

PETER BURNS

SHADOW THIEVES

ISLAND OF SKULLS



Farshore



First published in Great Britain in 2026 by Farshore

An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

farshore.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*
Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 C9W8

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Cover illustration copyright © Manuel Šumberac 2026
Map illustration by Vivienne To

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A CIP catalogue record of this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 00 866784 9

Printed and bound in the UK using 100% renewable electricity
at CPI Group (UK) Ltd

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To Claire, who always believed these books would happen one day.





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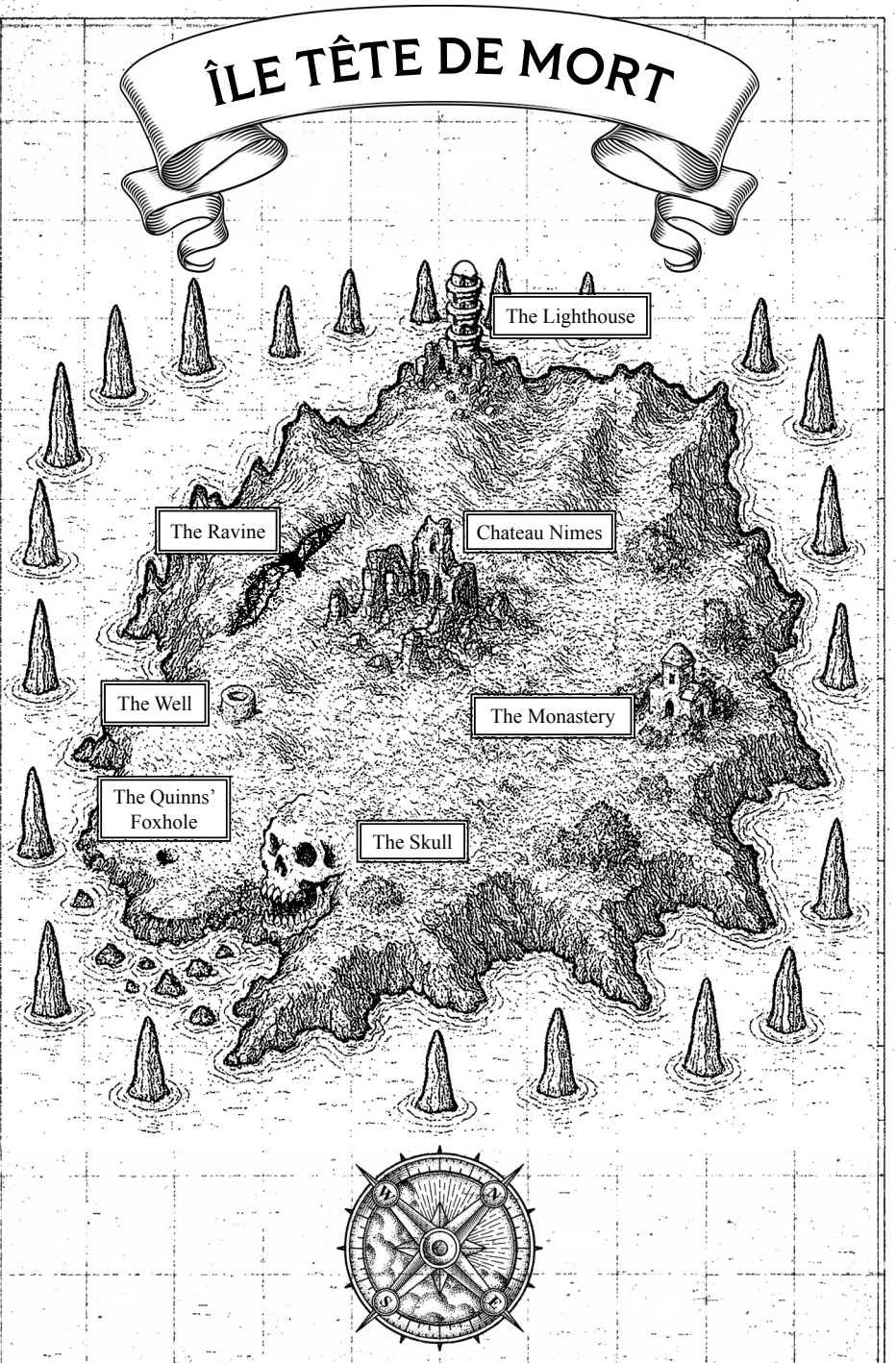
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THE THREE EMPIRES




LA GRANDE RÉPUBLIQUE DE FRANCE
THE KINGDOM OF PRUSSIA
THE JAPANESE EMPIRE
BEAUFORT'S SCHOOL FOR DECEPTIVE ARTS
French Alps
PALACE OF VERSAILLES
Throne of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte IV
THE RAWLOCK
'Deterrent institution'
THE GARDEN OF DEADLY DELIGHTS
Kyoto
THE CULPER INTELLIGENCE STATION
New Avignon
THE LORENZO DE MEDICI INSTITUTE OF POLITICO SCIENCE
Florence
ÎLE TÊTE DE MORT

ÎLE TÊTE DE MORT



Prologue

INMATE 104

A mile and a half from the San Francisco shoreline, an island of jagged rock marbled with gull droppings rose from dark, icy waters. Heavy swells crashed against its cliffs, sending sheets of white spray over twelve-foot-high, barbed-wire perimeter fences and into the concrete yards beyond. Overhead, birds shrieked and wheeled above gun towers, a lighthouse and a looming cell block at the centre of the island. This was Alcatraz – the Rock – the most notorious prison in New France.

In a cramped cell on the top tier of D Block, an emaciated man was hunched at a fold-down metal desk, engrossed in a copy of *The New Avignon Times*. A pair of spectacles were perched on his nose, their pale blue lenses glinting in the sunlight that spilled from the corridor windows beyond the bars.

He was registered as inmate 104, a Mr Cecil Rubens.

But his real name was Victor Lustig, Beaufort's School for Deceptive Arts graduate no. 25107.

A passing guard glanced in and could just make out the front-page news – Empress Beatriz had reached Toronto on the next stage of her North American tour and there were hopes that the emperor himself might join her for the

visits to Quebec, Montreal and New Avignon. There was also a headline declaring: *Japan turns towards naval pact with Prussia – Emperor commissions new fleet of battleships in response*. Nothing particularly unusual. But the way Lustig pored over the newspaper, one might believe it contained stories of the greatest wonder rather than run-of-the-mill daily news.

There was a clatter on the cell bars. Lustig looked up. 'Another shakedown?' he asked wearily. 'I have nothing to hide in here.'

'You have visitors,' said the warden gruffly as the second guard cuffed Lustig's wrists.

Lustig looked confused. 'Who?'

But the warden didn't answer.

The guards helped Lustig rise from his desk and kept him steady as he walked. He was thin and weak, and the short commute from D Block to the warden's office would have been almost impossible without assistance.

As they made their way down the stairs to the ground floor, jeers and catcalls began to ring out from the other inmates. D Block was reserved for the most dangerous criminals on the island. The top tier was home to inmates from la Grande République de France, the middle tier to those from the Japanese Empire, and the ground floor was for those who hailed from the kingdom of Prussia.

The prisoners all universally hated the warden and the guards – but they hated those on the other tiers even more.

'Filthy French pig!' came a roar from a cell on the middle tier.

'Death to Napoleon!' spat another.

And in response, inmates on the top tier bellowed back: '*Vive l'empereur! Vive la Grande République!*'

When Lustig was escorted into the warden's office and greeted by a woman and two men, he did a double take.

'Monsieur Rubens,' said the woman, rising from the chair, a thin smile creasing her lips. 'Please take a seat. I'm Agent Marissa Faulkner. These are my colleagues, Agents Edward Reeve and Olivier Marchand.'

Lustig glanced back at Reeve and Marchand. Neither man moved a muscle. *Agents*. He eyed their suits. They were from the Deuxième Bureau, he guessed, la Grande République's intelligence agency. He had encountered their like before. He would have to be cautious.

'You are from the parole board?' he asked, offering a hopeful, guileless smile.

'No,' said Faulkner. 'But if you can assist us with an inquiry, we would be prepared to put in a good word for you.'

'Of course, of course. I'll be any help that I can,' said Lustig earnestly. 'How may I be of assistance?'

'My colleagues and I are working on a rather . . . special case,' said Faulkner. 'We're investigating an international crime syndicate known as the Shadow League. And we believe that you may have information that can help our efforts, Monsieur *Lustig*.'

'Lustig?' Lustig asked blankly. 'Who is Lustig?'

'You look tired, Monsieur Lustig,' said Faulkner. She

picked up a folder from the desk and began to leaf through the pages. 'I can see from your record that during the two years you have been on Alcatraz, you've been in the Hole for sixteen weeks. *Sixteen weeks*. That's quite the number.'

The Hole was a cold, wet, lightless isolation cell at the end of D Block. There was no bed, not even a chair; just an opening in the floor to serve as a toilet, from which dreadful smells clawed the senses for every second a prisoner was in there. At night, inmates would be given a single blanket as bedding and food was kept to a minimum. A week in there felt like a lifetime – but Lustig had always made it through. As grim as the Hole was, it paled in comparison to the horrors of the Penumbra. The Shadow League prison was said to be a place of living nightmare.

'You would like to get out of here?' asked Faulkner.

'Of course,' said Lustig. 'But I fear that you think I'm someone I'm not – so I'm not holding out a lot of hope for an early release.'

Faulkner produced a flask and two cups from somewhere by her feet. She unscrewed the flask and filled the cups with tea. 'You look cold,' she said. 'This will help.'

The tea was delicious and brought a wonderful warmth to Lustig's chest as he drank. 'This is very pleasant,' he said, draining a second cup. 'Can we make it a regular meeting? I adore a tea party.'

'Maybe next time I could bring cakes,' said Faulkner. 'So, the Shadow League. I have questions.'

'It zounds ver' intressing,' said Lustig. 'Mysderiouss.'

His thoughts felt foggy. He peered down at the empty cup in his hand, then gave a little disappointed sigh. He should have known . . .

'There is a little something in your tea to help you relax,' Faulkner said.

'The slurring passes,' said Reeve. 'You'll be singing quite clearly soon.'

Faulkner leaned back in her chair. 'Your name is Victor Lustig,' she said. 'You are a highly trained member of the Shadow League – although perhaps not as highly trained as your superiors would have liked. Otherwise you wouldn't have ended up in here.'

Lustig kept his eyes on the floor, his expression blank.

'The Deuxième Bureau has learned of an accident right at the heart of the Shadow League which killed its leadership.' Faulkner shook her head in mock sorrow. 'We want you to tell us who the new leaders are and what they are capable of. We believe that you've had direct dealings with one of them, a man named Romulus Knox. If you help us, we'll get you off Alcatraz, hide you, give you a comfortable new life. Or you can spend the rest of your days in the Hole. And those days won't be many.'

Lustig barked a humourless laugh. 'The League has people everywhere. As soon as you requested this meeting, the noose began to tighten. I won't leave Alcatraz alive.'

'If you speak now, we can keep you safe,' said Marchand. He placed a reassuring hand on Lustig's shoulder.

Lustig's eyes were open, but he was in his own inner

world. 'Enjoy your lives while you can,' he said. 'Because everything is going to change. And soon. Knox is a fanatic. They all are. And they'll burn the world to get what they want.'

'Tell us more,' said Faulkner, leaning forward.

Lustig's jaw began to slacken. A thread of drool spilled from his lips.

'The weapon must remain hidden,' he said. 'But the secret is safe on the island . . .' His head jerked up. 'If I die . . . the compass! I should never have . . .'

His eyes began to roll back. 'Horse hair . . .' he muttered thickly. 'Horse hair . . .' Then he lost consciousness.

'Take him back to his cell,' said Faulkner with an irritated sigh. 'We'll pick this up again when he comes round.'

Marchand and Reeve hoisted Lustig up, a shoulder under each of his arms. The frenzied roars from the D Block inmates began once more as soon as they emerged from the warden's office. The din was so loud that the agents could barely hear the clang of their shoes on the iron stairs, and it took Marchand a moment to register another, gentler sound – the whisper of air past his ear, followed by the pock of breaking skin.

He glanced sideways and his eyes widened.

A small dart had appeared in Lustig's neck. From its angle, Marchand guessed that it had been fired from somewhere in the rafters. He gave a yell of warning and barrelled sideways, pulling a pistol from a holster beneath his jacket. All three agents trained their weapons on the

ceiling of D Block – where they caught sight of a figure slipping away from a small hole that had been cut in the roof.

'Sound the alarm!' roared Faulkner. 'Don't let them get away!'

Lustig's papery skin was yellowing, except for the bloom of purple that spread out like vines from where the dart had punctured his neck. He had no pulse. Foam flecked his lips. Faulkner shook him violently, trying to bring him round. But life had left the wretched Victor Lustig.



Sometime later, the agents morosely boarded the boat at the Alcatraz dock. They'd found no trace of the assassin. The guards on the gun towers and on patrol around the island had seen nothing. Nor had the guards or the warden inside the cell block. Not one of them could fathom how the assailant had got in and out so seamlessly. It was a classic kill, typical of a highly trained Shadow Assassin.

Reeve leaned against the handrail as Alcatraz retreated. 'How could the Shadow League act so quickly?' he muttered.

'They have connections in every government and law enforcement department in the country,' said Faulkner simply. 'Probably in the world.'

'And now our only lead is dead and we got nothing from him!' exploded Marchand.

'On the contrary,' corrected Faulkner. 'He told us about

a weapon that could change the world. And just before he died, he gave us a name.'

'What name?' said Reeve, confused.

'He was raving on about horse hair!' cried Marchand.

'No, he wasn't,' said Faulkner. 'He said "Corsair".'

'And what does that mean?' demanded Reeve.

'It means we have no choice,' Faulkner said. 'It's time to wake the sleepers.'