

INTRATERRESTRIAL

LEÓN DE MONTECRISTO

PROLOGUE

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23:39 P.M.

“Helmuth, boy, wake up,” said the voice of the old woman. “The professor needs to send an urgent message. It's quite important.”

The young man opened his eyes, lost and still half awake, and met the grim look of the housekeeper. He tried to guess what time it was. “Isn't it too late to send a message, Hilda?”

“What does it matter? Hurry up! He's in his office right now.”

Helmuth let out a couple of oaths, but he felt a certain urgency in the old servant's voice. He got up and dressed quickly. Professor Schaaffhausen was sealing an envelope when he arrived at his office. Helmuth was surprised to see him with his eyes disheveled, imprisoned, as never before, in an irrational panic. Since a time ago the prestigious anthropologist was obsessed with strange and unconventional precautions in him: he had ordered the windows of the house to be covered, he only went out in the daylight, he put a row of crucifixes and earth from the nearby cemetery in different parts of the house, and he himself slept with a rosary on his neck. He worked late into the night,

writing notes and making drawings that looked more like the fruit of a delirious mind than of a well-known scientist. In the last time, he had told him several times that he had the impression that they were following him or watching him.

But he had never seen the old professor as scared as he was that night.

“It's for Franz,” he said hurriedly as soon as he saw him, handing him the envelope. “For Franz and only for him. Don't talk to anyone or stay on the road. If you hear a noise, just hurry or run, but don't stop. Did you understand?”

Helmuth nodded, but only to reassure the professor and feeling sorry for him. He didn't really understand his fears until Schaaffhausen took his arm. “Don't come back tonight, go to your mother's house. If I can, I'll contact you tomorrow early in the morning. And Helmuth... be careful, son.”

The professor's voice was broken by emotion. For the first time the possibility arose that he might be in danger. He put the envelope in his jacket, hurriedly said goodbye to the professor and prepared to leave the house. He looked around before starting. Did not see anyone. It was a particularly cold and dark night, as silent as a graveyard.

He went without hesitation to the house of Franz Engels, a young anthropologist with whom Professor Schaaffhausen had been working in recent years. He didn't live too far, but not close enough to finish the job quickly. He wanted to be sheltered soon in a safe and warm bed; the encounter with the professor had filled his head with ghosts and the unbearable cold made him chew his teeth. He wondered what the letter would say and why the urgency of his employer. Whatever he wanted to say to Professor Engels, he could have waited for the next day. In fact, they looked almost daily. Why the rush?

He was tempted to open the letter, but it was sealed.

At times, he had the impression that some footsteps were following him, but when he turned around he saw nothing but darkness, so he continued to move forward.

He heard the crunch of some branches over his head as he passed an old walnut tree. Something

big moved in its foliage; maybe it was a kestrel or a buzzard. He was so engrossed that he almost jumped in shock. Far from there, he felt the hoot of an owl; It seemed to him that it came from Professor Schaaffhausen's house. His hair bristled when, from the walnut tree, something answered it; something that looked like a very big owl, but that sounded much more defined, almost human. He had the sinister impression that those two howls were communicating, that they spoke a kind of jargon, so he hurried the stride by huddling under his jacket.

A strong flutter passed over his head, although he didn't see what it was.

Imagination was playing against him. The steps, behind and in front of him, repeated themselves, but more than footsteps they looked like scratches on the ground, and he figured that they were the talons of some huge-sized bird. Sometimes, in the trees, he seemed to see eyes peering into the night.

He held his breath and began to run without knowing why, imprisoned in a sudden terror.

He finally arrived at Engels's house and knocked on the door, but nobody came. Then he saw the silhouette, outlined against the brightness of an old streetlight in the middle of the way. It didn't move, just watched. He could not have described it, but although it was only a shadow, Helmuth felt chills and had the impression that they were coming for the note he was carrying. He wanted to leave there. He knocked again on the door this time with urgency, but Engels did not come out, though he saw a light on the upper floor. The shadow began to move towards him. He felt a cold, visceral panic; He put the letter under the door and ran. The flutters above his head became more and more menacing. He no longer cared whether Engels received his message or not, nor did he ever intend to return to the house of Professor Schaaffhausen.

He ran down the street, but he did not get very far. It all ended very quickly: he felt the strength of a pair of hands closing over his neck and the pain of many teeth digging into his legs, arms and into his soft tissues, while someone searched his pockets. His agonized screams drowned in his throat and suddenly stopped.

When the housekeeper of the Engels's home opened the door only a couple of minutes later,

alerted by the screams, she saw no one in the street nor heard new moans. She saw a paper under the door and picked it up, and looked around, suspicious. She felt some fluttering in the sky and what remind the wind rocking the low branches of the trees. Then, silence. She didn't see the pool of blood lost in the darkness a few meters away, nor the unrecognizable body half devoured.

She entered the house and gently closed the door.