or Portuguese ship would’ve encountered them sooner or later.” He paused and went to the bar counter. “Besides, the route they had to take in order to reach America by riding the Equator Stream from the north started at the Canary Islands where they would’ve been obliged to stop to get food and water supplies. A continued presence of Templar ships there would’ve raised the inevitable suspicion. Therefore, as they were never discovered and there’s no record of unusual ships of the Order near the Canaries, it’s logical to assume that very few attempted such a risky journey.”

“I’m surprised that you take it for granted that in thirteen something they already knew about America!”

“They really knew long before that.” He pointed at the various bottles. “Care for a drink?”

“No, thanks. How long before?”

“Huh! Who knows! Since the Phoenicians or maybe earlier.”

“But, how could they have crossed the Atlantic at that time? And why isn’t there proof of it anywhere?”

The professor shook his head.

“The question, Ulysses, is rather: How is it possible that no one, even by chance, should’ve discovered an immense continent that runs all the way from the North Pole to the South Pole? If you throw a bottle into the ocean off the shores of the island of Hierro, in the Canaries, it’ll very likely arrive on American shores, all by itself in a couple of months. And don’t forget, the Phoenicians, for example, were excellent seamen. Hang on,” he said before I could interrupt him, “I have something to show you.”

He left the room and I could hear him moving books around until he exclaimed, “Eureka!” and came back in, smugly holding open a dusty old book.

“Here you are. It’s a story reported by Herodotus about an expedition ordered by the Pharaoh Necho II. Phoenician sailors were sent to find out what was beyond the Red Sea in 608 B.C. It goes like this: “... *he ordered the Phoenicians to set out with their ships to sail through the Pillars of Hercules to the Mediterranean and Egypt. So the Phoenicians sailed from Eritrea, toward the south. During this navigation they landed anywhere in the Lybian coast – that’s how Africa was known then – when Autumn came. There they planted crops*

and waited for them to grow. After harvest they set out again. Thus they spent two years and on the third year they rounded the Pillars of Hercules and reached Egypt.” He looked at me proudly. “So, what do you say to that?”

“I’d never have thought that cruises would’ve been in fashion six hundred years before Christ.”

He ignored me and went on. “But that’s not all. In the nineteenth century, an inscription was discovered in Parahiba, Brazil. It was written on a rock by the survivors of a ship that set out from the Red Sea, rounded the Cape of Good Hope and, as it was making its way up the west coast of Africa, was dragged off-course by the currents to an unknown shore.” He stopped again, dramatically, and added, “That inscription was made in Phoenician characters.”

“I see,” I said, although I wasn’t very convinced.

“You do, but you don’t fully believe me, do you?” He sensed my skepticism and added, “Crossing the Atlantic isn’t as complicated as you’d expect, if you know the right winds and currents. There are those who have done it in a row boat or a surf board. Several years ago, Thor Heyerdahl sailed from Africa to South America on a raft similar to those common in Ancient Egypt, which shows that, technically, it was possible to do the journey in that time.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “But Heyerdahl knew where he was headed whereas five hundred years ago the Atlantic was thought to be an immense ocean that reached the coasts of China, full of enormous sea creatures that would eat up any ship that left the safety of the coast.”

“But I bet you don’t know who started that myth...”

“No idea.”

“The Phoenicians, Ulysses. The Phoenicians did.”

“And why would they do something like that?”

“Very simple. For the second oldest reason in History: money. The Phoenicians were the best navigators and merchants of their time. And it is well known that they traded products in faraway regions such as India, West Africa or Iceland. It is therefore logical that they would try to keep their routes secret, intimidating anybody who showed an interest in going any further than the Straits of Gibraltar with stories of monsters and disasters. In a way, the fact that the story was kept alive for more than two thousand years suggests that maybe someone was interested in keeping it so.”

“Are you talking about a Phoenician-Templar conspiracy? With all due respect, Professor, isn’t this going too far?”

“Think of it,” he said, looking at me intently. “The Phoenicians or someone else before them, arrive in America. They decide to keep the secret. They frighten others with legends of monsters so they won’t follow their steps. And, with the passage of time, those legends become part of the collective memory. Yet, when centuries later, during their stay in Syria and Palestine, the Knights of the Temple discover some documents that specify how to reach an unknown land using favorable winds and currents, they decide to investigate. And *Bingo!*”

“Bingo?”

“They discovered America, you moron! Or, rather, they *re*-discovered America. For some reason they decided to continue exploiting the fear of the sea of that time and kept their secret until our dear Christopher Columbus made his triumphant entrance on the stage.” He crossed his arms with satisfaction as he concluded.

“Allow me to act as the devil’s advocate,” I objected. “But all this evidence is circumstantial. If this were a trial, the accused would walk free for lack of proof.”

“You want proof?” he challenged. “Would you believe me if I were to prove to you that Columbus wasn’t the first to reach America? And that, furthermore, he was able to achieve that honor thanks to some unequivocally Templar knowledge?”

“Surely that revelation would light the flame of truth in me.”

“It had better,” he replied, wagging a threatening finger at me, “or else I’ll throw you out of my home with a kick in the butt for being so ignorant and stubborn. Okay, as I have already explained, the Order of the Poor Soldiers of Christ ended up dismantled at the hands of Philip IV, King of France and Pope Clement V. The last Grand Meister Jacques de Molay was burnt on 18 March 1314. At first sight it would seem that everything came to an end there. All the members of the Order were either incarcerated or roasted, their wealth confiscated and the treasure vanished, end of story. But no! It turned out that in the rest of Europe, not all Templars were imprisoned. In fact, in kingdoms like that of Portugal they were sheltered in their flight and in a skilful maneuver, they became protected under the cover of a new Order they themselves created with the blessing of the King of Portugal: the Order of Christ. Honest they were, but also unimaginative in the choice of their new name.”

Professor Castillo paced his studio, gazing into vacancy, as if he were lecturing a class of college History students.

“This Order was the repository of all the files of the Templars, including maps, planispheres, and navigation charts, although the possession of these documents was kept secret for one hundred years. Until the beginning of the fifteenth century, when they began to reveal part of their nautical knowledge to the Court of Henry the Navigator, Prince of

Portugal, under whose patronage maritime exploration enjoyed a period of prosperity such as never before. Portuguese ships reached the remotest corners of the African coast, setting up prosperous colonies in places like Madeira or the Azores. Strangely enough, they never went further than the Cape Verde Islands where just by drifting with the trade winds, they would have reached the beaches of Brazil in only a few days. This unusual behavior was no doubt the consequence of a pact between the Order of Christ and Prince Henry. Protection in exchange for knowledge. But limited knowledge at that because, clearly, the old Templars didn't want anyone else to set foot in America. As proof, let me refer to the fact that the Portuguese ships that did sail further than Cape Bojador, off the shores of the Canaries, had to paint a Templar Cross on their sails for identification.”

“You mean to say that ... that big red cross that appears in all paintings of the ships of Columbus was a Templar cross?”

“Absolutely.”

“You're not going to tell me that Columbus was a Templar?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Will you let me finish explaining or not?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Please, proceed,” I said with a wink.

He mused, “Where was I? Ah, yes. I was saying that the Templars, under the cover of the new Order of Christ, were in control of all the maritime traffic in the Atlantic. But it so happened that after a mysterious shipwreck, there arrived on the Portuguese beaches of the Algarve, a shabby sailor who with his gift of gab, cunning and ambition, managed in less than three years, to marry Doña Philippa Moniz de Perestrello, a woman of noble lineage, daughter of the Portuguese discoverer Diego de Perestrello, a man of faith tightly related to the Order of Christ. This wrecked sailor, whose real name, religion or country were unknown, with his new influence acquired great experience as navigator under Genoese merchants. He even reached such faraway places as the coasts of Guinea. But his big prize came when, looking through a chest of his recently deceased father-in-law, he came across some rare navigational charts that belonged to the Order of Christ. These showed land unknown to him “*at 750 leagues west of the island of Hierro.*” This man, as you must have realized, was no other than he who called himself Christopher Columbus.”

“Then...” I said, stunned with this revelation, “you mean Columbus reached America because he had a map to show the way?”

“Not only a map, but a whole bunch of notes about distances, sea currents, winds and days of navigation. Although, unfortunately, they were in code, which accounts for any apparently inexplicable navigational error in that first crossing. For example, he mixed up

Castilian miles with Arabic ones, which led him to predict the exact distance to the new land in the wrong measurement. This almost cost him a mutiny on *La Santa Maria*.”

“Honestly, it’s hard to believe…”

“Well, you may start believing because it is rigorously true. All you have to do is read the Capitulations of Santa Fe, which Columbus made the Catholic King and Queen sign in 1491, one year before he set sail. In them he is certified as “*Admiral and Viceroy of the lands he has discovered in the ocean seas*.” He literally said that he had discovered, not that he was going to discover.”

Professor Castillo stopped talking, waiting for my reaction. But it took me a while to digest what I had just heard.

“I’m speechless. It’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever been told in my life.” I muttered at last.

“Then, from now on, will you believe what I tell you?”

“Well, you do know I’m a skeptic. But regarding this subject I’ll trust your knowledge.”

“Attaboy,” he said and stood up. “Now, let’s go get a beer at the bar downstairs. My throat is parched from so much talking.”

The beer turned into a snack and then into lunch and coffee so we didn’t get back to the flat until well after four o’clock in the afternoon. During all this time he provided me with many more details about this “parallel history” that is not found in school books. He explained that Egyptian amulets, Carthaginian coins or Phoenician tools appeared regularly all over America. However, it turned out that some of these objects had been purchased in the Old Continent and buried in the New, so as to be “found by chance” by some amateur archeologist, the whole had suffered for the part, as they say. The result was that now none of these findings had any credibility.

We also talked extensively about Christopher Columbus.

“Isn’t it interesting,” said the professor “that even now we still don’t know for sure who he was. The official version is that he was a Genoese sailor. The son of a cloth dealer whose ship was attacked by pirates in the course of a trip along the coasts of Portugal, which is why he appeared on that beach in the Algarve. But more recently, it has been proved that the only document which confirmed that he was a Genoese had been coarsely manipulated, so the rest of the story doesn’t have a leg to stand on. Among other things, Columbus never wrote once in Italian, not even when he addressed Genoese bankers asking for money. Most probably, he

was the son of either Catalan or Majorcan merchants of Jewish ancestry, which would explain why he never revealed his true origins, not even to his own children. As you know,” he concluded with a mischievous grin, “being a Jew wasn’t very good for one’s health.”

At his home again, we went straight to his studio. On the corner of the computer screen blinked the little envelope that meant he had mail.

6

“And what did you expect him to say?” I said in reaction to his disappointed look. “This is the best answer he could give.”

“But going all the way to Florida to speak to him? I really wasn’t counting on that...”

“Do you have anything else to do? Fold socks? Or clean the fishbowl, maybe...?”

“No, it’s not that ... I’m just not crazy about traveling by plane.”

“Are you afraid of flying?”

“Not afraid, Ulysses: Terrified,” he admitted wringing his hands at the mere thought.

“Sorry, but I need you to convince Hutch. You lend credibility to the whole business.”

“Oh, but...” he muttered, trying to find an excuse.

“No buts, Professor. I’ll make reservations on the web right away and, in four days we’ll visit the “treasure hunter”, as you call him. Meanwhile, let’s gather all the information we can on the Templars and their fortune. We must convince Hutch that we’re not a couple of lunatics. So apart from the bell, we must show him all the possible proof that there’s something of real value in that reef and that it really will be worth his while to invest his time and money in retrieving it.”

Five days later we landed in Miami, with Professor Castillo up to his ears in tranquilizers, letting himself be pushed around with an expression of idiotic happiness on his face. As had been agreed, a yellow pickup from Hutch Marine Explorations was expecting us and after a

brief introduction we put our luggage in the back and crammed into the cabin with the driver. We set off immediately for the Florida Keys where Hutch had his headquarters.

We crossed Homestead, where *Key Largo* was filmed and drove over the longest road in the world built on water. Two hours later we arrived at the tourist site of Key West, the most southern city of the USA. It is a tropical enclave with neat wooden houses, with flags on the lawn outside each porch and signs everywhere offering boat and submarine tours and fishing.

Our chauffeur left us at a small hotel on the outskirts and said he would be back at five. So we had time to freshen up, grab a bite and bring the Professor “back to life” with numerous strong black coffees.

Right on time, we crossed the doors of the Hutch Marine Explorations’ offices. A middle-aged man in a flowery shirt got up to greet us.

“Ulysses, my boy! So glad to see you!” he cried.

He was well over six-feet tall. His blue eyes had a questioning look, and his deceptively friendly smile hid a brain like a cash register. He gave each of us a strong handshake.

“Hiya, Hutch. How are things going around here?”

“Well, pretty much like always. Lots of work, you know,” he replied in his peculiar drawl.

“Seems things aren’t going too bad. By the way, I recognize a lot of signs and posters in Spanish.”

“Aah, after all the Spanish gold I’ve taken I figured it was the least I could do. Learn a bit. Although ... as usual, there is a woman. A little Cuban lady who’s driving me crazy...”

“Watch it. At your age you’d better be careful. You could have a heart attack.”

“Ho, ho ... I may have less hair and more of a paunch but I’m still in good shape,” he said defensively, flexing his arms so that his biceps showed.

“I see, I see...” I turned to the professor. “Here, let me introduce you to Professor Eduardo Castillo, one of the greatest experts in Medieval History.”

“Pleased to meet you, Professor. How do you prefer to be addressed, *Professor*? Or *Mr. Castillo*?”

“*Professor* is okay, thanks. It’s what I’m used to, Mr. Hutch.”

“Well, well!” Hutch seemed to be in a good mood. “Ulysses, Professor, let’s go into my office.”

We went in and sat down in some very comfortable black leather armchairs. I let my eyes wander over the many trophies that Hutch had rescued in previous subaquatic diggings: a perfectly preserved flint pistol, a gold coin floating inside a methacrylate cube that served as a paperweight...

“It’s a gold doubloon minted in New Spain,” Hutch replied to my unspoken question. “It was the only thing of value that I got from a seventeenth century Spanish galleon. A fiasco that nearly drove me to bankruptcy a few years ago. Just because I didn’t investigate enough and let myself be driven by other people’s enthusiasm.” He looked straight at me. “But you learn from experience. And that’s why I have it on my table, to remind me never to make the same mistake again.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the professor was watching me. I decided to ignore the concealed meaning behind Hutch’s words and went on.

“I want to thank you for seeing us, John. I know you’re always busy. But, when we finish telling you why we’re here, you’ll realize that we’re offering you the biggest chance in a lifetime.” As I said this I felt like a charlatan selling all-purpose tonic, but I was trying to show him that I was absolutely convinced of the success of a possible search. I also wanted to give the impression that any odds against were out of the question.

He leaned back into his seat. “We’ll see.” Then he added with a calculating look, “Now, tell me more about what you said in your email about the biggest treasure in history.”

“What did you think?” asked the professor, once we were back on the street walking away from Hutch Marine Explorations. We had spent more than two hours there among photocopies, drawings and maps.

“Truth is, I’m not sure. If it were a sunken Spanish galleon, there’d be no problem. But as soon as I said the word *Templar* I thought he was going to throw us out. Anyway, he’ll give us an answer in a couple days so, in the meantime all we have to do is enjoy the Caribbean, the sun and the *mojitos*.”

“Okay. While you do that I’ll get down to analyzing all the information we’ve brought.”

“No way,” I objected. “You’re coming with me. As soon as we get back to the hotel, we’ll change and go out and burn this place down!”

“Well, mm ... you see, I don’t think I brought the right clothes.”

“It doesn’t matter, almost everybody just wears a bathing suit. Because I assume you did bring a bathing suit.” The way he looked at me was answer enough.

Three days went by before we got a call from Hutch's secretary, giving us an appointment for that same evening at six.

Somewhat nervous, we arrived punctually at his office. With rather more formality than the first time, he invited us in. The three of us sat down in a silence only punctuated by the purring of the ceiling ventilator. Hutch seemed to be gauging us carefully. His eyes went from one to the other, but he mostly looked at me with what I thought was a shadow of distrust. After a few minutes, my hands were sweaty and I was beginning to think about other submarine retrieval companies when Hutch leaned forward on his massive mahogany desktop and picked up his paperweight.

"You've got a deal," he said as he played for a few moments with the transparent cube. "Of course I may come to regret it one day, but you've got a deal." He shook my hand.

"Wonderful!" I said. "When do we start?"

He asked, raising an eyebrow, "We? You've done your part, if we find the treasure you'll get a percentage of the profits but your job here's done."

"No way, John. We want to take part in the search."

"Sorry, but that's not negotiable. My team is already formed, and they're the best. I've got professional divers, oceanographers, archeologists and historians already on my pay roll." With a firm wave of hand he ended, "We don't need anybody else."

"But the professor is an expert in Medieval History. Nobody knows more than he does about the Templars and their secrets. And I'm a good diver, so we can both be of help."

"I said no, Ulysses. This isn't like teaching a class at college or guiding tourists under water."

Hutch did not seem ready to yield. The professor was following the conversation with a look that plainly said, "*I was afraid it would end like this.*" I refused to take no for an answer. I had promised the professor we would both be a part of the search, and quite apart from that I had been looking forward to it enough to risk my last (and perhaps only) card.

"John," I said as calmly as I could manage, "If we don't go, there's no treasure to look for."

This was a transparent bluff. I prayed that the professor would not realize and give us away with a rage of insults to me and my entire ancestry. But it was either that or leave in humiliation. I still had not given Hutch the exact location of the possible wreck so I was trusting that if I stayed inflexible, I would get my way.

Hutch's stare was unfriendly. He stayed stubbornly silent while he weighed pros and cons and calculated costs and benefits, not to mention how much he might lose if he just sent

me to hell. I had no doubt that if he thought for a moment, he had the slightest chance of locating the hull without me to give him the coordinates, the professor and I would already be on our way home. John Hutch was a man who did not take blackmailing well. Nor did he take kindly to two “amateurs” wanting to impose conditions.

He settled back more comfortably in his soft black leather seat, perhaps expecting me to back off. The first one to speak would lose as both of us knew.

He gave way at last, barely hiding his irritation. “All right. But you’ll both work on the ship without any payment.” He gestured menacingly at us and added, “And if you turn out to be a burden on the operation I’ll drop you off at the nearest port. Understood?”

I looked at the professor who with a slight nod let me know he agreed to these conditions.

“Okay, John. I think it’s fair,” I said. “And, as I said before, when do we start?”

The *Midas* was rocking heavily. The waves crashing against the prow whipped up clouds of spray that the southeastern wind deposited on the deck. Since our departure from Key West two days before, the weather had done nothing but worsen although this was not unusual as we were in the midst of the hurricane season. That day, the sky had dawned heavy with cloud and its leaden gray reflected on a sea that at moments looked as though it were covered with mercury.

In spite of sailing the supposedly warm Caribbean Sea, I was wearing a jacket to protect me from the thirty-knot wind, which blew rain against my face and forced me to squint.

In a few more hours we would arrive in Honduran waters. Before nightfall, we should be anchored above the same reef where less than a month ago I had found the little bronze bell. So many things had happened in those two weeks that it seemed to me I had been searching for that enigmatic treasure a lot longer.

I could imagine the look on my mother's face when I explained that I had not called by to see her again because I was in Florida, looking for a sunken ship in the company of Professor Castillo.

"Are you joking?"

"No, Mom, it's the truth. We leave for Utila the day after tomorrow." I was trying, unsuccessfully, to inject her with my enthusiasm.

“But you just arrived! And besides, what does that wretched Eduardo have to do with all this?”

“Mom,” I said soothingly, “he’s just helping me because I asked him to. There’s no sense in keeping on hating him.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have given you his number. It’s my fault.”

“Listen,” I interrupted, “I called to say I’m fine and tell you about my plans, not to have a fight, okay? I’m doing something I believe in and I’ll be in the company of the professor for quite a while. So, stop this nonsense and wish me luck.”

“Oh, dearie. Of course I do. It’s just...”

“It’s what, Mom?”

“Oh, nothing, Ulysses. Nothing. It’s only that I seem to be listening to your Dad all over again. Be very careful, please.”

I was going over this conversation in my mind when I heard a friendly “Hello!” behind me. Cassandra Brooks, the attractive, petite, chief archeologist of the expedition was leaning on the rail beside me.

“What’s up?” she asked. “Trying to catch pneumonia?”

“Hi, Cassie. Just looking for a bit of quiet. Besides, I get less dizzy out here than in the cabin.”

“Same here, pal. Keep it between us but I’ve already had half a box of anti-sickness pills.” She stared at me and asked, “What’s bugging you?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. Or maybe ... I’d like to find this treasure. But more than for the money, for the satisfaction of achieving something important.”

“Oh, you want to be famous?”

“No way. It’s not that. But, at my age I’m still roaming and sometimes I have doubts... This would make me feel good about myself.”

She put her hand on my arm. “Ulysses, you can’t rely on finding a sunken treasure to make you feel good about yourself.”

Then it was my turn to look at her intently, charmed by her deep green eyes.

“You’re right.” I put my hand over hers on the rail. “You’re so right.”

We had met just a few hours before setting out but had immediately hit it off and already felt like old buddies. Maybe it was because of our common Spanish background. I had been very surprised when I was introduced to a beautiful blonde woman with emerald green eyes, English surname but born in Acapulco.

“You can imagine it,” she had told me when I asked her about this, a few days before. We were sitting in the sun at the ship’s prow. “My dad, your typical American, he goes to Acapulco on holiday and there he meets my mom, with whom he falls head over heels in love. They get married, stay to live in Mexico and they have me, a yankee *señorita* in eyes, hair and surname but with a truly Mexican heart.”

“You may congratulate your parents on my behalf,” I had said, trying to be gallant, “because the experiment came out so well.”

“Thank you.” She blushed under her tan, which made her look even more attractive.

“And by the way, what led you to Marine Archeology?”

“The truth is it was almost inevitable. My dad was a deep sea diver and my mom was an archeologist. What else could I choose?”

“But do you like what you do?”

“Love it,” she said. “Always lived near the sea. Learned to dive with my dad before I learned to walk and archeology is my passion. Curiosity flows in my veins like blood, and finding a hull that’s been sunk for hundreds of years gives me a thrill like nothing else. What I love most in this world is unearthing something nobody else has seen or touched in centuries.

“But what you do here, with Hutch, that isn’t exactly archeology.”

From the look Cassandra gave me, she might have swallowed a toad. She lowered her eyes.

“I know, I’ve even thought of saying to hell with it a couple times. But work is scarce and although I don’t like John or his methods, he pays nicely ... and it’s not easy to resist the temptation of discovering sunken treasure.”

“I totally understand: I have a bout of gold fever too, even though I’ve never had the least interest in getting rich. But here I am,” I added with a smile.

Next morning at seven o’clock, called by Hutch to the sound of siren and loudspeakers, the search team and the crew gathered on the fore deck. In all there were about twenty people, comprising divers, oceanographers, marine geologists, specialists in submarine detection equipment, computer experts and of course, marine archeologists, among whom was Cassie. Professor Castillo meanwhile stood aside leaning on the rail. I guessed he might be a little lost in an environment that was alien to him.

I was surprised at how a small crew could handle a ship of more than fourteen feet. There were only six of them, assuming I had seen them all. I remembered during the first

dinner on board how Captain Preston had drawn me a picture of the technological wonders that made *The Midas* unique of her kind. But what with the beers I had drunk that night and the rocking of the ship, all I could recall was how hard it had been to find my cabin.

Finally, Hutch appeared on the bridge deck, accompanied by Goran Rakovijc, who had been his shadow ever since we had boarded. An imposing ex-soldier of Serbian origin and dark past, he had an unfriendly face and a mysterious total loyalty (according to hearsay) to Hutch.

Hutch imposed silence with a gesture. “Ladies and gentlemen! Some of you already know why we’re here. But most of you, as a safety measure, haven’t been informed yet. And this isn’t because we don’t trust some of you. In fact,” he added with a smile, “we don’t trust any of you.”

There was laughter. Someone shouted, “Hey John, you must know what happened to your wife was an accident!” Hutch made the gesture of firing with his finger at one of the crew and when the laughter subsided, he continued.

“We’re here to find a treasure. But not any treasure.” He gestured toward the rough surface of the sea. “A few feet underneath the keel of *The Midas*, hidden by sand and rocks, the treasure of treasures lies waiting for us.”

He paused, waiting for his words to have an effect.

“Seven hundred years ago, when we thought the white man hadn’t yet arrived in America, a small fleet set out from Europe with its holds full of gold, silver and precious stones. It reached these waters. We still don’t know why but, at least one of those ships sank with all her riches inside.” He glanced at us. “Thanks to Professor Castillo and Ulysses Vidal, today we know where. Exactly under our feet.”

He took a breath. Leaning over the rail so that the wind blew his clothes around him, he raised his voice.

“No one will ever have found so many riches in one single wreck. Not even me.” Again, laughter. “Because of that, what we’re about to do isn’t only to get rich. If we reach our goal, and let there be no doubts that we will, we’ll be making history! This treasure is waiting, fellas! Let’s go for it!”

A unanimous chorus of cat-whistles and cheers sounded on the deck of *The Midas*. It faded away in an ocean which moment by moment looked ever more gray and menacing.

Half an hour later, somewhat quieter, a group of seven people sat around the enormous wooden table in the meeting hall. Over it stretched the detailed chart from the US Oceanographic Institute, which corresponded to the islands of The Bay. The meeting was

presided by Hutch, flanked by his lieutenant Rakovijc and the captain of *The Midas*, Nicholas Preston. There was also Clive Brown as Chief Diver, Cassandra Brooks as Head Archeologist, Professor Castillo as Historical Advisor and myself, as the discoverer of the wreck.

“Gentlemen,” said Hutch as we sat down, “I believe you’ve all been introduced to each other so we’ll skip formalities. I’ll explain why we’re here and what we’re going to do in the coming days.”

He gave all of us a quick look and continued his speech.

“Mr. Vidal, here” he indicated me “less than a month ago, discovered an object buried in the reef. This object, according to all the evidence, came from a ship that belonged to a monastic military order of the Middle Ages which accumulated enormous wealth. That order was known in its day as the Templars.”

He paused briefly, waiting for his words to sink in.

“One particular day, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, nearly two hundred years before Columbus arrived in this continent, eighteen ships were launched from France with all the treasure of the Order in their holds. We believe one of those ships sank in these waters. Our mission is to locate the remains of the ship, excavate carefully around the remains, rescue it and take it home with us. Each one of you has before him a detailed report of what I’ve just told you.”

He leaned back in his chair.

“Some of you have already worked with me in previous recoveries. And I wish to warn you as well as the newcomers that this time it’s going to be a more difficult task. What we’re looking for is not only a great treasure, we have the possibility of making history in our hands ... by changing history. If we manage to prove that there were Europeans sailing these waters a long time before what’s believed, all the schoolbooks of the whole world will have to be rewritten. And when your children in years to come read that the intrepid explorers of *The Midas* solved the enigma of the discovery of America, you’ll be able to tell them proudly that you were there.”

“But why exactly is it going to be more difficult this time?” asked Brown, the Chief Diver, always pragmatic.

“Basically because we barely have information about the type of ship we’re looking for, her size, tonnage. She’s been under water twice as long as any other hull we’ve searched for. Because of that she’ll be more decomposed and sunk in the mud than any of the others. And, if this weren’t enough,” he added more seriously, “in those days ships didn’t carry artillery.

As you all know, nowadays, the best way to find a sunken ship is through magnetic detection of the iron of her cannons. Fortunately, *The Midas* is the best ship that's ever been built for the location and study of hulls: On top of this we have the best technology of the twenty-first century: potent cesium magnetometers, density discriminators and the best lateral sweep sonar on the market. To sum it up: if the ship is below, we'll find her."

We all remained silent until Cassie timidly raised her hand.

"What's up, Ms. Brooks?" Hutch asked.

"Well, it's only curiosity because, like nearly all members of this team I work for a salary." Looking straight at Hutch she added, "A more than generous salary, I have to say. But I'd like to know if the approximate value of this treasure we're looking for has been calculated."

Hutch pointed at the professor, who became instantly uneasy at being the center of interest. "Professor Castillo is the one who can tell you that with more accuracy."

"Ahem. Well, the truth is that the value it would reach today is incalculable. Consider for a minute that we're not only talking about precious stones and metals, but also about jewels centuries old, the work of goldsmiths, gifts from monarchs, religious relics..."

Hutch cut in. "About five hundred million dollars."

Brown let out a long whistle in admiration. And everyone, without exception, remained breathless for a second.

"The wealth accumulated by the Templars," Hutch went on, "is calculated to be around ten thousand million dollars at today's exchange rate. As we know that eighteen ships were launched with the whole treasure of the Order, simple division gives us the pretty sum of five hundred million dollars per ship. Isn't that right, Professor?"

The professor was rather peeved by the interruption. "Yes, well, we could say so. That would be an approximation."

"Any more questions?" asked Hutch. No hands were raised. "Okay, then to work. You all know what you have to do and there's no need for me to say that time is of the essence. We're in the middle of the hurricane season. A very active front is coming in our direction and at any moment we might be forced to get out, so there's no time to lose. At this precise moment we're already drawing the first maps of the sea bed and by this afternoon I expect to have divers in the water."

He paused for a final time. Looking at each one of us, he said gravely, "I've hired you because you're the best, and because of that I expect the best from each one of you. Don't let me down."

He got up from his chair and added, “And don’t you forget: *tempus fugit.*”

8

One hour later all the search equipment was ready and a cesium magnetometer was thrown in the water. This was a missile-shaped apparatus six and a half feet long with sensors fixed on the underside. According to the explanation I was given, these were capable of tracking a coin in a basketball court from about seven feet away, thanks to something called “90 gamma waves.” We also started to tow a sophisticated digital sonar from the Dutch Company Marinescan, which could transfer a perfectly detailed image of the sea bottom and of any object bigger than a hand to a computer screen. The *Midas* began its search by tracing a two mile square. Starting from the outside, this progressively spiraled to a point around the spot where I had found the sunken bell.

When I asked Captain Preston why this wasn’t done the other way around, starting the search at the point where it was more likely to find something, in other words “from the inside out,” the captain just shrugged.

“Hutch decided. He’s always done it this way. I’m not going to tell him otherwise.”

“But we’d finish sooner the other way, don’t you think?”

“Look here, son, if you’re in this, there’s something you’ve got to keep clear in your mind. John Hutch is the boss here. You may wonder if his approach is the right one. You may even question his methods, which may sometimes be unorthodox. But John is a living myth among sunken galleon hunters, and on board this ship you’d better not query his decisions with anyone. He’s not a man who lets himself be questioned about anything he does.” He put his hand on my shoulder and repeated with emphasis, “*Anything.*”

We sailed for more than nine hours at a rate of some ten knots in a very rough sea, gradually reducing the search area. It was already dark when this first tracking session was finished and we were summoned to the meeting hall; the same group as in the morning. I had spent the day hanging around the deck, impatient to dive and start the search for the ship or whatever was down there. It was something I'd been looking forward to ever since Professor Castillo had told me of the importance of my find.

Once again we were all sitting, waiting for the conclusions we assumed Hutch would offer and chatting among ourselves. From what was said I guessed I was not the only one eager to start the underwater search.

After a few minutes, Hutch appeared, followed as always by the intimidating figure of Rakovijc. He took his time to sit down while one of the computer operators hooked up the huge plasma TV screen, which covered one wall of the room, to a laptop. Then he addressed us with visible enthusiasm.

"Gentlemen," he announced, smiling like a shark and showing all his teeth, "we found it."

A round of applause ran through the room, with laughs and whoops of joy. I hugged Cassie, who returned the hug together with an enthusiastic kiss on my cheek.

When there was silence again, Hutch pressed a couple of keys on the laptop and turned to the screen on the wall.

"Less than a mile from the place Mr. Vidal indicated, we got this sonar image of the sea bottom."

A surface made up of different shades of brown with rising ground shown as orange appeared on the screen. What at first looked like just one more hump turned out on closer inspection to be the clear outline of a ship's hull with its edges outlined almost in yellow.

Hutch went on. "It's buried under a thin layer of sand about fifty feet deep which will make the retrieving work a lot easier." He turned to Cassie. "Is your equipment ready, Ms. Brooks?"

"Absolutely. By the time it's light tomorrow we'll be in the water measuring and making a preliminary study."

"Perfect," said Hutch, approvingly. Turning to Brown, the head of the diving team, he repeated the question.

“We’re all ready and eager to begin work,” Brown confirmed. “We’ll help the archeologists do their tasks and when they’re finished, we’ll start to clean the area and pump the sand out.”

“Wonderful!” said Hutch. “Any questions?”

I raised my arm. “I have one. How can the ship be so far from the place where I found the bronze bell?”

“That’s a question that may have several answers. But the most likely one is that the ship sustained a breach in the hull and the decision was made to throw away any unnecessary objects such as the bell in order to eliminate weight.” With a touch of impatience he added, “Any other question, Mr. Vidal?”

“I have one. If you don’t mind, of course,” said Cassandra, throwing me a lifeline. “Has the magnetometer detected anything down there?”

“Oh, sure! Thanks for reminding me, Ms. Brooks.” Hutch’s tone was one of unconvincing politeness. “It has detected something.” He turned to the rest. “The truth is that when it passed over the area in question, the magnetometer nearly jumped off the scale.”

That night I could barely sleep. On the one hand I was eager to start the search. On the other, and due to the strengthening waves, I was suffering from a slight queasiness which churned my dinner in my stomach. What’s more, I couldn’t take my mind off that kiss on my cheek, apparently innocent but something I could still feel on my skin.

Inevitably I got up looking dreadful, but noticed at breakfast that I was not the only one.

I had been included in the diving team under the orders of Clive Brown. This experienced diver had worked successfully for Hutch before. I was assured that he always put the safety of his divers before anything else. Because of this, his men respected and trusted him completely. They suggested that I do the same. We chatted as we prepared our gear on deck. We were already sweating when we got into the two-inch neoprene suits, thick enough for this latitude but a must if we were to spend several hours every day at a depth of fifty feet.

The remarkable thing was that we would not be using the traditional compressed air bottle system in this dive. In its place, we were to carry sophisticated apparatuses that recycle air by absorbing the carbon dioxide of the user’s exhaled breath, commonly known as rebreathers and made by Silent Diving System. Although I had already had a chance to try them, it still seemed unbelievable to me that with an air filter and two small bottles integrated

in a thin case, you could double your stay under water without having to increase decompression time. It also added another advantage which was very practical for certain underwater tasks: it did not expel the consumed air, which made for a far better visibility as there would be no curtain of bubbles constantly dancing in front of your visor.

Once we were ready, we jumped into the water from a special platform at the stern of the *Midas*. Then, loaded with photo and video cameras, Cassie and her team followed us.

We gathered together a couple hundred feet from the *Midas*, as we had agreed at the briefing, and when I saw the pretty archeologist nearby I swam toward her.

“Nervous?” she asked when I reached her side.

“Just a little,” I lied. “And you?”

“I feel like a bowl of jelly,” she said and put the regulator in her mouth.

After giving the OK signal, we emptied the air from our inflatable vests, sinking gently and leaving the distraction of the choppy surface behind us for the quiet of the deep.

The sun was still low at that time in the morning. The clouds covering the sky the past two days and the roughness of the ocean made for a visibility of only thirty feet, even though the water there was usually crystal clear. Even so, we all went directly down in a compact group. While we descended I noticed that the *Midas* was not anchored to anything even though there was no chain or rope joining the ship to the seabed and yet, strangely enough, it remained completely still over the bottom, indifferent to both currents and the constant push of the waves. I made a mental note to ask the captain about this when we went back to the ship.

I was lost in thoughts like this, when the group began to swim parallel to the bottom in a northerly direction, with me at the tail end. Some feet ahead, Cassie made a sign to stop and advanced alone, very slowly, touching the sand with the tips of her fingers.

Soon enough she stopped and fanned the sand away. When it settled again, it uncovered, in contrast with the whiteness of the sand, what appeared to be a dark worm-eaten wood plank which must have been buried centuries before.

9

Given their experience in similar situations, the group spread out in formation, in pairs, over a wide area, trying to find the limits of the hull and so set the boundaries for the excavation site. In only half an hour, a number of red flags bordered a rectangular area of about sixty five hundred square feet. Cassie's assistants were taking detailed photographs in order to later recreate a digital mosaic of the site on the computer.

My mission consisted of controlling the safety of the team from an elevated position. This was more or less what I used to do with the groups of amateur divers I took on submarine excursions when I worked for diving centers, although my usual job was as a diving instructor.

Obviously, on this occasion I could be more relaxed, because the feverish activity taking place several feet below me was being carried out by expert divers. As a result, I was free to enjoy the spectacle of a dozen men moving precisely in a sort of underwater ballet.

In less than an hour the work was completed and we all returned to the surface. My duty was to go up last so as to make sure nobody was left behind. After checking that we were all there we backstroked to the *Midas*, which was rocking heavily because of the waves. This made the team's return to ship an awkward business.

Once on board, we shed our neoprene suits. The archeological team went to download their cameras into the computers while the professional divers stayed on deck cleaning the equipment and refilling the air tanks for the following day.

I did not see Cassandra again that morning. She would have been locked up with the computer geeks, trying to fit all the pieces of their photographic puzzle together. I did come upon Professor Castillo on the bridge, gazing absently at the dark line of the horizon.

“What’s up, Professor? Are you getting bored?”

“Well, I’m ashamed to say so but, in the circumstances, I am. I’m out of place on this ship. I feel I’m more of a nuisance than anything else.”

“Nonsense,” I said. “As soon as we start bringing things up from down below,” I pointed down at the rough sea “you’ll be the one to identify and catalogue them. Nobody knows better than you what we might find.”

“Yeah ... you may be right. But I see everybody busy at something and here am I, just looking. I feel like an old pensioner watching the tide go in and out.” He laughed gruffly.

“By the way, Ulysses,” he added, “Hutch has summoned us to a meeting at twelve. I imagine he’ll want to know what you’ve found and to be honest, so do I. Can you tell me anything?”

“Wish I could. But from where I was, with all the suspended sand I could barely make out a couple boards here and there. But I’ve no doubt,” I added, leaning on his shoulder,” that they’ve found our ship.”

At twelve sharp we were all gathered in the meeting hall with the exception of Cassie who must have been finishing her report. Hutch was eyeing his expensive mini-sub impatiently. The rest of us meanwhile chatted animatedly about the morning’s dive, wondering how long it would take us to uncover a treasure which only a fine layer of sand was keeping hidden from us.

Ten minutes later Cassie walked through the door with her hair dishevelled, still in the bathing suit she had worn under her wet suit. Obviously she had not had time to go to her cabin and change.

“Excuse the delay,” she said to Hutch as she sat down and brushed her hair away from her face. “But I just finished this minute.”

“It’s okay, Ms. Brooks,” said Hutch. “Apology accepted.” With a look toward the black folder she had left on the table, he added, “What have you brought us?”

“Well, as you know, we’ve only set the boundaries of the area the sonar and magnetometer have taken us to, and topographed it.” She took out a CD from the folder

and inserted it in her laptop. “But at this point I can assure you that we’ve found the hull of a wooden ship.”

With a couple of clicks and a few swift movements of her wrist, she relayed the image to the plasma television. She rose from her seat and stood by the screen like a teacher addressing her students.

“What you see here,” she said, indicating a fuzzy image of a sandy seabed with black streaks, “is the digital combination of the two hundred-odd photos we took this morning. As you can see, there are several dark objects scattered in the sand. These are wooden planks torn from the hull of a ship.” She passed her finger over the screen. “If you look closely, you can make out their shape.”

“It looks as if it’s lying on its side,” said Brown, tilting his own head to see better.

“That’s what we thought too, probably on its port side.”

I was intrigued. “But, how is it that those planks we see aren’t either covered in coral, or eaten away by bacteria after hundreds of years underwater?”

“Good question,” she replied with a wink. “The truth is that I believe we’ve been extremely lucky. The only reason why it hasn’t happened is that the remains have been completely covered by sand until very recently. And that’s protected them from decomposition and coral growth. Perhaps the same hurricane that sank it covered it with sand afterward and kept it practically intact in its tomb until we arrived.”

“I see. And how big do you think the hull may be?”

“I’ve calculated between eighty-six and ninety feet long and maybe thirty feet wide.”

“Does this match the usual measurements of medieval ships?” asked Hutch.

“Well, to be honest I’m no expert in naval construction of that period. But someone here is. What do you have to say, Professor Castillo?”

Taken by surprise again by all the heads turning to him, he cleared his throat twice to collect his thoughts.

He began to explain didactically, “In the thirteenth century a kind of vessel called a cog appeared in Europe. It was very robust thanks to its double hull of overlapping boards. It had a stern castle, and on occasions a smaller one aft, one mast and an inside rudder.”

He rubbed his chin. “Barely any identifiable remains of these ships have been found but, from what we do know, they were prepared for long commercial journeys in the Atlantic for example, to Spain and Iceland. They would have been perfectly capable

of getting here with enough supplies. And yes, the measurements of the hull match those of a cog.”

“Well, Professor Castillo, thank you for the lesson,” said Hutch with a trace of sarcasm. “It seems that we have indeed found our sunken ship. So if there’s nothing more to add, we’ll start excavating this very afternoon.” He leaned on the table with his hands together and turned to the chief diver.

“Mr. Brown, your team will pump out sediments. Work together with Ms. Brooks so that the samples are gathered and catalogued as they come up with the sand. You only have twenty-four hours. By then I want the whole starboard side clean so we can start the second stage of our recovery.”

He turned his head toward me.

“You, Mr. Vidal, will carry on under the orders of Mr. Brown.” Then, turning to Professor Castillo, he added: “You’ll remain on deck to identify and classify everything the archeological team brings on board.”

“It’ll be my pleasure,” replied the professor, amused by the commanding tone of the ship’s owner.

“Okay, gentlemen, get your gear ready and go eat something because it’s going to be a pretty hard day. In a couple of hours I want everybody in the water.” He stood up and left the room followed by Rakovijc, who had not said a word since we had come aboard.

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