

The Caves of Etretat

The Sirenne Saga, #1

by Matt Chatelain, 1960-

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To Mom.

Fantastic new version. Canadian bookstore owner Paul Sirenne heads to the town of Etretat, France, on the trail of a hundred year old mystery hidden in the pages of *The Hollow Needle*, by Maurice Leblanc. Together with Leblanc's great-granddaughter, Sirenne unearths puzzles, codes and historical mysteries, exposing a secret war for control of a cave fortress in Etretat's chalk cliffs.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any

resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Foreword

I have been led to certain knowledge and this has caused me to re-evaluate everything I believe about the world. The knowledge did not come easily. I was manipulated into walking a trail, never knowing what I was to find until it was upon me.

In light of what I now know, my last task before I leave this world will be to write a chronicle, these four books, so I may reveal how this began.

A whole series of events were occurring in step with my journey. Others happened before I was born. I have inserted various journals at key points in this chronicle to clarify the multitude of connections leading me forward.

The beginning of any path rarely indicates where it will end. Now I know the answer was within me from the very start. I couldn't see it, not until I had walked the entire way. After all, that is the purpose of the path.

Paul Sirenne

Chapter 1

Murdered!

I had a feeling something was wrong before I even opened my front door. The three men standing on my porch, flashing their badges, did nothing to dispel my concerns. Behind them, I noticed a parked car with a rotating red light stuck on its dash. The tallest man spoke softly.

„Good evening. Sorry to disturb you at this late hour. We are looking for a man named Sirenne. Paul Sirenne.“

„I'm Paul Sirenne. What is this about?“

„My name is Detective Harris. This is my partner, Detective Stafford and this is Inspector Norton from Interpol, who is here strictly as an observer. I'm afraid I have some bad news. I was wondering if we might come in for a few minutes?“

Worried, I stepped aside and allowed them in. The two detectives entered, followed by the grimy-looking Inspector who walked in quickly, his shifty eyes darting nervously left and right. The men accompanied me to the study, where several easy chairs served as a setting for the conversation.

Detective Harris pulled out a small tape recorder, placing it on the coffee table between us. Detective Stafford excused himself, asking directions to the kitchen,

claiming to be thirsty. The Interpol Inspector remained standing, his beady eyes never leaving me.

„Sorry about the tape recorder. My memory is terrible and I can't take field notes, not legible ones anyway. It's always so difficult in these cases. I never know exactly how to proceed. However, experience has taught me being direct is the lesser of two evils. I'd like you to prepare yourself for a shock, Mr Sirenne, a bad shock.“

Harris shifted in his chair, waiting for my reaction. A hard knot in my stomach replaced the butterflies previously fluttering there. I nodded.

„Mr Sirenne, your parents have been murdered.“

„What? That's impossible, Detective. I just saw my father and Darlene three days ago. They were fine,“ I protested, choking up.

„I'm terribly sorry but we are positive of our facts. Their identity was confirmed through fingerprinting. Your father, identified as Paul Sirenne, and his wife, identified as Darlene Sirenne, were killed two nights ago, shortly after midnight.“

„What happened? Was it robbery?“

„No, I'm afraid it's nothing that easy, Mr Sirenne. They were murdered, then mutilated. Nothing was stolen, as far as we can tell.“

My head was spinning.

„They never did anything to anyone. Who would want to hurt them?“

Inspector Norton answered.

„Detective Harris doesn't know why, nobody does. However, I may know who has done it. I'm not from here, you see. I'm not even supposed to be on this case. Did you know someone called the murder in? Curious, isn't it? As soon as I heard about them, I knew they matched the pattern of a murderer I call the Shadow-Killer. By chance, I was right here in town for a convention. Lucky for you and for the local police. I've been investigating the Shadow-Killer for many years now, spending every hour of my spare time. He is the most elusive monster I have ever encountered, responsible for at least forty-five murders, most of them in Europe. I now believe he has come here, to Ottawa, to kill your parents.“

„I want to see them.“

Detective Harris jumped in, taking back control of the conversation.

„I'd suggest you don't, Mr Sirenne. He left a grisly scene. It's better if you remember your parents as you last saw them.“

„I don't care.“

„I know how you feel, believe me, but you should give this some time. Anyway, the bodies have already been taken to our forensics lab...“

Norton interrupted Harris again.

„For all the good it will do. The Shadow-Killer never leaves a speck of dust behind. You'd know that, Detective, if you'd seen what I've seen.“

Ignoring him, Detective Harris continued.

„Anyway, listen, how about we talk a bit more and after that, if you still want to see them, we'll take you down to the morgue. It's the best I can offer right now.“

Detective Stafford came back into the study with a glass of water, as Norton interrupted Harris yet again.

„Mr Sirenne, I am convinced your parents were selected, chosen, by the Shadow-Killer for some reason. Detective Harris was right not to want you to see

their bodies. The Shadow-Killer's modus operandi is brutal. He is inhuman when killing people. Seeing what he leaves behind is hard, even for seasoned officers. But what he did with your parents is truly horrible."

I was numbed. Norton continued his rapid-fire delivery, disregarding the looks from Detective Harris.

"The killer wanted to leave a message for someone. He staged the bodies, placing them in a way that would, uhm, look like two letters- an H and an N. Does that mean anything to you?"

My mind was a blank. I could hardly think, let alone reason.

"An H and an N? HN? No, I'm sorry it doesn't, Inspector."

How could a human body be positioned to look like an N? The H seemed easy enough, but the N baffled me. How could anyone position a body to look like a proper N?

"Mr Sirenne, don't go down that road. I know what you're thinking. Norton, how could you blurt it out like that? Listen to me, just let it go."

My mind kept working, ignoring his advice, bending an imaginary stick figure this way, that way, desperately trying to make it fit an N.

"Tell me how he did it."

"You don't want to know, Mr Sirenne, don't ask me that," Harris retorted, looking increasingly ill at ease.

"Tell me!"

"I'll tell him, Detective, if you're too squeamish."

"Norton, no. You're just an observer here."

"Give me a break with those stupid rules. He's got to understand what he's facing. I'm going to tell him and you're not going to stop me."

Norton sat next to the scowling Detective Harris, and looked me straight in the eyes.

"He placed your father in the shape of an H by opening up his arms and legs, his body acting as the centre bar. I believe the legs wouldn't take the right position so he, uhm, he cut the tendons. That way he could place both legs in a straight line. He cut off the head to finish the job."

The image burned into my brain. Norton continued with his description, his voice tightly controlled, his eyes never leaving mine.

"The N was harder. Again, he used the body as the angled bar in the centre of the letter. After removing the head, he placed the shoulders at the top and dropped the right arm as the first bar of the N. I suppose he didn't like the short length of the arm. The proportions probably seemed wrong to him. No matter why, he removed the left arm from her body and placed it below the right one, clasping the hands, to make that bar as long as the legs, the other vertical bar of the N. He then placed both heads on the ground, one after each body. I think he was trying to make sure we knew the letters represented full words, although I have no idea what those words might be. I had hoped you would know?"

He stopped speaking, chewing his lower lip strongly enough to leave marks.

My head felt ready to explode.

"Inspector Norton, Detectives, perhaps we could continue this later. I don't think I can handle any more right now."

Norton's mouth softened into an insincere smile. Detective Harris cut off whatever he was going to say.

„We understand. You need some time to recover from the shock. However, we will need to meet again soon. We'd like you to come down to the station and make an official statement, at some point in the next few days.“

He rose, picking up his tape recorder and handing me his card. The Interpol Inspector followed him out of the study, a sullen look on his face. Before the three men reached the front door, I asked one final question.

„Has my father's house been released by the police?“

Detective Stafford replied:

„Yes, Sir, it has. That was one of the reasons we came to see you. I guess I forgot to mention it. The Forensics Department finished with it a few hours ago. See you down at the station, Mr Sirenne.“

The detectives left the house, arguing with Norton. I watched them drive off, only one thought making it through the numbness.

I needed to go to my father's house.

Located in the Glebe area of Ottawa, it had been my birthplace and my home until I moved into my own house ten years ago. Now, I had to go there to face the end of my family. I didn't feel ready.

While driving toward my father's place, my rear view mirror allowed me the occasional glimpse of a familiar vehicle and its driver, Norton, his companions nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he was intent on protecting me but I doubted it. His comments had seemed disjointed, despite the circumstances. Everything had come across as insincere, as if he were following another agenda. I resolved to ignore him for the time being. Let him do his watching.

To some, police protection might seem comforting. To me, it felt like an irritant. I preferred to mind my own business and for others to do the same, even in dire circumstances. That way no one got hurt. I almost changed my opinion when I arrived at my father's house. I hurried up the entrance staircase and stopped in front of the door, taking a deep breath, frozen in place.

Breaking the spell and forcing myself to move, I removed the police tape with a trembling hand and entered. The entrance hallway seemed normal but it felt wrong, too quiet. I walked into the living room and there it was, the bloody outline of the H and the N. I was horrified by the bloodstained dots after each gruesome letter, knowing what had left those imprints.

Seized by a sudden, irresistible impulse, I ran to the kitchen, filled a large bucket with hot water and picked up a heavy bristle brush.

Those stains had to go!

I returned to the living room, trying to stay calm, to think nothing about what the stains represented. I knelt down, splashed water on the floor, and began scrubbing the dark stains. I didn't care if I scratched the wood. At some point, I was crying, great wracking sobs, the tears streaming down my cheeks and dripping onto the bloodstains.

By the time I was done, my tears had dried, evaporated by a burning resolve, an inflexible resolution. I did not know how, I did not know when, but I would catch the Shadow-Killer. He would pay for what he had done.

* * * * *

I returned home and collapsed on my bed, falling into a fitful sleep. Next morning, feeling somewhat more settled, I made a few phone calls. I informed my lawyer and he began doing what was necessary to wrap up my father's affairs. I also went to the police station, as requested, to make a statement. I ended up talking to Detective Harris again.

I made my statement. The detective assured me I had been eliminated as a serious suspect. He promised to let me know about any progress in the case. He informed me Norton was a loose cannon, acting pretty much as he pleased. The local police were in charge of the investigation and Norton had done nothing but slow things down.

I had not been home five minutes, when the doorbell rang. A delivery truck was parked in front, the driver waiting at the door with a package.

„Who's it from?“

The driver looked at his clipboard.

„Uhm, ah, here we are. It was a sent by a *Mr Sirene*, three days ago, with instructions to be delivered today.“

I signed for it hurriedly and he handed me a thick envelope. Closing the door in the driver's face, I ripped the package open, pulling out a large hardcover book, »The Hollow Needle«, by Maurice Leblanc. The letters **HN!**

I opened the front cover and found a small note, readily identifying the almost illegible scrawl as my father's handwriting:

Son,

After all this time, I have decided to send you this book for safekeeping. Despite its innocent appearance, it is the key to an incredible secret and riches beyond belief. Our family has been keeping it safe, waiting for the time when you are ready.

Someone has been watching me, Paul. A man with a European accent. I was planning to give you this book in six months, on your thirty-fifth birthday, but his presence has changed all that. There is no time to waste, son. You must begin the hunt now.

Read the book. Only by looking beyond its words will you succeed.

I know you will need help. Organize a small team but choose only your most trusted friends. Remember—secrets of this nature have a tendency to attract trouble. No matter what you do, keep your research discreet.

Good luck. Call me as soon as you can.

Your Father.

A knock at the front door interrupted me. I closed the book, putting it down. It was Norton. Norton with a European accent. I did not let him in, forcing him to talk from the front porch. He held a tape recorder in his left hand, aiming it like a gun.

„Ah, Mr Sirene. I hope you are calmer today, so we can finish our conversation.“

„I'm not sure we have a conversation to finish, Inspector.“

„Mr Sirenne, no matter what Harris has told you, I am the only one who knows what we are dealing with. The man who did this is unlike other serial killers. He’s in a class of his own. Usually his murders have a twisted logic that means something only to him. In the case of your parents, he departed from his long-established pattern and left the clearest message. **HN**. These simple letters have convinced me he specifically chose your parents. Did you know he watched them for at least two weeks before moving in for the kill? He meant for this message to be seen and I am having trouble thinking of anyone else but you. By the way, what did that truck just deliver?“

His voice dropped and his gaze sharpened. He left the question hanging in the air, saying nothing else, pressuring me for an answer.

„I own an antique bookstore, Inspector. The package was a book I ordered, nothing more. As for those letters, I gave you my answer last night. Despite thinking about it from every angle I can imagine, I still have no idea what they might mean.“

He brushed aside my answer.

„Look at it from my viewpoint, Sirenne: the Shadow-Killer doesn’t play around. Either he left this message for you or he just killed your parents as a lark, leaving you to inherit all their money, which, by the by, is a considerable sum, is it not?“

„Inspector, this *talk* is over.“

His demeanour changed instantly.

„Fine, I understand, you are still upset. I will leave but you would do well to remember my words. This killer has an agenda and I am convinced you are part of it, willing or not. You had better be careful. You really don’t want to get on his bad side. Nor on mine, for that matter. I think he will get in touch with you and I will be there when he does.“

„I admire your tenacity, Inspector but you have misjudged this situation. I have nothing to do with the Shadow-Killer. My father and his wife have just been killed and I am trying to come to terms with that. It is very difficult to know how to react, a fact you are taking advantage of. I need some time to reflect and grieve.“

Norton turned off the cassette recorder, his eyes stopping their incessant movement and riveting on me. He stepped closer, bringing his unshaven face within inches of mine, his voice low and threatening.

„I’ve been chasing this monster for fifteen years. I’ve seen the bodies he’s left behind, checked every detail, talked to every witness. In all those years, he has never left a single clue to anyone, except for this time. This is my best chance to catch him. Either you hired him or he left you a message. I don’t care which it is, as long as it leads me to him. One thing’s for sure. You’re not going to stand in my way, playing your stupid games!“

He was either crazy or he was goading me. I pulled away, distancing my face from his stinking breath.

„Listen, Inspector, surely you recognise I want the murderer found as much as you do. Stop wasting your time with pointless accusations and get back to the real job, of catching the killer.“

„Fine, Mr Sirenne. Have it your way but don’t think this is over, because it’s not,“ he raged, heading back down the front stairs, muttering to himself.

I didn’t know if it had been right to lie but it was too late now.

Keeping others in the dark was not a new thing. I was born with a predisposition for secrecy and solitude. My father had reinforced my secretive approach to life through frequent games of strategy and planning. I had learned to keep my own counsel, to do things my way. I hated it when someone told me what to do. Dealing with the law was no different. The police had a tendency to abuse their position of power. In any case, I didn't like Norton and I didn't like the way he was shadowing me. I would involve him when I was ready and not a minute before.

When my mother was killed in a car accident three years ago, my father and I had drawn closer. He had later remarried, with Darlene, but I had never gotten close to her. Now they were both gone, taken from me. All I had left was to solve the mystery hidden within the pages of the book my father had sent me, his final wish. The Shadow-Killer was probably not far behind, looking for the same book and the clues it contained.

I returned to the study and examined the book more closely. It was a good quality, leather-bound hardcover, with nothing particularly remarkable about it, except perhaps for its excellent condition. Maurice Leblanc's »Hollow Needle« had originally been published in 1909 but this copy was printed in 1955.

I recalled a similar book, a gift from my father on my ninth birthday. It too had come with a cryptic message though I no longer recalled what it was. What had my father been trying to tell me? This was not a new process. Nothing had ever been simple with my father. It was always a puzzle or a mystery, never a straight answer. «Keeps your mind active and alert, ready for anything», he would say.

As a child, I grew to love the little challenges he frequently prepared for me. My keen mind eagerly ferreted out every clue, every hint. I would rarely fail in my efforts, anxious to see the smile in his eyes and feel the congratulatory pressure of his hand on my shoulder.

Every now and then, he presented me with a masterpiece puzzle, every exquisite detail worked out perfectly. He called them hunts. Once I had solved a hunt, he would invariably organize another in short order. I could see him now, pointing the way to the start of a new trail, calling out:

„The hunt is on, Paul. The hunt is on! What waits for you at the end? You'll never know unless you begin.“

This book had to be a clue leading to such a hunt, the last hunt I would get from my father.

I wondered where I had placed the other copy of »The Hollow Needle«. I wanted to read the note it contained. Vaguely remembering it in my bedroom, I headed upstairs, three steps at a time, feeling a tinge of excitement despite the situation. Entering my room, I checked the small shelf above my bed, finding the book easily, to my relief. I found my father's original note, an old piece of Vellum paper affixed to the back cover, the tape holding it in place dried out and yellowed.

Dear Paul:

On the occasion of your ninth birthday, I give you the same book my father gave to me when I was nine. It's a wonderful story but it is also so much more. It is the beginning.

*The beginning and the end,
Follow the circle, it bends.*

*The end and the beginning,
The answer in the connecting.*

Your Father

PS:

*A real story ends near Etretat
Lost until Paul infers new ideas subtly
You ought understand responsibility,
Necessarily after moiling Etretat*

When I read the note at age nine, I had not grasped my father's true intent. Today, it was obvious he was signalling the start of a hunt. Something was going on in the town of Etretat and it was connected with this book.

It was time to read the Hollow Needle again, with fresh eyes and new purpose. I returned to the study, placing the two copies next to each other on the coffee table. They were virtually identical. I chose one at random, sat back in the recliner, and re-discovered Leblanc's finest novel.

It was a story full of historical mystery and treasure, with no less than the venerable Sherlock Holmes making an appearance. Filled with charm, respect and a proper code of ethics, ensconcing the reader in another era, when even villains had morals.

Its main character was a man named Arsene Lupin, developed by Leblanc, as a French counterpart to the immensely popular Sherlock Holmes in Britain. Lupin, a gentleman-thief, was a likeable rogue, able to steal your heart and your paintings at the same time. He was possessed of the same clarity of thinking as his British alter-ego, making him a perfect adversary for Holmes.

At the story's core was a fantastic concept. In France, off the chalk cliffs of the small town of Etretat, a hundred metre pillar of rock projected mightily from the salt waters of the English Channel. According to Leblanc, the needle of rock was hollow, a secret held for centuries by the kings and queens of France. Used as a stronghold and a repository for treasure, knowledge of its existence had been lost during the upheaval of the French Revolution. Of course, gentleman-thief Arsene Lupin rediscovered it and used it as his stronghold. Access to it was found near the Fort of Frefosse, located on top of the southern chalk cliff overlooking Etretat.

At the bottom of one page in the book, I noticed a note from the editors:

„A few years after this book was originally released to the public, the army was commissioned to alter the fort because of undue attention since the book's publication.“

It was all very convincing. So convincing I found myself half-believing the Needle was truly hollow. I got up from the recliner and went to my desk, turning the computer on. I called up a search engine on the internet, entering the name *Etretat*. I was surprised to find it was a real place and even found several pictures of the Needle. Encouraged, I tried other search queries, such as *treasure*, *hollow*, etc. I landed in a website with the following statement:

„Etretat, a popular tourist destination, often attracts treasure hunters looking for the famous entrance to the hollow needle. Well folks, the needle is indeed there, however it is, without a doubt, completely solid.“

I had hit a brick wall but this was not my first hunt. There were always obstacles and pitfalls along the way. Treasure was an incredibly elusive prey, far rarer than one would think. Many of them had already been found or plundered, while others had been proven to be wild goose chases, such as the Oak Island mystery.

Treasure was incidental. I wanted to solve my father's last hunt and find the Shadow-Killer.

One thing was certain: whatever this Hollow Needle mystery might be, it was not about a hollow needle!

* * * * *

I was moving at great speed. I saw landscape flying by, forests, fields, tilled land, then more woods. What was I doing here? Where was I? With sudden clarity, I knew I was dreaming though this was no ordinary dream. I had no control over movement or direction, flying a few hundred feet above a realistic landscape. I could not perceive my body. The landscape changed. I was now moving past farms and roads, with the odd house here and there. I heard the sound of waves crashing somewhere ahead.

I approached a cliff with a number of strangely shaped patches of grass. A golf course. I slowed down until I was hovering over a big building. Just beyond it, a couple was walking along a path, their arms linked together. They were approaching a squat, cement structure, an old bunker. An intense yellowish light was emanating from its every opening. For a brief moment, the man looked up, his face illuminated by the bright glow, before turning back towards the bunker opening, walking in with the black-haired woman.

He had looked like me!

The surf was crashing heavily below. I flew towards the edge of the cliff, almost colliding with it before coming to a full stop. Without any warning, I entered into a vertiginous descent towards the water below. This felt more like falling than flying. Panic gripped me, my eyes locked on the rapidly approaching water.

I was going to hit hard!

I woke with a start, my arms and legs flailing, screaming out, drenched in sweat. It took almost fifteen minutes to slow my heartbeat and calm my nerves. I had fallen asleep in the recliner after reading the Hollow Needle. I could neither figure out what had brought on the vivid dream, which still disturbed me with its odd intensity, nor explain what it could possibly mean. The man entering the bunker—how could he be me? Who was the woman with him?

I was baffled.

A thought intruded, about the editor's comment in Leblanc's book. Why did the army change the fort, if the story about the hollow needle was false? Why even place such a comment in the book?

By now, I was sitting up in the recliner, any chance for sleep gone. I wouldn't be able to rest until I had some sort of answer. Sighing, I went back to my computer

and typed *Fort of Frefosse* into the search engine. A single photo of a tattered postcard showing a blurry picture of the fort, circa 1900, came up. That was it.

Trying different search engines, I came across another picture, dated November 28, 1911, showing several people posing in an angle similar to the postcard. The fort's outline was radically different, the main structure completely destroyed, leaving a deep pit surrounded by a jumble of broken stones. All that remained of the fort were a few crumbling walls. The photo dovetailed nicely with the editor's note in the Hollow Needle but was it related to my father's hunt?

I found an online reference to Leblanc's Villa in Etretat. Originally purchased by an estate, it was later taken over by Leblanc's granddaughter, Victoire. She had renovated it into a bed and breakfast, themed around the Hollow Needle mystery.

Still searching, I located an internet site with something of substance. Maintained by a French caver, most of the site was about various cave systems but one page had a summary of a most interesting book:

The Secret of the Kings of France
or
The True Identity of Arsene Lupin
by Valere Catogan

Etretat is a small, nondescript town situated on the coast of the ancient Gaulish territory. What could have attracted emperors, kings and queens to this tiny village, lost in a small valley, nestled between two of the tallest chalk cliffs in the country? Historically, Etretat was previously known as Esttretat, as referenced in the 1628 Gerard Mercator Atlas. However, if you examine the map of the King's Navy (1534, Maritime Archives), you will read:

Ici est tr. Etat (translation: Here is tr. State)

Could tr. stand for treasure? Treasure of the State?

Here are a few facts, relating to Etretat's mystery:

1) In 1300, during the Hundred Year War, Henry the Fifth landed in Normandy with his troops somewhere on the Gaul coast, very likely the site of Etretat. How did Henry reach the top of the precipitous cliffs with his troops without anyone witnessing the invasion?

2) Alexander Dumas' novel of the Three Musketeers was based on historical facts: The Duke of Buckingham fell in love with Anne d'Autriche and he received the famous pearl necklace from her. How did he evade the vigilance of the Cardinal de Richelieu and enter several times into France, despite increased patrols along the coast?

3) In 1670, a secret treaty was signed by Charles the Second and Louis the Fourteenth, negotiated by the Duchess of Orleans. How did she leave France to reach England? Where did Jacques the Second, escaping from Guillaume d'Orange in 1688, land on the Normandy Coast?

4) Napoleon Bonaparte ordered plans to be drawn for the construction of a port of war in Etretat. This project was brought to a standstill by the insistence of

Talleyrand. Fouchet noted Talleyrand never concerned himself with naval affairs. Prior to his unexplained naval concern, Talleyrand received a visit from the Baron of Bellevert, later declared an English spy. For years, Talleyrand did everything possible to distance Napoleon and his engineers from this small beach.

5) Why, after the 1830, 1848 and 1870 revolutions, did the de-throned kings head for the roads leading to Etretat, instead of others, such as those towards Calais, or Boulogne?

Could these events be connected to the secret held within Etretat's cliffs?

What could this little town be hiding? Certainly not a hollow needle, as Maurice Leblanc suggested in his Arsene Lupin story. Etretat's great secret was a camouflaged docking point, hidden below the massive cliffs, invisible from above and inaccessible on foot. One could only reach the hidden dock thanks to a tunnel that pierced the cliff itself. This tunnel made it possible to leave France for England discreetly, or vice-versa.

Who dug these tunnels? No matter their origins, the elite kept the secret of the kings of France during many long centuries. During the early part of the nineteenth century, they took new precautions to ensure silence was maintained. Rich families purchased key neighbouring properties. A tunnel, which once connected the hidden docks to a small valley, was lengthened to reach into Etretat's Donjon, then later, to the Villa Le Petit Val and finally, to the Villa des Oeuillets, owned by Mr Beaugrand, jeweller for the Queen.

Today, this secret is no more. Some tunnels were rediscovered by local fishermen but the majority no longer exist. Access to the eight hundred metre long passageway is completely forbidden. The ancient dock was eroded long ago by the tide and the collapsing cliffs have buried its few remains. The Villa des Roches tunnel has been walled up, although one can still see its entrance point to the left of the stairs leading up the Amont cliff.

Etretat has not yet revealed all its knowledge. During the occupation, the Germans made many discoveries. Unfortunately, all such documents, housed in the City of Havre, were destroyed at the end of the war during an allied bombing run.

This text is a partial summary of a document written by Valere Catogan, a nom de plume used by Raymond Lindon, who researched the history of Etretat, aided by Maurice Leblanc.

End of document.

»The Secret of the Kings of France« was much more plausible than a supposed hollow needle. The author, Raymond Lindon, had sought to hide his identity by writing under a pseudonym. I could not help but wonder why. In addition, the article mentioned Leblanc had helped Lindon with the book.

Leblanc was always involved. His story of the Hollow Needle, while admittedly fictitious, seemed intended to attract attention to Etretat. In my case, it had succeeded. Another fact struck me: it was now 5:00 AM and I was exhausted. I went to bed, my head brimming over with tunnels, treasures, and secrets.

* * * * *

The next few days were very busy. I took an indefinite leave of absence from my business, a successful antique bookstore owned by the family for generations, leaving it in the capable hands of my manager. The police had released my father's remains and I struggled through the funeral arrangements and the reading of the will.

I was the only one present.

Norton had been right about one thing: my parents had left me a veritable fortune, more than fifty million dollars. I had not known they had such wealth. It had never been apparent in our daily life. I almost felt betrayed. Where had these riches come from? Was it from my grandfather? My great-grandfather?

Normally, when I had such questions, I would turn to my father for help. I was now forever deprived of his calm advice. Yet, he was not completely gone. I could still imagine his voice:

„You won't solve anything in that state, son. You have to calm down, get a bit of perspective on things. Take some time and think things through.“

I found solace in following his advice, allowing my anger and sadness, to settle. Logic and planning slowly took their place.

I had no confidence either Norton or the police would find the killer, or solve the deeper mysteries surrounding the case. I also had to be realistic. I was no detective. Despite my facility in finding connections, I had no experience in these worldly matters. I had never been the physical type, always more cerebral in my pursuits and shunning public activities. I might be up to the task given time but time was exactly what I did not have. It could be no coincidence my father sent the book before being killed. He was being watched and had to act.

I faced a crucial choice: keep the book safe and do nothing, or take up the hunt. If I did nothing, I allowed the death of my father and Darlene to go un-avenged. I would be a sitting duck, waiting for the killer to decide my fate. There was really no choice. I had to solve the mystery before the killer. Unfortunately, I was playing catch-up.

I needed help.

My father had known I would not have time to cover all the bases. He suggested I assemble a team. Sharing the secret was risky but necessary. Thanks to my father's will, I now had ample resources. The inheritance money implied something else: the treasure had to be something else than mere wealth.

Chapter 2

Assembling the Team.

After much deliberation, I chose three of my closest friends, Jonathan Briar, Fabian Coulter and Liam O'Flanahan, contacting them to arrange a preliminary meeting. A date was set for the day after the funeral.

On that day, I woke at 8:00am, showered, placed both Hollow Needle copies in my satchel, and headed out on foot to The Top Nut, a small coffee bar. Inspector Norton was still following me in his car and I evaded him by walking through several mini-malls in quick succession.

Ducking into the coffee shop, I stood in the doorway for a moment, looking around for my friends.

„Hey, Paul, we're over here!“

It was Fabian Coulter. I had selected him for his amazing skills with everything computer. He was a world-class hacker who had earned his repute in the highest circles. As a computer security consultant for the government, there was little he could not access. This thin, pasty thirty-year old, a perpetual night owl, was my closest friend. We had known each other for more than twenty years and I trusted him with my life. His enthusiasm, wiry strength, and keen intellect would serve well in our search.

Seated next to him was Jonathan Briar. Tall, fit, and bald, the head of the history department at the University of Ottawa was an expert on ancient history. He had been my unofficial mentor for the past ten years. It was partly thanks to him the Dead Sea Scroll deception had been uncovered. His specialty, however, was Roman history. We had worked together many times before. Our most recent foray had been about a year ago, focusing on the legend of the San Saba Silver Mines. I had always been impressed by Briar's ability to quickly collate masses of research into pertinent information. Despite being in his mid-fifties, he was an energetic man, neither afraid of confrontation, nor of hard work.

Finally, there was Liam O'Flanagan. Short and overweight, O'Flanagan was a publisher of unusual books and a self-admitted expert on mysteries, conspiracies and the bizarre. He was the one who had convinced me to waste two years of my life, and no small sum of money, on the Oak Island mystery, his personal obsession. This Irish, red-haired man, abrasive and irritating, would never rest until answers were found. I knew I could trust him.

We had investigated mysteries before, spending evenings engaged in conversation about lost treasure and forgotten history. We were amateurs to be sure but, as a team, there would be little we could not figure out.

„How was the funeral yesterday?“ asked Briar. „I'm so sorry I could not attend.“

I sat down as Bridget, the waitress, brought me a cup of coffee.

„It went as well as it could have. I was emotional when I got home. It ended up being a pretty rough night. Anyway, I'm glad you all decided to come. You may not believe this but I think my father sent me a lead to another hunt just before he was murdered.“

„Is the hunt connected to his death?“ O'Flanagan asked, already sniffing a possible conspiracy.

They all knew about my father's hunts. Briar had even accompanied me on several occasions. He had been impressed at the twists and turns required to solve the devious puzzles.

„Yes it is. Gentlemen, I called you here because I need your help. The Shadow-Killer murdered my father and his wife. According to Norton, an Interpol inspector, this monster did it to send a message: the letters H and N.“

My mind flashed briefly on the bloody scene in my parent's house. I banished the image.

„In all confidence, I must admit something: when questioned by Norton, I held back a key piece of evidence. I would like to share that evidence with the three of you. I can only do it if you agree to join me in a hunt which could prove both dangerous and lucrative. Don't make this decision lightly. The Shadow-Killer is involved and he is already on the job. I doubt he would hesitate to murder anyone who stood in his way. While making your decision, keep two facts in mind. One, I am convinced I cannot succeed without your help, and two, I am willing to pay you each a hundred thousand dollars if you agree.“

Coulter was the first to take the bait.

„Paul, you don't even have to offer a single penny. I'd help you for nothing but if you're offering the money anyway, I won't object too strenuously.“

O'Flanagan exploded into a loud guffaw.

„That's the spirit, Coulter. As for me, I'm all in. I mean, how can I not be? I live for conspiracies and you're giving me a hundred thousand bucks to get in on the ground floor plus it's dangerous. Who could resist that? Sounds like a hoot.“

Considerably more restrained, Briar was the last one to speak. He was independently wealthy, so money would not be a serious enticement.

„Paul, your offer certainly comes as a surprise, especially so soon after the double murder. I admire your courage and determination. Consider me in. As for your money, keep it! We'll use it in your father's hunt. I have no need of it. However, you now have us all exceedingly curious. It is time to reveal what you held back from Norton and why.“

I pulled out my father's copy of »The Hollow Needle«, along with the note.

„This note is what prevented me from revealing everything to Norton. The authorities would only slow things down and I am convinced time is of the essence. My father's murder was the starting gun. We must hurry if we are to have the slightest chance of wrestling the prize from the killer.“

„You think this Shadow-Killer knows about the Hollow Needle?“ asked a curious Briar.

„I do. Norton said leaving clues is out of character for the killer. What made him do it then? Why did my father send me the book shortly before being murdered? He had to be trying to prevent the killer from getting it.“

„I see what you're getting at. The killer has got to know something and not just about that book. He knows something about the secret your dad was talking about,“ O'Flanagan added excitedly.

„And my father outsmarted him, mailing the book before the killer could find it. Perhaps sending it is the very thing that got him murdered. We are dealing with a ruthless man, one who holds many more cards than we do.“

„Well, what are we wasting time for, then? Let's get on with some facts,“ prodded an incensed O'Flanagan.

„Let's start with this: the book he sent me is, in fact, an exact duplicate of another he gave me when I was nine years old. This was my not my father's last hunt, but rather, his original one.“

Removing the second copy from my satchel, I dropped it on top of the first. O'Flanagan picked them up, a keen interest in his eyes.

„I grew to know your father quite well over ten years,“ Briar said. „He was always purposeful and deliberate in his actions. What could he possibly have been trying to teach you, back then, when you were so young?“

„I'm not sure it's like that. I don't think he intended for me to start on this particular hunt, at least not until the time was right. The second copy was intended to spur me to remember the first. After re-reading the book and prodded by a curious little comment from the editor, I was led to an internet page suggesting Etretat may be at the centre of a forgotten historical mystery. As I see it now, all previous hunts were preparing me for this original hunt.“

„Are you sure you're not reading more into this than is really there? We've all done that before,“ Coulter asked, playing the devil's advocate.

„I am convinced this is a real trail and I think we should follow it. I need you to help me confirm I'm not deluding myself.“

„What do you want us to do, Paul?“ Coulter responded.

„This warrants a little more armchair detective work, despite the pressure of time. I was wondering if you would each spend a couple of days doing individual research and we could compare notes on Thursday evening.“

„You know I live to investigate forgotten history,“ Briar said „My skills could be of some use. I will search out what information I can about that area of France. Did you perhaps bring any pictures of the fort you mentioned?“

I fished for the before and after pictures. They had the desired effect.

„The fort is completely destroyed in this later picture. Who did that and why?“ questioned Coulter.

„It certainly is strange,“ agreed O'Flanagan. „The extent of the damage suggests an explosion. What else would cause that kind of destruction?“

„Don't forget about the editor's note. It states the army was involved. What's that about?“ I added.

„I might be able to help with that. Most cities have converted their documents to electronic format. I can hack into those sites in my sleep. I'll see what I can turn up. Might clear this whole thing up. Might be nothing,“ suggested Coulter.

„Might be something, though,“ interjected O'Flanagan. „I'll go through my contacts and my files as well. I've never heard about this tunnel stuff. I might find something that will help.“

My friends got up, eager to begin their research. I emptied my coffee cup, ordering a refill, feeling a bittersweet excitement at the thought of a new hunt, a gift my father had given me twenty-five years ago.

„So Thursday evening then? I'll arrange for supper and we can review our findings.“

They nodded, each taking the time to offer some well-meant condolences before leaving. Somehow, they weren't necessary. My father was right here next to me. I sat back down, drank my coffee, and spent a few minutes with him in silence.

Chapter 3

A Decision is reached.

I ordered a few pizzas as my friends seated themselves around the dining room table. I reflected on how different we were from each other. Coulter was a generally quiet man. O'Flanahan was loud, obnoxious, and out of shape. Finally, Briar, with his ageless face, taller than average, was a garrulous man who viewed everyone as a student. As for me, at thirty-five and slightly overweight, I was an average man whose only quality was a keen mind.

They appeared anxious to share the material they had brought. I had set up a dry-erase board on an easel in a corner of the dining room.

„First, I want to say thank you for coming in through the back.“

„You kidding? Outsmarting that Interpol cop was the most fun I've had this week,“ O'Flanahan commented. Coulter snickered in agreement.

„The less attention from him the better. Anyway, from the look of those folders, it seems each of you have found some information. Where should we start?“

„How about the origins of the fort? After all, that's what started this whole thing,“ suggested Briar. When no objection came, he cleared his throat and began a scholarly presentation.

„As you might know, historically, Etretat was primarily a fishing village. During the 18th century, an oyster bed was added at the Queen's request. Long before all that, Etretat was a natural port. While the water near the shore is too shallow to allow ships to moor today, there were once deep trenches in the marine floor, allowing ships to anchor within the safe confines of the cove. These trenches, most of which have filled up with rubble over the centuries, extended right under the current location of Etretat. Under Etretat's famous beach are the remnants of a Roman shipyard.“

Briar went to the dry-erase board and, picking up a black marker, drew an outline of Etretat's beachfront, a rough semi-circular shape with a huge cliff on each side. Before Briar could continue his discourse, Coulter had a comment to make.

„The cliffs you've drawn don't extend into the sea sufficiently to protect ships of any significant size.“

Briar smiled briefly.

„While that may be true today, it is important to note the area's geology. Those cliffs are composed primarily of chalk. Turonian chalk, with Cenomanian protrusions, to be precise. Of more importance is the average erosion rate of chalk cliffs, which is approximately twenty centimetres per year. Geologically speaking, that's pretty fast. Romans occupied this area perhaps as early as fifty AD. A quick calculation informs us the cliffs advanced into the channel almost four hundred metres further back then. That would have provided significant protection for a very large fleet indeed.“

Drawing another map, Briar connected a line from Etretat to an area near the Seine River.

„I located a reference to an ancient Roman road linking Etretat and Lillebonne, or Juliobonna, to the Romans. Lillebonne was an active trading town. For some reason, the Romans felt it was worthwhile to build a road between these two

towns. Today, there's nothing left except for a few remnants of the road and some Roman ruins on the north side of town."

Briar had barely sat down when O'Flanahan stood, a wide smile on his face. He moved to the easel and started pacing back and forth.

"That was real interesting but I think you missed the point, Briar. Sure we're looking to get some history but what we're really looking for is TREASURE! And I think I found it. Let's forget all that Roman nonsense and instead, focus on King Francis the First, who took over the fort, in the early 1500's. He renovated it and installed at least one cannon, which is still on display at the Museum of Rouen. He used the fort to protect the port but also, I suspect, to extort passage fees from ships sailing within reach of his cannons."

The doorbell rang, interrupting O'Flanahan's discourse. Pizza was received, the driver was paid, and drinks were served. We found ourselves back at the table, munching in time with O'Flanahan's speech.

"Francis the First was the original Renaissance monarch. He was well-educated, interested in culture, architecture, and artists, which is mainly what he spent his money on, apart from his incessant wars. Francis even convinced Da Vinci to retire to France. Imagine Da Vinci roaming the Fort of Frefosse. Think of what that could mean!" he said, his eyes far away. An exaggerated cough from Briar snapped him back to reality.

"Uhm, yes, anyway, another area of interest was exploration. Francis funded Jacques Cartier on at least three expeditions to Canada, to search for gold and diamonds. Cartier's first voyage was in 1534."

By now, he was speaking loudly. I had started feeling uneasy as soon as he mentioned Cartier, the name sparking a distant memory. O'Flanahan was up to something. He continued, increasing the volume of his voice even more:

"On Monday, Sirenne referred to an internet page involving tunnels. Looking it up, I found an interesting mention of Etretat in 1534, on the ancient »King's Maritime Map«. The king it refers to can only be Francis the First. A coincidence? I think not, if you note the map was dated the same year as Cartier's first expedition. I believe Cartier, on his first trip to Canada, did find treasure, contrary to recorded history."

Incensed, I stood up, shoving my chair back with a screech.

"Don't you dare, O'Flanahan."

He ignored me completely, increasing the volume by several decibels.

"Found in Canada, Cartier brought TREASURE back and hid it in the Fort of Frefosse. But, you ask, what treasure did he bring back? Isn't it obvious?"

"Stop, don't say it," I shouted, getting angrier by the second.

"He brought back the OAK ISLAND TREASURE, that's what!" he concluded, screaming at the top of his lungs.

O'Flanahan had done it again. This time, he had linked my father's hunt to his time-wasting Oak Island Treasure. How dare he? Briar and Coulter were laughing at me, so I sat back down, still glaring at him.

"All right, O'Flanahan, although I'm sure you did that just to bother me, go ahead and try to logically justify this nonsense!" I said through clenched teeth.

"Come on, Sirenne, take it easy. We're just talking here. I know you think the Oak Island Treasure is fictitious but it makes sense this time. Listen to the facts,

no nonsense here, just what we know about Oak Island. Something went on there, even you have to admit that. The *money-pit*, as they called it, was covered with large heavy flagstones. There were heavy oak platforms every three meters, to a depth of nearly thirty-six metres. On different levels, they found charcoal, putty, coconut fibre. They found an inscribed stone, complete with cryptic clue. Most importantly, let's not forget how the designers rebuilt two entire beaches. Using flat rocks, eel grass and coconut fibre, they successfully hid two flood tunnels, with five feeder drains, ensuring flooding."

"But no treasure was ever found. You know that, O'Flanahan," I said.

"In this case, I think that's a good point. Look, guys, no one knows who put it there or when but it was there at some point and somebody went through a whole lot of effort making sure it stayed hidden. Maybe it was used to store gold intended to pay Indians and soldiers garrisoned in Quebec and Montreal, although some people insist the Oak Island was connected to Templar treasure. Your guess is as good as mine. Officially, Cartier never found anything but what if he arrived at Oak Island and saw the gold being hidden? What if he sneaked in and stole the treasure? Would he admit to it? Who would he tell? One thing is for sure: Francis financed a second trip, so the news from the first can't have been all bad.

Coulter nodded.

"You make some sense but it's just theory. Little proof there, I'm afraid. We can't forget the basic rules of treasure hunting. Until we have enough solid facts, our conjectures will never amount to more than a Thursday night chat. I, on the other hand, unlike the two of you, came armed with real facts, pertinent to the changes in the Fort of Frefosse!"

Our ears perked up. Coulter was never one to exaggerate.

"As I said during our prior meeting, I have easy access to restricted documents. This allowed me to delve right into Etretat's records. I downloaded everything I could find from 1900 to 1920. After a sleepless night poring over old documents, I came up with this."

He held up an official looking piece of paper.

"This, gentlemen, is an accident report, dated November 13, 1911. It identifies a fellow named Old Man Vallin, if you can believe that. He had offered to carry out some minor road repairs to facilitate militia travel. There is reference to the poor character of Old Man Vallin and to his reputation for drunkenness. On October 26 1911, Vallin acquired several sticks of dynamite, purportedly to remove a boulder on one of these roads. He also purchased several bottles of wine for the trip. He took a wrong turn, ending on the trail to the Fort of Frefosse. By the time he arrived at the fort, he was hopelessly lost and drunk. Mistaking a dynamite stick for a candle, he nearly blew himself up. In a state of panic, he tossed all the sticks over the fort's walls. The resulting explosion destroyed the old fort. The town was in a furor. I found reference to a court summons for the unfortunate Vallin. Strangely, the case never went to trial. Vallin was declared innocent of wrongdoing and the incident labelled an accident. The land on which the fort stood was sold within days and a golf course opened on the site," Coulter put the sheet down, pulling another from his folder.

"I might have been satisfied with that, if it weren't for this document. It shows various outstanding taxes in Etretat in mid-1911. Here, you will note Old Man

Vallin's large tax debt. So large in fact, it was likely Vallin's home and land would be repossessed by the town. Not a rich man, our Vallin. Yet, on Nov 20 1911, just a few days after the explosion, Vallin paid his taxes in full, with cash, according to the notes in the ledger. Where did all this money come from? Who gave it to him and for what? Too many questions and too many coincidences," Coulter concluded, tossing the second sheet on the table.

We broke into chaotic conversation. Even if we tried to ascribe innocent explanations to these facts, their number was growing beyond what coincidence could easily allow. Eventually my friends quieted down. It was now my turn to talk. Retrieving the two copies of »The Hollow Needle« from a nearby shelf, I placed them in the centre of the table.

„I thought I would go at this from a different direction. While the mystery about Etretat and its fort was utterly fascinating, I found myself more captivated by these two identical books. Perhaps a natural inclination, being in the book business. Another factor influenced me: the books were here, in my hands, while Etretat was not. The first oddity I noted was this...“

I opened both books to the page opposite the list of chapters, containing the printing history.

„These books, printed in 1955, are from a limited edition and are individually numbered. The original copy, the one my father gave me when I was nine, is stamped number one in a limited printing of four and one, whatever that means.“

„Could it mean five?“ asked O'Flanahan. „After all four and one makes five, doesn't it?“

Briar jumped in.

„Why say it that way then? Surely it means something less obvious than that.“

O'Flanahan barked a reply.

„Tell me what it means then?“

„Come on, guys, let Paul finish what he was saying,“ interjected Coulter in a low voice. O'Flanahan looked sheepish for a moment, then smiled and sat back in his chair. I took this as my cue.

„If you examine the copy my father sent before his murder, you will note it is also number one in a limited printing of four and one. By logical conclusion, one of these books must be a counterfeit copy. Even stranger, they are both signed by Maurice Leblanc, apparently genuine signatures, yet Leblanc died in 1939, well before these books were printed.“

I paused for a second, my audience spellbound.

„I examined both for the slightest material difference. The paper, the ink, the typeset, the font, absolutely everything was identical and all in perfect condition. If one was a counterfeit copy, it had to be the best work I had ever seen. I kept returning to the note from my father at the back of the original book. The note and, more specifically, the dried-out tape keeping it in place. Once applied, tape will almost invariably damage a book. Over time, the glue can stain the book, or stick to the pages, as you can see here. My father simply would not do this. Not ever. So why did he do it here?“

Coulter was the first to suggest a possibility:

„To call attention to it! He wanted you to wonder about it.“

„Did you find out anything else?“ O'Flanahan jumped in.

„Actually, I waited for the three of you, so we could discover together what my father was trying to tell me. The trail is right here. What should we do?“

„Take the note and the tape off and look at everything carefully. That’s my suggestion,“ O’Flanahan answered.

Nods from the others carried the motion. Using a pair of fine tweezers, I tightly pinched the note and tape together then lifted. It came off easily, with a slight zipping noise, the dried glue flaking off the page, its adherence long gone. Pulling out a magnifying glass, I bent over the book and scrutinized the cover.

I saw stitches in the leather but some looked odd. I realised what looked like stitches, across an area of about eight centimetres, were in fact white ink drawn to look like stitches.

„There is a hidden pocket here.“

„What? Are you sure?“ asked Briar, looking stunned.

„Yes. Watch.“

Lifting the revealed flap with the tweezers, I peered inside, seeing a folded piece of paper. Reaching in, I pulled it out, unfolding it carefully.

Paul:

If you have found this note, you have discovered the Great Hunt. My father taught me the way of the hunt, and gave me specific instructions to teach you. You in turn will teach your son, preparing him. He is the one who must solve the Great Hunt mystery. It will be his duty to regain our lost heritage. I know part of the trail to our past is in this book. There’s something about the Fort of Frefosse, I am sure of it.

Good Luck, Paul. Prepare your Son. He must regain what our family has lost.

PS:

*A real story ends near Etretat,
Lost until Paul infers new ideas subtly.
You ought understand responsibility,
Necessarily after moiling Etretat.*

Paul Sirene

„There’s a problem with that note. It’s not my father’s writing.“

„Do you think it’s a fake?“ O’Flanahan asked.

„No, that’s not what I meant. It’s my grandfather’s writing.“

„Are you telling me your grandfather was also named Paul Sirene, like your father and you after him? Isn’t that odd?“ observed O’Flanahan.

I nodded in agreement. It was very odd. My father had never explained it satisfactorily, even though I had asked him on several occasions.

„If this note was written by your grandfather to your father, then the note is referring to you. The Great Hunt was intended to be your task,“ noted Briar.

„Wouldn’t that date the Great Hunt back to the time of the story in The Hollow Needle?“ Coulter asked excitedly.

„Yes, it would,“ I answered. „I am getting overwhelmed. Let’s have a coffee break.“

„Excellent idea,“ Coulter said without hesitation. „Perfect timing!“

Coulter followed me into the kitchen, while Briar and O'Flanahan stayed in the dining room, looking over the files. Within moments, they were arguing about something. What was it with those two? Meanwhile, I was having problems dealing with the note.

Nothing was accidental about any of this!

My father had always known I was meant to begin this hunt. This was a decades-long plan, inherited from father to son, waiting for me to undertake the Great Hunt. By luck or design, he had sent me the book and the Shadow-Killer's attempt to rob my heritage had failed.

Briar ran into the kitchen, holding a sheaf of papers.

„Coulter, where did you get these?“

„Those? Didn't I tell you? I guess I forgot. When I was searching for financial details, I did a random search and got some Francis the First financial records dated from 1525 onward. There were several folders there, along with the financial stuff, so I downloaded all of them. I printed some random sections to bring here.“

„You know how much I love these old documents. I found a sheet dated 1530. It's a letter from the College de France's administrator, Guillaume Bude, addressed to Francis the First. It summarizes a search for documents about the Fort of Frefosse and refers to plans or drawings of some sort, but they are not with the page. Do you have more of this file? We might be able to get an architectural drawing of the fort from back then,“ Briar asked, his breathing shallow and rapid.

„Yes, there is more to the folder. I brought my laptop, so we could check it out,“ assured Coulter.

Excited, we headed to the dining table only to realize Coulter still peered at us from the kitchen, a determined look on his face.

„After the coffee is done, of course!“

We finally found ourselves standing around his laptop, while he punched a few keys and called up the folder. After a moment or two, a frustrated Coulter muttered.

„It's not there. I can't find it but I think it was there at some point.“

The file Coulter had printed was numbered ›F1-3-1530-73‹ and the following file was ›F1-3-1530-75‹.

There was a file missing!

Coulter called up the folder index.

„It says here ›F1-3-1530-74‹ was not in the folder when the files were scanned into computer. It was assumed lost.“

„Can you search for it in other folders? Maybe it was misfiled,“ suggested O'Flanahan.

Coulter's fingers flew over the keyboard. A page of results popped up. With four of us looking, few details were likely to be missed. Just after Coulter's second cup of coffee, we found it, filed in a folder containing castle drawings and engineering plans.

„If you wanted to hide this document, there could not be a better place than this. It actually looks as if it belongs here. Someone placed this here intentionally,“ O'Flanahan said.

„Why didn't they simply steal it?“ Briar asked.

„Perhaps they were unable to. The physical documents were housed in the Royal Library. Not an easy place to steal documents. It would have been much simpler to misfile them deliberately,“ O’Flanahan answered.

We connected the laptop to my network and soon had a page printing. I placed it on the table, sweeping the rest of the papers out of the way. O’Flanahan seized the paper, pulling it close to his face. A strange tremor ran through his body, the hand holding the paper flopped to his side, and he collapsed backwards into his chair.

„I-I’ve seen those before,“ he stuttered, gasping for breath. Suddenly, he jumped up, full of energy and screamed at the top of his lungs:

„I’VE SEEN THOSE BEFORE HA-HA!“

He did a weird little jig, looking utterly ridiculous, and then ran frenetically to his coat, pulling out an old tattered paperback from a side pocket.

The Oak Island Mystery!

„No-no-no,“ I shouted despite myself. O’Flanahan hurried back, slipped on a loose area rug and almost fell, but caught himself and kept going, limping a little while swearing under his breath. He slammed the book on the table, opening it to the page showing the inscription found on the tablet from the money pit.

„There!“ he said. „Tell me those aren’t the same symbols,“ he challenged.

The symbols from the dungeon layout were similar to those on the tablet from Oak Island. For a moment, it seemed as if O’Flanahan had found a real link. Luckily, I had spent a fair bit of time on that *mystery* as well:

„Hold your horses, O’Flanahan. The stone with the original inscription was lost in the early 1900’s. You know that. The tablet inscription as we know it today, was the work of a company trying to sell shares in their newly registered Oak Island Mining Company. Using a very simple transposition of symbols with English letters, the cipher was easily translated to the phrase: ‘Forty feet below two million pounds are buried’. That inscription is a fake!“

O’Flanahan looked discomfited, which, admittedly, made me feel better, but his discomfort only lasted for a few moments.

„You’re right, of course. I forgot that part in my excitement. But, if it’s a fake, how come the symbols are on those Frefosse plans?“ he rallied back.

Briar, ever the professor, pounced on that one.

„When you think about it, the symbols in that inscription are not particularly rare. Circles, rectangles and triangles are common. The Romans certainly used them, as did the French. Perhaps it is just coincidence?“

We were in danger of veering off-track.

„I think it’s time to summarize what we have and decide our next move. This evening has been very productive, much more than we had any right to expect. So, where should we start?“

Briar jumped in immediately.

„We start with the geological information. Leblanc’s book implies the Needle of Etretat is hollow, a statement we know to be false. However, the premise is generally accurate. A crumbly material at best, chalk is easily eroded by the elements, waves and tidal currents. It is prone to cave formation, in particular, vertical pipes, following along cracks or weaknesses. These cracks often widen into large caves, such as the Beachy Head system, which is more than four hundred

metres in length. Therefore, Leblanc's theory in *The Hollow Needle* is essentially plausible, if not factual. Those cliffs are like Swiss cheese. If you ask me, I would stake my reputation on the probability of secret tunnels and caves being involved, despite that the needle is solid. The port of Etretat was both a boon and a danger. Enemy ships could approach as easily as local ships. The Romans built a road to Etretat to simplify access to the shipyard. They erected a fort to protect themselves from pirates. Later, because of the fall of the Roman Empire, activity ended and all of this was somehow lost to history. Fishermen took over the area and life went on. The next step is up to you, O'Flanahan."

"Although I did get a wee bit carried away with the Oak Island connection, there are still some powerful facts to consider. The fort fell into ruin over the centuries. It attracted the attention of Francis the First in 1530, or perhaps even earlier. Possibly, it has something to do with the mysterious tunnels mentioned in Lindon's book. At some point before 1530, Francis commissioned a rebuild of the fort. Perhaps it was to protect the coast but it could have been the presence of those tunnels that motivated Francis to rebuild. He sent Jacques Cartier to Canada, in search of gold and treasure. Possibly, he returned with more than history says he did."

Fabian Coulter continued the review:

"The fact is Francis rebuilt the fort and used it often. That's it. The fort dropped from sight until the early 1900's when it caught Leblanc's attention and was featured in his famous story. Soon after that, Old Man Vallin blew it up, at the request of someone whose identity remains unknown."

"I just want to add a few points. The first is we have barely touched the surface about this tunnel business. The second point is Leblanc. He is at the centre of all this. He found Etretat as a young man and kept coming back. He rented a summerhouse there and later bought it. It is certain he was fascinated with the small town and was instrumental in drawing much attention to it through his books. All this attention bothered someone enough to pay Old Man Vallin to blow the fort up and perhaps, also, to hide its architectural drawings. Finally, we cannot forget what the two *Hollow Needle* books and their notes imply. That may be the most telling point of all," I finished.

Silence ensued. Finally, Briar spoke for the entire team:

"I am convinced something is going on. Historically speaking, Etretat has drawn far more attention than a small fishing town deserves. Yet today all is forgotten, which, in itself, is odd. However, when Leblanc revives interest in this quaint little town, the Fort of Frefosse is coincidentally destroyed. I think the fort is the focal point of these events."

"I concur," supported Coulter.

"It's got my vote," O'Flanahan agreed.

"Gentleman, this is a solemn moment," I exclaimed. "From the slightest of clues, we have found a path to follow. The Great Hunt has begun."

"May we beat the Shadow-Killer to the goal," added Coulter sombrely.

"The question is: what do we do about it?" O'Flanahan asked, getting directly to the heart of the matter again.

„Some of us should go to France, to Etretat, and continue the investigation on site. The rest can stay behind and continue with the research. We can communicate by, uhm...“

„Don't worry about communications. I've got that covered,“ stated Coulter. „I think it would be best if I stayed behind for a while to set that up.“

„As you know, I'm in the publishing business,“ said O'Flanahan. „Despite our time pressures, I cannot just stop that machinery. It will take me at least a week to reorganize. In the meantime, I am positive I can turn up some useful information.“

Briar was nodding and looking sad at the same time.

„I would also love to go, but the finals are beginning and I have papers to grade. Once that is done, I will be completely available.“

This was not what I wanted. I wanted to work as a team. Phone calls would simply not be enough and I said as much. Coulter assured me the problem was easy to solve. He was convinced we could remain in communication via the Internet. With that problem addressed, it was agreed.

I was going to Etretat!

Chapter 4

Travelling to France.

I peered out the plane window at the water below briefly, before placing the laptop on my knees. Selected specifically for this trip by Coulter, it had been the first purchase in his plan to keep us in contact. With my overstuffed bank account footing the bill, he had bought without restraint. For several days, delivery trucks had dropped off dozens of boxes filled with high-tech gadgets.

The laptop came with a satellite uplink and it extended battery life using solar panels imbedded in its cover. Along with all this came a very special pair of glasses. Wirelessly connected to my laptop, the techno-glasses contained miniaturised cameras and viewing screens on the inside of the lenses. Microphones and headphones were built into the arms of the glasses. The cameras had a zoom function and I could view scenes in either infrared or ultraviolet.

After Coulter cobbled some software together, my team could receive audio and video from my glasses while sitting in comfort at home. They could send information, displaying it on the miniature screens. While the projected screen image only a few centimetres across, the impression was of a translucent sixty-centimetre screen, floating about half a metre in front of my eyes.

The only problem with this incredible technology was that I had to speak aloud for my three teammates to hear me. Unfortunately, no one else could hear them!

* * * * *

„Would you like something from the bar, or would you prefer a complimentary orange juice?“

„A glass of juice would be fine, thank you.“

While the stewardess served me, I heard O’Flanahan’s voice in my ear.

„Hey Paul, how’s it going?“

„Good.“

„Say, this techno gizmo Coulter put together is phenomenal. I can see everything as if I was there.“

I waited for the stewardess to finish before replying.

„What do you want, Liam?“

„I was wondering if you could do me a wee bit of a favour?“ he begged in an unctuous tone.

„Such as?“

„Could you turn your head to the right seventy-five degrees? I wish to settle an argument with Coulter,“ he explained.

I automatically turned my head, feeling like a remote control camera. My eyes now rested upon a pretty, raven-haired, bosomy woman, sitting across the aisle.

„That’s more like it. Much better than that boring window view,“ he affirmed with a laugh.

Having noticed my momentary stare, the dark-haired woman smiled briefly then looked away. I felt embarrassed.

„Are you interrupting me for anything more than this?“

„Of course. What sort of person do you think I am? I was just letting you know your reservation at the Villa Leblanc has been confirmed.“

„Why don’t you find some more info about the court case with Old Man Vallin? Why did it get dropped? Who was the prosecutor? Do some digging.“

„Right you are, Paul. I’ll get on it. See ya.“

O’Flanahan disconnected, causing a loud popping noise in my ear. I got up to stretch my legs, making my way to the forward cabin and returning to my seat. All the while, I reflected about the Fort of Frefosse. It had originally been built fifteen hundred years ago, when the cliff extended four hundred metres further into the channel. The fort would have been distant from the cliff edge, making it useless as a defence against naval attack. So why was that location chosen? There had to be some other factor involved. I suspected it might be a feature Briar had mentioned in his geology class:

Tunnels. Tunnels and caves.

He had said chalk cliffs were prone to form vertical pipes and large cavern systems. What if such an opening had been found? Would that have been motive enough to build the fort in such a disadvantageous location? My thoughts were interrupted by the captain. We were about to begin our descent. I heard a crackle in my ear. It was Coulter.

„I came up with something really interesting! You won’t believe it.“

„What did you find?“

„I downloaded a whole pile of French newspapers, scanning for stories relating to our search. Finding nothing, I did a random search for Old Man Vallin, the guy who blew up the fort.“

„What about him?“

„He was killed a few months after the explosion. Guess where he died?“ he taunted.

„Just tell me.“

„He died at the fort. Nobody knows what happened. His body was found by a couple of local boys. He might have been beaten, but it was hard to say. He fell from a good height into the jagged rocks.“

Coulter signed off as the plane landed. I made ready to leave, collecting my carry-on luggage. The woman from across the aisle stood up, glancing at me briefly and smiling. I smiled back, taken in by her natural beauty. There was something about her. However, I was stuck on Coulter's revelation about Old Man Vallin. Someone hadn't been happy about the fort being blown up. That someone had a conversation, a final conversation, with Old Man Vallin.

Had we uncovered a murder in Etretat?

* * * * *

I got off the plane, carrying my overfull satchel. I had brought no other luggage, sure that I could buy whatever I needed on the way. I rented a Porsche, which was conveniently equipped with a GPS. It suggested various routes from Paris to Etretat. I selected the first one and, following its prompts, navigated through the streets of Paris until I reached the A13 towards Rouen-Caen, continuing on towards Le Havre-Pont de Tancarville.

After the bridge, I headed towards Bolbec, on the D910. I heard a beep from the glasses and the monitor came on. Briar's head appeared a metre in front of my face. It was very distracting, so I had him turn off his laptop camera.

„It is quite clever to be conversing this way, my boy. The scenery is passing by and I hear the vehicle sounds in stereo. I could almost swear I am in the car. A capital idea, these techno-glasses,“ Briar stated.

„Thanks but they have disadvantages.“

„I have heard about some of them. O'Flanahan is often unstoppable, as are you, my friend but I did not call to discuss him. I have been researching, which is why I have not been in contact. I must even admit to ignoring some grading of papers,“ Briar confessed.

„Sounds like you have the bug pretty bad.“

„You are correct. This Etretat thing is very odd indeed. At first, with O'Flanahan's Oak Island nonsense, the Great Hunt seemed like poppycock, but every time I turn around, something else pops up, yet another bizarre fact.“

„What have you found now?“

„I came across a biography of Leblanc. Apparently, he was a sickly man. He supported his sometime-actress sister for much of her life. However, he was not an adventurer, being neither into politics, nor public affairs, and shunning most publicity, except when promoting his novels. I felt quite confident of this version of his life, until I came across a curious book, entitled »Filatures«, published in 1980 by the University Press in Grenoble, dealing with the «sum of Leblanc's writings».“

„The sum of his writing?“

„I kid you not. The book, subtitled «A Walk through the Cycles of Lupin and Rouletabille» claimed a very strange thing. Leblanc's books revealed two distinct writing *styles*. Certain storylines, words and names, were thought to have been chosen for reasons beyond the needs of the story. The purpose of this work is extremely nebulous and I found it quite bizarre someone would have thought of

doing such an analysis in the first place. By the way, another place where you can find a similar type of dual writing is in coded letters," Briar pointed out.

„Coded letters? Was Leblanc hiding codes in his books?“

„It is quite possible, if you believe the conclusions of this author.“

„Codes about what?“

„Indeed! I thought back to his biography, which held no place for a man hiding codes in his books. What was he trying to say and to whom was he saying it? Either »Filatures« was contrived statistical nonsense, or Leblanc's biography was falsified.“

„Codes or not, Leblanc is right in the middle of it again.“

Briar signed off only to be replaced within moments by an overly-excited O'Flanahan.

„Listen, do you remember Raymond Lindon?“

„Yes. The author who wrote about the tunnels in Etretat.“

„You got it, boyo. I've been doing some research about him. First thing was, I learnt he was the Avocat-General of France, their version of Attorney-General. Then I figured out the pseudonym he used, »Valere Catogan« is an anagram of Avocat-General. He was also elected Mayor of Etretat at some point. So Lindon, assisted by Leblanc, wrote a book linking Etretat to treasure and historical mystery, while presenting Lupin as a real person, not a fictional character. Finally, an absolute clincher this one, provided by Coulter just a few minutes ago, a young Raymond Lindon was the assistant to the attorney who dropped the charges instead of prosecuting Old Man Vallin. More wood for the fire, wouldn't you say?“

„Almost too much.“

„There are a lot of people involved. Leblanc, Lindon, Lupin, and we can't forget the Shadow-killer, or the book your dad sent you. I can smell a conspiracy all over this mess but that's okay, I love that smell, he-he-he. You're not still upset for that stunt I pulled on the plane, are you?“

„No I'm not, O'Flanahan. God knows, I needed a laugh. Everything has been so serious lately. At least, I managed to evade Norton at the airport.“

„I don't think he knows about the three of us yet. That gives us an edge and I intend to keep it. We can do a heck of a lot behind the scenes.“

„Thanks, I appreciate that, I really do. Listen, I'm getting into a bit of heavy traffic here. How about we touch base again once I'm settled in?“

„Right-o. See you then.“

I arrived in Etretat near nightfall. The drive had gone well but I was exhausted and suffering from jet lag. I found the Rue Guy de Maupassant #15 and, moments later, drove into the parking lot of the Villa Leblanc. It was as impressive as I had imagined. Its gabled roof, the imposing garden, complete with Roman statues, and its inviting entrance were more than I had expected.

The front door opened and an older woman, white-haired and matriarchal, walked out, a gentle smile on her face.

„Welcome to the Villa Leblanc. My name is Victoire Leblanc,“ she stated in a strong, clear voice.

„Thank you. I am so glad to meet you. My name is Paul Sirenne. I have a reservation.“

„Ah, Monsieur Sirenne. I remember taking your reservation. Please come in. You must be exhausted. You drove directly from Paris after your plane trip, yes?“

„I did. I am a bit tired, I must admit. Also somewhat hungry,“

„Well then, let us not waste any more time. We will get you signed in and I believe our cook may be able to put something together for you. While you settle in, I will arrange to have some food sent to your room, perhaps with some white wine?“ she suggested.

„That sounds wonderful.“

The villa's interior had been restored with careful attention to detail. One section was closed off and signs informed me this was the famous Hollow Needle Museum.

I knew what I was doing tomorrow.

Signing in was mercifully quick and I was directed to my room. I lay down on the sumptuous bed only to be roused by a knock at the door. It was a maid, bringing a seafood platter and a half litre of white wine. I ate the shrimp first, my personal weakness, then quickly took care of the rest. I dropped back onto the bed and, without further objection from my stomach, fell asleep.

Chapter 5

The Needle of Etretat.

The aroma of coffee awakened me. Next to my bed was a small table, upon which a single cup coffee machine, connected to an antique timer, was busy percolating. I jumped in the shower, then had the coffee in lieu of breakfast, my stomach unsettled from the long trip and the late night meal. Feeling better, I headed downstairs and went out to the garden at the back of the Villa. I wanted to go see the Needle but had decided to delay that until later in the afternoon, after the Arsene Lupin/Hollow Needle museum tour.

I wandered the path, enjoying the garden. Leblanc's villa was far bigger than I had anticipated. I came across a stone bench and sat, the morning sun warming my face. A cool breeze was blowing. A car door slamming made me open my eyes and I saw a taxi driving away. A raven-haired woman was walking up the entrance stairs of the villa, meeting up with Mrs Leblanc.

I heard voices talking excitedly but they faded away in the wind. I returned to my reflections, closing my eyes for a few moments.

* * * * *

After the museum tour, I was ready to go see the Needle. I put on my technoglasses and started a recording of the walk for my friends, knowing they were still deep in slumber. I headed down Rue de Maupassant, enjoying the clear blue sky and refreshing sea air. I took a left on Brindejont, which turned into Rue Prosper. Eventually I arrived at Etretat's renowned black pebble beach. To my right was the

magnificent Amont cliff with its »elephant trunk« arch. Angling my head, I peered through the Aval arch.

There it was: the famous Needle!

I headed left, arriving quickly at the Terrasse Guy de Maupassant, and clambered up a tourist trail, heading up the Aval cliff. I noted the mysterious »door in the cliff« and wondered what was behind it. About halfway up, I stopped for a brief rest, after which I finished the marathon climb. It would have been more inspiring had I been in better shape.

Arriving at the top was a letdown. The view of Etretat was excellent but I could see nothing of the Needle. Following the posted signs, I approached the edge of the cliff and was finally able to see it in its entirety. I'd examined pictures of it but nothing compared to the reality of being here, of seeing the Needle surrounded by the swelling and crashing of the channel water.

Moving away from the edge, I followed another trail, skirting the golf course. In the distance, I noticed a worn structure, an old bunker. It was exactly like the one in my dream. I wanted to go see it but my attention was drawn by the trail leading to the »Chambre des Demoiselles«, a small chamber carved into the edge of the cliff. In Leblanc's story, it had been the key which led Lupin to the hidden entrance below the Fort of Frefosse.

There was a small bridge leading to the chamber's rectangular entrance. Inside, the carved letters **D** and **F** projected from the floor below the small rectangular window, just as described in the Hollow Needle. Stepping onto them, I was elevated roughly to the window's height. There, on the left bottom corner, a quartz crystal stuck out, shaped roughly like an eagle's talon. Looking through the crystal was supposed to reveal the special brick that opened the secret tunnel. Closing one eye, I could indeed see a moss covered brick wall at the base of the fort's foundation. To my surprise, I saw a small white cross through the eagle's talon, as mentioned in Leblanc's novel.

My excitement could hardly be contained. I rushed out and ran back across the bridge, scrambling down a narrow path, nearly slipping off the precipitous edge in the process. I found the fort's old brick foundation but, to my disappointment, could not move any of the bricks, no matter how hard I tried.

After a while, I calmed down. I already knew the secret tunnel into the hollow needle was fiction, made up by Leblanc's fertile mind. Yet here I was, pushing and prodding every brick within reach, like a treasure-chasing amateur.

Still, it had been exciting, if only for a few moments!

It was mid-afternoon and I was tired. Spying a large building a few hundred yards away, I decided to head there to sit down and get a drink. As I walked through the parking lot, a car horn sounded twice, attracting my attention.

It was Inspector Norton.

He motioned for me to get in. Despite a degree of apprehension, curiosity gained the upper hand. If he'd wanted to arrest me, he would have done it already. I had barely seated myself in the passenger's seat when he took off briskly.

„Well, well, well. What a surprise. Running into each other on a completely different continent. I can barely explain it. Can you?“

He was toying with me. I stayed on my guard.

„There is nothing to explain, Inspector. The police said I wasn't a suspect.“

„Do you take me for a fool, Sirenne? Did you seriously believe you could evade me so easily?“ his face was getting animated. „I don't know what you think is going on here, Mr Sirenne, but let me assure you this is not a game.“

„Someone murdered my father and his wife. I know how serious this is.“

„And you think that impresses me? I have personally seen seventeen of the Shadow-Killer's victims, including my beloved sister, Helen.“

He stopped abruptly, holding back a sob. Now I knew why Norton was so vehemently obsessed with the Shadow-Killer. He had a personal vendetta. Looking at the man again, I tried to sympathise with him and failed.

It was his eyes. The way they shifted, scanning the horizon without cease, never settling on anything. He seemed unhinged. I watched him take a deep breath, visibly trying to contain his emotions. He drove to the beach area and parked near a bistro.

„I just want to have a quick drink and talk quietly for a while. The situation has changed. There are things you must be made aware of.“

He was making an effort of some sort. I nodded in agreement. He wove his way between the tables in front of the bistro, walking to the very back and sitting down. His eyes continued roving everywhere, as he placed his order with the waitress.

„Do you know a man named Harry Styles?“

„No.“

„No matter, I didn't expect you to. He was the manager of a car dealership in Ottawa. He was on the same flight you were on.“

„Okay.“

„There's a big problem with him being on that plane. He was killed twenty-four hours earlier!“

„What?“

„You heard me. Killed, dead as a doornail, yet he got on, or rather, someone used his ticket and got on that plane. I've got some news for you. The Shadow-Killer is right here, right now!“

His eyes darted madly in every direction. He looked haunted, or perhaps, hunted!

„Look, Sirenne, I don't know what you think you're doing here but you've got to know he is toying with you. I'll tell you something else. I'm convinced you lied to me, back there, at your house, when we spoke the second time, maybe something about that package you received. You know something and you're not telling. The killer left a message and you got it all right. Since then, you've been spending money all over the place, big money. Then you disappear, or at least you try to. These are not the actions of an innocent man. These are the actions of a man with something to hide.“

„Inspector...“

„No, let me finish. I don't care what you're doing here. I don't even care you lied to me. I just care about getting the Shadow-Killer. You go ahead and keep your little secrets, it doesn't matter. I'll find out about them eventually. Listen, Sirenne, this is the first real chance I've had to get close to that murdering monster. I can feel it. You can't imagine how frustrating this has been, how all-consuming it has become. Yet, no matter how hard I try, I always come up empty-handed. Not a

single shred of physical evidence has ever been left behind. No hair, no dead skin cells, no saliva, nothing! It's impossible. He'd have to be wearing a damn body-condom! And, of course, there are never any witnesses, nothing out of the usual. Even this last murder, surely done on the spur of the moment, was perfect. He didn't bother with any of his usual games, mind you. It was a clean kill."

Shuddering, he sat up straighter and continued.

"Despite the lack of any evidence, Harry Styles' murder and the murder of your parents have spoken to me. The killer was acting hastily, almost rashly, not caring about the consequences, about the attention these murders might attract. This is totally out of character for him. He wants something from you, Mr Sirene."

"Me?"

"Yes you, and I can tell you something else. Not much frightens me anymore but I am frightened now. The killer is here and he is watching your every move, waiting to pounce when the time is right. He could be anywhere, he could be anyone. Your only value is that you have not yet given him what he wants. When he gets it, the only thing between you and him will be me! Perhaps you'll start singing a different tune then."

He laughed loudly and off-key. The man was no longer in his right mind, obsessed with the Shadow-Killer. His assurances of protection gave me little faith. Yet, I had to heed his warning. I was not sufficiently prepared for this situation.

Norton left the bistro, muttering to himself. Even if the Shadow-Killer had murdered another man to come here incognito, my task remained unchanged. I had to keep on the hunt, or I would end up in the killer's wake, a dangerous place to be.

I headed to Etretat's City Hall to examine their older records. It was possible Coulter had missed something. According to my tourist map it was located on Place Maurice Guillard, only a few blocks away. I hurried down a narrow street, arriving at the building quickly.

Entering, I approached a long counter. A thin, small man stood up from a desk, an unlit cigarette hanging precariously from his mouth. He wore a half-cap and armbands, his cuffs folded up. Despite being shorter, he somehow managed to look down at me.

"Yes. What do you want?"

"I was wondering if I might check some of your older records?"

He looked at me piercingly.

"You're not from around here. Why do you want to examine our older records? What records?" he asked, demanding an answer with his eyes.

"I'm looking for records from the early 1900's, hopefully around 1911. Court documents, newspapers, that sort of thing."

"No. Absolutely not. You're not allowed. We don't keep the documents here anyway. You'd need a form 1138-G and those are only issued with approval from the mayor and he's away for two weeks," he shot back with finality, returning to his chair and studiously ignoring me.

I stood briefly at the counter, baffled by his reaction. He added brusquely.

"I must close. It is time to leave."

Opening his desk drawer, he pulled out a set of keys. Lifting a section of the counter, he dropped it back down after walking through it.

„Come on, let's go. I must close. Summer hours,“ he stated, gesturing with his arms.

I was literally pushed out, watching him lock the door and head off behind the building. Frustrated, I started back towards the Villa Leblanc.

Halfway there, I felt like I was being followed. Turning around, I saw a man some distance away. I pressed the tiny button on my glasses, activating the zoom mode. The screen came on, displaying an enlarged view. Tapping the button a couple of times, I increased the magnification, revealing the man from City Hall.

I turned around and shut the binocular mode off. He was following me, no doubt about it. The question was why? He couldn't be the Shadow-Killer. As for Leblanc's adventures, they happened almost one hundred years ago. How would that man even know about any of that?

I would've broken out into a fast run but I was exhausted and my feet were tired.

* * * * *

Arriving at the Villa, I found Mrs Leblanc at the counter.

„Ah, Monsieur Sirenne. How are you? Did you have a good walk?“

Seeing my state, her eyes softened.

„But what am I doing, talking on, while you are so obviously tired? Why don't you head up to your room? I will have some hot water and salts brought up to you, for soaking your feet.“

„Thank you, Mrs Leblanc. That is exactly what I need. You have read my mind.“

Once in my room, I sat on the bed, taking off my shoes and socks. After a moment of rest, I opened my laptop on the bedside table. I ensured it had recorded my meeting with Inspector Norton and the man from the Mairie. I saved it all and sent it to the team in Ottawa. As I finished, I heard a knock at the door. I stood up stiffly, moving slowly. Mrs Leblanc was there, a big bowl in hand.

„I'm sorry monsieur Sirenne but my maid has gone home for the day. My daughter has recently arrived but she is still busy unpacking, so I came with the water, if you do not mind.“

„Nonsense. I'm embarrassed for putting you to so much trouble.“

She came in, motioning me to the chair by the desk. She placed the flat-bottomed bowl by my feet and I slipped them into the warm water while she poured a packet of salts into the steaming liquid. A pleasant herbal smell wafted up. She handed me a small towel and stood up.

„There you are. Soon you will be back to normal. You did too much today, your first day here. You must learn to pace yourself,“ she paused, examining me curiously. „Did you enjoy our museum show?“

„Yes, very much. I was told you had a hand in creating it. It was fantastic. I'm afraid it is what inspired me to walk to the Needle,“

She laughed out loud.

„You must be looking for the treasure of the Hollow Needle, like all the others who come here. Fooled by my grandfather's books.“

„Not exactly like all the others. My father gave me a copy of The Hollow Needle when I was nine. I've dreamed of coming here since then.“

„Yes, the trip brings you closer to your father, does it not? The memories and the adventure all together.“

„You have it exactly. Leblanc and Lupin were my heroes during my youth. My father was the one who introduced me to them.“

A conspiratorial gleam appeared in her eyes.

„Would you like to see Grand-Papa’s office? The place where he wrote so many of his books?“ she suggested. „It is closed to the public but I will make an exception for you. I think you would appreciate it much more than the average tourist, don’t you?“

I lifted my feet from the steaming water, towelled them dry, then grabbed my socks, shoes, and glasses.

„I’m ready!“

She laughed, waiting for me to slip on the shoes. Soon after, we arrived at a door on the first floor. Before opening it, she cautioned.

„Please do not touch anything. It is being prepared for an upcoming presentation and many items have been placed specifically.“

„Don’t worry, I’ll just look,“ I replied, thinking of the recording cameras in my glasses.

The room was light beige, complimenting the antique furniture. Leblanc’s desk was simple enough, letters strewn over one side, a few reference books on the other. Behind his desk, an impressive built-in library rose from a wide drawer unit to the top of the wall. A few pictures were artfully placed on the ledge at the bottom of the bookcases. I examined everything avidly.

„I must return to the front desk soon. Perhaps we can come back another time?“ Mrs Leblanc informed me after a few minutes. Before we could leave, I heard a voice, coming from the hallway.

„Maman? Where are you? Maman?“

„Here, my dear, I am in Grand-Papa’s office with Mr Sirenne.“

I was standing deep in the office and could not see Mrs Leblanc’s daughter from my vantage point. As soon as she entered however, there was no mistaking it.

It was the raven-haired woman from the plane!

„This is my daughter, Raymonde, Mr Sirenne.“

„I think we have seen each other before, Mr Sirenne,“ she exclaimed with a twinkle in her deep hazel eyes.

„Yes, I’m sure we have,“ I replied a smile.

She smiled back instantly, turning to her mother.

„We are needed at the front desk, Maman. The large group has just arrived.“

With a sigh, Mrs Leblanc followed us out and locked the door. After saying a few parting words, they headed down the hall, towards the front desk. My attention remained on the daughter, inexplicably feeling a deep connection to her.

I returned to my room and sat on the edge of the bed, wondering why I felt this way. I hardly knew her. Suddenly I was looking at Coulter and O’Flanahan on the techno-glasses’ screen. They had been along for the ride for a while and had seen everything

„Hi guys, what’s up?“

O’Flanahan took the lead.

„While we were enjoying your tour of Leblanc’s office, we noticed something. Do you recall when you walked by the desk?“

„Yes, there were some letters and a few books,“

„Right. One of those letters caught my eye.“

O’Flanahan’s face disappeared, replaced by a letter, angled sideways on the desk. „Take a look at the handwriting on it.“

I turned my head sideways to straighten the letter out, accomplishing nothing because the image was inside my glasses and moved with my head.

„Sorry, can’t make it out. What about it?“

„Do you remember about four years ago, the booklet I published about Hitler not dying in the bunker? The one claiming he escaped in a submarine convoy?“ O’Flanahan asked, changing the subject completely.

„What about it?“

„I ended up working with copies of Hitler’s letters and got pretty familiar with them. The letter on Leblanc’s desk seems to be in the same handwriting,“ O’Flanahan dead-panned. Next to him, Coulter was nodding.

„I think he’s right, Paul. This isn’t nonsense. Even Briar agrees.“

„Hold on, you can’t be serious. Anyway, Mrs Leblanc said she placed all sorts of things in the office for an upcoming event. Maybe it’s not even related to Leblanc.“

„Those were our exact thoughts. Even if the video is too blurry, we can see the date just fine, January twelfth, 1910. That’s just before the events with Old Man Vallin. Hitler or not, I’m convinced we need to get a closer look at it. We want you to sneak in there and get that letter,“ O’Flanahan stated with conviction.

„WHAT? You want me to break into Leblanc’s office?“

„Calm down. We only want to look at the letter, not steal it. Just bring it up to your room. You can return it later on, when everyone is sleeping,“ Coulter oversimplified, adding: „Anyway, your glasses can see in the ultraviolet and infrared range.“

„So?“

„We can use them to help you pick the lock on the door,“ Coulter explained.

They were serious. I had to admit, if Hitler was involved, I wanted to know about it as quickly as possible. I agreed to *borrow* the letter, as they both knew I would. Secrecy was still paramount, so breaking in did seem to be the most viable option. I had a few small tools for my computer, in a little pouch. I could use them to pick the lock. I had never done it before but I was familiar with the principle. It should be fairly easy.

I waited a few hours to let everyone settle in at the Villa Leblanc. Eventually, I decided the time was right and opened my door slightly.

No-one around!

I sneaked out, tip-toeing down the hallway and staircase, quietly finding my way back to Leblanc’s office. I knelt by the door, pulling out my tools while looking nervously around.

„Stop turning your head. I can’t focus on the doorknob,“ Coulter’s voice blared in my ear, scaring the heck out of me. He sounded as nervous as I was.

Keeping my head still, a screen appeared in my glasses. The view of the doorknob changed to a green monochrome when Coulter altered the visual range

to infrared. It did little to show the locking mechanism, hidden within the now green doorknob.

„That’s not very helpful.“

Coulter changed the cameras to ultraviolet. The door colours flipped into a bright red with a luminescent yellow border, the doorknob now totally black. Very psychedelic but equally useless. Increasingly exasperated, I grabbed my tools and tried to pick the lock. I slipped a small screwdriver into the key hole and jiggled it along the top, trying to *scrub the pins*, not even sure where the pins were or what *scrubbing pins* meant. Meanwhile, Coulter kept shifting from infrared to ultraviolet, the screen blinding me. I was about to voice some sort of protest, when O’Flanahan exclaimed.

„Wait, look at the edge of the door, by the doorknob.“

The metal flange, holding the door closed tight, was missing. I pushed my screwdriver in between the door and the jamb. The door instantly snapped open and slammed loudly against the side wall. I knelt there, listening for any reaction, frozen.

„GO, GO, GO, what are you waiting for? Grab the letter and get out of there,“ O’Flanahan blasted.

His scream galvanised me into action and, my heart hammering in my chest, I ran to the desk and snatched the letter. I rushed back out, slamming the door behind me, then walked nonchalantly along the hall and up the stairs, while trying to calm my racing heart.

Meanwhile, O’Flanahan and Coulter were laughing nonstop.

„Listen to his breathing. Sounds like a train or something. That was funny. Did you see him go, go, go, when you said it? Ha-ha-ha,“ howled Coulter. O’Flanahan was laughing too hard to answer.

„Be quiet, both of you.“

* * * * *

Moments later, I was in my room examining the letter closely. It was written in German, so Coulter used a translation program.

January 12, 1910,

Sir,

I have recently read your book, *The Hollow Needle*. I found it revealing and interesting. Allow me to come to the point. I have long been fascinated by historical mysteries and treasures, both mystical and real, particularly those evidenced in architectural detail.

During my studies, I came across a historical reference to the same mystery and treasure to which your book alludes. Not in the same manner, to be sure, but sufficiently so to warrant further research. I am able to arrange a brief visit to Etretat in the near future, while visiting my sister in England.

It would be a perfect time to discuss certain matters which might be of value to us both.

I await your reply.

Johann Hister.

Coulter was the first to speak.

„The name Hister sounds familiar. Let me do a quick search ... Will you look at that. The search engine found it in Nostradamus' books. Several of his quatrains used ›Hister‹ to represent Hitler. That's a heck of a coincidence.“

„I remember it too, now that you mention it,“ added O'Flanahan.

A tired-looking face appeared on the screen. It was Briar. He had been listening in.

„Hold everything, gentlemen. I just had confirmation from my very excited friend in Nuremberg, a specialist in World War 2 history. That handwriting is indeed Hitler's. Best of all, Hitler was in England for a brief period of time, quite early on in his life, visiting his sister, just as the letter asserts. It has to be him!“

„Could Hitler really have come to Etretat? Before World War One?“ I wondered.

„Hitler knew something about the Hollow Needle. Perhaps he recognised inconsistencies in the story. He was obviously driven to contact Leblanc. Let's not forget we're talking about a young Hitler, during his formative years in Vienna. He had not even written ›Mein Kampf‹. The whole thing is very plausible,“ O'Flanahan surmised.

„I could agree with that theory,“ supported Briar. „However, if he did come here, it was done quite discretely and has remained a secret ever since, not a simple feat to achieve. Unfortunately, Hitler's letter is not enough to prove he visited Leblanc, nor tell us what occurred during that visit? Both are dead now. We will never know.“

„I want to know what Leblanc did back then.“

„How? What else can we do?“ Coulter asked.

„For now, continue digging. Review the videos of Inspector Norton and that man from the Mairie. Try to find more connections between the past and the present. As for me, I have to return the letter and get some sleep. Tomorrow, we can figure out our next step.“

My friends logged off and I removed my glasses, connecting them to the battery charger. My eyes wandered the room, settling on Hitler's letter. I picked it up carefully, the old paper feeling crumbly. It was nearing 12:30 AM.

This was probably as good a time as any to do the deed.

I arrived at the office without incident and knelt in front of the door, intent on using the screwdriver again. The weak latch gave way unexpectedly and the door flew open, banging loudly against the wall again. I hurried in, holding the letter, when a sound caused me to turn around. Standing in the doorway was Mrs Leblanc's daughter!

„Uhm, hello there, Raymonde, how are you, this fine evening?“

„What are you doing here? Why are you in Grand-Papa's room? You were stealing his papers! That is it.“

„No, I wasn't stealing it, I was, uhm, I was returning it.“

„And you think that makes it right? You broke in here to return stolen papers? And who stole them if it wasn't you? Tell me that, you, you liar.“

„Wait please. You are right. I did take the letter but I am also returning it. At least let me explain, then you can call the police if you want.“

I brought my hands together, the letter in them not helping my plea. Returning the letter to the table, I tapped it down, smoothing away the wrinkles.

„I know this looks bad but I swear this is truly important.“

She glared for a while but a smile worked against her frown.

„No thief could look as pitiful as that. Get up and explain yourself. No wait, I have a better idea. Meet me for breakfast downstairs, tomorrow morning. You can explain then and it had better be good. Now back to your room,“ she stated, motioning me with her hands. She followed me, not saying another word. I went into my room, looking at her one last time.

„Thank you for believing me.“

„Don't thank me yet. We will wait for tomorrow to see if thanks are due or not,“ she returned, closing the door and double-locking it from the outside.

Chapter 6

Raymonde Leblanc.

It was 7:30 AM. The sound of a key in my door had woken me.

„Be down in fifteen minutes. I'll be waiting downstairs for your explanation,“ Raymonde Leblanc stated through the door.

I showered, dressed rapidly and hurried down, joining her at the corner table in the dining room.

„I have already ordered breakfast for you. Your story had better be good.“

With a sigh, I sat down, looking at her. Her hazel eyes were luminous, accentuated by laughter lines. She seemed to be in her mid-thirties. A shock of raven black hair was barely held in check by a colourful ribbon tied behind her back. A few freckles adorned her cheeks. It made her look somehow mischievous. Her nose was small and pert. A wide smile and perfect teeth.

She was beautiful.

„Thank you for giving me a chance last night. I know we didn't start off well but it's all a big misunderstanding. I hope you don't mind but I have to go back a bit in order to explain why I am here.“

„Fine. I will listen.“

„My father and his wife were murdered by a monster called the Shadow-Killer. Before dying, my father sent me a clue about an ancient family mystery in the form of a book, »The Hollow Needle«, written by your great-grandfather. I followed the clues here, to Etretat. Unfortunately, the serial-Killer who killed my father is also here, searching for the same answers. On top of that, I've got an Interpol Inspector chasing me as well.“

„You poor man. To lose your parents like that,“ she sympathised. „And so brave to take up the chase for answers, despite all the dangers.“

„The dangers will be there no matter what I do. Bravery has little to do with it. The serial killer is out there and no one has a chance of stopping him any time soon. After re-reading the Hollow Needle, I wondered what Leblanc was really writing about. I asked a few friends to help me research the subject. A link seems to exist between my family, your great-grandfather, and the Fort of Frefosse.“

She seemed startled when I mentioned the fort. I continued.

„Coming here was the next logical step and I was selected to take the trip. My friends remained at home for the time being and, uhm, stayed in close communication throughout the trip. I would do the physical investigation, they would do the research and we would figure out together what was going on in Etretat.“

The waitress brought our breakfast. I had omitted mentioning the technoglasses because it would lead us right back into that plane cabin and how we met, thanks to O'Flanagan. From the moment I met Raymonde, I was attracted to her. The feelings were out of place but they were there nonetheless. I could not tell if she reciprocated my feelings but, after being caught stealing that letter, I didn't want to make any further mistakes and risk losing her burgeoning trust.

I noticed a thin man sitting at a table nearby, his head turning away when I looked in his direction. Despite an attempt to hide his features, I recognised him as the unpleasant clerk from the Mairie. He was listening to our every word.

A bead of sweat broke over my brow and butterflies invaded my stomach.

„Are you all right? You have gone all pale,“ Raymonde said, looking concerned.

„No, uhm, it's my stomach. It's cramping like crazy. I must return to my room. Can you help me there?“ I asked, bending over slightly.

Raymonde looked suspicious but helped me out of the restaurant, her warm, shapely body pressing against mine in the narrow hallway. Before we could reach the stairs, I straightened out and whispered in her ear:

„I'm fine. Not sick. Sorry about that, trust me, I'll explain in a few minutes. However, we must leave here now. Let's go to my car.“

I steered her towards the exit and the parking lot. We walked quickly, hurrying to the Porsche.

„What is going on?“

„I am being followed. That man sitting next to us. I met him yesterday, at the Mairie, where I was trying to get information about old records. He was inexplicably rude and refused to grant me access. Suddenly, this morning, he is sitting at the next table, listening to our every word. Do you know him?“ I asked.

„No, I'm afraid not. I haven't been here for years. But we should not have too much trouble finding out who he is. If he slept here, his name will be on the register. Maman will probably know him. She knows everybody around here. Where are we going?“

„I don't know. I just want to get away from him. How about we drive to the Needle and sit on a bench and talk there.“

„And what of breakfast? We walked away from our meal. I am still hungry,“ she argued, pouting a little.

„How about we stop and order a take-out meal on the way?“

„Non,“ she flatly refused. „I want to be comfortable for my breakfast. I will not sit on a cement bench, eating on my knees. There is a restaurant at the golf club, near the Needle. We can have breakfast there.“

„Fine,“ I agreed. She certainly was temperamental. Personally, I was fine with coffee for breakfast. I opened the car door and she got in when I saw the clerk from the Mairie looking through the restaurant window.

Incapable of resisting, I waved with what I hoped was an insolent smile and got in. Starting the powerful engine, I slammed it into gear and pushed my foot down hard. The wheels spun, screeching sharply, and we took off like a bullet, the back end of the car nearly sliding out of control. I almost hit a street sign as we shot out of the parking lot, narrowly avoiding an oncoming truck.

„What are you doing? Why are you going so fast? You nearly hit that truck back there,“ Raymonde screamed.

„Sorry, rented car. Not used to it yet.“

„That was scary.“

I noticed her fast breathing and its effect on her chest.

„Keep your eyes on the road. Get that foot off the gas and turn left over there.“

We reached the golf club restaurant quickly, thanks to her expert directions. We sat at a table overlooking the Aval cliff and ordered breakfast from a tall, balding waiter, whose shiny head reminded me of Briar. When he left, Raymonde leaned back in her chair.

„Well, now that we are here and all alone, perhaps you could finish your story?“

„I’m sorry for acting so suspiciously but, I didn’t want anyone else overhearing.“

„Unless that someone was going to call the police about a thief.“

„We both know the time has passed for that.“

Her hazel eyes jumped to mine.

„Well, you do have some backbone in you after all. Yes, you are right. I will not call the police. I don’t like involving them. I must admit I know something about this mystery as well. I will explain after you have told me the rest of your story. But be quick and to the point.“

I reached in my jacket pocket and pulled out my glasses. If Raymonde had important information, I had to record it.

„Why did you put those on? Do you have a problem with your eyes?“

„Yes, the glasses, uhm, help me see better,“ And farther. And in the dark. And record everything.

„Next time, pick a better style. Something not as black or heavy. You look like, how do you say it? Like a *dork*. Is that the word?“

„How about I tell you the rest of my story?“

„Go ahead, Mr Sirene.“

„Paul, please. As I said, I arrived in Paris, obtained a car and drove directly here. My focus was on the Fort of Frefosse, reputedly blown up in 1911 by the army. In fact, our information revealed someone called Old Man Vallin destroyed it and he was paid to do it. Two months later, Vallin was killed, thrown into the crater left after the fort’s destruction. After an encounter with Norton, the Interpol Inspector, I went to the Mairie, looking for clues about Old Man Vallin. That was where I met the little man who was spying on us. Last night, your mother showed me your great-grandfather’s office. While there, they, uhm, I saw a letter...“

„The letter I found you holding.“

„That’s the one.“

„I have seen it before, long ago. It was from Grand-Papa’s papers. Maman must have put it on the desk for the presentation coming up.“

„When I saw the letter, I thought I recognised the handwriting. I did not have time to check it out because you came in. I went back later to borrow the letter, to check if I was right about the writing.“

„Who had written it, then? Tell me.“

„Wait, here comes breakfast. We can't let the waiter overhear us.“

Raymonde was flustered but remained silent while the waiter served us. As soon as he was out of hearing distance, she pounced.

„Now, you will tell me who wrote that letter. No more delays. I will eat and you will speak.“

„Fine, if you put it like that. We, uhm, I believe the letter was written by Adolf Hitler.“

„Hitler? Are you positive?“

„Yes. A specialist from Nuremberg confirmed it. Hitler was living across the Channel with his sister, when the letter was written. We don't know if your grandfather met him, but Hitler's letter implied the Hollow Needle might not be complete fiction. There is more about the Fort of Frefosse. It might have been built over a tunnel leading to a huge cave. We think the Aval cliff is hollow and your grandfather knew it. Now, thanks to that letter, we believe Hitler may have known of it as well.“

She had cleaned her plate in the time it took me to tell her about Hitler.

„I too have questions about Grand-Papa. I'm sure you know Maman was with him when the Germans invaded our poor little town. She has never forgotten those events, although she rarely talks about them. That is when she lost her sister and her father. Relatives took her in after Grand-Papa died. Gone or not, Grand-Papa's spirit was always haunting us. When Maman re-opened the Villa and asked me to return, I decided I was going to find answers, if only to be done with Grand-Papa and maybe help Maman get on with her life. Something else happened instead. You happened!“

„Me? What about me?“

„Don't play the innocent. From the moment I saw you on that plane, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. You are the strangest man I have ever met, coming here with information and wild ideas, answering the exact questions I have. The thing is, despite your antics, I like you. I feel I can trust you. I don't know if I'm speaking out of turn but I'd like to work together on Grand-Papa's mystery. We could solve this thing together and catch the murderer who killed your parents. It sounds dangerous but I don't care. And we need to talk to Maman about all this.“

„Let's go right now.“

„No, we will wait for that man to go away. Right now, I would like to go for a walk and get to know more about you.“

She headed outside, leaving me to settle the bill. I gave the waiter a good tip, remembering his excellent timing, and hurried out of the restaurant. I caught sight of Raymonde walking near the edge of the cliff and hurried down to join her.

We walked in silence. I could think of little else but her, wondering what I was doing, thinking of a relationship, with so many dangers and challenges all around. I couldn't explain why now or why here but I knew I was falling in love!

I moved nearer. She didn't shift away and smiled shyly. We looked deep into each other's eyes and she entwined her arm into mine, pulling me tight against her. I could feel her every movement, her body rubbing against mine. I felt thrilled, my thoughts and emotions running wild.

As we walked along, a brisk wind stirred up. The whole scene felt vaguely familiar, like a *déjà-vu*. I tried to dispel the feeling but it only grew stronger when she started speaking.

„I used to come up here, as a little girl. I wandered the countryside but this was my favourite place. When you mentioned the tunnels and caves, it made me think of Jean Auel.“

„Didn't she write the book »Clan of the Cave Bear«?“

„That is the one. I was fascinated by her description of the Neanderthals and how they lived in caves, right here, in France. I have gone to some of them to see the wall paintings. France has thousands of caves and people have been living in them for more than twenty-five thousand years. It seems very possible there might be a cave right under our feet. Who knows for how long it has been here?“

She stopped walking and looked down.

We were standing where the Fort of Frefosse had been. If a cave existed, its entrance was here, buried below tons of concrete, sand traps and landscaping. I noticed a large, familiar-looking, structure nearby.

The *déjà-vu* feeling was back.

„What is that?“

„It is the first bunker built in Etretat by the Germans.“

„You mean to tell me the first bunker they built was over the ruins of the fort. Doesn't that seem curious?“

„Yes, now that you mention it. Let's go in and look around.“

It was a crumbling affair, a bad mix of cement and local sand. The bunker was a stark reminder that, sixty years ago, this small peaceful town had seen horrible destruction and upheaval at the hands of the German army.

Approaching the bunker, a powerful feeling swept over me, as if I were being watched. Was the Shadow-Killer here? Had the man from the Mairie found us? I looked around in a panic. Peering behind me, I realised this was the exact scene from my strange dream. Remembering the strong light coming from the bunker in my dream, I examined it.

The openings were dark and lifeless.

Raymonde's arm tightened on mine as we entered the bare doorway, leading us into a simple room. The cement was crumbling away everywhere except for the floor, poured from a later batch. Why would they have re-cemented it, if not to fill in or hide something? Apart from that, there was nothing unusual. Perhaps my dream had been nothing more. However, it had not felt like a dream. It had felt meaningful. We left the bunker, heading back onto the path.

She caught my arm again, pulling me against her side.

I thought about Maurice Leblanc, about how he had led me here, to Raymonde, his great-granddaughter. I thought about what my father had said so long ago, a phrase vividly remembered:

„Son, one day, you will be thinking about how life has brought you full circle, when the end has brought you back to the beginning. That is when the real

mystery will be exposed. That is when you will know why I have given you this book.“

In a way, my father's end had led me to this beginning with Raymonde. I wondered if my father had been telling me about the circle of life. Perhaps the real mystery had nothing to do with treasure.

Smiling to myself, I pulled Raymonde very close and kissed her. I forgot about my father after that.

Top Secret Document

For Adolf Hitler's eyes only.
From Obersleutenant Weissmuller.

2nd of February, 1937

This is to be my final report about the Etretat research project. I have succeeded in our original goals a full two years ahead of schedule. I believe the result to be exactly what we desired.

All specialists, historians and archaeologists who researched Etretat have been eliminated. No trace of them, or their research, will ever be found. In some instances, this required drastic measures, all of which were successfully conducted in complete secrecy. As well, all key documents were removed from the universities involved without incident.

As a result, we are now the only ones aware of the secrets which lie below the cliffs of Etretat, apart from whatever our opponents in Etretat might know. They and their cursed town have unfortunately remained well protected despite our most strenuous efforts. Luckily, it seems their desire for secrecy is as great as ours.

We are therefore safe to begin the next phase. I have already made preparations. My recent appointment to the post of Obersleutenant in your army will help in this regard. No matter what our opponents attempt, this time they will not succeed. We will be victorious and the caves will be ours.

I have attached a brief summary of the assembled research for your examination. Once I have access to the caves, a clearer picture should emerge.

Historical Summary.

1) The creation of the Etretat caves.

The caves were likely formed sixty-five million years ago by a meteorite impact in a shallow seabed. Through natural geological processes, the cracked seabed raised up, until it was an imposing limestone plateau, towering one hundred meters over the water. Four hundred and fifty thousand years ago, the Weald-Artois Anticline ridge failed, releasing a

million cubic meters of water per minute. Lasting several months, the flood carved out the core of the English Channel.

During the flood, the cracked seabed around the meteorite was exposed to hyper-erosion, the flood gouging out the cracks into much larger holes before receding. The process repeated one hundred and eighty thousand years ago when the Weald-Artois Anticline ridge failed again. The resulting flood finished digging out the English Channel and the caves.

2) The formation of the rift in the cliff (Location: Present-day Etretat)

The Weald-Artois flood created many lakes in surrounding valleys. An inland fresh water sea was formed on the mainland, not far from the caves. Over the years, several tributaries developed, emptying the inland sea into the new English Channel. One such tributary eventually became the Seine River.

Over time, a small river offshoot dug a narrow path in the limestone bed, near the buried meteorite and its nest of caves. Over millennia, the tributary grew, eroding its estuary into a long narrow valley.

As the inland sea level dropped, gravel was deposited on the tributary beds, filling the smaller rivers completely with fine gravel. The river emptying into the newly created port of Etretat stopped flowing on the surface. Plants encroached on the dry river bed until it vanished completely, hiding all evidence of the water still flowing below.

3) The Roman period of occupation

By 54 BC, the caves lay deep in Belgica, a Gaul territory, near the town of Caleti (Etretat). Caesar was developing plans to deal with the bothersome Gauls, who had been harassing the Romans for almost three hundred years. Unfortunately for the Gauls, Caesar's decision to commit most of the Roman military resources to the Gallic Wars was the turning point, setting the stage for a final confrontation.

Vercingetorix, chief of the Averni tribe of Central Gaul, incited by the brutal Roman attacks, successfully united the Gauls against the Romans. The inhabitants of Caleti, learning of Vercingetorix's rallying cry, sent ten thousand men to join the growing army, seriously depleting their ranks at home. Caesar suffered a defeat at Gergovia but finally cornered Vercingetorix at Alesia, effectively marking the end of the Gallic Wars.

The small Caleti port was taken over by the Romans. Construction of a road was begun, linking the port with Juliobonna. Roman structures were built on each cliff overlooking Caleti, One a Roman garrison and the other a fort, designed for private use.

This fort, known today as Frefosse, was built over the entrance to the cave, effectively hiding it. The port remained in use until the end of the Roman period.

The caves were re-discovered by Francis the First, during his rebuilding of the fort. He chose to keep their existence hidden, using them as his private repository for gold and other valuables. Knowledge of the caves was lost

during the French Revolution. They remained undisturbed until Leblanc's amateurish efforts brought attention to them once again.

End of Summary.

Chapter 7

Talking to Mrs Leblanc.

We spent the rest of the afternoon walking slowly along the paths, learning about each other. It gave me the opportunity to explain about my father's hunts and about the note found hidden inside the book. Through it all, I never breathed a single word about my techno-glasses.

I would find an opening when the time was right.

We agreed to join forces and figure out the connection between our families. The next step was to talk to her mother about her grandfather and when they escaped from the Germans, in 1939.

Leblanc had died shortly after his escape from Etretat and we hoped Mrs Leblanc would be able to shed light on his final days. However, the topic we wanted to discuss was taboo around the house. We had to proceed delicately.

We parked in the lot and got out of the Porsche, walking hand in hand. Her mother was at the Leblanc Villa counter, looking relieved.

„Well, well, well. My missing daughter is finally here to take over the desk.“

Mrs Leblanc came around the counter and hugged Raymonde tightly.

„I was worried. You were gone so long, without leaving a note,“ Mrs Leblanc said tenderly. She turned to me, a knowing look in her eyes. „Young man, I saw you holding my daughter's hand. Come here.“

I approached her, not knowing what to expect. She held my face with her steady hands and kissed me once on each cheek, both of which reddened immediately.

„Welcome to our home, Paul Sirenne.“

I reciprocated.

„Thank you. I will keep an eye on her for you.“

„You had better. And I will be keeping my eyes on the both of you. Now you can tell me how this romance has come about. No, actually, go on up to my private room. I will finish here and join you in five minutes. Off you go.“

At the very end of the second floor hallway was a door, which Raymonde opened. We walked into a spacious sitting room. Off to the left was a large bedroom and on the right, a tiny bathroom. We sat down on a small love seat. I was suddenly pressed up against Raymonde.

„I like this sofa, don't you?“ she said innocently.

„Yes. It's very, uhm, very cozy.“

„That is what I thought. Cozy,“ she said, her eyes smouldering.

„Do you think your mother will be up soon?“

She slapped me lightly, a fleeting smile on her lips.

„Spoilsport.“

As I smiled back, I realised her mother might reveal key information. I just couldn't conceive of not recording it. I pulled out my glasses once more, trying to slip them on surreptitiously.

„Why are you putting on those ugly glasses again?“

„I, uhm, I will need them to see your mother clearly. What's the problem? They don't look that bad, do they?“

„I'm sorry to say this but it's for your own good. You don't look good in those glasses. Not at all.“

Keeping the camera-in-the-eyeglasses thing a secret might not have been a good idea. At least, my friends hadn't tried to connect as soon as the glasses were turned on.

„I understand, Raymonde, but it's important I not miss a single nuance of your mother's expressions.“

She maintained a doubtful look but was prevented from arguing further by her mother, who came in through the door, another case of excellent timing.

„Sorry my dears, it took longer than expected,“ she apologized, seating herself in a comfortable-looking red chair, her eyes briefly glancing at my glasses.

„Now let's start at the beginning. What happened this morning? How did you two meet?“

Mrs Leblanc had gone right for the jugular. Raymonde was quick to respond.

„You remember last night, when you first introduced me to Paul? Yes? Well, a little later, I went out of my room when he was coming out of his. He was bothered, explaining about a letter he had seen on the desk, when he was in Grand-Papa's office. He thought he knew who the author of that letter was, so I brought him back to the office to look at it again. We confirmed he was right and decided to talk about it over breakfast.“

„Who wrote the letter?“

„It was Adolf Hitler, Mrs Leblanc.“

If I had been expecting a big reaction, I was disappointed.

„Adolf Hitler? How curious. What happened after that?“

„While we were eating, Paul noticed a man at a table next to ours, spying on us. He had followed Paul here from the Mairie, after refusing him access to old town documents. We left quickly to get away from him. That was why I didn't leave you a note.“

„I know who you're talking about. It's Jacques Vallin.“

„Excuse me, but did you say Vallin?“ I asked.

„Yes, one of two, unfortunately, and not a thought between the both of them. Two brothers, one small, the other large, neither exactly honest,“ she answered. „I wondered why he rented a room here last night. After all, he lives just down the road.“

What was a Vallin doing following me? He knew something. Despite the span of time, this descendant of Old Man Vallin had placed himself in the exact position to effect his own research.

„This Vallin name is familiar. In 1911, someone killed his ancestor, Old Man Vallin. It cannot be coincidence that, almost a hundred years later, his great-grandson is actively pursuing his own quest to uncover the Etretat mystery. That

is why we must ask you what happened when the Germans invaded Etretat and you were forced to escape with your grandfather.“

Raymonde looked a little nervous when I broached the subject so directly but her mother took it calmly.

„It is all right, Raymonde. I know you tread lightly where certain topics are concerned. However, I am not as fragile as you might think. For many years, I have reviewed those dreadful events. You must understand, I was very young and don't remember anything clearly, though I was aware something bad was going on. People were scared, angry! Papa was gone, had been gone for a while, and Grand-Papa was taking care of my sister and me. One day, Grand-Papa was there with a small valise for himself and an even smaller one for both of us. We threw in a few things, my favourite blanket, my sister's teddy bear, and some clothes. Grand-papa was crying and trying to hide it. My sister and I were very scared. We stayed quiet and did as we were told. Grand-papa took us to a man waiting with a horse and wagon. I didn't know his name but I had seen him before. We got on the wagon. ‚We are going on a little trip to visit some friends,‘ Grand-papa said.

„He gave us cookies and goat milk. Along the road, we saw hundreds of people walking, carrying everything they owned on their shoulders, in their bags, their suitcases, their boxes. Many were crying openly. Both my sister and I were crying. Grand-papa hugged us a lot and tried to make us feel better.

„No fires were allowed at night and we often travelled in the dark, staying on narrow roads in forested areas. I heard some bombs far away once, and, on another occasion, a plane swooped right over, having come up from behind. Finally, after many days we arrived in Perpignan. Grand-papa shook the driver's hand for a long time, saying a few words to him. I never saw the driver again. We walked the rest of the way, Grand-Papa leading us by the hand until we arrived at a tall house on the outskirts of Perpignan.

„That is where we stayed until he died,“ she said, her eyes far away. „He was unwell, you see, and the long trip had taken its toll. He hid it well, kept up a brave front for his ‚little girl‘. A few days before the end, he got better, or seemed to. He left us in the care of our friends and went out for the day, carrying a small leather satchel, much like the one you have, Paul. When he came back, he was very tired and did not have the satchel anymore. That night was the last time I sat with him, by the fireplace in our small apartment. He looked sad and concerned, saying many things. Not much made sense, not to my five-year-old mind anyway. He talked about someone who worried him very much. Something was his fault and he had tried to fix it. I have only one clear memory of that night.

„He took me upon his knee and, holding my two small hands in his, taught me a little song. He asked me to always remember it and to tell it to my children when the time was right. I guess this must be that time. It is a silly song, really, more of a ditty.“

*‚The beginning and the end
Follow the circle, it bends.
The end and the beginning,
The answer in the connecting.‘*

„We sang it many times. He told me one day the song would mean something more,“ she finished, her voice fading away.

er little ditty, the song taught by her grandfather, was exactly the same message from my father. How had these identical verses travelled the continents, over a century ago, ending up with both our families?

„We need to go to Perpignan.“

„Why do you say that?“ asked Raymonde.

„It’s the ditty, the song, the beginning is the end. Maurice Leblanc’s end was in Perpignan so that is where we have to go. To the place of his end, to see if any clues were left. I’m very curious about what he could have done during the day he disappeared. What was in the satchel he took with him? Why did he choose Perpignan as a destination?“

Mrs Leblanc had an insight.

„I might shed some light on a few of those questions. During that time, everything was chaos. There were few places safe from the invading Germans. Perpignan was close to Spain and relatively unimportant strategically. Perpignan was also home to several of Grand-papa’s old friends. On the day he left, he may have gone to visit one of them, to pass on the satchel. It contained a journal of some sort. I have memories of Grand-Papa leaning over a sheaf of papers by the dim light of a candle. I do not know who he could have gone to visit, unfortunately. I only know the address where we lived in Perpignan.“

She picked up a pad of notepaper and jotted down an address.

„There is a chance someone may remember him. He was famous enough in his time. Now I am afraid I will have to bid you both a good night, as I am feeling tired,“ she said, her voice shaky. She hugged us tightly and we agreed to meet for breakfast in the morning.

Walking along the hallway, it became apparent Raymonde was leading me to her room. My glasses suddenly squeaked and I was looking at Fabian Coulter.

„Hey, Paul, where have you been? We’ve been trying to connect with you. Say, who’s that walking ahead of you? She looks familiar.“

I reached up and turned the techno-glasses off without saying a single word. This situation was complicated enough. I removed the glasses and slipped them into my pocket as Raymonde opened her door. The room was similar to my own, with a large bed against the wall to the left of the door. An alcove with large windows nestled two chairs and a small coffee table. We sat down there.

„This has certainly been an eventful day.“

She smiled, her whole face lighting up.

„I feel as if I am in a whirlwind but that is the way I like it. And the way I like you,“ she added, her hand reaching out to grasp mine. „I must ask you something.“

She peered questioningly into my eyes and I nodded.

„When Maman told us about Grand-Papa’s little song, I thought you were holding something back. Were you?“

How had she picked that up?

„Yes, I did hold something back. If you remember, I explained about the note my father gave me when I was nine. I may not have told you the exact wording of that note but don’t worry, I don’t have to tell you, because your mother just told us.“

Raymonde was stunned.

„That’s right. Impossibly, that little ditty found its way into our two separate families, almost a hundred years ago. When you and I were walking together at the Fort of Frefosse site, I believed my father’s gift had led me to you but now, I’m not so sure. How could that ditty have come to be in both our families? I didn’t want to burden your mother with that question. It would have been too much. She already looked shaken, despite her strong words.“

Raymonde walked around the small table and pulled me into her arms. We kissed, a long lingering kiss, filled with passion.

„That was a nice thing to do. I had to say thank you somehow,“ she whispered. She moved to her bed, leaning back into the pillows.

„You weren’t thinking of going back to your room right away, were you?“

„Uhm, no, not at all.“

I lay down on the bed, my body close to hers. I leaned on my right arm, looking down at her, then bent down and kissed her again, with a yearning growing by the second. No matter what else might come, I had already found my true treasure.

* * * * *

I woke next morning, vivid flashes of the entire night running through my mind. I felt rested, though I had not slept many hours. Raymonde was lying next to me, still sleeping. I couldn’t believe I had ended up here, with her. She stirred, waking up. Pulling an arm out from under the sheet, she touched my chest tenderly.

„Good morning,“ she said, a bit shyly. „I’m glad you stayed the night.“

„I’m not sure I had any choice. You were irresistible. I certainly didn’t expect for things to develop this quickly but I’m happy they did.“

„Me too. I have never been attracted to anyone so rapidly before. You are not the type of man I am used to. You are quite odd, you know. The funny thing is that I like it. I don’t know where this is going between us...“

„Don’t worry about that. How about we simply focus on this mystery? Let’s not make it too complicated. I know I’m extremely happy being here and want to spend as much time with you as possible.“

„I couldn’t have said it better. Now let’s get showered, we have to meet Maman downstairs soon.“

Raymonde slid out from the sheets, slipping a bathrobe over her voluptuous body, and headed for the shower. I collected my clothes, intent on going to my room, perhaps to update my friends on the Internet. Her voice stopped me as I passed the bathroom.

„And just where do you think you are going? Aren’t you coming in for a shower?“

On second thought, perhaps I could leave my Internet friends to stew in their ignorance a little bit longer.

* * * * *

After our breakfast, Raymonde’s mother joined us for coffee, having been delayed by work at the front desk. Her knowing eye noticed our little looks and touches and she drew the obvious conclusion. After a short conversation, it was time to leave for Perpignan. We said our good-byes and headed off.

I still had not found a single moment to update my friends back home, having been without privacy since last night. I wasn't complaining but my three nosy friends were likely to be full of time-taking questions, time I did not have. They would simply have to wait. I would connect with them as soon as I could. Additionally, Raymonde was getting suspicious of my glasses. Her comments about my *dorky* appearance didn't fool me for a second. She knew something was up and I had to be extremely careful not to be found out. This tiny little deception was producing some seriously unanticipated complications. Now, all I could do was to follow through and hope for the best.

We took off down the Rue de Maupassant, setting the GPS destination to Orleans, planning to travel directly across France towards Perpignan. I set the cruise control at a leisurely hundred and ten kilometre an hour, following the directions on the screen. While travelling, Raymonde's conversation drifted from small talk to a more serious topic.

„I feel so strange, travelling with a man I did not know a few days ago, now my lover, heading toward the very thing I came back to confront. Everything feels like it is changing. I am a little afraid but not enough to stop myself from going on.“

„I know what you mean. For me, it started a few weeks ago, when my father was murdered. Since then, my entire life has been turned upside down. Before this, I have been an armchair sort of person, thinking and reading about the world rather than going out and touching it. All my life I've felt as if I were hiding in a cave. Only now am I discovering how much I have missed in the real world.“

Her hand tenderly touched my shoulder.

„I am glad you waited until now. I would surely have missed you otherwise. Still, the whole situation is a little strange, do you not think? There are so many mysteries, it is difficult to see the situation clearly.“

„With every step we take, I am more convinced this is just a glimpse of what is really going on. I can only hope the little ditty holds the key.“

While talking, I reached down and pulled out my glasses. This conversation was important. I squinted at the road when I put them on, surreptitiously pressing the record button. I noticed her frown and a slight biting of her lower lip but she remained uncharacteristically quiet. My squinting must have been better than I thought.

Unfortunately, I had forgotten about Coulter's programming skills. He had left a monitoring program running, which alerted him as soon as I turned the glasses on. His dishevelled face suddenly appeared in front of my eyes, causing me to swerve sharply. I corrected quickly but not quickly enough to evade Raymonde's sharp sarcasm.

„Apparently, the glasses do not improve your driving. Is everything all right?“ she asked coyly. I wasn't fooled, not for a second.

„Finally, you're online. The others will be on in a sec, I've just flagged them. We need to talk,“ Coulter said.

I froze. I had to answer both questions without letting on I was doing exactly that.

„Uh, everything's fine, thanks,“ I coughed, trying to sound hoarse. „Can't, uhm, can't talk right now.“

Jonathan Briar came online, complicating the situation even more. The screen split automatically into two smaller images, another display improvement by Coulter. Briar looked irritated.

„Would you like some water?“

I looked at Raymonde and nodded silently, desperately. As she leaned back, reaching for a bag on the minuscule back seat, Briar spoke up.

„Finally, my boy, you are online. It’s been a while. We have much to review and little time to do it in. You have provided us with such excellent material and we haven’t had the chance to...“ Briar stopped in mid-sentence when Coulter jumped in.

„Hey, Briar, glad to see you. Sirenne seems to be in a bind and wants us to be quiet.“

I could have strangled Coulter. Instead, I quietly accepted the water bottle from Raymonde and drank a gulp, taking my time swallowing. Briar was unhappy and getting vocal about it.

„He WHAT? This will simply not do.“

The screen changed into an oval, with a sleepy O’Flanahan appearing in the top section. I was finding it difficult to keep my eyes on the road.

„What’s going on? This darn computer won’t stop buzzing. What’s the emergency?“

I drank another slow gulp of water. By now, Raymonde was looking at me eagle-eyed. Briar took control of the conversation.

„Enough of this. My boy, listen to me, this ridiculous situation has gone on long enough. We are grown men, trying to solve a complex mystery, egged on by a brutal killer, who murdered your parents let us not forget, a common goal requiring our valuable time and serious expense. But are we solving our mystery? No, we are not. Instead, we are STAYING QUIET, because one of us...“

„He means you, Sirenne.“

„Be quiet, Coulter, don’t interrupt me, because YOU,“ Briar pointed right at the camera. „You have elected to keep this a secret in an elaborate attempt to turn this crucial collaboration into a total FARCE.“

Briar’s face was apoplectic. I was sorely tempted to reply, stopped only by the fact that I was sitting in a car, supposedly alone with Raymonde.

„Paul, you seem a little distant? Are you all right?“ she asked.

O’Flanahan was laughing at Briar’s last explosion.

„Come on, Briar, give Sirenne a break.“

„No Sir. It is time to end this. Either Mister Sirenne speaks now or I leave this idiotic group and go on to more productive pursuits.“

„Aw, come on, you don’t mean that!“ Coulter said.

„Paul? Are you going to answer me?“ Raymonde asked again.

I had four people talking and I was trying to drive, not to mention drinking a lot of water. I needed to find a way to answer everyone at the same time and keep the deception going.

„Just a second, I’m busy.“

As soon as I uttered the words, I wished I could pull them out of the air and pop them back into my mouth. What had sounded reasonable only an instant before,

now seemed completely inappropriate. Briar stopped talking, Raymonde's face grew red, her eyes flashing, and O'Flanahan gasped aloud.

„He blew it. Sirenne blew it with the dame. Be quiet everybody, I want to hear what happens next.“

The worse thing was not being able to tell my friends anything as they rambled on and on, messing everything up. Raymonde's mouth tightened and she said, in a strangely neutral tone.

„What do you mean *you are busy*? Doing what? What is keeping you so busy?“

My stomach tightened as O'Flanahan laughed some more.

„Yes, I know, but, I meant something else, uhm...“

I was feeling incredibly guilty. Moments stretched into eternity. As I wallowed in my guilt, I saw something enter into her eyes, a glimmer of understanding.

„Stop this car.“

„Right here? Don't you think we should...“

„Stop the car, right now. Park right over there,“ she ordered, pointing at a wide shoulder coming up. I had no choice but to obey, dreading her next statement.

„Ever since we met, there was something odd about you. Now it has become clear to me. That's right, pull up right here. I would have to say I first became suspicious when you put your glasses on when we went to talk with Maman. No matter what you said, I knew you had some other reason for putting on those ridiculous glasses. People wear glasses to see far or to see close. You put them on for both of those reasons. Therefore, you do not wear your glasses to see better, you wear them for some other reason. The reason you looked distracted and were too *busy*, is that you were distracted and busy. Get out of the car,“ she ordered flatly.

She got out herself and stood there waiting, her arms crossed. Superimposed over her, I could see my three friends, hanging on her every word, as if they were watching the best soap opera.

„Good Luck, Paul,“ Coulter said in sympathy.

„Yeah, good luck. You're going to need it, pal, he-he-he,“ O'Flanahan added.

„About time, I would say. Just rewards and all that, my boy,“ Briar said, waxing the moral authority.

„Thanks for everything guys,“ I whispered, trying to inject, in those simple words, as much sarcasm as was humanly possible. I opened my door and walked around the car, coming to a stop in front of Raymonde, looking at her sheepishly.

„Give me your glasses right now.“

„What? You can't be...“

„Be quiet and give me your glasses.“

I removed them, catching a last glimpse of a grinning O'Flanahan waving goodbye. She took them gingerly, surprised by their weight. Examining them from all angles, she finally caught sight of the miniature view screen and, glaring at me in victory, put the glasses on.

She stood for a second, somewhat bemused, until finally, she spoke:

„Uhm, hello?“

She fell quiet, listening to the three traitors. She nodded her head and smiled, then laughed aloud. I realised the guys probably had a full frontal view of me in my abject misery.

„Well, my name’s Raymonde. I am the daughter of Victoire Leblanc, and you are?“ she continued her one-sided conversation while walking away, leaving me to my own thoughts.

She was so vibrant, so beautiful. I truly loved her. For whatever reason, I had been led to this woman and I was not going to lose her because of a pair of glasses.

She had finished her conversation with my team and was walking back, taking off the glasses. She looked better without them. She also looked upset.

„Raymonde, before you say anything, please listen. I know I lied. It was a big mistake. It started with O’Flanahan and the airplane thing which I couldn’t explain because I might lose your trust.“

Her nostrils flared

„At first, I couldn’t tell you for fear you might not talk to me again and later, I couldn’t find the right moment to explain.“

She held up her hand, motioning me into silence.

„Enough! Stop these excuses. What you did was wrong. You lied and things got complicated but it’s because you lied in the first place.“

I dejectedly kicked at the gravel with my left foot.

„I am really sorry. I admit I made the wrong choice. However, I promise I won’t make that type of choice again. I don’t want to lose you. I... I can’t lose you.“

Her eyes stayed hard for a moment then softened. The smallest of smiles graced her lips.

„All right then. We have wasted enough time on this. It seems your friends have information to share but it will have to wait. For now, I want you to show me how to turn these off,“ she asked, lifting the glasses.

I pointed at the small button, which she pressed. The miniature screen faded away.

„I’m keeping these. I want you to stop in Orleans. I’ll direct you when we get there. Now, before we go...“

She gave me a long kiss and we embraced. After what seemed forever, we separated, both feeling much better.

Getting into the car, I noticed another stopped vehicle, an old beat-up truck. Two men, one tall, one short, were working on the engine. I drove off towards Orleans. I had decided to connect to the A13 and cross the Seine near Lillebonne, since we had come across that small town in our research. After the Ferry crossing, the road followed the river meandering across the landscape.

When the road cut into the side of a rocky hill, I noticed the beat-up truck again, coming up fast. Checking my rear-view mirror, I identified the two people in the cab.

„Raymonde, we’re being followed. It’s the Vallin brothers.“

The truck edged closer, enough to hear its engine whining.

„Can’t you go any faster in this thing?“

I pressed on the gas and the Porsche accelerated, outdistancing them quickly. They wouldn’t be able to keep up. The driver put his arm out of the window.

He was holding a gun.

A shot rang out, sounding like an explosion, quickly followed by another, and my side mirror blew off its mount, sending glass shards into the back of my hand.

I lost control of the Porsche, veering sharply to the right, the car careening dangerously close to the cliff wall. I jerked the steering to the left, the car fishtailed and we drove off the road.

Sliding onto the gravel shoulder, the car headed straight down the bank of a steep, rocky hill. A wire fence, no match for our speeding vehicle, snapped apart with a screeching sound. Everything was rattling in the car. Raymonde held on for dear life while I desperately tried to steer, feeling like some insane slalom skier. Several boulders directly ahead would finish us for sure. I pulled on the emergency brake, sending the back wheels into a slide. Turning left, I released the brake, floored the accelerator, and we shot sideways, missing the boulders by centimetres. A narrow bend in the river was now directly in front, a dirt road beyond. We might make it over the narrowest part, if we went faster.

I pushed the gas pedal to the floor. The car jumped forward and smashed over a small bump, sending us flying. Hitting the river surface, we skimmed the last part. The wheels hit the bank, finding traction. A massive burst of acceleration gave us enough momentum to reach the dirt road. I hit the emergency brakes and we skidded sideways, rocking to a standstill.

Dust was all around, little clicks and clacks coming from the engine. It turned over two more times and rattled to a stop. Raymonde was gulping big breaths, her hands tightly clasped to the edges of her seat.

„I take it all back. That was incredible driving. How did you know there was a road down here?“

I stopped my finger from trembling long enough to point at the GPS display.

„Nothing to it, my dear. All in a day’s work,“

I opened my door and got out on shaky legs, hurrying to the other side to help Raymonde out. Holding on to her, I examined the skid marks in the grass and gravel. I had somehow taken the only path possible to survive. We had been very lucky. Peering at the top of the hill, I saw the edge of the road, where two men stood, looking down.

Instinctively, I waved and smiled, dusting off my arms and legs. I was fairly sure we were out of firing range.

The car still looked functional. The frame wasn’t bent and the engine was in running order. The rental company might not be too happy about the dents and scratches but who cared about that? We were alive. Getting back into the car, we headed to Orleans, sticking to back roads, to avoid our would-be followers.

The Vallins had shot at us and I had no idea why. The developing relationship with Raymonde had made me forget how dangerous our pursuit really was. I vowed to be more careful.

Arriving in Orleans, I drove to an electronics store, as directed by Raymonde. I waited outside until she was done her mystery shopping. My credit card safely back in my pocket, she insisted we have supper. We ended up at a small bistro. She ordered trout and I followed suit. The waiter came back with our wine and I made a fuss, insisting to sniff the cork and fill her glass.

„To our future. May there be less excitement in it.“

She laughed and clinked her glass against mine, adding simply:

„To us.“

After our meal, we rented a room in a small Pension, near the bistro. Collapsing into bed, we fell asleep within moments. I woke at some point in the night, her body rubbing against me. Her hazel eyes were open, looking deeply into mine. We made love slowly, with the strongest passion I had ever felt.

Then we fell asleep again, this time in each other's arms.

Chapter 8

Leblanc's Hidden Message.

Next morning, we sat at the small breakfast table in our room, sipping coffee. She got up and returned with two things. A bag and my glasses.

„This is for lying.“

She snapped my glasses in two. My heart jumped. My glasses! She reached out and patted my hand.

„There, there, now you've learned your lesson. It's all over. Now for the surprise.“

She pulled out a gift-wrapped package from the bag.

„This is for you.“

As I opened the wrapped box, she explained.

„Your friend Fabian Coulter helped me with this. They were supportive of you, when I talked to them, you know. They explained what had been going on and told me some of the things they had discovered. I realised we both needed to work with your friends if we were truly serious about figuring this thing out, and there was no way I was going to wear those ugly glasses for one more second than necessary. So I had your friend check online for the closest place where I could buy some better-looking glasses, in a matching style, of course.“

Wrapping paper removed, I opened my box, pulling out a brand new pair of sleek glasses. Raymonde had a pair almost the same, except more feminine. She put them on. Style made a difference after all. When I put on mine, she nodded.

„Much better, Paul,“ she laughed. „Much better!“

I checked myself out in the mirror. At least the *dork* look was gone.

We were soon underway and this time, the miles flew by. We stayed on the main roads, certain we were not being followed. As I drove, we each put on our glasses and activated them. Within moments, the guys connected, all of them smiling.

„Gentlemen, you are on time,“ said Raymonde. She had planned everything!

Jonathan Briar was the first to speak. He could never resist the opportunity to pontificate.

„It is an honour to finally talk with you officially, my dear. I must say your presence has us all excited.“

O'Flanahan tactlessly interrupted him:

„Why is your side-view mirror broken?“

I briefly explained yesterday's events. Although concerned, O'Flanahan's main regret was that I had not been recording with the glasses when I went over the hill.

We all agreed things were getting serious. After that, we began discussing in earnest, Coulter leading the fray.

„I have to show you some video for a second. Hold on while I call it up. Here it is.“

The screen changed to someone walking along in an airplane. It was me. This was the video from my flight to France, just as I returned from stretching my legs. The video froze while I was looking to the rear of the cabin.

„I'm sure you all remember this scene. Let me paste this picture next to it. It's from a car commercial. The man you see in it, the announcer, is Harry Stiles.“

The pasted image showed a thick man, with thinning white hair and a florid nose. Coulter continued.

„Now, if you would look at the centre aisle and count seven rows behind Miss Raymonde. Examine the man sitting in the first seat on the right.“

It was Harry Stiles!

„That can only mean one thing. We are looking at the Shadow-Killer,“ I said. Coulter nodded.

„Now you get it. If Stiles is dead, the man in his seat must be the Shadow-Killer. Let me see if I can't zoom in on his face.“

The image jumped forward, giving us a grainy face, out of focus. Coulter continued fiddling with his controls and the image clarified.

„Look at that nose. And the hair. It's damn near perfect. What do you think, Briar?“ asked O'Flanahan. „He did a pretty good job on his disguise, eh?“

„Yes, he did, O'Flanahan. He did an excellent job, in fact,“ agreed Briar.

The images vanished and the faces of my three friends returned. Briar appeared annoyed at O'Flanahan's comment.

Who could blame him? O'Flanahan was annoying.

„This confirms Norton's story. The Shadow-Killer took Stiles' place on the plane, after prodding Sirenne with the murder of his parents,“ continued Briar.

„The Shadow-Killer is obviously great at planning and disguises,“ I replied.

„That is what I've been wondering about. I've done some research, looking into Inspector Norton's history. It seems he's had a chequered past. Since the death of his sister, he has claimed to be on the trail of the elusive Shadow-Killer, doing most of the detective work on his own time. It seems his superiors don't necessarily share his belief in the existence of his serial killer. Furthermore, my contacts inform me Inspector Norton has just been suspended for dereliction of duty. He has gone missing after your parents' murders.“

„What are you trying to say Briar?“ asked O'Flanahan in a dubious tone. „Do you think Norton is the Shadow-Killer?“

„It is a possibility that must be considered. His behaviour with Paul has been most bizarre and he was in Ottawa at the time of the murders. You must admit it is quite a coincidence.“

„Damn it all Briar, the man's a cop, not a killer. Heck, the killer even murdered Norton's sister,“ argued O'Flanahan, never one to let go.

„Unless Norton killed her too. What if that was his first murder and he's been killing ever since.“

„Come on guys, this is going nowhere. Maybe Norton is the Shadow-Killer but how would we know? We're not cops. We should look at facts, not theories.“

„Coulter is right. Although Norton doesn't exactly inspire confidence, right now, we are under pressure to come up with some answers and we've got to do it before someone else shoots at us,“ I said.

„You know, when we started, we had just one sentence at the bottom of a forgotten book. Now we have almost too much information,“ Briar said. „The strangest thing in our possession must be the letter from Adolf Hitler. No matter which way we look at it, it's real. The letter's contents have also presented a new question: what could Hitler have come across, in architecture or art, which would have led him to Etretat? It has to be the Fort. This is why I have been attempting to deepen my knowledge about the archaeological history of the area.“

Briar had been busy.

„Unfortunately, most of my research was stymied by a curious lack of information. I asked Coulter to look into it and he came up with some disturbing information, which he will share in a few moments. However, my efforts were not completely in vain. I did discover a few items of interest. The first is there was not one fort in Etretat but two. On the other side of Etretat, on the Amont cliff, there is an ancient church. Behind that church are ruins, the remains of a Roman garrison. These ruins are of the same period as those of the Fort of Frefosse. It is also the location of several remaining underground tunnels. The problem is Romans never built two forts in one town. It was too expensive. Someone with a personal interest must have pushed for the building of the fort. I believe it had to be for smuggling or piracy. Whoever built the fort placed it in a useless position for defense or attack. There had to be another reason for its position and a cave entrance seems the likely answer. The question is what benefit could such a cave have for anyone? It would be fairly useless, unless it had a secret opening to the sea.“

Briar was making sense. He continued:

„What if there was a hidden harbour with a passage through the cave to the fort above? A whole community of smugglers could live inside the cave with no one knowing. They would have access to the channel to smuggle goods and a fort to defend the loot. Pirates and smugglers often used secret signs to identify themselves to others. One of the most interesting is this one.“

Briar's face vanished, replaced by the photo of a crude symbol, carved in rock: a triangle above a rectangle, both inside a circle.

„We've seen those symbols before, on that drawing of Frefosse's dungeon.“

„Correct. Move to the head of the class, Mr Sirene. We have seen them before, but so have others. This sign was carved in many ancient caves in the cliffs along the English Channel. To date, no one has ever explained their presence, although many of the carvings have been dated to a period near 50 AD. There is a distinct possibility our Mr Hitler might have come across this symbol in his research. He might have suspected what it led to: a secret den, a cave full of pirated treasure. Leblanc's Hollow Needle pointed out a likely location.“ Briar finished.

An excited Coulter launched into an extension of Briar's theory:

„We cannot forget someone inscribed those very same symbols on a drawing of the Fort of Frefosse, a drawing which was deliberately hidden. However, this is not the most alarming information. Allow me to jump back to the other point made by Briar, the absence of local archaeological records. It was unusual to have so little

information. I began working on a program right after Briar asked me to check it out. It wasn't long before I had enough data coming in to analyse it. After a while, a pattern became clear. Let me show you."

His face was replaced by a graph. I was becoming adept at navigating the road while looking directly through a large, transparent screen.

"It's really a very simple analysis. My search program collected information on the net about research done in France. From that, I created a graph representing the average amount of information available for any given geographical area. Of course, I adjusted the graph for population density, economic factors, etc. Once done, I derived the amount of information available about Etretat and compared it to the general graph."

A new graph appeared in red over the previous one. It was markedly different, showing a much lower curve.

"I compared the results with several other areas. Eventually I had to accept there was something anomalous about research information concerning Etretat. So I refined the parameters of my data and came up with this."

The graph disappeared, replaced by another, showing several peaks and some noticeable drops.

"This graph reveals the specific areas of *negative* research causing these anomalous results. For example, there is no lack of recent economic or touristic information about Etretat. However, geological information relating to the Etretat area is conspicuously absent. Its history also contains noticeable periods lacking any information whatsoever."

Coulter's face came back on the screen.

"A quick check showed yet another unexpected result. The reason for these anomalous results was the research was missing!"

Everyone erupted in a clamour. He explained his conclusion.

"When you look at the information we have about a given topic, it is easy to forget much of this research was conducted in the past, perhaps hundreds of years ago. Up to the late 1980's, the information existed only in forgotten books, slowly rotting away in libraries. If someone were to plan it properly, during the early part of the twentieth century in particular, one could completely eliminate information about a given subject."

"There's a conspiracy about that. I published a small book about it."

Coulter ignored O'Flanagan and continued.

"I checked for periods when the documents might have begun disappearing. Eventually, my search led to Professor Biermann. I'm sure none of you know who he is, probably because he disappeared shortly after the end of the First World War. I believe this is when the »Etretat Brain Drain« started."

"What started?" I asked.

"Sorry guys, I just couldn't resist saying it. However, that's what it was: a brain drain. Over a period of about twenty years following the First World War, there were a series of unexplained disappearances all over Europe. It started with experts in one science or another, at first general topics, then gradually, more specifically relating to Etretat. The research itself disappeared from different places, universities, colleges, museums, the list is endless."

"I guess Hitler was busy," O'Flanagan said.

Briar snorted and objected.

„Oh, it wasn't Hitler; I can assure you. Perhaps Hitler wrote a letter to Leblanc that evaded historical attention but precious little else has escaped our notice. Hitler's life has been sifted through a fine-tooth comb. We know exactly where he was and when he was there. No, if someone was carrying out a secret agenda to destroy information, it wasn't him.“

O'Flanahan didn't skip a beat.

„That's excellent. It means there's more than one person involved. That spells *conspiracy*, if you ask me.“

„It does seem more likely that Hitler directed and another acted in his behalf. Perhaps a hired killer was working in the shadows,“ Briar added.

That sounded like the killer after us right now but it couldn't be. These events happened over eighty years ago. If our Shadow-Killer was the same man, he would be positively geriatric by now.

„Perhaps they were obtaining information about Etretat and hiding the trail at the same time,“ Coulter added. O'Flanahan jumped in excitedly:

„That's it. You've hit the nail on the head. Hitler and his hired help completely eradicated information about what lay beneath the Fort of Frefosse. Beginning with the fort's destruction in 1911 onward, a concerted effort was made to hide the existence of the caves of Etretat. This is a totally new conspiracy theory and the best part is it could be true! I am in seventh heaven,“ he exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear.

„Leblanc must have known about it,“ added Coulter, „He must have. I wonder what his role was in all this.“

* * * * *

I pulled into the driveway and turned off the engine. Thankfully, the Porsche had survived the trip. The brakes vibrated a bit, we heard some rattles here and there, but apart from that, it had been a good ride. Our differences had been ironed out during the voyage. In particular, Raymonde had made it clear she expected some techno-glasses rules about privacy.

We had arrived in Perpignan about two hours ago. After renting a motel room, where we showered and ate a small meal, we had headed off to visit the final residence of Maurice Leblanc.

Our glasses were on, we were recording, and everyone was online.

I knocked at the door. For a moment, we heard nothing, then a series of sounds, which got closer and closer. They clarified into distinct words: (I'm coming. Just hold on, I'll be right there.) Finally, the door opened, revealing a dishevelled woman, with a spot of flour on her left cheek. Her face broke into a wide smile and she welcomed us into the front room, which had been converted into a reception area. We introduced ourselves.

When the woman heard Raymonde's last name, she grew animated.

„Oh my Lord. Are you related to Maurice Leblanc the writer?“ she asked, her right hand held tight against her chest.

„I am his great-granddaughter,“ Raymonde answered.

„That's unbelievable,“ the woman tittered, „did you know that he stayed here? In the rooms upstairs on the second floor.“

The woman leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially:

„He died in the room but we're not supposed to mention that to our guests,“ She stood back up and returned to a normal tone of voice „Would you like to see the rooms? We normally charge five Euros but I guess in your case, I could make an exception, you being family and all. Only two Euros.“

I wasn't sure if Raymonde was insulted or complimented. I paid the landlady and we were ushered up the stairs by the overly talkative woman. She unlocked the room and gave us a few minutes alone. As soon as the door was closed, Raymonde headed towards the fireplace. She stayed very quiet, looking at an overstuffed easy chair.

„This is where my great-grandfather sat when he told that ditty to Maman, sitting on his knee. He was right here. I can almost feel him.“

She fell silent, sitting down in the big chair, perhaps to be closer to him. After a short while, she dabbed her eyes with the edge of her sleeve and glanced around the room. Her gaze settled on a small table. She bent down a little and peered under it.

„There's something there. Something hidden behind that table, on the wall.“

Coulter got on it right away.

„I'm enhancing it. Yes, I can see scratches in the paint. They are deep.“

I pulled the table away from the wall, revealing the scratches in their entirety. They had been painted over but, enhanced by our glasses, we could read two short lines:

*Reach a yarn many ought not discover
Last isolation near dawn of narrative*

„What does that nonsense mean?“ O'Flanahan said, sounding frustrated. „What a stupid clue to leave behind.“

We put the table back in place and looked around the room for a while longer, finding nothing else. We thanked the woman for her help and headed back to our motel room. Once there, Raymonde and I sat down, our online friends still with us. Coulter displayed a still image of the text on the screen.

„What if Leblanc were trying to leave a message? Something that would only make sense if you knew what you were looking for. That first line seems pretty clear. I think it means: 'if you want to find a story many people shouldn't know about.'“

„I would agree with your interpretation.“

„Thank you so much, Mr Briar,“ returned Coulter and Raymonde laughed. „The second line is a bit more difficult.“

O'Flanahan butted in.

„Perhaps you should let an expert try his hand at this. Let's look at the second line a bit closer: 'last isolation, near dawn of narrative' Most of it is also fairly clear but the word 'isolation' is throwing me for a curve. Doesn't it mean to hold the heat in or something?“

„No, not insulation! Isolation. It's a totally different word,“ Briar argued.

Coulter smiled, enjoying O'Flanahan's discomfiture.

„Isolation means to separate something or someone from the rest of the group. So last isolation might mean. last separation? No that doesn't sound quite right. Wait, maybe it means to retire or to die. Last retirement? Final retirement near dawn of narrative? Whose retirement?“ Briar continued.

„I might have an idea about that,“ Coulter said. „Raymonde, when your mother talked about coming to Perpignan, she said some of Leblanc's friend might be living here. Many people ran to Perpignan while escaping from the Germans. Leblanc was not the first to come here, nor was he the last. Earlier, I obtained the registry of people living in Etretat during the twenties, thirties and forties. What if I compared it to Perpignan's registry of the same period, to see if there are any names in common? Let me try that.“

We waited for a while as his computer collated the results.

„Hey guys, guess whose name just popped up?“ Coulter asked.

„I think I have an answer to that. It's, uhm, wait, is it Raymond Lindon?“

Coulter looked stunned.

„Why yes it is, Briar. How in the world did you guess that?“

„I was puzzled about the word *isolation* in Leblanc's second sentence. If he meant retirement, why didn't he say retirement? The whole thing seemed contrived as if Leblanc was trying to fit a message into a formula. Leblanc's books were full of codes. I wondered what type of code could apply here. Going back to the word *Isolation*, I tried simple codes, my first attempt being to look at the first letter of each word and that, my friends, gives you R.A.Y.M.O.N.D. on the first line and L.I.N.D.O.N. on the second,“ Briar glibly explained. I was impressed.

That was quick thinking.

So now, we had two sources of information, both implicating Raymond Lindon. Coulter gathered online information about this intriguing man. We were surprised to learn he was Jewish. He had been forced to assign a deputy mayor during the Nazi invasion and had moved to Perpignan for the period. After the war ended, he returned to Etretat and resumed his post, continuing as mayor for many years, eventually retiring to a small place called Ambrumesy.

„I know Ambrumesy. It is where the Hollow Needle story begins, in the Castle of Ambrumesy!“ exclaimed Raymonde excitedly.

Her words brought everything into sharp relief.

„Lindon retired near the beginning of the story that began everything. Ambrumesy is directly connected to the Hollow Needle. That's what the second line means. We have to go to Ambrumesy and visit Lindon's final home. That is where we will discover what we seek.“

„It's just like the little ditty. The end and the beginning come together once again. It's so ingenious. Only someone who already knew what they were looking for could figure out that message. My great-grandfather left us a message after all. We must heed it,“ Raymonde exclaimed.

I could have said the exact same words.

* * * * *

Ambrumesy was difficult to find. It was so small, it wasn't on the regular maps. The GPS finally located it near Dieppe. It had a castle and the ruins of an abbey.

Once a home to monks, the castle was destroyed after the Revolution. It had since been repaired and returned to its former glory.

We planned the most direct route and got on the road early next morning, arriving late in the evening, as the sun was beginning to set. We both felt certain something was waiting here and neither of us would leave until we found it.

Raymond Lindon had purchased the castle in the 1950's. Before his death, he had set up a trust fund to protect the castle and keep it in a good state of repair. Lindon's castle was directly related to the clue left in Perpignan by Leblanc.

The two men had to have been working together.

The castle was now a museum and tourist attraction. No one lived in it, except for a grounds keeper. It was closed by the time we arrived, so Raymonde and I walked the garden paths, looking for anything out of the ordinary. I had thought to call my friends but Raymonde prevented me.

„No, Paul, this moment should be only for us. Our great-grandfathers planned this. Their efforts deserve respect and privacy.“

„No O'Flanahan nonsense.“

„Yes. Just us.“

We walked in silence, holding hands.

„That fountain! It's in the story. And the chapel, over there, hidden in the castle's shadows, it's in the story too. Come on, let's go look,“ Raymonde exclaimed.

She ran around the large circular fountain and followed a circuitous gravel path through a maze of short hedges. I ran after her, joining her as she reached the ancient chapel. Despite its age, it was in excellent condition. We entered the main chamber and walked down the middle aisle, between two rows of stone pews. The altar was ornate, with decorative carvings covering its entire surface. There were two rooms adjoining the main chamber, one on each side of the altar. We entered the first to find a small baptismal pool and a confessional area. The other room was a small mausoleum, with plaques imbedded into the three walls, each bearing a name and date, none of which I recognised. In the centre of the room was an elaborately carved sarcophagus.

I searched for a name plaque but found none, which I thought curious. I examined the coffin's carvings but they were rather generic in topic. The only exception was on the back of the coffin's base, where I found a circular image carved into the stone: a snake eating its tail.

„If anything defines the phrase 'the end and the beginning', this would be it.“

Raymonde nodded.

„Remember what Maman's ditty said.“

„The beginning and the end, follow the circle, it bends. The end and the beginning, the answer in the connecting.“

„It suggests we 'follow the circle'. Let's try that,“ Raymonde suggested.

She touched the snake carving. Hesitatingly, she slid her index finger along the edge of the circle in a clockwise direction. She pulled her finger back with a start.

„It moved!“

„No way.“

„I tell you, it moved.“

„Try it again.“

She replaced her finger on the edge of the circle and repeated the sliding motion around the stone circle. The entire circle of stone oscillated slightly with each rotation of her hand. She applied more pressure, sliding her finger along the back of the carved snake. Abruptly, the whole circle moved inward a half inch.

„I think it's like a loose screw in a big hole. Your oscillations are making it jump its grooves. Slide your fingers in the other direction, counter-clockwise, then push it and let it go,“ she looked baffled but I motioned her on. „Go ahead. Try it. It will make sense when you do it.“

The first time she tried, her timing was wrong and the circle did nothing but oscillate. With the second attempt, her timing was perfect. The disk oscillated and popped out a centimetre, now flush with the surface of the coffin base again.

„YES! I knew it. That' it, do it again.“

She slid her finger around, pressing and letting go, and it popped out again. Excited, she went faster but lost the rhythm. Slowing down, she did it more carefully. The disk popped out more and more until, finally, a rock cylinder sprang out and fell to the floor, followed by a thick, coiled spring. We looked in the exposed hole but there was nothing else. I picked up the cylinder. It was not as heavy as I would have expected, about forty-five centimetres long and almost twenty-five centimetres in diameter.

„I think this thing is hollow.“

I shook it. Something slid around inside.

I heard the crunch of footsteps on the path outside the chapel. Ducking down behind the coffin base, I peeked over the top, keeping my head low. A man was approaching, walking slowly. It was Norton. He had a pistol in his hand and was standing at the chapel's entrance.

Dropping back down, I whispered to Raymonde.

„Stay low. We'll try to sneak out when he goes to check the other room.“

„What if he comes here first?“

„It's a fifty-fifty chance. I hope the odds are in our favour for once. Shhh, he's moving.“

Norton had to know we were here. Our car was in the castle's parking lot. My question was how had he known we were here in the first place? I had no answers and we were running out of time.

Luck was with us. Norton walked into the baptismal chamber.

It was now or never.

Picking up the rock cylinder, we sneaked out, sliding along the wall. Norton reached the back of the baptismal chamber and turned around, looking me straight in the eyes. We broke into a run, Raymonde passing me, as I lumbered on, the stone cylinder slowing me down.

A shot rang out and a chunk of stone broke off the fountain.

„Stop where you are. My next bullet will not miss.“

We both froze in our tracks.

„Wise choice. I am an excellent shot. Now turn around.“

I did as he asked, still holding the stone cylinder in my arms. Norton, twenty yards away, was approaching calmly, his pistol held straight, a smug look on his face.

„How did you find us so quickly?“

„I placed a GPS tracking device in the boot of your car, you idiot. You can't get away from me that easily. Who do you think you are? James Bond? HA! You make me laugh, Sirenne. You're so pathetic, so gullible. I knew you were lying, right from the start. I just had to follow you until it was time to reel you in. Well, the time has come. Give me that cylinder!“

I began walking towards him. He jerked his pistol in my direction.

„Slowly now, this pistol has a hair trigger.“

I made it seem as if I was having trouble holding on to the cylinder, exaggerating its weight. By the time I reached him, it was almost slipping out of my arms. I jostled it, apparently trying to lift it up, while, in fact, allowing it to slip.

„Watch out, you fool!“ screamed Norton.

I gave the cylinder an extra push and it flipped out of my hands, falling heavily onto its intended target.

Norton's left foot!

Norton let go a bellow of pain, forgetting everything else for a single moment, the moment I had been waiting for.

I slapped at his right hand, sending the pistol flying. Bringing my hand back and balling it into a tight fist, I hit him with the hardest roundhouse I could muster, putting all my anger and frustration over the murders into it. My rigid fist hit his screaming jaw like a brick. Norton flew back, his body flopping loosely against a hedge. Knocked unconscious, he slid to the ground, his swollen foot pinned beneath the stone cylinder.

Raymonde rushed to my side, her eyes wide.

„That was amazing, Paul. Are you all right? Is he all right?“

„I damn well hope not!“ I exclaimed, trying to slow my racing heart.

I lifted the cylinder from his foot, straightening out the man's leg. The foot was swollen. I searched him and found his wallet, which I kept just to give the guy more trouble. I retrieved his pistol and found two spare clips in his jacket pocket. I also found a pair of handcuffs and used them on him, throwing the key in the fountain.

„His foot is very bad. I think the cylinder might have broken something,“ Raymonde noted.

No wallet, no gun, broken foot, and no key for the handcuffs. Not a good day for Norton.

He would have a lot of trouble coming after us. I didn't know if I was doing the right thing, leaving Norton alive but I had trouble believing he was the Shadow-Killer, no matter what Briar said. He was too pathetic. As well, I wasn't a killer.

Picking up the stone cylinder, we returned to the Porsche. I found the GPS tracking device Norton had placed in my tire well. I threw it on the ground, crushing it with the heel of my shoe. Noticing Norton's car, I popped the hood and yanked out the distributor cap, tossing it over the hedge.

We took off as fast as we dared, considering the state of the Porsche, and headed back to Etretat, no more than an hour distant. We were laughing, shaking off the adrenaline rush.

Pulling into the familiar parking lot, we heaved a sigh of relief at being back home. Mrs Leblanc welcomed us with open arms, hugging us warmly. We updated her on the recent events while we ate a small meal. She gave me a stern look when

she learned of the *misunderstanding* about the techno-glasses and was horrified when we told her of Norton's attack.

Our meal done, Raymonde and I headed up to her room. I briefly contacted my friends. Briar was shocked we had not done more to restrain Norton.

Raymonde came to my defence. We had left the man in a physically weakened condition, with no money, no identification, no weapon and a disabled vehicle. If he had become a rogue Interpol agent, he would also have to avoid the authorities. Norton was not going to bother us for a while. Coulter recorded a video of the cylinder, planning to spend a sleepless night figuring out how to open it. We bid our goodbyes to our online friends and disconnected.

I placed the cylinder on the nightstand and lay down in bed next to an exhausted Raymonde. We simply lay there until we fell asleep.

When I woke up next morning, the cylinder was gone!

Chapter 9

The Secret in the Office.

I woke Raymonde and pointed toward the bed stand, feeling sick with worry. She went to get out of bed but I held her back.

„Let's just lie here and think about things for a second. I know we're panicky about the cylinder's disappearance but I think that this situation requires a little reflection before we act.“

She lay back down, nodding in agreement, her exposed bosom distracting me pleasantly. She noticed where I was looking and, covering herself up with the blanket, smacked me lightly.

„Keep your eyes on the business at hand!“

I laughed and gave her a kiss.

„Listen, Raymonde, let's look at this step by step. The cylinder is gone, so someone must have taken it. It can't be Norton. There's no way he could have been sneaking around, not with his broken foot. The Killer hasn't shown his face, unless of course, the killer is Norton. It has to be the Vallin brothers.“

„But how did they get in? The outside doors were locked. We heard no noise. How did they know we were here, that we had the cylinder? To get it, they had to come in here, right into my room.“

Her eyes went wide and her nostrils flared.

„I know, I know, try and keep calm. Let's go back to figuring it out and see where that gets us. How did they get in and how did they get out? First, the door. It is the most obvious way in. Did they use it?“

We checked the door. From our position on the bed, we could see the key, still in its lock. I distinctly remembered double-locking it the night before.

„What about the window?“

Our heads swivelled in unison. The window was slightly open, allowing a bit of cool air to waft through. Beyond it was a screen. It would have made too much noise to come in through there.

„Then, where could they have come from?“ questioned Raymonde, consternation evident in her face.

We searched for the slightest clue. I noticed our glasses on the small table by the window and remembered how special they were.

„Raymonde, could you get my glasses? Oh, could you close the drapes as well?“ I asked her.

Tip-toeing past the table, she picked up both pairs of glasses. Sliding the drapes closed, she jumped back in bed, pulling up the covers. She put on her glasses, handing me the other pair. She looked quite funny, with her wild morning hair and her cool glasses, making me think of a French Janis Joplin. Keeping that observation to myself, I slipped my glasses on.

„Switch them to infrared mode.“

„How do you do that?“

I showed her the little toggle. She pushed it and the small screen changed to a monochromatic greenish hue.

„I didn't know they could do that. I guess they're not just expensive toys after all. Hey, what's that on the screen?“ she asked pointing at the rug between the bed and the window.

„That's the heat signature of your feet,“ I explained. „The infrared mode displays heat instead of normal light. That's why I asked you to close the drapes. Heat signatures hang around much longer than most people would believe but it can be erased by other heat sources, like the morning sun. If we turn the gain up on the infrared mode to maximum, we might be able to detect the footsteps of the person who stole the cylinder. That might reveal how the invader came in to our room.“

Raymonde appeared suitably impressed.

I looked at the bed stand area, allowing the glasses' infra-red camera to absorb as much heat as possible. Red smears appeared in the rug near the bed stand, irregular shapes, too formless to be shoes.

„Maybe they walked around in socks,“ Raymonde suggested.

„That may be right.“

I panned slowly to the left, following the footsteps. They headed to the wall facing us, vanishing right through it.

„Whoever it was stopped moving for a moment, right there, and stood still. The heat signature of those particular footsteps is quite bright, compared to the others. Looks like only one person. He must have been checking the room. He walked around the bed and came to the stand. Cylinder in hand, he returned to the wall, leaving a second set of prints.“

„How could he have gone through the wall?“

„There simply has to be a hidden opening. There is no choice.“

„It makes sense, really. If there was ever going to be a hidden passage, it would be here, in this house, once owned by the creator of Arsene Lupin, whose adventures held countless hidden passages. How fitting.“

Her voice trailed off momentarily

„So if it's there, how do we open it?“

„We push the button, of course.“

„The button? What button?“

I approached the wall, avoiding the fading footsteps, and pressed a section of plaster moulding. It clicked back and a panel of wall swung away, revealing a dark, narrow corridor. Dust was everywhere.

„Wait a minute. I heard that button click as clear as day. There was no way he could have pressed that and not woken us.“

„He didn't need to use it. He opened the panel from behind, the sound of the mechanism muffled by the wall. After entering, he left the panel open. That way, he was able to retreat in complete silence.“

„If he didn't press it, there can't have been any heat left on the button from his finger. How did you know it was there?“

„Cold air insinuates itself in every crack. I thought there might be more cracks around a secret mechanism. All I had to do was look around for cold spots. I found several but only one near the wall where the footsteps disappeared. It had to be our button.“

My father's training had become habit over the years until it was second nature. Perhaps we had a chance of solving this puzzle after all.

„So, what should we do now?“

„Let's follow the footsteps, find out where they lead. We might catch the Vallin brothers in the tunnel.“

She shook her head, a slight smile on her face.

„Don't you think we should get dressed first?“

I had overlooked that small detail in all the excitement.

„I guess you're right. Clothes might be appropriate at this point.“

„Anyway, they are long gone. I am sure they did not come here recently. Otherwise, the heat of their footsteps would be glowing more than they are.“

Her comment gave me an idea.

„Let's shower quickly, contact the team and plan our next step. You go first; I've got something I want to do.“

She stood up from the bed, peering into the secret corridor for a second, then approached me, looking incredibly beautiful and happy at the same time. She kissed me and went into the washroom, leaving me to my own devices.

My infrared devices!

I started by recording the track of footprints. Putting on a pair of socks, I stood briefly on the rug, next to the faded marks. Stepping away, I recorded those as well and noted the exact time.

Leaving my equipment on the bed, I joined Raymonde just as she came out of the shower. I *helped* to dry her, and then had my own shower. Getting dressed, I noted forty-five minutes had passed. I picked up my glasses again and recorded the footprints one final time.

„What are you doing?“

„Your comment about the faded footprints made me think. Perhaps we can figure out when they did come into your room. With the recordings I just did, we should be able to come up with a fairly good estimate. I'll get Coulter to crunch the numbers. He's good at that sort of thing.“

I activated the glasses' regular viewing mode, and simply waited, knowing Coulter's monitoring program would alert him. It took only a few minutes. Raymonde slipped her glasses on and joined us.

Coulter could not believe we had let the cylinder slip through our fingers. However, even he had to admit there was no way we could have anticipated this. While he might have been upset at the loss of the cylinder, he was happy to learn about the entrance to the secret corridor. He downloaded the infrared video files from my notebook and worked on them as we talked. Within a few minutes, he had an answer.

„Although there is a margin of error, it's within an acceptable percentage. I would say that your visitor entered at approximately 3:00 AM.“

Briar and O'Flanahan signed on, bleary-eyed. We updated them as we prepared to enter the secret passageway. Raymonde had found a small flashlight with fresh batteries. I brought my laptop, since the wireless signal from the glasses would not reach as far as we expected to go. Our online friends were just as anxious to get started even though they were tired and a continent away.

I entered the corridor, careful not to stir up the dust. Raymonde followed behind. I angled my body sideways and walked along slowly for about three metres. Aiming the flashlight, I saw a descending staircase, exceedingly narrow and steep. The dust had been recently disturbed, no doubt by our unwelcome nocturnal visitor.

Reaching the bottom of the staircase, the corridor ended after two metres, making it seem like we had reached a dead end. Looking around carefully, I found a mechanism with a large toggle. Pushing it up, I heard a muted thunk and a part of the wall cracked open. Filled with trepidation, I pushed it and stepped into Maurice Leblanc's office!

Our grand exploratory adventure had taken us a total of ten metres and ended one floor below Raymonde's room.

A Selection from the Weissmuller Manuscript

The First Four Days

The invasion of Etretat began on the thirteenth of June 1940, at 11:30 AM. Our tanks led the way, going down each principal road into the small town. Several infantry platoons followed the Panzers under my command.

We had expected strong opposition during our takeover. Instead we found a town in disarray. More than fifteen hundred Etretatais had fled the town in panic, only to be rebuffed near the Seine River, where our planes decimated them. There remained little governmental activity and the local economy had collapsed.

Due to the lack of organized resistance, the first invasion phase was completed ahead of schedule. We were in control before the townspeople could utter a single protest. Our second phase could begin.

One platoon was dispatched to conduct a house-by-house search, in order to ascertain the exact number of able-bodied men, and to seize all available supplies. They were instructed to react strongly to any resistance.

My soldiers found a cache of wine bottles almost immediately and the search degenerated into a destructive, boisterous party. I didn't mind. The drunker they got, the more frightened the villagers would be. We wouldn't be fought off, not like before. I had foreseen every possible nuance of this invasion, anticipating all of its details.

A second platoon headed to the top of the Aval cliff, setting up camp and preparing to dig out the Frefosse fort foundation, while a third took possession of the Lindon and Leblanc villas. Once secured, a thorough search was undertaken to locate the hidden tunnels we suspected were there.

The deputy mayor, Rene Tonnetot, accompanied by several councillors, nervously stood in front of City Hall, the only persons to venture out of their homes. We selected the White Rocks hotel as our temporary base, where we organized the infrastructure necessary for our next phase.

I was baffled by the lack of resistance. The census team reported no weapons cache and few able-bodied men remained. If the French Resistance had been in this village at one time, they were not here now. I felt cheated. I had been looking forward to this moment for so long. Leblanc had scurried off like the coward he was.

Running had been a mistake. The Resistance had left behind two most valuable assets. That which we sought plus their women and children! It ensured our success, no matter what they did. Despite my eagerness to fight the Resistance, my real goal had little to do with them. My purpose was to seize that which Leblanc had held for more than thirty years.

By the end of the first day, all takeover phases had been carried out. I finished the evening drinking champagne and terrorizing the deputy mayor. It was entertaining enough, watching him jump from foot to foot, his face blanching in fear. He was a puppet for the absent Lindon. However, Tonnetot, Lindon and Leblanc were powerless. They could do nothing. This time, it was our turn.

On the second day, digging was well underway on the Aval cliff. I was informed we would soon break through into the buried Frefosse dungeon. As well, much headway had been made in the Leblanc villa. A secret passageway had been found connecting a bedroom with his office. The men were positive they would find another passageway soon. Following the census team's report, I had two locals brought in. Despite the severity of my questioning, neither admitted a single thing. We buried them behind the ancient church, a good end to a satisfying day.

The third day found me in a less than pleasant mood. The search of both villas had revealed nothing. My men were not solving the challenges. Early afternoon, I went out to Leblanc's home. It took six hours to find the second tunnel. Once in, we reached the caves in less than an hour, our arrival coinciding with the breakthrough into Frefosse's ancient dungeon on the other side.

The caves were ours!

The fourth day was to be our last *official* day in Etretat. Using an incident developing in the distant Havre as a handy excuse, we pretended to leave. In fact, only empty vehicles left Etretat, my men and I safely ensconced inside the caves. Another Kommandant was selected. Ignorant of the existence of the caves, he had orders to impose complete control over the region. We would be free to act.

We hid the entrance to Frefosse's dungeon, concealing it underneath a hastily-poured bunker. Its floor could be lowered by a hydraulic system. The Leblanc tunnel would be used as a secondary access.

Now came the most important phase of the project, where my planning would prove invaluable. We would not stop until these caves were transformed into a veritable fortress, unlike any other in the world, from which we could carry out our plans of world domination.

Chapter 10

The Tunnels.

I was sitting down in Leblanc's antique desk chair. I had been looking around the room, trying to solve our new riddle. The secret passageway led here, therefore the Vallins came through here. Both outside doors in the Villa had alarms and neither had gone off. So, where had the Vallin brothers gone?

„I may have something,“ said Briar. „Could you move back against the wall in front of the desk and slowly pan the room.“

I did as he asked.

„Perfect. Tell me what you see. Describe it, my boy.“

„I see a desk, behind that, a chair, and a low cabinet with a built-in bookshelf.“

„What about above the bookshelf? What do you see there? Tell me that!“ he emphasized, getting excited, his shiny head bouncing around animatedly.

„I see a large rectangle. Inside that, a triangle, and inside that, a circle!“

It had been there all the time, right in plain view.

Another Leblanc masterpiece.

„Bravo, my boy, Bravo!“ Briar added, nearly screaming. He caught himself and calmed down, straightening out his jacket.

Leblanc had purchased this house in 1917. He often claimed illness, spending much of his time in bed, resting. What if, instead, he had a hidden exit, allowing him to escape without being seen, not even by his wife? What then?

I returned to the desk chair and sat down. I thought of my father, training me to think logically, preparing me for moments like this. No matter which way I assembled the facts, my conclusion was always the same. The entrance used by the Vallin brothers had to be the library unit itself.

Three observations led me to this. The first: there wasn't enough room behind the walls for a hidden passage anywhere else in the house. The second: Leblanc

always put his clues in plain sight. I was sure he had done the same in his private office. He had placed the geometric symbols above the library.

The third observation was dust. Upstairs, the carpet had hidden the traces of dust from the hidden corridor. Down here, on the varnished wooden floor, dust was much more visible. By simply rotating my chair and looking down, I could see dusty footprints between the bedroom passageway and the bookcase. Though an attempt to clean up had been made, enough remained to note two different shoe impressions, confirming both Vallin brothers had invaded the house. One had likely remained in the office, keeping a vigil, while the other had gone up to Raymonde's bedroom.

Therefore, logically, a door was right in front of me. Mrs Leblanc was opening drawers and moving objects at random, trying to trigger the door mechanism. She would not succeed. It was not a book. Too easy to trigger. There would be no switch, no button. There could be no accidental opening of this doorway.

I noticed four little rectangles, one on each of the bookcase's four columns. They jarred with the rest of the library unit, as if imposed on it, not part of the original design. There was also a shelf missing on the right. Why was it missing?

„Raymonde, could you close the panel entrance into this room.“

„Paul's figured something out,“ Coulter said.

I opened the bookcase's left glass door, and emptied the second shelf. Removing it, I found it came off strangely, nestled inside a curious spring-loaded notch on the left. This was unlike the shelf's right side, where a small strip of wood acted as support. Pulling the shelf out, I heard a faint *thunk* emanating from inside the wall.

I opened the glass door on the right side of the library, exposing the area missing a shelf and checked for a similar indentation. It was painted over but it was there. With an apologetic look at Mrs Leblanc, I hit the indentation hard with the palm of my hand. The paint let go, revealing another spring-loaded notch. I took the shelf, pushing it into the indentation and dropping the other side down on the wooden strip. As it seated itself, a second, deep *thunk* was heard, much louder than the previous one. Closing all three cabinet glass doors, I felt them lock more securely than before. Holding my breath in anticipation, I reached for the cabinet handle on the right and pulled on it.

Nothing happened!

While wondering what I had missed, my eyes fell upon a book on the top shelf. It was *The Hollow Needle*, an identical copy to the two already in my possession. Unfortunately, the cabinet doors would not open again, probably not until I activated the mechanism to access the hidden entrance. I would have to examine the book later.

„Mrs Leblanc, would you mind closing the office door? It would probably be best if you closed it from the inside.“

The door closed with a solid *thunk*.

„Try opening it again.“

She tried but it was impossible.

„Excellent. Now let me have another go at this.“

I reached for the cabinet glass door one more time and pulled on its handle. After a few moments, I detected movement! Excited, I tugged harder. The entire

bookcase slid out of the wall, accompanied by a hiss of escaping air. It was nothing more than a very thick, very wide door. The low cabinet in front of it had gotten even lower, dropping into the floor, as the library continued to open on its massive hinges. The lower cabinet settled into a new position, becoming a handy step.

Raymonde and her mother peered into the inky darkness of the tunnel beyond, as they congratulated me. Coulter asked how I had done it.

„Oh no. I'm not wasting a half-hour explaining things. I'll explain it on the way. It's time for us to go exploring.“

* * * * *

Past the library doorway, a set of stairs vanished into the darkness. Aiming the flashlight around and seeing nothing dangerous, I descended slowly, Raymonde following close behind. We had packed a few supplies and brought a coil of rope, just in case. The glasses were recording and my three friends were glued to their monitors. Mrs Leblanc stayed behind, choosing to remain in the office until our return.

After about seven metres, the stairs ended and we followed a straight brick corridor, featureless except for electrical wires attached to the wall at regular intervals. The wires had been cut near the entrance, suggesting there had been an outside power source in the past. I saw an extremely old light bulb in a ceramic socket and I noticed more bulbs hanging from the wires in the distance. Coulter stopped me before I could go further.

„Do me a favour and examine that light bulb more closely. Maybe we can learn more about who placed them here.“

I lifted the light bulb up, exposing a printed logo.

„It's German. That means Germans were in this tunnel. When would they have had the chance? Would you know, Briar?“ wondered O'Flanahan.

„There can only be one time. The Germans invaded in Etretat in 1940. They took over Leblanc's house immediately following their arrival. They would have been able to search this house from top to bottom. It could not have held its secrets for long.“

„It must have been heart-rending for Leblanc to run away from his home, knowing the German army was coming to steal what he had kept hidden all these years,“ Raymonde commented.

This was no longer a clever theory spun around a coffee table. Unfortunately, Leblanc had taken whatever he knew to his grave. No, I was wrong about that. The Shadow-Killer knew. Hitler also knew, as early as 1911. Hitler and another man, killing people, stealing the same information we were desperately trying to collect today.

It truly was a conspiracy!

Unfortunately, I could not accept Leblanc would ever have allied himself with Hitler and company. Leblanc had run in 1939, proving he was not their ally but rather their enemy.

O'Flanahan's voice interrupted my thoughts.

„Say, are you going to explain how you opened the secret door in Leblanc's office or what?“

„It began with the impression of a straight line that wasn't there. The four rectangles on the bookcase implied a straight line. There was no shelf on the right side of the cabinet, breaking the line. When I transposed the right and left shelves with the concept of open and closed, as applied to the passageways, I understood Leblanc's game. The left shelf of the library represented the secret door in Leblanc's bedroom upstairs. The middle shelf represented the office itself and the right shelf represented the secret doorway leading out of the office. To move from the office to the hidden passageway, I would have to replace the missing shelf on the right but there was no spare shelf sitting around. I took my comparison a step further. Perhaps, I had to take the left shelf, the one representing the upstairs passageway, and move it to the right side to complete the line. This might mean only one door could be open at a time for the mechanism to work. That's why I asked Raymonde and Mrs Leblanc to close the entry points. With both doors closed and both shelves in the right position, the hidden passageway mechanism was unlocked, allowing me to open the tunnel door.“

„I can't believe you came up with that. I'm officially impressed,“ Coulter admitted.

„I'll second that,“ O'Flanahan said gruffly.

Our modern tunnel connected with a much older tunnel carved out of the bedrock. Water pooled around our feet, soaking our shoes.

„Maybe that's why the Vallin were walking around in socks. They came in rubber boots and took them off to avoid leaving wet tracks all over,“ Raymonde said.

The older tunnel ended in a T-junction, the wires turning to the left towards the Aval cliff and the caves we sought. Everyone wanted to follow the wires.

Our direction was chosen.

While we walked along the dark tunnel, countless noises echoing around us, Briar broached a previous topic:

„I have done more research into Norton being the killer.“

„You've been thinking Norton was the Shadow-Killer for a while now. I just don't see why it has to be him,“ O'Flanahan interrupted.

„Because he's the one after us, I mean after you, Paul. Raymonde as well, I would guess. Norton's actions at the Chapel did nothing to make him look innocent. You must admit that. I mean the man shot at you both. Once he had the cylinder in his possession, who knows what he might have done,“ Briar retorted.

„He might have done nothing, being just a cop tracking a killer and coming across an unexpected clue in the form of that cylinder,“ O'Flanahan snapped back.

Both had good arguments. I was leaning in O'Flanahan's corner. Norton might be unhinged but he didn't come across as a killer. Briar spoke up again.

„My point is I have come up with disturbing information. I am not the first to suspect Norton of killing his sister. He was investigated but the charges were dropped due to insufficient evidence. He saw shadows everywhere, Shadow-Killers, and he found them, or at least, he claimed he did. Many doubted the unsolved murders he collected for his list were connected. His work suffered as his obsession with the Shadow-Killer grew. Inspector Rowan from Interpol accused him with the murder of several people from his list. Unfortunately, Rowan was conveniently killed in an accident before he could reveal his evidence. The case

was dropped. Norton was eventually re-instated but warned to steer clear of his theories. When he pulled strings to check on your parent's murder and started talking about the killer again, Interpol became uneasy. After the Harry Stiles murder, Interpol stopped hesitating and shut Norton down or rather, they tried to. He took off before they could apprehend him. There is, at this very moment, a warrant for his arrest across the whole of Europe. I tell you, Norton is the killer. I am sure of it."

This was certainly worrisome.

Raymonde and I had walked about a hundred and fifty metres towards the Aval cliff. We encountered increasing amounts of rubble and broken chunks of rock. Everyone hoped the caves wouldn't be much further. The rubble deepened until it filled up the entire tunnel. The wires disappeared into the pile of broken rocks and stones.

"This mess has been here for a long time. It looks like the collapse may have been caused by an explosion of some force," informed Coulter.

"The tunnel was blown up after the Germans had been here. Those wires continue through the rubble. They blew the tunnel when they were done with it," observed O'Flanahan.

Frustrated, we headed back the other way.

"Digging tunnels through stone is hard work, even soft chalk like this. This is a long tunnel. Someone must have felt it was worth the effort," stated Briar.

"Could Romans have dug this tunnel?" wondered Coulter.

"Absolutely. Romans were here in 50 BC, they had the tools, the skills and the work force. They would have needed a lot of men, let me tell you. This is a very long tunnel."

Raymonde and I were now knee deep in freezing water and it was getting deeper. The reception for the glasses had been degrading as we got further underground. We managed to say good-bye to our friends before losing our connection to the Internet completely.

* * * * *

We had been wading through deep water for a while and were shivering from the cold. Luckily, the water grew shallower until, thankfully, we were past it. We took a short break to warm up. I took off my pants and wrung them dry. I was shaking with the cold, numbed by it, as was Raymonde. Despite being chilled, she still had enough energy to comment on my appearance, as I stood, shivering in my underwear.

She followed my example and removed her sopping pants, squeezing them free of excess water, while cleverly avoiding my sarcastic retort. We rubbed each other briskly to get the blood flowing again.

Our shivering taken care of, we dressed, our clothes sufficiently dry, and continued our march along the tunnel leading towards the Amont cliff. My senses sharpened in the gloom and I was able to pick out details in the rock walls. Despite the weak flashlight, I perceived everything with such clarity, I felt I might not need the flashlight at all.

I mentioned the strange occurrence to Raymonde. She surprised me by saying she was experiencing the same thing and suggested we turn off the flashlight.

As our eyes adjusted, it seemed as if the walls and roof of the tunnel were emanating a dim light, an incredibly faint yellow glow, so weak the flashlight had overwhelmed it. Neither of us came up with a satisfactory explanation for the strange luminosity. We continued in silence, enjoying the odd experience while it lasted, turning the flashlight back on when the glow faded to nothing.

We arrived at a dead end, the tunnel stopping abruptly, as if work on it had been abandoned. Baffled, Raymonde and I retraced our steps until we found a small room a few metres before the end of the tunnel. It was empty, except for a few rotten shelves.

We returned to the end of the tunnel. To our relief, we discovered a narrow cleft in the rock on the left, cleverly hidden in the folds of the tunnel walls. It led us to a door made of a single block of stone. A lever released a catch, allowing us to open it. We walked out into a bigger tunnel, this one lined in long bricks, much older than those in the tunnel near the Leblanc residence. Bricks like these had to be from the Roman period. I recorded everything for future analysis. We went along the right side of the tunnel. After a short distance, we encountered a locked gate, beyond which we saw an overgrown glade.

Unable to exit, we retraced our footsteps. Once past the camouflaged door, we perceived the faint sounds of pounding surf. Soon after, we arrived at the end of the tunnel, a hole in the Amont cliff, about ten metres above the ground. Below us, exposed by the retreating tide, was a short strip of sand connecting to the main beach.

I coiled a loop of rope around an outcropping, dropping both ends to the beach below. We were not the first to come here. There were signs of rope wear right where I had just placed mine. The Vallin brothers had probably come through here twelve hours ago, when the tide was out.

I climbed down first, getting to the bottom quickly and waited, holding the rope tight, as Raymonde went carefully over the ledge and made her way down the cliff. She dropped down the last few feet into my waiting arms. After a brief kiss, we separated and, reaching for the hanging rope, I pulled until it slipped off the outcropping. I coiled it up, hung it on my shoulder, picked up both pack-sacks and headed off to Etretat's main beach, Raymonde and I holding hands.

* * * * *

It was late afternoon when we reached Etretat from the beach. Raymonde called her mother using my cell phone, letting her know we were all right, and we took a taxi back to the Villa Leblanc. Mrs Leblanc invited us to her room, where we talked while having an afternoon snack.

„So, in the end, this was just a wild goose chase?“ Mrs Leblanc stated. „Simply a few forgotten tunnels leading to the channel.“

„Not so, Mrs Leblanc. These tunnels have told us much already. For example, we know Romans built some of them. Those tunnels have probably been in existence for more than 2000 years. Additionally their existence confirms the caves are real, even though we have not found them yet. That is no little thing to know. The Germans found and used these tunnels, confirming the link to Hitler. His involvement is no longer a mere letter in Leblanc's office,“ I explained.

„I have used that letter for many years in the display in Grand-Papa’s office. I found it folded with the final papers and books from his estate. I never knew it was so important, otherwise I would not have left it on display.“

„Be happy that you did. Without that crucial link, we would not have understood the true scale of the mysteries confronting us,“ I said.

Her comment about Leblanc reminded me of the book in the office.

„Mrs Leblanc, when you went through your grandfather’s papers, did you come across a copy of the Hollow Needle?“

She nodded.

„Yes, an old copy, signed by him. I have kept it in his office all these years. It was left to his son, Patrice Leblanc, my father. He died during the Second World War.“

Another piece of the puzzle clicked into place. I now understood why I was here, hot on the trail of a family mystery, while the Leblanc family was not. The person to whom the mystery had been intended to be revealed, Leblanc’s son, had died before he even knew of its existence.

We followed her into Leblanc’s office. I took the time to put on my glasses and activate them. Coulter came online, soon followed by Briar. I updated them on the end of our tunnel adventure. By then, Mrs Leblanc had opened the cabinet doors and pulled out her copy. Briar exclaimed:

„Good gosh, my boy, it’s absolutely identical to the other two.“

The printing history showed the same legend. It was number one of a limited printing of four and one.

„So none of them are forgeries. They are all identified as number one,“ commented Coulter.

Mrs Leblanc was shaking her head.

„Paul, what is bothering me about this the most, and please don’t take this the wrong way, is that you are here in the first place. I cannot understand how you were led to this place by your great-grandfather. Who was he that he knew about all this?“

„My boy, I have been asking myself these questions as well. Your great-grandfather, Paul Sirenne, must once have been in France. Yet, for unexplained reasons, he left and relocated to Canada to open that bookstore of his,“ said Briar.

„He was also very rich!“ I added. „My inherited wealth comes from long ago. The Sirens did not leave France for reasons of poverty.“

Inspired by a sudden thought, I opened the book to the back.

There were the same white stitches. Could it be? Yes! A hidden flap, carefully concealed by fake stitches.

„Let me get my tools.“

Before I could move, Mrs Leblanc had opened the desk drawer, pulling out a pair of tweezers. I got to work, playing with the edge, until I had loosened the thin layer of leather binding. Pulling the flap up, I revealed a piece of folded paper. Trying to stop the trembling in my fingers, I reached in with the tweezers and pulled it out.

Unfolding it gingerly, I read it aloud:

Patrice:

If you have found this note, then you have taken the first step towards regaining your heritage. Time and events have overtaken me. I have not been able to tell you everything. There is much more to know. You know what has been found, I have told you that much. You must look further, to discover what is really there.

When the time is right, your son's son must find a bookstore owner named Paul Sirene, in Ottawa, Canada. With his help, what we have hidden will be revealed. Do not fail me, do not fail Etretat.

Your Father,
Maurice Leblanc

PS:

A real story ends near Etretat
Lost until Patrice infers new ideas subtly
Your friend
Paul Sirene

My legs collapsing, I dropped heavily into the desk chair. O'Flanahan had just signed on and the others were talking excitedly. My head was buzzing. This note directly connected the Leblancs and the Sirenes together, telling us to find each other. Once again, I was forced to accept I was part of a pact spanning generations.

„What is going on?“ I exclaimed.

„If only we knew more about events in Etretat during the Second World War. The revelations from this note are also muddying the Vallin waters. Let's not forget we need to find out how they knew of these tunnels,“ said Briar.

„Would talking to someone who was there be helpful?“ sprung Mrs Leblanc.

I looked at her in surprise.

„Do you know of someone?“

„Yes, I do. He is old now but, from what I hear, still has his wits about him. I was very young when I ran away with Grand-Papa. When I was old enough to grow curious about such things, I researched the past of this place, to find out what had gone on in our house after we were forced to abandon it. Eventually, I was led to »Bequilles«, a local man who had been active in the Resistance during the Second World War. He was a cripple, walking around on crutches, and had not been accepted for regular service. However, he found other ways to be helpful. If you tell him I sent you, he might share what he knows.“

We decided to use the next few hours to go see this »Bequilles« fellow. Perhaps our visit would provide useful information.

Chapter 11

Bequilles' Story.

I parked the Porsche in front of an old house converted into apartments. I was wearing my glasses and they were in recording mode. The man's apartment was on the ground floor. There was no answer when we rang. A snooping landlord came out to tell us his tenant had gone out for a bite to eat, when Bequilles returned.

His old frame rested heavily on two worn crutches. He was looking at us with tired eyes, unsure about what we might want. His entire demeanour changed when we mentioned our names. He grew attentive and a spark scintillated in his deep, black eyes, barely visible underneath a pair of thick eyebrows.

„I'll not have us standing in the hallway like a gang of troublesome youngsters,“ he invited, unlocking the last door on the right. „Besides, I've been walking for almost thirty minutes. My old bones have had it for the day.“

We entered into the small apartment. There was clutter everywhere. He led us around various piles of newspapers and magazines, to a small dining table. Once we were seated, he reached into a nearby cupboard, pulling out a bottle of wine, along with three glasses that were more or less clean. Uncorking the bottle, he poured an equal amount in each glass. Lifting his glass up, he called a toast.

„To Victoire Leblanc, who lost so much and endured so much more.“

It made me reflect on her tribulations, sixty years ago. After a brief moment, Bequilles spoke up.

„Last time I saw Victoire, we talked about some things from a long while ago. Most folks around these parts might prefer to let those things be. But she sent you and I can't have you wasting all that time coming here for nothing. So go on, ask your questions.“

Right to the point. I liked him already!

„Sir, Raymonde and I are on a search for historical information. We have come up with some unexpected knowledge connecting Leblanc's old villa with the Germans in World War Two. Mrs Leblanc felt you were the best man to tell us about that period.“

His deep-set eyes bored into mine.

„These things you want to know, why do you want to know them?“

„Raymonde and I met at the Villa Leblanc. We were both looking for the same thing, although neither of us knew it at the time. Raymonde's interest comes from her mother, who got it from her grandfather, Maurice Leblanc. Mine comes from my father, who gave me Leblanc's book along with a strange message, when I was nine. Our search has united us in a way we could never have anticipated. We know something happened here long ago and it revolves around what Leblanc did in 1911. Then we discovered the Germans were mixed up in it.“

Bequilles sat in silence for a while before replying.

„There have been secrets in Etretat for a long time. I have been party to those secrets, something I hesitate to admit to strangers. But you may be the very people meant to receive this knowledge. Who knows? I wasn't part of the inner circle back then, so I wasn't made aware of everything. The war being what it was, some lines got blurred and I learned a bit more than I was supposed to, I guess. I always had a tendency to keep my mouth shut and my ears open.“

„It was bad, this war, and Etretat got hit pretty hard. Our little village fared better than some others, so there was little use complaining. I was already

working for the Resistance. Lucien Duperoux himself asked me to join. He knew about my skills with the radio. He had also seen me win a race with my crutches. He knew I could move fast when I needed to, something the Germans would never believe. I always acted stupid and slow around them. They might beat me but they would never suspect me.

„If I were to choose a place to start my story, it would be when Obersleutenant Weissmuller arrived, on June the thirteenth, 1940. I'll never forget that day, the day everything changed. One tank drove right up Henry V Avenue and shot at a large pile of garbage. Can't imagine what they were thinking. That's about the only funny thing that day. The Germans had itchy trigger fingers and some people got shot for simply being there. It was terrible. And it got worse. Over the next four days, they ransacked the entire town, terrorizing everyone, taking whatever they wanted and destroying the rest.

„Our real mayor back then, Raymond Lindon, had left before the Germans arrived, since he was Jewish. He went into hiding and he was good at that. He was an integral part of the local Resistance and had his hands in a lot of things. He came right back, as soon as the war ended and took up his post as if he had never left.

„Leblanc was gone by then, never to return. Anyway, Tonnetot, the deputy mayor, was summoned in the middle of night to meet Obersleutenant Weissmuller. Sitting in a bed, smoking our cigars and drinking our champagne, he threatened Tonnetot with death should any of his men be harmed and then sent him on his way. Four days later, Weissmuller was gone, called away to squelch a nest of resistance in Dieppe. On the seventeenth of June, another Kommandant arrived and took over control of the area.“

Bequilles refilled his wine glass.

„I've had a long time to think about back then. Over the years I came up with a theory. You see, although Weissmuller and his men drove off four days after they got here, I think they never left!“

He paused dramatically.

„I did a lot of things during those four years. Most of it was simple stuff. There was food to bring to those that needed it and that was most everybody. We had to hide what we did have, because the Germans kept taking everything. We got pretty tricky along the way and bamboozled them a fair few times. Sometimes, we would get caught. Like when I was caught with coal I shouldn't have had, which, back then, was a pretty bad thing. I played dumb as always. They took me to see the Kommandant. He was busy talking with another man, who was giving him a serious dressing down. I only saw that man for a minute but I would put my hand in the fire and swear it was Obersleutenant Weissmuller, supposed to be gone more than five months before.

„Whenever there was talk, I would listen, trying to piece more of it together. Everyone in the resistance knew something strange was going on. Unexplained murders, many of them downright gruesome, convoys in the night, all sorts of things. Then, there was the growing list of new Kommandants. Germans were a pretty organised lot. I mean they had to be, considering what they were trying to do. I would have thought when a Kommandant was in place, he would stay there. I even checked in other towns and found that was pretty much the rule. Yet, every

six months, a new Kommandant and his troops would roll in. It made no sense. Then, there were the trucks.“

„Trucks?“ Raymonde asked, captivated by his story.

„Yes. Lots and lots of trucks. Almost every night, you could hear their rumble. At night, the patrols doubled, so you couldn't go wandering the countryside on a whim, no sir. It was our biggest problem. The Resistance had a lot of trouble getting out there to find out what was going on. I know, from seeing a manifest one very lucky time, that some of those trucks were bringing cement. Tons of cement. Later, there were explosions in the channel. For almost six months, they went on. But things got real interesting when we noticed the duplicate German patrols.“

„Duplicate patrols? What do you mean?“

He grinned a toothless smile.

„It sure threw us for a loop when we figured it out. When the first unexpected patrol came by, we blamed the lookout who had worked on the timetable. When it happened again and again, we realised something entirely different was going on. One day, we were lucky. We were able to follow the surprise patrol to a small glade, near the Dungeon, a local restaurant. Soldiers were being dropped off. They entered the wooded glade and never came out. By our count, over one hundred men had entered the glade and vanished during a period of twelve days. To add to the mystery, it wasn't the Kommandant's troops either. It seemed likely they knew of the other soldiers, I mean, how could they not? But they never paid them the slightest notice.

„There were two separate groups of Germans, one hidden and the other brought here strictly to deal with the daily tasks, left in the dark about the activities of the first group.

„Eventually, the local leader of the Resistance sneaked into the glade to follow the disappearing men. We had all heard the fishermen's tales about secret tunnels and such. Perhaps there was some truth to them. Although guarded, the glade had a slight dip in its centre, which he used to crawl past unseen. Seeing a soldier entering a narrow hole in the west side of the glade, he pursued him, entering into a long tunnel, which led him to the beach, on the Amont side. The soldier was nowhere to be seen.“

Raymonde and I knew that tunnel. We had glimpsed the glade through the locked iron gate. Bequilles continued:

„The tunnel on the beach ended at least eight metres in the air, its original access destroyed long ago by the tide. The Germans could not be going there. There had to be another way out. So he searched and searched, only to be nearly caught by four soldiers who came out of the tunnel wall. He dropped to the ground, hiding in the shadows. After they were gone, he examined where they had come from and found a trigger brick that opened a hidden door, leading to another tunnel. More Germans were coming and he almost got caught, jumping into the Channel from the edge of the tunnel, the Germans hot on his tail. They must have thought he'd drowned, which he nearly did. They beefed up their security around the glade after that. It only was much later that he chanced going back, near the end of the war. The Germans were in a panic by then. He returned to the second hidden tunnel, eventually arriving at a crossroad. One way was blocked by a fresh rock fall. The other led to Leblanc's house.“

Bequilles emptied the last dregs of wine into his glass.

„That’s almost all I know. After the Germans left, one more thing happened. A woman who lived out on the Petit Valaine road woke up in the night, hearing faint screams and machine gun fire, followed by sporadic firing. Searches were carried out the next day but nothing was ever found.“

„The Resistance leader who found those tunnels? What was his name?“

„His name? He was called Vallin, Gerard Vallin.“

There was our connection. It explained how the Vallin brothers knew of the tunnel. Their father had been in the Resistance.

„Why did you never tell anyone of the tunnels?“

Bequilles’ eyes narrowed.

„That’s a good question. Yes sir, it is. Vallin told me about it as quick as he could, the first time around, and told many others, although most didn’t believe him. The second time he went in, he only told me. That’s because someone else was there, when he was doing the telling: Tonnetot. As soon as he heard Vallin, he jumped on both of us right quick. Told us we weren’t to ever tell anyone else about it. No one was to know about the Secret. That’s what he called it, *The Secret*, like it was something big and important. He said Etretat was hiding something very special and some of us had the duty to protect it. So, I haven’t breathed a word about them until this very day, no Sir, not to anyone.“

„So why did you tell us?“ Raymonde asked.

His eyes twinkled a bit.

„There are many reasons, I guess. I’m not long for this world,“ he stopped, seeing our concerned looks. „Oohh, there’s no use denying it, I can feel it coming. I’m thinking this might be the last chance I get to pass on the knowledge that’s been in my head all these years, never breathing a word of it. It feels good to let it out. But it’s not just that, it’s you two as well. Let me explain. When Tonnetot told us what he did, he let on more than he intended. He wasn’t surprised about the tunnels. He was more worried about us telling anyone than about what the Germans had been up to. One thing I knew for sure about Tonnetot—what he said was for the good of Etretat. Today, when you explained your reasons for being here, I felt you were here for the good of Etretat as well. I thought this story long dead, but you two are bringing it back to life,“ he paused, pointing a trembling finger at Raymonde. „You are from the very family that began all this so long ago. You are directly involved in this secret, as Tonnetot called it. As for you, Mr Sirene, I think you are very special indeed. I am very surprised to finally meet you. It is right for both of you to find out about your heritage. Call me an old fool but that is what I believe and that is why I told you.“

I shook his hand warmly, thanking him for his trust, and Raymonde hugged him tightly. He remained sitting at the kitchen table when we left, looking at his empty glass of wine.

* * * * *

It was late in the afternoon and we still had much to do, or at least I did. We were sitting at the restaurant table by the window, having a quick bite. Mrs Leblanc had joined us and Briar was online, as was Coulter. O’Flanahan couldn’t make it, so we were recording our conversation.

„We found out how the Vallins knew about the tunnels and that is no little thing. Bequilles gave us a few additional clues. Such as Obersleutenant Weissmuller, who was involved in secretive activities—Odd explosions in the water, trucks in the night, loads of cement, use of hidden tunnels, double patrols, the list goes on.“

I stopped and sipped some coffee. Briar took the opportunity to jump in.

„I'll check into Weissmuller. Perhaps my friend in Nuremberg can flesh out his character. We already know Hitler was involved from 1911 and someone else was working with him, killing people and destroying information about Etretat. It lasted through the First World War and for decades after that. At the first opportunity, during the beginning of World War 2, they invaded Etretat, marched directly into Leblanc's home and used his hidden tunnel to access the caves. They even built their first bunker over the Fort of Frefosse. Could Hitler have built a war machine just to take over the Etretat caves?“

Our conspiracy was taking on a more insidious tone. Was Hitler's incredible rush to power motivated by his discoveries in Etretat? What about his rise into politics? Hitler devoted his life to these goals. It could not simply be a feint to hide his interest in Etretat. However, the caves could have been a root cause, a hidden motivation for the whole thing.

We would never know, unless we took the next step.

„We have to go after that rock cylinder and deal with the Vallin brothers. No matter what the Germans did in the 1940's, the answer is here, now, and the Vallins stole that answer from us. We still aren't sure about the nature of their involvement but their acts so far haven't seemed very friendly. Let's not forget they have lived here all their lives. That's a lot of time for research and investigation.“

„So what are you going to do?“ Coulter asked.

„I'm going to visit them right after supper. I'll be going alone. They won't be expecting me. We'll have ourselves a little talk. I'm sure we'll be able to *resolve* things.“

Raymonde looked a bit miffed.

„There is no way you are leaving me behind. I want to talk to those rascals myself.“

„Raymonde, I know you want to come but I can't let you. This is something I have to do on my own. You'll be along anyway. I'll have my glasses on.“

„I don't care about the stupid glasses. I care about you and I don't want you hurt. They almost killed us, if you remember! What if Norton comes back?“ she said, tears in her eyes.

I hugged her.

„What? Hobbling on one foot? No, he's out of the picture for a while yet. Listen, Raymonde, I came here to solve a mystery and found you instead. All our search has done is to place both of us at risk. I can't stand that. It's time to end this and it's up to me to do it.“

„Very well. You can go but I want you to be careful,“ she hugged me again, squeezing me tight. „Or you'll have to answer to me.“

Chapter 12

The Vallin Brothers.

I examined Norton's pistol. The weight surprised me. It certainly was a big thing and looked fearsome enough. I held it gingerly, trying to figure out its main mechanisms. I found the safety catch, ensuring it was flipped on, and slipped the pistol into my small packsack.

After saying my good-byes to Raymonde and Mrs Leblanc, I got into the Porsche, directions in hand. Events were forcing me to act impulsively, going on gut instinct. I didn't know what to be more surprised at—what I was about to do, or that I was doing it!

I parked far from the Vallin house, not wanting to be seen. According to Mrs Leblanc, it had been home to the Vallin family for almost one hundred and twenty-five years. Old Man Vallin himself had lived there. Getting nearer, I activated the glasses, and everybody connected in, wishing me good luck. I asked them to keep quiet. I didn't want to be interrupted at a crucial moment.

The sun hadn't set yet but the shadows were getting long. I used them to my advantage, getting on my knees and crawling along a row of bushes, which bordered their property. Reaching the end, I saw their house. It was a one-floor affair, simple enough and poorly maintained. Their lawn hadn't been cut in months. I wasn't complaining since it made sneaking around much easier. Approaching the house and noticing an open window, I slowly raised my head to look inside.

They were both right there, the rock cylinder between them. One had a hammer and the other held a chisel. They were arguing. Apparently, they had been at this process for a while and were having little success. Preoccupied as they were, there was a good chance I could surprise them. I pulled the pistol out from the packsack and tried to stop myself from shaking.

„Be careful, my boy. Don't do anything careless.“

„Let him do it in peace, for Pete's sake, Briar,“ whispered O'Flanagan.

I crawled along the side of the house, reaching the door after a few minutes. The front door of their house was a two-part affair with the top separate from the bottom. I checked the lower knob, which thankfully was unlocked. I remembered my last attempt at unlocking a door. I pulled it slowly, leaving the top closed, while listening to their ongoing argument. I crouched on my knees in the middle of the entrance.

„Freeze, you two. Stop what you are doing and don't move. I have a gun aimed directly at both of you.“

My loud voice froze them into place.

„Excellent, my boy, you've got them now,“ Briar jumped in again.

„Hey, man will you please be quiet. This is the best part,“ Coulter shot back.

„What do you want Mister?“ the small Vallin asked, his voice shaking and nervous.

„You know what I want. It's on the table, right between you. You stole it from us, remember?“

„You have no right to that rock thing. It belongs to us, to Etretat.“

„No you are wrong about that. I am positive the cylinder was specifically intended for us,“ I stated, shaking the gun. „No matter who is right, although we are, you broke into our home and stole it. You also tried to run us off the road, shot at us, and listened in on our conversations,“ I listed with increasing volume. „None of these acts are those of honest people. Before anything goes further, we will take back what is ours.“

I moved forward, intent on taking the cylinder. My foot hit something and I reacted instinctively, looking down at a pair of old dirty boots. I had taken my attention off the two for a single moment but it was enough! The small Vallin vaulted over the couch, trying to get at a knife, planted in a wall beam on the other side of the room. I aimed at the knife and pulled the trigger.

The gun went *Click*.

The safety was still on!

I desperately scrambled to find the safety catch. The big Vallin jumped to the corner where a double-barrelled shotgun was leaning. He grabbed it, cocking it and lifting it to his shoulders, all in one smooth move.

Safety off, I swung my gun past the smaller Vallin but the big Vallin was faster, aiming his shotgun directly at my chest. His finger was on the trigger and it was tightening!

„Nobody move. I have a gun on all of you,“ a familiar voice rang out, strong and clear.

Mrs Leblanc!

For a moment, everybody froze. My adrenaline was kicking in, my senses at their peak. Everything slowed down to a crawl. Mrs Leblanc was standing outside. I saw her through the window. I wondered how she had gotten here. She held a rifle of some sort. Behind her, I could make out someone else. Raymonde, a look of concern on her face. The smaller Vallin looked tense, ready for anything. The bigger one was turning his shotgun toward Mrs Leblanc.

In a moment of clarity, I knew he would shoot her. There was no stopping it. The shotgun blast might kill both her and Raymonde. Even if Mrs Leblanc shot him, he would still shoot in reflex. They would all be killed.

I frantically launched myself at the big Vallin, propelling my body directly at his chest, both of my hands reaching for his shotgun. He was a big man much taller than me and at least a hundred and twenty kilos. I was overweight. I hoped it would be enough.

I slammed into him hard. My right hand clamped convulsively on the shotgun barrel and I jerked it down fast. It discharged thunderously, blowing a hole into the floor. The big Vallin fell back, smashing his head on the corner of the fireplace mantle and knocking himself out cold. My ears buzzing, I rolled off him, wrenching the shotgun out of his limp hands and throwing it in a far corner.

I heard a noise, turning around to see the other Vallin moving again. Before he could do anything, another booming shot rang out and a dish rack exploded into smithereens.

„Enough. No more fighting. This has gone far enough,“ screamed Mrs Leblanc at the top of her lungs. The big Vallin was down on the ground, out for the count, and the small Vallin was cowering in fear in the corner.

„Incredible, my boy. Absolutely incredible,“ Briar said, the pride obvious in his voice. „I knew you had it in you. Always did.“

* * * * *

We were sitting around the kitchen table. The big Vallin, Ives, was lying on the couch, holding an ice-filled rag to the swelling on the back of his head. Jacques Vallin, the smaller one, was on a chair, his hands tied behind his back. He appeared sullen and unhappy. Mrs Leblanc seemed to be holding up well. She had reserves of strength I had not suspected.

As soon as she had shot her rifle into the air, everyone had stopped fighting. Raymonde had run right in and hugged me, explaining in chopped sentences about her mother worrying, getting the rifle from over the mantelpiece and calling a taxi. Mrs Leblanc stayed exactly where she was, her rifle at the ready, until I found some rope and tied the protesting Jacques Vallin. Then I helped Ives Vallin onto the couch. He was slowly coming around from the glancing blow. Big as he was, he seemed rather gentle.

It was time to get down to business. Now that we had the Vallin Brothers where we wanted them, we would be able to get some answers.

„All right. It's apparent everyone's upset. You two don't trust us and we don't trust you, perhaps because you shot at us, among other things. Earlier, you said the rock cylinder belonged to you and to Etretat. I know it was intended for us, not you, which tells me you don't have a clue what we are doing and why we are doing it.“

Jacques Vallin interrupted, speaking in a slightly remorseful tone.

„We didn't shoot at you. I mean we DID but we didn't mean to. The truck was running so bad and was overheating again. We hadn't put enough water in the radiator when you took off. You had that fast sports car and you were going so fast, like you were taunting us or something. I was pretty mad, knowing we were going to lose you and I pulled out the gun, as I pushed the gas pedal to the floor. I never wanted to fire at you. I didn't know what I was going to do, really. That was when the engine just plain blew. Popped a cylinder right through the block. The explosion scared the heck out of me, my finger tightened by reflex, and the damn gun went off. By then, we were just coasting along, the truck without power, when you took off like a rocket and went right over the side of the road. I never saw anything like that before. You've got to have nerves of steel, Mister. Anyway, I braked like mad, jumped out of the truck and ran right to the edge of the cliff to see if you were all right, Brother right behind me. We got there just in time to see you skim over the river and drive right up to the road, smooth as silk,“ he jabbered.

I didn't remember it like that. It had been more like ›barely getting out alive‹ after ›losing control of the car‹. His brother spoke up.

„Yeah, then you got out of the car and just waved at us, calm as can be. That took guts, Mister.“

„Hey, I was telling the story,“ Jacques shot back.

„You never let me speak. Here I am, hurt, my head all busted up, and I can't even say a few words?“ Ives retorted. Jacques was getting ready to throw back some other quip. I spoke before he did.

„So you didn't shoot on purpose. Fine! What about following us all over the place?“

„Yes, all over the place, right into our bedroom, while we were sleeping, what about that?“ interrupted an angry Raymonde, pointing her finger at the smaller of the two Vallin, her whole body invested in the gesture.

Jacques hung his head down.

„I'm sorry, Miss. It's wasn't like that, really it wasn't, although I sure can't figure out how you knew exactly what I was doing, because you were sleeping all through. I went in, no idea what I was looking for, just checking around, real quiet like.“

Raymonde's eyes flashed. Ives kept going, talking faster and more nervously.

„It took me just a second to spot the rock thing on the bedside table. I figured it had to be something important. We didn't mean no harm. We just had to take it from you.“

„Why?“ I asked simply.

„Yes, why indeed? A key question my boy. There's more to this than meets the eye,“ Briar added in my ear. I had almost forgotten about my friends. The three were still rooted to their computers back home. They didn't even get commercial breaks for this show. For all their annoyance, I was glad they had come along for the ride.

„Because we had to. It was our duty to Father. We keep guard for Etretat,“ answered Ives Vallin.

„That's right, Brother, We keep guard for Etretat. When you came in to the Mairie for those records, Mister, you sure got me spooked. No one had asked for those papers, not in a real long time. I had to follow you to find out what you were up to. When I heard talk about the Fort of Frefosse, the next morning at breakfast, I knew you were right in the middle of it, because that's where our great-grandfather was killed. So we had to keep following you.“

What they were saying made sense, when seen from their perspective. Were we wrong about the Vallin Brothers? Perhaps this situation could be resolved more peaceably than I originally thought.

„What if I told you the things we are looking for, like that cylinder of rock, were hidden by Raymonde's great-grandfather? We know your great-grandfather was involved with this mystery. Perhaps what you are doing, this keeping on guard for Etretat, is related to the same affair. Maybe we could work together instead of fighting each other.“

Both of them mulled over my words.

„Maybe you're right, Mister. Maybe we are looking for the same thing,“ Ives said, as he sat up, carefully holding his head.

„What is this duty you speak of? What is it you guard?“ asked Raymonde.

Jacques looked sheepish, admitting with a slight smile:

„We sure don't know, Miss, and that's a fact. It's something big and it has to be kept secret. Our father gave us this duty and we intend to stand by it.“

Ives was nodding.

„We’ve kept at it all these years, just like we promised. It’s hard keeping a secret when you don’t know what it is. We’ve been trying to figure things out but it’s been pretty slow going. Say, you folks wouldn’t be willing to untie Brother’s hands, would you? I can see they’re getting all blue. He won’t do nothing. I’m the strong one but I won’t do anything either.“

Jacques’ hands were indeed blue from lack of circulation. Raymonde untied them and he briefly rubbed his wrists, then grabbed a bottle of red wine from the kitchen counter and some glasses.

„I just have to have a drink. Tonight has been too exciting, even for around these parts.“

I agreed with him. Mrs Leblanc did not accept any wine, looking a little tired. Raymonde and I each accepted a small glass.

„Somehow, this mystery is linked directly to all our families, even mine, far away in Canada. This secret, whatever it is, was intended to be re-discovered for a reason. We don’t know what that reason is yet. Perhaps it is lying there, inside that rock cylinder. I suggest we join forces. I will even offer you a salary, if you need it or want it. We could use the help, although I must warn you, in all conscience, there is some danger to this. Others are trying to solve this mystery as well and they don’t mind killing people.“

Raymonde placed her hand on my shoulder. Mrs Leblanc did nothing, as she was sleeping, sitting upright in her chair. Jacques Vallin answered:

„Mister, it’s true these ladies are Etretatais through-and-through. We don’t know you but you seem to be a fair man, willing to give us a chance. We’ve been at this a long while but we never got anywhere as far as you. Maybe you could do the thinking and we’ll do the helping.“

„Yeah, we’re good with helping. We know everyone in these parts. If you need something, you tell us, and we’ll get it. If I can ever find out what father was talking about all those years, it’ll be the happiest day of my life. And Mister Sirene, I want to say how sorry I am about the shotgun and what happened. Everything moved so fast, I didn’t have a chance to think. I’m so glad you hit me and stopped me from shooting that nice old lady.“

I offered my hand. He stood up slowly, wincing at the pain from his head. He reached his full height, towering over me. I couldn’t believe I had knocked him down. He was huge. He smiled and held out his hand.

„Friends?“ he asked.

„Friends!“ I affirmed.

His powerful handshake left my hand numb. I did the same with Jacques, who completed our handshake by raising his hand to his chest, holding the outside fingers and his thumb out while folding in the two inner ones. He was immediately copied by his brother. He looked very serious when he spoke.

„I’ll work with you, Mister, and I’ll be there to help, I swear. As for a salary, I wouldn’t say no, money being a bit rare for Brother and me these days.“

Instead of enemies, we now had a stronger group.

„Well, I don’t swear an oath to keep quiet. Not a chance. No way. This conspiracy is the biggest thing since the Roswell UFO crash. There is no way I’m not going to publish a book about it, so there,“ said O’Flanahan.

I reached up and turned off the glasses. Raymonde gently shook her mother's shoulder, waking her up.

„It's time to go home. Everything is sorted. We can sleep soundly in our beds tonight, thanks to you.“

I asked the Vallin brothers to bring the rock cylinder to the Villa Leblanc the next day, when we would try to open it. Seeing their pleased faces, I knew it had been the right thing to do. Raymonde helped her mother outside, while Jacques ran up the road to get my Porsche. As we waited, I held Raymonde's hand and looked at the stars. She whispered in my ear.

„You were so brave, saving my mother. And me, I guess. I can't believe you jumped Ives Vallin but you did and you saved us. And before that, with Norton. You were there when it counted. I love you, Paul Sirene.“

Suddenly, the stars looked much brighter.

* * * * *

I was moving along at great speed. The sounds I heard were strange, muted.

I was dreaming again!

I opened my eyes to find myself underwater, slicing through it at great speed without any physical effort. Inexplicably, I had no problem breathing. I saw fish darting away in the deepening waters. I went deeper until I could hardly see anything at all. Another type of sight took over. Everything became clearer without being brighter. I perceived every rock, sharply defined on the rapidly-approaching sandy bottom. I didn't think I was using my eyes.

I veered at the last minute, following the seabed. Rock cliffs appeared on my left. I turned and went down a side canyon, then another one. The cliffs flew by at a rapid pace, closing in. There was a dead end. In a flash it was gone, replaced by a monstrous owl, his giant beak open. He was going to cut me in half. I saw a yellowish light in his eyes, a light I had seen before. His beak kept getting closer and closer.

I woke up screaming, covered in sweat. Raymonde was shaking me, a concerned look on her face.

„What was that all about, Paul?“

„It was a dream. a very bizarre dream.“

I could not refute the first dream had been prophetic, presaging the moment when Raymonde and I entered the bunker. If this second dream was predicting the future in the same fashion, then I would soon be encountering a giant undersea owl with glowing eyes that would bite me to death.

I was missing something.

Exhausted from the day and from the ordeal in my dream, I lay back down next to Raymonde and fell into deep slumber.

* * * * *

Raymonde and I had breakfast in bed the next morning. We decided to keep the dreams between us for the time being, not knowing exactly how to explain them. Mrs Leblanc had slept in, overwrought by the recent events. We were both worried about her. She insisted she was fine, or would be, once she'd had some rest.

We'd been spinning theories from the start. Some of them were beginning to unravel. For example, the Vallins brothers were not villains. They were simply trying to protect their heritage.

If Old Man Vallin was a loyal Etretatais then we had to re-evaluate his reasons for blowing up the fort. I had thought an enemy of Leblanc paid Old Man Vallin to destroy it. Now I was not so sure.

We were up and showered by ten, heading down to the restaurant, my jet lag finally abated. Waking up next to Raymonde these past few days had made me realize how difficult it would be to leave her side, when I returned home to Canada. We had been acting and thinking as one since the beginning of this adventure and I could not imagine being apart from her.

From where I sat in the restaurant, I saw the two Vallins arrive in their beat-up old truck. I could hardly fail to notice they had dressed in their Sunday best, trying to make a better impression. Ives Vallin was proudly carrying the rock cylinder. I activated my glasses, knowing the team would want a recording of this conversation. Coulter had anticipated our meeting and signed on immediately, despite the early hour for him.

Mrs Leblanc joined us in timely fashion, just as greeted the Vallins. I introduced both of them to Coulter, by letting them wear my glasses for a few moments. This display of technology seemed to impress them more than any other thing.

„Before we try to open that mysterious cylinder, I would very much like to hear about how you came to be doing this duty of yours?“

Jacques Vallin, apparently getting the honours from his brother, started his explanation:

„I guess you know our great-grandfather, Old Man Vallin, was murdered at the destroyed Fort of Frefosse? What you may not know is that, Jean Vallin, our grandfather, found a gold coin in an old cigar box hidden under Old Man Vallin's mattress. Where did he get that coin? Who gave it to him? More importantly: were there more coins? There were few clues at the scene of the murder itself. Old Man Vallin had been beaten up real bad before he was thrown into the rocks to die. But he didn't die right away. No sir, our great-grandfather was tough. He hung on long enough to leave us a sign. He placed his hand on his chest like this.“ Jacques Vallin repeated the gesture from the night before. „It's our family's way of saying: «we swear loyalty». In his last moments, it was important for him to show he had stayed loyal. We just didn't know who that was. All we had was that gold coin.“

„And the money, Brother, don't forget about the money.“

Jacques gestured at Ives to keep quiet.

„I wasn't going to forget about the money, I was just getting to it and you didn't give me the time. There was about a thousand francs in the cigar box, which back then was a lot. Several times after that, when our family was in deep financial trouble, an envelope appeared in the mailbox, filled with money, always just enough to put us back on our feet.“

„How long did that go on?“ I asked.

„The last envelope came about 1937. This is what my father told me, you understand, but I am sure about the coin because we still have it, although not with us today,“ Jacques said.

„Because we didn't know you'd want to see it. Through thick and thin, we never sold it,“ Ives added. Jacques kept going, sending his brother a sidelong glance.

„Anyway, Grandfather and Old Man Vallin had never gotten along, mainly because Grandfather was greedy. He was not as moral as us.“

„No Sir, not as moral,“ said Ives.

„He was very curious about the gold coin and tried for a long time to discover where it came from. At first, he asked around town but people had nothing to say about it, so he went further afield, ending up in Paris. He made friends with a pawnbroker who had ears to the ground. One day, Grandfather received a note from the pawnbroker. Someone had sold more of those coins. Old coins they were, from the early 1200's. Unfortunately, the description of the man who sold the coins was vague: a well dressed man, slightly taller than average, and a bit thin. Nothing more. Over the years, more gold was sold but there was never enough information to figure out who was doing the selling.“

Jacques paused to gulp some tea then continued.

„By 1934, Father was living on his own. Him and Grandfather didn't get along much but they did share interest in the gold coin, although not for the same reasons. Father wanted to find out what had happened to Old Man Vallin. That was all.“

„Tell them about 1937. You're getting sidetracked,“ Ives prodded.

„I will, Brother, enough already. In 1937, the Vallin family was having some tough times. Taxes were owed on the house again and Grandfather had done a few too many bad deals. One day, an envelope was found in the mailbox, nothing written on it, but plenty of cash inside. In fact, there was enough to pay the back taxes and the bad debts, with two hundred francs left over for food and clothes. That money put the Vallins back on their feet. At the very same time, Grandfather got another note from the pawnbroker. Checking on the dates, they learned the gold had been sold three days before the money was dropped in our mailbox. Whoever did that had to be living around here, or at least keeping tabs on us, otherwise how would they know about our troubles, to the exact franc?“

His conclusions were valid. Whoever had helped them had a reason to do so. Could it be an act of retribution, guilt over Old Man Vallin's death? It certainly seemed possible. Jacques went on with his fascinating story:

„Grandfather never found out any more. It was Father who figured out the rest. He was smart our father.“

„Very smart, not like me,“ added Ives.

„You're smart in your own ways, Brother. Look at what you can do with cars. It's like magic. Anyway, Father was the one who put things together. It took him a long time though. When the Germans invaded France, he was mad through and through. He wanted to fight them but there was no way he was going to leave Etretat and go die in some God-forsaken trench like all the others. He stayed here to join the Resistance and ended up doing so much, people never forgot about him. Some still nod to us when we pass them on the street, just because we're his children.“

„Not many of them do that nowadays but some still do, that's true enough,“ confirmed Ives.

„We weren't around yet, because he had us when he was in his sixties. Anyway, he took risks he might not have taken if he'd had family around. He loved Etretat and he wasn't going to see it destroyed. He was always putting his nose in places where it didn't belong. He knew the story about the accidental destruction of the fort was made up. The courts had swept it all under the rug, giving Old Man Vallin a mere slap on the wrist. And nobody suffered from the blowing up of that fort. It spelled the beginning of the good years for Etretat. Father figured someone in Etretat had paid Old Man Vallin to blow up the fort. Maybe paid the whole town to keep quiet. The question was who? If he could find that out, Father might get one step closer to figuring out who had killed Old Man Vallin. Unfortunately, if anyone knew, they weren't talking.“

Jacques' story was more than fascinating, it was revelatory! When my friends and I originally found out about the fort's destruction, we always assumed someone against Etretat had done it. Later, Hitler's appearance in our theories had provided a convenient contender for the position. Now we knew someone local ordered Old Man Vallin to blow it up. Its destruction had been meant as an act of protection, rather than one of destruction, to prevent others from getting into the caves.

Jacques continued.

„During the war, Father kept figured out some pretty interesting things, like the Ghost Germans during World War 2.“

„Yeah, the Ghost Germans. I really like this part, go on, Brother, tell them.“

„Hidden somewhere in Etretat, was an entire platoon of Germans. You never saw them, you never talked to them but they were there. Bequilles, Father's friend, told him their leader was someone called Weissmuller. The Ghost Germans were bringing in trucks filled with things, almost every night. Father learned they were unloading most of those trucks on top of the Aval cliff, right into the bunker built over the Fort of Frefosse. There were always a lot of guards around the bunker, making it impossible to get near. Father thought there was an entrance to some underground lair under that bunker. When Father finally got into it, after the Germans left, he found a freshly poured concrete floor. The Ghost Germans vanished, as if they had never been.

„When Father told his superiors about the tunnels he found, it was as if no one wanted to hear about them. They ordered Father to shut up, telling him the tunnels were part of a big secret and had to be kept quiet. When Father asked what the secret was, he was told very few people knew what it was. It was safer that way. They did tell him Old Man Vallin had acted out of loyalty. He had faced the consequences willingly and had been killed by an unknown enemy trying to steal the Secret. So Father got the answers he sought and found himself a new purpose in life: to keep a watchful eye on Etretat and to keep the Secret safe. When we were old enough, he swore us to secrecy and gave us the same task. Unfortunately, it was not enough. We still wanted to know who had killed Old Man Vallin,“ Jacques finished.

O'Flanahan and Briar connected up and I gave them a brief rundown of the latest.

„Absolutely phenomenal, my boy. I cannot believe how much you have learned in such a short time. Unfortunately, I have some rather disturbing news for you. Are you sitting down?“ asked Briar, an odd tone in his voice.

„Yes, I am. What’s up?“

„Perhaps you could put this on speaker, so everyone may hear. It’s too shocking to say it more than once. I can hardly believe it myself,“ Briar added.

Opening my laptop, I connected the audio feed to the speakers. Briar’s voice came on, sounding tinny, with occasional background noises, maybe cars.

„I’m sorry to be so mysterious but I think we have reached a turning point, by confirming this is no wild goose chase. However, we still had one massive question: what was the link between the Sirenes and the Leblancs? Well, I have figured out the connection.“

„Come on, Briar, stop patting yourself on the back and just tell us,“ interrupted O’Flanahan.

Ignoring him, Briar continued:

„When you found that copy of the Hollow Needle in Leblanc’s library, you gave me the clue we needed, Paul. Just like the note from your father’s book, it held a message intended for you. My attention was attracted by both Post-Scriptum. Yours was:

*A real story ends near Etretat
Lost until Paul infers new ideas subtly
You ought understand responsibility,
Necessarily after moiling Etretat
Your father,
Paul Sirenne*

while in Leblanc’s copy, it said:

*A real story ends near Etretat
Lost until Patrice infers new ideas subtly
Your friend
Paul Sirenne*

„The Post-Scriptum in each note differed subtly. Your father’s had two extra lines about responsibility. My question was why was it different? Also the wording seemed awkward. We had come across the same type of awkward wording before,“ continued Briar.

Raymonde interrupted:

„When we were in Perpignan, in Grandfather’s last apartment, the scratched words on the wall.“

„Quite right my dear, the scratched words on the wall. I asked myself if the PS could hold a code as well? If you remember, the scratched words one gave us the name Raymond Lindon. Why don’t you try and figure out what this code gives us.“

I assembled the first letter of each word.

„ARSENE LUPIN IS YOUR NAME. My great-grandfather was Arsene Lupin? It can't be, Lupin is not even real,“ I objected, amidst the excited voices of my friends.

„I thought the same thing, my boy. However, if you were to examine your own name, the one your family ensured you kept, you will discover the letters making up your name recombine into Arsene Lupin. Leblanc used the same trick repeatedly in his stories, creating endless anagrams. You are apparently the descendant of Arsene Lupin, a fictitious character who has just become very real indeed!“ he finished.

„This is too much, Briar,“ exclaimed O'Flanahan. „How could a fictitious character be Sirenne's ancestor?“

„There is only one possible answer to that. Arsene Lupin must be real,“ reasoned Briar.

„Hold on there,“ I argued. „There is no way the Lupin stories are real.“

Raymonde gazed at me in sympathy as Briar replied.

„You are correct, of course. Total invention, exactly like the Hollow Needle story, right? Perhaps Lupin represented a real person. I have read a few articles regarding this topic. Many names have been examined, like Marius Jacob, but none was ever determined to be a perfect match. It is likely the real Lupin was not like the fictional one.“

„Gee, that should make him easy to find,“ noted O'Flanahan, a tinge of sarcasm tainting his voice.

„Let's not forget Raymond Lindon wrote the book: »The Secret of the Kings of France, or the Real Identity of Arsene Lupin«. He obviously thought Lupin was real,“ Coulter added.

„This investigation has uncovered far more than expected and it is hitting very close to home, I'm afraid. We have not even opened the rock cylinder yet. Who knows what further revelations it may contain? Perhaps we should stop now,“ Briar warned.

„I appreciate your concern but I cannot. True, I'm shocked by what we have uncovered. However, our ancestors spent a great amount of effort preparing this and I am sure they did it for valid reasons. I will not turn away, no matters my fears or concerns. The Great Hunt will continue to its inevitable end, whatever that may be.“

„You have voiced what I felt in my heart.“ Raymonde added, holding my hand tightly. Despite the support, I was shaken to my core.

„This revelation is attempting to rewrite my very identity and I am impelled to repudiate it. I am not that man from long ago, a Lupin, if he even exists. I am Paul Sirenne; that is my name. Perhaps they used this trick to convince me I was involved. The letters of my great-grandfather's name may have been an anagram for Arsene Lupin but I am not that man. I never was and I never will be.“

Mrs Leblanc gave me a light hug in sympathy.

„Of course you're not, Paul. We know that. At least now you know you're not related to the Leblanc family, which would not have been good, considering your affection for my daughter.“

Her levity steadied me.

„Well, if you're all done spouting these grandiose issues, let's stop talking. Somebody open that cylinder, so we can get on with it!“ O'Flanahan blasted impatiently.

Ives got up, cradling the cylinder in his massive arms.

„Where should I put it?“ he asked.

I suggested we head out into the garden, where we could set up a table to work in the fresh air and in relative privacy.

* * * * *

Mrs Leblanc had draped a thick cloth over a folding card table, obtained from the Villa's basement. Ives Vallin carefully placed the cylinder in the centre of the small table, next to my laptop. Everyone was looking at the thick stone tube.

Coulter explained his progress:

„I've enhanced the object and was able to confirm it is indeed hollow. Best of all, there is something inside. One notable characteristic along the shaft is a single thick line carved around its centre. Here, at this end, opposite the snake carving, you can see a stone plug in the centre. What still escapes me is the method used to secure this plug.“

„Why don't you just admit you don't know how to open it,“ said O'Flanahan.

„Wait, wait, are the plug and the cylinder made of the same type of stone?“ Briar asked excitedly.

Using my glasses, I zoomed in on the rock. They were made of different stone. Briar grew more excited still:

„That plug is made of slate. The cylinder appears to be basaltic granite. If we heated...“

Ives Vallin was jumping up and down, a big smile on his face.

„I have an idea too, I have an idea. It's a good one, too. Brother, can I try it, please can I?“ he jabbered, hopping from foot to foot. I had trouble stopping a smile from appearing on my face. Jacques answered his brother sternly, like a father would.

„I don't know, Brother, It's not my decision to make. You should ask Mr Sirenne.“

The big Vallin turned his imploring face towards, removing his beret. He held it in his hands, clasped in supplication.

„Mr Sirenne, I just need a little thing from the truck. It'll only take a minute, can I go get it? I know it'll work, I just know it.“

I could not refuse. I nodded and he took off running. No sooner was he gone that Briar re-asserted himself:

„Gentlemen, let's not be hasty. The plug is made of slate. If heated, slate will fragment and crack, since Petroleum is one of its components. You could place the plug over a controlled source of heat, like a propane torch. The plug should eventually crack into smaller pieces.“

„Briar, your idea is completely ridiculous. There could be paper in there, old, dry paper. it would burn up with the plug? Seems like a bad idea,“ O'Flanahan argued.

Before Briar could voice an objection, Ives Vallin returned, breathing hard, his hair wildly out of place from his race to the truck. He lifted the stone cylinder and

overturned it, laying it down on its side. Jacques, knowing his brother's moods, tried asking a question but Ives beat him to the punch:

„Watch this!“ he exclaimed.

He lifted a long-handled five-kilo hammer up into the air, handling it as if it were a toothpick. I heard Mrs Leblanc's sharp intake of a breath. Briar screamed in my ear:

„Wait, stop, we can burn...“

I barely had time to grab the laptop before the hammer came down, smashing the cylinder right in the middle! The poor card table was simply not able to deal with the massive blow and collapsed in two, crashing to the ground and taking the cylinder with it.

I sat there, stunned, as the dust settled from the tremendous impact. Jacques Vallin was the first to recover, jumping up in rage and smacking his brother on the head, completely forgetting about his previous head injury. Ives clasped his head in pain as Jacques screamed.

„You idiot. I keep telling you. Wait until we've talked before acting, Brother. You have to wait.“

„No, Hold on there, Jacques, you're being unfair. Look at the cylinder,“ Raymonde said.

There, in the wreck of the card table, lay the cylinder, broken into two equal pieces, an ancient sheaf of papers, wrapped in oilcloth, spilling out of it. Ives' face broke into a wide smile and he exclaimed:

„See, See, Brother, I was right after all.“

Setting the laptop down on an empty chair, I gave Ives a light slap on the back.

„Good job, Ives, good job!“

He beamed, overjoyed. I gently pulled the sheaf of papers from the broken cylinder. It was roughly rolled up, tied with rotting string. Opening it carefully, I revealed a neat, clean handwriting.

Leblanc's Journal!

* * * * *

Another round of coffee and tea had been served. Ives had the chance to explain. He spoke slowly, trying to say it properly.

„It was the shape, that's what it was. When Brother was speaking, I was looking at the cylinder and it made me think of a spool. It was narrower in the center, with a thick line circling the cylinder. If I was to hit it in the middle with my best hammer, it should crack right along that line.“

It seemed obvious in hindsight. The cylinder was meant to be broken. We had over-complicated the whole thing. There was a slight tension in the air, everyone wondering what we should next.

„The thing we set out to find is finally ours: Leblanc's journal. If you are willing, I will read his journal out loud, so we may all discover what he wanted us to learn.“

MY FINAL STORY

By Maurice Leblanc

Patrice:

I have just left my beloved Etretat. All its wonders and its secrets, gone, just like that. I am sure I will never see it again. This is a one way trip. Always has been, I would venture to say. Somehow, my trip has been rather more adventurous than most. Overall, I would have preferred a calmer life.

I can only hope, when this horrendous burden is finally exposed, my peers will judge me more favourably than I have judged myself. By this point, I have done everything in my power, to put things right. I probably will never know if my trap will work, if the monster will fall for so vain a ploy, but I must believe in its success. The alternative is unthinkable.

I am writing this journal, this confession, my son, hoping that, by presenting my view, by telling you how events unfolded, I can explain my shortcomings through these meagre words. Normally a story like this would start at the beginning but for you to have found this text, certain things must already be known. Therefore, the starting point of my adventure has to be the day when I received the letter. If you will allow me, I will relate to you the events, which have led me, step by step, to this very moment, forced to run away from my beloved home in fear and desperation.

ERGO

The Letter and the Man Who Wrote It.

The letter was in German, which was intriguing, because this letter's author, Hister, had to know I was not fluent in German, making the letter an arrogant act. By pure coincidence, I had recently finished working with Germany to publish my latest novel. As a result, I was sufficiently acquainted with the language to translate the letter.

He wanted to meet in order to discuss certain things about my book, *The Hollow Needle*. His letter stated he had found archaeological evidence which indicated there was something more to my novel than fiction. Many are the times I have cursed myself for writing that story. If I had only known, back then, the truth behind Etretat's legends, I would never have drawn attention to it in so obvious a fashion. Yet, in my defence, what I had done in *The Hollow Needle* was the same process I used in my previous book and all the others since. No other person had ever noticed what I built into the stories.

Hister was the only one.

However, for the letter to arrive at the exact time when my own research was finally giving me some results, now that was a wonder. It was this coincidence which drove me to reply, not to accept his query but to refuse it, which I did in no uncertain terms, given the rudimentary grasp I had of his language.

He must have felt my negative response was too strong, that I was hiding something. It is the only possibility which would explain why he came despite my refusal. Up to this point I had pursued my research in absolute secrecy,

hiding my activities with feigned illness. While people thought I was convalescing in bed, I was wandering the hillsides, in search of the secret Cochet had alluded to.

I met the priest Cochet only once but what a meeting it was. There was no mistaking our like minds, the connection immediate. I was very young, full of energy, feeling like the world was mine to seize. He was an older, more introspective man. The wisdom of those years had enabled his search for the hidden jewel in Etretat. He explained the original purpose of the tunnels. I had known about them but had not realised their true significance. We discussed the excavations and his discoveries, in particular the ones he kept to himself. He knew his time was limited on this earthly plane and desperately needed a successor to carry on his search, someone equal to the task, capable of life-long secrecy. His friends, Monseigneur Billard, Father Gelis and Father Boudet each suggested this research was not a waste of time. Rather the opposite, in fact.

That meeting, so long ago, seeded a purpose in me. It kept growing until it blossomed into obsession. I wrote a fictional story around it, as others had done before, and, in my folly, included the Fort of Frefosse. It was inevitable it be mentioned but, by attracting attention to it, I put in motion events that would involve the entire world.

For it was the fort that was the key, of this I was certain.

I had recently gone visiting the Royal Library to examine ancient documents concerning the Fort of Frefosse. It was there I found the plans for the fort, as presented to Francis the First by Guillaume Bude. It was there I saw the original overview of the dungeon, that I understood the geometric symbols on the walls. I drew them on the plan, circle, rectangle, triangle. So simple.

I made the decision to remove this drawing. I could not bring myself to destroy it, so placed it in a file of similar architectural drawings, hiding it in plain sight, my favourite trick. I returned home in exultation, to be confronted by Johann Hister's letter, threatening to expose everything.

That was my state of mind when I sent my response. I wrote quickly, reacting harshly, instead of using the usual caution and care. That was my mistake and I admit it here freely, Patrice. There is no denying it. Because, he came.

He arrived, one early morning, while I was examining the fort from the outside, calculating its original size, to discover the exact position of the dungeon. A noise startled me. I turned to find a young man looking at me. Despite his unremarkable appearance, being slight physically, he exuded an arrogant confidence. I felt instantly repelled by him.

Nodding perfunctorily to the stranger, I walked away, as if I were done with my work and leaving. He stopped me with a sudden hand gesture and spoke haltingly, in badly accented French:

„I am Johann Hister. Sorry to have come. But must talk.“

The intensity in his eyes was one I had not seen in a long time, not since I had met the Priest Cochet. Unlike Cochet, I distrusted this Johann Hister.

His being here at this specific time made me distinctly uncomfortable. I had kept my own counsel to that point and still believed that was my best, and only, course of action. I reacted angrily, screaming, gesturing for him to leave. He tried to talk again. I remained obstinate, ignoring his attempts. He grew red-faced, letting go a jet of injurious German insults. In his outburst, I saw a gleam of such cold hatred, such malevolence, I became afraid he would do me physical harm. I braced for such an assault but it never came. Instead, he left without another word, glaring until he turned away. I stopped my work for the day and returned home.

I had been unnerved by the timing of Hister's appearance because I now was convinced I had found the entranceway of the cave system. It was in the dungeon, of this I was positive. Not in the dungeon of today, however. That was nothing but a converted wine cellar, yet another false trail. My research determined the real dungeon entrance had been bricked up long ago.

There was an exterior door accessing the servant's quarters from the courtyard. This door led to an extremely curious feature: a sudden turn in the corridor, the purpose of which was not evident from the building's architecture. Closer examination revealed expert brickwork had been done at this turning point.

I was convinced this was the way to the ancient dungeon. Despite my concerns about Johann Hister, I returned the next day with tools, determined to get out of sight before spying eyes could notice my presence. Earlier that year, I had rented the fort through a third party, an expensive thing to do at the time but necessary to keep things quiet.

A pickaxe served me well to remove the bricks. Within four hours, I broke through the thick wall and flashed my lantern into the hole, seeing a long dusty hallway with a descending staircase at its end. I redoubled my energy and soon cleared a hole big enough to crawl to the other side. Carrying a small shovel, my lantern, and a spare candle in my back pocket, I headed along the dark, echoing hallway.

It was utterly devoid of any feature, solidly built of large stone blocks. Dust caked the floor and made me cough. I walked slowly, approaching the staircase. Halfway there, I saw an oddly shaped doorway on my right, leading to a narrow staircase, its upper landing lost in the darkness. The odd, oblique construction implied it was a secret passage, probably leading to a camouflaged entrance in some room upstairs. An alternate access point might explain the bricked-up corridor.

Returning to the corridor, I continued my way to the end. This slightly curving staircase was much older than the other one. Its steps, carved from the bedrock, were deeply worn. Descending past the foundations of the fort, I noticed various rock strata in the ceiling above my head, with a layer of crumbly stone in the centre. Rock dust littered the floor, evidence of continuing disintegration. SUM

Reaching the bottom of the staircase, I entered a round room. There was little evidence of it ever being a dungeon. More of a storeroom, perhaps. It was large and circular, ten metres in diameter, with five columns supporting the

vaulted ceiling. The columns dissected the room, placed like the five points of a star.

Using the small shovel as a broom, I carefully swept the dust out of the way. Standing back, I examined the columns, looking for geometric symbols. I saw the circle first, carved at head height in the column to the left of the entrance. The one opposite that, to the right of the entrance, bore a rectangle. Bringing my eyes back to the left again, I saw a triangle on the next column. Exactly as anticipated.

The final two columns had geometric designs, instead of simple symbols. One was a rectangle lying down inside a triangle. The last column, opposite the dungeon's entrance, had three triangles next to each other, the middle one slightly elevated above the other two. It was a code.

Solving the Riddle

The original Roman fort had once been much bigger and heavily fortified. During the Francis years, its shape had been refined, due to Francis' burgeoning interest in architecture. At the time, the fort's original location had seemed to be a most curious choice. I had gone to Rome to search for documents concerning this, which had led me to the crypts of the Vatican. Through special dispensation, I was allowed to peruse ancient Roman letters and documents. I found one in which approval for a fort was being requested. This letter was from a *legatus legionis* named Manius Stertinius Gallicus, the man in charge of the local garrison. Using this information as a starting point, I came to believe another element had been involved: smugglers!

While exploring the town of Etretat, I had found a corner stone on one of the oldest buildings, which was obtained from the fort after a change in its layout. To my surprise and great interest, I noticed three geometrical shapes roughly carved into the stone. A circle with a rectangle and triangle inside. To the untrained eye, it looked like a childish drawing of a house.

However, previous research indicated this to be a smuggler's sign. Located at the Fort of Frefosse, it had shown the way to the secret entrance of a smuggler's lair unlike any other in history. In addition, through Cochet, I knew secret tunnels ran through those cliffs. What more proof did I need?

Returning my attention to the columns, I played with possible combinations of the geometrical shapes, hoping to unlock the hidden doorway which had to be there. The smuggler's sign had shown a rectangle and triangle inside a circle. The circle was easy, as the room itself was circular. I noticed the columns were oddly positioned, not equidistant from each other. Perhaps they had some other, less obvious purpose.

Connecting four of the columns with straight, imaginary lines, I visualised a simple rectangle, mentally adding a triangle above the rectangle, with the fifth column as its top point, exactly the design I had seen carved on the corner stone. The resulting triangle, short and long, outlined an area on the floor.

This was exactly the same triangle shape as that on the fourth column. Visualizing a smaller rectangle inside this triangle, I realised this would create

three triangles, one above the other two, the same design carved on the fifth column. Looking closer at the dungeon floor, I saw thin lines duplicating this design, unnoticed before, hidden in the complex tile patterns. That was the clue I needed. I rolled a large heavy barrel onto the triangle to my right and stood on the left one.

There was an audible *CLICK* as soon as my weight pressed down on the triangle. I noticed the column beneath the ceiling line had moved into the wall. Reaching out, I pushed on it. It swung in, smoothly and silently. It was not a column; it was a door! Lupin would have been proud of me. My excitement could not have been more intense. After all these years, I had finally found the entrance to the caves beneath the fort.

I heard a sound behind me, something like a choked cough. Covering my lantern, I stood still in the dark, listening for the slightest noise. After several minutes of total silence, I relaxed my vigilance and walked through the revealed doorway, finding a curving staircase. I descended, my footsteps echoing hollowly. I soon reached bottom, a natural stone landing. Raising the lantern, I illuminated a large chamber, with openings in the distance, leading to further caves. A clutter of broken amphorae littered one corner. Further to my right, a long hallway headed off into the darkness. I wandered along the corridor for about ten metres when a gleam caught my eye, a reflection of light from the right.

I quickly ascertained I was looking at a narrow opening in the wall. Squeezing in, I found myself in a small room, about three metres square. There was a crack in the far wall. The bright gleam had come from there. I walked over to it but stopped when I heard another noise. Turning around, I saw something indistinct coming down. I dodged the oncoming object as best I could but received a staggering blow nonetheless. I fell to the ground hard, a cloud of dust all around, my eyesight fading in and out.

Although everything was a blur and fading fast, I recognised Hister's slight silhouette in the light cast by my lantern, holding my shovel high in the air. His illuminated face held a terrible rictus of hatred. He hit me again, after which, I knew no more!

The Treachery of Johann Hister

I woke in the dark. My head was pounding terribly and I was choking from the thick dust. I had been the victim of foul play. Hister had hit me from behind. Judging by the feel of the large gash on my head, he had probably thought me dead or dying. I certainly felt near death. The air was stuffy and hot, lacking oxygen.

I could see nothing and felt around for the lantern, growing panicky. My senses slowly returning, I remembered the spare candle I had stuffed in my back pocket. Finding it, I fished around my jacket for the small packet of matches I always kept there.

I felt such thankfulness for that small flame it could hardly be believed. I quickly put it to the wick of the candle and light sprang forth, although not as brightly as I had hoped, lacking sufficient air for a proper flame. Despite the

dim light, I noted the crack with the bright gleam from before, was now a large gaping hole, revealing a stone recess. It had been hidden by a cleverly applied coat of painted plaster on a fitted wooden frame. Over the centuries, the plaster had dried out, falling away in places, revealing the natural shelf behind it. Something had been hidden in there.

It was now gone, surely stolen by that murderous Hister. Examining the recess, I found a small sack, in the deepest part. Pulling it out, the rotten cloth ripped, spilling out a handful of gold coins. I had been fooled and nearly killed by a thief.

With a sigh and a groan, I stood up and walked unsteadily out of the small chamber, my legs feeling like bars of Indian rubber. I headed toward the entrance staircase, breathing heavily in the stuffy air, and protecting the tiny, naked candle flame with my hand. I reached the column door quickly but found it closed. Despite pulling and prodding, I simply could not get it open again. Desperate, I returned to the great cave below.

I knew my candle would not last forever and I had no other. My pounding head and a weak feeling in my limbs told me I had other things to worry about. I saw several openings into a maze of other caverns. It would be easy to get lost in here. Looking at the ground, I found a piece of chalk. Scratching it on the wall provided me with a method to mark my passage.

I entered the first cave to my left but left right away, as it had no other exits. I saw rotting bags on the ground, which held ancient grain. All around, items lay about, a small casket, wine bottles, rum, statues, yet all I could think of was freedom. I had yearned to find this place my entire life. Now my every thought was to leave.

I heard the sound of water on my right and could smell it as well, salty and damp, giving hope a way to the channel could be found. I followed the smell, noting the floor was worn by the passage of countless feet. The size of the complex was incredible. Each cave had treasures to reveal. After a long way down, I arrived at an underground lake. Its brackish water suggested it might have an opening to the channel, although I could not see one. Feeling increasingly unwell, I staggered back the way I came. I noticed the worn steps forked into two separate trails. Choosing the left one, I found a round tunnel lined with ancient bricks.

It was too late to turn back; I had to go this way. My senses were fading in and out. I walked through water, then waded. My candle was growing dim and I was feeling dizzy, having to rest every few steps. When I arrived at a dead end, I truly despaired.

On the left, a narrow tunnel lay hidden in the shadows. I could barely fit through it. At its end, I found a stone doorway, large stone pins holding it in place, with a bar sticking out from the wall. Playing with the bar with my waning strength, I was able to push it upwards. The door opened and I fell through its opening.

I knew where I was: this was one of the cliff tunnels mentioned by the priest Cochet, located under the Amont Cliff. I could make out a faint dot of light at its end. The timing could not be better, as both my candle and I were on our last legs. Unfortunately, my tribulations were not over. When I arrived

at the end, I found myself about seven metres in the air. The cliff had eroded away, removing the last few metres of tunnel. There was no choice but to hang down and let myself fall.

I fell badly, twisting my ankle and knocking myself out on the rocks below. When I came to, I was in the house of Old Man Vallin.

By writing down these words, I have been reminded of the turmoil of those times, so long ago. The intervening years had softened the impact of those events. While I cannot fault any specific decision I made, it all went astray, no matter what I did. Painful as it may be to retrace my footsteps, I must continue, for this was just the beginning. My adventures were far from over.

An Unexpected Friendship

When I woke up, I was lying on a cot and covered by an old smelly blanket. There was something tightly wrapped over my head, which was throbbing. My ordeal suddenly came back and I sat up. A strong wave of dizziness hit me. A hand on my shoulder steadied me and, in that way, I became aware I was not alone in the room.

Sitting in a tattered chair next to the cot, was an old man, his face wrinkled and covered with a three-day-old beard. The sour odour of whisky emanated from him. When his face broke into a concerned smile, I understood he meant no harm. He had been combing the beach when I fell onto the rocks about sixty metres away. He had dragged me to his cart and placed me in the back, covering me with a few potato sacks to keep me warm. He brought me back to his home and tended to my wounds. I had been unconscious for more than a day.

While I rested, he told me about himself. He admitted being a poacher but he was still a proud man with strong morals, having fallen on hard times. I asked him why he had not simply returned me home. He replied he had seen me often, sneaking about the hills and cliffs of Etretat, when common talk said I was sick and resting at home. Suspecting I wanted to keep my activities under wraps, he had kept my accident quiet. It took another day before I was able to summon enough strength to return home. I was sure my wife would be worried about my unexplained absence.

Surprisingly, during these few days of rest, a strong friendship was forged with Old Man Vallin. It was as unlikely a friendship as it was timely.

I had shared my discovery with him, knowing instinctively he could be trusted. I desperately needed a friend as well as help in dealing with this terrible turn of events. I had uncovered the secret of Etretat, only to inadvertently reveal it to the would-be murderer, Johann Hister. He had already plundered some of the cave's treasures and I was convinced he would come back for more.

The more time passed, the more I grew concerned about the implications of my discovery. This cave held incredible treasures, many of them historical in nature. Premature release of its discovery would attract treasure hunters of the worst sort. I need only refer to Hister for proof of this assertion. Whatever

the caves contained would vanish in the night. France would be robbed of its heritage before it even learned of it.

Hister had planned his assault long before I had even entered the cave. He had waited for the best moment to catch me unaware. Luckily, his vicious blows had not succeeded. However, my personal fate paled into insignificance. A murderous thief now knew the way into the caves.

It was my responsibility, my duty, to right this wrong. Old Man Vallin swore to help me. I arranged to meet him in a few days in order to return to the fort. In the meantime, Vallin would contact some of his friends, to keep an eye out for suspicious strangers about town. If Hister was still in the area, he would be found and dealt with.

Vallin arrived at the fort, a shotgun cradled in his arms. He considered this situation as seriously as I did. Walking into the servant's corridor, I found all evidence of my previous presence erased. The wall had been rebuilt; there was no sign of the wheelbarrow, or of my tools. Hister had taken his time before vanishing into the night. He must have thought me truly dead.

We broke through the wall easily, as I knew exactly where to hit. Soon after, Old Man Vallin and I arrived in the dungeon. To my relief, the column opened as before. With the stronger light from the miner's hat, it was easy to see why I had been unable to open the door when stuck inside the caves. The lack of light from my candle had prevented me from noticing the long rods of stone used as locks.

I have long felt foolish for having been so close to the way out, yet not finding it. Of course, had I done so, it is likely I would have encountered Hister bricking the wall back up. In my weakened state, I would not have stood a chance against him.

We became aware of an inexplicable glowing of the walls when fresh air entered into the long sealed room but it faded after we closed the door behind us. I was not sure what to think of the phenomena. It was transient and we had other things on our minds.

Without a word, we went down the curving staircase, reaching the main chamber and headed into the impressive long hallway. Entering into the small chamber again, I found my small shovel on the ground, noting a dark stain on its edge and a large pool of drying blood on the ground. My blood. It had been a close thing.

Leaving the chamber, we saw paintings on the wall, high up and to the left side. They were magnificent, prehistoric drawings of animals, with groups of hunters dancing around them. We saw evidence of ancient fires in another corner, surrounded by piles of flint flakes.

Everywhere I looked, I saw evidence of Roman presence. There were column supports shoring up weaker parts of the cave roof. I saw niches, carved at regular intervals into the tunnel walls, which must have held skeletons at some point. Stone stairs had been installed in many areas where the cave floor fell away too sharply.

The geological features of the cave implied water had been the original creator of this complex. However, the sheer multitude of interconnected caves implied a latticework of cracks must have existed before any water got in here.

French workers had also been here, confirming Francis' discovery of the caves during his renovations of the fort. He must have been the one who ordered the sealing up of the dungeon access. We found one large chamber transformed into a grand reception hall, with tapestries hanging on every wall. The floor was worn smooth and hard. Two large chandeliers hung from ancient chains. At the end of the room, a large chair was positioned on a raised platform, looking like a throne. Everything was highly ornate, intended to impress royalty.

Going on, we chose the tunnel leading to the large body of brackish water. With the brighter light of our miner's hat, we were able to appreciate the true size of this particular cave. It was big enough to hold a small lake. Looking at the roof, we saw a dip in the northern direction that might form a large tunnel to the open sea. However, no light came from there. Whatever had existed before was now collapsed.

Retracing our steps, we came upon the trail where I had changed direction. I had been in a bad state when I last staggered through here and had missed much, my concern being survival rather than discovery.

We undertook the journey, our eyes alert. About halfway through, deep under Etretat, we saw a tunnel fork away to the right but ignored it for the moment. Eventually we reached the small cave, carved into the side of the tunnel. Its entrance was cleverly positioned, which might explain why I had such trouble locating it in the first place. Stored inside, we found our first real treasure.

A corner of the small room had a collapsed, plaster-covered cache, similar to the one plundered by Hister, only this one was still stuffed full of rotting leather bags, each holding either precious stones or gold and silver coins. A heavy, hinged box, forced into the narrowest part of the crevice, held various gold objects, looking like the spoils of theft or piracy. A smaller box held a variety of ancient gold rings. Our excitement was palpable.

I filled our food basket with as many leather sacks as I could carry. Before leaving the small cave, I reiterated what might happen to Etretat if it were ever known what riches lay hidden here. Old Man Vallin spit in his hand and shook mine. Looking straight into my eyes, he held up his other hand, folding in his two middle fingers, leaving the outside ones extended. He held it against his chest, waiting for me to do the same. Then, we swore a solemn oath to secrecy.

We would use these riches to protect the caves. Vallin took a single coin to remind him of his oath. He was to receive further payment later on. We left the room and followed the tunnel to its end, where the stone door lay in wait. I had been frantic for sunlight when I arrived here before. This time, we went the other way to see where it might lead us.

After a long walk along the dark tunnel, we found ourselves going uphill until we reached the end of the tunnel, exiting into a small wooded glade.

Seeing a building nearby, I recognised the restaurant known as »the Dungeon«, a name that flew in the face of coincidence. We had travelled an incredibly long way, coming out on the other side of Etretat.

Our travels had also left us with a fantastic revelation: we now had another way into the caves!

A Decision is Reached

Later that evening, we reviewed the day. We were stunned by the size of the cave system and by the magnitude of what lay hidden there. I was also singularly conscious there was another man out there who knew of the caves. Although I hoped I had seen the last of Hister, deep down, I knew he would return.

It was Vallin who came up with the most logical solution. We were the only ones who knew of the second entrance to the caves. Even if someone were able to find their way into the tunnel in the glade, they would never find the hidden doorway that led under Etretat. If we were to destroy the original entrance, Hister would never be able to find his way in again.

It was a good suggestion but could we be so bold? To destroy the Fort of Frefosse, a veritable landmark in Etretat? Since this act could not be hidden, it would be done in plain sight. Vallin had a working knowledge of explosives, sufficient to ensure the complete obliteration of the dungeon. He felt confident he could come up with a sufficiently convincing cover story, given his existing reputation. I would remain in the background, using my influence and our newfound funds to protect him from the legal repercussions. We were in agreement.

That is how we arrived at the inconceivable but necessary decision of blowing up the Fort of Frefosse. All through this journal, I have shown you how each decision led to the other, linking into an inevitable chain of events. We had no other choice!

A Friend is Contacted

It took only a few days to get ready, with Old Man Vallin pestering the local militia effectively, preparing to carry out our carefully laid plans. As for myself, I knew I had to enlist the help of yet another in our plans. I had long thought about this step, because it would involve someone who already had a dangerous reputation. Despite my concerns about the outcome, I sent a message along the usual route, through Raymond Lindon, asking A.L. to come and meet me, on the following evening.

Now, I know what you're thinking, Patrice, so let me put a few things to rest. Yes, my character was based on a real person. He is not much like my creation but he is a man of high intellect and of immense resources. Because of his desire for anonymity, I will not name him, even here. I will simply refer to him as A.L.

He arrived on time, using the small gate door to which only he had the key. We had shared more than one adventure. In the course of our time spent together, we had cemented a friendship, despite our differing viewpoints. After the usual small talk and tea, I explained why I had asked him here. The look on his face was priceless, when I revealed my investigation, the danger I had been in, and then, my discoveries. He laughed in delight when I explained how I had solved the mechanism of the dungeon door.

However, he became thoughtful when I explained our planned solution, the destruction of the fort itself. He thought deeply for a while then nodded, directing me to contact Raymond Lindon again and to engage his services. We could trust Lindon and he was perfectly placed to assist us with the repercussions of Vallin's plan. Accustomed to money and high society since his early years, due to his affiliations with A.L., Lindon had chosen to devote himself to legal studies. Gifted with a keen intellect, Lindon already had many connections to men of power and the maturity to know when to use these connections.

The next morning, I went to see Lindon, who had already been briefed about the situation. A.L. certainly acted fast. Lindon had drafted a more complete version of events. He knew of a company anxious to purchase the fort property in order to open a golf resort. It was an impossible request because Etretat's inhabitants would never acquiesce to the fort's removal. Anticipating the fallout from our plans once the fort was destroyed, Lindon felt he could obtain economic and public support from them, which would help smooth over the problems for Vallin.

I was impressed by Lindon and retained him as my advisor on the spot. He became my friend and my right hand man in a secret battle that was to last for more than thirty years.

The Die is Cast

Inevitably, a date was set. I was jittery throughout that fateful day and, when the explosion finally happened, it was more of a relief than anything else. Many thought there had been an earthquake, until the news reached them. The incident flooded the local papers and Old Man Vallin had a pretty rough time at first. He bore it well, with honour and silence.

Lindon was in the background through it all. He hired the lawyer who defended Vallin, supporting the accidental nature of the fort's destruction. It did not hurt that Lindon knew the judge personally and had met with him privately the previous evening.

Vallin was found innocent of wrongdoing, receiving a mild slap on the hands, and was sent on his way. Rumours abounded but, with the judgement passed, little could be done. Events returned to normal. It was the calm before the storm.

Murder is done

It happened on a Friday evening, late in the night. A horrible scream was heard by Mr Lanoix around midnight. The state of Vallin's body, when he was found, was frightful. He had been severely beaten, tortured for hours before his death. He was thrown, barely alive, down into the jumble of stones, all that remained of the fort, left to die, stuck between two jagged boulders.

Lindon was able to view the body discreetly. Old Man Vallin's last act was to clench his hand against his chest, with the two middle fingers folded in. That act could have but one meaning for me. He had died without revealing the existence of the second entrance. It also meant someone had tried to get him to reveal that information before killing him. There could only be one such man.

This is when I first felt the weight of the enormous burden of guilt, which I have shouldered since. We had decided together to blow up the fort but it was Vallin who took the blame. Now, because of his decision, he was dead!

Vallin had left behind a son, who knew nothing of his father's recent actions. After a brief talk with Lindon, we decided to keep the son in the dark. However, in the following years, I kept tabs on his family and arranged to have money anonymously mailed to them, to help during difficult financial times. It was the least my conscience would allow me to do.

After Vallin's death, both Lindon and I kept close counsel indeed. We felt besieged by an invisible villain, looking for a way to get at us and to the treasure in the caves. Lindon contacted many friends and created a string of watchers all around Etretat. No stranger could enter our small valley without being seen. It was through this growing *net* that we learned of Hister's next foray into our territory.

World War 1 had begun by then and I was often called away to fulfill the growing obligations of my chosen public profession. Lindon was also growing in fame but it was of a different sort, found in the court of law. I had long since moved my wife from Etretat to Paris, choosing to use the Villa only as a summer residence. I often returned there alone, to conduct more research into the caves.

War is Declared

It was during one of these visits that Hister attacked us. I always took the precaution of informing Lindon when I arrived in town and he would contact the Net, placing them at the highest alert.

I was at my summer villa, sitting in the office, when I heard a knock at the door. Three large men confronted me, men I knew to be employed by Lindon. They were apologetic for the late hour but something was going on. A motorcycle had been heard in the distance. Following that, two men wearing German uniforms were seen, prowling past the homes in the north. They were staying off the main roads but had been seen nonetheless.

I armed myself and lay down in wait with my companions. My nerves were stretched to the breaking point. Violence had never been my cup of tea, yet

here I was, being thrust into the thick of it. I had no one else to blame, it was my own doing. At two in the morning, I heard some shots far away in the distance then, later, more shots followed by screams. Following that, I heard the faint sounds of a motorcycle leaving the area at high speed.

Lindon was at my door the next morning, a sombre look on his face. Two of our men had been killed. The attackers had come prepared. They were skilful and had been well armed. From the description of the assailants, one had probably been Hister and the other, an unknown, taller man.

We compensated the families monetarily but it was not enough for my conscience. My burden of guilt continued to grow. Although our country was in a state of war, there was another war going on, a hidden one, between Hister and myself. Both sides had funds, coming from the same source, the caves. Hister's funds may have been stolen but the wealth was real nonetheless.

This first attack had likely been intended as a foray: they came, found us prepared and were repulsed. However, they had killed and escaped unharmed. They now knew we were waiting for them. They also had to know I was still alive and that Hister's attempted cover-up had failed.

I now understood the first strike of this hidden war had been his letter. Hister always intended to take whatever it was he found, by force or treachery. He knew what he was looking for and he was not going to stop until he got it. The only problem was me, standing in his way.

We were engaged in a war to the death, hidden in the shadows. Those who helped me believed in what they were doing, protecting their land from these invaders. Over the succeeding years, this group of people, »The Net«, took pride in this heritage. They would die protecting it, protecting me.

With each subsequent visit, it became apparent the caves held much more than treasure. They caves had been occupied for thousands of years, used for ancient ceremonies and for ritual sacrifice. I had barely begun to plumb their depths. They went on for tremendous distances, deep into the bedrock. Each new cave we found was filled with yet more mysterious relics. They had to be protected!

The Net Suffers a Blow

Hister's second attack, a full year later, was nothing like the first one. He came on the sly, accompanied by the same man as before. They moved silently through the night, a stormy one, easy to hide in. They killed with knives and without conscience. They had come prepared, having identified several members of the Net, brutally killing them and their entire families. Their grisly task completed, they invaded my Villa unnoticed, made their way to my room, stabbing my sleeping body three times in the chest.

However, it was not me. It was another member of the Net, Claude Gislain, who was of my size and appearance. I had thought the precaution excessive when Lindon suggested it. Hister left Etretat, convinced he had succeeded in

his goals. They were careless only for a single moment upon exiting the Villa. A sudden lightning strike revealed them to the neighbour's watchful eye.

A general alarm was sounded. Every road was blocked and the two murderous fiends were trapped in the Etretat Valley. Horrified by what they had done, we wanted revenge. Everyone was up and part of the chase, a large group searching the valley, house by house. Etretat was now truly at war!

We felt sure they were trapped but our enemies had anticipated our every move. Abandoning all attempts at subtlety, using a machine gun, they mowed down several men blocking a road, making a run for the weakest part of our line. Once they were past the crest of the valley, they were gone, leaving a veritable massacre behind.

They killed more than thirty people that night. We held a meeting with everyone involved and it was agreed, once again, to keep the event a secret, despite our sorrow and horror at the unexpected carnage of our loved ones. The bodies were buried, the deaths listed as accidents, or from natural causes. Every house was cleaned up and Etretat returned to its defensive position, licking its wounds, determined to win out in the end.

The interlopers' attack had been too precise, too specific. They knew exactly where and who everyone was. Only Lindon's thoroughness had saved me. Hister's first foray had taught them as well as us. I'm sure his face was crestfallen when he learned I was still alive and unharmed after stabbing me three times. My heart ached for Claude Gislain, who paid the real price for Hister's treachery.

Much time had passed between attacks. Perhaps it was difficult for Hister to get here. When the Germans made further inroads into France, dispatch riders were used to bring crucial information from command to outpost. Some of these dispatch riders travelled near here. If Hister was a German soldier, his furtive attacks might have been carried out under the cover of genuine orders.

I became convinced this was the truth of it. After all, he had been in uniform during his forays. Hister was using the Great War as cover for his own twisted plans, trying to sneak back in here and take possession of the caves and their loot. He had enlisted a helper, as I had, but his was a most deadly helper. Whereas I employed farmers and fishermen, Hister's helper was a trained killer.

Because of these two attacks, Etretat separated from the rest of France, becoming a country unto itself, alert for any attack, protecting its own, ever vigilant. The Net never had more meaning than during those days. Yet, on the surface, to all others, Etretat was a quiet little fishing village, with healthy tourism, a peaceful resort, the exact opposite of what lay hidden below.

Hister's third and final foray was an equal measure of success and failure. By that point, The Net had refined its methods, using affiliations with other groups, such as the Abbey, to provide advance notice. As a result, Hister's invasion attempt was detected from the very first moment. A contingent of armed men was alerted within minutes. Before Hister and his cohort had penetrated more than a hundred metres into the valley, the Net was already closing in. Our enemies, sharp as ever, retreated immediately, knowing the

game was up. Several volleys of shots followed them on their way out and at least one found its mark, wounding Hister in the leg!

There was a celebration in Etretat that night. In the morning, we were back at our posts, waiting for the next attack.

That attack took twenty years to come and was the most horrible thing ever perpetrated by a single man in the history of the world!

Caves, Tunnels and Destiny

I continued my exploration of the caves, converting more treasure into a growing fund. A.L. was my partner more than once in these cave expeditions. The more we found, the more convinced we were the caves must remain unknown to the world at large. Some knowledge ought never be revealed.

Despite the passage of many quiet years, I was always convinced Hister would return. I could not explain his long absence. Perhaps life had gotten in his way. Perhaps his goals had changed. However, in my heart, I knew he would return here one day, to claim what he felt was his.

While he might have coveted the caves, they were in my possession. I had hidden the way in and he was effectively locked out, thanks to the Net. It was a responsibility I took seriously. I purchased the Villa I loved so much and began construction on a concealed tunnel of my own, connecting it to the tunnel under Etretat. It was an ambitious project but some of the work had already been done long ago.

The long tunnel connecting the two cliffs together had a branch heading east, in the general direction of my Villa. It went for a distance of almost two hundred metres before stopping. Ancient tools were found abandoned as well as several skeletons, killed in the tunnels thousands of years ago.

Whatever the reason for the tunnel, it saved us weeks of work, allowing us to begin and finish the remaining section of the tunnel in less than three months. Once completed, I could enter the tunnel and access the caves from the safety of my villa.

More than ever, I felt the caves were truly a burden. I was held in thrall by them as much as Hister was, though I was not motivated by selfish greed. Men of destiny are not those who go out and take what they want, riding roughshod over their victims. No, true destiny is foisted on the average man, despite what he wants. He finds himself the plaything of fate, without having had any such intent.

The caves had chosen me. It was up to me to decide what must be done with them. The choice I ended up making altered the course of world history, as Hister marched on to his destiny, equally controlled by the caves.

A while has passed since my last entry. Victoire and Angelique are safe. They will be cared for, no matter what happens. I have arranged it. As for me, Patrice, it is the end. I fell ill on the way to Perpignan and my old body is too tired to fight off the disease. I know I will succumb. However, I have done what I had to do and few men get that chance. My only regret is the time I never spent with you.

The Monster is Revealed

I settled into my new home and life regained a normality of sorts. I continued my investigation of the caves and wrote my books. In the back of my mind, I could not forget Hister. I knew this calm was but a temporary period as Hister prepared his forces for another onslaught. During the twenties, I did not learn anything more about him but in the 1930's, I saw a picture of him in the papers. His true name, Adolf Hitler was finally revealed. I read about him in horror. He had somehow convinced an entire nation to follow his insane leadership, fooling all his fellow countrymen.

I suddenly knew, beyond the shadow of any doubt, that Hister wanted it all. He wanted the caves, Etretat, France, and the world with it. Nothing would stop him. He was working day and night to build an army to take what he felt was his. He would return here with ten thousand men, if he needed them.

If no one did what had to be done, he would never be stopped. If he took the caves, the world would be his. I was the only one who truly understood. The only good thing was: if he wanted the caves, he would have to come here to get them.

It gave me a chance, a single opportunity to trap him. I sent for A.L. to come and give me his advice, one final time.

A Visit in the Night

It was nearing midnight when I heard the creak of the door in the garden. I had just stoked the fire in my room and it was getting cozy. He came in silently. I shook his hand, noting the weariness in his eyes. Age was encroaching on us all. I handed him a glass of cognac, as I explained my problem.

„You see, A.L., if my enemy is truly Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of the Third Reich, as I am sure it is, I must somehow defeat him without ever getting the opportunity to meet him in person. The man is completely unapproachable! He is building a war machine, one which I am convinced he plans to use to come back here. I am the only one who knows he must be stopped, who has a chance of stopping him. I must not fail but how can I succeed, when I face the might of an entire country?“ I finished.

He looked at me in sympathy. Pointing with his cigar, he spoke quietly, as the fire snapped and crackled in the background.

„I too, have followed Hitler's career, becoming very concerned about his politics. Things have been so unsettled in Europe since the Great War. Germany has been grumbling about the severity of its reparations payments. Hitler has stepped into power at an auspicious moment. Despite assurances to the contrary, his brownshirts, and now his blackshirts, can be seen as nothing more than the beginning of a massive army. His speeches seed unrest and attempt to place the German over everyone else. The Master Race indeed. It is a ludicrous viewpoint, without any substance, basing itself on

reworked history and false myths, but it must not be taken lightly. He is intent on fomenting trouble. Big trouble.“

His words struck a chord about Hitler:

„A. L., now that I think about it, there is something wrong with the intensity of his speeches. He is so very sure of himself, impossibly so, as if he believed the lies he was spouting.“

„You are on to something. What makes a man push himself so, as if he could get anything he wanted, willing to justify any action to achieve his goals?“ A.L. wondered.

„He is a maniac, a megalomaniac, seeking power and control by any means, believing it to be his right,“ I answered.

„Yes, a megalomaniac, exactly my thinking. That is how you will catch your man, my dear Leblanc. By using his weakness against him.“

I clinked my glass with his and downed my remaining cognac in a single gulp, already planning how I was going to build my trap.

A.L left, after a quiet good-bye. He had provided me the impetus I needed to get out of my brown study and attend to my most important task: destroying Adolf Hitler.

Of these things, I can speak no more. Hitler is still out there and his spies may yet discover this journal.

I have spent years readying my trap, spending much of my riches in preparation. To my sorrow, this meant I had to leave investigating the knowledge buried in the caves for another. I have hoped it would be you, Patrice. Lately, I am not so sure. I have received disturbing news about your safety, so I have made arrangements with A.L., for an alternate person to reclaim Etretat's heritage. You know of whom I speak.

Ever since I entered those caves, I have felt a great purpose controlling my decisions and directing my every move. My personal desires and feelings have been utterly inconsequential. Everything has confirmed how little I really know about the caves, about their purpose for being here. For they have a purpose, of that there can be no doubt.

This much I do know: I have prepared the caves for another. I can only hope it will be you, Patrice, my beloved son. So allow me to believe you will survive, that the information I have been given about you is wrong. There are so many things I have left unsaid, waiting too long to speak. Now you may be gone and I will surely be gone soon as well. There is no more time. Only this journal can speak for me.

Allow me to apologise one final time for all the things I was not as a father and for the things I was forced to do in my life. I can only hope you see fit to forgive me and to reciprocate the love in my heart for you, outshining all that can be found there.

Good-bye, my son, my Patrice.

Your loving father

Maurice Leblanc

PS: ERGO 5-8-1, 10-8-2, 22-1-8, 27-4-4,, 40-5-1, 60-1-5, 49-2-4,, 71-9-1, 75-13-2, 33-6-2, 97-1-6,, 92-2-1, 31-1-2, 61-1-2, 73-14-4, 18-3-1,,, 100-13-2, 90-6-4, 29-1-5, 88-2-4,, 24-2-1, 66-2-2, 62-4-3,, 30-6-1, 14-5-2, 94-3-4,, 69-5-1, 31-7-9, 87-6-6, 20-1-1,, 78-2-1, 57-2-1, 48-6-6, 25-2-3, 95-2-1,,, 98-3-1, 12-1-2, 50-3-3, 91-1-2, 7-1-1,, 38-9-1, 89-1-3, 19-2-1, 41-5-1,, 54-1-4, 45-2-2, 55-1-7,, 82-6-4, 16-1-2, 53-6-3, 8-2-6, 42-1-2, 93-6-2,, 32-6-6, 23-3-2, 64-3-2, 59-9-4,,, SUM : 1P-K4,P-K4, 2 KT-KB3 KT-QB3, 3 P-Q4 KTXP, 4 KTXKT PXKT, 5 B-QB4 B-B4, 6 P-QB3 Q-K2, 7 O-O Q-K4, 8 P-KB4 PXPCH, 9 K-R1 PXP

Chapter 13

Maximillian Bauer.

„Well, that’s it,“ I finished, accepting a glass of cold water from Raymonde. As I drank, I noticed the total silence around me. Each person here, and my friends online, had been deeply affected by the contents of the journal.

Mrs Leblanc was crying copiously. The two Vallin Brothers each bore a different expression. Ives appeared somewhat bemused and Jacques looked upset. He was biting his lips, as if trying to restrain himself from bursting out.

They were also expecting me to say something. Before I could utter a single word, however, O’Flanahan tactlessly jumped in:

„I can’t wait to publish this!“

„O’Flanahan, I’m sure you will agree discretion is of extreme importance at this point. If Leblanc kept this secret for nearly one hundred years, then surely we can assume he had a valid reason for doing so. I expect everyone to respect his decision for the time being.“

„Well, I for one do not respect this Leblanc,“ exclaimed Jacques Vallin, his trembling voice betraying a deep anger.

Mrs Leblanc burst into tears again. Vallin’s face instantly mollified, realising what his harsh words had done. Wrestling his emotions into control, he explained why he was so upset.

„All our lives, our only goal, Brother and me, has been to find what happened to our great-grandfather. My father before me and his father before him have each spent their lives trying to learn who killed Old Man Vallin and why. Now, after a century, we discover the reason is Mr Leblanc simply chose not to explain to my grandfather what had transpired. Had he spoken but once, none of our lives would have been so wasted,“ he finished, his tremulous voice trailing off.

„Jacques, I recognise you feel genuinely hurt. However, imagine Leblanc’s difficulty in deciding whether the reason for Old Man Vallin’s murder should be revealed. He understood only too well the impact of his silence. The proof is he tried to minimise this necessary wrong by anonymously providing your family with funds when you needed them the most. It’s easy to see why he wrote his journal as a confession. His choices came at such a heavy price. It can only speak more on

the need to maintain silence until we comprehend what is now in our hands," I explained.

Jacques' expression softened until he nodded in agreement, hesitantly at first, then firmly, his brother joining him.

„Well said, my boy," stated Briar. „I will support you one hundred percent in this. Discretion is called for, extreme discretion. There is more here than meets the eye. The fewer who know about it the better.“

„That's not all," Coulter added. „Leblanc's journal leaves almost as many questions as it answers.“

On the laptop screen, O'Flanahan was nodding his head vigorously in agreement with Coulter.

„My first question would be: what trap did he set for Hitler?" I wondered aloud.

Mrs Leblanc, looking slightly more composed, added her own question.

„I'm wondering if we might head inside for a short rest? This afternoon has simply been too emotional.“

Everyone agreed. I suspected we were all equally drained.

* * * * *

A few hours later, I was sitting in my room. The short rest had done me a world of good. Raymonde had gone out to run a few errands for her mother. I did not have any such tasks, so I was free to reflect on Leblanc's journal. It was so sad the way things had turned out for him. Here was a man who had solved the most amazing historical mystery of his time and then found himself in the fight of his life, literally forced to contend with the direct and horrific attention of the most dangerous man in the twentieth century.

Despite all that, Leblanc's revelations were nothing less than astounding.

He had found the caves hidden within the Aval cliff and he had discovered treasure. He also alluded to knowledge buried in their depths. In the fight against a lurking Hitler, Leblanc had committed himself to protecting the caves at any cost. Apparently, most of the town had been involved, although only a few had known about the caves specifically.

A beeping sound from my laptop drew my attention. Three windows popped up on the screen, displaying my friends. Behind Coulter, I saw discarded cups of coffee and a few pizza boxes. Behind O'Flanahan was the usual mess of his office. Briar seemed to be outside. There was a building in the background but I couldn't make it out. No matter where they were, these guys had been reviewing the journal non-stop since they had signed off this afternoon. Now they were coming to me with their conclusions. I had to admit I welcomed their call.

„Ah, my boy, there you are. Thank God, Coulter understands all this technowizardry. Being far away like this is quite limiting, you know. I am becoming somewhat frustrated with it," Briar explained. „I assume you have been thinking about the journal?"

„I've been thinking of nothing else. Its revelations seem to fly in the face of history. We now have to accept Hitler came back to Etretat several times, with murder and theft on his mind, although, in the end, he failed to gain his objective. Leblanc even claims Hitler was wounded.“

„I knew that you would wonder about that, because, frankly, that is what I thought. Like minds and all that. Anyway, we've come up with a theory,“ Briar responded.

„Go on, I'm listening,“

„If Leblanc's journal is accurate, its facts would inevitably have to fit with what we know of Hitler's life. This may actually be the case. For example, we can confirm the specific encounters related in the journal fit quite nicely with Hitler's life during the First World War. Hitler volunteered repeatedly to be a courier, delivering important messages to German outposts, deep within France. On certain missions, he travelled within thirty kilometres of Etretat. Better yet, Hitler was wounded during World War 1, an injury that won him a prestigious award. Perhaps, the true reason for the injury was not what the world was led to believe.“

Coulter interrupted Briar, eager to add his piece:

„And, thanks to Leblanc, we now know there was another man with Hitler in Etretat, a trained assassin. Did he become a convenient witness, explaining away Hitler's mysterious wound? Were other witnesses coerced into supporting Hitler's altered version?“

„So, you're implying Hitler used his official missions as a cover, during which he returned to Etretat. That begs the question: If Hitler was willing to join the army in order to sneak back into Etretat, what else would he be willing to do following that failure?“ I replied.

„Are you asking if Hitler would have been so treacherous as to lead an entire country astray to conquer Etretat, as Leblanc attests in his journal?“ Briar retorted.

„Yes, that is exactly what I am asking. I am beginning to think Hitler's entire life, ever since he entered into those caves, was devoted to returning there, to the exclusion of all else, a true obsession. The only thing I can't understand is why he never went there later, when he so obviously could have. His army took Etretat over in 1940. Yet, history is clear on one particular point: Hitler never returned there. He died, in a Berlin bunker in 1945. So why didn't Hitler escape to those caves if that was his goal in the first place?“

„I think I have an answer to that particular question,“ affirmed O'Flanahan. „Have any of you ever heard of Maximillian Bauer?“ he asked innocently.

„I hope this isn't another conspiracy theory,“ flatly objected Briar.

Instead of looking flustered, O'Flanahan looked smug.

„In the world of conspiracies, my friends, some are so far-fetched they barely register on the scale. Others are supported by mountains of facts. However, there are a few placed in a very special pile. If you were to look in that pile, every conspiracy confronting you would sound preposterous on the surface but the more you thought about it, the more you would realize only your perspective prevented it from being true. Well, the top story in that pile would be the strange case of Maximillian Bauer. So I repeat to you: have any of you heard of him?“

None of us had. O'Flanahan explained what he knew:

„In the month of February 1939, a small book was published by the Macaulay Press, a New York printing company, which bore the title: »The Strange Death of Adolf Hitler«. The author remained anonymous, afraid of persecution. He claimed to have been entrusted this document by Maximillian Bauer. Following a

dangerous and circuitous route, our Mr Anonymous escaped from Germany and found his way to the United States. He translated the document into English and submitted it for publication. Of course, it didn't matter to the editors whether the story was true or not, just so long as it caused a furor," O'Flanahan began. „And a furor it did cause, of that there can be no doubt.“

„Stop beating around the bush, O'Flanahan and tell us about it, for Pete's sake," ranted Coulter.

„I'm getting to it, just calm down. Maximillian Bauer was born with the unlucky fate of looking exactly like Adolf Hitler. Better yet, he could talk like Hitler. He had his Voice!“

„Are you telling us this guy was Hitler's exact double?“ asked Coulter.

„Now you're getting it. To the public, the two were one and the same. However, if we are to believe the book, behind the scenes, all was not well. Because of his special position, Bauer was uniquely placed to observe the events leading up to the Second World War. He witnessed the in-fighting between Hitler's henchmen, Boormann, von Arnheim, Goebbels and the others. There were many conspiracies to unseat Hitler. There was a third problem. Hitler himself was sick. He was becoming more paranoid, seeing danger everywhere. He was probably right. As time went on, Bauer did most of the public appearances and speeches, with Hitler directing behind the scenes. Now, you must remember this book was published in 1939 and had been smuggled out of Germany before the war had even begun. Every small detail noted in his book has been verified by independent investigations over the years. The conveniently anonymous author had to have been present to know what happened in those private chambers. The secret love affairs, the illegal activities, it's all there. Were it not for those little details, this book would not be credible. With them, it becomes very, very plausible.“

„Well, it is known Hitler had doubles. That is no big secret," scoffed Briar.

„True, but the big secret revealed in the book, is Hitler, the real Hitler, died before 1939, from a combination of ill health and poison. It was his double who carried on and finished the war. It was his double who died in the bunker.“

„What happened to the author?“ asked Briar.

„The author disappeared in December 1938, just before the first publication of the book. He was never heard from again, not even claiming a penny of his royalties. A year and a half later, Etretat was invaded by the Nazis," O'Flanahan clarified.

„What if the author was a complete fake?“ I asked, getting the attention of all three. „What if the reason he was *anonymous* was that his own background would not hold up to scrutiny? If the author was Hitler's henchman, this Weissmuller perhaps, then the whole Bauer story could be a plant. Maximilian Bauer took Hitler's place, allowing him to vanish into the caves without anyone noticing. Of course, we still don't understand why Hitler was so fascinated by the caves.“

„As was Leblanc, let us not forget," added Briar.

„Yes, exactly like Leblanc, in fact. Obsessed with the caves. So much so Hitler came up with a complex plan to subjugate an entire country in order to regain his objective! Let's assume the book about Bauer was part of that plan, seeded with half-truths to *prove* Hitler had died. Such a false conclusion would end any burgeoning investigation into Hitler's whereabouts, further protecting the caves.“

Once Etretat was invaded, with Weissmuller in charge, Hitler had no further interest in remaining in Germany. The minute the caves were ready, he abandoned Germany, leaving his double behind.“

„Well, I’m glad someone has figured out why I thought it was important to talk about that book,“ asserted O’Flanahan.

„You were right to bring it to our attention. If anything, it strengthens our version of the facts. After the beginning of World War Two, Hitler’s behaviour was the opposite of what you would expect of a leader. Instead of making more appearances everywhere, he reduced the number of public speeches. He never changed his appearance, always presenting the exact same look. This all supports the idea of a double, repeating what he had been taught. Perhaps, in the end, Germany failed because Hitler was no longer at its helm, replaced by an imitator, skilled only in deception. It would have become a fatal weakness for the Nazi regime.“

„We may have much more to thank Maurice Leblanc for than we imagined at first. Perhaps his trap succeeded, leaving a Nazi War machine decapitated when it was at the height of its power. Bauer tried to keep it going but ultimately failed, being a mimic rather than the military genius Hitler was,“ said Briar.

„It also implies something else,“ added O’Flanahan. „If that book was published before the Second World War, then its author had to be aware of the plan to invade Etretat. Publishing the book was a premeditated act, anticipating the act of invasion. Hitler and the author were in cahoots with each other. It had to be Weissmuller.“

Trust O’Flanahan to come up with something that twisty.

I was overwhelmed yet again at how this kept evolving into something unexpected. I was reminded of Leblanc’s final comment in his journal:

„I have felt a great purpose, controlling my decisions and directing my every move. This much I know: I have prepared the way for another.“

Something deeper was going on, something hidden. Both men, Leblanc and Hitler had been changed forever by their encounter with the caves. Something had polarized these two men, setting into motion a string of events, which had led directly to my presence here, a full century later.

If we were going to find our answers, there was only one place for us to look.

„Gentlemen, I think it’s time to think about going into the caves!“

* * * * *

After disconnecting with my friends, before Raymonde returned, I decided to do some advance scouting by returning to the Aval cliff. Arriving at the golf club parking, I got out of my car and headed down the path, putting on my glasses and switching them on. A moment later, Coulter signed on.

„Hey, Paul. Where are you now?“

„I’m on top of the cliff near the bunker,“ I turned my head in its direction as I walked nearer. „Where are the other guys?“

„O’Flanahan’s off hunting something. He was mumbling when he signed off so I missed most of it. I don’t know where Briar is. I haven’t seen him in a while but he’s been busy doing research. He sure has come up with the goods on a pile of stuff,“ Coulter said, drinking from a thermos cup and sitting back in his chair.

„You're telling me. I'm glad I brought him in on this. He has a lot of resources,“ I replied.

„What is it between him and O'Flanahan?“

„Beats me. However, let's admit it, O'Flanahan can be irritating at the best of times.“

„You got that right,“ Coulter laughed. „Why did you ask him along if he's so irritating?“

I walked into the bunker. Finding nothing new, I went back outside.

„I know he's quirky but I can't help that. From the first day I met him, I knew I could trust him. No matter his antics, this guy will be there when you need him. Besides, he really is in his element with all these Hitler conspiracies. What do you think of him?“

„Oh, you know I'm easy going. Both guys have different viewpoints and that has to be a good thing. I'm just along for the ride,“ he broke off, laughing a bit more.

„But seriously, you have to be careful. You don't just have yourself to think of anymore. There's Raymonde and her mom, and the Vallin brothers. These people are all counting on you.“

„Come on, give me a break. I've only been in France a few days. I'm doing my best to catch up.“

„I know. You've done pretty well, if you ask me, except last night when you forgot to take the safety off your gun. I thought you were a goner.“

I smiled at the memory but there was a serious edge to his comment. I was learning but would it be fast enough? I couldn't always be lucky. Reaching the edge of the cliff, I looked down, seeing the Needle below, waves crashing all around.

„Wow! Look at that. Man, that's a sight. What are you doing up here anyway?“

„I've been thinking about the way to get into those caves. If what we've learnt is true, that bunker is right over the Frefosse dungeon entrance into those caves. We've also surmised an ancient entrance once existed at a level from more than two thousand years ago.“

„I get it. You think we have to go underwater to find our way in.“

„Yes. I want you to check into it. Find out what equipment we might need and who's got it. Use my account, make a deal and get it here fast. Along with that, let's try to pin down some data to back up this approach, just to make absolutely sure.“

„You seem pretty committed already.“

„Let me just say I've had a hunch.“

And a dream!

„Why don't you just stop right where you are, Sirenne. I've got a gun!“

I froze. Coulter began talking at a rapid-fire pace in my ear.

„Is that Norton? It is, isn't it? Oh, man, this is bad. What are we going to do? What are you going to do? Wait, wait, I've got it. I'm on it. I'm calling Raymonde right now. NO! I'm calling the Vallin Brothers. They're closer and meaner.“

„Norton! What a surprise. How's your foot?“ I spoke up, saying anything to keep the dangerous man off balance.

„It's still ringing at the Vallin. WAIT, someone's picking up,“ Coulter's voice faded off.

„It hurts, what do you think? You almost broke it, you cretin. I should kill you right here, Sirene, you bother me so much. But I'm not going to, not now, not yet. Because I want some answers, damn it. Now turn around slow and easy. Don't make any sudden moves.“

His pistol was a small stubby thing, probably a back up. I had forgotten to search his car. Another mistake! Norton held the pistol low, so as not to attract attention from the few tourists in the distance. I had a plan but I had to get it right.

I had brought my pistol too.

Unfortunately, it was behind my back, stuck in my pants, underneath my jacket, the exact spot where Norton was looking. I turned my body slowly. At the same time, I frantically slid my hand inside my jacket. With incredible relief, I felt my palm grasp the pistol.

„Keep your hands in view,“ Norton warned.

I slid my hand back, pulling the pistol out of my pants without a hitch, flipping the safety catch at the same time. It was now or never. In a single gesture, I jerked my gun out, aiming it directly at Norton's head, catching him completely unaware. Surprised, he froze for a moment, allowing me to take several steps, narrowing the distance between us.

„The Vallins are on the way. Five minutes tops and they'll be here. Hey, you've got a gun! Why didn't you say that?“ Coulter stammered. „Wait a minute, don't get closer to the guy.“

„Shut up and get me a map of this place,“ I whispered.

„What?“

„Find me a way out of here. Get me a MAP.“

His face brightened.

„Ohh, I got it. One 3D map of the cliff coming up—it'll take a few secs, sorry.“

Norton was stuck in an awkward position, with his arm down, his gun held at waist height. He had put his shoes back on and was using a branch as a cane. He spoke angrily.

„I keep underestimating you. So you've got a pistol on me and I've got a pistol on you. Big deal.“

My plan was to do something he could not. I was going to run! Unfortunately, in order to do this, I had to get closer because I was on a projection of the cliff and he was blocking my way.

Norton continued talking as I kept walking, my left arm held out stiffly, holding the pistol aimed right at his face. The few tourists in the distance hadn't noticed anything yet but it was just a matter of time.

„We might shoot each other but I want some answers from you and I am going to get them, no matter what.“

„What questions?“ I retorted, stalling.

„What does H.N. mean? Answer that, for starters,“ he screamed.

„Don't you know?“ I shot back.

„God damn it, stop it with these games. It's always games, all the time. Just tell me, I beg you,“ his face contorted, looking ready to cry for a moment, then flashing into a twisted rage, then back to tears.

„That guy is not stable,“ Coulter whispered, checking his watch. „Three more minutes and the Vallin brothers will be there. Just hold on, you’re doing great so far. That was fast thinking with the gun. Can’t believe you did that. Here’s the 3D map you asked for.“

I scanned it rapidly, orienting myself. I immediately found what I had seen before: a way down those precipitous cliffs! It was on my right about thirty yards away, the second dip in the cliff past the Needle. Unlike the first dip, the second one didn’t stop, going all the way down to a disused metal staircase. Norton spoke again, his voice going up and down in volume. He was losing it.

„First, it was my sister, Helena, then it was my friend Henri Nadeau and all the others, all the same, and they were blaming me but they didn’t understand. It was all a game and I was stuck in it. It wasn’t me. They were wrong. I just can’t prove it and now, HE stole my file, everything I had on him,“ he laughed frenziedly but stopped himself, continuing his incomprehensible ramble. „And this time, the first time ever, I caught him, I saw him. The Shadow-Killer. He was leaving with my file under his arm. I saw him in the mirror, the door was open, and he, he was me, he was me, ha-ha-ha, he was me, can you believe it? Ha-ha-ha, what a perfect trick.“

He broke into another crazy laugh and his head fell to his chest.

The moment his eyes dropped, I took off running, knowing exactly where I was going, thanks to Coulter’s map. I had never broken any speed records before but, at that moment, I felt as if I was a train, barrelling non-stop across the landscape, increasing my momentum and distance with every second. His pistol barrel was too short for any type of accuracy. If he wanted to shoot me, he would have to catch me and I wasn’t planning to give him the chance!

Coulter kept scrolling the map on the screen, showing me where I had to go, cheering me on all the while. Norton yelled and I risked a single glance backwards. He was hobbling after me at a decent pace, using his cane to lop forward, his pistol waving around with every step.

He appeared angry.

I heard some car doors slam and more screaming in the distance. The two Vallin brothers were in the parking lot, running all out toward Norton. They were both brandishing bats and waving them madly. I kept going, aiming directly for the cleft, sliding on one foot, dangerously out of control. Norton was closer than I would’ve liked.

„Watch it, you’re going to lose it, you’re going to lose it. No, you’re fine, doing good, now be careful, here’s the stairs,“ Coulter yammered in my ear, keeping a running commentary. I came to a desperate stop, right above the rusty steps. They were clogged with silt and sand. Signs warned tourists off and bars blocked the staircase.

„Just go for it, Norton’s right behind you,“ Coulter screamed.

Incredibly, Norton was coming down fast, using his branch to balance himself, still holding his gun.

I scrambled over the bars and dropped my feet down on the railing and, pushing myself off, careened down the railing at a precipitous pace. A mound of dirt blocked the bottom of the staircase and I jumped off, landing in the soft sand below. Not stopping for a second, I ran towards the Needle. Norton shot once but his bullet missed by a mile. He bellowed in frustration, hurrying down the stairs. A

glance upwards showed me the Vallins at the top of the steep slope, still waving bats. The hunter was about to become the hunted. I redoubled my speed and neared the Needle, intent on rejoining Etretat's main beach beyond the arch.

Unfortunately, the tide was in and the area around the arch was flooded. I didn't hesitate for a second and jumped in the channel water. It was cold but I felt nothing, the adrenaline numbing the shock. Norton, let go another bellow and shot once more, uselessly, still too far away.

Despite my situation, I resisted shooting back. I just couldn't convince myself to do it. Coulter had other concerns.

„Try not to get the glasses wet, they're waterproof but I'll probably lose reception and I don't want to miss a second of this.“

„I am trying to get away, you know,“ I answered back, too breathless to sound sarcastic. Wading in to my neck, I started swimming, barely keeping ahead of the undercurrent.

„You gotta turn your head back. I want to see how close the Vallin brothers are... Darn, go, man, go. Norton's about to shoot again,“ Coulter shouted.

Norton was ranting, his words reaching me faintly.

„You just won't listen. Well, I'll make you listen.“

I dove underwater, soaking the glasses and losing Coulter, just as Norton emptied his gun. I felt a wallop in my shoulder.

I was hit.

Right away, I knew it wasn't bad. I had been underwater and the bullet was robbed of its momentum. I might be sore but I wasn't dead! With renewed vigour, I kicked with my legs, propelling myself forward a fair distance, coming back up to the surface. I turned around to face the beach, lifting my gun above the water in defence.

I had nothing to shoot at.

I fell back into the water, my glasses miraculously still glued to my face. Norton had been forced to jump into the water in an attempt to escape the approaching Vallin Brothers. He was swimming towards me in earnest, his face contorting in agony every time his damaged foot moved through the water. Soon, he was sinking more than swimming. I pulled away, easily outdistancing him in his debilitated condition.

A look of intense frustration appeared on his face. Unfortunately, his body was completely worn out and his foot was hurting him tremendously. I swam a big circle, heading back towards the shore. The Vallin brothers reached the water and waded in knee deep to help me out of the water. I checked for Norton, finally spotting him.

He was in trouble, sinking under the heavy waves, unable to keep his head above the water any longer. I had an impulse to save him despite all he had done but I was too exhausted. Ives Vallin headed off into the waters valiantly in my stead but Norton went under long before he could reach him.

He never resurfaced.

A Selection from the Weissmuller Manuscript

Meeting Hitler

I first met Hitler while in Vienna in 1908. Several years later, he renewed contact, intent on involving me in a new scheme.

At first, I was not very interested. All I knew from before was that he painted for food money. I couldn't imagine what such a man could have to offer. I tended to work alone. However, something had changed about him. This Hitler was different, brimming with energy, his eyes glowing with conviction.

Slowly, over supper, he exposed the most unbelievable discovery: a complex of caves hidden near a small town in France. He admitted to killing a man, named Leblanc. He also spoke of gold and jewels, some of which he had taken.

He admitted feeling guilty for several days following the murder. The guilt was eventually replaced by a growing sense of rightness: he had been justified to take ownership of the caves, said he, they were his by right of conquest. He had begun dreaming about what he could do with such a lair at his disposal. He had perceived a path laid out in front of him, revealed by Destiny itself. The caves were his to take.

He had bricked up the entrance and left the body of Leblanc entombed in them. No one would ever find him. Then the impossible happened. Leblanc was seen returning home. He was not dead and had somehow escaped from the caves. Hitler was convinced he had killed the man. There was something going on in there, something he desperately wanted to investigate.

I wasn't sure about his claims. It was hard to kill a man, particularly if you didn't know what you were doing and why he was admitting all these things to me? Hitler wasn't done with his explanation.

Baffled by Leblanc's supposed return to life, Hitler returned to the town, hoping to finish the job. Upon his arrival, he was horrified to discover the entrance into the caves had been completely destroyed. Learning about the involvement of a local man named Vallin, Hitler took him prisoner.

He tortured Vallin for several hours but either the man was a true drunken idiot, or he was devoted to his cause, because he never spoke a word. Frustrated, Hitler took Vallin to the destroyed fort and threw him into the hole, leaving him there to die. Returning to Vienna, Hitler realized his plans would have to become much more complex. He could no longer return to take control of the caves. Worse yet, Leblanc had free access to them, stealing the gold Hitler believed to be his by right. Hitler was convinced other secrets rested in the caves, more important than all the gold in the world.

Despite his wild claims, the inner energy animating him was strong. This was a man not easily thwarted once set upon a path. I still didn't know why he was talking to me. I didn't have long to wonder when he launched into a different type of history: my own.

Apparently, he had been impressed during the time we had spent in Vienna. He had felt something was different about me. In that, he was, of

course, absolutely correct. Then he amazed me, by talking about a particular incident that happened while I was still in school.

For the first time in many years, my heart jumped and I almost felt worry. Hitler had somehow uncovered the one event where I had made the slightest of mistakes in my experiments. With this dangerous information in his hands, I wondered if perhaps Hitler himself ought not participate in one of my experiments. I had been thinking of a new approach lately. However, these interesting thoughts were banished when he pulled a thick folder from a paper bag, saying it was a gift.

Opening it, I found three complete copies of the file concerning the incident. They were the ones I had not been able to remove from the school's records. At the time, I was not gifted enough to succeed in this necessary task. Hitler had gone back and done what I should have done.

I had finally met a kindred spirit. One with whom I could share my thoughts. Unlike me, he had purpose. I was wandering through life, trying to understand why I looked at things the way I did. Here was a man who was telling me it did not have to be like that. If I joined him in his quest, acting as his lieutenant, I would be able to continue my experiments, but this time I would have a reason for them. The thought appealed to me mightily.

Then, his timing perfect, he pulled out a small leather purse, full of gold coins. At that very moment, I decided to do it. I would join him and with me at his side, we could not fail.

* * * * *

We left Vienna to find a place to use as a home base. During the trip, Hitler revealed his deeper thoughts and ambitions. This was no mere whim. Although he was obsessed about the caves, he had other aspirations, political ones. They were still nebulous, unclear but, somehow, he knew the greatness he was destined to achieve. He had chosen me with care, after reviewing all those he had encountered, knowing he needed help of a special nature.

He admitted noticing something special about me. The thought bothered me, because I had believed my outer shell, the *skin* others saw, had become smooth enough to escape detection. He calmed my concerns by stating he was also different. He spent much time indicating the exact points which had alerted him, helping me greatly in designing a better skin.

As he revealed what he expected me to do, I grew more and more amazed. It was as if he had read my mind and selected a task designed specifically for me. I was to start by becoming completely invisible. No one was to be left alive who might know my true nature. I was to refine the art of camouflage, until it was a science, until I could hide myself in the skin of others quickly and easily, learning to hide in plain view.

Once that was done, I would begin my assigned task. Hitler wanted me to achieve two things at the same time. First, I was to assemble all available information about the caves into a coherent format, and, second, I was to erase the caves from recorded history. Such a task appealed immediately. It would provide the freedom I needed to continue my experiments. I could

explore putting on different skins, learning to become anyone and then vanish.

As for those with the information I sought, they were to be eliminated. This final requirement was the most wonderful. Hitler understood my passion for experiments. Now he had provided me with a format in which I could continue.

I truly did not care about the caves. I only cared about the opportunity to follow my life's ambition, this time structured with exquisite planning. From past experience, I knew structure was the only thing keeping me from prison. Without the care taken to perfect my skins, without the extreme attention to detail, I would be arrested before I could even begin.

As for Hitler's claims, I would reserve judgment. His wilder statements did not truly matter. Who was I to say whether his beliefs were justified or not? I was happy doing his bidding, as long as it continued to fit with my own goals.

* * * * *

We parted ways soon after. He would contact me by sending messages to our home base. In the meantime, I had much to do. He was adamant about my achieving complete invisibility. The best way to do this would be to return to the neighborhoods of my past and eliminate every shred of evidence concerning my existence. In being absolutely thorough, I would reach true invisibility. The exercises would double as training for future investigations.

I selected my first step as the eradication of my family. They were aware of some of my animal experiments. As well, if I *killed* myself along with them, anyone investigating my trail would come to an abrupt end. Using my father's birthday as a reason to get together, I prepared the end of my beginning. That morning, I selected a man of similar build, knocking him out just as he was about to enter his house. Tying and gagging him securely, I lay him down in the woodshed behind my rented house, covering his body with a tarp and a few planks of wood.

The evening went as planned. My family arrived early and we ate the meal my mother had brought. They all enjoyed the cake I had prepared. Shortly after ingestion, I noted the oncoming of the cramps, caused by the large quantity of strychnine I had added to the recipe. I put the *concerned* look on my face and pretended to help. Soon they were unable to move, due to the increasing severity of the cramping.

After drawing the drapes, I dragged their cramping bodies into the living room, to watch them die together. I had to muffle their screams with napkins stuffed in their mouths, watching as the strychnine-induced spasms increased, until the slightest noise sent them into paroxysms of pain. I looked deep into their eyes to see what they were seeing, what they were feeling. Once more I failed. The bodies collapsed and I saw no evidence of souls. Just bodies.

I resolved not to use strychnine again. It was too slow a poison. I went to the woodshed and retrieved the bound man, still hidden under the tarp. His eyes were wild as I lifted him over my shoulder and carried him into the

house. I dropped him down next to the rest of my family. He wriggled as hard as he could, perhaps getting an inkling of what was coming.

I ignored him for the time being, busying myself by staging the bodies around the dining table. My mind flashed back to the meal and my mouth salivated. I would miss my mother's cooking.

I placed my father on the ground, his left arm reaching for the door. My mother was at the table. My two brothers lay behind her, lying on the floor, entwined as if they had tripped over each other in their haste to leave the room. Finally, all bodies were arranged in the right position.

I picked up a large pillow from the couch and sat down on top of the bound man, straddling his chest. He was unable to utter a single sound, his eyes darting left and right frantically. If I used the pillow, I would be unable to see his eyes as he died, so I put it down. He took this to mean he was getting a reprieve and relief appeared in his eyes. Whatever it was disappeared when I bent down, lying flat on top of his body, my face centimeters from his. Using an extended index finger from both hands, my arms slowly moved in on his face from each side, closer and closer to his nose. He redoubled in his efforts, trying to throw me off, to spit out his gag. I moved my legs, locking myself over him, and brought both index fingers against his flaring nostrils, pushing them hard together.

His air supply cut off, he fought wildly but I kept my position, holding his nostrils shut tight. He would get no further reprieve. This was the moment I had chosen for him to die, the moment of my experiment. It happened suddenly. One moment, he was fighting, the next he was gone. Nothing left him.

I placed him near *his* mother as if he had been trying to save her, a loyal son to the end. I grabbed two kerosene lanterns and threw the first on the dining table. Flames exploded, engulfing my mother instantly, the fire spreading rapidly. Before exiting out the back door, I threw the second lantern near my two brothers. Both fires joined, consuming the living room and my family.

I walked away from the house, already planning the next step.

My classmates and teachers. They all had to go!

Chapter 14

A Surprise from my Friends.

I was resting, my shoulder still sore from its encounter with a bullet. Raymonde brought supper with her and confirmed no one had seen Norton, nor had his body been found. He had vanished. However, Coulter had dug up some of Norton's high school records. He had been captain of the swimming team and had once been considered for the Olympics. His survival was a distinct possibility.

I was still not sure what to make of Norton's attack. Why was he after me and not the Shadow-Killer? Why was he so stuck on the letters **HN**? The man seemed demented, speaking in circles.

Despite the circumstances, I was troubled by his disappearance. Had I been responsible somehow? Perhaps I should have told him what he wanted to know. However, going down that route might have been far worse. Norton was not listening to me anyway. His ramble made sense only to him.

Raymonde's hand on my shoulder pulled me out of my reverie.

„I still can't believe the video Coulter sent me. I'm amazed by what you did. That was incredibly brave.“

Her words made me feel better but I knew fear had made me fleet of foot. Bravery had little to do with it. Had I been in my right mind, I would never have contemplated such a reckless course of action. Hugging her as she sat down on the bed, I explained how I felt:

„These last few days have been a whirlwind, as if time were being compressed. Just a few days ago, I had no idea what was waiting for me. Today, I am holding the hand of the woman I love, on a roller-coaster of a ride, with death, danger, and mystery all around. After reading the Leblanc journal, when I saw your mother crying so hard, I didn't know what to say to you. I'm worried you might be upset with me for bringing such turmoil to your mother's life, to your life.“

Her arms tightened, her eyes shining with warmth.

„My mother's tears were good tears. She finally knows what happened back then and can lay those ghosts to rest. I don't regret a single instant since you arrived here. These are things we were meant to go through, I can feel it. Besides, it allowed us to find each other.“

„Well, thank God for that, then,“ I joked and she smiled. „I talked to my friends online this afternoon.“

„Uh-oh, I know what that means. Our adventures aren't over, are they?“

„Uhm, no, not exactly,“ I answered. I summarized the Maximillian Bauer story and then explained our plan.

„All along, through the Great Hunt, we always found just enough facts to point the way to where we should go next. As with before, there was only one choice now: to enter the caves. We will find all our answers when we enter them.“

„But you don't know how to get in. The Germans blocked all the entrances.“

„No, I don't think they did. There is a chance we can find a way in. We'll talk more about that in the morning, when Briar and the others connect back on,“ I said, refusing to explain further. It was no longer time to talk about the caves.

It was time for bed!

* * * * *

Next morning found me frustrated. We had gotten up early, showered, and eaten. Since then, I had been trying to connect with my friends. I had run through our last conversation, confirming they definitely set a contact time of 10:00 AM. It was now 10:35 AM and I could not get them to answer, no matter what I did.

Raymonde was of absolutely no help, trying to tickle me whenever I brought the topic up. There was a knock at the door. It was the maid:

„There is a phone call for Mr Sirenne. The front desk said you'll have to go down to the restaurant to pick it up,“ she informed us.

„Fine, thank you. I'll be down presently.“

„Thank you sir, I'll tell them,“ she said, leaving quickly. Them?

„I wonder who it could be? Are you coming down?“ I asked Raymonde.

„I wouldn't miss this for the world,“ she answered mysteriously.

Reaching the small restaurant room and, seeing *our* table, where a phone had been placed, I sat down, picking it up.

„This is Paul Sirenne. There's a call for me?“

„Just a second, Sir, I'll connect you.“

A few clicks and pops later, an unmistakable voice blasted over the phone:

„Sirenne, thank God it's you. It's O'Flanahan, old buddy.“

„I know who you are, O'Flanahan, what's this all about? Where have you been?“

„There's no time for that, me boy. I just need you to do me a wee favour, is all,“ he begged, his Irish accent overwhelming the phone's tiny speaker.

„A favour? You've got to be kidding, right?“

„Please, it's such a small thing. I was wondering if you could turn your head about seventy-five degrees to the right?“ he asked. That request sounded very familiar. I did as he asked and turned my head to the right.

I was looking at a table where three men were sitting. One of them was facing me, holding up a cell phone. It was O'Flanahan. The other two turned around. It was Coulter and Briar. My jaw dropped open. Raymonde was covering her face with her hand as she tried to hide her smile. Mrs Leblanc was peeking in from the restaurant entrance, laughing as well. Had they all been in on it?

I started laughing finally. They had done it well; I had to admit it. I walked over to my friends and sat down in the fourth chair, trying to look unflappable, as I said:

„Coffees all around? I believe it's my round this time, gentlemen.“

* * * * *

Apparently, the distance had been bothering all three. The events in Etretat were occurring with ever-increasing speed and there they were, sitting around at home, looking at their computers. A unanimous decision was reached to do what they knew had to be done. According to Coulter, it had been terribly difficult to arrange the flights on such short notice. He had found two seats on a red-eye flight for himself and O'Flanahan. Briar organized a flight on his own and they met in the Paris International Airport.

„My dear boy, sorry for springing this on you in this manner but, really, there was no way any of us could stay away from Etretat for one more second, grading of papers be damned,“ exclaimed Briar.

A pot of coffee sat on the table, already three quarters empty.

„Yesterday, before all the excitement, I said it was time to go find the caves. If you think back on Leblanc's journal, you may remember the section when he wandered into a very big cave with a large body of brackish water. Brackish water implies an opening to the English Channel. I wondered if, at some point in the past, that opening might have been larger. The Fort of Frefosse once had such an entrance, a hidden port, giving access to the open sea for the smugglers. This

ancient sea entrance would have been covered by silt and debris more than a thousand years ago. However, the Germans might have re-opened the hidden entrance, an entrance that would be more than three hundred metres out to sea and perhaps just as deep," I concluded.

"I don't know why I didn't think of that before. You must be right. But why make an opening below sea level? Unless it was designed for submarine access," theorized O'Flanahan.

"That's what I think. With a sub, Hitler could have come here unobserved. And it is going to be our way in."

"If there really was such an opening, why wouldn't it have been found yet?" Briar asked.

"It is a concern the Germans would also have had. Perhaps they found some way of dealing with that."

"Paul, none of us are deep sea divers. How do you expect us to go down there?" worried Raymonde.

"Coulter's looking into that. Before going into the water however, we might be able to use our resources to pinpoint the area."

Coulter popped open his laptop and began typing. Within seconds, he pushed his laptop to the centre of the table, a smug look on his face:

"Take a look at this."

We examined a digital display of Etretat's underwater topography. The exposed seabed was a series of frozen, undulating waves radiating away from the coastline, looking like spokes on a wheel. The spokes radiated from a central point: the Aval cliff and the Needle.

"Where did you get this? This is great!" O'Flanahan exclaimed.

"This program allows you to look at any underwater area of the world, using digitized satellite imagery. It's not available for public use but I found us a special pass."

"Do you guys see the same pattern that I'm seeing?" I asked, pointing at the image. "There certainly would be room for a sub in those chasms between the radiating spokes. Look at the one in the centre. It's perfectly lined up with the cliff."

Coulter pressed a few keys.

"At this scale, the chasm depth would be, uhm, just a sec, about one hundred metres. I tried comparing rock density to reveal an opening but nothing stood out. If there's an entrance down there, it's well camouflaged."

"Everything points to it being in that central furrow. The others are simply too far. When we go looking, that's where we were going," I affirmed.

I just hoped Coulter came up with something to get us there.

* * * * *

Raymonde approached the front door and knocked. Jacques Vallin opened, calling out loudly to his brother, who was in the old garage next to the house.

"I'm so sorry for what I said yesterday," Jacques apologised. "I don't know what came over me. I felt like my whole life had been ripped away but now that I've had a bit of time to think it over, I can see how Mr Leblanc never had any choice. He

did the best he could to help those who got hurt. Our family just got caught in the middle.“

Ives walked in, his face breaking into a smile.

„You two have had a rough time of it, it’s true enough, but there’s no need to worry about the past anymore. The present seems exciting enough, wouldn’t you say? I think we’ve figured a way to get into the caves but we’re going to need your local connections: is there a boat we could rent, something big and seaworthy?“ I asked them.

„I know a fellow who’s got a real wide boat on those pontoons. It’s pretty big and he knows how to keep quiet too,“ Ives suggested.

„Are you talking about Languenoc’s boat?“ asked Jacques.

„You know I am, Brother.“

„We can go right away and have a talk with him,“ Jacques said, getting up. „Don’t you worry, Mr Paul, we’ll get your boat.“

We agreed to meet on the beach at 8:00 AM next morning, hopefully giving Coulter enough time to get organized. His last text message had said he had found something and was working hard to get it here. Arriving back at the Villa Leblanc, Raymonde and I found Briar and O’Flanahan in the restaurant, still arguing. We decided to join them.

As I sat down, I received a second call from Coulter. The package was on its way. He still had more things to arrange, so I wished him good luck. It was a big undertaking, especially in such little time.

O’Flanahan spoke up.

„Listen, I know I’ve been ranting a lot about publishing this thing. I’m sure you understand why. We have uncovered a whopping conspiracy and it’s my business to publish that type of stuff. This is pure gold. The biggest conspiracy of them all, right here in our hands, and nobody knows a thing about it. It’s unbearable!“

„I know this is an issue for you, O’Flanahan. From the beginning, the Great Hunt has been teaching us the need for caution. We have uncovered evidence of a battle fought entirely in the shadows. Can it really be just about caves? Something doesn’t fit. I can’t express it in words but I can tell you we have not uncovered the real story yet,“ I said.

„I’ve felt a bit of this myself. It’s as if we are out of control. The events keep drawing us further and further into the unknown,“ Briar added.

„I’ve felt like that too. Every day has brought more complexity. What does it mean? Where is it leading us?“ Raymonde asked.

„It’s leading us to the caves. That’s obvious. When those caves were last entered, the entire world was affected. Hitler’s and Leblanc’s lives were irrevocably altered. We truly do not know what we are dealing with. It behooves us to move forward carefully, with due consideration. To answer your original question, O’Flanahan, discretion is not an option, it’s a requirement. There’s something in those caves. I can feel it. Until we find out what it is, we must remain absolutely quiet!“

„I concur wholeheartedly!“ supported Briar.

* * * * *

The morning found us in the center of Etretat’s main beach with the Vallin brothers. A fishing boat was pulled up on shore. Mrs Leblanc had declined joining

us, her aging body simply not up to the rigours of the task awaiting us. O'Flanahan appeared distinctly greenish when he stepped into the boat.

I looked at Jacques Vallin.

„Is this the stable boat you were talking about?“

„No, Mr Paul, it isn't. Languenoc's boat is too big to come this close to the shore. We arranged for a local fisherman to take us out.“

I jumped into the boat, joining the others. Ives hopped in deftly, after giving the boat a strong, hard push. The pilot started the outboard and we headed out to sea. The boat was bobbing and weaving madly. I was holding on for dear life, unable to fathom how anyone could earn a living doing something as dangerous as this.

We talked amongst each other, huddled together in the middle of the boat.

„I've done nothing but read and re-read Leblanc's journal, this last day,“ Briar admitted, wiping the sea spray from his face. „There are a few passages that seem more worthy of note than others.“

„Like what?“ asked O'Flanahan.

„In particular, the section where he contacted Raymond Lindon to reach Lupin. Why Lindon?“ Briar started.

„Yeah, that's a good one, all right, Briar. I noticed one of my own: It was near the beginning when Leblanc met Father Cochet. He mentioned a couple of names that are rather curious. In particular, Father Boudet. If these names lead us where I suspect, our little conspiracy just connected to a whole family of conspiracies we haven't even considered yet,“ added O'Flanahan.

„That's all well and good, O'Flanahan, but my concern about Lindon may be important to us, unlike your vague allusions. Our attention has been hovering over Raymond Lindon for a while now. He became Leblanc's lieutenant, helping him through thick and thin. He was in charge of the Net, no small thing there, and now we know he was Leblanc's go-between with Lupin. So, again, why Lindon? He continued playing a role after the war, by purchasing Ambrumesy castle and hiding the stone cylinder there. There can be no question he was an integral part of Leblanc's plans and deserves more attention,“ Briar concluded.

„I'm much more curious about that group of numbers at the end of his journal,“ O'Flanahan added. „They are obviously a code. I think his whole journal is off-kilter, as if the words were concealing a deeper meaning. Perhaps those numbers are the key. But that's not all. Since O'Flanahan mentioned Maximillian Bauer, I haven't been able to keep the story out of my mind. I did some research and eventually found a single faded picture of the anonymous author of the Bauer book. I compared it to a fuzzy picture of Weissmuller from a book about Etretat and the Second World War. The two pictures are a close match. Bauer may be Weissmuller after all. I am now trying to find pictures of Hitler during the First World War. Perhaps I can find one with our elusive Weissmuller standing nearby... Hey, we're going the wrong way. The Needle is over there. I don't want to have to suffer through this torture any more than necessary.“

Jacques took a moment to clarify the situation.

„We're just going to meet Captain Languenoc.“

„Look, there it is. I can see it,“ Raymonde exclaimed.

As we rounded a bend, Languenoc's ship was finally revealed. It was an impressive sight. Two large pontoons anchored a massive platform. Near the rear, a series of structures were erected, with a second level featuring the bridge of the ship. I could not see any form of propulsion but it was moving along at a good clip.

„Thank God, look at how stable it is,“ said O'Flanahan.

The fishing boat swerved smartly, positioning itself next to the nearest pontoon, beside a mooring post and some metal steps. A large man, wearing a deep blue, woollen shirt and a captain's hat, waited while we climbed aboard.

„Welcome to my ship, the HELEN.“

„This is a fantastic vessel, Captain Languenoc? My name is Paul Sirenne.“

„Glad to finally meet you, Mr Sirenne. Jacques told me all about you. Thanks for the comment about HELEN. I built her myself, not another one like her,“ he answered, an easy smile complimenting his rugged features.

„How come it's so stable?“ wondered Coulter.

„There are two more pontoons, well below the waves on the surfaces. I control how much ballast they hold. Gives us instant mass and almost complete stability. I have four massive water jets powered by that generator over there. They control the motion of the boat in any direction, giving me the ability to move at speed or to stay exactly where I want.“

„Well I'm impressed,“ Coulter admitted. „Did our package arrive in time?“

„A helicopter dropped it off ten minutes before we left port this morning. Good timing on your part, Mr Coulter. Follow my man. He'll show you where it is, while I tend to things here. I'll have you where you want to go in about twenty minutes.“

Curious about the mysterious package, everyone followed Coulter to a large crate with the words »Oceanographic Institute of France« stamped on the side. We made quick work of opening it, using a couple of crowbars provided by the Captain. Our host had thought of almost everything.

„Anyone want coffee? It's freshly brewed!“

No, I was wrong: he had thought of everything after all.

* * * * *

„People, let me present to you »Calvin the Third«,“ stated Coulter, sounding as if he were showing us a newborn baby. The pride apparent in his voice, he continued: „Calvin is the latest development in remote controlled underwater camera technology. From this console, we can direct and watch Calvin's descent, while sitting comfortably on the surface. Additionally, the console records everything on DVD for later analysis. All we have to do is drop Calvin over the side and we can begin our exploration.“

A Selection from the Weissmuller Manuscript

Fighting the Net

After six months of construction, the infrastructure of our underground complex is well established. I have driven the men hard but it has paid good

dividends. The power station will soon be brought online. The main connecting tunnels have all been cleared and stabilized. We have mapped out most of the upper level caves and will be starting on the lower levels within one month.

We have found many curious things in the caves, the most intriguing being a fast-growing fungus, unique to the caves, which has fascinating bioluminescent properties. It was quite dark when we originally entered into the caves but as we pumped fresh air into them, the fungus emitted more and more light until there was no need to use electrical lamps.

While the refurbishing of the caves is going well, the situation above ground is another matter. When we arrived and completed our takeover, I had felt quite elated by the apparent cowardice of the French Resistance. Now, it is clear I was mistaken. A large component of the local population, commonly called »the Net«, is actively fighting against us.

They are being clever about it. It is a war of passive resistance. At first, there were apparently innocent incidents. Vehicles broke down, gas leaks, fires. After a month of such incidents, I increased security and severely punished any man linked to the problems. It soon became obvious these were not acts of carelessness but rather sabotage.

The Resistance had chosen to fight a battle of attrition. I had to admit it was an effective approach, having developed the process to an art form myself. However, sabotage was only the beginning. The attacks quickly became more aggressive. The Maquis, an extremist section of the French Resistance, made its deadly appearance, attacking vehicles all over the countryside. During these attacks, my men were killed, the vehicle stolen, leaving little evidence behind. No one ever heard or saw anything. Rarely, we found hastily-buried bodies, deep in the undergrowth. Usually, those bodies were mutilated, showing evidence of torture. Too much violence for the Maquis. I suspected the Net was involved.

Within several months, what first appeared as an irritating mosquito changed into a murderous jackal snapping at our heels. Nonetheless, I had to remain completely focused on the development of the cave complex. My Weissmuller skin came with an increasing amount of responsibility. Demands on my time were severe. I could no longer return to the shadows I yearned for. No matter the intensity of my cravings, I found fewer and fewer occasions to carry out experiments. I enjoyed the fear my men had of me and the thought of controlling others held a powerful appeal but these pleasures were not enough to drown out the call for experiments.

The murderous acts of the Maquis incensed me, challenging me to my core. They felt safe in the covertness of their actions, believing their power lay in invisibility. They were wrong. I could turn invisibility into their Achilles' Heel. I would also carry out torture and murder. I did not even need to choose specific victims, so long as the blame fell directly upon the Maquis and, subsequently, the Net.

I would retaliate personally, with every death, every act of sabotage. My acts would bring fear and horror into the Maquis' heart and leave the blame on the Net.

I began going out during the night, alone, draped in the shadows I so loved. I chose a victim at random, performing experiments reminiscent of the tortures wrought upon my men by the Maquis. I would always leave a small propaganda leaflet, bearing the »Croix de Lorraine«, the French Resistance symbol.

Over time, rumors spread and locals began viewing the Maquis with disfavor, attributing the horrible deaths to them. This fear eventually extended into their ranks, distrust spreading deep into the Net. They did not know who was doing the killing, thus were powerless to fight against it, foisting upon them the very feelings of helplessness they wished to force upon me.

With every tactical experiment, the intensity of my cravings diminished and my inner calm returned. I reveled in my dual role for many months, released from the Maquis' manipulations, confident my approach was sufficient to reduce their attacks.

Carrying out these nocturnal activities was satisfying but they were also draining. As a solution, I scheduled a batch of experiments once a week, leaving six full days for the continuing expansion of the cave complex.

One of the rooms fascinated me in particular. My research indicated Francis the First was likely to have been the architect of this chamber, converted into a fabulously wealthy throne room. I knew Hitler would be equally impressed by it.

* * * * *

I was also frustrated by the disappearance of Leblanc and Lindon. They had both vanished well before I neared their small town. They were still acting against us, despite their distant positions. Unfortunately, I had priorities to attend to and could not look for them, no matter their strategic importance. There was nothing they could do against us now, in any case. The stronghold was ours.

As the war progressed, I formulated secondary plans to further destabilize the local Resistance movement, by striking directly at key personnel. A few collaborators, blended into the local army, worked the locals and returned with specific results. The name Vallin surfaced, a name I remembered from stories Hitler had told me. However, this Vallin was careful and we got no chances to trap him. During a covert observation of his activities, I uncovered the familiar name of Leblanc.

I had found Maurice Leblanc's son. He had joined the Resistance movement and was involved in planning many missions. I prepared a very special experiment, one that would send a message directly into his scheming father's heart. Maurice Leblanc would learn the error of his ways. I would be his teacher and the lesson would be difficult.

During the period of Maquis-inspired experiments, I experienced a different excitement. When I carried out dual-purposed experiments, my satisfaction with the process literally doubled.

When I first performed experiments under Hitler's new guidelines, I had felt a similar increase in satisfaction. Recently, with my tactical approach to the

Maquis situation, increasing the level of purpose enhanced the experiments in a way I could hardly explain.

When I combined my basic desire for experiments with both military purpose and revenge on Leblanc's son, my attention and eagerness nearly tripled in intensity. I became infused with energy, my planning reaching heights of complexity I had never previously imagined possible. It was as if I were floating above everyone, my control absolute.

This was the exact reason I had begun my experiments in the first place. Now I knew that I had been looking in the wrong place. The crescendo of my experiment was not its culmination. Rather, my approach mattered. It was all about method and purpose!

I had finally found the path I was looking for, and I embraced it without reserve. Safe in the caves, I planned and planned. Maurice Leblanc's son would pay for his father's sins. Retribution would be at hand. I would carry out Hitler's orders. I would build my fortress.

I would establish my true superiority over all others.

I had found Purpose!

Chapter 15

The Secret in the Depths.

Captain Languenoc had provided a cabin, away from wind and spray, which could damage the electronic equipment. Calvin had been lowered over the side, the portable antenna erected, and we had retreated to the relative comfort of the small room. Our eyes were glued to the monitor as Calvin's cameras revealed the depths of the channel waters.

„Don't forget there's been more than sixty years since anyone's been down there, if anyone was ever down there, of course.“

„There's something there, Coulter. I'm sure of it.“

„I'm with Mr O'Flanahan. I think this is terribly exciting, don't you, Maman?“ asked Raymonde.

Had she just addressed her mother? The answer came when Mrs Leblanc's voice emanated from a tiny speaker, located on Coulter's laptop:

„Yes Raymonde, this is wonderful. It is just as if I were there with you. These glasses are fantastic. Thank Mr Coulter for arranging this.“

Although Raymonde was wearing her techno-glasses, I realised mine were nowhere to be seen.

„I re-routed the signal from Raymonde's glasses, through my laptop, to Mrs Leblanc,“ Coulter explained.

„Look, there's the bottom now,“ Briar said.

Our eyes returned to the monitor. Coulter went on, as he manipulated Calvin's controls:

„These cameras are so advanced, they don't need any light. We are using a combination of sophisticated sonar waves emitted by Calvin. We're coming to the edge of the trench now. If we continue along this path we should reach its end within a few minutes. We should soon see a slight bend on our right.“

The screen indeed revealed a slow bend in the trench wall, leading into a side canyon of some depth. Remembering my dream, I suggested:

„Go into there.“

Calvin headed down the side canyon. It was about twenty metres wide and formed a deep cut into the trench walls. Suddenly the cameras grew confused in the centre of the screen, becoming blurry.

„Let me switch to regular lights for this area. There's something reflective in the centre.“

The monitor image flipped, displaying the end of the side canyon in a stark white light. The steep side walls of the trench closed in rapidly to a sharp line about twenty-five metres in front of Calvin.

„Why is the sonar having so much trouble?“ asked Briar.

„Over there, see those nodules? They could be natural magnetite. The compass is flying all over the place. If the magnetic fields surrounding those natural deposits were strong enough, they would probably cause disruptions to most equipment. Sound waves could be similarly affected by odd compositions of the bedrock, or by certain reflective shapes. There's nothing here. This is a dead end. Let's go back and continue on the original route,“ Coulter suggested.

Calvin turned around and travelled at a steady speed until it returned to the main trench. Heading down to its end, the cameras revealed something in the depths. The view-screen displayed an increasing quantity of rubble. Rock falls were apparent. The trench walls had suffered explosive damage at some point in the past.

I kept looking for a giant underwater owl.

Calvin floated upward, following the wall of rubble. It reached an area definitely cleared and flattened.

„Look at that,“ exclaimed Briar.

Partially obscured by rubble, at the back of the artificial plateau, was a faint, slightly curved line traversing the cliff wall. Below the line, the stone looked greyer than normal and far smoother.

„What is it?“ wondered Coulter.

„It looks like the edge of a circular entrance, don't you think?“ suggested Briar.

„Is it big enough for a submarine?“

„It's possible, Raymonde. Very good eyes, Briar!“ I said. „Unfortunately, if there had ever been an opening there, it has been sealed, either by the forces of man or nature. No matter the cause, we will have to accept there is no way into the caves to be found here.“

Our common disappointment left a palpable atmosphere in the cabin. Coulter guided Calvin carefully along the natural cleft created by the massive trench walls but found nothing else. The rock-fall covering the ancient opening had eclipsed our best chance.

I could not let go. My second dream had to be right! The first one had been prophetic about the bunker and about Raymonde. I had to keep trying.

„Coulter, why don't we go back to that side canyon? All those strange readings have left me a bit curious.“

„Yeah, why not? Since we're here and all,“ added O'Flanagan.

„I was thinking about going back there anyway,“ Coulter agreed. „I didn't like that weird stuff with the cameras and the compass either. We have about another hour of onboard power for Calvin. There's no umbilical with this baby. It's all wireless, can you believe that? We're back at the bottom now. I'll turn around and go back the way we came.“

The side canyon was about thirty metres wide and slowly curved to our left, revealing the odd clump of magnetite on the jagged canyon walls.

„Why is this side canyon so clean while the other one is full of debris? You would expect it to be... Well, isn't that strange.“

„What is it, Coulter?“ asked Briar.

„Sorry, it's just that... Wait a second, let me do something.“

He directed Calvin sideways, while keeping the cameras centered on the cleft at the end of the side canyon.

„Look at the cleft. There is something very strange about it. It seems to be following us.“

„Not following us, my boy, it's changing perspective! Will you look at that,“ exclaimed Briar.

The cleft did indeed seem to be constantly re-adjusting to remain in the exact centre of our field of vision. There could only be one explanation.

„Make Calvin head directly into the cleft. Aim it right at the centre.“

Coulter complained about crashing expensive equipment but did as I asked. We watched the monitors intently as Calvin inched forward, closer and closer to the rock wall. As we neared, the cleft stretched out and the image distorted.

„Uhm, I'm losing Calvin's signal, something's going on down there.“

„Keep going, push the motors to the max and power up all the sensors on that thing.“

„But it'll crash.“

„I don't care. Just ram it. Do it.“

Coulter unwillingly aimed it for the wavering cleft. At the exact point when it should have smashed into the stone cleft, everything went crazy on the monitor. The image warped bizarrely on both sides, stressing the centre point until it completely split apart. Calvin's cameras were wobbling as they flashed on giant silvery disks, one on the left and the other on the right.

„I'm losing Calvin. I can't hold it,“ screamed Coulter, in a fit of panic.

Calvin entered an uncontrolled spiralling descent. Just before Calvin's signal failed completely, the cameras whirled around one last time, giving us a single view of a long tunnel heading into the cliff.

* * * * *

Calvin's command centre had been turned off, useless now, with the loss of the deep-sea camera. Coffees had been refilled and Coulter was preparing an analysis of the amazing footage we had obtained.

„Everybody gather round. I'm going to replay the last moments at half speed.“

The screen brightened for a moment and the image coalesced into a view of the seabed floor, as we approached the side canyon *end*, which we now knew to be a disguised passage.

„Did you see those strange owl eyes? What do you think those were?“ asked Raymonde, her words giving me a start.

My dream.

„Hold on, we're getting there, the weird stuff's about to start. Let me slow it down to frame by frame. Here we go.“

Coulter ran his fingers over the keyboard, presenting a still image of the two canyon walls forming the cleft.

„Now, Calvin is about to start moving sideways. That was when we noticed the bizarre *change of perspective*,“ informed Coulter.

„Look, there it goes,“ stated Briar, „the perspective jumps with each frame. It's as if the meeting point of the two canyon walls is re-adjusting to our changing point of view.“

„Each wall seems to be stretching or compressing, depending on where we are. The end result is the cleft is always right in front,“ O'Flanahan added.

„It's got to be an illusion of some sort,“ affirmed Coulter. A voice spoke up from his speaker. I had forgotten Mrs Leblanc was still looking at everything through Raymonde's glasses.

„I've seen something like that before. That strange effect of always having the same point exactly in your centre of vision. I'm not sure if that information can be helpful.“

„Anything could be useful at this point, Mrs Leblanc,“ I replied.

„It's just a small area downstairs, in a corner, near the front desk of the Villa Leblanc. I had mirrors installed in the corner and placed some plants in front of it. It made the corner look so much bigger. Whenever you looked in the corner, you couldn't see your face. It was always hidden by the joining point of the two mirrors, the cleft. You could bend your head this way or that and the corner seemed to shift with you, matching your every move.“

„Maybe those disks are mirrors,“ theorized Coulter.

O'Flanahan made a desultory gesture.

„Mirrors? You can't be serious. Look in front of you. We are seeing a three dimensional image.“

„Hold on, O'Flanahan,“ I objected. „Coulter, fast-forward the video a bit.“

Once again, we witnessed a strange flattening of the cleft, during the underwater camera's final, calamitous approach toward the canyon wall.

„Freeze it for a second, would you Coulter? Now, O'Flanahan, look at what is happening here: all cleft details are grainier and stretched out. This supports Mrs Leblanc's comparison to a mirror. However, I don't think these are regular mirrors. Move ahead a bit more, Coulter.“

A line appeared in the centre of the screen.

„This is where I lost control of Calvin,“ remembered Coulter.

„It's also when we saw those huge owl eyes,“ added Raymonde.

„I don't think they were eyes.“ I predicted. „Move the images forward until we see them again.“

Coulter complied quickly, just as curious to see them revealed. The line grew wider and wider, until the canyon walls were completely gone. By then, Calvin was rotating uncontrollably in a wide circle, falling to the seabed. The images swirled slowly until the first eye came into view. Coulter froze the image.

„Will you look at that,“ exclaimed Raymonde „It does look like a giant owl eye but it is a mirror, isn't it?“

I nodded.

„Yes. I believe we are looking at a concave mirror, built on an inconceivable scale, able to project a very large image. When I was younger, a friend showed me a magic trick. It was a small, black conical pyramid with an open top where a penny floated. Try as you might, you could not touch that penny. Your fingers would just float through it because, in fact, the penny wasn't there. It was sitting below, in the bottom of a bowl-shaped mirror. Because of its concave shape, you saw the penny's reflection floating in front of the mirror surface, not behind it.“

„Look, Calvin's rotated around and there's the second mirror, exactly opposite the first one. This one is a bit clearer. We can see more details. Gosh, it's huge. What's that shape in the middle?“ wondered Coulter.

„I think it's a miniature side canyon wall. The mirrors reflect the image, hugely magnified. The two mirrors act in concert projecting an illusion of rock walls in the center. That's why the centre kept shifting. We were looking at two projected images,“ I added.

„Hey, check that out,“ Coulter exclaimed, freezing the image again and jabbing his finger at a corner of the monitor. „The whole wall is covered with small pocks. That explains everything.“

„What are you talking about, Coulter,“ badgered O'Flanahan.

„Calvin's deep sea camera worked with sound waves. When we went into the side canyon and looked at the end, the signals got all messed up.“

„I remember that. You had to switch to regular lights,“ remarked Briar.

„That's right. Whoever built this place covered the walls with small concave indentations. Any sound wave hitting those pocks would be sent careening in some side direction and the signal would be lost. It's brilliant. That magnetite was probably planted too!“

„It explains how this place stayed hidden for so long,“ mentioned Briar, „They certainly planned well.“

„Look at tunnel,“ pointed Raymonde.

There it was, the tunnel I had known we would find. There had been no doubt in my mind; it simply had to be there. A large arch stretched over the entrance to the tunnel, shaped somewhat like an owl's beak. The dream was complete!

We had found the way in.

Now, all we needed was some convenient transportation to get us physically down there.

„Coulter, we need to talk to Captain Languenoc.“

* * * * *

The Captain was heading to a point off Etretat's beach. We would use his ship as a base of operations. He had assured me the second item Coulter had ordered could be docked easily on the left pontoon. Coulter informed me he had been

successful in its rental. Given the amount of money he had thrown at the owners, the item should be here within a few days! Languenoc would contact us when it arrived. We decided to head back to shore. Jacques Vallin made a quick phone call, using O'Flanagan's cell phone.

„The fishing boat is on its way. Should be here soon.“

„I can't wait,“ said O'Flanagan, his voice laced with sarcasm.

As we approached the beach, it seemed to be much busier than when we left. I didn't like it. I looked at the Vallin Brothers.

„Keep a sharp eye out.“

„Yes Sir, Mr Paul.“

The fishing boat hit the bottom gently, carried in by the fading crest of a wave. The Vallins jumped out first, Ives holding the boat steady, while Jacques looked around like a hawk. I helped Raymonde out. There was tension in the air, as if an electrical storm was about to break. Both Briar and O'Flanagan stayed close as Coulter jumped out, obviously feeling the same apprehension.

Suddenly a man stepped out from the crowd, limping badly. Norton! He was still holding the stubby little pistol, aimed straight in our direction, his face contorted in a rictus of rage.

Briar stood on my left. O'Flanagan was on my right. Raymonde and Coulter were behind me to one side. Norton aimed his pistol, seeming ready to shoot. He was mumbling. I couldn't hear what he was saying. A woman noticed Norton's levelled pistol and screamed. He jumped at the sound, his face jittery, and the crowd ran away from him in panic.

A blur of metal shot towards Norton from my left, planting itself right into his gun arm with a solid *thock*. Norton screamed in pain, dropping the pistol into the sand.

Jacques Vallin had thrown a knife! He was holding another one, looking ready for anything.

Norton grabbed his arm, his screams turning to whimpers as he bent down desperately to pick up his pistol. Before Norton could reach it, Ives Vallin's big meaty hand clamped down on the Inspector's ravaged arm, grabbing his shoulder with the other hand. Lifting the man bodily off the ground, Ives shook him roughly. Norton looked done in.

Most tourists had run away but a large group of men remained, forming a loose circle around us, perhaps curious to see what would happen next.

Ives lowered Norton and we approached cautiously. The long knife was still sticking out of his right arm, blood dripping from the wound. He was barely conscious. I stopped in front of him, Briar hovering protectively. Norton looked up and laughed. It was a pitiful sound.

„You again... I know you now. I was wrong earlier when I said it was me in the mirror. he-he-he. I know that now. I figured it out. You almost had me fooled. It wasn't me, it was YOU!“

Listening to him speaking in circles, I was finally convinced Norton was the Shadow-Killer. It had to be him. He had two personalities, one forever chasing the other. Whoever got in his way became the Shadow-Killer to him. No wonder so many of his friends had been killed.

Having spoken those few words with a failing, gasping breath, Norton collapsed weakly in Ives Vallin's arms. In a sudden frenetic move, his left hand shot out, grasping the knife stuck in his right arm. He wrenched it out in a desperate jerk, blood spurting from his wound, trailing after the knife. He twisted out of Ives' grip and jerked his body up, bringing himself to a standing position. Using his last reserves of energy, he stabbed at me with the bloody blade.

Briar, the ever-alert Briar, jumped in between, his hand jabbing out in a frantic attempt to stop the oncoming blow. Norton swerved the knife past Briar's outstretched arm, aiming directly at his chest, instead of mine. Briar swivelled around in a rapid sideways move, barely avoiding injury. His left hand grasped the stabbing knife by the handle, squeezing Norton's hand in an iron grip. In an adrenaline-infused move, Briar jerked the bloody knife out from his ripped shirt, Norton's arm trailing, his hand pinned inside Briar's tense grip.

For a moment, everything froze!

Briar was standing, his arm held high, the blood-covered knife reaching the top of its arc. I glimpsed a light of anger and rage still burning in Norton's eyes, despite his desperate circumstances. I could feel Raymonde's hand on the small of my back and saw O'Flanahan standing to my right, his eyes open and alert.

Then, time clicked back in, and the knife flashed, impelled with tremendous force, as Briar twisted it back down and under, slicing directly into Norton's abdomen and slamming it up, straight into his heart! The flame of life faded from Norton's eyes and, after one final breath, he fell limply to the ground, taking the Shadow-Killer's secrets with him.

Briar released the knife in horror.

„My God, what have I done? It all happened so fast. First he tried to stab you, then I stopped him and I... I stabbed him. I couldn't stop myself. I'm sorry. So sorry.“

Raymonde patted his back in sympathy. Thankfully, Briar had escaped serious harm. I thought him finished for a moment. He had moved so very fast! So had the Vallins. Everybody had, while I stood around, doing absolutely nothing!

„He was crazy, Briar, nothing could have stopped him. It would have happened sooner or later. At least now, it's over,“ O'Flanahan said.

I was thankful for Briar saving my life but now a man was dead because of me, even if it was the Shadow-Killer. Perhaps if I had told him what he had wanted to know, things would have turned out differently.

The circle of discontented men had grown to an alarming number. Now with Norton's death, the men became downright unruly and the circle tightened. Some were holding improvised weapons, branches, clubs and shotguns.

„This doesn't look good. You'd better handle this, Sirene,“ O'Flanahan said, supportive as ever.

Jacques Vallin stood protectively to my right and Ives towered over my shoulder. The crowd was upon us, several shotguns aimed at our feet. They looked determined.

„It's time for you to leave. You are bringing too much attention to this place,“ blustered a thickset man. His shotgun inched up, adding a serious threat to his words.

„No one is going to threaten Mr Paul. No one, do you hear? Or you'll have to deal with me, and you all know me and what I can do,“ Ives Vallin roared, completely ignoring the shotgun. A knife, thrown with incredible accuracy, planted itself into the sand, inches from the thickset man's feet.

„And me. You all know me too,“ Jacques warned. The thickset man shifted his feet and retreated back into the anonymity of the crowd, his gun almost slipping from his trembling hands. The crowd had taken a step back, not expecting the aggressive reaction of the Vallin brothers. I used the lull to try and take control of the situation instead of being buffeted by it. I would not remain frozen again.

„It's time to calm down and talk this out. Is there one who could step forward and talk? A bit of civility could lead us much further than threats and violence, don't you think?“

Many looked away, unwilling to meet my gaze. Another man stepped out from the group.

„I'll talk.“

He was a tall man, thin, with piercing blue eyes and a bushy moustache.

„Very well. My name is...“

„We don't care who you are. You're just like all the others. We've dealt with your type before. You've been snooping around since you arrived. We've been watching you. We're used to regular tourists, even the Lupin fanatics, but when you had that chase yesterday, we felt it was time to get you to move on. With what we've just seen, a murder this time, on our very beach, we know it's time for you to go. We'll deal with the body. No police. Just pack your bags, leave, and never come back.“

They were watching us?

„Why do you want us to move on? Why are we a threat?“ I shot back. While the others milled around in indecision, the man explained himself:

„We don't like strangers who snoop. This is our town. You come here to stir up trouble. You could destroy everything we have here. We want you to leave.“

Well, that was plain enough! However, it didn't explain much, sounding more like dogma than anything. Familiar dogma.

„You said you were watching us. How long have you been watching people?“

„Since long before you were born, mister. This is our town and we intend to protect it,“ he answered.

This was starting to make sense, in a strange sort of way.

„Do you remember when you started protecting your town?“ I asked, looking around at each of them „Do any of you? Or are you doing what your parents told you? To protect your town? To keep the Secret? Do you remember what started all this, what started the Net?“

A murmur swept through the crowd. I was on the right track.

„You're what's left of the Net aren't you? Doing what your parents did? Not knowing why it had to be done, just that you had to be on the lookout? That's it, isn't it?“

„How do you know all this, Mister? How do you know about us?“

„Allow me to introduce Raymonde Leblanc, Maurice Leblanc's great-granddaughter. Some of you may not know her. She has been living in British Columbia for a while. The reason your Net was created was to protect Maurice

Leblanc, her great-grandfather. I suspect you may have forgotten this. So, let me remind you: your parents, and their parents before them, swore to protect Etretat's big secret. The Leblanc family held that secret. You are here to protect her."

The man with the moustache resisted:

"How do we know you're saying the truth, Mister?"

"What if I said it was the truth? Would you believe me, you bunch of idiots?"

The thin, wheezing voice came from the edge of the beach, barely audible, where a taxi had stopped, disgorging a determined-looking Mrs Leblanc and an older man with two crutches.

Bequilles!

"That's right, you all know what I did in the war, so don't you go questioning me. I know these people and I know why they're here. You idiots couldn't even realize you're not here to kick them out, you're here to protect them. It is a bit my fault because there is something I have told none of you, never thinking the time would actually come: That man there, standing next to Miss Leblanc, is Paul Sirene! Long, long ago, I was told by Raymond Lindon a man with that name would be coming one day and, on that day, purpose would return to our town. Well, he is right there in front of you. Quite a reception you've given him I must say. I'm too tired and too old for all this nonsense. I'm going home."

Without another word, Bequilles returned to the waiting taxi, heading back to his small apartment. His task was done, thanks to Mrs Leblanc. She was removing her techno-glasses. She had done the one thing she could to help. Her timing could not have been better.

But how could Bequilles have known about me, before I was even born?

By the time Mrs Leblanc made her way to the dock, the crowd's mood had changed completely. People were moving off the beach, letting us join Mrs Leblanc. Several men converged on Norton's body, including the Vallin Brothers. O'Flanahan accompanied the group, eager to be part of a developing conspiracy. Within moments, the crowd had dispersed, as if nothing had taken place.

The man with the moustache walked along with us.

"We're really sorry, Mr Sirene, Miss Leblanc. We just didn't know. We've been watching for so long, we lost track of the most important things. We won't make that mistake again. You can count on us. You do what you have to. We'll keep an eye out for you."

These loyal Etretatais had been given an incredible sense of purpose, to protect something so important it could never be revealed. It had set them apart from everyone else, like a *country unto itself*, as Leblanc had said.

My head spun with the enormity of it all: a single event, distant by a century, was still affecting thousands, perhaps millions of people today. I returned in my mind to when Leblanc and Hitler entered into those caves. That moment had sent ripples out into time, affecting everyone in its path, right up to today, culminating in Norton's death moments ago. A shudder ran up my spine, as I understood the responsibility for these caves was being thrust directly into my hands. Although I had not yet set foot in those caves, I was already irrevocably connected to them.

A band of sweat broke on my brow and I felt faint, thinking of Norton's blood, Leblanc, Hitler, the caves, and Bequilles with my name on his lips.

„Paul, are you all right?“ Raymonde asked, noticing my change in demeanour.

I was spinning, my head whirling, buffeted by the events, everything overtaking me. I felt as if my life was spiralling out of control.

„I need to sit down. I seem to have lost my bearings,“ I said. My thoughts continued unravelling and I felt increasingly dizzy.

„Don't worry, I've got you, Mr Paul,“ Ives said, his strong arm giving me support I suddenly needed.

I was helped to a beach chair, proffered by a concerned man nearby. I sat down and immediately closed my eyes, trying to slow the insane spinning.

„Here's some water,“ Raymonde said, sliding a water bottle in my left palm. I put it on my forehead for a moment, savouring its coolness. I uncapped the water bottle and took a long drink, keeping my eyes closed, regaining a bit of perspective. I opened my eyes, adjusting to the sunlight.

More than thirty people surrounded me. My friends were nearest, with members of the Net in the background. In the distance, a man with a black bag was running towards us. The amount of concern overwhelmed me yet again and I closed my eyes for another moment.

„Paul? You're scaring me,“ Raymonde said, her voice thick with emotion.

„I'm okay, I think. I just need a bit of quiet,“ I answered shakily.

„Make way for the Doctor! The Doctor is here.“

The crowd parted, allowing the man with the black bag to approach.

„There's no need for all this fuss, really,“ I objected weakly, only to be tut-tutted by the doctor.

„Why don't you let me be the judge of that, young man? Hmm? Move back everybody. Give him some room, he needs fresh air.“

His hands flew all over, checking my pulse, temperature, eyes, ears, heart, nothing escaped.

„You seem to be suffering from mild shock, young man. Everything should be fine after a good rest. Would you like a tranquiliser?“

„Uhm, no, I don't think so but thank you. There's no need to go to all this trouble,“ I argued again.

„Listen, young man: if I took the trouble to come here this fast, you can certainly take the trouble of following my orders. You get some rest. Let things sort themselves for a while.“

The doctor gave my shoulder a quick pat and snapped his black bag shut.

„It's all over folks. He's fine. He'll be up and around in no time.“

* * * * *

I was lying on Raymonde's bed, resting as ordered. My friends had stayed for a while but eventually opted for the restaurant. Everyone was slightly uncomfortable, especially around Briar. Raymonde entered.

„Are you up for some company?“ she asked.

„Sure. I'm feeling much better now. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to scare anybody.“

„I know. It's okay,“ she said, as she sat on the bed.

„It all happened so fast. Norton attacked and he, uhm, he died, and the Net confronted us. After Bequilles mentioned my name, I was standing there, my

thoughts rolling around Leblanc and Hitler going into those caves. That's what started it, I think. That single event caused a huge impact on the entire world and nobody even knows! Hitler's actions in World War 2 are directly related to these caves. My entire family's history, my father's murder, is all due to Leblanc and his plans to leave a heritage. A killer is now dead because of us. My name is not even my name, it's Lupin. Bequilles said my arrival was foretold decades before I was even born. Everything around me was connected to these caves, even you. And now, it was my life being affected by these caves. I had nothing to hold on to, nothing that was mine. It was all for the caves."

"You seemed ready to faint. You got so pale."

"My head was spinning. It just wouldn't stop. As a final blow, with Norton's death, I realised, with inescapable clarity, that the responsibility of this secret was being placed solidly into my hands. Why me? Why did they prepare all this, Leblanc, Lindon, Lupin? What were they doing and why was it so important that I return?"

"You've got to give it some time. Despite the shock of Norton's final moments, at least we know it's over! The Shadow-Killer is dead. We are free of his manipulations. You can lay your family to rest, their deaths avenged. As for Leblanc and the others, all that happened a long time ago. It's over and done with. We may be just finding out about it but the story itself is finished."

"Is it, Raymonde? It doesn't feel finished. It feels vibrant and alive. You are right about one thing: Leblanc, Hitler, Lindon, Lupin, they're all gone. However, I can feel their influence on everything. No matter that they are dead, their ideas, their thoughts have lived on and the result is I have been brought here, to uncover the mysteries they left for me."

The past was gone but it was also still with us, appearing between the cracks, directing our movements, its ideas still powerful, undiminished by the passage of time. As I lay there, reflecting, Raymonde leaned over and gave me a hug.

It became longer, until she stretched out and we fell asleep in each other's arms.

* * * * *

A knock on the door woke us up. A glance at the bedside clock told me it was almost suppertime. I felt grounded again after the much-needed rest. My shoulder was better, almost back to normal. Raymonde opened the door.

Mrs Leblanc was standing there, holding two steaming plates.

"I thought you two might be hungry. Everyone else has eaten and retired to their rooms. No one felt much like speaking anyway."

"Come in, Maman. Thanks!" Raymonde exclaimed, taking the two plates from her mother. I sat with them at the small table. For a while, no one spoke. We picked at our plates, too excited to be hungry. Giving up, I leaned back, looking at Mrs Leblanc, while Raymonde resolutely tried to finish her plate.

"Mrs Leblanc, I have something I would like to ask. It might be a bit forward on my part but I simply must find out."

"Paul?"

"It's all right, Raymonde," Mrs Leblanc said, "I know where he's going with this. Go ahead, Paul, ask your question."

„I’ve been thinking about the role you’ve played in our discoveries. For example: You were there, just in time, to save me, when I was in the Vallin’s house. There’s the comments you made about Leblanc’s journal which started us on our chase to Perpignan. You knew by heart the address of the place in Perpignan, where you and Maurice Leblanc stayed. The ditty which helped us find Maurice Leblanc’s journal. Sending us to Bequilles. There’s Hitler’s letter displayed prominently in Maurice Leblanc’s office, which you brought me to see. Almost everything we have achieved has been due to your timely intervention. Today, your timing was perfect, when you arrived with Bequilles in tow.“

„Just ask your question,“ Mrs Leblanc prodded.

„Very well. You seem to know much more than you have let on. Do you?“

„Of course I do. I am the grand-daughter of Maurice Leblanc. How could I not? Surely that must have been obvious to you for a while now.“ she admitted, her stance completely different. Her back was straighter, her voice sure and confident.

„Maman?“

„Yes, my dear, it’s true! After Grand-Papa’s death, friends of the family, part of the Net, brought me up. Raymond Lindon played a role in my upbringing as well. When the time was right, he gave me some letters from Grand-Papa. They revealed many things about what he had prepared. The letters told me Paul would come and that I should help him find answers. Raymonde, I was going to tell you about all this, on your thirty-fifth birthday as arranged. When Paul arrived six months early, everything moved so quickly I had no opportunity to sit with you and explain.“

Raymonde was shocked.

„I’m so sorry, Raymonde, but Grand-papa was very clear on certain points. I had to wait until a specific time before I could tell you everything.“

„Everything, Maman? Is there more?“

„Grand-papa left us more than a few letters. He left a trust, a very large trust, with over one hundred million Francs. The money was entrusted to me, to prepare for your return and for Paul’s arrival. So now, following Grand-papa’s wishes, the trust will be passed on to you, my daughter, so you may help Paul finish what was started so long ago.“

„And what is that, Mrs Leblanc?“ I wondered aloud.

„Why, to reclaim your heritage, our combined heritage, Paul. My ancestors and yours have prepared the way. You have only to reach out and it will be yours. For a while now, Bequilles and I have been the only ones to know the truth. The Net had been allowed to lay dormant, another part of Grand-papa’s plans, waiting for the day of your arrival. I was prepared for all these things. Nothing could have prepared me for you two ending up in love.“

She stood up, gazing at us tenderly:

„I couldn’t be prouder.“

With tears in her eyes, after a brief hug and kiss, she left the room.

„You know what this means, don’t you?“

„What, Paul?“

„We’re both multi-millionaires now.“

* * * * *

Arriving downstairs early next morning, I was back to my old self. Entering the restaurant with Raymonde, I found Jonathan Briar and Mrs Leblanc. The others were nowhere to be seen. Briar stood, concern evident on his face.

„Good morning to both of you. I am glad to see you up and around.“

„I am feeling much better. How about you?“ I added.

„I am fine. I thought I might be bothered about what I did to Norton but I am not. I rid the world of a monster and that has to be a good thing.“

We sat down and the waitress took our breakfast order. Briar continued.

„Physically, I was very lucky. I escaped with only a few scratches, thank god. Last night I was in shock but this morning, reason tells me Norton would have stopped at nothing to get at you. Despite all that, the memory will be with me for a long while.“

„Where are the other two?“ I asked, curious.

„Captain Languenoc called for Coulter. He had some news about whatever it is we are waiting for and needed some help smoothing things over for a speedy delivery.“

Coulter was excellent at smoothing difficulties.

„O’Flanahan went down to the beach, with plans to walk around and get the feel of the place,“ Briar added

Breakfast arrived and we ate. I stuck to coffee, not feeling hungry. I didn’t think Coulter would succeed in his endeavours today but there was a fair chance tomorrow morning might bring better luck. Briar had a pensive look in his eyes.

„Paul, would you be up to a walk in that wonderful garden out back? I have a few things I would like to share. It shouldn’t take more than a few minutes.“

„Certainly. I’ll bring my cup of coffee with me, if that’s okay, Mrs Leblanc? I’ll be right back.“

„Take your time. I’ll sit here with Maman,“ added Raymonde.

Briar and I made our way outside. Stepping down the stone stairs, we walked along the brick path.

„My boy, you had me quite worried yesterday,“ Briar started.

„I’m sorry about that. I don’t know what came over me.“

„The thing is, I think you know exactly what happened. That is why I asked you to come out here. We’ve known each other for more than ten years, so I guess it’s no secret I’ve come to look upon you as the son I never had. This means so much more now that your father is gone. That’s why I found yesterday so painful to watch. My boy, I must speak frankly.“

„Go ahead. I know you mean well. Hey, you just risked your life to save mine.“

„All these events are putting an unexpected, perhaps even unwanted, load on your shoulders. You cannot understand how this comes to be and you cannot accept you are being singled out,“ Briar said, his finger pointing at me in emphasis. „I have lived many years longer than you and have travelled all over the world. Experience has taught me much. You have stayed mostly at home, surrounded by your books, always living as if in a cave, missing out on life. Yesterday, that shock was a necessary step for you, Paul.“

We sat down on a stone bench.

„Your breakdown was, I believe, the result of refusing to face up to these events. You stood frozen, when Norton attacked, unwilling to protect yourself. Had I not

been there, you might well have died! It is time for you to stop being afraid, to stop being the *armchair detective* and to accept that, in the real world, events have conspired to place you in the centre of things. If you keep refusing what is, you will drive yourself mad. Life is asking you to step up to the plate. What are you going to do? Close your eyes and look away? Or are you going to grasp what is in front of you for all it's worth? In so doing, you may just discover what life has in store for you," Briar finished.

My fear slipped away. This was what I had been preparing for. Briar was right! It was time to step up to the plate.

I still didn't know why it was intended for me but I would no longer shy away. I would follow the Great Hunt through to the end. If this was to be my challenge then so be it!

„Thank you, Briar, thank you.“

Raymonde was running towards us, a note in her hand.

„You won't believe this. The Net has invited us to a meeting. They want to know what's going on.“

„What? When?“

„Mid-afternoon. They're sending someone to pick us up in an hour.“

* * * * *

Coming in with Briar, we met O'Flanahan, just returning from his expedition, looking excited. Sitting down in the restaurant, I called Coulter, informing him of the upcoming meeting with the Net.

„We haven't been here two days and already the cat's out of the bag. What are we going to tell them?“ he wondered.

„I don't know. I don't want to lie. Let me think about it. I'll come up with something.“

„I'm still wrapping things up here. We had a few glitches and it got kind of expensive. I won't make it for that meeting. The good news is we should be good for tomorrow.“

„Great. I knew I could count on you.“

Snapping the cell phone shut, I looked at O'Flanahan. He was acting like a little boy, bursting with news, hardly able to contain himself.

„This morning, I went down to the beach and checked out a bunch of those touristy features. I saw that mysterious door in the cliff and the oyster beds. On the way back, I met up with Ives and Jacques Vallin and we decided to share a bottle of wine. We started talking about the coin Old Man Vallin had left in the cigar box hidden under his mattress, you remember?" he asked, waiting for confirmation that I did, indeed, remember. Seeing my nod, he continued:

„One thing led to another, we ended up at their place, where we found another bottle of wine. And the coin, of course. They wouldn't let me bring it back but I made a pencil rubbing so I could show you.“

He pulled a tattered sheet of onion paper out of his trouser pocket and laid it on the table.

„If you look at the date on this side of the coin, you'll note it says 1306. If you're familiar with coins, you'll know this one was minted by Edward the Second, King of England. I've been wondering a wee bit, if this coin couldn't possibly provide us

with proof that Cartier did steal some gold from Oak Island? Couldn't that just be possible? Couldn't it, Sirenne?"

O'Flanahan was insufferable. He was throwing his beloved Oak Island farce in my face again, using whatever was conveniently at hand. It was unfortunate the gold coin fit nicely with his theory, making it irritatingly harder to refute.

„What can I say? Yes, I must agree with you that a gold coin minted in 1306..."

He interrupted me.

„An English coin.“

Raymonde unsuccessfully tried to suppress a smile and Briar looked up at the ceiling in exasperation.

„Yes, an English coin minted in 1306 might be construed to fit into a contrived theory about Oak Island, IF you could prove the English had been buried there. I'm sorry, O'Flanahan, but it's so weak it hardly holds up. While the gold coin does nothing to hurt your theory, there is simply not enough to support it.“

He shook his head, his lower jaw sticking out, making him resemble even more the bulldog he made me think of. He was about to bark a counter-argument but Raymonde stopped him, laughter obvious in her voice:

„Mr O'Flanahan, I have enjoyed listening to your theory. Perhaps we could talk about it again later? Right now, we have to prepare ourselves. It is nearing mid-afternoon. The Net will be here to pick us up soon.“

I finished my coffee and got up.

„I'm not sure what to expect. I'm just going to have to play it by ear.“

„Well, I hope you can play a good tune, my boy,“ Briar added pointedly.

Chapter 16

A Meeting With The Net.

A procession of three vehicles arrived, exactly on time. A well-dressed chauffeur stepped out of a Rolls Royce, opening the rear door.

„Mr Sirenne, Miss Leblanc. Would you both be so kind as to step into my vehicle? The others will follow in the remaining cars.“

We headed out of town. After several circuitous turns, the driver stopped on the side of a non-descript dirt road. Two other cars were already parked. They were empty. The driver hurried around the Rolls Royce and opened the side door.

„If you would follow me.“

The driver led us into the woods, revealing a small trail. It was well maintained, having recently been shored up in many places. We arrived at a small clearing. Near the far end, a small group of people waited. A short, pudgy man smiled widely as we approached, holding out his thick hand.

I shook it, surprised by the steel in his grip. He was literally bubbling with enthusiasm.

„Mr Sirenne, I am so pleased to finally meet you. Thank you for accepting our invitation. I am Adrien Tonnetot, Mayor of Etretat, This is our treasurer, Mr

Joseph, and that is my good friend, Alain Boisvert. We are the, uhm, the ad-hoc committee selected to represent the Net. We brought you here, to show you this.“

Mayor Tonnetot pulled back the branches of a large bush, revealing a narrow, marble slab, bearing a long list of names. Each had died on the same day, in 1916. The list had a simple heading:

„You will be avenged!“

„This stone was found about ten years ago. It had somehow been completely forgotten. Who placed it here? More importantly, why? No one seemed to know. It cannot be coincidence these people died on the same night. It is what has re-awakened the Net, sleeping for so long,“ the mayor explained.

He remained quiet for a moment, looking at the stone slab.

„Yesterday, when Bequilles revealed you were the one we had long waited for, most of us were convinced this was the time to bring the Net fully back to life. Many of us have met to discuss this issue. Most of our members want, no, need answers. Our history demands it. That is why I called this meeting and I must thank you for agreeing to attend. I felt it best to discuss these issues privately with you for now. Later, I will inform the Net about the topics we have discussed. These people who elected me, my friends, have been waiting for this moment a very long time. Since our birth, we have been indoctrinated in a society of our ancestors‘ making, prepared for a purpose we never understood: to help you. Now that you are finally here, Mr Paul Sirene, after all these years, not one of us can wait a single moment longer. We need to re-discover our purpose.“

His earnest words filled me with amazement. These people wanted me not only to help them understand what had brought them here but also to lead them. It made me flash back to my father’s words:

*„A real story ends near Etretat,
Lost until Paul infers new ideas subtly.
You ought understand responsibility,
Necessarily after moiling Etretat.“*

Could this be the responsibility to which he was referring? That word *moiling* was certainly indicative. It meant to dig, to move dirt, to mess things around. The more I dug, the more responsibility I would find.

The mayor continued:

„Our parents all told us some things were best left forgotten and time had to pass before Etretat could regain its glory. They also said a day would come when our heritage would return. Until then, we were to keep quiet, each swearing to it on our fifteenth birthday. Silence Above All! We all know how much we already owe Maurice Leblanc and Raymond Lindon. Every Net member, every family in Etretat was helped financially in some way by them. Loans, no-interest mortgages or outright donations of cash, there was no limit to their generosity. The survival of our town is due solely to them. We cannot ignore what these men have done for us in the past.“

I realised the Net members owed everything they had to the caves, to the riches within and to the moral men who had created the Net. Briar's words came back, reminding me of my nascent role as leader of men, a role I had never expected to play.

„I am just as indebted to Leblanc and Lindon as every one of you. My presence here is the result of my great-grandfather preparing the way for me, using clues and codes. Just like each of you, I was placed on the trail of a forgotten mystery and, as you have seen, a dangerous one, even today. However, we have not completely solved this puzzle yet, I am sorry to say. In the past, Maurice Leblanc shared nothing of what he knew with Net members. Today, the conditions requiring this are long gone and the original people concerned are dead. Time has healed many wounds. I think we must break with tradition and share our knowledge with the Net. We are all involved.“

No more games, no more deceit, not with these people. An entire group was ready to help me. All I had to do was to trust them, to give them the answers they had been seeking all their lives:

„In 1911, Maurice Leblanc found a secret so phenomenal it had to be kept out of public hands. He was not the only one on the trail. Another man knew of the secret, a true monster. Maurice Leblanc decided he must do whatever possible to stop him. Your ancestors banded together to help protect Leblanc and Etretat but the cost was high.“

I lowered the tone of my voice and spoke respectfully: „I know what happened to the people named on your mysterious stone. They were killed by the man Maurice Leblanc was fighting, probably one of the most dangerous men in the world. Adolf Hitler!“

The Mayor's eyes widened. I continued:

„Leblanc appealed to his friends, to Old Man Vallin, to Raymond Lindon and, in turn, to all of your grand-parents. A Net was formed, a group of people protecting something they knew nothing about. Leblanc hatched a trap for Hitler that would take many years to unfold. Once sprung, decades would have to pass, to give the world time to forget. So Leblanc prepared for the future, when it would be safe, the monster dead and forgotten. Your parents were part of that plan, as were mine, far away in Canada. Now, together, we will re-discover what has lain hidden in your midst. Unfortunately, the path is not a simple one. Our only chance to be successful is to work together! I have been called here, to Etretat, to do this very thing. So, let us seize this moment. The Net must return to full and active duty, our ancestors must be honoured.“

The Mayor was beaming. He grabbed my hand, pumping it effusively.

„I think I can speak for all of the Net when I say: We Accept! We accept most proudly and eagerly. The Net has returned, with Paul Sirene at the helm! With you in place, there will be nothing we cannot achieve.“

* * * * *

I was dreaming again.

I was floating over Etretat, high in the air, moving in a great lazy circle around the Aval cliff. It was night yet I could see clearly. Yellow light illuminated

everything, emanating from inside the cliff, growing brighter by the second, shining through the rock.

A swastika lit the cliff from within using this overpowering light. I circled it in total silence, my eyes glued on the symbol of so much hatred and so much pain. Seeing both front and back, something about the opposite images drew my attention but the light interfered, growing in brightness. The light increased in intensity until it blotted everything out. A repeating, strident noise began intruding through the blinding light.

Slowly I became aware my eyes were open. I was looking at the sun, peeking through the shades of Raymonde's bedroom window. I averted my burning eyes, annoyed by the racket next to my ears.

The phone was ringing.

It was Captain Languenoc. Our package had arrived and they were getting it ready. It was time to go. We were soon dressed and fed, anxious to get back to Languenoc's ship.

Except for O'Flanahan, perhaps.

To our surprise, we found a much better boat waiting, surrounded by a large crowd of new friends. The Mayor had been true to his word and all Net Members were keeping a watchful eye, making sure we were left in peace.

It was a much more stable and speedy trip out to the HELEN. I was wearing my glasses again, recording for later analysis. Coulter and I had stayed quiet about what we had obtained and the others were understandably very curious. Upon arrival, Captain Languenoc led us to the other side of the platform, where a large, bright orange, oblong vehicle was floating in the water, tethered solidly to the pontoon.

„Gentlemen, allow me to present to you the ARGOS, a sixteen-passenger electric submarine,“ proudly intoned Coulter. „It can go to a depth of one hundred metres, which is perfect for us. The owners agreed to rent it for a few weeks for four hundred thousand dollars. If we like it, we can consider that a down payment. Isn't she beautiful? And simple to drive, too. You should see the controls.“

„It's fully charged and ready to go, Mr Sirene,“ informed Captain Languenoc.

With his help, we crossed the gangplank stretched between the HELEN and the ARGOS. I was the second to step onto the submarine deck, wobbling slowly in the calm waters. I ascended the small ladder, stepped onto the conning tower and went down the open hatch. Inside, I was confronted by a spacious area, with two rows of seven seats. There were two more seats at the front. Small viewing ports allowed each passenger to look at their underwater surroundings comfortably.

Coulter ran to the front, seating himself in the Pilot's chair.

„Paul, come up here with me. You can take the Captain's chair.“

Raymonde sat right behind me as I tried the luxurious Captain's chair. A row of screens displayed views from all around the sub. Coulter was already pressing switches and toggles.

„How do you know what to do?“ asked Briar, looking over Coulter's shoulder.

„I downloaded the manual last night and brushed up on the specifics. I've done tons of simulated submarine dives before, so I'm already familiar with most of the controls. I'm closing the hatch now.“

He pressed another button. With a whirring noise, the hatch lifted up, locking with a solid clang. My ears popped as the pressure increased and stabilised.

„This baby is all automatic, so it's easy to operate. Okay, everyone put your seat belts on. We're going down!“

A muted whine accompanied bubbles flowing up both sides of the ARGOS and it slowly sank into the channel waters, moving forward at a brisk rate.

„It's so quiet,“ commented Raymonde. „Look, I can see fish.“

We examined the marine life as we continued our descent. I experienced apprehension when the gloom became darkness. Lights flashed on, dispelling my vague feelings.

„There's the bottom. I've got our position marked, Let's set our proper heading. There. Now the ARGOS knows where to go.“

We reached the underwater canyon quickly. Coulter reduced speed, slowing the ARGOS to a crawl and we headed into the side canyon. The sub's powerful lights exposed the strange optical illusion once more. Even though I knew it was illusion, it still remained completely convincing. Slowing further still, we approached what seemed like a solid rock wall. I tensed as we inched closer, my hands gripping the arms of my chair tightly.

„Thank God, there's the line. I thought we were going to crash,“ exclaimed O'Flanagan, breathing a sigh of relief.

The cleft had split in two, a dark line appearing where they joined. The line grew wider, revealing the optical illusion for what it was. Halfway through, Coulter slowed the ARGOS to a complete stop, giving us a chance to examine the huge concave mirrors. They were made of metal plates, polished to a perfect sheen. Requiring no energy, it was a brilliant camouflaging system. Simple and effective.

„There's Calvin!“ shouted Coulter, jabbing at a screen in excitement.

Calvin, our lost remote camera, was lying on the seabed floor where it had landed after it lost our controlling signals.

„I had Captain Languenoc attach a magnet to a winch under the sub, preparing for this exact possibility. I think we can recover Calvin. Bear with me for a few moments,“ he explained, his fingers flying over the controls.

The submarine inched forward imperceptibly. The main screen switched to a camera below the submarine, illuminating the seabed floor. Calvin was almost directly below. He was getting closer and closer to the centre of the screen, where red crosshairs had appeared. The moment Calvin lined up with the crosshairs, Coulter pressed another button and a large magnet floated down, wavering from side to side as it descended. Its aim was true, landing solidly onto Calvin's back.

„Contact! I've got him,“ exclaimed Coulter in glee.

„Enough of this time wasting, Coulter. It's time to go down that tunnel,“ prodded O'Flanagan.

„I was just trying to get our deposit back,“ Coulter shot back. Once the remote camera was nestled safely under the ARGOS, he activated the propellers, starting us moving towards the exposed tunnel. It headed under the cliff at a sharp angle. Nothing but a submarine could come here.

„Move forward slowly until we've reached the end of the tunnel. Everyone keep your eyes peeled,“ I cautioned.

The ARGOS slid forward, exiting the tunnel. Coulter brought the sub to a full stop. We were in the bottom of a large rock bowl, shaped almost like a giant pipe. The sides were close. Coulter filled the ballast tanks with compressed air and we began rising. The walls vanished from view, forming a vast chamber.

„The radar’s detected something floating above. It’s almost as large as the ARGOS,“ informed Coulter.

„Can we surface beside it?“ I asked.

„Yes. There’s plenty of room. It’s like a small lake up there.“

While we continued our ascent, the waters became clearer, as if light were coming from above, which should be impossible in a cave. By now, it was easy to see the shape Coulter had detected. It was large and cigar-shaped, appearing distinctly like another submarine. Its shape was compact, like ours, and covered in a reflective yellow metal. Its surface was pitted with the same indentations as those in the camouflaged entrance.

The ARGOS broke the surface of the calm waters. Coulter turned off the submarine systems, opening the outside hatch. The ambient, yellowish light was strong while seeming to have no direct source. It reminded me of the light from my dreams.

„We’re here! Time to disembark.“

„Me first,“ O’Flanahan said, running for the hatch and lumbering up out of sight.

Soon, we were standing on the ARGOS ‘ deck, looking around in awe. We were in a massive chamber. On the far left were huge stalagmites surrounded by a small natural landing. On this side, a long dock led to a concrete stairway winding its way upwards. The ancient submarine was moored to it.

„Look at that sub. It’s all gold!“ whispered O’Flanahan, his voice hushed.

It did indeed seem covered entirely in gold. It was sleek and stylish, almost feral in its design. Embossed on the conning tower was the Swastika symbol, putting to rest all of our questions about Nazi involvement. They had been here and they had left their flagship behind!

The dock was a massive structure stretching for a distance of at least thirty metres. At its end, the concrete staircase climbed along the vaulted walls of the cavern. Far above, a large concrete structure overlooked the entire cavern. Two gun turrets jutted out, one on each side.

A deep silence filled the cave, broken only by the occasional drip of water and the lapping of small waves.

„Let’s take the gangplank and stretch it across between the two submarines. After that, we should be able to get onto that dock,“ suggested Jacques Vallin.

Once across, we located a metal ladder fastened to the dock. Climbing onto the dock, we looked around for a moment then went up the wide staircase. It didn’t take long to reach a dizzying height.

Looking down, both submarines reminded me of toys, floating in the translucent water, light reflecting from everywhere, dancing designs over the walls. We continued the climb, the irrepressible O’Flanahan always several steps ahead. He entered the guard room, after examining one of the gun turrets, its barrel aiming downward, untouched by human hands in decades.

„There’s a way into the caves in here, guys.“

Inside the long, narrow room, O'Flanahan waited by a door.

„It certainly is quiet,“ said Raymonde.

„Some systems are still active. I can feel dry, fresh air coming from that doorway. There are still more than sixty-five metres of cliff above us. Fresh air could not possibly be filtering down here without help,“ Coulter mentioned.

I opened the door, any trepidation easily overwhelmed by curiosity. Walking along a well-lit corridor, still without any apparent light source, I saw several entrances. We stopped briefly at the first two, rooms intended as barracks. Checking the second room, Briar stopped suddenly, his eyes peering in the corner.

„What's that, over there, in the corner, by that bed frame?“

Coulter walked over and checked the indistinct shape. He recoiled in horror, his hand held over his mouth.

„It's a dead man!“

We rushed forward, more to see the body than in sympathy for Coulter. The years had softened the outline of the man, mummified by the dry air.

„There's another one over here.“

O'Flanahan had found it hidden behind a desk. Mummified, like the first.

„How did they die?“ asked Raymonde.

„They don't seem to have been wounded. It's like they just dropped where they were standing,“ observed Briar.

Bending down to look at the second body, he leaned on the wall for support. He pulled his hand away in surprise, looking dumbfounded.

„What is it?“ I asked.

The wall was darker where his hand had touched, leaving a slowly fading imprint. His hand was now glowing faintly. I touched the wall too, the first contact a surprise. I could understand why Briar had pulled his hand away. The wall felt soft and alive, its surface leathery. I had thought it was metal, painted a reflective white.

„These walls are bioluminescent.“

„Exactly, my boy. Whoever built this knew what they were doing.“

„Both of these men are curled up in a fetal position. That's why we didn't see them at first,“ exclaimed O'Flanahan. „Look at the hands. They died clutching their throats. Their mouths are frozen open in a last gasping breath.“

„These poor men,“ observed Raymonde.

„Poor nothing, Miss Leblanc,“ retorted O'Flanahan. „Look at those uniforms. They were part of the SS. These were very bad people. I don't pity them for one second.“

„Still, something caused both of those men to drop right where they stood,“ commented Briar. „I think these men were poisoned or suffocated.“

Ives Vallin grew agitated. His brother jumped in quickly:

„Don't worry, Brother. Everything happened long ago. The danger has passed. Hasn't it, Mr Paul?“

„I'm sure we're fine. It's been over sixty years. I don't know of many poisons which could last that long. Still, we should be careful. Not everything is as it appears. This is a more of a tomb than a fortress,“ I said, shuddering slightly.

„Let's move on. I don't think we can find much more around here,“ Raymonde suggested, eager to be out of the room.

We returned to the corridor and continued to its end, arriving at a metal door. A screen in its top half area allowed fresh air to flow freely. Entering, we found ourselves in a large octagonal room, a central hub, with eight passages heading off into different areas. Rails were imbedded in the floor. There was small turntable in the centre of the room from which a rail cart could have been sent in any direction. Plaques with symbols above each passageway indicated either their direction or purpose.

One of them was a lightning bolt.

„That might be leading to a generating station.“

Raymonde pointed at another plaque:

„Could that one indicate another connecting hub, like this one?“ she asked.

It was a symbol, shaped vaguely like an octopus, with eight arms around it. Below it was an arrow aiming upward next to a staircase symbol.

„Yes, another hub, likely one above us,“ I agreed.

„How big is this place?“ exclaimed O’Flanahan.

„We could get lost in here!“ realized Briar. „We’d better be careful.“

„Don’t worry, we won’t get lost,“ added Coulter. „Using an enhanced GPS, I’ve been logging our movements. I know exactly where we are.“

„What does that plaque mean?“ asked O’Flanahan, a certain tone in his voice. He was getting excited about something.

„It looks like rows of shelves,“ helped Briar. „Perhaps the corridor leads to storage areas.“

„Let’s go there,“ urged O’Flanahan.

„I’d much rather go up,“ I said. „I want to get to the entrance under the destroyed foundation of the Fort of Frefosse. We might find more answers there.“

„Fine. You go up, I’ll go over there,“ O’Flanahan replied.

„Why don’t we take a break here? We can use the time to figure out what to do,“ suggested Raymonde.

„Sounds good to me, young lady. I’m quite thirsty. Despite all that water below, this fresh air is very dry,“ Briar said.

Opening her backpack, Raymonde passed out sandwiches and coffee from a thermos. Wanting neither, I sat down on one of the metal benches lining the walls.

„Why do you want to see those shelves so much?“ asked Coulter.

Liam O’Flanahan swallowed his mouthful with a noisy gulp. Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he stood up and walked to a position where we could all look at him.

„Guys, you know I live on conspiracies. It’s my bread and butter. This adventure has been like heaven so far but that plaque has to take the cake. If I’m right, that passage will lead us to the answer of one of World War 2’s most unbelievable mystery.“

Our eyes were locked on O’Flanahan. He did have his moments.

„Throughout the Second World War, the invading Nazis stole countless heirlooms and invaluable pieces of art. As many as one hundred thousand items were stolen. The Nazis had convoys bearing gold, silver, art, statues, and other valuables, streaming out of invaded countries and ferreted into underground hiding places. Eisenhower himself went to examine some of the bigger finds. Over the years, many paintings were recovered. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts

of bereft families and other well-intentioned researchers, over twenty thousand items remain unrecovered. Rumours abound of a »Lost Museum«, filled with the largest collection of stolen art in the world. The caves of Etretat would have been perfect as a hiding place. It is likely Hitler would have felt secure bringing the most valuable art to this stronghold. You all remember the stories from Bequilles and the Vallin brothers, about the constant convoys of trucks. So, just like you, I've been putting two and two together. I think we are standing at the entrance to that »Lost Museum«. Hidden below us might be thousands of art pieces, stolen from the Nazis' battered victims.“

„I'd like to find out if he's right, Paul,“ Raymonde said.

A similar glint of morbid curiosity was reflected in everyone's eyes.

„All right, O'Flanahan, let's go see your shelves.“

* * * * *

We headed down a long sloping corridor, following the rails from the hub. Reaching the bottom, we found a tunnel lined with endless sliding doors, stretching almost as far as our eyes could see. The first room we came to was filled to overflowing, heavily obstructed with crates. Squeezing between boxes, we made our way to a large shelf system. Every crate was emblazoned with swastikas. My mind flashed back to my dream.

The shelving structure was massive. There were four levels, reaching a height of five metres. Hinged glass panels covered individual sections. Opening the first glass panel with a grinding squeak, I exposed a tall, narrow shelf on which rested four large frames. Selecting one at random, I picked up a Rembrandt, a landscape. Seeing a smaller panel, I lifted it gingerly. Another Rembrandt.

This was indeed the »Lost Museum«, its aisles glutted with the spoils of war. We had found a treasure but I wanted none of it. I felt horror instead of in awe. How many people had died to fill this room? Our mood had turned sombre, the joviality of the moment completely gone.

„Let's get out of here,“ O'Flanahan said.

A Selection from the Weissmuller Manuscript

Developing the caves

It has taken several years to complete the cave complex. The power plant, developed by captive scientists, is producing more energy than we will ever need. The illuminating fungus has been trained to grow in all corridors, which are used to provide air for both men and this plant-based light source. A filtering system has been built to control dust and humidity. The cave mapping has been completed, providing us with a layout comprising more than seven hundred distinct caves. A rail system has been added which greatly facilitates the moving of the crates which arrive nightly.

Over the years, I have lost more than fifty of my men through the efforts of the Maquis but I am satisfied to have exacted a high price for their lives. As

well, I have been informed of Maurice Leblanc's death. I can only hope he learned of his son's demise before his own end. Perhaps it even hastened his death. He is now completely powerless against me. As for Lindon, he has vanished. I can feel his influence, moving pawns all around, but never close enough to matter. I know his puppet, Vallin, entered the tunnels a few times. He was much too late. The important one has been blocked. He can play in there all he wants. He will find nothing.

While my men were the ones who constructed the complex, I was the only one who obtained a complete perspective of the scope of these caves. I designed a three-dimensional map which revealed certain oddities. The caves were arrayed in a vast circle, layer upon layer of them, most connected by cracks or tunnels. The central area was solid, filled with an amalgam of rubble, rather than bedrock. We used this area to install our main air shaft and stair system.

Near sea level, we encountered an underground river blocking our way into the lower cave system. We also discovered the water of this river has bizarre curative properties which cannot be explained by analysis. It was used as a potable water source in the fortress, keeping my men in much better health than should have been expected.

The vast rubble-filled shaft in the center of the complex had me baffled. The caves' creation could neither be explained by natural sedimentary process nor by erosion. Water had been involved, to be sure, but another force had been originally responsible for this intricately woven web of caves. From prior research, the only answer possible was the destructive power of a meteorite.

When we dug an exploratory tunnel directly into this central area, we struck a massive object composed of magnetic iron and traces of iridium, about one hundred meters below the cliff surface, confirming the meteorite hypothesis. It had been subjected to high levels of heat, melting its surface perfectly smooth.

It was a gigantic elongated conical meteorite, driven deep into the cliff. The meteorite was too hard to mine and we had no need of unprocessed iron, so, after a few tests, we left it alone. The tests confirmed it had indeed originated from outer space and its magnetic field had likely been created during its superheated travel through Earth's atmosphere.

* * * * *

The time is nearing when Hitler will arrive to take control of the fortress. His double is ready and travel arrangements are being prepared. Hitler has learnt much since I first met him. Our goals were almost one for a while. However, I have found him strangely distant during his last visits. He has issued orders to eliminate my men since they know too much about the caves.

I had expected those orders, since I also agree with that decision, but I worry about Hitler's increasing megalomania. Dare I trust his motivations? He believes the caves are his destiny. What role shall I play, now that his plans have reached fruition?

I too have become fascinated by the caves. We found evidence of Roman occupation and of their extermination. We found countless caches of gold and jewels, hidden in various locations in the caves. Several of these caches had been pilfered, probably by Leblanc and his cohorts. The gold Hitler had stolen from the caves had come from one such cache.

That did not stop me from reserving several caches for myself. Hitler could have his art and his paintings but I would have my experiments, my purpose, and the gold from the caves.

I have left the massive throne room almost completely intact for Hitler. Behind the giant tapestries, I found ancient burial niches, filled with Neanderthal skeletons. It impressed Hitler to no end as I had known it would. This throne room would be a fitting, parting gift, from me to him.

In retrospect, I believe meeting Hitler has had a beneficial impact on my life, providing many lessons. I have also recognized the caves still have much to teach me and I do not wish to relinquish my control. Despite Hitler's achievements and our previous arrangement, I believe he is a weak man, no longer able to make the proper decisions, to proceed in the right direction.

I do not have this weakness.

I see things far more clearly than he, unhampered by bothersome emotions. I had long thought this a flaw but my experiments have proven this lack to be my strength. It allows me to see into the center of everything. I am free of the rules and the puppet strings which bind all others.

Therefore, I am no longer Hitler's lieutenant.

He is mine!

I will allow him his final illusion. I will remain in the shadows, the place where I truly belong. From there, I can do whatever I desire, control whomever I choose. I will even kill my men as he requests. However, if treachery is on Hitler's mind, he will not find me easy prey and retribution will not be far behind!

Chapter 17

Final Answers.

Having returned to the central hub, we headed for the stairs to the level above. They were a circular affair, going around a large open shaft. At the next level, a passageway headed off to another hub in the distance but the staircase kept going.

„It seems we have found a way to the top, my boy,“ stated Briar.

We continued our ascension, reaching a new level with every turn around the staircase. At the top of the staircase was a grand circular cave. The rails were also present, indicating the open shaft was once used to lower material to the various

levels below. Two larger-than-life paintings of Adolf Hitler hung on the far wall, a large doorway between them.

„Guys, hold up for a second,“ wheezed O'Flanahan, huffing and puffing, still half a level below. Everyone gathered round the top of the staircase, waiting for him. O'Flanahan finished his climb, leaning on the staircase railing for support.

„Should we take a break for you, O'Flanahan?“ asked Briar.

O'Flanahan's face scrunched up in annoyance.

„No, I don't need a break, thank you very much. I'm fit as a fiddle. I just wouldn't mind a drink is all. I can't reach it in my packsack by myself,“ he blustered. „There's no way I want to stop now anyway. We've worked this hard to get here and I don't see why we should stop ten metres from our goal.“

Coulter handed him a bottle of water as we approached the overlarge and pretentious doorway, leading to a high, sloping hallway. The roof overhead was dark bedrock with a faint line in the centre.

„I think we are in the original hallway of the caves. That crack in the ceiling reminds me of Leblanc's description.“ I reflected aloud.

The corridor grew wider, giving way to a large natural cave. On my right was a tunnel leading to an empty chamber. Further on, I noticed the ruins of a primitive locking mechanism over an irregularly shaped opening.

„We must be near the bunker where the fort used to be,“ noted Raymonde.

„The GPS says we're almost under it,“ informed Coulter.

Passing through the ancient entrance, we came to a solid concrete plug.

„They've blocked it. They unloaded all the stolen treasure and the supplies needed to build this place, then sealed the access with fresh cement. After that, coming in here would be by submarine only,“ concluded O'Flanahan.

Retracing our steps led to another hallway on our right. I was reminded of Leblanc, when he entered this place for the first time, almost one hundred years ago. I thought of the small chamber, where the treacherous Hitler had assaulted him. Checking carefully along the left side, I saw the narrow cleft, exactly as described. Stopping the group, I squeezed into the dark crevice, the others following me in. My eyes froze on a dark stain on the ground, still visible through the thick layer of dust.

„That's a lot of blood. No wonder Hitler thought Leblanc was dead,“ remarked Coulter.

Briar found the exposed crack in the wall where Leblanc had discovered the small sack of gold coins. Remnants of plaster, used to camouflage the crack, were still visible. Who could have hidden that gold here and why? Our questions unanswered, we returned to the hallway.

„Leblanc described a large chamber, covered in ancient tapestries, close to here. Let's go find that,“ I suggested.

„What are you looking for, my boy?“ asked Briar.

„I have not forgotten what Leblanc said in his journal. He devoted all his efforts to create a trap for Hitler. It must be somewhere in this place. Everything we have seen so far suggests to me his trap was successful. For example, why is that fancy gold submarine still here? The bunker entrance was filled with concrete and the tunnels under Etretat were sealed by an explosion. So, how did the Nazis leave this place, if they left their submarine behind? Remember those two dead guards,

poisoned or suffocated. Leblanc mentioned the room with the tapestries only once but his words gave me the feeling he thought it important. His trap must have been designed to not be seen as one. It would be something irresistible for Hitler, prepared specifically for him. I think we will find our answer in that room.“

„Well, what are we waiting for then? Let's go find it,“ exclaimed O'Flanahan.

Although work had been done to shore up weakened cavern walls, this area had been left essentially untouched. Jacques Vallin pointed at an arched entrance to our left.

I saw the first body since the two guards, lying near the opening. Ives Vallin found two more. They were clutching their throats, poisoned like the others.

I followed Raymonde's gaze, deep into the room.

I was overwhelmed by the splendour. The cave had been prepared as a King's chamber. Rich tapestries hung on all the walls, woven in gold or silver thread, displaying hunting scenes and heroic battles. Suits of armour stood at regular intervals against the wall. Two ornate chandeliers hung from the ceiling. The brilliance of the lower crystals attracted my attention. I identified diamonds, rubies, emeralds, opals, and other precious stones. Each chandelier held more than three hundred precious stones. A veritable fortune was suspended above our heads.

A large stone platform, a metre in height, stood near the furthest wall, a gilded throne in its centre. Our voices hushed, we approached it. Bodies were lying all around, mummified where they had fallen. From their positions, it seemed they had been assembled around the throne.

„There's something lying by the side of the throne,“ exclaimed O'Flanahan, climbing up the short staircase.

Another body lay curled up beside the throne. It had been hidden by the throne's position. Curiously, one of the man's hands remained extended, instead of clutching at his throat.

„What's he reaching for?“ asked O'Flanahan.

Walking around the throne, I saw an open panel, revealing a hidden cavity below the throne seat. Still held by the dead man's mummified fingers, was the most incredible crown I had ever seen. Covered in jewels, exquisitely carved out of pure gold, it was opulent beyond belief.

„Look at his face. Look at the dead man's face,“ stuttered Raymonde.

There, on the dead man's upper lip, were the remains of a tiny moustache. My eyes swept upwards, seeing the sharp lock of hair going down at an angle.

It was Adolf Hitler!

This was the secret hidden for so long.

Hitler had fooled everyone. His goal had always been to return to these caves, to build an invisible fortress from which he could carry on his insane plans. He trained a double and then, at the peak of his power, went on a secret trip to Etretat, intent on grasping what he sought all those years. Instead, he disappeared, never to return. His double, Maximillian Bauer, was forced to step into his shoes permanently. From that point on, the war effort was doomed. The Nazi machine was headless; their true leader vanished.

Leblanc was the only one who understood Hitler's master plan. He had anticipated his moves, like an expert chess master, and placed his trap exactly

where he knew Hitler would end up: inside the Caves of Etretat! He had designed the perfect bait, appealing directly to Hitler's feelings of megalomania.

The piece of cheese he used was ideal: the most fabulous crown you could imagine. Hitler would have been drawn to it, like a moth to a flame. The moment he touched that crown, it would have been too late.

„Stop that, what do you think you are doing?“ Coulter exploded at O'Flanahan, who was reaching for the crown.

„Don't worry, Coulter. Whatever poison came out of that trap is long gone.“

„Well, I wouldn't like to find out you were wrong. I'd wait, if I were you, at least until we've examined it a bit more.“

A glint of caution entered O'Flanahan's eyes and he carefully inched his hand away from the trigger, seeing it for what it really was. A tempting worm, dangling on a very dangerous hook.

„So my great-grandfather succeeded in his goal. He really killed Hitler,“ said Raymonde.

„Yes, he actually did it. This entire room was designed with one purpose in mind, to entice Hitler to sit on that throne. Once there, he would have eventually figured out there was a hidden mechanism on the chair. It would have been somewhat complex. Nothing straightforward, I'm sure. He would have found that irresistible, bejewelled crown,“ I explained.

„But what killed them?“ asked Ives Vallin.

Coulter, who was examining the throne, asked if he could borrow my technoglasses. He returned to his kneeling position, checking the throne's entire base with the glasses in zoom mode.

„It looks like the plate below the crown is separate from the base of the throne. It could be a pressure switch of some sort. Any movement of the crown would have triggered it.“

„A pressure switch? What for?“ asked Briar, joining in.

„I don't know yet,“ Coulter replied.

„Might I see those glasses for a moment?“ asked Briar.

„Here you go.“

„I'm turning them to infrared mode. I can use it to detect hollows or cracks.“

Briar walked along the raised platform.

„As I suspected, there is a hollow chamber beneath this raised area. The infrared is showing a large hollow rectangle. The space measures about ten metres by seven metres square and is at least one metre deep. Leblanc must have built this huge platform, expertly camouflaged to look like a natural piece of the bedrock, using the space created to hide his poison chamber and his trap mechanism.“

„That's seventy cubic metres! How much poison did they need?“ said O'Flanahan.

„I'm sure with more investigation we will find vents hidden around this room, perhaps behind the tapestries. The poison would have been released in enormous quantities. It does seem like overkill,“ observed Briar.

„Not if he intended to kill any Nazis coming to take over the abandoned fortress,“ I added. „He released so much poison it would take years to dissipate.“

Any subsequent invader would be poisoned upon arrival. That may be why we had to wait so long before our return.“

„Makes sense,“ agreed Raymonde. „My great-grandfather could not take any chances. He turned the caves into a deathtrap, effectively closing them down.“

„We should think of getting back,“ I suggested. „We can return tomorrow and begin a more thorough investigation. There are many questions left unanswered. One thing is certain however. We have finally succeeded in solving the Great Hunt. We now know what they wanted us to discover: Maurice Leblanc stopped Adolf Hitler, and the Nazi regime with him.“

* * * * *

Upon returning to the original hub, Coulter remarked:

„I still can't believe how fresh the air is.“

„You're right. It is surprising the machinery still works,“ replied Briar.

„And that there's still power to run it. I've been wondering what type of power plant could keep working after all these years,“ Coulter returned.

„Sounds to me like you're asking to visit the generator room,“ observed O'Flanahan.

„Yes, I guess I am. We're so close. I'm sure that plaque over the corridor, the one with the lightning bolt, goes directly there. It would only take a few moments.“

The excitement was still running high, despite the long day and everyone agreed to visit the generators. The tunnel led to a monstrous cavern with ten huge boxes in the middle.

„What are those? Where are the generators?“ asked Jacques Vallin, looking around in consternation.

„I don't know. I'm not sure. Let's get closer,“ Coulter muttered.

„Technology's got his tongue,“ sniggered O'Flanahan.

Coulter approached the dull-gray metallic cubes. They towered above us, each measuring five meters to a side. Two massive copper bars emerged from each cube and connected to thick cables. These joined together, snaking around the cubes. Coulter noticed a long control panel.

„That meter. I think it measures voltage coming out of that box there. Look at the numbers. Each is putting out twenty-four volts at, uhm,“ he stopped, his eyes settling on a row of smaller meters. „Four thousand amperes. That can't be right,“ he came back to the panel. „No, it's four thousand amperes all right.“

Coulter stood back in awe. „Good gosh, this system is generating almost a million watts.“

„How is it doing that?“ asked Briar.

„I'm working on it. Give me another minute.“

Coulter put his hand on the nearest cube.

„It's warm. Hey, does anyone have a knife?“

Jacques Vallin, slid a sharp knife out from a leg holster and passed it, handle first, to Coulter.

Coulter used the tip and scraped a gouge in the surface of the cube.

„Ah-ha! I thought so,“ he exclaimed, scraping the cube again, this time removing a small amount of metal. Holding it between two fingers and bending it easily, he smiled in satisfaction.

„It's lead. I know what this thing is, although I don't believe it. I think it's a nuclear battery!“

„A nuclear battery? You've got to be kidding,“ snapped O'Flanagan in disdain. „Those are hoaxes.“

„Actually no, not all of them are. The military has developed some working prototypes. They're not very efficient but they do work,“ Briar remarked. „Looking at this system, they seem to work for a very long time!“

„If they are not efficient, how can they be generating all that power?“ asked Raymonde, still mystified.

„I think it's a question of scale,“ Coulter answered. „Inside that thick lead box, lies a very large quantity of uranium 238. It emits alpha and beta particles which can be harnessed to generate heat. Hundreds of thousands of thermocouples are used to create electricity from the heat. It is designed as a closed system and will last as long as the radioactive material continues emitting its particles.“

„It's surprising you can figure that out so quickly, my boy. I am convinced you are right. A brilliant analysis,“ Briar added, with an admiring look in his eyes. „What is that noise I hear in the background, that loud hum?“

„Well it's not coming from the nuclear batteries. They are completely silent. Perhaps there is some machinery nearby,“ Coulter replied.

„It sounds like it's louder over there,“ mentioned Ives Vallin, pointing at a doorway.

„Let's go check,“ Briar decided, heading off in that direction without waiting.

We ran to catch up, joining him as he arrived at the door, a plaque above it showing a rotating blade of some sort.

„Could be the fan room,“ suggested O'Flanagan.

Opening the door, Briar walked along the wide tunnel. The sound was deafening. We passed a side door, barely giving it a glance. Entering the last room, we found three massive fans in a tall shaft, surrounded by an access platform. A nearby wall was covered with electrical panels, with thick cables connecting to the large fan motors.

One of the fans had broken down but the other two were still powerful enough to move a huge volume of air. It pulled the air from somewhere below and pushed it up a shaft to the uppermost level. From there, gravity would cause a trickling down of fresh air in the entire cavern system. Simple and clever. It was apparent they spared no expense here. The place was built to last. The noise of the fans was overwhelming and we beat a hasty retreat to the corridor.

Retracing our footsteps, Briar stopped at the side door we had previously ignored.

„I wonder what's in here.“

Opening the door, he stood still for a moment then moved slowly backwards.

„There's another body in there,“ he said in a monotone.

O'Flanagan rushed forward.

„His hands aren't at his throat. He's mummified, though. Hey, look at that,“ he pointed at a small round hole in the man's jacket. „He was shot in the back, whoever he was.“

O'Flanagan turned the mummified body over. „He looks familiar somehow. I know, he reminds me of you, Briar.“

Briar peered closer at the man's face.

„His features are similar, now that you mention it, but this is a mummified corpse. I doubt he would have looked the same while alive.“

„One thing for sure: he had way more hair than you, pal.“

Briar was about to retort but paused, noticing a bulge in the man's dried out leather coat.

„What's that?“

O'Flanahan pulled open the cracked leather flaps of the coat.

„It's a book or something. Let me pull it out.“

Working at the dried leather slowly, O'Flanahan removed the old book. He opened it to the first page.

„Looks like a manuscript of some sort. It's written in German. Nice handwriting. Very neat,“ O'Flanahan randomly flipped to the middle, then to the end. „I don't believe it. Guys, this book was signed by Weissmuller. This is his manuscript.“

Who had killed him? What was he doing here? More questions without answers. One deduction was easily made, based on the way he had died. He had been killed before the poison was released in the caves.

Raymonde, noticing another door beyond Weissmuller's body, exclaimed:

„That door has no screen and has a lock. Why would that be?“

The door was tightly sealed and none of us could open it without the key. The quick-witted Jacques Vallin had an idea. He returned to Weissmuller's body and searched his clothes. The result of his search was a Luger and two keys on a ring!

„This Luger's been fired. Twice, I think. It's missing two bullets in its clip,“ Jacques asserted. „Here, Mr. Paul.“

I caught the keys in mid-air and tried one in the lock. No good. The other fit perfectly. The lock was seized with age but gave way under the pressure I exerted. The deadbolt released with a clunk. I pulled the door open slowly, not knowing what to expect.

A ghastly odor was released. Fresh air entered the room, activating dormant lichen on the walls. The increasing light revealed a horrifying sight, literally from Dante's Hell: the room was filled with corpses, piled one upon another. Decomposition stains covered what floor we could see. The sealed room had prevented these bodies from mummifying. They had rotted instead. There were hundreds of dead bodies here.

„Could these be Weissmuller's men?“ questioned O'Flanahan.

Seeing our questioning looks, he explained:

„Sorry guys but I always think in terms of conspiracy. If this place was mine, I might be led to kill anyone who might have loose lips and reveal my big secret. For proof, look at those,“ he added, showing two machine guns visible through tears in rotting tarps. „He hid machine guns under those tarps, called the men in, and the shooting began, like fish in a barrel. The carnage over, Weissmuller shot the last two men, the executioners.“

„Who shot Weissmuller, if all his men were dead?“ asked Raymonde.

„Adolf Hitler killed him!“ I said.

It was the only answer which made sense. The single loose end, after the death of Weissmuller's men, would have been Weissmuller himself, a man privy to all of Hitler's deepest secrets. Hitler would have shot Weissmuller in the back,

completing his own decades-long plan. A fitting end to Weissmuller, betrayed by a man who had betrayed everyone.

We closed the door silently, heading back without a word. Returning to the ARGOS, I reflected on the caves. So many dead. The allure of finding riches here, our original goal, had been completely muted by the reality of what lay hidden here. The legacy my father had left had nothing wonderful about it. It was not about treasure. A burden had been placed on my shoulders, one I did not know if I wanted. Like it or not, the Caves of Etretat were now in my hands.

I made a silent vow to all those who had prepared the path. I would discover what mysteries lay hidden in the depths of the caves. I would hold true to their lofty ideals and adopt them as mine. With my loyal friends at my side, with Raymonde as my partner and an entire town ready to do my bidding, it was now up to me to begin the real task, the real challenge.

I remembered, one more time, the coded words from my father:

*„You ought understand responsibility,
Necessarily after moiling Etretat“*

I would assume that responsibility and I would never let go, not until I solved the mystery of the Caves of Etretat!

* * * * *

I entered the private room, stopping at the hospital bed, where Bequilles lay dying. Upon our return from the caves, we were informed Bequilles had been found on his kitchen floor, stricken by a massive coronary. The doctor had told me he could go any time. Bequilles' eyes fluttered open, still clear. A faint smile graced his lips.

„Sirenne.“

„Yes, Bequilles, it's me. The doctor told me you didn't have much time left.“

„S'okay. Time for me to go,“ he whispered.

„I brought you a parting gift, if that's okay?“ I said.

„A gift? Now?“

„Yes, a gift. Have you ever seen these?“

„Your glasses?“

„That's right. These glasses are special. Here, let me show you.“

I slipped them onto his nose before he could object. Coulter was waiting online, Raymonde next to him. With tears in her eyes, she explained with this was all about:

„Hello Bequilles. Paul told me you don't have long. We thought you might enjoy watching a home-made movie. Before we start it though, I want to say thank you for all your help. We could never have done this without you.“

Raymonde surreptitiously wiped a tear from her cheek as she motioned to Coulter. Bequilles was suddenly inside our submarine, when we prepared to enter the caves for the first time. The big secret he had protected all these years was now revealed. He watched silently, his breath wheezing in and out laboriously.

Halfway through the video, his heart had a serious jump and began failing. The doctor came in but could do no more. Bequilles' held on to every precious second, until, finally, the face of a dead Adolf Hitler was revealed on the video.

Bequilles broke into a big smile.

„It was worth it after all. My life was not wasted. There was a real Secret!“

„Yes, Bequilles, it was real and you kept it.“

My words were wasted. Bequilles could hear no more.

Addendum

A Note about O'Flanahan

Liam O'Flanahan would not allow me to publish this book without including this next section. Despite our many arguments about the subject, O'Flanahan has displayed a single-minded tenaciousness, coming back to this issue repeatedly. No matter whether he is correct or not, in this instance, I have no better theory to offer.

Paul Sirenne

A King's Displeasure

By Liam O'Flanahan

„All right, he's been standing out there for three hours. That should be enough. We want everybody out except for you, Bude. Don't give Us that look, you know exactly what part you played in this and so do We.“

King Francis the First motioned for his Grand Chamberlain to empty the throne room of all the courtiers and attendants. A muted, polite expression of protest wafted up from the closest Courtiers but Francis was firm. His Chamberlain had been instructed. These were exceedingly private matters and none were to be within hearing distance, except for those concerned.

Jacques Cartier was ushered in, the Grand Chamberlain closing the massive doors behind him. Far away, at the end of the large room, Cartier could see the King, sitting impassively on the throne. He wiped his cold, sweaty palms on his pants and started the long walk to the throne.

A few voices had spoken in his ear; people had been asking questions. Last week, two of his men had gone drinking and never returned. Seeing Bude, standing nervously next to the King, did nothing to assuage Cartier's growing concerns. What if the King knew everything?

He was about to find out. He had run out of red carpet and out of time. He took his place, well below the raised throne, looking up at his stern-faced King, with what he hoped was an innocent face.

„Jacques Cartier, We have summoned you this day, because you have incurred Our displeasure.“

The King paused heavily, the silence laced with accusations.

„My King, what could your lowly servant have done?“

„Don't you play that fawning game with Us. You know very well what you have done.“

„Perhaps, your Highness would be willing to provide his servant with the barest of indications as to how one might have acted wrongly?“

„Let Us discuss your trip to the New World. Perhaps that might jar your failing memories.“

Cartier's face fell. The game was up. The King knew. But how much? Cartier had to be brazen. He would not admit anything willingly.

„My trip, Your Majesty? It went perfectly. I'm not sure...“

„So you said in your report. We were quite pleased at the time. However, We were not so pleased when a rumor came to Our ears. Rumors of a part of the trip not reported? To an island? What do you have to say about that? Speak, instead of standing there with your mouth gaping like a fish.“

The anger in the King's voice shot a blast of fear through Cartier's veins.

„Certainly, Your Majesty, your servant did go to several islands he did not report. Most were too small to mention.“

„We thought you might have difficulty remembering. That is why We asked Our Royal Investigators to question some of the sailors who accompanied you on this voyage We funded.“

The King he knew had to know more than he was saying. He was just leading Cartier on, letting him hang himself. Thinking fast, Cartier decided to admit to something, anything, to steer the story away from the most damning facts.

„Your Servant does remember a particular island, now that your Highness mentions it. We rested there for a short while.“

„About two full months, from what We have heard. A large gap in your report, wouldn't you say? And what led you there?“

„Uhm, uh, we, uhm, we were led there by a ship.“

„What type of ship? From what country, tell Us that?“

„We, uhm, we followed an English ship, your Majesty, but, but it was a Pirate ship. They had lost all morals.“

„SILENCE.“

Cartier stopped blubbering. He had lost control for a moment. Luckily, the King's outburst had given Cartier time to calm down. He kept his eyes low, not trusting himself to look up.

„Now go on and tell Us what this English ship was doing to make you follow it and exactly why you felt it was not necessary to include it in your supposedly comprehensive report.“

Feeling like his entire head was in a vise he was being forced to tighten himself, Cartier explained his actions, his shifty eyes locked on the ground, trying to unload the blame wherever possible.

„Your servant's intentions were always honorable, Your Majesty. The English ship was sighted in the distance, behaving, uhm, oddly. Further out, barely visible on the horizon, our man in the turret could see smoke, which could only mean a sinking, destroyed ship, implying Piracy, your Majesty! We followed the ship from a distance, to find out what they were doing. They landed at an island, where they moored in a small bay. They had obviously been there before, your Highness. We

watched as they unloaded several big caskets and brought them to a tree, after complicated measurements from stones on the island. Once at the tree, they dug down a few feet, removing thick oak planks and exposing a hidden shaft leading deep into the ground. They lowered their caskets down the shaft, using a block and tackle. After they were done, they covered the shaft again, hid all evidence of their presence and left.“

„It seems as if your memory has recovered from its sudden bout of amnesia. We wonder how much of what you are telling Us now is really true?“

This line of inquiry had to be stopped, before all was revealed.

„Your Highness, please permit your servant to finish explaining. Your Majesty will see we acted properly all along.“

„Humphfff, this should be interesting to hear. Very well, you have Our permission to finish.“

„We moored our ship and disembarked. Our scouts found where the block and tackle had been hidden. Using it, my men exposed the shaft and went to the bottom, over thirty meters below the island’s surface. Once there, the men found many caskets, which were brought back to the surface, the excitement of the crew turning rapidly into greed. When they opened the caskets, we, uhm, they found only, uhm, cloth, beads, mirrors and, and tin knives. This angered the men, who had been hoping for something more valuable. I had little choice but to allow them to vent their anger, if only to prevent a mutiny, your Majesty.“

„Enough of this prattle. What did you do then, pray tell?“

„My men believed these English pirates would be, uhm, dangerous on the high seas, where perhaps, we ourselves might come under attack by the immoral heathens, so they decided to lay a trap for them.“

„Your men designed a trap? What type of trap?“

„They dug a few small shafts, to allow some seawater to flood the lower chamber where the barrels were found. If the, uhm, the English ever returned, they would learn their lesson.“

„Why did you not feel it worth mentioning all this in your report?“

„Your Majesty, I did not feel good allowing my men to lay such a trap, warranted though it may have been. My actions were not above some small amount of reproach. As well, no real harm had been done. If the English never conducted an act of piracy on the open seas again, then, they would suffer no harm. Justice would only come to the wicked.“

„In other words, you are almost blameless. Apart from a minor straying, you acted properly all along.“

„This is what I have been saying, your Majesty. Your servant has always tried to do the best thing for France.“

There, that didn’t go so badly, Cartier thought. It almost sounded believable.

„Well, your words have satisfied Us. There is only one other matter, Cartier and then, you may go.“

Cartier’s heart soared with elation. He had done it. One more question and he was free of this. He felt brave enough to look up at his King, keeping his eyes as straight and clear as was possible.

„Your servant lives but to answer.“

„Perfect. Then you will have no problem in telling Us about the gold!“

Cartier's entire body froze.

„The g-gold, Your Highness? What g-gold?“

„Stop that stuttering. Yes the gold. Gold like this.“

Francis the First threw several coins at Cartier's feet. Cartier recognized them instantly. He had told his men not to spend their portions until he gave permission. Obviously, not all had listened. Cartier kept his eyes on the ground, knowing the King was spearing him with his gaze, demanding an answer. How would he get out of this?

„Your servant now remembers a few of the caskets, caskets we had not opened until much later did, in fact, have a few pieces of gold in them. I did not think it worthy of mention.“

„We noticed that fact. It seems your first trip to the New World has been a disappointment all around. We sent you there to find diamonds, gold and other riches. All you brought back to Us was two Indians, kidnapped Indians no less, and some few bales of moldy fur. Imagine Our surprise, when We learn Our trusted Captain omitted to mention he had stolen caskets filled with gold.“

„Hardly filled, your Majesty.“

„2BE QUIET AND STOP YOUR LIES. WE WILL HAVE YOUR TONGUE CUT OUT IF WE HEAR ONE MORE LIE. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?“

Cartier fell to the floor, prostrating himself in supplication, keeping his tongue deep within his tightly shut mouth.

„So you followed an English ship to an island, lay in wait while they hid their gold, then stole it from them and lay a trap to drown them if they ever returned. Did We state what happened correctly?“

„Yes, your Majesty, perfectly correctly.“

„Excellent. Now tell Us what have you been doing since you returned?“

„Hardly anything, Your Majesty. I have been exhausted from the trip to the New World and have spent my time resting.“

„Did you perhaps go for a vacation or two during that resting time?“

„Yes Sire. The beauty of France always bring such joy to your servant's eyes.“

„Yes, well, did you feel any of that joy while visiting Our fort?“

„Your fort, Your Highness?“

„Yes, Our fort. You know very well which fort I speak of: the Fort of Frefosse. The one We have been repairing.“

„I did not know it was yours, Your Majesty. It is a lovely fort. I do remember it slightly. I may have passed by it, once or twice.“

The King made a face, upon hearing this last evasion. Getting tired of Cartier's constant slithering shiftiness, Francis took a different tact.

„Imagine Our surprise when Our Royal Investigators informed me of a link between you and the College de France's administrator, Guillaume Bude. Perhaps you remember meeting him in passing as well? When We asked him to explain this connection, can you imagine what he might have told Us?“

The reason for Bude's presence was finally being revealed. The weak-willed fool had probably admitted everything he knew, eager to maintain his present post. Still Cartier refused to give up.

„Your Majesty is clearly all knowing. How could a lowly servant such as I pretend to know what Your highness knows.“

He was good, Francis had to admit but his admiration was easily dampened by the anger he felt at having been duped.

„We learned you have been made aware of what lies beyond Frefosse’s dungeon, thanks to Bude’s loose lips. We have also learned you entered in the fort, having been seen at least twice, carrying heavy sacks and coming back out without them. Also, our neighbor, England, is extremely upset at the disappearance of several of their vessels under suspicious circumstances. We believe YOU HAVE HIDDEN THE GOLD YOU STOLE IN THE CAVES BENEATH THE DUNGEON.“

„Your Majesty, I must admit I did hide some gold in those caves, to keep it safe from my thieving men, but it is hardly anything worth making such a fuss about. I never thought it would cause such trouble. However, Sire, I have carefully written the way into the caves and put it in a safe place.“

„We are amazed at how you constantly change the events to suit you. Do you dare imply a threat on Our Royal Person?“

„No, never Your Majesty. Your servant reveres your Royal Person. It is simply a precaution, in case anyone should do me harm. These are uncertain times, Your Highness.“

Cartier’s veiled words made the King pause. Knowledge of the caves had to be kept quiet at all cost. Too many skeletons buried in there. Francis understood the situation had changed. Until he was assured the caves were safe, he could do Cartier no real harm. Frustrated but used to these cat-and-mouse games, he changed approach immediately.

„We want that gold returned in Our hands.“

„Your Majesty, your servant lives but to obey. I would be happy to return to the caves and...“

„Oh no. You will never set foot in those caves again. We do not trust you. Unfortunately, We still have need of you, as you are Our most knowledgeable man, when it comes to the New World. You can draw a map to your hidden gold. Then you will make immediate preparations to leave France. Until then, you will be accompanied by heavy guard, no matter where you should go. We are banishing you to the New World, for the time being. We shall require you to return there and remove this trap of yours. You are to avoid any contact with the English from now on, and the Spanish for that matter. You will return the two kidnapped Indian sons to their father; you will look for, and return with, real gold and real diamonds for the glory of France, AND YOU WILL NEVER SPEAK OF THIS TO ANYONE EVER AGAIN. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?“

„Yes Your Majesty. Thank you for your overwhelming mercy, your Majesty. I will be forever in your debt and will carry out your every bidding from this moment forward. As long as I remain under your protection, the caves will remain our secret!“

„Shut up you worm. We have heard enough of your sniveling. Remove yourself at once from Our Royal Presence.“

Cartier beat a hasty retreat, almost tripping over his feet in his anxiousness to leave the throne room. He couldn’t believe he had come out of there with his head still attached. Thank God he had taken a few precautions. In fact, it hadn’t turned out too bad.

The King hadn’t even asked about the jewels!

He would draw a confusing map for the King and then head back to the New World and kill those English cowards. When he came back, he would sneak into the caves, get his gold and disappear. It should be a piece of cake.

Back in the throne room, the King was fuming.

„Who does he think he is? Trying to blackmail Us indeed! And you, Bude! How could you have helped that odious man?“

„Sire, certainly you just heard him speak. His gilded tongue is adept at ferreting out support in the unlikeliest of ways. One seems to remember your Majesty selected him over many others, to go to the New World.“

„Watch what you say, Bude. You may be the College de France’s administrator but We don’t need your tongue to have you present your written reports. You would do well to remember that.“

Bude gulped heavily, mentally kicking himself for that comment, but it had been irresistible. The King had been asking for it. Francis continued in his rant.

„As for that upstart, We shall teach him to hide his gold in Our caves. I want you to instruct Our Royal Engineer to begin drawing up plans to close off access to the dungeon.“

„Your Majesty, the restoration of the fort has only recently been completed!“

„Be quiet. You will do as We request. Ensure the hallway leading to the dungeon is permanently sealed and plans prepared to build a secret access to it in Our private chambers. Cartier will never find his way back into those caves. Now get out of here. We don’t want to see you for at least a month.“

Bude ran out of the throne room almost as fast as Cartier had, moments before him, glad the King had not uncovered exactly why he had helped Cartier. He would have to melt those gold coins down. He hurried out, intent on carrying out that task without delay.

The Sirenne Saga

Unknowingly manipulated to become the key in the final phase of a complex conspiracy spanning millennia, Paul Sirenne is led to discover hidden knowledge and gain fantastic new abilities, preparing him for an ultimate confrontation beyond the forces of good and evil.

The »Caves of Etretat« series is a four book, epic adventure which follows Sirenne as he learns the answer to the primordial question: why are we here? Inextricably woven into actual history and intrinsically based on ancient esoteric principles, the series gradually reveals an alternate perspective on the nature of reality, explaining the why and the how of our existence through Sirenne’s personal evolution.

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Book Two: The Four Books of Etretat

In the second novel, Sirenne discovers the real reason for the hidden war: the secret of immortality. Becoming an immortal himself, Sirenne learns of the Abbey, a thousand year old organization dedicated to chasing the oldest immortal on earth, known as the Greyman. The Abbey has given Sirenne control of the caves and its secrets, apparently preparing him for a confrontation with the Greyman. Unfortunately, the serial killer who killed Sirenne's father, Weissmuller, has discovered this knowledge before Sirenne. Now an immortal and constantly dogging Sirenne's steps, Weissmuller seems to be playing a game of his own.

Book Three: The One Book of Etretat

In the third novel, the world is in chaos. Countless disasters are occurring everywhere and a pandemic disease is killing all children in the womb. People and countries, desperate for a solution, are demanding Sirenne's immortality cure. Sirenne knows it's not the true answer and is desperately trying to solve the clues laid out by Maurice Leblanc and the Abbey, looking for the One Book. Changed by his immortality, he develops new senses which give him an increasingly different perspective on everything he sees. At the same time, all events seem to be converging on him. Weissmuller, the immortal serial killer is circling closer and closer.

Book Four: The Greyman

In the fourth and final novel of the series, Sirenne learns that he has been selected to lead the Abbey to the Other, the only being strong enough to defeat the Greyman. Sirenne has mastered electromagnetic flight and the ability to manifest objects and manipulate matter. Weissmuller has revealed himself and an uneasy alliance has been made. The world is falling apart and people are dying by the millions as Sirenne continues trying to understand what is really going on. The unstoppable Greyman is drawing near and an ultimate confrontation seems inevitable. Everything rests on Sirenne's final decision. Will he be able to accept the real answers behind everything?

