

# The Saltamontes Chronicles, Part 2:

## The Secret Brotherhood

### Chapter 5

#### Under San Gimignano

It would be fair to say that the mysterious old man they'd caught throwing a coin into the municipal cistern which collected rainwater for the inhabitants of medieval San Gimignano knew a lot about the Saltamontes Brotherhood. As soon as Alberto and Annabelle had left, having packed enough suitcases into the car for the entire family, the neighbours and the neighbours of those neighbours, Adam and Alex mounted their horse at dawn and galloped to Fabien and Antoinette's. For fear of giving their parents, and new carers Barbara and Daniel, a heart attack, they said nothing about the hot stone in the can.

Annabelle and Alberto had entrusted Fabien with the mysterious brotherhood, knowing that he was a man of curiosity but also of common sense. Fabien said that he wouldn't bet on not going underground, but that he'd do everything in his power not to "do anything stupid." Annabelle, who was busy getting her dresses, shoes and hats together, finally let it slide and said that she would say no more about it and would happily take a break from wellies, and head off to the back of beyond, i.e. to Paris. So that way Alex and Adam got to spend a lot of time with Fabien, and Barbara and Daniel looked after the house, garden and field and debated with Amélie about "why the boys don't want to take me with them." And the happy couple enjoyed the freedom that comes of being newly-weds, looking into each other's eyes, changing into something different every two minutes, doing a thousand other things that don't get done when children are sleeping on the other side of the wall, and parading down the Champs Elysées.

Meanwhile, Alex's imagination kept him awake at night. In the evenings, when no one could see him, he would often go on the balcony and listen to the cicada orchestra. He would stare into the distance and fantasise about what his beloved Catarina might look like now. Only teenagers can understand that the imagination can get drunk on dreams. Alex also believed that only then can you understand the state in which your loved one, despite being absent, is so close in your mind that you can almost feel the touch of their hand and its smell. What did Catarina smell like? Lavender-scented soap? The wind?

In his imagination, Alex was always holding her hand, just like they'd done when they'd gone to Tiziano's five years previously to listen to a concert. Maybe her hand had changed? Maybe her long fingers had got even longer? Maybe she'd gained weight? Or lost weight? Was she prettier? Uglier? In fact, in Alex's mind, she was the same girl. And the biggest dream of the boy who was just about to turn into a man was to find his beloved, throw the treasure of the mysterious Saltamontes Brotherhood at her feet and tell her so many important things about his feelings that it would be better if nobody in the family heard.

To feel and understand what Alex felt, you either need to be seventeen or have the kind of faith that moves mountains. So there was no evening when Alex wasn't thinking about the girl from Parma or the treasures he would offer her.

But let's get back to our story. So when Alex and Adam rushed into Fabien's courtyard again, leaving clouds

of sand floating in the air behind them, they finally decided to tell him what had happened to them in town. Hopping from one foot to the other, they shouted over each other, overwhelming Fabien with details and causing him greater and greater amazement.

'Well, would you believe it!' he cried. 'And you're only telling me about it now?!' he gasped, pacing around the front yard nervously. 'An incredible story ...'

'We didn't want to tell you before, when Mum and Dad were around ... They get really upset when they know we're out and about,' Alex said.

'Are you surprised?' Antoinette said. 'Who wouldn't worry! Especially after what we saw a few years ago! Even these days, when I remember our underground trips, I get goosebumps.' She gently covered her eyes against the glare of the sun.

'Yeah, but now we'd be careful ... Not like then,' said Adam.

'That's true. Then we got into the underground tunnels by accident and acted without any kind of plan,' added Fabien.

'So let's decide what to do now,' Alex suggested.

Fabien winked at his wife. He grabbed her hand and headed for the house. A moment later, he also looked at his guests.

'Come and tell me, lads, exactly what happened with the old man,' he said, going through the wide-open doorway.

And then Adam and Alex, sitting comfortably on the couch, once again began telling the story of how they first went to the strange man's apartment, and then ran away from the other man, because he'd tried to reach for Alex's map in such a threatening way that he'd got scared. And when they ran away, they mingled in with a crowd of tourists, and then sat down in a narrow street and found a blot on the map. This was in a place where there were intricately made doors to a mysterious apartment, a library in fact. So Alex made a key from some wire, which Alberto had taught him to do, telling him that it was only for legitimate purposes, and these were legitimate purposes. And they went into the room and discovered a stack of books and a desk, on which someone had been making hand-made leather-bound works. Importantly, both of them had a moment of inspiration and wonder at the image of a slave ship, the three-masted *Whydah*, and it clearly isn't normal for someone to be so impressed with a picture that they want to faint. Phew..! And that's how they ended their story.

'That's a lot to take in,' Fabien admitted. 'And indeed, when I listen to it, I don't know if Annabelle and Alberto would be proud of you. You didn't even take Meatball!' he said, shifting in his chair.

'Meatball?' Adam was surprised. 'He's an old boy now. He isn't as lively as he used to be – he just wants to lie by the tap the cold water drips from, and in the evening flop down by the fireplace and toast his fur.'

'Besides, how do you take Meatball on a horse into town?' Alex added, looking at the chair in which Fabien was sitting. 'He's so old that he can't keep up with the horse, and we won't stick him on the saddle.'

'You're right,' Fabien said. 'Let's leave Meatball out of this. But you're in my care, so you must swear to me that you won't go messing about any more. From today, I'll be coming out with you. Antoinette will be staying at home and if we haven't come back by a certain time, she'll be able to react. Darling!' He turned to his wife. 'It's comfortable, this armchair,' he said, all of a sudden.

Antoinette peered into the room her husband and guests were sitting in.

'Did you know that I bought this armchair and a few chairs at the flea market and apparently they came from some pirate ship?!'

'I don't believe it ... Those stallholders could see you coming,' Fabien replied disparagingly, but nonetheless was rather admiring of the newly acquired furniture.

'Fairy tales they may be, but apparently when someone regularly sits in this armchair or on these chairs, they become young at heart.'

Fabien gave a dismissive wave, and went back to the story of the underground cities.

'Well ... as long as it wasn't like in Cahors when someone barricaded the door to the winery. If we hadn't found another way out, we would've ended up like the two skeletons down there. And that's why we're going to make a plan now. Anyone care to comment?' he asked.

'I'd take some string with us,' said Adam. 'You can get lost in those underground tunnels. Maybe I'd let it out behind us so we could follow it back?'

'Good idea. And you, Alex, what do you think?'

'I'd draw. If I went down with a notebook and drew the way, or maybe even found something interesting along the way that's worth remembering, I could take notes.'

'But it's often very dark down there,' said Antoinette, who for fear of being made fun of had dropped the subject of furniture.

'In that case we won't go without a supply of torches,' Fabien said.

'And candles,' said Adam.

'And matches,' said Alex.

'Right, but before we go looking for the underground city, it'd be good if we went back to that apartment. The library, I mean,' Adam added.

'That's what I plan to do. Give me a minute and I'll figure out how to do it so that no one walks in on us. Plus I also wouldn't mind visiting that strange old man. What do you reckon, lads?' Fabien could barely contain his excitement.

To make the trip comfortable, Fabien took a small horse-drawn carriage, which he often used for trips into town with his wife. It was late afternoon when the three of them went to Villa Annabelle to announce their plans to Daniel and Barbara and to say that the boys would spend the night away from home. Then all three went to San Gimignano. Antoinette stayed and was to raise the alarm if Fabien and the boys didn't get back before midnight. It wasn't far to town, and the horse galloped, rocking the carriage from side to side, spurred on by the smell of ripening wheat floating all around. Long streams of light from the setting sun flooded the fields. When they reached the town, they left the carriage in front of the same gate where they'd tied up the horse a few days previously. They slipped across the street, mixing in again with the tourists. People visited the town year round, but now there seemed to be even more of them, because all the restaurants and cafés were teeming with life and all the seats were taken. Fabien stopped at Piazza del Duomo and looked at the boys.

'Is it somewhere round here?'

'No, no ...' Alex replied. 'Keep on going to Piazza della Cisterna, then you have to go down one of the side streets.' He pointed at the map. 'But what shall we tell them, Mister Michel?'

Fabien paused and had a quick think.

'What's happened?' Adam asked.

'I have an idea ... I'd feel more comfortable if you called me by my first name.'

'Are you sure?' Alex was surprised.

'Well of course! I'm not your teacher!'

'But you're much older than us!' Adam added.

'Only in body, my boy, only in body! Look around you. How many people of my age can you see here who still feel like doing more than just sitting on a chair in front of the house and warming their old bones in the sun?'

'Uh ... not many.'

'In that case, lads, my name's Fabien. Alright?'

Alex and Adam looked at each other.

'Fine by me,' said Alex, 'but I'll probably get it wrong for a while yet.'

'Well, you have my permission anyway. And if you get it wrong, too bad. Let's go!'

They were heading toward the centre when suddenly Fabien stopped again.

'Lads. Let's do this – you wait here and I'll go to the man's house, knock and pretend to be an idiot looking for someone who knows something about it.'

'About what?'

'You know ... the map. I'll say I found it. No, I won't. I'll say I got it, which is true. Alex, can you lend me the map?'

'Of course.'

Alex looked around and handed the map to Fabien, then sat down on one of the walls at the Piazza della Cisterna.

'We'll be waiting for you, er, Fabien,' Adam said and grabbed Adam by the arm. 'But don't be long,' he added anxiously.

Fabien headed for the apartment the boys had showed him. At the top of the stairs he paused for a moment, catching his breath, because it wasn't as if he was getting any fitter. Sixty-eight is an age when your heart is still keen to discover new things, but your body tells you to take it easy on the couch. For a moment, he thought about the furniture story, which made him laugh, and which would apparently bring back his youthfulness of spirit for good. He concluded that he'd been spending far too little time sitting on it. Finally, he got his breath back and knocked. There was a pause of a few seconds when nothing happened. And then, just as he was about to leave, he heard a faint and then louder shuffling. He listened hard.

'Who's there?!' A booming, unfriendly voice called from behind the door.

'Good morning! My name's Fabien Michel and I'm looking for a certain second-hand bookseller.'

'Which one?'

'My friend from France, who is also a second-hand bookseller, told me that here in San Gimignano I would find his friend who could help me solve the mystery of a certain map ...' he lied brazenly.

And then Fabien heard the sound of keys rattling that made him realise that the apartment was barricaded up like a fortress. When the last lock finally surrendered, the door opened.

'What map?' asked an older man wearing strange rags, who had one eye smaller than the other, and

a hooked nose. A shiver went down Fabien's spine.

'Well, erm, this map of San Gimignano, I think from a few centuries ago.'

Fabien took out the map, keeping it at a safe distance from the man, who suddenly came alive and involuntarily jumped up, awkwardly trying to hide a false smile.

'Of course,' he said, between clenched teeth. 'Come in, Mister –'

'Michel. Fabien Michel.'

'You're French ...'

'Yes, I come from France.'

'You speak excellent Italian.'

'Thank you.'

Fabien looked around.

'Where did you get this map from?'

The old man reached out towards Fabien. But Fabien held onto his treasure tightly, pretending to study it.

'Is it valuable? Do you know anything about it?'

The man sneered icily. He began to speak in such a tone that Fabien immediately knew that the bookseller, whether he was one or not, was lying like a dog (not to be insulting to Meatball).

'The map, my dear Fabien ... May I call you Fabien?' he asked with mock friendliness, and Fabien nodded.

'Well, the map is of no great importance, except historical. You don't have to give it to me, my friend, for I can see from afar that it is a piece of rubbish. But old rubbish. So I can give you ... Well, let's say ...'

'But I don't want to sell it,' Fabien replied quickly; his intelligence and life experience were ringing alarm bells, and he could tell he was dealing with a seasoned liar.

The old man's body shook and it seemed that his smaller eye had got even tinier, while the larger one had opened even wider. When the light coming through the window into the room lit up that strangely distorted face, Fabien suddenly felt afraid. It seemed to him that he'd seen a similar expression in someone's eyes before. Not exactly the same, slightly different, but one that caused an incomprehensible fear. Fabien immediately wanted to change the subject.

'My friend, may I call you that?' Fabien mockingly echoed. 'What is your name, sir? We're probably around the same age ...'

'Oh, my dear friend,' replied the old man, 'I guarantee that we are not.' A smirk appeared on his face again.

Several long seconds passed, during which the old man collected his thoughts. The sun had shifted a little and the soft rays had begun to turn into grey shadows. At that moment, streams of yellow light flooded in from the other room, so intense that both men squinted.

'It's my nephew lighting the candles,' the old man sighed in a slightly gentler tone. 'He's supposed to help me at work, but he's only interested in foolish things.'

Fabien made no comment on the man's explanation, looking only at the glow of the amber light and wondering by what miracle candles could burn with such an intense flame.

In one second, just like in a play at the theatre, clear shapes of furniture emerged. They were antiques, whose usefulness played a secondary role behind the artistry of their creator.

'Nice furniture. They don't make it like that any more ...'

'Oh they do, they do,' said the old man, coming to life again. 'Well then, will you show me this map? My friend ...'

Fabien felt a twinge of anxiety. All the more so because he'd just remembered that he'd left Adam and Alex on the wall at the Piazza della Cisterna. However, with his remaining strength, he decided to give the old man the benefit of the doubt and handed him the map.

There was a silence.

'And so you're telling me, dear Fabien, my friend from France who speaks perfect Italian, that you don't want to sell it?'

'I wasn't planning to ... Anyway, since it's worth nothing ... My friend, since I don't know where it comes from, and I speak perfect Italian,' Fabien said sarcastically, 'I thought I might learn something about it.'

The old man began leering again, and Fabien felt that strange anxiety again. When he realised that he wouldn't learn much at all, he reached for the map.

But the old man was grasping it tightly.

'Can I have it back? It's not worth anything ...'

The mysterious man gave the map back deliberately slowly.

'When you're in need, and penniless, come here. I'll buy the map from you.'

But Fabien was already heading toward the door, which had several heavy-duty locks on the inside.

'I don't think I want to sell it.'

He shook hands with the old man.

'Will you tell me your name?'

And then for the first time the old man looked him in the eye. Fabien was overcome with fear. The horrifying gaze that had fallen a few minutes earlier on the carved furniture now pierced through him. In an instant he could feel cold drops of sweat running down his back.

'My name is Hostus. Hostus Vitruvius. But to my friends, I'm Horace. It's easier to pronounce. Goodbye, my friend!'

And with that, he gave a final sneer and closed the door behind him. Fabien stood on the stairs, gasping for breath. As the old man's footsteps faded away, he heard someone else speaking.

'You gave him that map back?' said a voice Fabien didn't recognise.

'Be patient ... He'll bring it to us, and in his teeth, like a dog. And for free, because soon his only dream will be to get rid of it,' replied Horace, and cackled ominously.

The sun was hiding behind the horizon, enveloping the town in mystery and magic. Fabien, Alex and Adam walked briskly towards the gate they'd left the carriage behind.

'Hang on.' Fabien paused for a moment. 'You were supposed to show me that apartment, and the library.'

'Oh yeah!' Adam jumped in surprise. 'Maybe we'll find a clue there!'

'But not a peep to anyone,' added Fabien. 'Do you understand? Because you know if someone caught us

entering someone else's apartment ...'

'It's not an apartment,' said Alex, waving in its direction. 'Nobody lives there. It's just a place ... I don't know. It looked like somewhere they make books and paintings.'

'Never mind, but it belongs to someone!'

'But maybe once we get there, we'll finally find out how to get into the underground tunnels in San Gimignano. To the real dungeons. With mazes, stairs and mysterious people,' Adam added.

'Show me where this apartment-cum-library is. We'll just go in for a minute, we won't touch anything and our intentions are good.' He winked at the boys. 'And with this underground place, be careful. It may turn out to be really very dangerous there. And that Annabelle and Alberto were right to be scared ... But I have a secret confession to make ...'

'What is it?' Alex glanced at him.

'I've been dreaming of finding a way down underground since Cahors.'

Adam inadvertently bounced off a tourist who was in a hurry and hadn't noticed the boy in front of him.

'It's over there.' Alex pointed at the door. 'So it's exactly where the blot is on the map.'

'A blot, did you say? Just a blot?' Fabien looked pensive.

'Yes, look here,' Alex said, and unfolded the map again.

'You know what, lads?' 'If there's a blot here, look, there are several more, too!'

The boys stuck their noses onto the yellowed sheet of paper.

'Oh, wow!!! So there are ...' Adam blurted out. 'And they're in different colours!'

'Darker, brighter ...' Alex added.

'Little ones. Like drops of blood. Brrr!' Adam shivered.

'Not blood, I told you – it was wine with soot.'

'And gum arabic. When they were mixed in different proportions they would've given different colours,' said Fabien.

'Or maybe the blots were put on the map at different times?' added Adam.

'Or maybe different types of wine were used for it?' Alex asked.

Fabien stood still, still examining the map, then looked around.

'I would never in a million years have come up with what you have, lads! Come on, let's go and hide in an alleyway, because we're standing here like complete lemons. After all, we're right out in public,' he explained. 'We'll talk about it some more, but first we have to hide a bit.'

'This is the passageway between the buildings. Let's sit down. Nobody'll see us here,' Alex replied confidently and with a smile.

When they sat down, they realised that it was already getting late.

'I have an idea,' Fabien said. 'Show me that mysterious door that leads to this, well ... uninhabited library or studio today, and then we'll go back home before Antoinette kicks up a fuss that we've been gone for so long, alright?'

'Luckily, we told Daniel and Barbara that we were staying the night with you,' Alex added.

'But we told my wife we'd be back by midnight,' Fabien said. 'Today we'll just take a look at the door and

we'll come back tomorrow. Maybe at dawn, when there are no hordes of tourists.'

Alex put the map in his pocket and pulled Adam toward the mysterious library. Fabien followed them. They walked several dozen metres and found themselves in front of the door that was the work of an artist with exceptional talent. Fabien walked over to the door handle, which meandered and entwined around itself, imitating the dance of ivy and branches. He began to admire it, touching it like it was a precious sculpture.

'A pretty amazing job,' he whispered. 'But we'd better get going. We'll be back here tomorrow before the town rises from its slumber.'

It was late when Fabien, Alex and Adam, all lost in thought, reached the large wooden gate on the edge of town. The horse whinnied at the sight of them, and they got into the carriage and galloped back home for dinner. They didn't say a word to each other all the way, and just listened to the wind and the huffing and puffing of the horse. All they could think about was that when they arrived, they'd jump off the carriage, go inside, have a quick bite to eat, wash and go to sleep. After all, they had to get up very early the next day.

It's hard to say, though, whether any of them got a good night's sleep. It was hot, so Antoinette opened the windows wide, but the boys' sheets were still soaked with sweat. They tossed and turned in their beds, and eventually fell asleep much later than they'd wanted to. So when Fabien nudged them awake at three-thirty, both Alex and Adam just grunted and rolled over.

'Maybe you shouldn't wake them up. They're fast asleep,' whispered Antoinette. 'You and your ideas ...' she muttered under her breath. 'Can't a man just enjoy what he has? Because from what I can see, it doesn't matter if he's big or small, he just won't sit still.'

'I promised them ... What'll I tell them later? That I didn't wake them up because I felt sorry for them? That I treated them like little children?'

'As you wish ...' she said resignedly, and shrugged.

'Antoinette ...' Fabien whispered. 'You know that it was only after we moved to Tuscany that I felt I was really alive. That I could really breathe.'

'But at your age ... All these escapades ...'

'Well, someone's got to keep an eye on the boys! Besides, if I sit for a while in your enchanted armchair or chairs ...' he retorted.

'Alright, alright. Watching the boys is just an excuse, admit it. The truth is, the older you get, the crazier you get.'

'And don't you like me this way?' Fabien asked. 'Would you prefer me to be a grumpy old man with one foot in the grave? Just because I'm old I have to be bitter, spiteful and mean?'

Antoinette smiled tenderly at her husband.

'Wake them up,' she whispered. 'I won't interfere in your business any more.' She gave a resigned wave of her hand.

It wasn't easy, but the boys finally got up. As soon as it finally dawned on them that they were going to the mysterious library (or studio), where they had to go at that time because no one was there, they washed and dressed at the speed of light. Given what time they'd gone to sleep and what time they got up, it can hardly be said that they were rested.

Fabien had readied the carriage, which was waiting in the front courtyard bathed in the livid rays of the lazily waking sun. And – giddy-up! – off they went, eagerly, to greet the sleeping town. The galloping horse, rocking the carriage, which bounced over every stone, finally woke the boys up for good. And when they



stuck their faces into the wind, they were met with a blast of crisp, cool air. When they finally stood before the wall surrounding San Gimignano, they completely forgot that the night had somehow escaped from them, and that they could barely keep their eyes open. Once again they slipped through the great wooden gates, passed by the narrow streets and empty restaurants with chairs stacked upside down, and reached the place that had triggered their curiosity. Alex took the piece of wire out of his pocket.

'I opened it last time, and I'll open it now,' he whispered, looking around. He put the wire in the keyhole and began to stir it around like a spoon in soup. The lock gave way easily.

'How do you do that?' Fabien smiled and scratched his head.

'Alberto taught me.' Alex returned the smile and gave a knowing nod.

'Let's go in. We don't have much time.'

Fabien, Alex and Adam immersed themselves in the dark grey space of the studio (or library). With their hearts in their mouths, they started looking around nervously.

'There's the picture I was talking about,' Alex said in a whisper.

'Nice,' Fabien said, focusing briefly on the three-masted slave ship.

'Only nice? This is – how should I put it – magical!' said Adam.

'Quiet!' Fabien replied. 'We mustn't give ourselves away. Don't forget!' The boys nodded. 'And here, look ...'

'Yup, it's the desk. Please note the stationery,' Alex said.

'And the blood,' added Adam.

'Oh, for crying out loud, it's not blood! We already agreed that it's soot and wine,' Alex replied.

'And gum arabic, lads, gum arabic,' Fabien clarified, although when he looked at the vials again, he began to have doubts as to whether he was right.

'But it seems to me that every time I see a glass bottle like that ...' Adam covered his mouth with his hand.

'Oh, Adam, you and your imagination!' sighed Fabien, pushing dark thoughts aside. 'Look at these books.'

'They've all got the same symbol on them. A grasshopper,' Adam said.

'Exactly. But not all of them are old. Actually, these ones are pretty new.' Fabien began to stroke the covers.

'Someone's still making them?' Alex asked.

'Looks like it,' Fabien said, turning one of the books over in his hand. 'Only this one's much smaller than the ones I saw in the Cahors underground city. But it looks exactly like it was work of the same artist.'

'Do artists make books like these?' Adam added.

'Oh yes ...' Fabien sighed. 'Books like these can only be made by artists. And very talented ones, at that. But what have we got here?'

Adam and Alex looked into the corner where Fabien was pointing.

'Another passage?'

'Looks like it ...' Fabien sighed, gazing at another beautiful solid wood door. 'So what are we doing, then?'

'We're going in! What do you think!' Alex perked up. 'That's what we came here for – to sniff out as much as possible!'

'We can't ...' Fabien replied.

The boys fell silent.

'What the heck ... Let's get things straight, finally.' Alex swallowed hard. 'Are we sticking our noses into other people's business or not? And let's just stop sneaking around!'

Fabien looked at Alex with his mature man's eyes.

'I'm not a coward,' Alex muttered, sensing his friend's accusing look.

'Good,' Fabien conceded. 'If we didn't find out what was behind the door, it would be a huge disappointment for everyone.'

'Exactly! Dis-a-point-ment! Alex exclaimed.

'Not so loud!' Fabien hissed through his teeth.

Without further ado, all three went up to the door.

'Well? Are we going in?' Adam asked.

'The brotherhood doesn't speak to people directly, but speaks a language of secrets. Let's go in. I think it's another piece of the puzzle,' Fabien said, glancing furtively at the boys to make sure they weren't afraid.

Alex was first to grab the door handle and gently pushed it down. The door swung open easily. And suddenly there was a very unpleasant smell.

'Urgh, it's so stuffy in here,' Adam said.

Fabien sniffed.

'Yes, there is a rather nasty whiff.'

'It's good that it's just a nasty whiff, and not a stench. We'll manage,' Alex said.

'Does nobody ever air it?' Fabien asked himself and pointed. 'Look, here are some stairs. Shall I go first?' He looked at Adam. 'Have you got the string?'

'You bet I have!'

'And you, Alex, have you got the notebook?'

'Yup!' he replied, quick as a flash. 'How much time have we got before Antoinette dies of fright because we're late?' he asked.

'Two hours,' Fabien replied. 'Remember that we have to take the carriage home, and before that, get to the gate, so we'll have to squeeze our way through the tourists who come to town for their morning coffee. So we can't spend more than an hour in the library. It would also be silly because in the early morning someone could catch us here, and we don't want that, do we?'

The boys agreed with Fabien.

'Well then, shall we get going?' they asked, almost in unison.

'Let's get going,' Fabien replied.

So Adam tied the string to a nail sticking out of the wall, and Alex took out his notebook and pencil.

'I'll go first and shine the torch. Adventure ahoy!' Fabien cried, and sighed deeply, remembering how old he was. 'Let's get going ...'

Behind the door was a stone staircase covered in a thick layer of slippery dirt, descending steeply into a night-blue darkness. Unfortunately, the torch could only steal a small amount of space from the blackness. They could only imagine what was lurking in the corners that melted into the abyss.

'Alright lads, this is the last time I'll say it,' Fabien whispered. 'If you're scared, we can always go back ...'

'Nooo,' they replied together, forgetting they were tired and not paying attention to their hearts, which were pounding like the bells in one of the towers in San Gimignano.

After a while, they were hit by a strong smell of soil, and their feet began to slide as if they were on a frozen lake.

'Not fun ... First it smelt of rot and now it smells of death,' Fabien said, holding onto the wall. 'Reminds me of funerals and that every life ends someday. It's worse than in Cahors. And it's also wet.'

'And it's definitely worse than at Saint-Martin-du-Canigou,' Adam added, clutching onto Alex's back.

The brave trio walked a few more steps, looking back every now and again and holding onto the stone wall. Touching it was like sticking their fingers into cold jelly.

'What if someone locks us in here too? Just like they did in the winery?' Adam asked in a shaky voice.

Fabien also thought about it and was about to turn back when he heard the voice of a small child.

'Can you hear that?' Adam held his breath.

'There's someone there,' Fabien hissed. 'We have to go in there!'

After a while they came to another wooden door. It was shabby-looking and partly covered with cobwebs and droplets of moisture.

'I'm going to open it,' Fabien said. 'What the heck. Here goes!'

And he pulled the door open firmly, revealing a room bathed in streams of soft light. They froze.