

The Four Books of Etretat

The Sirenne Saga, #2

by Matt Chatelain, 1960-

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To Dad.

Prologue

The Discovery.

By Liam O’Flanahan.

**1475 Anno Domini
On the New Continent, near Green Oaks**

The ship floated slowly along the narrow river, sails lowered. A sailor whistled briefly from the lookout on the main mast. He was pointing at a side channel, completely clogged by thick evergreens crowding the shores.

„She’ll not fit through there, Sire,“ first mate Cristophorus stated in a trembling voice. He hated being the bearer of bad news. The captain had been in a foul mood all morning, fingering his scimitar constantly. Heads could roll at any instant. The wrath the first mate feared did not materialize.

„Very well. Drop anchor here.“

A dozen sailors jumped forward, obeying as quickly as possible.

„This channel is as the map describes, is it not?“

„Yes Sire, exactly as the map indicates. We are here, Sire, after all these long months.“

„Don't count my gold before you've found it, Cristophorus. We've yet to find the mine entrance—and those cursed redskins litter the shores like rats, give us no peace.“

„Perhaps they did not appreciate our last encounter, Sire,“ opined Cristophorus.

The captain, reminded of the incident, showed an expanse of long, sharp teeth when he laughed brutally.

„No, I guess they didn't, did they? Oh well, the day is young. They may show their faces still. Call to my troops below. Let's ready our supplies, get to shore, and be on our way. We know what we are looking for. Let's go find it.“

A soldier ran out of the quarters below deck, bringing the captain's war clothes, each item bearing his family's dragon crest, with its distinctive four wings. The soldier carefully placed a pointed helmet on the captain's head, making sure the ears didn't catch on the metal edges, lest he lose his own. He'd barely finished when the Captain moved away, not even acknowledging the soldier's presence. The long voyage was nearly over. The Dragon's treasure would soon be found.

Long boats were lowered and they were off, reaching shore quickly. Cristophorus wasted little time orienting himself, familiar with his captain's short fuse. The map he used was a strange thing, tattooed with a dark red ink on a piece of leather with a skin pattern he did not want to recognize. The captain had never spoken of its origin and Cristophorus had never asked.

The soldiers and sailors assembled on shore. The captain gestured everyone into silence, sniffing the air and peering carefully through the open woods. His head veered towards the east, on the other side of the narrow river.

„The redskins are coming. Let's make sure our second reception is their last one. Foot soldiers, position yourselves by the banks. Archers, hide behind the trees. Let none cross the river. A reward to the first man who kills ten and death to whoever kills none. Now, not a sound until I give the signal.“

Soldiers and archers hurried to find camouflage, fighting for the best positions in the thick bushes, hoping for a large number of redskins. Every man wanted to be guaranteed at least one kill. Slight sounds and unusual bird calls announced the arrival of the redskins, though none could yet be seen.

The redskins would have to cross the narrow river to reach their intended quarry. The attempt began with three young bucks slipping noiselessly into the water under the watchful eyes of the rest. When the three neared the middle without harm, another four bucks slipped into the frigid waters.

The second group neared the shore when a short command sounded. Four arrows shot out from the far bank, reaching their targets unerringly. A dozen more arrows followed, finding targets across the shore with similar accuracy. Several soldiers jumped up, brandishing their scimitars, and beheaded the three redskins on the western shore, before fading back into the brush. The dying bucks sank into the river, their blood pumping into the cold waters.

For a while, all lay still, silence reigning over the forest. On one bank, an entire force lay hidden, waiting for any betraying movement. On the opposite bank, the remaining redskins used every skill to get closer to the murderous invaders. They

had nothing to lose, their squaws and children hacked to death during their last encounter.

It was a hopeless task. The force they faced was composed of formidable warriors. The soldier's bows were far superior to those the redskins used. At close range, the invaders were even more dangerous. They carried long, curved swords and knew how to use them. Metal plates protected their bodies. When cornered they became maddened, striking out with savage rage until they were either killed or they escaped. Nothing could stop them.

The outcome was predictable, the redskins betraying their positions with a move or a sound and dying instants later. When the last one was gone, the soldiers heaved a common sigh of relief. They had each killed at least one redskin. The captain stood, using his scimitar as a cane. He looked across the river, his keen eyes missing nothing.

„Good. Now that the amusement is over, perhaps we will be able to find the fabled mine. Cristophorus, what direction?“

The first mate pointed in a northwesterly direction.

„That way, Sire.“

Cristophorus got to his feet, shouldering his heavy pack, and started to walk, leading the others. He was anxious to get there, just like his captain. It had been difficult to make out all the landmarks on the leather map. The stretching of the hide had distorted the shoreline.

The captain might have refused to tell Cristophorus where the map had come from but whoever had drawn it had been here, in this very location. Other men had been to this unknown continent, men who had brought the Dragon's treasure to leave it behind deliberately. The sacrifice was unthinkable. What was dangerous about treasure? Cristophorus wondered if he should be running from what they sought rather than seeking it so ardently.

After a day's travel, they arrived at a nondescript stone cliff with a natural opening in its side, shaped like a large doorway. Nearby, covered by heavy vegetation, piles of tailings could still be recognized. Once again, the map was right. This was a mine. Several sailors complained about going down into the dark tunnel. The soldiers remained silent, knowing better than to show fear in their captain's presence. He solved the problem by ordering the sailors to set up camp by the entrance, leaving behind three soldiers as guards. The rest would come with him into the mine.

Torches were lit and ropes prepared for the descent. The way was steep, precipitous at times. The tunnel appeared natural, created by some unexplained seismic event in the past. Although the map had led them here, it seemed like they had the wrong place.

The captain spotted a regular pattern to the cracks on a side wall, a pattern where none should have been. Closer inspection revealed ancient cement, carefully shaped and colored to imitate rock. Seasonal temperature change and constant humidity had cracked the surface layer, betraying the presence of stone blocks behind it. This was no wall. It was a hidden doorway.

Tools were improvised and the men began hammering at the cement. It was slow going. The cement broke away in small chips, requiring many blows to make any significant progress. The captain ordered more men to hammer at it. They had

to be careful not to hit each other in the confined space. The wall could not long survive such a concerted assault. Several stone blocks, near the center of the wall, broke away from their mortar bedding, revealing a deep darkness beyond.

The way was cleared rapidly to permit the captain to enter. Seizing a fresh torch, he bent down, passing through the narrow entrance, followed by an eager Cristophorus. Negotiating a long passageway, the captain stepped into a magnificent large chamber, deep in the heart of the mine. The men slowly sidled in beside him, hugging the walls in awe, their torches revealing a fantastic sight. Everywhere they looked, gold and jewels shone back. Boxes, crates, chests, sacks, all filled to overflowing.

„Look, Sire, over there, at the far end of the chamber. Do you see it, upon the stone ledge?“

The captain raised his torch, peering into the gloom. Sitting by itself, distant from the rest of the treasure, was a large, bejeweled, rectangular box, an ornate golden carving on its lid reflecting their torchlight tantalizingly.

„The Four Wings of the Dragon, borne by the Angels of Destiny. At last. The map has truly led us to it, after all this time.“

„Yes Sire. We have finally found it.“

The captain sent one of the soldiers running forward with a torch, to better illuminate the room. The box emitted a high-pitched keening as the soldier neared it. He slowed his approach, turning back towards the captain for instructions, a concerned look on his face. Bolts of lightning jumped from the four Dragon wings, hitting the soldier square on the breastplate.

His muscles cramped, frozen by the immense power pouring into him. The soldier's eyes locked with the captain's, betraying an awareness of his fate, then the man's flesh burst into brilliant blue flames, his blood boiled, and his heart exploded. Before he could fall dead to the ground, several more lightning bursts sprang from the Dragon chest, hitting the soldier's body on the head, the chest, the arms, until nothing was left but molten slag and ashes.

A charged silence fell over the cathedral chamber until a trembling voice made itself heard. It was Cristophorus.

„We might have to rethink our approach, Sire.“

Present Day

A Brief Update.

By Paul Sirenne.

For a few months following the discovery of the caves, I was very busy overseeing the re-awakening of our long-slumbering fortress. The Great Hunt had sent me down an inevitable path, leading me to accept the stewardship of the caves of Etretat. The long-dead Maurice Leblanc, the author of »The Hollow Needle«, along with his cohorts, Raymond Lindon and Arsene Lupin, had handed

their task to me across a gulf of more than sixty years. The Net, a secretive group organized by Leblanc to protect Etretat and its deep secrets, had placed itself entirely at my disposal, looking to me for direction. Using the funds we had inherited, I employed the Net to develop and run different centers in our underground fortress.

I purchased the electric submarine, the ARGOS, which we had originally leased. It had been instrumental in helping us discover the underwater entrance to the fortress. It was soon serving as a touristic attraction during the day and as transport for members of the Net during the night. It even made sufficient revenues to pay for itself. The Vallin brothers took it over its operation, often arguing about who would pilot it.

Raymonde, Mrs Leblanc's daughter and the woman I loved, took over the administration of the Net, a task previously carried out by her aging mother. Raymonde now organized salaries, schedules, supplies, and resolved inter-personal difficulties.

Although our romantic relationship had developed and deepened, we were both so busy that we found little time to spend together. Nevertheless, we remained strongly connected, united in life and in purpose. At times I felt her presence inside me, our thoughts often echoing each other's.

Since arriving in the caves, we had both become infused with energy, working ceaselessly at returning this underground fortress to life, anxious to begin the important investigations.

Fabian Coulter, my life-long friend and a perpetual night owl, had undertaken the installation of a massive computer room, intended to provide us with eyes over the entire world. Coulter, using his phenomenal hacking skills, had tapped into telephone cables dating from World War 2, still connected to the local infrastructure, giving us access to the Internet and free long distance.

Jonathan Briar, my mentor and the man who saved my life when Inspector Norton tried to kill me, was now studying the physical archeology in the caves. After a working vacation in England, where he participated in an ongoing archeological project, he returned to the caves with a team of archeologists. Under his expert direction, they were preparing to delve into the deeper history of the place, along with mapping the layout of the lower caves.

Liam O'Flanahan, the third member of my original team, had appropriated the Weissmuller manuscript and the Leblanc journal, vowing to figure out what they really meant. A conspiracy expert and incredibly tenacious, O'Flanahan would ferret out the codes hidden in those documents sooner or later. Coulter and I had a rendezvous with him later on, to discuss some of his preliminary findings.

I had reserved the three mysteriously identical Hollow Needle books as my area of study. I was planning to search into their history- when I could get to it. I had endless obligations to attend to. Being the one that everybody looked up to was an unsettling experience. I didn't feel different but people treated me with increased respect and, more disturbingly, often with reverence.

Mayor Tonnetot and I had many meetings, planning the development of our growing resources. The entire town of Etretat was now part of the once-dormant organization called the Net. Even though it had been dormant for decades, awaiting my return, the Net had blossomed quickly when exposed to the light once

more. The Etretatais had always believed they had a unique purpose. That knowledge had kept their lips sealed, waiting for the prophesied moment when the Net would return to life.

Many members ascribed spiritual overtones to the prophecy of my arrival, which explained their reverence. I knew the prophecy to be part of an elaborate plan developed by Leblanc and company. Anticipating Hitler's arrival, they had set an elaborate trap in the caves. With a fabulous crown hidden beneath a throne as the trigger, set to release massive quantities of poison, the trap killed Adolf Hitler, bringing the Third Reich crashing down and saving the world in the process. Leblanc had also prepared for my return, sixty years after the fact. In the doing, they had effectively shut down the caves for more than half a century.

Once the right time had passed, their machinations began clicking once more and I was brought out from the folds of history. Unfortunately, their attempts at secrecy had not been entirely successful. Someone else had known about the caves.

Inspector Norton from Interpol.

A twisted murderer, known as the Shadow-Killer, Norton had been afflicted with two conflicting identities, one killing senselessly and the other endlessly hunting the killer. He had murdered my father and his wife, Darlene, inhumanly twisting their bodies into a clue, prodding me to start the Great Hunt prepared by my father. We still had no idea how Norton had known of the caves. He had been remorseless, dogging our footsteps during our mad run for answers.

These answers had led us directly to the caves of Etretat, revealing the hidden role Leblanc had played in history, of beheading the Nazi Regime in a masterful move. However, our discoveries had left more questions than answers. Norton had been killed by Briar, saving my life in the nick of time as I stood there frozen, completely unprepared. Norton had died without saying a word, leaving us unable to explain why he had been after me.

The whole adventure had left me baffled and disturbed, instead of satisfied that the worst was over.

To speed our process of cave discovery, I had decided the original team members, Briar, O'Flanahan, Coulter and Raymonde, should meet at least once weekly. We used the meetings to review the recent discoveries and plan our next investigations. In this way, all were kept informed, able to provide support when needed.

Although planning had brought me here and not spiritual prophesy, it was difficult to avoid admitting the caves felt very special indeed. Unfortunately, the peaceful months we took to supply and man the fortress ended all too quickly when we were thrown into the chase once more from an unexpected direction.

Chapter 1

The Shadow Killer.

Early that morning, Coulter had called me on the wireless intranet that connected all of us together. Raymonde and I wore techno-glasses (sunglasses with built-in monitor, cameras, speakers and microphones, connected wirelessly), the lenses heavily tinted because of the bright fungus-produced light in the caves. Other techno-glasses had been obtained so personnel could stay in contact with each other. Eventually, everyone in the caves received a pair.

They became a popular tool for Net members, who could consult in real-time while examining streaming video of the discoveries. Now people, would just stop working, sit for a break and have an online discussion about the best way to proceed. As many could be brought into the decision-making process as was necessary. Once done, people would disconnect and continue with their work. It made for a certain type of hive mentality and private channels were set up to allow for gossip and social activities. Schedules were organized for video broadcasts at certain times and a „breaking-news“ interactive hotline had been set-up, receiving rave reviews.

Coulter had given me a five minutes heads-up. He wanted to hold an online meeting, telling me to prepare for some bad news. I connected online with Raymonde and we chatted while I prepared lunch in the kitchen.

„What do you think he could have to say?“ she wondered.

„I don't know. He had that look in his eyes. It can't be good,“ I replied. „How has your day gone?“

„Fine. Excellent really. I am on my way to you on the first automated electric golf cart to be brought online. It has an onboard computer and can safely carry anyone to any point in the renovated cave areas. It can even recharge itself. Also, we just finished bringing in the final load of supplies this morning, so everyone is fairly happy. It figures Coulter would announce rain on such a good day. Here I am,“ she got off her cart, her cam revealing a familiar-looking entrance.

Our own.

Turning off my glasses, I opened the main door, finding her about to enter. We hugged tightly then returned to the kitchen, where I served her some lunch. I picked at mine, not hungry. Looking over, I saw her doing the same. She looked up, her deep black eyes probing into mine. We both laughed.

„How about some juice then?“

„May as well, though I'm not thirsty either. I should be but I'm not.“

„Me neither.“

The others signed on and the online meeting got underway.

„What was so important, Coulter?“ rasped O'Flanahan. „We're going to meet in a little while anyway.“

„Indeed, Coulter, I was in the middle of a meeting with the head of the archeological team. We are just about to begin the first excavations. Despite the convenience of this intranet, it is sometimes a bother,“ added Briar.

„Guys, please, this is difficult enough,“ interrupted a nervous Coulter. „Maybe I should just get to the point. You all remember this video, I hope.“

The glasses' monitor changed to show a grainy still from a video, a rearward-looking shot over several passengers sitting in a plane. I remembered it instantly. This was from my plane flight to Paris, the one where I originally met Raymonde,

thanks to O'Flanahan's antics. It was also the same flight taken by Norton, the Shadow-Killer, disguised as Harry Stiles, a man he had killed for his plane ticket. I could see him in the picture, sitting calmly three rows behind me. Coulter superimposed a red outline around his face.

„You all know how I like playing with my videos.“

O'Flanahan snickered. Coulter ignored him, remaining focused.

„This image bothered me in particular. It took me a while to figure out what was niggling at me but I finally got it. Let me give you a hint.“

The image altered, with the fake Harry Stiles fading into light grey tones. It allowed me to focus more easily on what was behind Stiles, a row of seats, filled with various people.

My eyes were drawn by an odd shape behind and just to the right of the fake Stiles. It was a man sitting oddly, his body contorted, slumping in the chair. He was bending his head down, his hand held by the side of his face, as if deliberately trying to hide himself. Something in the curve of the nose and the end of the man's chin struck me as familiar.

My mind revved up, scanning through all the faces I could think of.

Only one matched.

„Norton was on the plane with the Shadow-Killer,“ I said.

„How did you catch on so quickly?“ Coulter exclaimed, highlighting the Interpol Inspector's outline.

„I just saw it faster than everybody else, that's all,“ I replied.

„Well, you are, as always, correct. Norton was on that plane, sitting right behind the man disguised as Harry Stiles, who had to be the Shadow-Killer—and if Norton was on the plane with the killer...“

O'Flanahan, jumped to the logical conclusion:

„Then Norton couldn't be the Shadow-Killer. Ha-ha-ha. I knew it. Briar killed the wrong man.“

Briar's face became apoplectic, his bald head turning red.

„I resent that, O'Flanahan. You're trying to imply I did the wrong thing, that I killed an innocent man somehow. You couldn't be more wrong and you know it. Killer or not, the man was deranged. You all saw that. He shot at Sirenne then attacked him on the beach with a knife, intent on killing him. If I hadn't done what I did, Paul would be dead. I don't regret it, not for a second.“

„Mr Briar's right,“ supported Raymonde. „We can't blame him for doing the best he could. He made the only decision he was able to.“

Briar jumped back in, not finished.

„Thank you, Raymonde, but it's not just that. I don't think any of you have thought this through to its proper conclusion. Sirenne's father warned us of the need for silence. Perhaps Norton was not the Shadow-Killer but he was dangerous nonetheless and knew something about our caves. He was screaming the letters HN at every opportunity, calling attention to the Hollow Needle. How long would our Great Hunt have lasted then?“ Briar added. „We have proven to ourselves the reality of these caves. I am convinced keeping them secret is of paramount importance.“

„Hey, Briar, you just made me realize something.“ O'Flanahan admitted. „When Norton talked about HN, we always thought it was connected to Leblanc's Hollow

Needle book. I'm beginning to wonder if he even knew of the book. Do any of you remember what Norton was screaming at Sirene, when he attacked him on top of the cliff? Didn't he ask Paul about his sister?"

I flashed on the day in my mind, the scene vivid, watching Norton, his gun pointed at me, screaming in the wind.

„Helena. He called her Helena. Helena Norton. The letters HN!“ I whispered.

„You got it, Bucko.“

„I remember that too. Let me call up the video, I've got it right here,“ Coulter exclaimed excitedly.

The monitor image jumped to the streaming video recorded by my technoglasses when I was walking towards the bunker on top of Etretat's Aval cliff, near the bunker, where our adventure had begun. The video fast-forwarded and I watched myself running through my paces. Norton called out to me, holding his small gun at waist height. Everyone saw me whip out my gun in a surprise move.

„Man, that was nervy, Paul. I'd forgotten about that,“ stated an impressed Coulter. The video replayed Norton's key words:

„First, it was my sister, Helena. Then it was my friend Horatio Nolan. Then all the others, always the same. Everybody blamed 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. But this time, the first time ever, I caught him. I SAW HIM. The Shadow-Killer. He was leaving with my file under his arm and 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 disguise.“

I had found those words incomprehensible the first time I heard them, the ravings of a demented killer. Now, looking at them from a new perspective, his words took on new meaning. Everyone spoke up. O'Flanahan took control, talking louder than the rest, anxious to bring his point home.

„Something's bugging me about what he said: 'It wasn't just my sister Helena, but my friend Horatio Nolan, and all the others.' What others?“

Coulter sprang into action, his fingers flashing on his keyboard.

„I can check into that. I'll tap into the Interpol files about Norton.“ He grinned. „I broke into their site weeks ago. I knew there'd be a good reason for it. Here we go.“

He scanned the screen with a practiced eye and exclaimed:

„Wow, it was right there in front of us, all the time. Every one of the murdered victims had the initials HN. Henri Nadeau. Honore Noel. The list goes on and on. Norton's words are making sense all of a sudden.“

O'Flanahan continued spinning logical conclusions.

„If Norton was innocent, then the Shadow-Killer had to be the one murdering everyone around Norton with the initials HN, goading him into madness. When Paul's parents were killed, their bodies twisted into those very letters, it would have drawn Norton like a moth to a flame. Perhaps he never even knew about the Hollow Needle.“

„So, when he talked of seeing the Shadow-Killer reflected in the mirror...“ Raymonde began.

„The very thing which made us think he had two personalities,“ I continued, in tune with Raymonde’s thoughts.

„Yes. Norton saw the Shadow-Killer in the mirror, not himself. He wasn’t making it up. His words were those of a man driven mad by a killer haunting his footsteps for years. It’s absolutely horrifying,“ she finished.

„He was being primed until he was ready to explode. It guaranteed the HN murders would be followed by an enraged cop ready to pounce on Sirenne. It was a set-up, planned by the Shadow-Killer, to lead the crazed Norton directly to Paul’s doorstep,“ O’Flanahan continued.

„O’Flanahan, if that’s true, it also means the Shadow-Killer was planning this thing fifteen years ago at least, when he killed Norton’s sister. I can read the date of her murder right here in the records. Whoever he is, he’s been planning this for a very, very long time,“ Coulter said.

O’Flanahan nodded, looking thoughtful.

„I wonder how old the guy is?“

„Maybe the killer needed someone for us to blame, to focus on, in order to take our attention off what he was really doing,“ suggested Briar.

„That sounds exactly right, Briar,“ supported O’Flanahan.

„It seems he has succeeded in his attempts,“ I added. „So far we still don’t know who he is, where he is and why he is there in the first place. At least we know he is out there. We can hopefully take measures to protect ourselves against him.“

„If we can find him. He certainly lives up to his name. He has successfully remained in the shadows, watching our every move, using us as puppets,“ stated Coulter.

„The only option available to us is to continue our efforts. We might learn why the killer is prodding us. He knows more than we do about this mystery. I think he’s looking for something only we can provide. Until we find that, there is a fair chance we will remain safe,“ I reasoned.

„I agree, Paul. The Shadow-Killer has not attacked any of us personally to date. As long as we keep doing what he wants, he will likely remain in the shadows. It gives us a window of opportunity. Let us seize it and find some answers but let’s do it faster than he is expecting. Then, he will be in our shadow,“ Briar added, as forceful and focused as ever.

We finished our online meeting on that note. Raymonde and I discussed the daily tasks ahead. Her late afternoon was clear but lunchtime was jammed with final meetings with department heads. I had cleared my day in order to concentrate my efforts on examining the three Hollow Needle books, an area of research I was convinced held our answers. I had even been dreaming about it.

Now, I could put it off no longer.

Chapter 2

Deciphering the Code.

I followed Raymonde out to the electric golf cart. She selected Coulter's cave from the list. The vehicle was programmed to avoid objects and people, keeping the ride smooth all the while. It took the recently installed lift in the center of the huge main circular staircase and went down two levels, then travelled along a side tunnel for a hundred meters.

Weissmuller had built the place solidly and planned it well.

Every level had one central hub, reached by the main staircase. There were ten levels of caves, with each level having an average of seventy caves. The deeper the level, the smaller the caves. The lower cave levels had been designed as living quarters and many Net members had moved in with their families. The upper levels held community halls, main kitchens, hospital, meeting rooms and research centers. Our caves were located on the uppermost level. There were more caves below the ten levels but those had neither been reached, nor explored. They were to be the focus of future attention by Briar's archeological team.

Raymonde dropped me off with a quick kiss, eager to go. She had a meeting with Jacques Vallin, to talk about security. I stood in front of Coulter's cave, holding my satchel. He had chosen the location for its central placement in the cave complex and its proximity to the main wiring station. Through it, he could access all cave systems, controlling them remotely from his cave. He had enough processing power in there to rival the CIA.

I entered, finding Coulter at the center of his command center, sitting on a wheeled stool, flitting from keyboard to keyboard, completely absorbed in his tasks. I coughed, jolting him out of his concentration. He jumped, swiveling around on his chair, and smiled sheepishly.

„Geez, Paul, you scared me. I was just putting the finishing touches on a dedicated search-bot program. I see you brought the books.“

„Yes, finally. Our recent conversation has galvanized me. I have allowed the day-to-day tasks to move my focus from where it should have remained. Meanwhile, the Shadow-Killer keeps planning and sneaking around. I don't like it. Not at all!“

„Don't blame yourself too much, Paul. Organizing the fortress was necessary and you know it. By bringing all that manpower in, we turned a tomb into a vibrant community, with everyone eager to help us solve this thing. And I have a feeling we're going to need them.“

„Me too,“ I agreed. „Although we have retaken control of the caves, we are no closer to solving why Leblanc, Lupin, and Lindon developed such a complicated plan to get me here after sixty years? It seems like tremendous overkill. They could just have left a simple note.“

„I know what you mean but you're not considering all the facts. There was a time element involved and it had to be dealt with. Leblanc could neither anticipate how many Nazis would be in the caves, nor how many knew about them on the outside. When he planned to poison the air in the caves, he planned for the long term. He was going to make sure anyone invading the caves would die in them.“

„You're right, of course, Fabian. Time was necessary for the events to be forgotten. Throughout history the caves have always remained hidden, unnoticed. Yet they seem to have played a crucial role in history during the last two thousand years at least. Let's not forget that Weissmuller's manuscript described repeated

walling up of the entrances, attempts to hide the caves. Leblanc stated in his journal that he had been given the role of cave protector. He felt the true task of understanding them would be left to another.“

„That would be you.“

„Yes. That would be me, thank you Coulter. It is hard to accept. Still, they gave us tons of money, a pile of clues and a loyal workforce to help us get here.“

„Well, why don't we start by working on these books of yours?“

„Sounds like a great idea.“

„Want some coffee to start us off? Yes? Coming right up.“

Coulter busied himself in the kitchenette and returned with two steaming cups. I accepted one with thanks, though I wasn't thirsty.

„Where do you want me to place the books?“ I asked.

„Right on top of that glass surface over there. I'll scan them into the computer. It's a laborious process but once it's done our analysis will proceed more easily.“

I sipped my coffee, hardly tasting it, while he worked. His computer digitized their exterior image down to the microscopic level. He started scanning the inside of the first book but was interrupted by a crash outside his door, followed by a muffled „Sorry“ and several swear words. The door opened to reveal a disheveled O'Flanahan.

„Stupid electric golf carts,“ he complained acerbically.

„What happened, O'Flanahan?“ Coulter asked, watching O'Flanahan ineffectually swat his hair back in position with one hand.

„They never told me not to grab the steering wheel. Stupid thing's all automatic. I hate that stuff. I like to feel in control. Anyway, your door's a bit dented but it still opens okay.“

Coulter returned to his scanning, shaking his head.

„Did you come here just to destroy my things?“

O'Flanahan looked at Coulter with a smug grin.

„No, of course not. I brought this as well.“

He pulled out a tattered pile of folded paper sheets from his back pocket. It was smudged with stains of dirt and food, ripped in several places. Coulter's eyes bulged in his sockets.

„Is that Leblanc's journal? You've, you've DESTROYED it!“ he screamed, looking at the papers in horror.

„Relax already, Coulter. It's a copy, fer chrissakes,“ O'Flanahan replied, patting Coulter lightly on the back in false sympathy.

„Thank God.“

„Anyway, forgetting your antics, yes, I brought Leblanc's journal. I told you I was studying it. I had a feeling there was more to it and now I can prove it. I figured out his code.“

My mind flashed back to the day when Raymonde and I found the journal, hidden inside a tomb, a carving of the worm Ouroubouros on its stone container. I mentally called up the journal, reviewing it rapidly.

„You mean the code at the end of the journal. There was a list of numbers,“ I said.

„You got it, Boyo,“ O'Flanahan replied, looking insufferably pleased. „It was a code and I knew it had to relate to the journal somehow. Hey Coulter, why don't

you make yourself useful and call up the journal on your big screen there, so we can all look at it?"

„Sure thing. Here it is.“

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

O'Flanahan explained his discovery, upping the volume of his voice automatically when he got more excited.

„As you can see, the post-scriptum is comprised of numbers that follow the same pattern. One number, a dash, a second number, another dash and a final third number. There is either a single comma or two commas between the numbers. Rarely, there is a third. I started thinking of these numbers as coordinates, as a location where a specific letter might be found. The code was encapsulated by two words, ERGO and SUM. I figured they had to be the beginning and ending of the code. Looking in Leblanc's journal, I found the very same words, beginning and ending a specific section. There were limits to each number set which gave me something to look for. Eventually, I found an approach that worked perfectly. If you number the lines of Leblanc's journal, a standard practice done to refer easily to any part of a document, then the code begins to make sense.“

„Numbered? What are you talking about O'Flanahan?“ Coulter asked.

„Using ERGO as a starting point, I numbered each line sequentially, including the blank lines. This gave me the first number of the coded pattern. The second number indicated which word was to be selected in that line. Finally, the last number indicated which letter of the word was to be selected. The end of the sequence was indicated by the word SUM, after which there was a smaller section using a different code. Anyway, when I wrote down the decoded letters in order, I found the commas served a purpose as well. One comma meant next letter. Two commas meant next word and finally three commas meant next sentence. With this figured out, I was able to figure out Leblanc's message.“

„Find the Four Books. Read between the lines. Look for the lost caves. Start with the Lindon Book. The second code is, I believe, chess notation, a short game, apparently,“ I exclaimed, unable to stop myself.

My two friends stared at me, a stunned look on their faces.

„Sirenne, you stole my thunder again. How in blazes did you do it?“ O'Flanahan complained.

I could hardly explain it to myself, let alone them.

As soon as O'Flanahan had mentioned the numbering of the paragraphs, I had started a search for the coded letter in Leblanc's journal, in an incredible mental whirlwind.

Everything I visualized was in extreme detail. Faster and faster, I ran through the coded sequence, until I had the answer. The entire process had taken less than a few seconds. It felt like my memory had become photographic and that my mental processing speed had increased a hundredfold.

„It's hard to explain. I seem to be able to connect things much faster than I used to,“ I said, failing to express the true level of consternation I felt.

„I'll say. That's near genius level, Paul,“ Coulter said. „But let's look at what you figured out.“

„You mean what I figured out. Sirenne stole it from me,“ argued O'Flanahan.

„Who cares, O'Flanahan. I just want to know what it means,“ Coulter shot back.

„It means we're on the right track. Leblanc left us a coded trail. The first line of the message, Find the Four Books, must refer to the four identical Hollow Needle books. It is where we must start. Our own research had led us there already. The purpose of this very meeting is to examine the three books we do have and decide our next step. I suspect the next parts of the message, Read between the lines, Look for the lost caves, and the chess game reference, will be easier to understand once we have found the fourth book. Of those we already have, one I was given when I was nine. The second my father sent to me before he was killed and the third comes from Leblanc, handed down to Mrs Leblanc as part of her inheritance. The fourth book, the one still missing, must logically come from Raymond Lindon. It can only be him. Remember, we are dealing with a very small circle of people who could have been given one of these books. Lindon is the last of the group. Even Leblanc's coded section points us in Lindon's direction with that chess notation. It can't be coincidence,“ I said.

Coulter switched the image on his giant monitor, with a section from another journal. The neat, precise script identified it as the Weissmuller's manuscript.

„Weissmuller mentioned he investigated Lindon's home and found nothing. The good thing is that it took him hours to figure out the mechanism leading to the hidden tunnels. I watched you figure that thing out in no more than fifteen minutes. Maybe you can succeed where Weissmuller failed. I say we go to Lindon's house and see if we can't find ourselves that fourth book.“

O'Flanahan slapped Coulter on the left shoulder hard, agreeing with exuberance:

„That's what I like to hear. I'm with you on this one. I'm tired of being cooped up in here anyway. I need some fresh air.“

I nodded my head.

„Sounds like just the thing. Why don't you set it up with Jacques Vallin? We need to get that sub.“

„I'm on it already, Paul,“ Coulter snapped back, his fingers flashing on the keyboard.

Chapter 3

The Villa Lindon.

It was good to see Jacques Vallin again. I spoke to him online often enough but rarely in person. He and his brother were very busy, having taken on the running of the ARGOS and the development of our fledgling security force. After the Norton attack, Vallin had organized a team of bodyguards, assigned when I went out of the caves. I thought these precautions unnecessary but Vallin was adamant. As a result, my every travel outside had to be orchestrated.

„Thanks for doing this on such short notice.“

„Hey, you’re the boss, Mr Paul. We were just about to start a training exercise anyway.“

Vallin steered the sub upwards, approaching our landing point off the beach, a platform built for that express purpose.

„I’ve called ahead and they are waiting for us with a limousine at the beach,“ he added.

„A limousine?“ I complained.

„Like it or not, you’re the most important man in these parts. Everyone here knows how special you are. You deserve to be treated like this and they all expect it. Anyway, the limousine is armored, which is why we are going to use it. It’s already arranged,“ Vallin finished, his tone brooking no further argument.

The sub broke the water’s surface and we slid in smoothly next to the platform. After exiting, we were ferried to the beach by speed boat and loaded into the big car after a brief greeting with the huge Ives Vallin. He informed us the Lindon villa was being cleared for our arrival. A car following us held two bodyguards. Two more sat in the front seat of our car. They were tight-lipped, keeping a respectful silence, intent on their task.

While we drove through the small streets of Etretat, I noted the presence of monks, here and there among the tourists.

„What are all those monks doing here, Jacques?“

„There’s a week long convention that just started. Why they picked Etretat as their site is a mystery to me.“

O’Flanahan shook his head and made a face.

„A monk convention? Now I’ve heard of everything. I thought they had a vow of silence or something.“

„Apparently not all of them, O’Flanahan,“ retorted Coulter. „There sure are a lot, though. I never thought of monks as plentiful.“

„We should have eaten before we left. I’m hungry,“ O’Flanahan continued, sliding into a new complaint without skipping a beat.

„Come on, O’Flanahan, we’re almost there. We’ll eat later. Maybe you can find a baguette in Lindon’s kitchen,“ Coulter shot back, eager to get on with the Great Hunt.

„I don’t want a baguette. I want some good cave food,“ O’Flanahan retorted, unwilling to be put off.

„Well, can't blame you there. That chef is pretty good,“ replied Coulter, licking his lips absent-mindedly while peering through the limousine window.

A few minutes later, the limousine pulled to a stop at the end of a long private driveway, in front of the majestic Lindon villa. The guards were already running into position, two of them hurrying across the grounds and the other two taking their posts at the door. That left the five of us free to enter the villa and begin our exploration.

„I've been here before,“ Jacques Vallin said.

„Me too, Brother, me too,“ added Ives, tagging along behind Jacques.

„I know that, Brother, you were with me at the time.“

„Oh, yes. Sorry.“

„Anyway, I meant to say that I know my way around a bit. What is it we are looking for?“ Jacques asked us.

„A chessboard,“ I answered.

Vallin grew pensive.

„I don't remember seeing a chessboard here.“

„Me neither,“ added Ives.

„Enough of this time-wasting,“ muttered O'Flanahan. „Let's just spread out and look around. We'll find something soon enough. I can smell it.“

We split up, activating our glasses to stay in contact. The place was huge. It might take a long time to find something the clever Weissmuller had missed. I walked through the first floor left wing, while trying to figure out where the chessboard might be.

If Lindon had really hidden a book here, he would have made sure that the clues remained after his passing. The chessboard had to be part of the house, something not easily removed or altered. However Weissmuller had failed to find it. He may have been a psychopathic serial killer but his intellect had never been in doubt.

I entered into a huge room, with hanging chandeliers and large windows. It could have been a ballroom. I continued my exploration, arriving in the main dining hall, where no less than twenty chairs surrounded a long table. A small door at the edge of the room caught my eye. A servant's door. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, servants played an important but invisible role. Even today, aristocrats tended to act as if their servants were not there.

There and not there at the same time.

Leblanc liked to use the same idea in his puzzles. Could Lindon and Leblanc have anticipated Weissmuller's attitudes towards servants? Going through the servant's door, I found a small room, probably a staging area for the meals, which led to a narrow staircase going down one level into the main kitchen, located in the middle of the servant's quarters. Centered in the square room was a massive wooden-block table, with ancient stoves lining one wall and counters on another. The tiled floor was worn and stained. Something about it drew my attention. Some of the tiles seemed to have a different look than the others. It was very faint. Enhancing the floor with my techno-glasses, I noticed a section where every alternating tile had slightly darker inclusions. I counted the tiles. Eight on one side and eight on the other.

It was the chessboard.

Boosting the glasses' magnification to maximum, I noticed the tiles had a production stamp located on the right upper corner. In some of them, the stamp differed subtly. I made out various stylized shapes, here a horse head, there a bishop's hat. I was looking at chess symbols, not production stamps. On the nearest tile was the symbol of a pawn and there, next to it, another pawn. Below it, a rook. Shoving the large block table aside easily, I exposed the entire chessboard. Excited, I used my techno-glasses to call my friends.

By the time they arrived, I had drawn up a chessboard on a piece of paper and marked the position of each chess piece as indicated by the floor layout. My friends looked alternatively at the exposed floor and my diagram.

„You found it,“ Coulter said, stating the obvious. „I knew it would be you.“

„Stop patting the guy on the back; he's going to get a swelled head,“ O'Flanahan complained.

„I think we are looking at a chess game in progress,“ I explained. „The chess notation from the Leblanc journal leads to this exact point in the game.“

„What does this tell us then? The game's not even over,“ worried O'Flanahan.

„No, you don't get it, O'Flanahan. Man, those guys were clever,“ admired Coulter. „They gave us some clues all right but we have to continue the game to find the right square.“

I examined the game. Black was setting up a pawn attack, backed up by his queen. White would have none of it and had countered with a pawn move, directly threatening Black's queen. White was now perfectly positioned for an attack on Black's king, using his bishop, which could lead to a checkmate for Black. Lindon and Leblanc had left us at a crucial position in the game.

„There seems to be a lot of symbolism in this game, which, oddly enough, reflects our own situation,“ I explained.

„Go on,“ Coulter prodded.

„Black thinks he's on the attack but, if he proceeds, he will lose his queen. If he retreats, he saves his queen but loses the advantage. That must be the key. All along, Leblanc and Lindon made great sacrifices in their quest for the caves. If we want to succeed in our path and win the game, we have to make sacrifices as well. In order to reveal our book's location, we must risk that our Queen may die and go on the attack. Our book is hidden here, under this tile.“

„Are you sure, Paul?“ asked O'Flanahan.

„I am positive,“ I answered. „I have finally remembered where I have seen this game before. This is a famous game, taught to me by my father when I was nine. This game was played, and won, by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1820, in the city of St Helena. The opponent was Count Bernard. We must look here.“

Jacques Vallin needed no further prodding and dropped to his knees, his hand pulling out one of his knives. He scraped the edge of the tile, removing grime and mortar. It flaked off easily, revealing an unsuspected thickness to the tile. Jacques motioned for Ives to help, handing him another knife. They removed the last of the mortar, confirming that the tile was a deep ceramic block. Wedging the two knives against the sides, the brothers carefully levered the block out. Coulter brought it to the woodblock table.

„Amazing, me boy. I don't think it took you more than five minutes this time. You're getting faster,“ O'Flanahan admitted.

„I'll say,“ Coulter agreed.

I flipped the ceramic block over, revealing a neatly fitted lid. Finding its edge on one side, I applied slight pressure with my fingers, trying to slide it open. Something snapped. Feeling looseness, I slid the lid off, looking inside.

It was empty.

„What the heck is this?“ O'Flanahan yelled with frustration.

„Somebody's been here before us. That has to be the answer. Someone was here and took the book,“ I exclaimed, unable to hide the disappointment I felt.

„Hey, don't blame yourself, Paul. You did everything right. The only problem was someone else did it before you,“ Coulter added in sympathy.

Chapter 4

Father Plantagenet.

Jacques Vallin's hand whipped up to his ear.

„We've got a problem.“

„What's going on?“ I asked.

„The monks we saw earlier. They are converging towards the Lindon villa, swarming out of the woods like rats. My men are running back towards the house.“

„Let's go,“ I said. „We'll rejoin the bodyguards on the first floor. Perhaps we'll find safety in numbers. Have them meet us by the main entrance to the villa.“

We ran up the stairs, back through the main dining room into the reception hall. Two of the bodyguards were waiting for us.

„Where are the others?“ O'Flanahan rasped.

„We don't know. They were with us when we started running but they were gone by the time we reached the door.“

„Great. This is getting better and better.“ O'Flanahan asked.

I looked outside cautiously, peering through the hallway drapes. There were at least a hundred monks walking inexorably closer to the villa. More were pouring out of the woods.

„A monk convention! I should have known,“ exclaimed Jacques Vallin. „I'm really sorry, Mr Paul.“

„No need to be, Jacques. It's not your fault. Let's wait and see what happens. Everybody keep quiet.“

More monks arrived until they formed a solid wall in front of the house. I could see our missing bodyguards, held by several monks but otherwise unharmed. A single monk walked forward from the mass and approached the main entrance. Removing his hood, he revealed a wizened face topped by a faint wisp of thin, white hair.

„Paul Sirenne. I know you are in there. Please come out. It is time for us to talk.“

I looked at my friends in surprise.

„Don't you go out there, Mr Paul,“ cautioned Ives Vallin, hovering protectively next to me.

„You will not be harmed, Mr Sirenne. Please come out,“ the monk continued.

„Paul, be careful,“ cautioned Coulter, looking worried.

„I'll be all right.“ I reassured him. „I want you to stay here. I won't really be alone, I'll be wearing these.“ I pointed to my techno-glasses. Coulter nodded knowingly, a small smile on his face.

„Well, be careful anyway,“ he replied.

Seeing no point in hesitating any further, I walked out the front door and marched down the steps towards the old monk. My fears faded as soon as I approached the old man. His face held a wide smile and his eyes looked without guile, filled with curiosity. He seemed to be almost eighty years of age.

„You wanted me here, you got me here. Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?“ I said, confronting him with a bravado I did not feel.

„Relax, Mr Sirenne. I am not your enemy.“

„Who are you then?“

„My name is Father Plantagenet. I am the head of an organization known as the Abbey. We didn't expect you to come here this quickly. Luckily, we were alerted to your early presence and managed to react in time, with our *convention*. We thought it might be time to, uhm, to introduce ourselves.“

„And what would the Abbey want with me?“

„Why, to say hello, of course, and to provide you with some pertinent history about our background.“

„Sounds like a great idea. I'd like to know what is going on.“

„The Abbey has been around for a very long time. It has deep history. Our origin dates back to the beginning of the tenth century. While originally a monastery, our order's mission statement dramatically changed after a mysterious incident with one of the founding members. Since that time, we have been gathering information and dedicating ourselves to keeping safe what special knowledge we had gathered. Over many centuries, our Order has kept evolving until it began brokering information for others, a funding approach to provide us with the resources we require to keep at our sacred task. Now, I am sure you are wondering what an organization such as ours would be doing here, talking with you. During more recent history, in 1912, in fact, the Abbey entered into a limited partnership with Maurice Leblanc and Raymond Lindon.“

His face brightened with delight upon seeing the consternation on my own.

„This is a surprise?“

„Yes, it is. Leblanc seems to have kept many things to himself.“

„The caves of Etretat among them, no doubt.“

„You know about the caves then?“

„But of course, Mr Sirenne. Our order has known of them for centuries. We even know what you are doing there, you and your Net. Yes, we know about them as well. The Abbey played a key role in helping the Net protect this little valley during the earlier parts of this century. When Hitler attacked the town with his henchman, Weissmuller, during World War 1, we were the ones who provided the Net with advance warning of their approach. Despite our precautions, he almost

succeeded in his goals. When Leblanc took possession of the caves, we made sure he learned of our order and of our purpose.“

„And what is your purpose, if I may ask?“

„Today, it is to make your acquaintance and to give you this.“

The old monk pulled out a bizarre-looking key and a business card, handing them to me. Looking on the back of the card revealed two long numbers.

975W-XJY89-5LRM-6720B-RRR43

773,462,823.37

„What are these?“

„The card is, of course, for you to use, should you want to contact me for any reason. I will remain at your service, Mr Sirenne, please believe that. It is in our common interest that I do so. On the back of the card, the first number you see is an account located in a bank in Geneva, held for you until your arrival in Etretat, at the request of Mr Leblanc in 1938. The number below the account is the amount of funds held in that account. The key will become useful at the proper time. Guard it well. There is not another like it in the entire world.“

I looked at the astronomical number on the back of the card. The number represented overwhelming riches. The caves had held far more wealth than I ever imagined.

„It is time for you to stop playing games and look at what is really going on, to focus on the bigger picture. You have woken the caves, Mr Sirenne, and may well have begun the endgame. You must realize you have been selected to play a key role in coming events. You cannot permit yourself to ignore how crucial your every move may be. Our Order was retained in 1912 to offer you and yours a measure of protection and we now make that offer once more, to the Net and to you, an offer of allegiance and partnership.“

„Father Plantagenet, thank you for your trust in me.“

„This has nothing to do with trust. Whether you realize it or not, our two organizations are aligned. We both march down the same path. These caves you have occupied have been around for millions of years. They hold history you cannot begin to comprehend, or accept. You are a usurper, Mr Sirenne. Another, of whom I may not speak at this time, owns the caves. You have invaded his caves and one day, he will return to take them back. You must be ready for his arrival and, in this pursuit, we offer our help. We have many resources and knowledge, which we will reveal when the time is right.“

„Why not tell me now and save me all the trouble?“

„Some knowledge must be earned through experience, Mr Sirenne. Until you have traveled the path you are on to its conclusion, you will simply not be ready to accept what I have to tell you. However, you must mark my words: The time is coming when you will be sorely tested. What you choose to do may well determine the fate of the entire world itself.“

His words struck me to my core. I was being told that everything might hinge on what I chose to do. To complicate matters, yet another person was involved, the *true owner* of the caves. Unfortunately, ambiguity veiled the Father's every word.

„You are throwing a lot of responsibility on my shoulders.“

„What you see as responsibility, I see as a boon, Mr Sirenne, a chance to free mankind of the shackles of true Evil.“

„What of the allegiance you offer?“

„While my words may be unclear on some matters, on this my meaning is plain. The Abbey wishes to help you protect the caves and keep ownership of them. We can train your Net to be more effective, to be ready for the others who are sure to come.“

„The others? What are you talking about?“

„Mr Sirenne, there are many organizations, many countries, interested in what the caves might be hiding. Some of them have been looking for years, others for centuries. Once they discover what you are holding, they will want to take it from you. Your Net must be prepared, YOU must be prepared, for this inevitable eventuality. You cannot avoid this, it is too late. Your only hope is to see it through and we intend to be there to help, to be at your side in your hour of glory.“

We had a head start, already in possession of the caves, and our team was working hard to assemble the clues that would lead us to success. Would that be enough?

„I accept your offer, Father Plantagenet with one stipulation. Your responsibility is strictly outside. You may assist to protect the caves but they will always remain my domain.“

„I would want it no other way, Mr Sirenne. Thank you for accepting my offer. You have made the right choice. My men will be in touch to arrange training for the Net. I will now take my leave. I am sure I have already overstayed my welcome. Figure out where to use that key. You may find what you are missing.“

Father Plantagenet stuck out his hand and I shook it, finalizing our new agreement. For better or worse, I had just taken on a new partner. I hoped Raymonde wouldn't be too mad. Replacing the hood over his head, the old monk rejoined the rest of his men, disappearing in the sea of monks. My guards were released and the monks left at a rapid pace, regaining the forest and roads from which they had come.

I returned to the villa's main door. My friends were removing their technoglasses.

„Well at least this outing didn't turn out to be a complete wash,“ O'Flanahan stated sarcastically. „We've got the monks on our side!“

Chapter 5

The Shadow-Killer Attacks.

The ARGOS surfaced in the cave lagoon next to the ancient Nazi Flagship submarine, an inheritance from Adolf Hitler. A team of specialists had carefully restored it. The process cost less money than buying a new one, especially one with a skin of solid gold. Its design was feral, made for speed, with its bow sticking

out at a rakish angle. It had been taken out by Briar on a test voyage during his trip to England.

We exited the sub and walked up the landing plank. I was leading the group, anxious to return to Coulter's caves in order to examine the three books. I was ascending the stairs, deep in thought, when I heard Raymonde shout:

„Get away from me. What do you think you are... NO... STOP!“

I looked around in alarm.

„Did any of you hear that?“

„Hear what, Mr Paul?“ asked Ives Vallin.

„HELP ME SOMEONE... STOP, PAUL. HELP ME.“

„It's Raymonde, she's in danger. I can't explain it but I'm hearing her. We've got to get to her now! Jacques, Coulter use those glasses, get her some help, I'm going after her.“

I galloped up the stairs at a frantic pace, leaving them all behind. Scurrying to the top in moments, I ran down the hall to the main entry hub, smashing the hallway doors out of my way. I kept hearing Raymonde scream, her anger and rage coming through. I had a feeling she was running, although I couldn't explain why.

There were people in the hallways and rooms I ran through, all standing still. I wove around them as best I could. How could I rescue Raymonde when I had no clue where she was? In a crystal-clear flash, her location came to me. She was close to the main kitchen and cafeteria, five levels above. People would be in the cafeteria, people and safety. I felt her fear and even bafflement. She was running. How did I know that?

I redoubled my speed.

Arriving at the bottom of the main circular staircase leading to the top of the buried fortress, I saw the lift lowering ponderously. The thought of waiting for its arrival was untenable. I looked behind for my friends, convinced they were right on my heels but saw no one. I continued up the stairs, jumping three steps at a time, my goal clear.

To save Raymonde.

Although I was speeding up the stairs at an insane pace, I felt full of energy and knew I could up the pace further still. I really poured it on, my legs a smooth blur beneath me. I felt a spark of hope, somehow coming from Raymonde. I tried to send her a burst of reassurance. It connected, my emotions sliding through and touching her mind.

I was almost there.

I broke into the cafeteria, knocking the door off its hinges, heedless of its presence. She was running directly towards me. On the other side of the large cave, a few other people were hurrying out of the kitchen in alarm. Her eyes grew wide with relief and we fell into each other's arms.

„I felt you, in my head,“ she said, her fear dissipating.

„Me too. I can't explain it,“ I replied. *„Are you all right?“*

„I am now. I was attacked by the Shadow-Killer.“

A strong burst of anger welled up and I went to run after him. She restrained me.

„It's too late, he's gone. Just before running into the cafeteria, I risked a glance backwards. I saw him standing absolutely still for a moment, looking at me. Then

he turned and ran, vanishing down the corridor. It was horrible, Paul. It was you. The Shadow-Killer came disguised as you.“

My heart jumped. This twisted murderer was using our trust against us. I hugged her tightly, kissing the top of her raven-haired head, then her mouth, my lips sticking to hers like glue. The inner bond flared into life again.

„What is happening to us, Paul?“ she whispered, her bafflement echoing through our connection.

„I don't know but I don't mind it, even if I can't explain it. I can feel you inside.“

„Me too. And I think the link is getting stronger.“

Coulter, O'Flanagan and the Vallin Brothers burst into the cafeteria, each more out of breath than the other. Seeing Raymonde in my arms, their immediate concerns assuaged, they examined me with extreme curiosity, stopping to investigate the broken door lying on the ground.

„We'll talk more about this later, okay?“

„Yes,“ she responded, greeting our friends warmly. They barely looked at her, still focused on me.

„All right guys, what is it? What's up?“

Ives Vallin was the first to reply, holding his beret in his hands and twisting it nervously.

„It's just that you sure took off mighty fast, Mr Paul. I've never seen the like. We couldn't keep up with you.“

„None of us could,“ added Jacques Vallin. „I'm a good runner, Mr Paul, I always won all the races. But I couldn't hold a candle next to you. You were gone, just like that.“

„Not only that, we get to the main stairs, totally out of breath, and we see you way up there, already an incredible feat, but then you speed up and literally fly up the next two levels,“ Coulter added.

„Best of all, Sirene, is that door. Did you take a look at it?“ exclaimed O'Flanagan, his hand pointing at the twisted metal. „It's totally wrecked. You sheared those hinge pins, did you know that?“

They all stood there, their arms crossed, waiting for an explanation, one which I was at a loss to provide. In retrospect, I realized my mad scramble had an element of the impossible to it. How had I been able to run that fast? O'Flanagan was right, that door was destroyed. I could see the twisted frame from here.

I had heard before of adrenaline-infused strength but I had not felt any of that. It had all seemed rather effortless. My heart had not been pumping fast, I had never run out of breath, the door had smashed away without difficulty or pain. Looking at my hands, I could see no evidence of bruising, no broken or reddened skin.

I was fine. In fact, I felt great.

„Guys, I don't know what to say. What I did seems impossible now that I look back on it but there is too much at stake to spend a lot of time on this. Raymonde was attacked by the Shadow-Killer. She says he came disguised as me.“

„The bastard!“ raged O'Flanagan, as we heard a door slam in the background.

It was Briar, looking alarmed, having torn himself away from his inaugural digging. His knees were smudged and he was holding a small trowel, not even

aware it was still in his hand. He ran to us, the relief showing in his dirt-stained face.

„Coulter called me. I came as fast as I could, given the state of these old bones of mine.“

„I think you had your mind on other bones, if you were to ask me,“ O’Flanahan commented acerbically.

„O’Flanahan, please! This dig is extremely important; you cannot imagine what it may reveal.“

„Hey, relax, Briar. I just meant you missed all the fun. While you were digging up dirt, we went out, found the hiding spot where Lindon hid his copy of the Hollow Needle, then lost it, because somebody took it before us. You also missed meeting old Father Plantagenet and his two hundred monks, who had just stopped by to say hello so they could give Sirenne a huge fortune along with the keys to the Kingdom, if we heard them right. That’s got to be better than dry old bones.“

Briar was not easily deterred from his point.

„Actually no, not this time, O’Flanahan. If I’m right about what my preliminary findings imply, I think I may have found something even more meaningful than that. I cannot risk speaking about it until I have done further confirmation work. However, I am quite glad to see that Miss Raymonde is fine. What has happened? The information Coulter sent seemed somewhat disjointed.“

„Why don’t we let Raymonde tell us,“ I suggested.

„And let’s eat while we’re at it. We ran all this way to get to the cafeteria. Wouldn’t be right not to eat. I don’t mind telling you I’m famished,“ admitted O’Flanahan. Jacques Vallin took our orders and went off to get the food with his brother.

We sat down at a table and listened to Raymonde:

„I had just returned to our home cave. It was early afternoon. I sat down to do a bit of last-minute scheduling, when I heard the cave door open softly. I turned around and saw you standing there, Paul. I was baffled because I didn’t expect you back for a short while yet. I stood up and said hello but you didn’t answer me, you just walked forward in silence, getting closer and closer. Your approach felt creepy, wrong somehow. The more you drew near, the more apprehension I felt. Looking into your eyes, I saw through the deception. These were not your eyes. This was not you!“ she said, uttering the last word with anguish.

The Vallin brothers returned with several plates. We ate as Raymonde continued her tale. I could barely pick at my food, still too excited.

„By now, I was standing up, scared and baffled at the same time. If this was not Paul, who could it be? There could be only one possibility. It had to be the Shadow-Killer. If he was here, it was to kill me. I heard him utter: *Sirenne’s Queen*. His mouth moved strangely when he spoke and his voice was raspy, glacial. I think his face, your face, Paul, was a mask.

„He pounced, his hands sweeping up like claws. I screamed and twisted to the right with a speed born from fear, his grasping hands barely missing my neck. I let myself drop down in a crouch and jumped to the right, away from him, vaulting into the air briefly and landing at a dead run. I ran straight for the open cave door, reaching it in seconds.

„Scared for my life, I ran all out, looking back at him for the briefest of moments. Seeing a glint of steel in his hand, a knife, I knew he meant to use it on me.

„I felt a strong blow to my shoulder and looked down, seeing a knife clatter to the floor. He had thrown it at me but, luckily, it was a bad throw. I desperately swiped at it, grasping its handle with the tip of my fingers. Victorious, I stood up and threw it back at him with all the strength I could muster. My aim was dead on but, instead of avoiding the knife, the Shadow-Killer stood rock still, letting it hit him. I watched the knife bounce off his chest and fall harmlessly to the floor.“

„He must have been wearing a Kevlar vest,“ suggested Briar.

„I don't know but it certainly terrified me. That knife throw had been my best chance to stop him and it had failed. I must have screamed in frustration then but it did not prevent me from running again, as fast as I possibly could. I heard him coming after me but did not dare look behind me. A misstep would be the end of me. I could hear him, he was inexorably getting closer. If I continued down the corridor, he would catch me.

„I knew there were four cave entrances coming up. Two were small, for storage, but the other two were used by Briar's team as examination stations for his finds. Both caves connected to a larger cave in the back. I had to make it to the cafeteria but it was still a long way off. I had to lose the Shadow-Killer now.

„I kept up my pace, speeding up past the first two storage caves, really laying it on when I turned around the sharp bend in the corridor. My feet went out from under me but, somehow, my rubber soles found some grip and I managed to keep going, scrambling to the first of the joined caves.

„Thankfully, the door was open and I flew in, looking frantically around, trying to figure out where the tunnel connecting to the anterior cave was. I spied it at the furthest corner on the right, and headed there, dodging around the tables desperately. I had almost navigated my way through the cave when I heard a noise. I dropped to the floor in fear, knowing it had to be the Shadow-Killer.

„Peering through the steel table legs, I saw him by the entrance, standing absolutely still. Suddenly his head turned, his cold eyes locking right on mine. He dropped flat to the ground and I lost sight of him. Two tables moved slightly. He was snaking along the ground, moving fast. I had to get out of there.

„I turned around and frantically made my way to the tunnel leading to the back cave. Reaching it, I risked a final glance behind me, seeing nothing at all. The Shadow-Killer had vanished. I ran down the access tunnel, quickly arriving into the anterior cave. It was filled with industrial shelving, heavily loaded with countless wooden boxes.

„I made my way to the far cave wall, running past several rows of shelves. I hugged the wall tightly and kept running, knowing I would come across the second connecting tunnel eventually. Finding it, I turned into it and ran madly, hoping the Shadow-Killer would waste time looking for me in the anterior cave. I tried to stay as quiet as I could in the narrow tunnel, stopping abruptly at its mouth, feeling an unexplainable apprehension.

„My peripheral vision caught a movement coming fast on my right. I instinctively ducked, lifting up my right arm in a blocking stance. I felt a jarring blow stopping the Killer's arm, his knifepoint inches from my face. He put

incredible pressure on my arm, trying to force the knife straight into my mouth. He had known of the second tunnel and had gone the other way to trap me!

„The knife point slipped forward, almost touching my lips. I pushed back at him hard, adrenaline fueling my strength, distancing the knifepoint from my face. I braced myself against the tunnel wall and kned him in the groin. It was a solid, bone-jarring blow yet he acted as if he had not even felt it. My attack had changed our position slightly, making him move further into the tunnel, and his knife was no longer aiming directly at me. He tried to pull it back in position.

„I followed my groin blow with a kick, knocking the Shadow-Killer's left foot out from under him. I was resting against the tunnel wall, giving me stability, but he was out in the open, hovering over me. Coming back with my foot, I kicked his other leg and he fell sideways, to the left. He recovered, slashing at me in a long sweeping stroke, the cutting edge of his knife glinting in the yellow cave light.

„I desperately jumped along the tunnel wall, distancing myself from his reach but not quickly enough,“ Raymonde showed us her shirt, displaying a long horizontal slash at the bottom. "I felt the tickle of the blade against my stomach but I managed to avoid being sliced open.

„I ran to the table nearest me and jumped over it. Turning around frantically, I pushed at the table with all my strength, just as the Shadow-Killer stood up, looking at me with those dead, impassive eyes. Before he could move out from the tunnel entrance, I slammed the table into his mid-section, throwing him back into the narrow passage, then jammed the table in after him, lifting it up and blocking the entire tunnel opening. It clattered into place, scraping past a rock projection on the ceiling, snapping back up once it was past, wedged tightly into place. He was banging on the table, his blows shaking it mightily. I raced to the entrance of the cave and flew down the hall at breakneck speed, aiming straight for the cafeteria, now within attainable distance. I looked back one final time and saw him standing there briefly, before he vanished back into the shadows. That was when I knew I would make it," she finished.

I slipped my arm around her, comforting her.

„It's amazing you survived through that,“ Coulter sympathized. „But it's alarming to learn the Shadow-Killer is now here, with us, in the caves. How did he get in?“

„Maybe he's one of us,“ suggested the conspiracy-minded O'Flanahan.

„No, I don't think so,“ retorted Briar. "Did any of you note how the Shadow-Killer anticipated Raymonde's deception with my sorting caves? It demonstrates he is quite familiar in here, far more than any of us. He has been here before, whereas we are new arrivals. What I cannot understand is why he chose to come out of the shadows at this moment.“

„I think the answer to that question is obvious,“ I asserted. „We cannot forget Napoleon Bonaparte's chess game in the Lindon villa. It was a trick play. Napoleon attacked the Queen but it was a false attack, hiding an attack on the King. Symbolically, you could say that I am the King of these caves and you could also say that Raymonde is my Queen.“

„That's devious thinking, me boy,“ stated O'Flanahan, a smile on his face. „Makes me proud of you. Do you seriously think the Shadow-Killer is that devious as well?“

„He’s proven it already. He started his plan at least fifteen years ago, when he murdered Norton’s sister. We know he came on the plane with me, disguised as Harry Stiles, killed for his flight ticket. We know he was dogging Norton’s every step, driving him madder with every new HN murder. I think we are just touching the tip of the iceberg. The Killer has a definite agenda and his attack on Raymonde was part of it. By trying to kill my *Queen*, he has stated in no uncertain terms that we are embarked on the same game in real life. The attack on Raymonde conceals an attack on me,“ I paused, looking at Raymonde. „Had you died, he may well have succeeded. Your loss might have been too much to bear. Who knows what I would have done.“

She gazed tenderly at me for a moment.

„I think you are right Paul. The Shadow-Killer is playing a game with us,“ she said.

„He must need something only Paul can provide,“ Coulter suggested. „Why else would he involve us in his affairs? The Shadow-Killer is taking terrible risks by hovering so closely.“

„I don’t know about you guys but I can’t get those monks out of my mind,“ added O’Flanahan. „Who the heck are they? Why did Leblanc ally himself with them and why did he keep that connection to himself? What about that strange key? Then, there’s your increased speed and strength, Paul. No way is that normal. All of this is pointing to some much deeper conspiracy. Hitler dying in these caves might end up a mere taste test in comparison.“

They made sense and it worried me. The Great Hunt was taking more serious turns by the second.

„We need to stop messing around. I feel like my head is buried in the sand and all these separate incidents are screaming at me to pull it out. I consider today’s outing almost a joke now. All along, the Shadow-Killer was laughing at us, while we went on our merry way, ignoring what was at stake. He used our absence to try and kill Raymonde, in an attempt to drive his point home. Thank God he failed. So we’re going to change our approach, right here, right now! I want a meeting tomorrow morning with all of you. That meeting will last until we know what we are dealing with. I want you to come prepared. So do your research, drum up some theories and come ready to do this. Jacques, I want you to call up Father Plantagenet right away and arrange for some extra protection. I also want you to assign the submarine responsibilities to someone else immediately.“

„I’ve been training the son of a friend. He’d do pretty good.“

„Excellent. You and your brother will become responsible for overseeing the protection of this place. Hire and buy what you need, get your training from the monks but don’t trust them too much.“

„Sure thing Mr Paul. Listen, I want to post some guards at your door tonight as well. It might sound like overkill.“

„No, do it. No more taking chances. Assign some to each of the others here, O’Flanahan, Briar, Coulter, all of us.“

„But...“ Briar objected. I cut him off.

„No buts. It’s time to take the threat seriously. The Shadow-Killer is moving among us, completely hidden. We can worry about a better approach tomorrow. For now, it will have to be bodyguards.“

I looked at my friends, my meaning plain. What if the Killer returned tonight, to finish the job while we slept? What if, frustrated by his failure with Raymonde, he chose another one of us?

„Raymonde, contact the medical staff and schedule an appointment for me in the morning, about an hour before the meeting. Let’s pin down what’s happening to my body. It has to be related,“ I added.

„What about my digging and those possible results?“ Briar interrupted.

„Sorry but, for the moment, I think we have more immediate concerns. That doesn’t mean I have forgotten about what you alluded to. As soon as we can, I want you back on those digs. History has played a large part in these caves. What you uncover may lead us to important answers,“ I replied

„I am sure of it. Very well, I will do as you ask. We must focus on what the game is about before we can play it, particularly when your queen is in danger,“ he returned.

„You have it exactly, Briar. Well, I think that’s it for now. Tomorrow, we will solve this thing. Tonight, it’s time for some research and maybe some rest.“

Chapter 6

A Talk and a Dream.

Raymonde and I were sitting back on our sofa, enjoying the muted quietness of the cave. Even the yellow fungus light seemed pleasant. We were trying to forget about the two impassive bodyguards sitting in the next room. Two more were outside, monitoring the corridor.

Jacques Vallin had taken me at my word.

A week ago, Coulter had installed a huge flatscreen monitor in our living room. Right now, it displayed a real-time view of the crashing waters around the needle of Etretat, glimmering in the early evening sunlight. The volume was set low but I could hear the faint reassuring sounds of the pounding surf. The view’s realism was stunning, giving us the impression of looking through a window.

Raymonde had showed little ill effect from her close brush with death. Upon examination, her stomach revealed the Shadow-Killer’s knife had not even scraped her. The discovery led to disturbing conclusions:

„I felt that knife slide right across my stomach. I just can’t understand why I didn’t get cut,“ she admitted.

„I had something similar occur when I broke the cafeteria door off its hinges. I should have suffered some injury, at least a minor sprain. But not a single scratch, just like you. No, something else is at work. You know it as well as I do,“ I returned.

„The connection between us?“ she whispered.

„Yes. The connection. I feel it even now. You were right before when you said it was growing in strength. It is. I heard you scream earlier yet I was nowhere near

you. That's not all. Lately, my mind is increasingly enhanced in both speed and ability."

"As with you, something is changing within me but it's more on an emotional level. I find myself able to deal with people with extreme ease, as if I can anticipate what their needs are, how they are feeling. It is a very empathic thing, hard to put into words. Tell me more about your enhanced mind."

"I am thinking much faster than I used to and with a greater ability to visualize. Anything I have ever seen can be recalled, rotated around in my mind and examined in minute detail. I can tell you what it weighs, where every irregularity might be. I can take it apart and reassemble it. I can tell you which parts don't fit well. I can also travel through my memories like a video with stop, fast-forward and rewind buttons. I am sopping up information like a sponge," I stopped talking, afraid I had gone too far. I felt an inner reassurance flood from her, caressing my heart and soothing me.

"Is this what happens when you deal with people?"

"Yes, it is exactly that," she replied.

Despite the differences, our changes were both profound.

"I am sure the caves are behind it."

"It's as if we are being prepared," Raymonde added.

"Yes, that's it exactly, my very feeling. You missed meeting Father Plantagenet this afternoon."

"That encounter must have been a bit of a surprise."

"Tell me about it," I replied, fingering the ancient key hung around my neck, showing it to Raymonde. "When I asked him to simply tell me the information instead of making me chase all over for it, he said: 'Some knowledge must be earned through experience, Mr Sirene. Until you have traveled the path you are on to its conclusion, you will simply not be ready to accept what I have to tell you.' I am beginning to think he may be right."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember the dreams I told you about?"

"Yes, the three dreams. You had them when this whole thing started, almost four months ago."

"They each had a prophetic element to them. I saw you in my first dream, as plain as day, yet I did not know you then. I also saw the bunker on top of the cliff and the fungus light pouring out of it. The second dream showed me the way into the caves under the cliff. The third dream showed me a revolving Swastika deep inside the cliff."

"Pointing the finger towards Hitler."

"That's what I thought at first. That explanation fit so well, so easily. Now, I'm not so sure."

"Why, what has changed?"

"My viewpoint has changed. All along, there have been intimations of predestination to this. The same message coming at me from multiple quarters, assailing me with its inevitable conclusion. This is not simply about the machinations of men, of Leblanc and the Shadow-Killer, but rather something deeper."

Raymonde's eyes probed mine.

„Are you serious?“

„It sounds crazy, I know. I have never given such matters much thought before but it is getting harder to refute. In the third dream, I was flying a lazy circle around a giant swastika imbedded inside the cliff. There was so much focus on seeing the swastika from both sides.“

„Well, the Swastika has deep history. The Nazis appropriated the symbol for their nefarious purposes, trying to attach its strong symbolism to their fledgling party. In the end, all they succeeded in doing was to darken a symbol meant to express ‚Being Good‘. It is incredibly ancient, going back more than twelve thousand years.“

„My dream made me look at both sides of the swastika. Could it have been meant to show that the same symbol combined two opposite concepts, both Evil and Good at the same time?“

„Perhaps. I suspect the dream will become clearer when the time is right.“

„It would be so easy to ascribe spiritual overtones to the occurrences surrounding me but I have never been one to do that. I have always believed in the world of facts and science, not God and magic. Most members of the Net treat me with a reverence I do not feel is warranted.“

„You are too modest, Paul. You have succeeded where most others would have failed, never giving up. I am not a follower of science, being more of the heart, and my heart has always told me God is real, that you find him in all things. You are afraid that your dream might alter your view of the world. However, spirituality is not something separate from physical reality. It is intrinsically part of it; in fact, I believe it is the very root of all around us. Stop worrying about such things. Let the spirituality issue sort itself out in the fullness of time. For now, focus on doing what you must to get us to the next step, as you have already done so many times now.“

Her calming words gave me a much needed perspective. I was impressed by her wisdom. Her presence within me soothed my worries. I slid over the couch and lay against her, hardly feeling her skin rubbing against mine, our souls intertwining within. We retired to the bedroom and lost ourselves in each other, attracted like never before.

* * * * *

I was rising above my bed. The ceiling was inches from my face. I turned around to look below me and saw myself, lying on the bed, my eyes closed, apparently in a deep sleep. Raymonde was curled up next to me, looking restless.

I rose again, moving through the rock ceiling as if it were not even there. I could distinguish tiny particles in the chalk, everything precise, suffused with an inner yellow light. I broke free of the bedrock and floated above the cliff, seeing the ancient bunker to my left, its entrance and windows radiating yellow light. I rose higher still, rotating at the same time.

I was dreaming again.

I was now hovering high enough in the air to distinguish Etretat clearly. My body was aimed in a southerly direction, moving forward slowly, slicing through the night air easily. I wasn't in control, my ethereal body traveling where the dream dictated. I looked down at the landscape scrolling by at an ever-increasing

speed. I flew over Le Tilleul, Beaurepaire, Villainville, and Criquetot-L'Esneval, in quick succession. After that, I reached such a speed I could no longer identify anything but the largest of landscape features. I crossed the Seine in short order and continued southward.

I sensed the wind's presence but it had absolutely no effect on me. I eventually noticed a gradual slowing down. I dropped lower in the sky, giving me the distinct impression that I was coming in for a landing. Instead, I stopped moving entirely, hovering over a small mountain. After floating over it for a moment, I sped up again, still in a southern direction. After a few moments of high acceleration, I slowed down, my body rotating and coming to a stop a few feet above the ground.

My transparent feet were hanging down weightlessly, the grassy hill beneath me sloping down at a good angle. I was facing a stone building of some sort, with a small tower on its left side. Somehow, I knew there was another tower on the other side of the building, which went down into the ground. I flew back up into the air, traveling a short while further, until I stopped once more, hovering over a church this time. Again, I knew there was a second church, next to the first one, invisible, inverted, going into the ground.

I flew up into the air and returned to the small mountain. I was drawn to a rocky outcropping resembling a giant throne. There was a yellowish glow around the area, strongest by the outcropping itself. Breaking away, I flew back up with ever-increasing speed, higher and higher, slowing down only when I reached the stratosphere, at the apogee of my arc.

I fell back, following an ellipsoid curve, this time in the grip of gravitational force. I felt elongated and solid. My surface heated up with the intense friction, layers flaking away in frenzied bursts, white-hot shavings flying off in showers of iridescent sparks. My speed kept increasing. I neared the ground, headed for an impact with the very cliff where my dream had started. My shape had smoothed out into a gleaming sword of primeval iron, lancing down towards its inevitable kiss with the surface of the Earth.

I smashed into the cliff with incredible force, sending thousands of cracks burrowing into the bedrock. I broke the ceiling of a cave and I slammed through my own body. I woke with a start, my heart racing madly and breathing like a locomotive.

I lay there for a long while, staring at the ceiling, still not sure if I was awake. I had become the ancient meteoritic shard of iron buried below these caves. The dream had been so vivid! A look at the clock told me it had taken less than ten minutes. It had felt far longer than that.

Once again, I had been given a map, exactly as in the three previous dreams. I had been shown a physical location, far to the south of here, a small mountain, a tower and a church. As for the sequence with the shard of iron, I had knowledge of its origin, explained in Weissmuller's manuscript.

His manuscript had contained several such surprises, revealing an intelligent, twisted man, who had assembled many pieces of the puzzle represented by the caves. These results had not come easily. He had murdered countless researchers over decades, accumulating the stolen results of their work and hiding the caves of Etretat at the same time. Later, he had masterminded the building of this underground fortress. He had discovered the meteoritic iron shard, buried deep

underground, covered in a layer of crumbling iridium, its presence revealed by a magnetic field strong enough to perturb nearby compasses.

I could therefore explain to myself how had come to dream about the meteorite. What I could not do was explain why I had dreamt it. I could not explain its utter vividness, or its implication of strong underlying meaning. Perhaps this was another aspect of my mental changes. I closed my eyes and tried to fall back asleep but found it utterly impossible. I simply didn't feel tired. I lay on the bed at two-thirty in the morning, infused with energy, eager for the new day.

I sat up, noticing Raymonde, angelic in her sleep, her mischievous eyes hidden away. She seemed to be in a dream of her own. Sliding on some clothes, I reached for my glasses. Walking into the kitchen and nodding at the bodyguards, I buzzed Coulter, taking a chance that my night-owl friend might still be up. He connected immediately.

„Hey Paul.“

„Had a dream. Can't sleep.“

„One of those nights, eh?“

„Yes, one of many lately. I was wondering if you would be up to some company?“

„Sure thing, Paul. Maybe we could do some more work on those books of yours. I know we didn't find Lindon's copy but we still have the other three. That's a good place to start.“

„I'll be right over.“

Chapter 7

Examining the Books.

Coulter had placed the three books side by side on the examination table. A powerful digital camera, held on a small, spring-loaded boom over the table, allowed him to focus on any area, with whatever level of magnification we might require, the camera's image projected on the central monitor.

„Why don't we start by reviewing again what we know of these books,“ I suggested.

„As good a place as any,“ agreed Coulter. „I'll record the data we collect and add it to the stuff we already have,“ he suggested, aligning the camera over the middle book.

„Like I said before, my father gave me the first one when I was nine. He sent me a second one, just before he was killed. The third was found in Maurice Leblanc's office. All three were signed by Leblanc. The signatures look authentic enough but when we examine the printing legend inside, we find the books were printed in 1955, the same year the Lindon family opened their publishing house, Edition Minuit. Since Maurice Leblanc died in 1939, either the printing year is false or Leblanc's signature is. These books are identical, each presented as Number One of four and one. That, in itself, may be a message. If it was five, why not say five?“

„Perhaps we are being told that there are four books and one book at the same time, one hidden inside the others. After all, Leblanc’s code says ‘Read between the lines.’“

„Very sharp, Fabian. You may be right.“

„And where do the books come from? Who had them originally? The clues led us to Lindon’s copy but someone took it before us. If that someone is the Shadow-Killer, I rather doubt we’ll ever get our hands on it,“ Coulter returned, a depressed tone in his voice.

„Listen, the Hollow Needle copy from my father was meant for our family line. The book found in the Leblanc Villa library was handed down to Mrs Leblanc. Lindon’s missing book was probably intended for his family as well. Three books, three families. So why would my father have a second copy? It breaks the pattern.“

My comment evoked a mental image of the note I had received with my father’s second book. Rotating the note around, examining it in minute detail, I noticed something odd about the handwriting.

„Wait a minute, that can’t be right,“ I exclaimed, horrified by a monstrous possibility.

„What is it?“ questioned Coulter.

„Where’s that note, the one that came with my father’s second book?“ I asked, my mind floundering. It couldn’t be, it just couldn’t.

Coulter removed the note from the book. I looked at the familiar scrawl, trying to see my father writing these words. The whole thing jarred.

„Fabian, can you scan this in to your computer?“

„Sure thing. Why?“

„I don’t think my father wrote this note. Help me prove I’m wrong, that what I’m thinking isn’t true.“

He gave the note the full treatment, flashing several different frequencies of light on it and comparing it to handwriting examples from my father.

The note was a forgery.

It closely replicated my father’s scrawl but my enhanced mind had picked up the slight variations. If my father had not sent it, only one other man could have.

The Shadow-Killer!

In my heart, I now knew my father would have told me about our family secret but was killed before he had the chance. The Shadow-Killer had orchestrated the entire series of events, planned it with utter precision. His first move had been to send the Hollow Needle book with the counterfeit note, so that I received it immediately after my father’s murder.

„The Shadow-Killer knew exactly what he was doing.“

Coulter interrupted with a practical concern.

„But where did he get his copy? There are only four?“

I walked over to the table, picking each book up in turn, trying to work it out logically.

„We know the provenance of two of these books is incontestable. Only the one from the Shadow-Killer has an unexplained origin. It is inconceivable that Leblanc gave it to him.“

„I agree with you on that. Leblanc wanted us to find it, not anyone else,“ Coulter said.

„Say Fabian, You know those little notes, hidden in my father’s copy and in Leblanc’s?“

He nodded his head.

„Yes, the ones in the back of the books.“

„What if the Shadow-Killer’s book had a note as well? We’ve never checked.“

Coulter looked thunderstruck.

„I can’t believe we never thought of that. It’s such an obvious thing to do. Well, no time like the present, eh, Paul?“

Coulter jumped off his stool, landing directly in front of my father’s second book. He opened it from the back while adjusting the dangling camera with his other hand. Once again, the fine white threads used to sow the leather lining were not threads but carefully applied white ink. This was definitely another concealed compartment.

I reached for the book but Coulter blocked me.

„Oh no, let me do it this time. You got to do it on the other two books. It’s not fair. I should get my chance and this is it.“

I let him go on, laughing to myself. Coulter opened a case attached to his belt, removing a small tool.

„Titanium tweezers. Best things in the world when you need them.“

„Just open the flap.“

„I’m getting to it.“

He picked at the leather carefully and it rose with the faintest of resistance. He angled the camera into the flap, revealing a neatly folded piece of vellum paper. Looking at the giant monitor for guidance, he expertly dipped his tweezers into the flap, sliding the note out smoothly, a wide smile on his face.

„Like a pro, Paul, like a pro, I tell you.“

„Open it up already,“ I smiled back, ignoring his familiar taunts.

He carefully unfolded the note and laid it flat on the table, smoothing out the creases carefully, giving us a perfect view of the message on the huge monitor:

Dear Paul Sirenne:

I salute you and congratulate you for having solved the puzzle thus far. By now, you should have become aware that what brought you here is not the whole story. At the same time, it is likely that you still do not have enough information to go much further. Don’t worry, more clues will come. You can expect a meeting soon, with members of the Abbey, who will have some items for you. Coming to my Villa to get this book was the pre-established trigger point to bring our trusted allies back into contact with you. Listen to them and accept their help. You will need it in the difficult times ahead.

Read my book »The Secrets of the Kings of France«. It should open many doors for you.

Be patient, Paul. This process will take the time it needs and you must learn the facts in the right order. Keep solving the puzzles and you will reach your goal, the goal prepared by all of us, throughout many years. So much rests on your shoulders already. I am sure you worry about taking on more but don’t falter, don’t weaken, and keep pushing. The answers are there, waiting for you, the only one who can find them.

*Do your appointed task.
Raymond Lindon*

PS: If you are looking for confirmation of what you suspect, rip the last page out of the book.

I turned my head towards Coulter who was echoing a surprised look.

„This is Lindon’s book,“ I asserted. „And if it’s Lindon’s book, we know how the Shadow-Killer got hold of it.“

„Yeah, he stole it from the Villa,“ accused Coulter.

„It means much more than that. He had to have deciphered the clues in Leblanc’s journal to find the book. This means he read the journal as well. He must have found it, then returned it, leaving it for us to find. We have been retracing his footsteps all this while. The Shadow-Killer knows absolutely everything we do.“

„Probably more. It explains why we weren’t expecting the monks. We didn’t find the note in time. We weren’t ready for them and they weren’t ready for us. It also proves conclusively the Killer isn’t part of Leblanc plans.“

„You’re right. I wonder if the killer even found the note. It doesn’t seem like it. Why would he have left it in there? It reveals key information, putting us back on track, not exactly to the Shadow-Killer’s advantage.“

„What about that post-scriptum? Why does Lindon want us to rip a page out of the book?“

„He says it will give us confirmation of what we suspect. All I suspect at present is that this goes far deeper than I ever anticipated.“

„How could ripping a page out of the book help us prove that?“

„Let’s try it and find out. Lindon hasn’t led us wrong so far.“

Coulter moved the other two books to the side, bringing Lindon’s copy to the center of the table. Adjusting the camera and starting a new recording session, he opened the book, exposing the last page. Grabbing hold of it, he paused, glancing at me with a twinkle in his eye.

„You sure you want me to do this? These are valuable books after all.“

„Money is the least of our concerns and you know it. I am as baffled as you. It’s just a page out of a book. It can conceal no note, no further secret that I can imagine. Yet, we must trust Lindon. Just rip that page out and be ready for anything.“

Coulter nodded, tightening his grip on the page with his left hand and holding the binding of the book with his right. Steeling himself, he took a deep breath and pulled on the page.

Nothing happened.

Surprised, he tried again. Holding the top of the page as near the binding as he could, he pulled down with much more strength, trying to rip the page out with sheer muscle power. He stood there, immobile except for a slight trembling of his arms and back, betraying the immense effort he was putting into it. The page appeared completely unaffected by his straining.

„I can’t do it. It just won’t rip,“ he said, expelling a deep breath and wiping the sweat on his brow.

„What’s the matter with it? Is it not paper?“

Coulter looked at it closely, feeling it.

„It sure seems to be plain paper. Odd thing though, light doesn’t shine through it. Look.“

He lifted the book in the air, holding it underneath one of the ceiling lights. Although the pages appeared to be thin, white paper, they remained totally opaque to light.

„Why don’t you try ripping it? We know you’re much stronger than me,“ Coulter suggested.

He had a point. If I could shear hinge pins without thinking about it, I should be able to rip paper in my sleep. I handled the book gingerly, examining the material. It looked like ordinary leather on the outside and regular quality paper inside. It was well bound but not remarkably so. I opened it to the back page and repeated the same steps Coulter had.

It did not rip.

In frustration, Coulter ran to his shelves, returning with a randomly selected hardcover book and handing it to me.

„Just satisfy me this one whim. Try to rip that entire book in half.“

Without a word, curious myself, I held the book between my two hands and lightly wrenched. The book ripped down the middle instantly, leaving me holding two halves, a stunned look on my face. I had not put any effort into it. I was glad I was going for that medical exam in the morning.

„I knew it,“ Coulter stated. „I knew you were stronger than before and I knew it wasn’t us. It’s that book,“ he finished, pointing at it.

„Let me try another page,“ I suggested. „Maybe this one page is treated, somehow different than the rest.“

Lifting the book up one more time, I selected a page at random and tried to remove it forcibly from the book. Again, I failed.

„Maybe we can cut it,“ Coulter suggested, his hand lifting up a pair of scissors.

I watched as he tried to cut the page without making the slightest indentation. I tried as well but when I applied the slightest force, the scissors bent out of shape and broke instead of cutting the paper. I felt like a clumsy Superman. Coulter came up with another idea, running away to rummage through a tool box hidden under a desk, jumping back up with a small propane torch, held high in the air with his left hand.

„Ahah! I knew I still had it here. Let’s see that book deal with something a bit more energetic.“

I held the page out for him, while he lit the torch. He brought the flame to bear on the edge of the page. Seeing that fail, he stubbornly persisted, aiming the streaming jet of blue flame directly on the center of the page. The flame flattened out against the paper, doing no damage whatsoever. I slid my hand under the page.

„The heat of that flame is not crossing over to the other side of the page.“

„What? That’s physically impossible.“

„That seems par for the course at this point.“

„Uhm, yes, I guess so,“ Coulter replied, turning the torch off.

„Let’s think about this for a bit.“

Coulter nodded, returning the torch to the toolbox, sliding it back under the desk with his foot.

„Man, this is getting weird,“ he exclaimed.
I had to agree with him.

* * * * *

An hour later, Coulter and I were back on our stools, his coffee refilled, the books displayed in front of us. We had determined that all three were equally invulnerable to harm. Coulter summed up our findings:

„We have to admit it, something is very strange with these books. I had scanned them from beginning to end but, upon examination, the results are ambiguous. There is an unexplainable fuzziness to all scans. The scans intended to go deeper within the structure of the materials have failed. The books are opaque to ultrasound, x-rays, radio waves, microwaves, infra-red, and ultraviolet. Nothing penetrates their outer surface. The effect, whatever it is, is consistent. The only anomaly I have come up with is found under extreme magnification using regular light, the only wavelength that refracts properly.“

He opened the middle book, adjusted the camera over it, pressed a few buttons and an image of a random page from one of the books appeared on the monitor. He zoomed in, the specialized lenses telescoping outward, until the area became a grainy surface. Coulter adjusted the image into sharp focus.

„We are looking at an area no wider than one thousandth of a millimeter. This should give you a sense of the extremely minuteness of what we are seeing here,“ he explained.

The magnified landscape was covered with a layer of transparent six-sided cells, looking like rough hexagons. There was a slight bulge in the center of each cell and a type of scilla around the edges, glued to the next cell.

„What are they?“ I asked Coulter.

„I’m not sure. I’ve tried scraping some off for closer analysis but, since the books are invulnerable, I can’t get a single cell off the surface.“

„You think the cells are conferring invulnerability to the books?“

„I suspect it. Possibly, these books were, uhm, dipped into a solution of these cells and they have fused together, bound by those scilla, creating an invulnerable layer. However, I am at a loss to explain what those cells are composed of. At the human scale, they are entirely transparent. Apart from a very slight magnetism, I can get no readings. I am stumped,“ he admitted.

„At least it does one thing.“

„What’s that?“

„It provides us with confirmation of what we suspect,“ I answered, a smile on my face.

Coulter smiled back.

„That it does.“

Chapter 8

Doctor Phillippe.

The automated golf cart dropped us off at the medical caves, heading on to some further errand. Upon my return from Coulter's caves, I was unable to sleep, still full of energy. In fact, there was so much of it, I found it hard to contain. Raymonde was also awake and just as restless. Her sleep had been haunted by fleeting dreams, leaving her with a strong feeling of coming change.

I related my own dream to her and about the invulnerable books. I spent the rest of my available time doing further research, following Lindon's advice from his note, until it was time for my medical check-up.

Everything we had found so far was swirling around in a mental maelstrom, the pieces connecting to each other one second and falling apart in the next. Raymonde wondered if she should be examined as well but I suggested it might be a wise precaution to leave the focus on me for the moment.

When I walked into the clinic, several nurses jumped to attention. A small, rotund man approached, munching on a pastry.

„Mr Sirenne. I'm so glad to meet you, Sir. My name is Dr Phillippe and these are my assistants. I will be conducting your medical examination. All our equipment is ready, Sir.“

His head slightly downcast, he swept his hand towards an open door in an affable gesture.

„If you would come this way.“

The deference left me unsettled. The same thing was happening all over the caves. All members of the Net had made an oath of loyalty until their death. I was the one in charge of their group. I knew that. Still, the deference bothered me. We each did our bit to make everything work. I needed them as much as they needed me.

„I'm not the usual doctor. He called in sick, imagine that, so I'm still finding my way around. I'm not even a Doctor of medicine. Well, I was, but I don't practice anymore, I moved into the field of Physics. Can't explain why, that's just what I did. They called me here, to give you a once-over. I hope you don't mind. I'm sure I remember all the basics. Would you like a pastry? They are delicious.“

„No thank you, Doctor. I'm not particularly hungry.“

Dr Phillippe had me provide a urine sample and strip down to my underwear. I came out of the small bathroom and sat down on the hospital bed, handing my sample to a nurse. Dr Phillippe selected a hypodermic needle and a rubber tube from a drawer.

„I thought we could get some blood right away and proceed with a basic check-up while my assistants process it.“

„Sounds fine,“ I answered, raising my arm to allow him to place the tube around it. He tied a knot in the tube and tightened it. No matter how tight he made it, I couldn't feel it at all.

„Hmm. I don't seem to be raising a vein,“ the doctor admitted, returning to the rubber tube, tightening it some more and tapping my skin. Although I saw everything he did, I felt none of it.

„Nope. No vein popping up. Curious. Well, I know where it should be. How about I take a chance?“ he asked.

„Go ahead.“

He attempted to insert the needle. It pushed against my arm but, instead of piercing my skin, the needle bent. Dr Phillippe apologized and, pulling the needle back, re-positioned it. He put so much effort trying to push the needle in that it snapped. I still felt none of it. The doctor looked baffled.

„I'm really sorry. I don't know what happened. I can't seem to get the needle to go in.“

This sounded familiar, like trying to rip the page out of a book.

The nurse came in, holding my urine sample. She approached the doctor, whispering in his ear, after a slight curtsy in my direction. She handed him the bottle and left after another curtsy. The doctor held the bottle in his hand, looking at it curiously for a moment, then, opening the top, brought it to his nose, giving it a good sniff. His eyebrows lifted up in amazement. He sniffed the contents of the bottle one further time.

„Tell me, Mr Sirenne, what did you have for breakfast this morning?“

„I skipped breakfast. I wasn't hungry. I did force myself to drink a bit of juice. What is this about, Doctor? What is wrong with my urine sample?“ I asked, worried.

„Well, your urine appears to be apple juice. Cold apple juice, in fact. Without actually analyzing it, it seems to be rather pure. No traces of gastric juices anyway, no other inclusions. You didn't play a trick on us, did you?“

He looked hopeful.

„No, I'm afraid not. I used, uhm, the usual method to provide you with that sample. Did you say cold apple juice? That seems impossible. Wouldn't it have to be warm?“

The doctor nodded his head strongly in agreement.

„Yes that is exactly my thinking. Impossible. It must be a trick.“

„I'm afraid not, Doctor. I can't explain it either but I suspect we will find further anomalies. Let's keep working on the check-up.“

My words jarred him back to a more professional approach and he pulled a standard glass thermometer from a protective sleeve, placing it in my open mouth. Lifting the stethoscope from around his neck, he placed the nubs on his ears and the resonator to my chest. After a moment, he lifted it away, blew on its surface, and replaced it in a slightly different spot. He moved it again, then one more time. Giving up, he stood back from me slightly, placing the stethoscope on his own chest, a strong frown on his forehead. He removed the thermometer from my mouth. Looking at the result, he began trembling slightly.

„Mr Sirenne, I'm terribly sorry. I cannot get any results from my instruments. If I were to believe them, you would have no heartbeat and your body seems to be at ambient temperature. I have verified the proper functioning of the stethoscope upon myself. I am sure the thermometer is in equally good working order. I must conclude it is you.“

„It certainly seems like excellent logic to me, Doctor. Let's not stop and worry too much about how anomalous the results are. Let's catalog them and perhaps we can find patterns, something to give us a clue about what is causing this. I can

assure you that my heart is beating. I can feel its pulsations internally. I can also say that I do not feel cold. I feel as if the temperature is exactly right, even if I am standing here in my underwear. My only sensation is numbness.“

Dr Philippe wrote this down, pulling out a small hammer with a triangular rubber head.

„Let’s continue then, with a brief test of your reflexes.“

He tapped my knee but it did not respond, as if the doctor had missed the nerve.

„Do you mind if I try again? A little harder perhaps?“

„Go ahead. I’m not feeling anything.“

He tapped my knee again, then seeing it fail, hit it a third and final time, with considerably more effort. I felt the impact but the sensation was strangely muted, like being hit through reams of soft cotton. The doctor tested reflexes in my feet, with the same negative results. He attempted to use ultrasound and then x-rays. In each case, the results were opaqueness.

I directed the doctor to use the visible wavelength of light at extreme magnification on my skin.

„You were right, Mr Sirene. There is something transparent covering your skin. It is very fine, much finer than your individual cells. There seems to be many layers.“

I looked at the monitor display. Unlike the books, with a single layer of those bizarre cells, my skin was covered with multiple layers of the stuff. He checked my mouth, worried that the cells might have invaded the internal parts of my body. I held still, while he magnified an area on my tongue, confirming the cells were present. The doctor tried to get a sample of my saliva, using a cotton swab. Even this attempt was frustrated. When he lifted the swab from the pool of saliva in my mouth, it emerged completely dry.

Attempting to spit into a container, I was unable to collect a sufficient amount of saliva. The doctor was at his wit’s end and I was not far behind. The cells had invaded my system and were the likely cause of my recent changes. The doctor checked his own skin in comparison, finding no trace of the cells. He did have one thought about them.

„I regularly talk to several colleagues over the internet. One of them is a botanical specialist. He devotes much of his time to the study of pollens, spores and seeds, as a technique to date ancient objects. Upon occasion, he has sent me image collections of these. The cells I see covering your skin remind me of some of those images. If one was to imagine them as single cells, rather than all flattened out and glued to each other, one might visualize them as amorphous balls with little spines sticking out all around, just like some types of spores.“

I ordered the doctor to do further study, asking him to put together a brief report of his findings as soon as he could. It was time to go to the meeting. The others were waiting.

Chapter 9

The Great Secret Revealed.

I arrived at the conference cave, finding everyone there already, serving themselves coffee and scones. Raymonde handed me a cup, whispering as she did so:

„How did the check-up go?“

„I would tell you if we had been able to obtain a single sample or reading, apart from my weight.“

„That sounds pretty bad.“

„Well, it could be worse. I may have given us a trail to follow.“

„Good. We're going to need it.“

She patted my shoulder before walking back to the table. I hardly felt the physical contact of her arm but there was an accompanying internal sensation, an echo of the physical touch, making the contact feel almost normal.

Walking to the head of the long table, I sat down.

„Good morning everyone. Our problem is that we do not have the whole story in our hands. Major elements have been evading our grasp. From the very beginning, the Great Hunt has been filled with unseen agendas. If we were to accept the version we were originally given, Leblanc found the caves, Hitler sneaked in, tried to kill Leblanc, stole some gold from the caves and left, sealing up what he thought to be Leblanc's body. Leblanc survived and blew up the fort of Frefosse, preventing Hitler from returning to the caves. After that, we are to accept that both men spent the rest of their lives focused on those caves. Why? Certainly there was gold in the caves but, frankly, after many years, Hitler had no further need for gold. As Fuhrer, he had all the wealth and power he could desire. Why would he still seek control of the caves? He had other underground fortresses to run to. It makes no sense, unless there was some other reason, something that, until now, has escaped our notice.“

„I've examined Weissmuller's manuscript carefully. In it, Weissmuller mentions Hitler saying he had killed Leblanc. Yet Leblanc came out of those caves, as alive as you and me. Prior to today, I had discounted that part as coming from a lunatic, as had Weissmuller originally. However, after working in the caves for three years, Weissmuller changed his opinion. In the manuscript's last section, he admitted there was something about the caves which made him think Hitler was right about them after all,“ O'Flanagan commented.

„What are you implying, O'Flanagan? That Leblanc spontaneously resuscitated after being killed by Hitler? That sounds utterly ludicrous.“

„Look, Briar, I'm just saying it's something we ought to look at. I'm not making this up.“

„O'Flanagan's right!“ I added. „More than he knows, I suspect. These three books have been treated, covered in a layer of bizarre spore-like cells, making them impervious to harm. I, too, have been covered by these cells. They are now deep within my body. My increased strength, speed, and accelerated mental state are probably caused by them. The common point between those books and my body has to be the caves themselves. This is why I believe O'Flanagan may be right.“

„Very well, I will play along. Let us suppose this theory is valid. What then?“ asked Briar.

„Lindon left us a note. It was hidden in my father’s second book, which we now know was stolen from Lindon’s house by the Shadow-Killer,“ I said, dropping the bombshell without warning.

„What do you mean?“ asked a red-faced Briar. „You’re not telling me you found another note hidden in those books, are you?“

O’Flanahan jumped in with a quick retort:

„I guess the Shadow-Killer must have missed it. He did all that set-up and missed the most obvious part. If I was him, I sure would be pissed off.“

Briar’s lips were tight and pursed, listening to O’Flanahan’s tirade, and he made a visible effort to relax before replying, a slight smile on his face.

„Yes, for once I think you are right, O’Flanahan. It surely would upset him, if he were human. However, I suspect a monster such as he would take it in stride.“

„Maybe you’re right, Briar. Anyway, what was in Lindon’s note, Paul?“ O’Flanahan asked, returning to the main fray.

„Apart from leading us to discover the books were indestructible, the note informed us that the Abbey monks were indeed our allies. More importantly, Lindon told us to read one of his books, titled »La Veritable identite d’Arsene Lupin ou le secret des rois de France«. I read the book this morning, prior to my medical checkup and what it told me was extremely revealing. It is a short, convincing treatise on the mystery of the Hollow Needle. It seems Lindon was not satisfied by Leblanc’s interpretation of the note left by Marie Antoinette before her beheading, the very note Lupin decoded hundreds of years later to find the location of the supposed Hollow Needle. His treatise re-examines that note and re-interprets the code. Leblanc’s version might have been incorrect.“

„Could Leblanc have done it on purpose?“ wondered Coulter.

„Absolutely. Leblanc wrote the Hollow Needle before his discovery of the caves and I am positive he was careful to muddle the trail. What is certain is that neither Leblanc’s interpretation, nor his journal, ever even hinted of this alternate possibility. Were it not for the note, this whole direction of investigation could well have been missed.“

„What did the treatise say then, Paul?“ asked Raymonde.

„If one reads it in the proper way, it states the secret is an underground river with special properties, which the Kings of France knew about for centuries.“

„A river? What river?“ wondered Coulter.

„It’s an underground river, which flows beneath the Aval cliff and the town of Etretat. It can be seen pouring into the channel at extremely low tide, below the Amont cliff. Weissmuller himself mentioned it and its effects on health. It courses through the caves, deep underground. An entire section of caves is flooded by its waters.“

„What’s so special about the river?“ added Coulter.

„The explanation for that comes from the final part of Lindon’s book. Let me fill you in on a bit of the story. In 1876, there was a big drought around Etretat. The nearby river dried out, restricting access to the main water supply. A local candy maker, Mr Hamel, normally used regular water in the making of his confections. During the drought, he looked for alternate sources. The underground river was

still flowing, piped to a small fountain called La Fontaine D'Amont. Hamel used the water in the making of a particular confection, following an ancient family recipe, which were commonly called »les Carres-Hamel«. Prior to using the new water, the candies, which were small soft squares, had enjoyed a modest popularity. Once the new water had been added, Hamel could not keep them in supply. Over time, many customer made claims of increased health and attributed these changes to the »Carres-Hamel«, which name had been contracted to Car-Hamel or Caramel. Somehow, the addition of the underground river water to the caramels improved the health of those who ate them. To this day, that fountain still carries myths of improved health and longevity. In fact, if one studies the few reports available, you will discover that local inhabitants benefit from a higher than average life-span. It is not uncommon for most Etretatais to have at least one family member over the age of one hundred.“

By now, O'Flanahan eyes were bulging out of his head.

„Sirenne, you're not saying what I think you're saying are you?“

I laughed at the look on his face.

„Yes, I believe so, O'Flanahan.“

„Mother-Of-Pearl. You can't be serious,“ O'Flanahan stood up and paced around the room, talking a mile a minute. „Do you know what this might mean? Good gosh. And to think I was impressed when we found Hitler's body in the caves. Wait until I print this, I said. Now, I see myself as a mere child. It's time to handle the grown-up conspiracies, the ones that might actually mean something.“

„Frankly, O'Flanahan, don't you think you are over-reacting a tad?“ snapped Briar.

„Not really. Not one bit in fact. I don't know what you think Paul was trying to say with his origin-of-caramels story but it came through clear-as-day to me.“

Coulter looked at O'Flanahan in confusion, still not getting it. O'Flanahan spelled it out:

„We're sitting on the Fountain of Youth, me boy, the Fountain of Youth.“

O'Flanahan fell back in his chair, completely overwrought. He sat there, mulling his thoughts for a moment before speaking again, this time in a low chilling tone.

„And if we are to believe Leblanc did in fact return from the dead, as Hitler claimed all along, then not only have we found the Fountain of Youth, we may well have found the secret of immortality, particularly when we add the invulnerable books and Sirenne's changes to the mix. My friends, all this concerns me greatly. Every single man who has ever lived has been seeking this from the moment they figured out they were going to die. We may be sitting on the most valuable secret on the face of the earth.“

A brief silence fell over the table. Our reflection did not last long, interrupted by a wireless call. It was Doctor Phillippe.

„Mr Sirenne, Sir, I have found the link. I have found it.“

The man was brimming with excitement.

„Calm down, Doctor. Tell us what you have found,“ I directed him.

„After you left, Sir, I kept comparing those cells to images of spores. Eventually, I found a match. It was an ancient spore, more than five hundred thousand years old. I contacted Dr Solanski, the man who had sent me the images, and asked him about it. He informed me it belonged to an extinct species of cave lichen.“

Naturally, I thought of the light-giving fungus on our walls. I wondered what its spores might look like. I set about trying to collect some. I was surprised at how long it took me to obtain a single sample. It seems the air currents are sufficiently strong to carry them away rapidly.“

„I’ve noticed that,“ mentioned Raymonde. „The dust is always pulled away in the main corridors, never gathering.“

The doctor nodded in agreement.

„Yes, Miss Raymonde, exactly. Well, it took some time but I managed to isolate a single spore. Here is a magnified picture of it. Allow me to place this comparative image from Mr Sirenne’s skin.“

The cells covering my body were distorted spores.

„I was also baffled that your skin was covered in spores while mine was not. I have checked many others and none have shown any evidence of spores. I will keep collecting the spores, if you wish, Sir, and continue doing research on them.“

„That sounds perfect, Doctor Phillippe, thank you. You have provided us with a key element, I am sure of it. Go on with your research. And Doctor?“

„Yes, Mr Sirenne?“

„Work fast. Use all available resources. Time is of the essence.“

The doctor gulped and nodded.

„Yes, Sir, I will. As fast as possible.“

„Well, that certainly was a timely bit of news,“ O’Flanahan commented when the doctor disconnected.

„I agree,“ I retorted. „If we are going to accept that these caves conceal the secret of immortality, then I want some scientific proof.“

„Ever the Doubting Thomas, Paul?“ added Briar.

„Yes Jonathan, Thomas should have been my middle name. However, the good doctor has solved my nascent dilemma. He has provided us with a physical link. Spores from that bizarre light-giving fungus which covers the cave walls.“

„How could spores make someone immortal?“ asked Raymonde, a tone of concern in her voice. I couldn’t forget she was just as affected as I was.

„We don’t know that yet. We just know there is a link. Those spores have covered the book and me. Both have exhibited material changes as a result. That is what we know. For the moment, we should let Doctor Phillippe pursue his research and, hopefully, he will be able to provide us with further information.“

„Everything seems to revolve around Leblanc’s encounter with Hitler in the caves,“ Raymonde mentioned.

„Yes, Miss Raymonde, you are quite correct,“ Briar joined in. „I am led to think of Jesus Christ after he was removed from the cross and buried in his tomb. The same key question must be asked.“

„Good one, Briar,“ agreed O’Flanahan. „That’s the key question all right: did he come back from the dead? Was Leblanc killed or not?“

„Why don’t we go look?“ I suggested. „The cave is just down the hall.“

Getting up from the conference table, we exited the throne cave, heading to the right.

„When we first found the cave where Leblanc was hit, I was surprised at the amount of blood on the floor,“ I said.

„Me too. I remember a big stain, mostly hidden by the dust,“ added Coulter.

„We never touched that cave, out of respect to Leblanc. I should have wondered before now that this cave in particular wasn't touched by Weissmuller and his men either,“ I said.

„Perhaps he held a similar respect,“ suggested Briar.

„No, I don't think so. Weissmuller was a monster, as you said yourself. He would never have cared a whit for Leblanc's feelings, particularly not a dead Leblanc,“ riposted O'Flanahan.

„Here we are,“ I said, cutting off another argument between my two friends. They were such different men, almost total opposites. They held little love for each other, although there might be grudging respect between the two.

We squeezed carefully through the narrow opening, O'Flanahan's larger belly getting stuck for a brief moment, much to his chagrin, and to Coulter's delight. Finally, all comments over with, our bodyguards in place by the entrance, we stood around the ancient stain on the floor.

„This is where it all started. I wonder if Leblanc had any idea of the nest he was stirring when he walked in here,“ asked O'Flanahan.

„Do any of us ever know where our footsteps will lead us in time? I would think not. All men muddle through their lives like sheep, looking in front of their noses, just far enough to know where to place their next step. Men have no vision of the true consequences of their actions. In my field of study, I have seen enough skeletons to prove that conclusively,“ philosophized Briar.

His viewpoint, while sounding cynical, might be right.

Coulter knelt down, carefully brushing the dust away to reveal the bloodstain. While he did this, I noticed a curious phenomenon. The stirred-up dust, floating into the air, settled into a slow, curious pattern of movement. Some of the dust particles were swirling around me. More were doing the same around Raymonde. The others hadn't noted the slight orbital pattern, except perhaps for Raymonde herself.

Neither of us said anything, locked in a frozen moment, looking at the swirling dust orbiting around us, the individual motes like diamond specks in the bright fungus light. I felt as if I was the center of a galaxy, stars majestically rotating in four big spiraling arms, trailing slowly through the eons. The details I could pick up were disconcerting. I could easily discern individual specks and watch them as they spiraled ever closer to Raymonde. I saw one land and vanish in a puff of light. Then another and another.

Spores.

The dust was filled with spores. Somehow, they were specifically attracted to Raymonde and me. Coulter's sweeping had set them in motion and the liberated spores were able to move freely in the faint air currents, my perception of them surely enhanced by my recent changes. I doubted the others could see such fine movements, although it seemed like a veritable maelstrom to me.

The moment ended and my perceptions returned to normal, time kicking back into gear. I locked onto Raymonde's eyes wordlessly. She too had perceived the same incredible pattern.

„Does it seem brighter in here to you guys?“ wondered Coulter, squinting despite his glasses. „This is an enclosed space. Less free oxygen. It shouldn't be this bright.“

I said nothing, not sure how to explain what Raymonde and I had just witnessed. Coulter's attention thankfully returned to measuring the bloodstain.

„This is an awfully big stain. And look how dark it is. It had to be pretty thick to start with, in order to be this dark a century later.“

Coulter pulled a small calculator from his belt holder. He jabbed numbers at a rapid pace on the poor instrument. After a prolonged attack, the calculator surrendered the answer.

„There is no way Leblanc could have survived losing this much blood. Even allowing for a large percentage of error in my calculations, the numbers are unarguable. Leblanc bled out on this floor. He had to have died, right here, almost a hundred years ago.“

„Yet history tells us otherwise. His own journal tells us he got up from this very spot and walked away, living for another thirty years,“ affirmed O'Flanahan. „If this isn't proof that something is going on, I don't know what is.“

„Okay, but that still doesn't explain how he came back from the dead,“ argued Briar.

„I think I can answer that. He fell to the dust-covered floor of this small recessed cave when he was hit. That dust was hundreds of matted layers, centuries old, centuries thick, saturated with fungus spores. If we are to accept the spores are the link, which I do, then this was their chance to do their thing, even if we cannot explain what that thing is.“

„Paul's right. This has to be the connection,“ O'Flanahan stated unequivocally, as Coulter stood up, patting his knees and sending more dust flying. I avoided focusing on it, hoping to prevent another perceptual episode.

„So Hitler was speaking the truth all along then?“ Raymonde asked while we filed out of the small cave.

„It was right in front of us. We just didn't see it because it was so unbelievable,“ I answered. „We made the wrong assumption from the very beginning. With Leblanc's impossible return to life, Hitler learned the caves held far more than he ever expected. The secret of immortality! This is why Hitler changed, what crystallized him. This is the key event that changed the entire world.“

„Good gosh. It makes Hitler's actions so much clearer. Think about his thousand-year Reich. If you need more proof, remember the prayer he wrote for schoolchildren, naming himself as their immortal God. Those things were never intended to be myths. Hitler truly thought he would live forever,“ O'Flanahan exclaimed.

„No wonder he never gave up trying to come back here,“ Coulter threw in, shaking his head.

„The crafty Leblanc blocked him at every turn, anticipating all his moves, and killing him in the end, preventing the world from having to deal with an immortal Hitler,“ O'Flanahan added.

Raymonde shuddered.

„How did my great-grandfather succeed? How did he stop Hitler from coming back too, if the trap was in the spore-filled caves?“

„That is an excellent question, one to which I believe I have the answer,“ Briar answered. „When we found that trap, with the hidden poison gas tanks, our only thought was to ensure the poison was long gone, which thankfully it was. Leblanc

had to achieve many things with his poison gas. He knew he would never return to the Caves once he left them. His trap had to work. It could not be a matter of mere chance. It is one of the first things I investigated when we originally moved in to the Caves. I tested the surfaces of several escape jets, which I found hidden behind the tapestries. The results came back showing the presence of iron oxides, as well as high levels of carbon dioxide.“

„And what the heck does that mean, Briar?“ asked O’Flanahan.

„Iron oxides are powerful oxygen absorbers, particularly in a humid environment, such as this cave air. I believe Leblanc’s trap contained a combination of oxygen absorbers and pressurized carbon dioxide. Its release would have fatally lowered oxygen levels while the increase in carbon dioxide levels would have ensured rapid human death. It only takes a concentration of ten or twenty percent carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to prove lethal to humans. The idea of adding pulverized iron particles was truly brilliant. It combined rapidly with the humidity in the air, activating instantly and turning to rust. Hitler and the others never stood a chance. By coincidence, the air system built by Weissmuller added a higher efficiency to the process, spreading the gas/iron dust mix throughout the entire complex within minutes of its release.“

I shook my head at the planning required.

„It’s incredible.“

„As well,“ finished Briar with a smile, „Since carbon dioxide is heavier than air, the highest concentrations would end up in the lagoon chamber. Even with breathing tanks, the saturated air would poison you through the skin. He turned these caves into a deadly tomb for more than sixty years with his trap, an amazing achievement.“

Briar was right. Leblanc’s trap had done exactly what it had to do.

We entered the conference cave. Coulter hurried to the coffee bar and prepared himself a fresh cup. When he turned around, to return to the table, he smashed into an immobile O’Flanahan, spilling his cup.

„Watch out, O’Flanahan,“ Coulter exclaimed, awkwardly swerving around him.

„Sorry, Coulter, it’s just that I had a pretty scary thought.“

When O’Flanahan was in full conspiracy-swing, his thoughts had a tendency to extremes.

„Come sit down and tell us, Liam,“ asked Raymonde.

O’Flanahan drank some hot coffee and pulled out a chair, sitting down on its edge.

„It’s just one of those stupid thought-chains; you know how they go, right? You start with one, then another latches on, then another. The first thing you know, you have gotten pretty far from where you started, you know what I mean?“

I nodded. O’Flanahan stood up again and started pacing.

„Well, I found myself wondering: what about Weissmuller? I mean, what was he doing in all this? All along, we have looked at Hitler but this Weissmuller guy was there as well. He is the one who did all the killing while Hitler did all the politicking. He is the one who came here, to Etretat, and built this entire fortress, for Pete’s sake. He researched the meteorite buried in the middle of the caves. He knew all about it. He also knew about the fungus, because he installed the air system to feed it oxygen in order to use it as a light source for the caves. The

crowning piece for me is his manuscript. There it was, waiting for us to find it, with all sorts of answers.“

He stopped pacing for a moment, taking a bite from a scone and another sip from his cup. Crumbs fell off his chin onto his dirty sweater.

„You all know me, with my conspiracies. I see them everywhere. When I saw that manuscript, I thought to myself, how convenient, here’s Weissmuller shot in the head and here’s his manuscript telling us all about it. Well, I just didn’t buy it, not for a minute. It was all too pat. But what could I do about it? Those events happened in 1945. Even if Weissmuller hadn’t died, he’d surely be dead by now, sixty years later. That was when I asked myself: what if?“

He paused dramatically, looking at each of us in turn.

„What if he knew about the spores? What then? Well, after that, the thoughts just wouldn’t stop latching together, it was happening all on its own. Hitler told Weissmuller his beliefs about the caves; it was right in the manuscript. After working in the caves for three years, Weissmuller believed the caves were more important than they seemed at first. He mentioned the underground river. He could measure Leblanc’s bloodstain just as easily as we could. He would have known Hitler wasn’t speaking nonsense when he talked about immortality. He even considered himself Hitler’s superior near the end, no longer trusting his partner in crime. He claimed in his manuscript he was ready for Hitler’s treachery if it came. I thought he had failed, that Hitler had caught him by surprise, shot him in the back like the coward he was. But now, I’m not so sure.“

„O’Flanahan, you must return to earth. No matter what you suppose, Weissmuller is well and truly dead. We found his mummified body together. You are the one who pulled the manuscript from his cold, dead corpse. How can you argue with that?“ Briar countered, bringing reality back to the fore.

O’Flanahan was unfazed.

„How? Easily, that’s how. Weissmuller was no fool. He was a cold serial killer. He worked in the caves for three long years, plenty of time to ferret out its secrets. Sirenne has only been here for a few months and he’s damn near indestructible already. We know this stuff isn’t science-fiction. Those books, and Paul here, are the proof. There is no way Weissmuller did not know about the spores. And knowing about the spores is just a step away from using them. So, in answer to you, Briar, even if there is a body down there, Weissmuller did not die. He knew how treacherous Hitler was. I am sure he took countermeasures. We already know the guy loved hiding in the shadows. If Hitler had a double, why couldn’t Weissmuller have one? Why does that body down there have to be Weissmuller’s? It doesn’t and you know it. You all know it.“

Briar could say nothing to O’Flanahan’s irrefutable words. Weissmuller’s journal had proven him to be a brilliant man, subject to fits of excessive planning. It had allowed him to remain invisible after more than thirty years of brutal killing. He would have protected himself. O’Flanahan continued:

„I don’t even need to go check those remains, although I will, just to get Briar off my back. I am convinced I will find evidence of surgical alterations, hair coloration, something that will prove me right. Unfortunately, that’s not the end of it. That was just the next thought in my chain. The following one was even worse, Paul. A real killer!“

He was looking directly at me. I returned his stare, looking deep into his bright eyes.

„If he didn't die, then he was the only one to survive, the last one who knew about the secret of the caves. He had riches beyond compare, no one knew he was alive and he very possibly held immortality in his hands. That was when I asked myself: what has he been doing all this time? That was sixty long years ago. Where is he now? Could he be here, still alive after all these years? Could he be the Shadow-Killer? That's the thought that froze me, Paul, the thought I can't get out of my head right now, no matter what I try. Crazy as it sounds, I think Weissmuller is right here, right now, walking among us, with his crazy disguises, still pulling our strings, after more than a hundred years of existence. And that thought scares the heck out of me.“

Weissmuller Recollections, 1943-1954

My great discovery came through simple curiosity concerning the river flowing through the caves. Its health effects on anyone who drank it were undisputable, although consistent intake was necessary. Examination of the water revealed nothing unusual: normal water contaminants, fresh water plankton and various plant spores.

I continued using the water in the caves for two reasons: a healthy workforce would be more productive and I would have a ready source of guinea pigs to observe. By 1942, I was able to draw a few conclusions. They were difficult to accept.

I did a further study to replicate my results, adding two control groups to the first group of one hundred men. The results confirmed my original conclusions:

Statistical Study Results

Period of analysis: two years

Group A -Special water from underground river:

One hundred males, median age: thirty-five.

Incidence of disease while living in cave:-----0%

Incidence of disease while outside of caves:-0%

Group B- control group-plain water, living inside and outside caves:

Fifty males, median age thirty-seven.

Incidence of disease while living in caves:-----0%

Incidence of disease while living outside of caves:--12%

Group C- second control group, plain water, living outside.

Twenty-five males, Median age thirty-five.

Incidence of disease while living outside of caves:--74%

Something common to the river water and the caves was increasing my men's resistance to disease. The hospital staff on level three related other facts, not apparent in my statistical examination. The men demonstrated an

amazing resistance to injury as well as disease. Accidents which should have resulted in broken bones often did not. Pain was generally non-existent. In a few cases, skin had even become resistive to acids.

What was doing this and how strong were its effects? What if we made a concentrated elixir of it? Would it banish disease?

I experimented on selected hardy specimens, to determine the level of protectiveness provided by the river and air of our caves. Early in the fortress' construction, I had reserved a group of forty chambers as my private area, away from the others, deep underground, where I felt safest. I had transformed them into the ultimate testing rooms, where I could carry out several experiments at once, for days, if I desired.

I placed my first specimen in the main chamber, tied to a table of my own design. He had been drinking the river water exclusively for more than a year. He had suffered three accidents in that period, the third quite serious, or at least it would have been, if he hadn't come out inexplicably unharmed. I had to discover how far the water *effect* would protect him from a focused attempt to cause bodily harm.

I gagged the soldier to reduce his pointless objections. My first attempt was straightforward, stabbing him in the leg with a long, sharp knife. The tip slipped on his skin, sliding to the examination table beneath him. Trying again, using both hands to steady the knife, I stabbed into his leg. Once more, my knife slid along the skin. Selecting a larger area, I thrust the knife into his stomach repeatedly. The knife jabbed deeply, failing to pierce the skin, no matter the force applied.

The man was bouncing with every one of my blows although he did not seem to be in serious pain. He was struggling against his bonds but they would hold him until he died. Deciding to be less subtle about my attempts, I picked up a heavy hammer and hit him squarely on the chest, a truly resounding blow. His body was squashed under the hammer's impact, his air expelled and his chest cage flattened. At the last possible moment, the hammer was pushed back, the chest cage throwing off the impact energy, leaving the specimen relatively unharmed.

The man's eyes were wild. He was breathing in and out like a steam piston. Performing a brief examination confirmed two ribs had cracked, although the cracks were relatively minor. His skin was heavily bruised around the point of impact but it was already healing. My blow should have crushed his chest cage and his heart. It was unquestionable that some protective agent was present.

I returned to my specimen with a vengeance. After many, many tests, I knew his protection was all-encompassing. He was resistive to burning, drowning, poisoning, starvation, and infection. In short, everything I could think of throwing at him. He was nearly indestructible.

The effect lessened after I placed him in an isolated chamber, feeding him canned air and water. It took two weeks. He began to look hungry and tired. One day, my knife was able to leave deep cuts on his skin, causing several satisfactory screams. After that, death came quickly.

Renewed examination of the cave air and underground river revealed a common element: spores from the bioluminescent fungus. The microscopic spores could only be seen under powerful magnification. They floated easily through fine screens, unhampered by sophisticated filtration systems.

The spores were surprisingly resistive to analysis, not affected by any reagent, including aqua regia. I could not get them to germinate, no matter the richness of the growing medium. Breathed in or swallowed, the spores soon found their way into the blood and the rest of the body. If intake was stopped, the spores would vanish from the body over a period of two weeks.

I wondered if ingesting a concentrated spore solution would render a man completely indestructible. The thought appealed to me immediately. I would find a way of collecting the spores, increasing their potency, and use them on myself. Secrecy was an absolute priority. None could know but me.

I came up with a way to achieve my goals, ordering my men to install an enhanced filtering system on all air-returns supplying our three ventilation fans. It was placed below the existing air filtration room, accessible through a door hidden in the fan room. The system used a centrifuge, forcing all particles into multiple filtration screens, separating the spores from the other particles. Hidden deep within the installation was a small chamber, where a pure concentrate of spores accumulated.

The filtration removed all spores from the air in the caves. I stopped providing my men with river water, substituting it with distilled water from our desalination plant. Soon, my men's health returned to normal and all was forgotten, the oddity of the healthier times attributed to our isolation, a theory I originated. The men accepted the explanation readily. I reflected on the effectiveness of such simple misdirection. Manipulation could be incredibly powerful when yielded with hidden purpose.

With reflection, I could anticipate where their very thoughts would roam, the questions they would ask themselves. Planting a thought, an easy explanation for questions before they arose, could win the battle before it started. With proper anticipation, with purpose, I could make them think or believe whatever I wanted.

Hitler was the first to show me the importance of purpose. By adding multiple layers of purpose to my actions, each action became clearer, sharper, more defined. The more purpose I applied, the more order I imposed on the world. In purpose, I found peace and serenity.

After a few months, the filtration unit had collected a quantity of pure spore concentrate. Considering the efficiency of the process, it collected a rather small quantity of spores over a given period of time. The reason was the spore's extremely small size. A cubic centimeter could hold more than one million of them.

I carefully poured a kilo of spores into a beaker. It was a fine grey dust, so fine it moved like a thick liquid, rolling around in heavy waves. When heated, its movement increased, behaving like convection currents in a liquid. It could not be brought to a boil and could not be made to melt. It would not freeze. It was also heavier than lead. One kilo of spores was a small amount of material.

The movement in its roiling surface fascinated me. Inevitably, one day, all testing done, incapable of waiting any further, I gathered a quantity of spores and dropped it into my waiting mouth. It mixed with my saliva, coating my mouth and numbing it powerfully.

I swallowed reflexively, feeling a burning sensation when the spores traveled down my throat. Entering my stomach, the burning changed to a warm numbness. I moved my tongue, vaguely feeling it respond. I spoke, my words clear despite the numbness.

After an hour, the internal heat lessened, leaving me with an energetic, warm feeling over my entire body. I had eaten about four times the amount of spores absorbed by my soldiers in the course of a year. The intense effects I experienced had to be due to the higher concentration.

The annoying numbness remained, spreading over my entire body. On the other hand, my hearing and my vision were crystal clear. Both body and mind were vibrant with energy, the spores providing all I needed. I waited a full day for the spores to reach maximum protectiveness and tried to harm myself. My first attempts were hesitant but I quickly gained confidence when I realized that I absolutely could not do myself any damage. My favorite attempt was drowning.

My lungs would spasm when inhaling the first gulp of water, sending my chest in a frenzy of inhalations. Eventually reason would overcome the body's instinctive reactions when it became obvious that nothing bad was happening. I could breathe water just as easily as air, feeling no discomfort, no sense of running out of oxygen.

This led me to try a simple test. I stopped breathing. Everything continued along just fine. I felt no need to breathe. I got up and ran, holding my breath. After thirty minutes of strenuous effort, with no ill effects whatsoever, I was convinced. The spores were not simply protecting me! They had stopped my bodily functions, eliminating my physical needs. My heart was beating, so circulation was apparently still necessary, perhaps to move the spores around.

I no longer needed to eat or drink. My intestinal system would accept food and liquid but analysis determined that I was processing nothing. If I drank wine, I pissed wine! I no longer got drunk. Smoking cigarettes provided no nicotine lift. Injecting drugs was impossible; needles would not even pierce the skin.

Yet, my body felt suffused with energy. I was replete with it and never used it up. It was always there, a vast reserve to draw upon. My strength had more than doubled and was still increasing. My memory was sharp, my mind clear, overflowing with ideas and plans.

Although I felt powerfully alive, the spore concentrate had frozen my body at a single point in time. The day I ingested those first spores, my body stopped changing. If I was no longer changing, time no longer held dominion over me.

I wasn't indestructible. I was immortal!

* * * * *

I took the spore concentrate regularly, slowly increasing the quantity I ingested, experimenting with its powerful effects. The more I took, the stronger I became, the more energetic I felt. The energy moved in a loop, a vast molten river of energy waiting to erupt at the slightest opportunity.

Taking more spores increased the amount of energy but, after a point, it became counter-productive, driving me into hyper-frenetic actions. I eventually settled on a specific dose, needing only a regular infusion of spore concentrate to keep me going.

It gave me the stamina to drive my men like a tank. I became unstoppable. I often had to control my exuberance. However, when I was displeased with results, I allowed myself the occasional display of inhuman strength, such as lifting a man bodily off the floor with one arm and snapping his neck like a twig. These demonstrations sufficed to induce great fear and absolute obedience in my men.

I withheld the discovery of the spores from Hitler, knowing it was what he sought. I no longer wanted to give it to him. He had been speaking the truth all along. The spores might well have protected the dying Leblanc. Hitler had been right to pursue the take-over of the caves but he had been wrong to trust me to do it for him.

Leblanc had also been foolish, assuming I would not find his trap. I had known it would exist before I entered the caves. It was obvious really, a pathetic attempt. Yet, where it had failed on me, it would succeed with Hitler.

Leblanc had stored a vast quantity of an oxygen-absorbing carbon dioxide compound in the throne room. Hidden vents, located in key areas, would rapidly flood the cave system. Once the trap was triggered, the air would become deadly, without a trace of oxygen. People would die where they stood.

Removing oxygen served a dual purpose. Without it, the fungus became dormant, producing neither light nor spores. Those who died in the caves would remain dead. Leblanc had known about the spores and had chosen his chemicals with them in mind. Leblanc was not quite the fool I took him to be. My only question was why had he not partaken of the spores?

What had been his purpose?

The room he had chosen as the setting for his trap fascinated me. Neanderthal bones lay in niches behind every tapestry, hundreds of skeletons in all. The history of the caves was far older than anyone ever supposed. Neanderthals vanished from the face of the earth about thirty thousand years ago. Did human history in the caves span that far back? How could the fungus spores have remained a secret all that time?

There was evidence that the main entrances to the caves were repeatedly sealed, both at sea level and on top of the cliff. The spores did not provide sufficient lure to keep men here. Something drove them off.

When Hitler arrived to take over the caves, I would no longer have freedom to learn the answers I sought. It was unacceptable. I had already received orders from him, requiring me to kill my men. I had been planning to do this all along but when the order came from Hitler, it seemed likely my own assassination might be next. It was what I would do. Of course, I no longer feared death but I did not desire to be exposed as an immortal quite yet.

My solution was to anticipate everything and to leave Leblanc's trap as a backup. I would not be unduly concerned if everyone in the caves died except for me. However, I wanted to see if Hitler's intent was truly to betray me. I used the same subterfuge he did, preparing one of my men as my double. Since my Weissmuller skin was a disguise to begin with, training another to look like me was child's play. Copying my speech pattern was simple. I tended to keep my voice bland, devoid of inflection or accent.

When Hitler shot my double in the back of the head, I quietly slipped into my hidden caves and allowed events to unfold, observing everything from the shadows. Inevitably, Hitler found the crown under the throne and triggered it. Walking out of my concealed caves, I stood by, reveling in their final gasps.

By activating the trigger, Hitler had ensured that none but me would learn of his beloved caves. The oxygen depletion reduced the caves to near darkness. My increased sensitivity made it appear as bright as daylight. Of more significance, the dormant fungus no longer produced spores and my filtration system collected less and less concentrate, until one day it was no longer collecting any at all.

Anticipating this moment, I had carefully hoarded all concentrate collected to date. I needed precious little to keep me going. My calculations indicated the oxygen-absorbing chemicals would be exhausted within sixty years or so. I had just enough concentrate to last until then.

I remained inside for several months, preparing a new skin for myself, a new life. Eventually, I left the caves, ready for a new type of existence, as an immortal.

* * * * *

For a few years, I contented myself with simple, mindless experimentation. I traveled the countryside doing little more than scouting for the next victim. The aftermath of war was all around and chaos still reigned supreme. Both police and army were overwhelmed by the staggering needs of recovering nations and my little exercises went by relatively unnoticed. Unfortunately, war ended and my excesses became more noticeable.

I travelled through lesser-known areas, experimenting wherever chance brought me, honing my skills. Slowly but surely, I was training myself to become the ultimate shadow-master. Eventually, my travels brought me to Romania. I loved the Carpathian Mountains. Romania was a truly ancient land, steeped in fear and superstition for centuries. It was not long before I learned about *vampyre* myths and legends.

One night, after one particularly gory experiment gone wrong, where the male I had chosen moved exactly when I struck, causing a far bigger spray of blood than intended, I wondered if there was a way to have less bloody experiments. Some of my solutions were rather novel, using the local vampyric lore to my advantage. My enhanced strength allowed me to do many things a vampyre might be expected to do.

After some interesting practice, I could jump down from a rooftop, rip a victim's throat open with my bare teeth and suck all of his blood in one big draw. The feeling of killing my prey by draining them of blood was truly

inebriating and I reveled in repeating this act, usually on the stroke of midnight, hopefully in front of many witnesses. Dropping the body, I would bound up to the roof of a nearby house and, jumping from rooftop to rooftop, vanish into the shadows.

I settled in Romania for a while, literally haunting the countryside and inspiring as much fear in the inhabitants as I could achieve. I killed a local man who had a reputation of being a bit mad and took his skin. After that, I was able to observe the effects of my experiments firsthand.

Every murder could enhance the wave of fear running through the countryside if timed properly. Fear took on a life of its own, jumping from man to man, permeating the very air, making it oppressive and pervasive, inescapable. Once a man was in its grip, there was no release from its merciless clutches. His thoughts would return again and again to its horrible call.

I could make the fear grow and wane, simply by timing the next vampyric act. It became mechanical after a while. I would move into an area and murder people one by one, killing them in a spiral pattern, starting far outside of town, rotating closer and closer to its center. By using these basic principles, I could create a running, panicked mob within less than thirty minutes, a fact of which I was quite proud.

I became fairly adept at simulating vampyric lore and was not above using theatrical effects, with fog machines and pre-recorded sounds, all activated with the most exquisite timing. As for ingesting blood, I found it completely acceptable. It made less mess, solving my original concern. I could no longer taste anything, so it was neutral as a liquid. My body did not absorb any of the blood and I could simply eliminate it by urinating at a later, more convenient moment.

Along the way, simply because it was what I had fallen into, I decided to investigate my namesake, Count Dracula. Although Bram Stoker featured the vampyre in his 1897 book, Dracula was based on a real man who held an entire continent bathed in fear during his reign in the 1400's, a renaissance Genghis Khan. I needed to know more.

By now, my investigative technique was well practiced. I would do basic research into which local professors taught my subject of interest. Selecting an acceptable candidate, I developed an appropriate scenario to kidnap the professor. I always varied the scenario in order to keep the process entertaining and to avoid leaving any type of identifiable pattern.

Once I had obtained the professor, I would chain him to a wall prepared in advance. In order to focus his attention, I would remove one or two appendages, small ones at first and bigger ones if more convincing was necessary. I would thus induce the specialist to educate me.

I found my heightened senses in these situations enabled total recall and I never forgot their instructions, which were most memorable when the professor's voice was tinged with a certain amount of fear and pain, acting as a delectable subset.

Once my class was finished, I would dispatch the professor as reward for a lesson well learned. The process was simplicity itself and quite stimulating. I

fondly remembered the years spent selecting and killing the specialists studying Etretat, eradicating their accumulated knowledge from history at the same time. The true meaning of killing two birds with one stone.

In the end, my vampyre history lesson provided me with the information I sought.

Known by his loving subjects as Vlad the Impaler, Dracula's Romanian surname, Draculea was derived from his father's title, Dracul, although his given name was Vlad Tepes. In modern Romanian, the word Dracul means devil or demon, but in Vlad's day, it meant Dragon, derived from the Latin »Draco«. Oriental myths referred to dragons as beings of immortal power.

Over time, Vlad had become connected to vampyric legends. Originally, I blamed Bram Stoker for fictitious embellishment but I was wrong. Stoker had not originated anything. Certainly, he assembled various stories into a single package but the myth itself was born long before Stoker.

The Impaler's bloody history was generally thought to be the reason for his connection to the vampyre myth. In fact, it was because of his personal quest to attain immortality. Vlad's fears were simple: his enemies and death. Enemies he could kill but death could not be avoided.

Like others of his time, he had known of stories about immortality. There was the philosopher's stone, of which alchemists spoke, and there were stories about immortals from long ago, in early Christian history. Vlad's search for immortality drove him towards vampyrism in 1474, soon after he was released from captivity, a few years before he regained his throne for the third and final time.

The professor's knowledge of this particular historical section was vague. Vlad had traveled far and none knew where he had gone. When he returned, he had the strength of ten men and lived in the dark. His acts of brutality grew to extremes, even for him. The locals finally revolted and, overpowering him through sheer numbers, forced him into a special tomb, beneath the entrance of a church, burying him alive. His bones were found within the thick granite tomb, still chained into immobility after five hundred years.

As an immortal, I thought myself impervious to harm. I had not considered eternal entombment. Without a regular infusion of spores, I would lose my special powers, becoming as mortal as the next man. Then I would die. It was an important lesson. Being immortal did not stop you from getting killed. It just made it a lot harder to do.

Vlad's quest for immortality had sent him over the edge, his brutality grown into madness. Still, the question remained: where had he gone and what had he learned which made him immortal? More importantly, what had gone wrong with him? What made him a vampyre and me an immortal?

It took two years to learn the answer. By then, my vampyre skin had outstayed its welcome. The locally organized vampyre hunts were becoming quite irritating.

After almost being caught by an enraged mob, despite a number of precautions, I decided to go on a vacation from the local haunts. My travels were not without purpose, because I had finally tracked down the last

remaining Dracula family. I found them living in a small stone house, bereft of any luxury, fallen on hard times.

There were four of them: a mother, two little girls, and a decrepit old man. Considering his advanced years, his eyes were wary and piercing. He didn't buy my innocent act, not for a second. Yet he said nothing, continuing to live the lie, keeping the illusion going. He was trying to save his family from the devil who had entered their haven of safety. I waited, doing the same as him, playing my role with consummate skill, the woman and children oblivious to the fate that waited them this night. After an hour of game-playing, the old man pulled out an old brandy bottle, kept in the family for years, probably reserved for grand occasions. Pulling out his tobacco pouch, he asked me to join him outside for some man-to-man talk.

I drank his spirits and smoked his rolled cigarette, waiting him out. Once fortified with a strong shot of brandy he made a no-nonsense plea for the lives of his granddaughter and her two children. In exchange, he offered himself, giving me his life then and there. I countered with my own offer, one he could not refuse, for the alternative was death.

The man was old, well over a hundred years, but his mind was still sharp. I told him to rekindle his memories of ancient family lore. By design or by luck, I had fallen on a learned man. He had been well educated in his youth. I could still see signs of nobility through the ravages of hunger and age. He knew about Vlad Dracul and his changes. The old man's family had been close to Royalty in olden days, before being betrayed by their cousins, and they had been privy to certain secrets.

The old man's story:

„Vlad Dracul traveled far in his time, killing people from every part of the continent. One day, Dracul and his retinue came across a group of travelers, white-robed monks in appearance, a tempting morsel, apparently easy for the taking. However, when confronted, weapons appeared as if by magic. A great battle ensued, Dracul barely escaping with his life. Angered by his failure, he pursued the monks relentlessly.

„The chase took weeks, with several confrontations, leaving dead on both sides, until only one warrior-monk remained alive. Tortured and questioned, he died without uttering a single word. A strange tattoo, found on the man's inner thigh, was removed and mounted in a frame.

„Dracul would occasionally bring out the strange trophy, regaling his guests with the wild tale of its acquisition. He always puzzled over the tattoo, suspecting it concealed more than he knew.

„In 1474, the answer was revealed while attending a massive orgy. A young sailor told a joke comparing the shape of a harbor and certain women's charms. The talk of a harbor's outline struck Dracul as the solution to his long-standing questions. The tattoo was a map! The young sailor, named Cristophorus, was shown the tattoo, confirming Dracul's belief. The tattoo was indeed a map.

„Cristophorus thought it was a map leading to a sacred object of power, referenced by a small drawing akin to a dragon surrounded by beams of lightning. The problem with the map, according to Cristophorus, was that it pointed to a land mass where none was known to exist, far across the endless ocean. Dracul was impressed by the dragon on the tattoo. He knew of the legends of the dragon. Immortal life could be bestowed upon he who knew the dragon's secrets.

„Vlad Dracul was at a key point in his life. He had twice lost his throne and intended to regain it one final time. Unfortunately, Dracul was aging and could no longer muster the energy of youth. He feared death and treachery with every breath he took. The idea of becoming immortal appealed to him mightily, the solution to all his problems. He would conquer the entire world and none would be able to stop him.

„Entering into a pact of secrecy with Cristophorus, they set out on a voyage across the open sea, Vlad funding their five-ship mission. Neither was sure of success but the gamble seemed worth it to both. Fate guided their sails and they arrived to the new land indicated on the map, with relatively few deaths among the crew. Traveling up the coast, they sought a particular inlet, leading to a mighty river. Reaching an area where the compass went wild, they landed and headed north. They found the ancient mine entrance, exactly as indicated on the tattoo map.

„The men made camp and headed deep into the steep, jagged mine. Once inside, Dracul found a hidden entrance, breaking through into a concealed room. There were bags and bags of gold and jewels, rings, crowns, a veritable treasure. Nothing compared to what was in the back of the chamber. On a platform of pure quartz, lay a golden container, covered with ornate carvings, with two magnificent angels on its lid.

„A man ventured too close and was burned by a beam of white lightning. No iron could be brought near the container. Eventually, the lid was lifted, revealing a white powder of mysterious properties. When touched by sunlight, the powder would explode violently into light itself. They removed some of the powder, working in complete darkness, filling a small casket lined with lead.

„Dracul decided to move the treasure, stealing it from those who had hidden it here. Their ships' holds were filled to overflowing. Over laden as they were, the ships would not survive a trip across the open sea. A local island was found where the treasure could be temporarily buried. The golden container was considerably more difficult to move, requiring a separate trip. Carefully sealed inside a lead lined wooden box, it was transported on a solid wooden raft lashed with rope. A single piece of iron could bring about deadly lightning. The men were very afraid of it.

„The treasure was unloaded safely to its new home, an oak tree island, off the main coast of the new land. A deep pit was dug and oak platforms built. After the treasure was lowered down, the pit was refilled and closed. Markers were placed on the island to help them find it when they returned.

„They had kept some treasure, of course. A golden scroll had been found in the Dragon-box, along with the powder. Dracul took the scroll and the small box filled with white powder. It wasn't long before he experimented with the

powder. It had powerful effects, making him stronger and invulnerable to harm. Unfortunately, he also became extremely sensitive to light. In the presence of strong sunlight, his skin would burn and boil.

„By the time the ship returned to recognizable shores, Dracul was a changed man. The men feared for their lives more than ever. Dracul had never shared secrets well and had no intention of changing old habits now. He had decided all must die, planning to do away with them on the eve before landfall.

„His plan was altered by fate, when thirteen French and Portuguese ships, at war with the Flemish, attacked their five ships. By pure hazard, Cristophorus's ship, the BECHALLA had chosen to fly under the flag of Flanders, reason enough for the thirteen ships to attack.

„Dracul used the opportunity to kill as many of his men as he could. Cristophorus realized his coming fate. He had just enough time to grab the tattoo map and the golden scroll before jumping overboard. Dracul never saw him again, thinking his first mate drowned. Dracul deserted the BECHALLA, keeping only the casket of powder and a small amount of gold, sending the doomed ship to the bottom before the attackers could lay a hand on her.

„After he returned to his homeland, Dracul started down a path of bloody war and destruction. It only stopped when he was captured by his own men and buried alive.“

The old man finished his tale. He had done well and his information had proven highly pertinent. I stood up to my full height, placed my hand on his shoulder and pulled him to me, biting into his throat, draining him of his lifeblood.

I took more time with the others. I had all night.

My actions were almost perfunctory, distracted by question upon question, filling a vast field in my mind. What treasure had Dracul found, who placed it there, where was that powder-filled casket now? Was the powder made of spores from the caves? I did not think so. The spores had never made my skin burn and boil in sunlight. Dracul's powder might be a related substance but it was not spores.

A humorous thought occurred to me. Dracul's excesses became understandable, particularly if he suffered from the same damnable numbness as I did. He would be craving stronger and stronger stimulus. He was probably never a vampire but, rather, a misunderstood immortal.

I decided to travel to Central Romania, in the Wallachia region and visit Poenari Castle, Vlad Dracul's residential home. I was curious to see if I could find any evidence of his powder casket.

I enjoyed traveling, having developed a game I called *Straight-Line Walking*, playable only by members of the immortal club. As an immortal, I was infused with an ocean of energy. It never stopped pouring out, always a thousand times what I needed. My strength was such that I could carve handholds into rock with bare hands. I needed neither sleep, nor food, nor air.

So, I took it upon myself to pick a direction and walk in as straight a line as possible, no matter what obstructions stood in my way. I could walk at a good clip, averaging about forty kilometers an hour. It was an entertaining pastime and occupied me while I traveled towards my goal.

I added little twists to the game. For example, if I arrived directly in front of a door, then I was to go in and perform an experiment on the first person I encountered, as rapidly as possible. It happened more often than one would imagine, even if I had to veer a little.

I carried a five-year's supply of spores at all times, the remainder safely stashed within the caves. When compressed and treated with a certain degree of heat, spores could be packed into little centimeter cubes. I needed only one of them every two weeks to keep my condition steady. When I was straight-line walking, I had a tendency to consume two cubes instead of one, which would give me a torrent of energy.

I arrived at the remote Wallachia region and made my way to Dracul's favorite home. I was disappointed. Little was left of the once impressive castle. Small sections of outer walls here and there. That was all. Any ancient hiding place was long gone. Perhaps there was no powder left. Dracul's small casket would have held a finite amount of powder. At some point, Dracul would have run out, his supply a continent away. I had been quite scientific in my self-dosing of spores. It was unlikely the Impaler would have had the same caution.

Dracul was killed in battle against the Turks, going to war against them with a far inferior force. It sounded like the act of an immortal, convinced he could never be stopped. There were rumors of treachery by his men. Despite the smaller army, Dracul's strength and energy were sufficient to push them to a brutal and bloody victory. At the final moment, with triumph solidly in his grasp, his men fell upon him, catching the Impaler unaware. Chaining him, he was entombed under a church, the men hoping God himself would lend a hand in keeping the monster buried.

As for the powder casket, it was likely Dracul never kept it far from his sight. It would have been with him or near him on the traitorous night of his downfall. It would not have remained in Poenari castle. Someone would have stolen the powder, craving Dracul's powers. Finding it today would be an impossible stroke of luck. If someone had stolen it back then, perhaps another immortal had been born after Dracul's downfall.

Could Dracul's powder have caused the birth of the Vampirism myth? I was convinced of it. Vampirism had never been vampyrism. It had been immortality. Eventually, inevitably, the box would have been emptied. Whoever used it lasted only as long as their supply.

Warrior monks had held its secret prior to 1474. Who were they? More importantly, were they still around? The monks themselves had not been immortal. What would make a man refuse the call of immortality? Were the monks motivated by religious fervor?

Dracul had lived in another castle, long before Poenari, basing his attacks from there while in exile from his native lands.

Bran castle.

A quick specialist session later, using the last professor available on this topic in the area, informed me I was on the right track. Bran castle was built by Teutonic knights, a branch of the Knights Templar, created to protect German travelers heading to Jerusalem. The Knights Templar's presence in Jerusalem was linked to a mythical treasure hidden beneath Solomon's Temple. Dracul's winged box could have been the Ark of the Covenant, once hidden below Solomon's Temple.

Swallowing an additional cube, I headed towards Bran castle, straight-line-walking, sorting out the implications all the while. The Impaler had latched on to another group's plans, either by accident or by design. His time spent in Bran castle probably gave him some clue. My visit there would verify that. Perhaps his encounter with the four monks was not accidental.

He had been looking for what they carried, the tattooed map. He intercepted them and stole their map for himself. What the map led to could be nothing else than the lost gold of the Knights Templar, vanished after King Philip the Fourth attempted to seize it, on Friday, October 13, 1307, the most infamous day in history. Some of the Knights Templar survived, hiding their treasure where no man would find it, on an unknown continent.

Once again this led me to an inevitable question. This was the powder of immortality. Why hide it away from everybody? Perhaps the power of immortality was more dangerous than I thought. Others knew of it, and had become immortal before me. Where were they all now? One would assume the world would be proliferating with immortals, considering they never die.

In fact, there was almost no historical information about such people. I knew of only one involved in such searches. Ponce de Leon, reputed to have found the fountain of youth. Needing a quick refresher course, I did a brief stopover at the City of Cimbung for a speedy session with a history professor from the local university.

Pressing him for information with my knife, he informed me Ponce de Leon had been on Christopher Columbus' second voyage to North America, in 1493. I dropped my knife in surprise, nearly killing the professor in the process. I had to work rapidly to force more information out of him before he died. My efforts were rewarded before he breathed his last, when he told me Christopher Columbus's real name, in its original form: Cristophorus Columbus.

I returned on my trail to Bran castle, fortified by this last bit of news. The different trails were merging. Vlad the Impaler's first mate, Cristophorus, had been Christopher Columbus. Ponce de Leon had berthed on a ship with the only other man to know immortality was real. After his lucky escape from Dracul, Columbus went back to North America to find the treasure he had left behind, taking Ponce de Leon with him. When they returned from their trip, they split up, Leon's quest for immortality taking him to what is known as Florida today.

Arriving at Bran castle, I dispatched the guards, a la vampyre, squeezing all three corpses in a small closet, a tight fit. Shortly after, I found the hidden passageway leading from the first floor to the third. The small room, halfway up the staircase, had little to give away. It was empty, save for a few religious

carvings on the wall. The Star of David, the yin and yang of the Orient, the Egyptian Ankh, and the ancient swastika. All seemed to roll around concepts inherent in immortality. Apart from that, the Teutonic Knights had left nothing behind.

I stayed in the city of Bran and visited Brasov a few times, sampling the local inhabitants. I managed to create a bit of a ruckus, forgetting myself and using the Vampyrism method yet again. I justified my actions by reasoning that habits are easily learned and hard to unlearn. I had grown extremely fond of the Vampyrism way of taking human life. In a world of numbness, it was the only experience still giving me physical stimulus.

The numbness was having an effect upon me. Slowly but surely, I felt more and more removed from my environment, as if I were somehow floating through an illusion where nothing mattered, more a movie than life itself. At times, more often lately, I felt driven to go on a rampage, to cause as much mayhem as possible, just to prove that something of this world was real, that something mattered!

When hapless officers of the law cornered me, the resulting violence left me completely unfazed. I was forgetting the taste of food, the taste of life. To dispel the numbness, I had to become mortal again and that I could not, would not, do. I was imprisoned in a growing cycle of excesses.

Through all this, Vampyrism found a niche in me. I could feel the prey's heart pulsing in their blood when I drank it. I was invariably looking in their eyes, draining them, taking their life with their last blood, seeing it go and feeling it flooding into me. It was all I had. I did not want to stop killing specimens in the Vampyrism way. How could you refuse what you wanted?

I had been taken over by an idea. True, the idea translated into real life, with acts of Vampyrism, but the very idea of Vampyrism had taken hold in my mind and would not be rooted out. I should stop draining my victims, yet I craved it more at the same time. My mind, in complete control over everything, weakened terribly in this one area. I wished I had never been exposed to it in the first place but wishes could do nothing.

However, by indulging in this one weakness, I remained strong in all others. My mind was clear, as long as I accepted blood-sucking as my basic method of killing. It was an inkling of the true challenge faced by previous immortals. Perhaps the numbness eventually drove men mad. Perhaps the Vampyrism idea-infection was just the beginning and madness lay ahead in the future. People might have a valid reason to fear immortals, if they ended up driven to mayhem and destruction by the maddening numbness.

The key to retaining a hold on sanity was purpose. I had to maintain purpose and, right now, it was going to be learning everything I could about immortality, starting with where it came from. Perhaps I would find answers that would solve the numbness. Many had known of the powder of immortality yet it always ended up buried and forgotten.

Vlad's powder had been in the Ark of the Covenant. What it was doing inside such a historical artifact in the first place? Where had it come from, who had made it?

The Knights Templar, who went to Jerusalem to steal Solomon's treasure from beneath the Temple on the Mount, had done so with purpose. They were rich, well organized and successful in their venture. They returned with their hoard and with the Ark. Then, something happened; something changed their opinion about the Ark and its powder. They had not kept the power for themselves. Instead, they had hidden it on a continent unknown to the rest of the world.

The Knights Templar had feared immortals and their power. If their organization was still alive after all these centuries, they could well be on the lookout for those such as me, immortals roaming the earth. They could mean me harm. I would not give them the chance. I would find them before they found me. Their knowledge would be mine. I would be their hunter and they would become my prey.

Chapter 10

Weissmuller and the Spores.

We sat around the conference table for a while, mulling over O'Flanahan's revelation. He had ferreted out the exact truth of the situation. Weissmuller was the Shadow-Killer, still alive after more than a hundred years, plotting and planning, hidden behind the scenes, manipulating us all!

I was fed up with all this manipulation. What was it all for?

„Weissmuller is after something he cannot get. His research has convinced him he needs me to get what he wants. He has followed the same trail we are on, the one Leblanc laid down for us,“ I said.

„He was missing the key!“

We all turned towards Briar.

„Well, it's obvious when you think of it. Weissmuller's hands were tied. The key the Abbey has given you has to be what he was looking for,“ he explained.

„That's great Briar, now we just have to figure out where the keyhole is and we'll be fine,“ O'Flanahan exclaimed sarcastically. „What I don't understand here is the difference between Weissmuller's immortality and Paul's.“

My quizzical look forced him to explain himself.

„Doctor Phillippe informed us spores are causing your indestructibility. I can accept that for now, without understanding why the spores can do it. Weissmuller was in the caves for years, with easy access to the spores. He likely figured out a way to collect them. He probably figured out how to use them and become immortal. That's the way I see it, anyway. But Paul, here, is totally different. Those spores are literally throwing themselves at him. How come just him?“ he paused, a slight smile on his unshaven face. „Sorry, but I'm a bit jealous, I wouldn't mind some of that immortality myself, if you know what I mean. Still, how come it's just Paul this is happening to?“

They did not know about Raymonde yet. Should I tell them now?

No.

Something held me back, a feeling I could not explain. The link between Raymonde and me flared up with my hesitation and I felt her agreement flow through wordlessly. Coulter made his own revelation.

„I have an idea about that, O’Flanahan. The notes from the Books inform us Paul is the descendant of whoever Arsene Lupin was in real life. We know Lupin spent time in the caves. What if those spores affected Lupin back then, leaving a genetic marker, a predisposition for the spores?“

„Do you mean to suggest that once spores enter the body, they have a genetic effect? Some of my archeological investigations have led me to examine this possibility. It is a disturbing question,“ Briar countered.

„I don’t know really. It’s just speculation. But something is different about Paul. The spores are going to him and no one else.“

„Wait a minute, if what you say is accurate, wouldn’t it also be true of Miss Raymonde? She is Leblanc’s great-granddaughter after all. He spent no less time in the caves than Lupin. She should have the same genetic predisposition as Paul,“ Briar interjected unexpectedly.

I should have expected the sharp-minded Briar to connect her into it. He was looking at Raymonde, deep in thought. I had to get him away from that line of investigation. How quickly my decision for deceit was leading to complications. In the end, I resorted to misdirection, just enough to sow some doubt.

„Perhaps Coulter is only partially right. The genetic alteration might only be passed down to the male of the species. I admit this sounds sexist but it is not without precedent.“

„I can say that I do not feel as Paul does,“ added Raymonde, not lying, technically.

Coulter nodded but Briar still wasn’t swayed. I forged ahead.

„No matter the reason, Leblanc knew the spores would specifically have an effect on me. His machinations to bring me here bear this out. Then, there is the ancient key from Plantagenet, as Briar mentioned. Where does it fit? Is it related to the Four Books?“

„Of which we only have three,“ inserted O’Flanahan.

„Yes, we need the fourth book and so does Weissmuller. The key leads to it. He has been prodding me ruthlessly, to find the fourth book so he can take it,“ I said.

„He certainly is confident enough about his abilities. In order to lead us into the Great Hunt, he allowed three of the books to fall into our hands. He must believe himself able to get them back whenever he wants,“ O’Flanahan stated, looking over his shoulder nervously. „It supports the theory that he is right here, in the caves, hiding and waiting for the right moment to close his trap upon us.“

„Weissmuller seems extremely devious,“ agreed Briar. „We must play our cards close to the vest. Let’s keep our search for the fourth book between us, involve no one else. If we move discreetly, perhaps we can assemble those books without him ever knowing.“

„Those damn books,“ protested O’Flanahan. „We just can’t seem to get away from them.“

„No, we can’t, Liam,“ I replied. „Without the complete set, I suspect we will remain unable to decipher their mysterious purpose. However, I do have one card

up my sleeve. I've told you I have previously had prophetic dreams. Each indicated the next step of the Great Hunt. While I cannot explain how or why I am getting these dreams, their synchronicity must be recognized. Last night, I had such a dream, it's message simple: we must go southward, until we come to a small French town, where we will find a church and a small tower, up on a hill."

"That sounds quite familiar," Briar mentioned.

"It should, Jonathan. You and I studied that area together for a while, shortly after we met. When I had the dream, I could not place it but, after waking up, I remembered it in seconds. The small French town is Rennes-le-Chateau, the church is Father Saunier's church and the tower is known as the Magdala tower."

Briar was stunned.

"Saunier? Of course, how could we not have seen it? You have found our link to immortality: The Magdala tower. Back to it again, after all these years."

"You're not talking about the guy who spent three hundred and fifty thousand old francs on his church, when he was earning less than a few hundred francs a year? The old priest who built codes in his church, pointing the way to a vast treasure, like the Holy Grail or the Ark of the Covenant? That guy?" asked O'Flanahan, getting more excited by the minute.

"Yes that man, O'Flanahan," snapped Briar.

"I knew he was involved. It just had to be. Remember in Leblanc's journal, when he mentioned Father Boudet. Boudet was directly connected to Saunier. He was probably the one who gave Saunier that fortune."

"Let's not get lost in a web of conspiracies too quickly. Admittedly, Leblanc probably knew about Saunier, through Boudet, as you mention, O'Flanahan. The codes in Leblanc's books were indeed pointing the way to Rennes-le-Chateau. Fine, Paul, say I accept your dream has aimed us in the right direction. What do you intend to do about it?"

"I intend to go there."

"But what if Weissmuller follows us somehow?" Raymonde worried.

"Let him. I'm invulnerable. What can he do to me?" I replied, winking at her, a slight smile on my face.

"That's just great for you, Sirenne, but what about my skin?" objected O'Flanahan. "It's still pretty sensitive to knives, bullets and things. He might not be able to shoot you but there are others around who can still be hurt."

O'Flanahan's blunt words held a wise caution. It wouldn't do for me to become brash and careless.

"Let me call our new allies, the Abbey. They seem well prepared. With time being of the essence, they might be able to obtain fast transport to Rennes-le-Chateau."

"Are you sure you want to do that, Paul?" interrupted Briar, a concerned look on his face. "The more who know, the less secret this becomes."

"They already know, Jonathan. Their involvement dates from Leblanc's return to life."

"I recognize that, but do we ever truly know if anyone is on our side. There seem to be many agendas at work here. We should be careful not to place too much trust in others. At least not until we know more about them."

„Come on, Briar, we can't just sit around, not involving anyone. We're in trouble here. We've got an immortal serial killer pulling our strings and dogging our footsteps. We're hot on the trail of the biggest conspiracy ever, and we've got all the resources we could need. I say let's go for it. Let's get the fastest jet we can and beat Weissmuller to the goods,“ O'Flanahan enthused.

„I'm with O'Flanahan,“ Coulter rallied. „We can't let Weissmuller haunt these caves a moment longer than necessary. He could end up killing us all and we are simply not ready to deal with him. We're not some mercenary force. How can we hope to out-plan an immortal? No, we need to use every resource we've got and fast. I'm not saying we shout about immortality across the rooftops but, still, if we stay like this, we're already outmatched. We've got to gain the upper hand. Weissmuller is after the four books as a set. Once we have those, we might get ahead of the game.“

„Perhaps you are right. Unfortunately, we still don't know why he wants them. Why are they here in the first place? Who made them?“ Briar riposted. Raymonde added:

„Paul's instincts have never steered us in the wrong direction. If he says we go to Rennes-le-Chateau, we should go. If he says call the Abbey, let's call the Abbey. I am just as involved in this as Paul is but he is the one chosen to be our leader. Our purpose, all of us, the Net and the members of the Abbey, is to provide him with whatever help he may need. My great-grandfather, Maurice Leblanc, discovered immortality by dying in that small cave. From the moment of his return to life, he fought to protect that knowledge. Now, after nearly one hundred years, these efforts have led directly to Paul. My vote is with him.“

I felt her emotions flare out strongly from her when she spoke, enlarging in a rapid wave and encompassing our group. She was swaying them! It was hypnotic in intensity. Her powers were growing and she was learning how to assert them. I realized it had been happening all along. From the moment we had met, she had been instinctively influencing the people around us.

In a flash, my mind connected a series of memories, attaching themselves into an unstoppable chain, as with O'Flanahan. I returned once again to a moment after we entered the tunnels below Leblanc's Villa. Both of us had felt numbness, attributed to the cold while wading through water. Now, my mind's eye showed what I had missed back then. Spores, suspended in the water, zipping through the liquid, attaching themselves to us.

We had begun changing long ago, from the very beginning.

Another memory fell into place. How fast I had run away from Norton when he chased me on his one good leg. I slid down a hundred meters of steep slope effortlessly, running across the beach in moments. After I jumped in the water, Norton shot at me. At the time, I thought the water had slowed the bullet down, rendering it relatively harmless. Now I knew differently. I had been hit and hit hard but the bullet had not even penetrated the skin because I was already invulnerable!

I had always been surprised by how easily the Net had accepted us and the Vallin brothers, for that matter. Raymonde had been there all along, influencing them.

I perceived another purpose in Raymonde's words. She was erasing herself from the picture, placing me in the center of attention. She would become less noticed, able to work in the shadows, her abilities hidden from all but me.

* * * * *

The others had left to get ready. I briefly talked to Jacques Vallin about his dealings with the monks. He told me he found them highly organized and efficient but close-mouthed. I asked him to contact his brother and prepare the sub.

Then, I called Father Plantagenet.

„Mr Sirene, how good to hear from you. Your call is certainly timely. I was about to call you,“ he informed me.

„To call me? Why?“

„I have been thinking about our conversation. I have come to the conclusion that our appearance was unexpected. Did Raymond Lindon's note not reach your hands in time? Was the Book not there?“ he asked, a note of concern in his voice.

„No, actually, it was not, although we have since found it. That is partly why I was calling. Let me be frank, Father.“

„By all means.“

„I understand my ancestors have prepared a trail and that you are part of the trail, following a pre-established plan. Unfortunately, there is a problem. There is a very dangerous interloper involved, someone with his own agenda and he has been messing with the trail.“

„What? Who?“

„We believe his name to be Weissmuller, the man you mentioned as Hitler's henchman. He has been masquerading as the Shadow-Killer of late. He just made an overt move, by attacking Raymonde. Luckily, she escaped unharmed.“

„Weissmuller? That's impossible, Weissmuller died long ago,“ Plantagenet flatly refuted.

„It was a double.“

My words threw him into momentary silence, his thoughts thrown into chaos by the revelation. Finally, he gasped two dry words:

„A double!“

„Yes.“

„But he would be too old by now, unless...“ the monk gasped again, this time in horror. „Unless he knew the secret.“

„He knew the secret and so do we.“

„I will not speak of this on the phone. We must meet in person. This is extremely disturbing.“

„There is something more. We have decided that we must travel. To a tower and a church,“ I said, choosing my words carefully.

„That is the proper place to go,“ he answered, just as carefully. „You are progressing quickly. Are other changes happening?“

He knew about the spores!

„Yes, many. I will not speak of those on the phone either.“

„Good. What do you require?“

„Right now, I would need rapid transport to our chosen location. Perhaps we could meet when we return?“

„No, that would be too late. If all is as you say, Mr Sirenne, there is no time to waste. We will arrange for the transport you require. Be on the Aval cliff, near the bunker, in one hour. How many will be in your party?“

„Six.“

„That’s fine for what I have in mind.“

„What about our meeting?“

„We will talk on the way. I am coming with you.“

I put the phone down and looked at Raymonde.

„I felt what you did during the meeting.“

I held her hand, my every touch numb, our inner connection filling the gap.

„I was just stretching a bit, to see if I could do it consciously. It felt strange, like a new muscle that wasn’t there before. I only did it a little but it already felt familiar. I could feel the effect as an expanding awareness, as if I was generating a field of some sort. If I closed my eyes, I could perceive all of you around me, without thinking, without seeing. But each person was different. With you Paul, I was channeling directly inside.“

„You are deep inside. I feel a link that never goes away.“

„Me too, it is the same. With Coulter, I felt my energy flow all over him, as if it was caressing him,“ she looked embarrassed. „I’m sorry but that’s how it felt. Almost intimate. At first, when my field enveloped him, his field was different, not moving the same way. When I kept sliding over him, his field started to move with mine, matching it.“

I understood what she was describing, empathically feeling what she had done.

„Jonathan was completely different. His field was slippery. I went over it, but did not affect it at all.“

I wondered about that. Briar had a strong personality. He was highly independent. Could that strength be expressed in a resistive field around him? Could being open and receptive, like Coulter, make a person more malleable?

„What about O’Flanahan? What was he like?“

„I couldn’t find him. It’s as if he wasn’t there.“

Now that was odd. She continued.

„I couldn’t feel his field. I just flowed through him without any resistance. I perceived his body, but not his field.“

It didn’t speak much for O’Flanahan’s mental abilities.

„Well, keep practicing. I think you’ve been doing this instinctively all along, influencing the Net and others. Your power works in tandem with mine. What you said back then is not true. It’s not just me, it’s both of us.“

„I know that, Paul, but we can’t let anyone know what rôle I am playing. Like you, I feel it must be kept quiet. So, for now, we will present you, right in front, while I will remain in the shadows.“

Chapter 11

A Trip to Rennes-le-Chateau.

We stood near the bunker, a string of bodyguards all around. Net members had moved the tourists off the cliff. I felt at peace. Being indestructible was changing my viewpoint about things.

I feared no harm. None!

Fear had been my personal companion all my life. I had never been an active person, preferring intellectual pursuits. Although having held my own in the few fights I had been inadvertently involved in, I preferred using my wits to get out of trouble. Admittedly, I held a grudging respect of those who used their muscles unthinkingly.

Being intelligent did nothing to stop a punch from cracking your jaw.

Now, no punch, no bullet could harm me. I could do anything I wanted and no one could stop me.

The world was mine!

A bubble popped and my perspective returned to where it should have remained. How easily this power could lead to megalomania. What would hold anyone back with such power in their hands?

How did you control invincibility?

Immortality really was dangerous, like a powerful drug. I had to rein in its effects. Deep inside, I knew what would provide the required control I needed. It would come from my father, from his careful training, forging in me the exact principles and strengths I would need.

Another piece falling into place.

Deep in the throes of memory, I approached the edge of the cliff. In my first dream, I had come to where I stood right now and jumped straight down into the water. Looking at the crashing waves, a hundred meters below, I found the view hypnotic. I leant forward, almost getting ready to dive right now. Raymonde was suddenly next to me.

„Someone’s coming. In the sky. I can feel them,“ she whispered.

Her words brought me back to reality. What had I been thinking? I had almost stepped off a cliff on the whim of it. Could I even have survived such a jump? A distant noise interrupted my thoughts. I looked up at the sky and saw a huge luxury helicopter approaching.

Father Plantagenet was going to take us there in style.

The helicopter hovered briefly before landing near the bunker. The side door slid open, revealing a man in a brown frock, flapping powerfully in the rotor-generated gusts of wind. He waved, inviting us over. Although the rotors were spinning a meter over my invulnerable head, I bent down as low as I could and ran closer. I jumped in after Raymonde, and shook Father Plantagenet’s hand, seating myself next to him. The others hopped up and strapped in. The door slid shut, reducing the helicopter’s incredible din to a muted roar. I leaned over to Plantagenet.

„Aren’t you a little old for all this excitement?“ I asked him.

„My age is of absolutely no consequence in this matter. I have been waiting for these events all my life,“ he answered without humor.

„So you knew about what has been hidden in the caves.“

„Yes. Our organization has known for a very long time, though those who know everything are few in number. You said there had been changes? Are you changing, Mr Sirenne?“

„Yes. I have become as the books. We have found the spores.“

„Then it has truly begun.“

„What has begun?“

The monk paused a moment before answering.

„There is much I still cannot explain, you understand that?“

I nodded my head.

„I think so. If you had simply told me what I know now, I probably would not have believed you.“

„Good. You are starting to understand the important things. Belief is the key, my son, never forget that. Sauniere left us with clear instructions in these matters. We cannot lead you. You must find the way yourself. I have been very worried by Weissmuller's presence. It is an unexpected development and a highly unwelcome one at that. But it was to be expected. Our plan was a risky one, hinged on many uncertainties. You cannot imagine the effort that it has taken to bring you to this point. The trail was fraught with false leads and with unmistakable danger, as those who have died before you can attest.“

His admission surprised me.

„What does that mean? Are you saying others have come before me?“

He laughed.

„Mr Sirenne, really, are you truly that naive? Of course you are not the first. There have been others like you before and a few unlike you as well. Sauniere was your immediate predecessor, a very special man. It is he we can thank for the Four Books, a true masterpiece. Unfortunately, none before you were ready, not even Sauniere. All failed in the end. However, this time we have high hopes. Things are happening exactly as they should despite, despite Weissmuller's presence, which I still have trouble assimilating. It is very troubling.“

„Yes, it was for us as well,“ I said with cynicism.

„I can imagine. What do you think his agenda may be?“

„I believe he is after the four books.“

„And he could not get the fourth without our involvement. Now I understand. This is much worse than it looks. He knows our plans. You believe him to be changed as well?“

„Yes, all the indications are there.“

He nodded slowly.

„Well, it puts more pressure on things but I think we can deal with it. He would not be the first of his kind we have dealt with. Do you believe he is still hiding in the caves?“

„There's a good chance.“

„Would you have any objection to us entering the caves and setting up some roving patrols?“

When I had met Father Plantagenet, I had been cautious. Now, I needed his help and his ready resources.

„I think that it is exactly what must be done. Bring as many men in as you have. I'll give Jacques Vallin the go-ahead to transport your men inside.“

„Very good. My men will not betray your trust. They are each and every one a man of deep faith, sworn to silence and allegiance.“

Raymonde would put that to the test, when the time came.

„So Father, what is so important about the four books?“

„That is what you must learn, my son. I am sorry for being so cryptic but it cannot be helped. For you to succeed, you must come to your own understanding.“

„So why are you coming with me?“

„I too have a role to play, Mr Sirenne. You may be the chosen one but there are many others playing supporting roles. They are simply not as apparent. In this pursuit, the path you choose is everything. More importantly, your purpose must remain clear.“

„That’s a bit hard when you don’t have a clue what that purpose might be.“

„Come now, we both know that’s not true. Your purpose is changing but it is a process of refinement, of removing the non-essential elements and avoiding the side trails that constantly present themselves.“

I found it a bit frustrating speaking to someone whose every word was so distant from actual facts.

„Where are you taking us?“

„The pilot has orders to drop us down about five kilometers outside Rennes-le-Chateau. A car will be waiting. We will go in as tourists.“

Tourists.

I fell silent, seeing no further reason to talk. The place we were flying to was well known to me. Others had extensively researched the mystery of Rennes-le-Chateau and the priest Sauniere. No less than two hundred books had been written about the curious features of Sauniere’s church, providing a variety of theories about its hidden purpose, each more fantastic than the other.

At its core, lay a series of undisputable facts, centering around a small-town priest named Sauniere, who lived from 1852 to 1917. He arrived in Rennes-le-Chateau as young man in 1885, coming from the town of Clat. He had been ordained in June 1879, after his seminary education in Carcassone. He would have remained unknown, were it not for his excavation of local Templar Church ruins, where he found mysterious documents. Following this discovery, his life changed. He renovated the church, built an estate for himself, »Villa Bethania«, and a tower on a local hill, »Magdala Tower«, his personal library.

The problem with these construction projects was that Sauniere was a poor man, receiving a stipend of three hundred francs a year. The cost of the church renovations alone was in excess of half a million francs. Sauniere was accused of participating in the illegal selling of masses (at one franc each) but the documents provided to support the accusation failed to convince an ecclesiastical jury, who cleared him of all charges.

Over years, the mystery had grown by leaps and bounds. Sauniere’s church decorations were bizarre, hinting at coded messages. His Magdala tower was no less curious. Stories of buried gold abounded, as well as allusions to a more ancient mystery, the location of the Ark of the Covenant. Some books claimed a historical conspiracy, that descendants of Jesus Christ, the Merovingians, still roamed the earth today.

Finding one's way in the convoluted mess was no easy task. In the fifties, the story had grown more complicated. Several new approaches to the decoding of Saunier's documents led in different directions. The »Priore de Sion« made its appearance. A man named Pierre Plantard created false genealogical documents, elevating himself to head of the Priore, claiming to be a direct descendant of the Merovingian line.

Too many perspectives.

Isolated from my friends by the roar of the rotor blades, I closed my eyes for a moment. The moment I did, I became aware of Raymonde's presence inside me. Keeping my eyes closed, I concentrated on the feeling, trying to pin down exactly where it was. The feeling strengthened and blossomed, bringing Raymonde's presence closer and closer to me.

Suddenly, she was there. I felt her awareness wrapping itself around mine softly, touching me intimately, connecting at a level I would never have believed possible. In the midst of incredible closeness, a joining of our two minds, I detected a distinct thought that was not mine.

Paul? Can you hear me?

I focused my mind and assembled a clear response, projecting it towards her:

Raymonde? Is that you?

A blast of surprise and elation flowed through me, powerfully broadcast by her nascent powers.

I can't believe it. We are talking to each other inside our minds.

Neither can I. I can perceive your every emotion. You are much stronger than me.

Our powers are very different.

But they seem to complement each other.

Yes. My senses are expanding. I am reaching out further and further.

By removing the need to utter words, our thoughts were able to flash at high speed, enabling us to share much in a brief time.

We're getting close to Rennes-le-Chateau. I can feel it in the distance. Perhaps we should „disconnect“, I suggested.

After several attempts to close the inner connection, we had to admit failure. No matter what, we always remained in contact.

It certainly redefined closeness.

I welcomed her presence. Her inner presence and her *radar sense* provided replacement perceptions, superseding the numbness and making me feel almost normal again.

I opened my eyes and bright sunlight flooded my mind with rough, grainy detail. The graininess did not prevent me from noting that Father Plantagenet was examining both Raymonde and me intently.

Now was not the time to try and needle any more info out of him. My every probing attempt, so far, had given me only vague hints about nebulous possibilities. Nothing useful at all. Further attempts would likely yield no better results.

Within moments, my concerns about Father Plantagenet were put to the side, as the helicopter dropped lower, hovering near a small side road, where a white limousine was waiting for us.

Greyman Chronicles

Watching the Watchers.

By Liam O'Flanagan

The tall, thin man named Pierre opened his rucksack, pulling out a sandwich and a bottle of red table wine.

„Hey, bring me a sandwich too. I'm starving.“

The second man, Louis, was younger than the first and, if possible, thinner. He passed his pair of binoculars to the third man in the small room, a short, squat fellow named Robert. Louis accepted the plastic-wrapped sandwich from Pierre and Robert took up the watching post by the window, vacated by the hungry Louis. Robert lifted powerful binoculars to his eyes, looking northerly at a church entrance, through a set of carefully adjusted wooden shutters.

It was the usual tourist crowd this afternoon.

The two men reviewed the results of their long vigil, while they munched.

„Pretty slim pickings, let me tell you. Not a single incident for the entire two weeks. You sure your friend's tip was good?“

„Hey, she's the best astrologist I know. Heck, she was doing readings when she was five years old. If she says the stars are pointing to something weird, I'm going to pay attention. Gotta have some faith, man.“

„Relax, Pierre, I was just asking. I mean, this is my vacation and my time is running out.“

„I know, me too, but she said this was the time and I'm going to keep an eye out until the very last second. It could be history in the making and we'd be at ground zero.“

„Remember in the States, when Danny Harris finally snapped a picture of a UFO landing at Hangar 51? He'd waited more than six months for that one.“

„And he made the front page of »Conspiracy News«. Lucky bastard.“

„Maybe this time it's going to be our turn.“

„I just wish I knew what we were supposed to be looking for. Stars are great for portents but not so hot on details.“

„Yeah.“

„Hey guys, come check this out. Grab your cameras. I think something's going down.“

Pierre and Louis jumped off their chairs, their half-eaten sandwiches flying every which way, scrambling for their digital cameras. They banged into each other, disentangling quickly, focused on reaching the window within the next nanosecond.

Ensconcing themselves next to Robert, they trained their cameras through the slats, zooming in on the church.

„What are we looking at?“

„Look over there. See that limousine driving up?“

„What about it?“

„Apart from the fact we don't see many of them around here, I've noticed that design before. It's a bulletproof car. Who comes here in a bulletproof limousine?“

The other two nodded at Robert's perceptive analysis. Only someone really important would do that. As well, the only thing drawing anyone here was Saunier's church.

„Maybe your friend was right after all. This could be what we've been waiting for,“ Louis exclaimed, his voice trembling with suppressed excitement.

„They're pulling up near the church. I wonder who it is?“

„It couldn't be the Greyman, could it? We couldn't be lucky enough to actually get the Greyman on film, could we?“

„He's not even real. The Greyman is a myth and you know it. We have a better chance of seeing the immortal Count Saint-Germain himself than the Greyman.“

„Will you two stop arguing. The point is moot. The limo's door is opening.“

„No, that's just the driver...“

„And a bodyguard, judging by the thickness of his neck.“

„Okay, he's opening the back door. Someone's coming out.“

„No, that's another bodyguard. Darn, the suspense is killing me.“

„Me too. Wait, there he, no, there SHE is. Wow. Who is that?“

„Never seen her before but, man, she's gorgeous!“

„Hey, keep your eyes in your pants and your camera on their faces. We need clear headshots.“

„Well, they aren't shy, whoever they are. That grand limousine entrance into Rennes-le-Chateau is sure to have alerted the others.“

„You think so? Usually they tend to keep to their digging.“

„Are you kidding me? They always keep an eye on the church, just like us. It's the honey pot. Everyone who's looking comes there eventually. It's the best place to catch them.“

„Another guy is coming out. He's holding the woman's hand.“

„Lucky guy. Must be her boyfriend but I've never seen him before. Do you guys know him?“

„No, man, he's nobody. Wait, here's another one.“

„Whoever he is, he sure is fat, look how big his stomach is! He hasn't even shaved. I don't know him either. Did you get a good shot of him?“

„Yeah, a real clear one. Look, there's another one, a tall guy for a change.“

„This is weird. That's four people and we don't know any of them. They can't be important, we know all the important ones.“

„Not the Greyman. No one knows what HE looks like.“

„Enough about the Greyman. You're always spou...“

„I know that one but I can't believe it.“

Robert and Louis stopped their bickering, avidly returning to their cameras.

„Who?“

„The last guy who just came out, the short one, dressed in a monk’s outfit. That’s Father Plantagenet, the man in charge of the Abbey.“

„No way. You can’t be serious? What’s he doing here? He NEVER ventures out of the Abbey. He’s got to be what. eighty, eighty-two years old?“

„At least. You sure it’s him?“

„Positive. Last year, an Italian friend of mine flew a model plane over the main Abbey Courtyard long enough to snap some pictures of the people there. He got three shots of Plantagenet before they latched on to its signal. He almost got killed doing that. They tracked the signal using triangulation and were at his hideout within five minutes. He was still upstairs when they got there. It’s a miracle he escaped.“

„Man that’s fast. Bastards. I feel for that guy. I almost got caught myself, once.“

„We know! You’ve only told us that story a thousand times and it gets more daring every time. Wait, what’s the woman doing?“

„She’s just standing there.“

„I know, that’s what I mean. She just stopped.“

„I think her eyes are closed but I’m not sure. My camera’s not sharp enough at this zoom level.“

She reached out and touched the man who had been holding her hand. Instantly, his head swiveled around and stopped exactly in the three watcher’s direction. Each of them felt as if the man was looking directly at them, eye to eye, even though they were well hidden behind angled window shutters and more than a thousand yards from the church.

For what seemed an eternity, they were held in a grip of fear, their hearts racing and their stomachs jumping. As suddenly as the moment had come, it was gone.

„Man, what was that? Did you see that? That guy, he, he...“

„He saw us. I know it, I know he did. He was looking right at me.“

„He couldn’t have.“

„I KNOW HE COULDN’T HAVE! But it felt like it just the same.“

„If he knows we’re here, why isn’t he doing anything about it?“

„He’s just looking around now. He’s ignoring us completely. Maybe it was in our heads. He didn’t see us. We just thought he did. Right?“

„I don’t know, man. I’ve never felt anything like that. I know you two felt it just the same.“

„Well, there they go, right into the church, like good little ducks, all in a row.“

„Thank God. I couldn’t have handled another thing like that. My nerves are shot.“

Their respite was brief. Robert, still alert, noticed movement from around the corner building. Activating one of the remote burst cameras, they got a better angle, revealing who was sneaking around.

„Oh God, it’s the Israelis, that Mossad couple.“

„I thought they were over at Mount Bucharach, looking for their precious menorah or that book of theirs?“

„I thought so too. I don't know what they're doing here this early in the morning.“

„They're doing the exact same as us. Drawn by that limousine.“

„Look at that, the opportunists. They're going in the church.“

„Just keep taping; we never know what we can catch on the video.“

„I'm taping, I'm taping.“

„Guys, is that the Americans over there?“

Two cameras swiveled at the same time and refocused.

„You're right, it is. And they're going into the church too, bold as brass.“

„Man, I wish we were in there too. Good Gosh, look! There's the French now.“

„Better late than never, it's their country after all.“

„And there they go, into the church.“

The three paused for a moment, waiting until the church doors closed fully, before they breathed a sigh of relief.

„Man, I've never seen the like. All of them in the church at the same time. They must be really curious. I hope they don't kill each other.“

„I'll say. Plantagenet is acting totally out of character. What is he doing coming out in the open, with a bunch of strangers in tow, acting like a tourist guide, of all things? The guy usually deals with heads of State. These people are total unknowns.“

„Yeah, well, why is he helping them then? Who are they?“

„They may look like nobodies but what that guy did when he looked at us, that's not normal. He's not nobody. He's somebody, we just don't know who.“

„And the French, the Mossad, and the Americans seem to know it too.“

„We know what they're like. What chance does the Abbey have against the Mossad, or the others?“

„Hey, don't kid yourself. Remember, just about every country in the world has skeletons hidden away in the Abbey's closet. None of them would dare touch those monks.“

„Yeah, maybe. What I don't get is why the guy saw us but not the Mossad and the others.“

„Maybe he did. Remember, after he looked at us, he scanned around the place, maybe he saw them.“

„Couldn't be, man, he was looking at us for a long time. He hardly looked around anywhere else.“

„How do we know that? I was like a deer frozen in the headlights. Subjectively, it felt long, but objectively, it might not be long at all. Let's prove it one way or the other.“

„We could rewind the video file and time it.“

Robert and Pierre busied themselves prepping the video on the monitor, while Louis kept a sharp lookout. They were soon looking at a rerun of the earlier events. After a few quick rewind and play session, they had the timing down perfectly.

„It's incredible. First off, she stops moving and closes her eyes. Then she touches him and he stops right away.“

„They don't even speak.“

„No, not a word but then he looks around.“

„Just like one of those scanners in that movie series.“

„Yeah, I remember the creepy scanners. Those bulging veins.“

„Come on guys, enough. After that, he begins looking around then comes to us. We freeze.“

„He stops turning his head for no more than one second then starts scanning around again.“

„He does the same stop and start three more times. We've calculated the angles: he was looking directly at the Mossad after us, then the Americans and the French.“

„If he had the same effect on them that he did on us, it might explain why they went into the church. Heck, I would go in there too, if I wasn't so worried about getting killed.“

„Well, you can call your astrology friend and tell her she was right. Now, we've got to get to work. First, we have to contact home base in Ottawa and get our team to figure out who the strangers are with Plantagenet. Maybe contact the local chapter too. If my gut feeling is right, I think the lid has just blown off the kettle. I don't know who those guys are yet but they've attracted the attention of just about everybody.“

„What are we going to do about them?“

„Well, duh. We're going to have to follow them. Until we know who they are, it's our only way to track them.“

„How are we going to do that? We don't even have a car.“

„I don't have a clue. I'm working on it. Maybe you could go and see if you can't try to rent a local car.“

„From those crooks? Do you know how much I'd have to fork over to get a car from them? They're just lying in wait for a sucker like me.“

„Hey, we have to follow them, right? Just get it done.“

Louis stood up and sighed, shaking his head and muttering as he left the room. Robert looked at Pierre with a heavy frown.

„Even if we get a car, there's no way we can follow them, not for long. We'll get found out. There's hardly anybody on the roads around here.“

„I know but what can we do? We can't afford to lose them.“

„What if we put a tracer on them?“

„We don't have a tracer, you know that.“

„I know but we do have some wireless subminiature cameras. I could lengthen the antenna and boost the signal to the max. We'd get some video and audio for a while, before they got out of range but we'd likely be able to track the signal through our French network.“

Pierre smiled.

„That is excellent field thinking, Robert. I'm impressed. You work on fixing one of the wireless cams and I'll contact the network to get them ready. I'll send the headshots we got to the local branch. Maybe they can figure out who they are.“

Both men worked feverishly. In their rush, they stopped looking outside for brief intervals. Their inattention almost cost them their prize but the returning Louis saved them.

„Hey, get back to the window, things are happening out there.“

„Shit, shit, shit. I'm still not done with the antenna.“

„Doesn't matter. Do it on the way, get out there and don't miss.“

„What do you take me for? I know what's at stake. I won't miss, I swear.“

„Shoot it on the fat guy. He'll never feel it land, if you do it right.“

„Gotcha. Gotta go.“

Robert ran out the door, still talking, navigating the stairs three at a time, while holding a magnifying glass in one hand and a tiny micro-cam in the other. A specialized air rifle was hanging from his left arm, bobbing all over the place. By the time he was at the bottom of the stairs, his job was done, the antenna firmly connected, the magnifying glass put away, and he was inserting the cam dart into the air rifle.

He had thousand yards to cover and no time to do it in. If he was caught, he was dead.

Weissmuller Recollections, 1954-1960

Hunting the Abbey.

Part One

Searching for warrior-monks was one thing, finding them was another. All I had were five hundred year old stories, likely distorted by their passage through time. I wasn't even sure if the monks were still around. The old man had mentioned Columbus escaping from Dracul with the map and a golden scroll. What had become of him?

I left Wallachia and Romania behind, heading towards Italy. It was time to get closer to Columbus' home. I slowed my pace long enough to locate a suitable specialist, a historian in this case. Using my usual methods, I forced him to educate me, killed him and took on his skin.

This is how I became Guilio Arnak for the next few years. It was a pattern I repeated every five years or so, finding a new home base, a new skin, always remaining in the shadows, avoiding police, authorities, and performing my experiments with impunity then vanishing into visibility.

I had chosen Arnak more for his physical appearance and his work connections than his knowledge. He was tall and thin, similar to my general profile, making it easy to take on his appearance. He wore glasses and had a receding hairline, both easily recognizable features. I adapted a hairpiece for the purpose, cropping it to perfection and used his glasses. He did not need them anymore.

During our session, Arnak had provided me with sufficient details about his personal life to deceive his friends and acquaintances easily. He had general education as a historian but had recently specialized in ancient

documents, exactly what I needed to get into the restricted section of the Vatican Library.

Wearing my new skin comfortably, honed by years of practice, I returned to the light once more, converting Arnak's small apartment into my home base in Rome. It was private enough, enabling me to come and go as I pleased.

Before expiring, Arnak had informed me that Columbus' voyage diaries of the 1492 voyage to North America were curiously incorrect. They did not hold up to scrutiny. Attempts to repeat his voyage failed when following his journey descriptions. Columbus could not have followed the itinerary he claimed to have taken. The conclusion was inescapable. Columbus lied about where he went and what he did. It was also known he had consulted a map during his voyages. It never left his person and no one was allowed to examine it.

Then there was the matter of Ponce de Leon.

His presence on Columbus' second voyage to the Americas could not be coincidence. This was the one man known to have searched for immortality. The problem was that immortality was caused by a powder or spores. It was not a *Fountain of Youth* as de Leon claimed.

His search never went near my caves. In fact, if one were to believe Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda, a shipwreck survivor who published his memoirs in 1575, the Fountain of Youth was in Florida, discovered by Ponce de Leon. The whole thing was preposterous. Yet, in 1615, Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas published another account about the same thing in his »Historia General de los Hechos de los Castellanos«.

Ponce de Leon had to have learned of Dracul's powder of immortality from Columbus during the voyage. It was inevitable. Yet, when he returned from his voyage, Ponce de Leon left Columbus immediately and headed on the wildest goose chase ever recorded, looking for a mythic fountain, ending up in Florida, the unlikeliest location possible. His chase for the fabled fountain had to be complete fabrication.

His search had been no such thing. It was an attempt to put an entire continent between himself and Columbus' powder of immortality. Ponce de Leon had run away, laying down a false trail that anyone connected to the immortality powder would recognize.

Who was he running from? Not Columbus certainly. Leon was a rich, influential man, having acquired his wealth through the subjugation of others, an admirable ability requiring strength of character and extreme confidence. What could make a man like that run?

Why had he not simply ended his search for immortality? This very oddity finally convinced me I had the right theory. Leon was already connected to the immortality chase, due to his voyage with Columbus. He couldn't pretend he knew nothing about it. Instead, he made a blatant public effort of going in the wrong direction.

He had to have believed himself in mortal danger, the only threat I deemed sufficient to motivate him, a threat which occurred immediately upon his return. Someone confronted Columbus and Ponce de Leon, frightening them terribly. Someone, some organization, had been watching their search, intent

on interceding if they got too close to the secret of immortality. Who else could that be but the warrior-monks, those who had hidden the powder in the first place?

This was my reason for settling in Rome, in Arnak's skin. I was now close to the Vatican, the center of the most powerful religious organization in the world. If anyone knew of a warrior-monk sect descended from the Knights Templar, it had to be the Roman Catholic Church, allied with King Phillip, the man who had dissolved the Templar order in 1307.

Neither Phillip nor the Church succeeded in their plans. The Templar knowledge and the hoard of riches they sought were long gone, whisked away by the faithful. A large retinue of warrior-monks would have accompanied the gold, likely armed to the teeth. Could this contingent of armed monks have also been carrying knowledge intended to be kept alive by the chosen few, unknown to the rest of the world, keepers of the secrets of immortality?

Admittedly, they were a force to be reckoned with if, two hundred and fifty years later, Ponce de Leon scurried away to Florida to escape them. Apparently, the monks not only kept their secrets, they ensured these secrets would remain hidden through the centuries.

* * * * *

Once I was successfully established as Guilio Arnak, I used my skin's contacts to get within the Vatican City's walls, purportedly to authenticate several disputed documents. It gave me a chance to peruse the library ensconced within its wall. I was looking for historical documents between the period of 1307 and 1474, relating to Vlad Dracul, Christopher Columbus and Knights Templar.

The Vatican Library infiltration was exceedingly easy due to my excellent choice of a proper skin. Guilio was well known and security measures were a mere formality. Unfortunately, my final goal was not so easily reached. While pretending to work on document authentication, I did a careful search of the inventory files, browsing rapidly through various categories. I found gaps in the available historical documents. It was little surprise that the gaps matched my areas of interest.

Their absence confirmed I was on the right track. If five hundred year old documents were sufficiently sensitive to remove them from the general library today, then they had to contain something serious indeed.

Only one place could house the missing documents: the Vatican Secret Archives. Access to these rooms was restricted and I could not legitimately provide a reason for needing entry into that area.

I would have to visit the Vatican after hours.

* * * * *

I started my expedition at 1:30 AM, dressed in black. I was brimming with energy, a fact easily explained by my recent intake of an extra cube of spores. My eyes were so attuned to the dark it was as daylight to me. I arrived near the Vatican City enclave by way of Via Leone North, walking down the length

of the narrow street until I reached a ninety-degree turn, where the Vatican border wall swerved sharply to the left.

Directly on the other side of the wall was a narrow alleyway, located near the Vatican building in which the records I sought were housed. The streets were deserted. I wasted no time, jumping up as high as I could, hitting the wall hard near the second story level. I dug into the soft brick with my fingers, scaling the wall rapidly, gouging handholds wherever necessary. It took mere moments to reach the wall's highest peak, where I paused briefly, hanging like a gargoyle, examining the scene below me.

The Vatican City State covered a huge area within the heart of Rome. The wall I had just climbed had been built to seal off access to one of the few areas not already enclosed by existing buildings. Looking below, I detected no nearby presence. I dropped to the ground, landing as lightly as possible considering the height.

I ran straight along the road, jumped over a hedge on my right, landing in a narrower side road, the Salita Del Giardini. I kept going at full speed along a small courtyard, doing a running jump onto the Vatican building. I hit the wall with my fingers splayed out, letting them plant themselves into the stone. I propelled myself upward, ripping my fingers out of the stone explosively, reaching the roof in three easy jumps. I vaulted over the edge of the wall, landing near the exhaust vent, exactly as planned. Crunching the lock, I ripped the vent cover off and jumped down, feet first, falling about five meters before pushing against the sides of the vent, slowing myself to a stop before reaching the bottom turn.

Dropping flat to the ground, I slid along the air vent, looking for an exit screen. Finding one, I waited for a short while to ensure no guards were close by. Popping the screen off its mounts, I slid out, flipping over and landing on my toes, all senses alert. I was in! Recognizing where I was, I ran through the Vatican's hallways, silently moving closer to my goal with every passing second.

Arriving at a locked door, I applied a strong pressure to the door, pushing on the locking mechanism. All the energy was channeled directly into the bolt, shearing it instantly and the door opened. I removed the bolt stub from the metal jamb, and dropped it into my pocket, pushing the door closed and getting to work. I knew approximately where the documents might be located, which was a good thing, as these rooms housed more than a hundred thousand items within their walls.

I had barely begun, when a guard doing his rounds interrupted me. He was far away and did not venture near this area, a good thing for him. I was in no mood for trifling interruptions every five minutes. He was lucky I intended to do this quietly. Chance was with me and I found a pertinent folder right away, bearing the title »Ade Leonæ«. I could not resist peeking inside.

It was there. It was all there. Leon's activities had not gone unnoticed by the Vatican. My eyes locked in on the final notation to the file.

„Possible involvement of Abbey confirmed. See Count St Germain file for further details.“

The Count St Germain? Who was that? I had to get that file.

Unfortunately, it was on the other side of the Secret Archives, where the guard was. So be it. One guard surely wouldn't be missed. I saw him come around the corner in the distance, his light flashing back and forth slowly. Dropping to the floor, I scurried across it like a spider, coming upon the guard before his senses even registered my presence. He was aiming his flashlight down an aisle when I kicked his feet out from under him. He fell hard on his back, his arms flailing, the flashlight going flying. I was on him instantly, my hand clamping tight on his mouth and nose, cutting off his air, stopping any sound. He struggled, managing to hit me once, a punch to my gut. It was a good effort. I didn't feel it.

I twisted his head savagely to the side, bit into his neck and drank his blood deep.

I drained him in less than five seconds, feeling his last, frantic heartbeats hammering in his lifeblood. What a fantastic feeling! I stayed there immobile, not thinking, flowing with the blood. I came back to myself, barely aware of where I was, and dropped the corpse. I stood up, kicking the body into a nearby corner, and continued my search for the Count St Germain file. I eventually succeeded in locating it. Hurrying to leave before the changing of the guards, I took the two files, along with the guard's body, returning to my access vent, where I encountered a serious problem. An absent guard is quite a different thing than a dead guard. The guard had to come with me. Unfortunately, his body would not fit into the vent.

I had to force him in.

I crushed his upper body, breaking his chest cage, doing the same to his pelvis. Lifting up the more or less amorphous mass, I inserted it into the access vent, head first, until it was squished in. I pulled myself in and slid the body along, thanking myself for having drained it of blood. It would have been so messy otherwise. Vampirism was a good thing after all. I reached the end of the air vent channel where it joined the main shaft. Holding the body by its foot, I slid out and looked up the vent, suspecting it would be cumbersome climbing while pulling a dead body along.

Looking around for a convenient alternative, I saw a narrow ledge above me which might suit my purpose. I tossed the guard's body up onto it, where it fell rather loosely. Jumping up after it, I secured the mass in place with one hand. I used my other hand to rip strips of metal off the sides of the vent walls, bending them over the body, holding it securely in place. Drained of blood and with fresh air passing by, the body would desiccate and mummify here. No one should find him, not for years.

Standing on the ledge, I propelled myself up towards the vent opening, reaching it easily. Hanging by one hand, I lifted myself out and lowered the lid back down, replacing the broken lock with the new one I had brought.

I stood there, my two files in hand, on the edge of the roof, looking at the massive structures beneath me, the buildings built by man, stretching out as far as my eye could see, a vast domain, mine for the taking.

I was on top of the world. Nothing and no one could stop me. I was invincible. I was invisible. I was the Shadow-Killer.

* * * * *

The file on Ponce de Leon was thin, but sufficient. It contained the facts I already suspected, adding that de Leon had indeed been seriously harassed, barely surviving an assassination attempt, soon after his return from the new continent. Columbus also suffered his share of problems. They blamed the harassment and attempted murder on an organization called the Abbey. The file concluded Ponce de Leon was „no longer a threat“, which I interpreted to mean his fountain of youth nonsense had convinced them to leave him alone.

This Abbey had to be the warrior-monks I was investigating. They were watchdogs, keeping a lookout for their own reasons, and they were indeed a threat to anyone involved with immortality.

Ponce de Leon's file provided a final thread. Columbus had failed in the purpose of his return expeditions. He had not succeeded in retrieving what he had been seeking in the new continent. His map survived him, falling into the hands of Jacques Cartier, another seaborne explorer of the times.

Cartier succeeded where Columbus had failed, hiding his ill-gotten gains in the caves of Etretat. I was the beneficiary of most of that gold. My fortune was therefore part of the Templar treasure.

I opened the file on the Count St Germain, not knowing what I would find. It was far more than I expected. Divided into three, the first section contained a bizarre biography of his life, the second presented the Church's suspicions about his immortality and the third, the thinnest, held information about the Abbey's suspected involvement with St Germain.

Below are summaries of the three sections. I am now convinced St Germain was an immortal. I also believe he played crucial roles throughout the centuries. He may well have been the first immortal to defy the Abbey.

Section One

The Count St Germain's Life:

No one knew when or where he was really born. Count St Germain never spoke of it. We are left with guesses, some possibly more informed than others. My favorite theory is that he was the son of Francis Racoczi II, Prince of Transylvania. Racoczi's children were raised by the Emperor of Austria but one of them, the likely candidate, was withdrawn from his guardianship and vanished from sight.

However, this is mere supposition, as was most of his biography. Few facts were truly known about this mysterious man. Germain was a generic name, akin to Smith in this century. It was a derivative of the ancient French spelling: „Germain“. The „Saint“ in his name did not refer to Church-ordained sainthood but, rather, was definitive of his supposed place of origin, a common enough appellation in France. His title of Count had been purchased from the Pope, not inherited through family, creating a thoroughly murky, inaccurate background.

Saint Germain first appeared in Venice, early in the eighteenth century. In 1710, Jean-Philippe Rameau, one of France's leading composers, praised St Germain, indicating he was an accomplished musician by that time. In 1723, St Germain met Madame de Pompadour, along with a number of Austrian and Hungarian nobles, such as Prince Kaunitz and Prince Ferdinand von Lobkowitz. From 1737 to 1742, St Germain traveled to the court of the Shah of Persia, where he immersed himself into alchemical studies, which eventually led him to understand the workings of nature.

He arrived in London in 1743. Horace Walpole described St Germain, from his time spent in London, as a „wonderful violinist, who sang, composed, was quite mad, and not very sensible“. Two of his compositions, dated 1745 and 1760 are still preserved today, in the British Museum. His playing style compared favorably to Paganini's, according to testimony from those who had heard them both. I never liked Paganini.

The Count always presented the same countenance. He was of medium height, powerfully built and appeared to be between forty and fifty years old. This is how he was described throughout his entire life. Vanishing from London, he reappeared in Edinburgh in 1745, arrested for spying, implicated in the Jacobite Revolution. Somehow, St Germain immediately cleared himself, discharged on the day of his arrest in time to dine with William Stanholpe, Earl of Harrington.

He traveled to Vienna in the same year, visiting Frederick the Great at Sans-Souci, which is where he met Voltaire, who said of him: „St Germain is a man who was never born, who will never die and who knows everything“. He made his fame once more as a violinist, becoming the toast of the town, vanishing from sight again in 1746.

He reappeared in 1758, in Versailles, bearing specialized dye recipes as his stock in trade. He ended up housed in the Chateau de Chambord, through the graces of the King of France, Louis XV. He openly claimed to be centuries old during this period, supporting his claims with eccentric behavior and unexplained lavish wealth. It was not uncommon for him to present diamonds as gifts. He became known as a master storyteller, socializing with the rich and famous, and whose skills in alchemy and chemistry could not be denied. He was familiar with almost any language he encountered. His knowledge of history was unparalleled, often revealing a perspective not found in books.

He met Louis XV and his mistress, Madame de Pompadour, as soon as he arrived in Paris, quickly ensconcing himself as the king's confidant, to the consternation of his ministers and the jealousy of the court. He was made privy to intimate details of many affairs of state, being eventually entrusted with several secretive missions. The missions involved St Germain in foreign affairs, behind the back of the King's ministers. The displeased ministers had been lying in wait for such an inflammatory incident, something sufficient to oust him from his seat of power. A warrant for his arrest was issued and, in 1760, he was forced to flee to England, where he remained for a period of at least two years.

From there, he went to Russia, where he involved himself in the affairs that put Catherine the Great on the throne in 1762. After that, silence until 1774. The occasion of his return to Paris, was Louis the Sixteenth and Marie Antoinette's arrival to the throne of France. Somehow finding himself in their Royal Chambers, as trusted confidant again, St Germain warned of events in the far future, predicting „there will be a bloodthirsty republic, whose scepter will be the executioner's knife“.

The Count St Germain apparently died, while secluded at Eckenforn, in 1784, his age calculated to be no less than one hundred years at that point, although he still appeared to be an ageless fifty. He had announced he was tired of life, appearing weak and melancholic to his close friends. No details exist of his death; no tombstone can be found which bears his name.

Section Two

The Church investigation into St Germain's activities:

The Church was quite concerned about St Germain's underground activities, generally unknown to the public. Reading the file, I could understand why. The Church was intent on keeping control over the populace at all costs. Some of the Count's activities were designed to undermine the Church, by preaching a message to lead the sheep away from the shepherd.

He had a ready audience. The 1700's were a breeding ground for secret societies. Initiates from a thousand groups abounded, each claiming roots shrouded in ancient times. Most societies preached that a different path to salvation existed. The answers initiates sought were reputed to be found in a mythical lost book, a hidden scroll, a forgotten ritual. It differed, depending on the society. Most „lost knowledge“ was written or devised by a long gone master, providing spiritual revelation and leading initiates to inner freedom and immortality.

All this sent daggers of fear into the Church. Secret societies had revelations over which the church had no control. Eventually, after the St Germain's events, the Church enacted a drastic solution. Belonging to a secret society was outlawed upon penalty of death.

In Vienna, St Germain's first suspect activities were noted when he took part in the foundation of the Order of Asiatic Brethren of Europe 1780-81, while disguised under the identity of a Franciscan monk, Justus. As Justus, St Germain had spent years in the Orient where he made the acquaintance of Jewish Cabbalists. He studied their disciplines, obtaining sacred manuscripts and doctrines from them. These were cleverly incorporated into the Order of Asiatic Brethren, creating the first attempt to mesh Jewish and Christian faith. It was quite an ambitious endeavor during those turbulent times.

St Germain's spiritual theories struck at the core of Freemasonry, Rosicrucian and Knight Templar beliefs, suggesting his knowledge came from a source predating them. St Germain undertook an all-out attempt to change Freemasonry, clarifying their incomprehensible rituals.

By this time, the Order of the Knights Templar had been reconstituted. Freemasonry had increased the number of its lodges, until one could be found in every town. St Germain associated himself with other mystics of the times, such as Martinez de Pasqually, Savalette de Lange, Count Gebelin and Saint Martin, all part of the group known as »The Lodge of the Friends Assembled«.

Later, St Germain, with the co-operation of Savalette, founded the group of Philalethes, (truth-seekers), with the cream of the „Friends Assembled“ members. The Prince of Hesse, Condorcet, Cagliostro, all joined this extremely exclusive group. St Germain expounded his unifying theories, in Ermenonville and later, in Paris, on the Rue Platriere. He taught that Man has in him infinite possibilities and he must strive unceasingly to free himself of matter in his quest for higher planes of existence.

These discourses were sufficiently motivating to push those attending to organize a general assembly, where every Freemason lodge would be represented. That meeting was when the Philalethes attempted to reform Freemasonry. If they had attained their aim, a society of philosopher-initiates would have been created, leading mankind to a much different state of existence.

It was not to be. Rivals rapidly extinguished the dawning attempt, flatly refusing to relinquish their hold on the reins of power, preferring that to future spiritual salvation. Had I been there, I would have agreed with them.

St Germain's actions, occurring shortly before his supposed death, were what led the church to consider him dangerous. During their investigation, they collated many facts about his immortality.

The list grew so long that it was a certainty St Germain was immortal. Although Count Hesse claimed St Germain died at his castle in February 1784, the investigation continued unabated, the Church remained convinced his death had been too convenient an artifice. Over time, the facts proved them right.

In the course of their hundred-year investigation, the Church listed every authenticated report of his appearance after his death. Eventually it became the proof they needed, confirming the fraudulent death and his immortality at the same stroke. Unfortunately, St Germain had vanished into the shadows by then, never to be seen again under this guise.

Here are the most pertinent facts from the Church's list:

Facts inferring immortality:

- = No one ever saw him eat. He would invite people to lavish feasts but he himself was never once seen to consume a single morsel of food. This related well to my own lack of hunger, induced by the spores.
- = He knew too many languages. French. English. Italian. Spanish. Portuguese. Greek. Latin. Sanskrit. Chinese. Hebrew. Arabic. The list went on and on.
- = He was ambidextrous and could write with both hands simultaneously, indicating enhanced mental abilities.

= He was skilled in everything and seemed well experienced when doing it. No one could have accumulated that amount of experience in a single lifetime.

= He held special knowledge not known by the common people. For example, he could grow pearls artificially and once removed a flaw from a large diamond owned by Louis XV. He could transmute other metals into gold. Casanova witnessed a silver, sixty-centime coin transmuted into gold in front of his eyes, in less than two minutes. This coin fell into the possession of Field Marshall Keith in Berlin and still exists today, the only gold sixty-centime coin in existence.

= He had lavish, unexplained wealth. He was fascinated with jewels and always carried a box filled with them. His shoe buckles alone were worth two hundred thousand francs. He had jewels sewn into all of his clothing. Invitations to his sumptuous dinners were encrusted with precious stones. He had credit at every bank, was never in debt. The source of his wealth is still unknown to this day.

= Madame Languet de Gergy, who first met the Count in 1710, told Madame de Pompadour that she had received from St Germain, while in Venice, an elixir which had allowed her to maintain for many years, the appearance of a woman of twenty-five. He had also promised such an elixir to Mademoiselle de Genlis when she was a child, on the day she reached the age of eighteen.

Facts relating to his age:

= Two previous alchemists bore the same physical description as Count St Germain: Signor Geraldini who vanished in 1691, and Lascaris who appeared in 1693. Lascaris disappeared shortly before Saint Germain arrived in England. The Church believed they were the same man.

= His stories of King Francis the First were so detailed and precise they gave the distinct impression he had been present in his court.

= In 1760, Countess von Georgy met him at the court of Louis XV. Stunned to see St Germain completely unchanged after fifty years, she challenged his identity. He quickly related several events known only to the two of them, proving himself who he claimed to be.

= In 1821, the Comtesse d'Adhemar stated: „I have seen St Germain again, each time, to my amazement, looking the same. I saw him when the Queen was murdered. I also saw him on the day following the death of the Duke d'Enghien in January 1815, and on the eve of the murder of the Duke de Berry.“

= Mademoiselle De Genlis insisted she met the Count St Germain in 1821, during the negotiations of the treaty of Vienna. The Comte de Chalons spoke to him, soon afterward in the Piazza di San Marco. He was seen in the crowds during the tribunal of Princess de Lamballe, before her execution.

= There were rumors of him alive in Paris in 1835, in Milan in 1867 and in Egypt during Napoleon's campaign. Napoleon the Third kept a dossier on him. Annie Besant said she met the Count in 1896.

= Theosophist C.W. Leadbeater claimed to have met him in 1926, mentioning that one of St Germain's homes had been a castle in Transylvania.

= Albert Vandam in his memoirs, »An Englishman in Paris«, mentioned a Major Fraser who lived alone and never mentioned his past. He possessed a marvelous knowledge of all the countries of Europe and was lavish with money, though its source remained a mystery. His memory knew no compare and he hinted his learning did not come from books. He was known to have mentioned speaking to the Emperor Nero, Dante and so on. He seemed to be between forty and fifty years of age, of middle height and strongly built. Like St Germain, he became the prize of Parisian High Society and, like St Germain, disappeared without leaving a trace.

St Germain had to have been an immortal. Not only that, he tried to change the course of humanity in his takeover attempt of the Freemason doctrines. He felt it was important enough to come out of the shadows to do. His failure, explained in the third section of the file, was what had led the Church directly to the doors of the Abbey.

Section Three

St Germain and the Abbey.

St Germain's immortality was no longer in doubt, although I still had many questions about the nature of his immortality. It was certainly more akin to a spore-caused effect, as opposed to Vlad Dracul's powder from the Ark of the Covenant. St Germain was able to wander in daylight freely, without any fear of burning skin. Did St Germain owe his immortality to my caves? Had he been in them? Did he know of the spores? Or was his immortality of yet another type?

St Germain had revealed he held knowledge of immortality through his overt actions and his claims, attracting attention from the Church. The Church quickly discovered another group was concerned about St Germain's activities, long before he entered the spiritual arena.

The Abbey:

Their influence was first noticed during St Germain's involvement in the Jacobite Revolution, in 1745. He was arrested for treason, despite being involved at the request of King Louis XV. The Church uncovered that his arrest did not happen accidentally. Someone had planted a treasonous letter in St Germain's pocket, apparently written by the Young Pretender to the Throne, Charles Edward Stuart. The forged letter was clever, convincing the authorities they had arrested the right man. Furthermore, the authorities had been informed anonymously about St Germain's supposed treachery. St Germain easily handled the situation, his feet never touching the floor of a prison cell.

The church grew curious about who might have wanted to stop St Germain, eventually identifying a group of monks, known as the Abbey. St Germain's travels to other countries were always preceded by false rumors, harassment, and sometimes, outright attempts on his life. The rumors came from no known source. The harassment vanished as soon as St Germain did.

Eventually, St Germain held his talks at the Freemason general assemblies, with the help of the other Philalethes members. Once again, his failure was attributable to an outside influence, operating in the shadows. The Abbey's hand could be seen, tightening a noose around St Germain, even before he began his final, desperate attempt to teach his new doctrines.

Unfortunately, the Church had not collated many useful facts about the Abbey. It was believed to have started as a small group of initiates, hidden within the deepest recesses of political power. They had created the Knights Templar, manipulating the organization for their aims. The Abbey had long known of the coming treachery of King Phillip, planning their escape and survival. They allowed the visible Templar Order to die, in order for their group to fall into total obscurity. The Abbey disappeared into the folds of history, relentlessly watching and waiting for every moment when immortality reared its head.

They had been at work throughout history, stopping all immortals in their tracks. Each one had been destroyed, Vlad Dracul among them. Yet, with St Germain, they had failed. He had danced around their plots and subterfuges, escaping them every time.

I could not forget St Germain had only been a skin. He picked up skins and dropped them at his convenience, exactly as I did. I knew of several times when St Germain had used different aliases. In 1761, he bought land while claiming to be named Surmount. In 1774, he presented himself in Bavaria, as Freiherr Reinhard Gemmingen-Guttenberg, Count of Tsarogy. In 1776, he became Count Welldone. Later he claimed to be Francis Rakoczy the Second. Other skins, like Major Fraser after his supposed death, and Justus, during his study of eastern doctrines, confirmed how alike he and I were. The immortal became whom he wanted, when he wanted. The Abbey was powerless against him.

Unlike me, St Germain had chosen to remain in daylight. He screamed his message for all to hear. The Abbey had brought all their resources to bear, failing to kill him. Admittedly, they managed to stop him from teaching his doctrines but that had been a small victory. The real goal had been to stop him and, in that, they had failed.

St Germain could not be an average immortal. His easy evasion from the Abbey demonstrated him to be far more skilled and experienced than I. Perhaps St Germain could prove to be an ally against the Abbey. If I could find him and obtain his knowledge, I would become completely invulnerable.

I resolved there and then, to do exactly that. I would search for him, study his techniques. We would become allies against the Abbey and rule the world together, immortals in the shadows.

Until I had no further need for him, anyway.

Chapter 12

The Secret in the Church.

Exiting from the limousine, Raymonde touched my hand.

Paul, I can sense people all around. They seem to be watching us.

I stopped immediately and scanned the area. Following her mental directions, I noticed an open window, far up in the hills. A brief, reflective glint confirmed my suspicions. Peering carefully, I was able to pick out three sets of eyes looking back at me. I kept looking around and picked out three other groups checking us out. I could not explain why my eyesight was so sharp. Another change.

What do you want to do? she sent.

I think we should go in as planned. Everyone with us is armed and we are both invulnerable. We can protect those who need it.

True.

Let's just see where this goes.

We entered into Sauniere's church, glancing briefly at the garish figure of the demon Asmodeus on our left. Heading down the center aisle, I heard the door opening behind us. Looking back, I saw the three groups enter, each moving away from the other in a sullen silence, fraught with tension. We reached the end of the aisle and stopped in front of the altar, examining the floor. We were staring at a tile chessboard.

Father Plantagenet took his place next to us, continuing his role as observer.

„Come on, it can't be that obvious,“ O'Flanahan rasped. „Nothing comes that easy.“

„I would tend to agree with you,“ Briar joined in.

„A miracle! The two of you agreeing on something and in a church to boot. How fitting,“ exclaimed Coulter in a sarcastic tone. The Vallin brothers exploded in laughter. Briar shot them both a look that shut them up. My friends did not seem aware of the newcomers yet, unlike our bodyguards, who were bristling with professional suspicion, instinctively taking position between us and them.

Examining the floor tiles, I found them identical to the tiles in Lindon's home, with the same tiny marks on their edge.

„I guess we're going to be lucky today. Those tiles are chess squares!“ I confirmed.

And there is a hollow beneath the same tile as before. I can sense it, she sent to me.

The whole situation struck me as surreal. Napoleon Bonaparte's chess game had made an unexpected return, its presence baffling me. Briar had mentioned Napoleon making plans to build a port in Etretat. Now, hundreds of years later, Sauniere and Leblanc both used his chess game. It had to mean something. An impatient O'Flanahan interrupted my musings.

„Well, what are we waiting for? Let's find the right tile and open it,“ he exclaimed.

„We can't very well perform an excavation in the floor of the church in broad daylight. Can't you see there are tourists about?“ retorted Briar in an irritated tone. „We have to plan these things.“

„Maybe it won't take as long as you think!“ I added.

„What's up, Paul?“ Coulter asked.

„I've noticed something on the edges of that tile, over there. Might be hinges.“

Hinges implied a handle or a lock. The grout around the tile looked subtly different in the corners, indicating a place to start.

„I read Berenger Sauniere found a hollow in this floor during his original excavations. Do any of you remember about that?“ Briar questioned.

„There was something hidden in the Visigoth altar leg. A glass vial, with notes in them, I think,“ O'Flanahan suggested.

„No, that was a decoy, planted to confuse the masses. There are so many of them in this church. It is easy to fall into them. Like those angels over there, pointing at those letters, or the reversed crosses in the Jesus carvings over there.“ Briar sermonized.

„All right, all right,“ O'Flanahan gave in, knowing that few rivaled Briar's expertise in Sauniere lore.

„Didn't Sauniere find a rock in that hollow?“ I asked.

„Yes, that's it, a carved rock of some sort,“ Briar agreed, nodding his head. „A miniature replica of the Devil's chair, up on mount Bucharach, I believe.“

„Mount Bucharach was also in my dream,“ I said.

„That's all well and good, guys but how are we going to get that tile open with all these people watching?“ O'Flanahan wondered. After looking at the groups hovering by the entrance, each surreptitiously looking in our direction, he added in a lower voice. „Suspicious people watching us at that. Did you note how odd those tourists are? Certainly is a multi-cultural group.“

His voice dropped another notch, to a conspiratorial tone.

„Those guys over there have got to be from the Middle East, I'd put my hand in the fire about that. And those other three are American. And if that last group isn't French Military, I'll eat my hat.“

„I saw them all right, Mr O'Flanahan. Don't you worry. I'm sure we can take them, if it comes to that, right Brother?“ Jacques Vallin added.

„I can handle those four, if you take the other three,“ acknowledged Ives effusively.

„Well, I don't like this at all, I must say,“ added Briar. „I was so absorbed in what might be under that floor that I never noticed them, despite all my words about vigilance. What should we do?“

„We will do nothing for the moment. As far as everyone is concerned, we are all tourists here. Give me some time to come up with something.“

Paul, I think I can keep them busy, Raymonde sent.

What can you do? I returned.

I can slow them down for a few minutes. Start those two guards walking towards them when you're ready to open that tile.

She was going to reverse her radar sense, broadcasting with it, affecting the people in those three groups. While under her control, these people would become

less aware of our actions. However, focusing on so many people at once might prove to be too much of a drain on her. We would have to hurry.

Okay, Raymonde. Just give me a few moments to figure out how to open it.

A few moments? Is that all? she sent along with a sense of laughter.

I've almost got it. I'm sure of it but I need to look at the tiles a bit closer. Then I'll know for sure.

Briar and O'Flanahan were standing next to a grouping of four angel statues. I signaled the Vallin brothers and Coulter, who were nearest. They approached, casually looking around, until they were able to hear my whispered words.

„I've got an idea. Can you place yourselves in such a way to hide me from our observers?“

„Sure thing, Mr Paul.“

They positioned themselves, innocently talking amongst each other and pointing at this or that church feature. As soon as they were in place, I dropped straight down, kneeling on the chessboard tile edge.

If this was Napoleon's chess game, I had to accept that Saunier's church was intrinsically linked to my own quest in the caves of Etretat. Nothing in the Saunier mystery had previously alluded to such a connection but the more I thought about it, the more obvious it became.

The documents, unearthed by Saunier in this very church, had opened the door to a piece of forgotten history. It began in 1108, when eight men formed an alliance to travel to Jerusalem and take it from the Moslems, by force if necessary, in order to retrieve the treasure they believed was hidden below the ruins of Solomon's Temple.

To achieve this was no small task, requiring a massive army. These eight men were the origin of the Knights Templar and the root cause of the first Crusade. Recent digs conducted on the mount had revealed the location of their encampment and uncovered the tunnels they had dug to breach the ancient chamber hidden below the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem.

For more than one thousand years, their actions were forgotten. All that changed when a Bedouin found the first cache of Dead Sea scrolls. After years of arduous preservation work, a researcher was able to present the translation of the famous Copper Scroll, itemizing the list of treasures hidden beneath Solomon's temple. Chief among those treasures was the most fabled of all, the Ark of the Covenant!

Most importantly, the Ark was reputed to confer immortality on those who controlled its power.

Was the Ark of the Covenant connected to the cave spores? Was that what Saunier tried to get across? At the very least, with immortality linking Saunier and Leblanc's plans, Saunier's messages had to be intended for me!

Once again, the immensity of the revelation fell upon my shoulders, sagging against the burden placed upon me. What was worth all this effort? I was frustrated, unable to pierce the shroud in front of my eyes. No matter what my growing intellect revealed, I found only further questions.

To make matters worse, none of them believed in speaking clearly.

Everything was codes, puzzles, tricks, decoys, requiring leaps of faith, theories founded upon supposition, the whole collapsing only to be replaced by more complex possibilities. Why could they not simply tell me?

A rush of warmth flooded me, Raymonde bolstering my daunted spirits.

It's all right Paul. I'm here for you.

Her soul touched mine, her peaceful aura suffusing me.

Calming down, I remembered Father Plantagenet's words: Belief is the key, my son, never forget that! I pulled out the ancient key Plantagenet had given me, I looked at it with fresh eyes.

Thank you Raymonde. That was just what I needed and it has helped me figure it out. I'm going to open this tile.

My energy was brimming like never before, my senses at a hyper pitch. It was time.

„Jacques, send the two bodyguards walking down the aisle towards those men. Get ready to go. This will happen quickly.“

Plantagenet had given me a key for a reason. It was shaped like two triangles, one regular and one inverted, traveling straight through each other at a perpendicular angle, forming a cross. Whatever barrel this key fit would need a cross-shaped slot.

Just like the corners between tiles.

Particularly the bottom left intersection below the hollow tile, where my closer examination revealed a discoloration in the grout. I now had a possible keyhole, and it tied into Plantagenet's words. Where else but in a church would belief be a key?

The bodyguards were on their way. I pulled the key off my neck, snapping the string, aligning it over the bottom left intersection. I pushed the key down very lightly, concerned about my enhanced strength. There was a slight give and the key went in. The key reached bottom and I turned it clockwise one quarter turn, hearing an audible *click*.

The tile popped open.

Seeing an oilskin-wrapped item in the small hollow, I pulled it out, clicking the tile back down, and removed the key. The spring-loaded corner reseated itself between the tiles, hiding all evidence of my intrusion. I stood up, sliding the small package into my satchel.

„Let's go. We're done here.“

Father Plantagenet leaned over to me and whispered:

„Expertly done, Mr Sirenne. Congratulations.“

Nodding to him, I led the others forward, catching up quickly to the bodyguards, still advancing towards the three groups. We walked rapidly past them, talking about trivial things. They were looking at us with dull eyes, as if their minds were not on the moment. We hurried to the door.

Coming out of the church, my eyes darted around, looking for any sight of the watchers ensconced in the distant building. I picked out one of them, lying nearby, on top of a building. I could see his hand, the top of his head, and the tip of what appeared to be a rifle.

He appeared to be aiming at O'Flanahan. When the watcher squeezed his trigger, I moved between his rifle and O'Flanahan. I felt a light impact in the

middle of my back and reached behind, touching something sticky. I pulled it off and entered into the limo. The object was small and very sticky on one side. I could see a small wire wrapped around it and a tiny lens in its center. I threw it at Coulter, seated across from me. He caught it in mid-flight with his right hand.

„What do you make of this, Fabian?“

He examined it curiously.

„I'd say it's a subminiature wireless camera. Looks like an antenna was added for greater range. Jury-rigged job but not bad, all in all. Where did you get it?“

„Somebody just shot it at us.“

He took the news well in hand.

„Do you want me to disable it?“

„If you don't mind but don't break it. It could come in useful later.“

Coulter snapped a compartment open and removed a small disk battery. Finished, he shot me a curious look.

„Okay, uhm, how did you know someone shot it at us?“

„My eyes have improved. I picked those groups out before we even went in,“ I explained, omitting any mention of Raymonde's assistance. O'Flanahan struck at the heart of the situation with his usual single-mindedness:

„What did you pull out from under that tile? The suspense is killing me.“

I reached into my satchel and pulled out the oilskin, unwrapping it carefully.

„It's just a stupid piece of rock,“ exclaimed a disappointed O'Flanahan.

„Really, O'Flanahan, Sauniere would not have hidden it if it were not a crucial clue of some sort. Examination is the key, not offhand comments,“ Briar retorted.

The stone had been roughly carved, hollowing out a section of it. It looked strongly familiar. I placed it quickly.

„This is a miniature replica of the Devil's Chair on Mount Bucharach, exactly like the one previously found by Sauniere, in 1875,“ I explained.

„Could this be the same one?“ asked Father Plantagenet, his first question since our entry into the church.

„No, I think the original is on display in the Berenger Sauniere museum,“ answered Briar. „The original one's placement beneath the church floor had long been unexplained and is the source of the current fascination with Mount Bucharach, where the real Devil's Chair is situated. The discovery of a second stone replica, places an entirely different emphasis on its importance.“

„You think we should go look at Mount Bucharach?“

„It seems a logical choice, considering that Paul also dreamt about it,“ finished Briar.

„Seems like a good direction to me,“ supported Coulter, closing the empty battery compartment on the wireless cam. „Dead in the water. They will get no further data from this. When we get back to my lab, I'll check it out.“

He tossed it into his coat pocket, jostling O'Flanahan with his elbow.

„Hey, watch it. Well, I'm not sure if I agree. I want to look at more than rocks,“ added a grumbling O'Flanahan.

I directed the driver to hurry. I wanted to be well out of range when those seven „tourists“ came to their senses.

Greyman Chronicles

The Americans Thawing Out

The seven were looking at each other. Each was dealing with a curious sense of internal fuzziness, as if something had occurred without having a clue what it was. The Israelis were the first to recover, pulling their weapons and covering the others, intent on staying in control, no matter what. The French pulled theirs in reaction, followed by the three Americans.

For the first time, the men noticed the new arrivals, the ones who had attracted their attention in so distinctive a fashion, were no longer in the church. The face-off continued briefly, brandished guns hovering nervously, but another more insistent concern was taking over.

Where was the group from the limo?

The Americans were the first to drop their guns and lurch for the door. The French soon followed, with the Israelis on their heels. They ran out in a bunch, the narrow door causing a brief pile up. They spilled out without a word, their trained eyes scanning every which way.

„What just happened?“ one of the Americans asked.

The Mossad agents said nothing, keeping their own counsel. They knew what this meant.

„Were they even here?“ wondered one of the French.

„Yes, look, there in the dust, those tire tracks. They were here all right but where did they go? How did they vanish like that?“ another American questioned with a baffled tone.

The Mossad agents knew but they weren't telling those gentiles. The time had come, as predicted. They simply turned away from the Americans and the French, walking away without uttering a single word. Silence was best, they would never understand.

The French looked warily at the remaining Americans, their guns still by their sides.

„It is time for you to move on,“ one of the Frenchmen ordered.

„We have as much right to be here and you know it,“ an American sniggered back.

„This is our land. You have no right to behave like this. This is a peaceful town, Monsieur.“

„Yeah? Why don't you call your government and ask them if they agree with you on that? You know just as well as I do that they signed the agreement giving us the right to be here.“

„Only as observers, not as aggressors, a fact which you seem to forget,“ argued the Frenchman, his gun hand tensing.

„You must holster your weapons immediately and walk away. We will secure the church, do our investigation and duly report to your government. Now leave,“ the second Frenchman asserted in a no-nonsense tone.

Tension flared but the Americans knew it was neither the time nor the place to start an incident. They had to contact headquarters. This was important.

„Fine! Have it your way but we better get that report within the next forty-eight hours.“

Greyman Chronicles

The Watchers.

Tracking Destiny.

Pierre looked at the agents walk away from each other and breathed a sigh of relief. They had been so heated up with each other that they had never noticed Robert, lying within a stone's throw of them. He had taken some serious risks getting to that position but it had paid off, or almost. The girl's boyfriend had somehow managed to step between Robert and his intended target at the last second. The bug had landed on the boyfriend's back instead. He had scooped it off his back in a second.

Returning to their rented room, Pierre reviewed the video of Plantagenet's departure, watching the second guy enter the limo. Something about him looked familiar.

He could be Fabian Coulter.

The hair was different but it really could be him. Nervous with excitement, he stabbed at his keyboard with shaky fingers. Coulter. It could be Coulter.

He popped up his underground database, clicked the 'C' file, and scrolled down the list. There it was! He clicked again and a picture filled the screen.

It was him.

Pierre knew Fabian Coulter. He had met him at a hacker's convention, a few years back. Coulter hadn't even been a guest there and Pierre had not known who he was at first. They had struck up a conversation. Pierre had met him on a few occasions after that night. What was Coulter doing here, mixed up in this mess? Coulter was an Ottawa boy, just like Pierre. He never traveled far from home, he didn't need to. The guy lived on the Internet.

Pierre sent a highest-priority query to home base, asking Maria to check out Coulter's recent movements. Maybe they could track down something more about him.

Robert burst through the door, his chest heaving. He collapsed in the nearest chair, accepting a beer from Louis with a nod of thanks. For a while, he lay there, gasping, finally managing to utter a few words.

„Did it work?“

„No, they disabled it.“

„What about the second cam?“

„What second cam?“

„Didn't you hear me? I told you I'd stick two cams together. They might think there's only one. If the second one is still active, we can still track the signal. Heck, we can do it from right here. We have two antennas, don't we?“

Louis and Pierre jumped to their seats, typing on their keyboards like crazy and Robert heaved himself off the chair, walking over to the other two.

„It's live. The second cam is live. I don't believe it.“

„Stop babbling and begin triangulating.“

„I'm doing it, so give me a break, okay?“

They hurriedly took several measurements, one after the other, overlaying their results on a digitized map of the area.

„They're heading in Mount Bucharach's direction!“

They sat back in their chairs, the excitement too much to bear. Bucharach was the center of everything. Those guys had to be on to something. After a moment, Pierre said to his two friends:

„One of them's Fabian Coulter. I've got Maria checking on his background as we speak.“

Robert and Louis shook their heads.

„Coulter? Isn't he some major league hacker?“

„Expert level, from what I heard. He went professional though.“

„Too bad. What's he doing here?“

„Don't know but Maria will ferret out something. She lives in Ottawa, a couple of blocks away from Coulter's place. She's good at what she does.“

„I think we should pack, get ready to go. Were you able to get a car, Louis?“

„Yeah, for a ton of francs, but I got it.“

Pierre nodded and looked at Robert.

„Can you get us mobile with the signal tracker?“

„I think so. Let me connect with the local network. You contacted them, right?“

„Yep. They are on high alert right now, let me tell you.“

„Good. I can use them to do all the legwork in tracking the signal. Then they can relay it all to this laptop. Easy as Pi, he-he-he.“

Robert's finger flew over the laptop keyboard, sending message after message.

„We're good to go.“

The three stood up but, before they went, Pierre felt the need to say something important.

„Guys, coming here was a stretch but it just paid off. We are at ground zero, in time to see it start, whatever it is, and we know what that means. Things are going to be happening, important things. Some of those things are going to have to do with us. I can't stress how crucial it is that we not fail. We have to find out where these guys are going and it's all resting on one hidden wireless cam and our single-minded efforts.“

The other two nodded in understanding. They grabbed all the equipment they could possibly need, turning off the light when they left the room. None of them noticed the laptop's spare battery pack, still behind the large easy chair, where it had fallen about two hours before.

Chapter 13

The Hoard of Spores.

When the helicopter lifted into the air, heading towards the top of Mount Bucharach, my glasses pinged and an image formed on their internal screen.

It was Dr Phillippe. He was munching on something.

„Yes, Doctor?“

„I have had the most stupendous luck, Mr Sirenne, Sir. It’s just amazing. You will never believe it.“

I signaled the others to connect in on the broadcast. This promised to be good.

„Go on, Doctor, we’re all listening.“

The screen moved away from the doctor, showing him attempting to move a large stiff canvas sack filled with an incredibly heavy, powdery substance.

„This bag is filled with more than one hundred kilos of spores, can you believe that? It’s incredible, I tell you, totally incredible.“

„How did this discovery come about, Doctor Phillippe?“

„Didn’t I tell you? Oh no, I’m so sorry about that, Mr Sirenne. I am so overwhelmed. Very well, let me collect myself. Jean-Claude, pull back and show them where we are. I wish I had some tea, my mouth is so dry after that pastry.“

His assistant moved back and panned slowly around the room.

„That’s near the Fan Room,“ Briar said.

„Correct, Mr Briar. You see, I was baffled by a great many things after Mr Sirenne’s most interesting physical this morning. The one practical question I kept returning to was: where were all the spores? We have miles of fungus-covered tunnels down here, you all know that. There should be spores by the billions around us and we should...“ the doctor lowered his tone and hunched his shoulders towards the camera confidentially „We should, by all rights, be as changed as you are, Sir, but this is obviously not so. That is why I asked myself: where could all the spores have gone? Naturally, I thought of the fans, at the heart of this complex.“

Coulter couldn’t stop himself from jumping in.

„Of course, the Fan Room. That’s where all the dust went. It had no choice.“

„Yes, Mr Coulter. It was purely logical. The next thing was just as logical. I came in here, where we can see the three massive fans,“ he screamed above the powerful din. „The third one was broken when you first arrived. It was finally repaired last month. As part of general maintenance, the metal grill flooring around the fan was examined for loose connections to the cement superstructure. Several bolts were replaced. It was by pure luck that three of those bolts were replaced consecutively, lowering the position of the metal walkway by a mere two centimeters. It was just enough to reveal this to my inquisitive eye, this afternoon, when I came looking.“

His hand was pointing at a slight crack running along the cement between two riveted, floor-to-ceiling, metal flanges.

„When I examined it more closely, I noted a fair amount of air was moving through that small crack. I wondered if I could be looking at a door, camouflaged to look like a cement wall. This thought was reinforced when I looked up and saw another thin crack, right up there. His speech was punctuated by an upward jabbing movement with his hand. „So I looked at those flanges and noted that these three rivets over here, at shoulder height, looked more worn than all the others. I couldn't help but press them. You can imagine my surprise when this happened.“

Dr Phillippe reached up and pressed the three rivets. They sank under his touch, releasing a latch mechanism, and a camouflaged door swung open.

„What's this, what's this?“ O'Flanahan exclaimed with rapt eyes.

„Yes indeed, Mr O'Flanahan, but this is nothing. Wait until you see what's inside.“

Jean-Claude followed Dr Phillippe, his camera panning around, revealing a metal landing leading to a descending circular staircase. They headed down the staircase arriving two levels below, at the bottommost level in the cave complex. None of us had hitherto suspected the existence of these hidden caves. Reaching the lower level, Dr Phillippe opened another door. Here the deafening noise of the huge fans above was thankfully muted by more than five meters of solid cement.

„Of course, seeing this room, everything made sense. Whoever designed this complex was very clever.“

„I would agree,“ concurred Briar. „I would very much like to return to the caves and investigate this for myself.“

Dr Phillippe continued.

„In retrospect, the existence of this room would inevitably have been suspected, if you want my opinion. It is pure chance I was the first one led to these conclusions. Nonetheless, what we are looking at here, at first sight anyway, is an automated air filtering system. It takes incoming dust-laden air and uses a large centrifuge to force dust out through specially designed vents. The centrifuge has the added benefit of generating a significant amount of both cold and hot air. The hot air is vented out in the summer, the cold in the winter keeping the temperature constant in the caves. Anyway, I digress. The filtered dust goes through there and slides down those chutes, to be expelled outside through hidden vents in the cliff. That is what I thought until I examined this panel. I mean it is very interesting but what does it really do? And what about those two bolts, one down there and another above, on top over there. Could they not be hinges? Could these dials have the purpose to fool us into not seeing yet another hidden door?“

Doctor Phillippe pressed a similar set of three rivets on the left metal flange, releasing the front panel of the machine and revealing a second circular staircase.

„Bravo!“ uttered a stunned O'Flanahan.

„Yes, I thought so too, Mr O'Flanahan. There is another level below, unsuspected by any of us.“

„That's pretty smart. They developed ten levels and we thought that was all there was. There was nothing stopping other levels existing. A bad assumption on our part,“ O'Flanahan added.

„Isn't there an underground river blocking access to some other caves?“ asked Raymonde.

„Yes there is, Miss Raymonde,“ answered Briar. „The river current is so strong, no normal swimmer could hope to survive in there. Underground rivers are far more dangerous than those on the surface.“

„We're about to land.“

The helicopter pilot was letting us know it was time to wrap things up. Dr Phillippe hurried to finish.

„Getting down here, it was obvious that a much more sophisticated filtering system had been installed, completely automatic, intended to remove the spores so that they end up here,“ he lifted a hatch, revealing a curious, flexible material, holding a small quantity of rolling, heavy powder at its center. „It is already collecting more, since I emptied it this afternoon. What I collected in the bag is probably several years' worth. Perhaps since the caves have come back to life.“

„This is of strong importance, Dr Phillippe. I'll ask you to keep this discovery extremely quiet.“

„Yes Sir, Mr Sirenne. Knowledge of this has been restricted to Jean-Claude and me. But if I am to investigate further, I really would need more people, particularly if time is of the essence.“

The doctor was on the ball.

„Very well. Select ten men you trust.“

„My team is idle right now and I would gladly volunteer them for this task,“ Briar offered but Dr Phillippe shook his head negatively.

„Thank you but it is not necessary Mr Briar. I anticipated Mr Sirenne and have a team ready to go.“

„Good man!“ O'Flanahan said. „That's what I like to hear, somebody organized.“

„Indeed. Good investigating Dr Phillippe. Make sure to lock up that spore powder in your office safe and keep it under guard.“ I added as we landed. The doctor signed off and I made to exit from the helicopter but was restrained by Father Plantagenet.

„Mr Sirenne, a minute of your time alone, if you please.“

I nodded to him, asking the others to wait for me.

„What is it, Father?“

„Am I to understand you have found hidden levels to the fortress? The fortress built by Weissmuller?“

„Yes, that is correct.“

„And you have discovered some type of filtration system? Possibly designed to collect spores?“

„You are correct. Doctor Phillippe found one hundred kilos of spores collected in the final filtration chamber.“

„This is extremely alarming, Mr Sirenne. First the discovery of an unknown immortal, Weissmuller, and now, a hoard of spores. We must act quickly.“

„And do what exactly, Father?“ I didn't like his pushiness.

„We must remove the spores from human hands without the slightest delay. That is our first concern.“

„Why? What is so alarming about their existence?“

„Mr Sirenne, surely you understand how dangerous those spores are. One hundred kilos is sufficient to create a veritable army of invulnerable soldiers. Whoever held that powder in their hand could well own the world. Immortals, as a rule, are very dangerous.“

I didn't like where this was going.

„Immortals like me, Father?“

„No, not like you. Not like you at all. You have been trained by your father for this exact moment. Additionally, your immortality is genetic in origin, due to your great-grandfather's exposure to the spores. You are unique, Mr Sirenne. We believe it will make you a far different being than those creatures which came before you.“

Plantagenet seemed to know a whole lot about me and my past. Did the spores really have genetic effects?

„That's not all, Mr Sirenne. This Weissmuller, the Shadow-Killer, has been bothering me more and more. He seems to be in the middle of our plans and that is something I do not like. What is he doing here, meddling in our affairs? He is not the Greyman, that is certain, but he is an interloper nonetheless, one who seems very canny. He must be eliminated and quickly.“

„That's easy to say but the guy's invisible, masquerading as someone else all the time, not to mention immortal like me.“

„Oh no, not like you, Mr Sirenne. Again, you are unique in the annals of immortality. No, by my reckoning, Weissmuller has been eating spores for over sixty years. It is amazing he has kept it together for so long.“

„What are you talking about?“

„Spore-induced immortality comes at a high price, Mr Sirenne, something you would do well never to forget. That price is sanity! The numbness, which you surely feel this very moment, has been plaguing Weissmuller for over sixty years. By now he has completely forgotten what physical sensations are like. His mind will be screaming and craving strong acute sensations every maddening second of every day. It must be eating his mind alive and it will not stop, until he goes totally, irrevocably, mad!“

„Is this my fate as well?“

„We do not think so. The training you received from your father should steer your thoughts in the right direction.“

He was wrong. I would retain my sanity because of Raymonde's presence within me but I wasn't about to tell him that.

„Dr Phillippe will keep the spores in a safe place, while he continues his investigation, which will surely not be finished when we return. As for Weissmuller, you already have your roving patrols in and around the caves. I will get Fabian Coulter to install cameras throughout the installation. It may provide valuable intelligence about Weissmuller's movements, if we are lucky.“

„Very well. That will do for now. But once we return to the caves, we must eliminate these spores. I know how to do it.“

We would see. For now, our little *talk* was over. I left Plantagenet to his slow amble and joined Raymonde and my friends to head up the mountain.

Greyman Chronicles

The Watchers. Destiny by the Tail.

„Did you get all that, Louis?“

„Almost everything. Man, am I ever glad we sprung for the wireless cams with mikes. They were worth every buck. Those guys must be pretty close, for the reception to be so clear, eh Pierre?“

„No, we're still distant. The signal is being relayed through the network.“

„Thank god for that. If we weren't sure this was important before, there is absolutely no question of it now.“

„You're telling me. They were talking about immortality and linking it to spores from some caves.“

„Yeah, and Plantagenet seemed to know all about it, too! I knew he was in it up to his neck.“

„So, we can take it as confirmed that there is an underground fortress where they collect spores of some sort to make people immortal.“

„Man, I knew it, I just knew it,“ Louis kept repeating over and over while driving in the signal's direction.

„Hey get a hold of yourself, Louis. This isn't the time to get all dreamy-eyed about landing in the middle of it. We've got to keep our wits about us. First off, what does this spore stuff make you think of? Robert? Louis?“

They were silent for only a second.

„The Holy Grail!“ exclaimed Louis.

„The Ark of the Covenant,“ answered Robert, just as convinced, keeping a wary eye on his laptop screen.

„I think it's both,“ countered Pierre.

„You can't prove that,“ objected Louis, swerving around a big pothole.

„Of course not! But I think I can make a damn good case,“ Pierre argued back. „Look, you both know we came here because of an astrological prediction, made by our friend back home. She said the stars were aligning in a very odd way and all sorts of portents could be read into the situation, or none at all, and it was going to start, if it started, at Saunier's church.“

„What does this have to do with the Holy Grail and the Ark of the Covenant?“

„I'm getting to it,“ Pierre shot back, a little annoyed. „I joined this group because I always knew, deep down, that what was around us was not what it seemed. There was more to life than this world. I felt, like you guys, that a veil had been deliberately drawn over my eyes by groups in power. These groups were trying to retain power forever, and gather more, at the expense of each of us. The more I looked, the more obvious it was. Anyway, no matter how hard those in power tried, they couldn't stop us from finding out everything they tried to hide had a common thread, linked by a single purpose.“

„Well put, Pierre,“ Robert supported from the back seat of the car.

„Thanks. That single mysterious purpose has been very hard to pin down, by its very nature but these immortality spores fit the bill perfectly. Let me put together what we know, or at least what we think is the most likely version of the facts. Robert, you mentioned the Ark of the Covenant, because you know, just as I do, that it contained, not only the tablets of the Ten Commandments but also the immortality powder from Egypt. It was stolen from the Pharaohs by Moses himself, while he was at Mount Horeb. Later, the Jews took the powder across the submerged Red Sea land bridge. Some of it was given to King David when he was a mere shepherd. It was what gave him the strength to defeat the giant Goliath. His fantastic success in his numerous wars is further proof. His son, Solomon, built the Temple of all Temples in Jerusalem and hid the Ark in the sacred vault beneath it, following his father's instructions to the letter. Unfortunately, by the year 50 AD, Romans had killed so many Jews that the knowledge was forgotten, lost to time but not lost to history. More than a thousand years later, eight men, the first Knights Templar, assembled to retrieve the Ark and its immortality powder, spurred by a still unexplained event.“

Pierre stopped talking for a moment. Louis took the opportunity to interject.

„What about the Holy Grail?“

„Fine, fine, fine. Let's talk about the Holy Grail but only to put it to rest one final time. I know you believe the Holy Grail is the key to everything, Louis. I happen to agree with you but not in the way you think. If you go right back to the first mention of the Holy Grail, it becomes obvious it has nothing to do with Jesus' cup from the last supper.“

„Yeah, what hogwash! Another lie foisted on us by the blasted church,“ Robert chimed in.

„A perfect example of an idea-virus, really. A lie presented as myth, to shape our minds and veer them away from the truth,“ agreed Pierre, who continued. „No, we all know the Holy Grail's real history lies much deeper than Christianity, reaching back in time to the Egyptians, at the very least.“

„Oh, I get where you're going with this.“ Louis admitted. „It's all related.“

„You got it. Look, the Holy Grail has always been known to have special powers for those who possess its secret. Even the church couldn't hide that. In particular, the power of eternal health, the power of granting immortality. When the church coined that 'cup of Jesus Christ' nonsense, they were canner than we ever thought. We were made to think of the Grail as a thing, as an object with fabled powers. It ensured mankind would never find it, not in a million years, because it wasn't a thing, it was something much more powerful, it was an idea! The Holy Grail is not an object, it is immortality itself, embodied by the Egyptian powder, held within the Ark of the Covenant.“

The other two could not help but nod their heads in agreement. They were convinced. Louis added his own two cent's worth:

„I remember the Holy Grail in that movie, »Excalibur«. They searched everywhere for it but couldn't find it. Only by nearly dying was the secret revealed to one of the Knights of the Round Table, Percival, I think. Only after

that could he give life back to King Arthur. I'm convinced. It was right there in front of my face all the time. I just had to see it a different way. You're right, Pierre."

Robert added another thought to the mix.

"It explains to me how come all these biblical character lived so long, beginning with Moses himself. I mean, he lived to a hundred and twenty when the average life span back then was less than thirty-five."

Pierre wasn't finished with his explanation.

"I can go further. When we think about the Ark of the Covenant, we forget it's not about an Ark, it's about the Covenant. But what Covenant do we speak of, anyway? Most would say the Ten Commandments but they would be wrong. The Covenant is far more ancient than that. It refers to God's original covenant with the Jewish race, the chosen people. There were never any tablets. It's not what Moses received on top of the mountain."

"Oh, I heard about that one. Isn't it connected to salt or something?" asked Louis.

"Yes, that's it exactly. In the Torah, the Book of Numbers, you can read the key line: 'It is a Covenant of salt forever, before the Lord.' and if that wasn't enough, we can read in Chronicles, 'The Lord God of Israel gave the kingdom over Israel to David forever, even to him and to his sons, by a covenant of salt.'"

Robert was still lost.

"What does salt have to do with anything? I don't get it."

"Come on, Robert, you can't be serious? Salt is the key of it all. Of course, we're not talking about refined table salt here." Louis guffawed out loud at the idea. "Salt was the only word which got even close to the idea they were trying to express. Actually, salt is a pretty good match when you think about it. It was used by Egyptians to preserve mummies to ensure eternal life, it preserves food, it is necessary to all life. It will provide health when present and death when absent. It is a fine white powder and all men crave it. What closer comparison to the powder of immortality can there be? No, there can be no doubt; the Ark of the Covenant is the repository of the powder of immortality, exactly as written in the bible itself."

Louis slowed down and stopped to let a herd of sheep cross the road. It was a big herd and the farmers didn't seem in a hurry to get them across. It was futile to argue, so they waited while Pierre finished his explanation.

"So that deals with the Holy Grail. It is the powder of immortality held within the Ark of the Covenant. The Knights Templar raised an army, heading to Jerusalem with the intention of taking the Ark of the Covenant back with them when they returned home."

"Why did they do it in the first place?" wondered Robert.

"Nobody really knows. They used some of the treasure to build their vast empire but that ended in 1307 when King Philip arrested them in order to appropriate the powder for himself. He was dying by then. The allure of eternal health and immense wealth was irresistible. But the Templars were no fools. By the time the King's army illegally savaged their castles, the gold, and the Ark, were gone."

„And in comes the Abbey,“ added Louis.

„Right! The Abbey, with all their secrets. The keepers of immortality. When the Templars were decimated, King Philip couldn't get at the Teutonic Knights, who were in a different country. That's where the Ark and the Templar treasure went, along with all that Templar knowledge, let us not forget. After that, things get murky.“

„The Dark Ages!“

„Absolutely. But, lucky for us, there are still some clues around. Others knew about immortality, or found it on their own. Unfortunately, none of them lived very long. Someone was hunting them down and killing them, like the Count St Germain.“

„Or Vlad the Impaler...“

„I never put any faith in that Dracula-as-Immortal theory.“

„Me neither.“

„Fine. I won't ever mention it again,“ pouted Louis.

Pierre laughed and went on, trying to wrap up his explanation before the last of the slow-moving sheep crossed the road.

„In time, this region was selected by a group in the know, the Visigoths, with Teutonic backgrounds and everything. They settled here and hundreds of years later, Sauniere came along, somehow putting two and two together. He spent his life and a mysterious fortune building his beloved church and the Magdala Tower, leaving a ton of clues behind for everyone to see, in an attempt to lead some of us to the knowledge he was privy to.“

„How fitting that this is where the astrological predictions said it would start,“ stated Robert.

„Who says it's an accident? Sauniere was so illuminated, he probably selected the spot because he knew how important it would be,“ Pierre added.

„Hold on,“ interrupted Robert from the back, his eyes glued to his monitor. „Plantagenet's group has stopped moving. We'd better hurry.“

Chapter 14

A Gain, a Loss, an Unexpected Find.

„This is a total waste of time. There's nothing here,“ exploded a red-faced O'Flanahan.

„I would tend to agree with you, on this one occasion,“ nodded Briar solemnly, shutting O'Flanahan up for a brief moment. Coulter had ideas of his own.

„I'm not so sure. I mean look at the Devil's Chair. Then look at this miniature version. They're identical, except for the size.“

„So?“

„Well, this small version isn't a piece of molded and painted plaster. It seems to be a natural piece of rock. So how did they find a rock that had the exact same

color and grain patterns as the Devil's chair, only in miniature? The odds against that are staggering."

"It's just like the Four Books," I agreed. "Perfect copies. Impossibly perfect. You're right Coulter. This is a clue but I'm not sure yet where it's going."

"Like I said, a total waste of time," O'Flanahan ranted again.

"Maybe Coulter could take a few pictures of the Devil's Chair and..."

"Already done," Coulter's voice piped in.

"So now we could head to the Magdala Tower and check that out. Maybe we can find something more useful there," I finished.

We looked around a bit more, trying to see something else, long enough for the Plantagenet to arrive, bodyguards in tow. We apologized, heading back down the hill. He looked tired and accepted to be carried by his bodyguards on the return trip. I slowed my pace and explained our brief conclusions to him. He seemed pleased by them and remained silent after that.

Our trip to the Magdala Tower was short but, before landing, I instructed the pilot to do a full circle around the tower to look at it from the same perspective as my dream. I was struck by how similar the view was, as if I had really flown here in my dream. The helicopter landed and we exited in short order, hoping to find something more substantial than the ephemeral information gleaned on Mount Bucharach. The Magdala tower was our last hope. It was open to the public as a museum, so we had little trouble gaining access without attracting attention.

Once inside, another chess game waited for us. The floor was more ornate this time but it was the same eight by eight squares. Raymonde connected telepathically, explaining something was blocking her senses. She could not detect any hollows. I examined the square which had been hollow in Lindon's house but, this time, it was not where we would find our answers. Coulter undertook the tedious process of examining every ceramic tile edge, while we discussed possibilities back and forth.

"How about the chess game itself, the one played originally by Napoleon Bonaparte," suggested O'Flanahan as a starting point. "Maybe we could look at that again."

"Very well, O'Flanahan." Briar stated, willing to go along. "In that game, we were led to a specific point. Although the crucial move involved a single pawn, the entire game hinged on it."

"Don't forget it involved the Queen," I continued.

"Excellent point, my boy," Briar agreed.

Coulter suggested another idea, standing up from his careful perusal of the tiles.

"What if the move in Lindon's house wasn't the only move possible?"

"What are you talking about, Coulter?" asked O'Flanahan.

"Leblanc's journal led us to that one crucial move. Who's to say saving the King is the only play possible? What if we did the opposite and saved the Queen?"

Coulter moved to White's Queen Bishop Three tile and bent down close, using his techno-glasses. "And I would be right. Seems to me like I can see a keyhole," he added smugly.

I wasted no time and inserted my special key. The lid popped open revealing another hollow.

It was empty!

„Not again!“ hollered O’Flanahan.

„Wait!“ screamed Coulter, his glasses still in magnification mode. „What’s that on the bottom?“

I bent down and examined it closely. What had looked like dirt at first, was, in fact, an old, brownish oilcloth. It had been covered with a smattering of dust. It would have been easily missed by whoever had removed the fourth »Hollow Needle« book from the hole.

„Pull it out, pull it out. What are you waiting for?“ continued the unstoppable O’Flanahan.

I lifted the oilcloth gingerly, feeling a flat, flexible object within its folds. Untying the knot at the top of the folded material, I revealed a sheaf of paper. The last time I had seen paper sheets like those had been when we had broken open the rock cylinder from Lindon’s Castle in Ambrumesy.

I lifted the sheaf out carefully, revealing a tight, clean script, a familiar signature and something none of us had ever expected:

Maurice Leblanc’s second journal!

When I read his first journal, nothing in it gave any clue a second one existed. Yet, it made sense. Many questions had been raised by his first journal and left unanswered. He had given us a specific task, using his coded section at the end of the journal. Now that we had accomplished the first section, or tried to anyway, Leblanc had made sure to leave us a note about it.

We could not consider reading the journal in the Magdala Tower, with prying eyes all around, nor in the helicopter, with its noise and vibration. We agreed to put it off until our return to the safety of the caves. We sealed up the tile and returned outside to our limousine, anxious to be on our way.

Greyman Chronicles

The Americans.

Figuring it out.

„All right, both of you stop walking right now.“

Walter Cross and Jim Logan twirled around, looking at Bill Omaha, lagging behind them, his brow creased with worry.

„What’s up, Omaha?“

„I need to know what happened back there. How can we make a report? We don’t have a clue what to say.“

„Calm down, Omaha.“

„How can I, Logan?“ Omaha retorted cynically, shaking his head. „First we were looking at them, whoever they were, the French and those damn Israelis

right next to us, then the second after, they're GONE, and we're all standing there, like a bunch of idiots, pointing our guns at each other."

Walter Cross nodded his head.

"Yeah, it is pretty baffling, I must admit. I think those Israelis had a clue. They were damn calm about it. They left without a single word, leaving us to argue with the French."

"Walter's right about that. The Mossad have always pissed me off with their *we-know-more-than-you* attitude. They're here, the same as us, but I think that they have deeper reasons than we do, you know what I mean?" Logan added.

"Fine, the Mossad knows something but we don't. We need to figure this out before we call in. I have to tell them something sensible," retorted Omaha.

"Well, something happened to us for sure. I looked at my watch before we came in and again when I managed to get my bearings. We lost at least ten minutes."

"I can remember weird things like I was seeing movements I couldn't quite catch. My thoughts felt sluggish, slowed down."

"THAT'S IT. Logan, you're a genius. We were slowed down, that's what they did to us." Omaha was on to something. "I read an article last year, in a report from the research branch. It was about fields, magnetic fields or something."

"Not magnetic, electromagnetic, Omaha. I read the same article. They projected a field at a distance and were able to disrupt the natural electromagnetic field of the test subjects. It induced a stasis state, if I remember," Walter Cross said.

"You got it, Cross, that's the one. It matches what we felt. The problem is that it took the dedicated energy of an entire power station to project that field. How could those people harness that much power?. I mean it can't be magic, guys."

"What if they were immortals?"

"Shit, don't say that," shuddered Omaha. "No. You don't think so, do you? God damn it! I know you're right. Field projection is a suspected ability of Immortals. Okay, well, that changes everything. No more fooling around. If we've got a bunch of damn immortals roaming around, this is our chance to nab one."

"Or better yet, let them lead us to their hole, wherever they crawled out from," interrupted Cross. "Look, I've been thinking, the answer's simple. We don't really have a problem. They came here in a limousine, not exactly a subtle move on their part. Anyway, my point is the limousine was their second vehicle. They arrived originally by helicopter. We all heard it. It was what got our attention in the first place. Heck, we were stationed here to wait for something just like this."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, so what?" Logan impatiently asked.

"So, if they took off in a helicopter, we can track them, is what. One phone call will get our satellite to focus on this area. It'll be a simple matter to spot them and then, we just have to follow the little blip to their homes."

„Why didn't I think of that?“ Omaha ranted, looking pleased nonetheless. He flipped up his cell phone and pressed the rapid dial. „I'm calling headquarters to set it up. We don't have any time to lose.“

Omaha shot off instructions to a NSA agent on the phone, while they ran towards their car. This was their chance and they weren't going to miss it.

Greyman Chronicles

The Watchers.

Powering Destiny.

Louis was driving at a breakneck pace, heading north across France, following the directions relayed by Robert, who was sitting in the back and collating reports fed by the local Watchers chapter. Pierre was sitting next to Louis up front, map in hand, trying to anticipate their route. The GPS was useless. You had to know where you were going to use a GPS.

„This is great,“ Robert exclaimed. „I think that we are going to have Coulter's location pinned down in another thirty minutes, the way things are going.“

A small speaker emitted a pinging sound.

„Oh, no, darn,“ Robert exclaimed.

„What is it?“ retorted Pierre in alarm.

„It's the laptop battery. It's about to run out of juice. But that's okay, it's okay. We have the spare, right?“

„Yeah, we have the spare. I mean, I think we do,“ muttered Louis from the front, his forehead creased in worry.

„I don't remember grabbing the spare when we jumped in the car,“ objected a concerned-sounding Pierre. „Sorry guys but I don't.“

„Me neither. Damn it, damn it, damn it,“ screamed Robert in frustration, hitting the seat next to him several times with his fist.

„Hey, get a hold of yourself. This isn't the time or place for a freak fit. Cool heads must prevail here. Too much is at stake,“ screamed Pierre, a frightened Louis nodding in agreement.

„Yeah, man. You should relax. How much time we got before the battery lets go?“

„Five minutes tops. If it fails, we lose the data we've collected so far and we won't be able to triangulate where Coulter's base is.“

„Okay, fine. We've got five minutes to figure this out. In the meantime, you keep driving as fast as you can, Louis. You, Robert, stop your fits and note down the info we do have, on that pad there, next to you. At the same time we've got to figure out how to get some more battery power.“

„What about the battery for the car? It's got plenty of juice,“ exclaimed an excited Louis, narrowly avoiding a horse-drawn cart blocking the road.

„Too much power, come on, you know that Louis. It would fry the laptop. Nice try but no cigar.“

„Wait. Look over there. A gas station. Yes, yes, go there, Louis, hurry get over there. How much time we got, Robert?“

„Four minutes max. What for?“

„Batteries, man, batteries. We can buy batteries there. Robert, how many volts do we need?“

„I'm not sure.“

„Check, damn it, what are you waiting for?“ complained a frantic Pierre.

Louis slammed on the brakes and they screeched to a halt with two minutes to go. The three piled out of the car, laptop in hand, running into the garage station and confronting a very surprised, grease-stained mechanic.

„Where are your batteries?“

„We need nine volts. And not those useless little jobbies either,“ screamed Robert while looking under the laptop's open battery flap.

„Look for the battery connections. Louis, find us some wires, for Pete's sake.“

The mechanic was slowly standing up, not understanding what the commotion was about. Pierre grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him up.

„Time is of the essence, my good man. We need to know where your batteries are. Right now. Tell us right now.“

„And some tape. We need some kind of tape,“ screamed Louis, brandishing wires and frantically stripping the ends down to bare copper.

„And we need some tape. Hurry,“ echoed Pierre, shaking the hapless mechanic once more.

The befuddled mechanic lifted a wavering hand and pointed at a small battery display in the corner.

„ONE MINUTE,“ screamed Robert at the top of his lungs. Louis threw the stripped wires at him. He caught one but dropped the other, screaming wordlessly and diving for it. Pierre vaulted over the car hood, reached the display, grabbed it in its entirety and ran back, ripping packages of 'D' batteries off the rack and tossing them to Louis.

„Would this be helpful?“ The mechanic asked in a soft, timid voice, holding up a roll of grey duct tape with a shaking hand.

All three screamed in ecstasy upon seeing the roll. Robert ripped it out of the mechanic's hand, tearing strips from it and frantically wrapping them around a long stack of 'D' batteries, held by Louis.

„There's one too many, there's one too many,“ yelled Pierre, dropping the battery display to the floor, heedless of the mess he was making. Robert screamed in frustration again and tore the top battery off while Louis stuck the wires on both ends of the stack, holding them in place.

„Do it, do it,“ yelled Pierre. „We're out of time. You gotta do it now.“

Louis and Robert both grabbed a wire and Pierre upturned the laptop exposing the battery contacts.

„They're not going to fit.“

„I DON'T CARE! JUST JAM THEM IN THERE!“

The two slammed the wires down with some force, spurred by desperation and the total lack of time.

The laptop screen did a flicker and kept running.

The three collapsed from nervous exhaustion. It had been too close. They hugged the mechanic, laughing nervously all the while, securing the wires with more duct tape, and threw a bunch of francs in the still-befuddled mechanic's hands.

„Thank you, thank you,“ sputtered Pierre. „You cannot know how important this was. Please don't tell anyone about it.“

Waving at the mechanic, the three piled back into the car, still jabbering excitedly, and drove off in a screech of dust.

The mechanic watched them go until they disappeared in the distance.

He shook his head.

Tell anyone? What could he say? He didn't even know what it had been about.

Chapter 15

Back to the Caves.

The helicopter was gone, taking the diminutive Plantagenet with it. The ARGOS had been waiting for us, the quiet ride giving us time to ponder things. I could think of nothing else but that journal. Leblanc had held it back, concealing it with the fourth book. It had to mean something.

Unfortunately, someone else had stolen the fourth book before we got there. Mere luck had prevented them from seeing Leblanc's second journal, wrapped in a mud-colored oil cloth. Their loss was our gain.

„I can't stand all this waiting,“ exclaimed O'Flanahan. „I need to know what's in that damn journal.“

„Me too. It's all I can think about,“ exclaimed a grinning Coulter.

All of us burst out laughing, realizing we had been thinking the same thing. Coulter finished by saying:

„Don't worry guys. I've got a surprise planned. I beg you to give me about an hour after we get back and we can get together for a reading unlike any you can imagine.“

„That's a date,“ rasped O'Flanahan. „Man, am I ever glad that Plantagenet guy didn't come back with us. He creeps me out. He's always looking at us like a lizard. Don't you get that feeling?“

„Yes, I do, sort of,“ agreed Coulter. „I don't trust him much, even if he was working with Leblanc long ago.“

„He seems a dangerous ally, at the very least,“ supported Briar.

„He was sure anxious to get his paws on our immortality powder,“ O'Flanahan pointed out. „I mean, I haven't even tasted any yet. That doesn't sound right or fair.“

„Surely you don't mean to ingest that poison, O'Flanahan?“ objected Briar. „Our poor friend Paul may not have any choice in the matter but I don't see that as a reason to endanger anyone else. You heard Plantagenet say it leads to madness and, frankly, I think he's right. Sorry Paul but it's the truth. I have to say what I believe. I think anyone who's been exposed to this powder is in extreme danger. Not only from the effects of the powder itself, but they will also be identified as an immortal and we have already seen how that attracts unwanted attention.“

O'Flanahan exploded.

„Sure, all those words are fine, but they won't do any difference if a bullet is heading directly towards my head. I'm thinking about the practical aspects of our situation here. Listen guys, we're right in the middle of a worldwide conspiracy and they're all going to be after what we've got. Those guys at the church weren't whistling Dixie. That bug they threw at us was no joke. They are already circling around us like so many flies. Paul, you've got to think about what's involved here. There are lots of real people, our friends, who are in danger, just because we're looking for some answers. As leader of this little group of ours, you have to think about them. We're not equipped to protect ourselves against some determined force, anxious to take our powder. We need to get an edge and that powder is it. I'll take our best chance at staying alive for now and we can debate the philosophy later,“ O'Flanahan finished, jutting his lower jaw out, stubbornly sticking to his guns.

Both men had valid arguments. Unfortunately, as usual, they were opposite viewpoints.

„I need some time to think. I would like to retire with Raymonde for a brief while. Perhaps we can get back together when Coulter gives us a call.“

The sub docked in the lagoon cave. Raymonde and I headed up the staircase hand in hand, listening to O'Flanahan behind us, his words buffeted by the echoing sound of the lagoon waves:

„Stupid stairs. I mean, why do these caves have to have so many damn stairs? Why didn't that Weissmuller put in some elevators? It makes no sense, I tell you, no sense at all.“

„Please, O'Flanahan, could you not give your mouth a rest?“ complained Briar, sounding irritated. „Some of us have more serious things to think about than stairs.“

„It's just poor design, is all,“ retorted O'Flanahan instantly. „And I can see why you don't mind, being all tall and fit, which is impressive, considering your advanced years. But me, I'm short and fat. It's not my fault. It's a glandular thing, and I got flat feet as well, so when I see these stairs all the time, you can understand why there's a problem.“

I could hear Briar grinding his teeth from where I stood.

Some time alone seemed the perfect thing right now.

* * * * *

Raymonde and I returned to our chambers, leaving the bodyguards outside, affording us a brief moment of privacy.

„Would you like something to drink or eat?“ I asked her out of habit.

„No thank you, I'm not thirsty, or hungry or even tired for that matter,“ she said, echoing my own thoughts. „I was hardly able to sleep last night. I kept my eyes closed but I'm simply not tired anymore. This is really happening, Paul. Are we going to go mad?“

„No, I don't believe it, not for a second,“ I replied. „Our changes are not random. There is a growing telepathic connection between us. It helps us *feel*, I'm sure of it. Being in contact with each other renders the numbness unimportant.“

We were both pacing around the room instead of sitting down. I laughed when I noticed it and sat. Within moments, I was pacing again. I simply had too much energy.

„What are we going to do about our friends, like Mr O'Flanahan said?“ worried Raymonde.

„We need to think outside the box on this one. While I do not trust Father Plantagenet, I don't think he's our enemy. Right now, he seems to have the same interests. As for the future, who knows? However, I no longer like having his henchmen meddling in our affairs. I think it was a mistake to let his men in, even when we have a serial killer among us.“

„What do you think we should do?“

„It is hard enough to solve this mystery without having increasing turmoil around us. It muddies the picture. We need to simplify things.“

Raymonde nodded, agreeing with me.

„I'll call Jacques Vallin, right now. By morning, all the Abbey monks will be gone from the caves.“

My glasses pinged, followed by Raymonde's. It was Coulter.

„Come on down. I'm all set.“

* * * * *

Coulter had invited us to the auditorium cave, refusing to explain himself in any way. We arrived, leaving our guards outside. Coulter was brimming with excitement, running up the stairs along the row of chairs.

„Please come and sit down over here. The view should be perfect from that angle.“

O'Flanahan had a little smile on his face, laughing to himself when Coulter handed him a small set of cheap 3D glasses. Raymonde and I accepted our pairs without comment. The same could not be said for a displeased Briar.

„What's this, Mr Coulter? I don't want to put these ridiculous things on my face.“

Coulter smiled sheepishly.

„Look, it'll all be worthwhile, Mr Briar. Trust me.“

„Yeah, Briar, what the heck's the problem? I'm wearing them. They fit just fine.“

With his pair on, O'Flanahan somehow looked exactly like an old hippy on an LSD trip. Briar pointed at O'Flanahan with his left index finger, his arm held rigidly.

„That is exactly why I do not want to wear them.“

Coulter managed to convince Briar to wear the 3D glasses by promising no one would look at him. He ran back down to the stage, dimming the lights. He exclaimed out loud, using a theatrical gesture:

„Hey guys, who’s that over there?“

I noticed a man sitting in an antique easy-chair, the light around him growing brighter in the deepening gloom. He looked familiar. The man smiled briefly, looked around at each of us, then, removing his wide brimmed hat, began speaking through a thick curling mustache.

„My dear Paul, I must present to you my apologies and my congratulations at one and the same time.“

It was Maurice Leblanc.

I looked at Coulter with open mouth. He pressed a button, freezing the ersatz Leblanc in mid-sentence.

„Well, what do you think? It was so irresistible to do this,“ Coulter exclaimed.

„Yes, a perfect example of Paul’s money at work, eh, Coulter?“ stated O’Flanahan. His serious look rapidly degenerated into a smile. „Don’t worry, pal. I approve. I think you did a great job. How’d you do it?“

„It was simple enough. I scanned the journal into the computer. I had come across some old recordings with Leblanc’s voice, so I sampled it. I found an old film clip of him sitting down in his favorite chair, cleaned it up, then digitized it, processing it into the 3D mode using another program. Finally, I attached Leblanc’s facial features to an animation program used to express speech for cartoons and voila. I have brought you Leblanc to read you his second journal.“

„Stop patting yourself on the back and get the puppet show going, Coulter. I’m all ears and tired of waiting,“ replied O’Flanahan, single-minded as always.

Coulter reset the journal to the beginning. Considering Coulter’s speedy production, he had done an excellent job and the illusion was perfect.

So, for the next short while, I found myself sitting in Leblanc’s presence, feeling as if he was speaking directly to me, which in a very real sense, he was.

Maurice Leblanc’s Second Journal

My dear Paul:

I must present you my apologies and my congratulations at one and the same time. Finding my second journal cannot have been easy. By now, it must be obvious to you that certain aspects of my previous journal just don’t hold up. I admit to practicing a certain amount of subterfuge in its presentation, which is the reason for my apology but I ask you to retain some clemency before judging me. You will soon understand the reasons why I perpetrated such a hoax.

It was crucial my previous journal provide you with answers sufficient to convince you, without betraying the full scope of what was held within the caves. You could not betray something you did not know. The journal was not all fiction. Most sections convey accurately what happened. My feelings were certainly genuine. I simply could not reveal the spores to you. It was something you had to discover by yourself.

By now, the Abbey monks have surely presented themselves. You probably have many questions about them. I, and they, have been the architects of your life, of your present situation. The time has come to explain not only how you

have gotten here but why as well, to the extent of my ability anyway. I am not party to all that has gone on.

The story has its roots in many streams of history. This is why it has so successfully remained hidden from humankind. Who would believe such disparate elements were connected, that the entire history of the world, as we knew it, had been misrepresented, misunderstood by us all? I was no different than you. I had no idea what I was stepping into when I entered into those caves the first time.

It took a mortal blow for real understanding to come to me!

My entire life changed that day. Mine and Hitler's. He killed me and I came back from the realm of the dead, resuscitated by spores in the dust. I came back a changed man. That very day, when I woke up, lying in a pool of my own blood, I saw the future of mankind laid out before me. The vision did not last but the few details that remained were clear enough. The man who had killed me had also been changed. He had breathed the dust, inhaled the spores, his previous ills had vanished, and he had been imbued with a fresh new purpose, the same one I held: to take over these caves and master their knowledge.

He would succeed in his efforts if I did not stop him. Sitting in the magical dust, I swore to devote my life to foil this monster's attempts to claim the power of immortality. This is how you came to be!

Not even born yet, you became the key to all my plans. In choosing to fight Hitler, I had to abandon my own dreams. Not willing to give up, I attempted to return someone to these caves to finish what I never started. I would not have succeeded without the help of others, like Sauniere and the two Lindons.

And so, I come to this point, where suddenly your need and mine coincide through the span of time. I need to tell you how you got here and you need to know. I have seen you coming to Sauniere's home in quest of heavy answers.

You have found my journal as a direct result of Hitler killing me in the caves. You are my legacy and too long have you lived in the dark, not knowing who you truly are. This then, is how you came to be here:

The beginning:

Albert Lindenbrook was born in 1864, the son of Jewish immigrants recently arrived in France. His parents were neither wealthy, nor sophisticated, plain, hard-working folk who intended to provide the best life they could for their only son.

Albert was a precocious child. He had bright, piercing eyes, a shock of unruly, deep-brown hair, and a perpetual mischievous smile. He was of a stocky, robust build, not prone to sickness or weakness. Pain never stopped him when he was intent on doing what he set out to do.

Fate was kind to the Lindenbrooks and they managed to establish a small jewelry shop. It never amounted to much but it paid their way consistently through the years. Young Alfred was an eager pupil in the trade, particularly when it came to manufacturing individual pieces. Useless broken bits of gold

would transform through the melting and casting process, becoming a work of art.

They provided him with a proper education, sending him to the best schools they could afford but he resisted their every attempt at fitting in, preferring to find his learning in books, which he devoured avidly, and in the lessons life could teach him. He was always up to something but rarely, if ever, got caught. He was simply too clever for that. Usually surrounded by a clique, he was always the leader.

School was his learning ground but not through lessons from the stuffy professors. Albert learned by being attentive to those around him and figuring out what they were doing and why they were doing it. He was excellent at anticipating people's reactions when confronted by various situations. He was protective of the smaller children, of those who could not protect themselves from the local bullies. Bullies came in all shapes and forms but, in the end, they were all the same to Albert.

Bullies were his victims.

Over time, various rumors ran around school, of bullies being mobbed and beaten, their stolen money stolen from them in turn. Complaints were lodged, a few pointing the finger directly at Albert Lindenbrook. Investigations were launched, impelled by influential parents. Nothing could be made to stick to the slippery Albert. His sly smile would infuriate them, as he danced around their accusations, his every alibi supported by dozens of cronies. Searches revealed nothing. He became the hero of the meek and the bane of the greedy.

Eventually, Albert bored of this game and left school, followed by most of his clique. He vanished for several, formative years, during which little was known of his true activities but much was suspected. Unexplained thefts, break-ins where nothing was taken, crimes where everything was unclear but someone always lost something. Nothing could ever be linked to Lindenbrook. His wealth grew and his influence spread further than his money. He became smoother, more refined, until finally, he could be found frequenting the elite and powerful, having successfully re-invented himself into a young man of society, of perfect manner, impeccable style and dark connections.

The man who could do anything for you but always at a price.

From an early age, Lindenbrook demonstrated an interest in jewels of every type. Born in his father's jewelry shop, over the passing years, his interest blossomed into an obsession. His knowledge and skill got him employed in the diamond industry as designer, then later, as importer and private manufacturer. From this grew a strange occupation. Lindenbrook began selling jewelry exclusively to the wealthy and powerful, ensconcing himself in their circle of influence.

He used his growing backroom influence carefully, holding his own counsel. He was a capable, young man and his connections ran deep. Over time, it became known that you could go see him if you had a problem, any problem. He would always listen and would rarely say a word. More often than not, a few days later, the problem would resolve itself. Lindenbrook never required a single franc from those who came to him but, in the end, someone always lost something and it was always Albert who gained it.

He exchanged favors more often than he did jewelry, eventually becoming the confidant everyone sought. He remained in the shadows, forcing the elite to come to him, rather than the opposite. For a few years, he settled in St Irennee, a small French town, near Carcassone.

In this small town began a story which is not finished yet. It is where Albert Lindenbrook met the priest Berenger Sauniere. Sauniere had previously taken an apartment in St Irennee, away from the prying eyes of his parish in Rennes-le-Chateau. He could have roomed for free, down the road in the »Fauviere«, but preferred the anonymity of his private apartment.

Sauniere never did anything without a reason. He was already discerning future events at that point and knew of the coming of Lindenbrook to St Irennee. Their meetings were Sauniere's only opportunity to prepare Lindenbrook for his future tasks.

Lindenbrook never revealed all the intricate details of his discussions with Sauniere but, it was during his time in St Irennee that he first learned of the existence of the Abbey, of which Sauniere was a leading member. The Abbey was an organization pre-eminently involved in the search for a specific immortal man. For centuries, they had devoted themselves to their search, which had expanded into everything dealing with immortality. They knew of the dangers of immortality, having tracked and destroyed several would-be immortals. One and all had gone mad, laying a swath of destruction no matter their original intentions. The power of immortality was a total corruptor of man. The Abbey had sworn to destroy both immortals and knowledge of immortality, saving the world over and over again in the doing.

The Abbey had hidden in plain sight as an unobtrusive sub-sect of the Christian church. They spread across the land as innocent priests and monks, seeking information everywhere. Eventually, they had focused on Rennes-le-Chateau. Berenger Sauniere had been dispatched there, in 1885. He was thirty-three and his visions were just beginning to occur. He found the Knights Templar Church and began his investigations.

Soon after, he began his bizarre, vision-impelled renovations. Sauniere revealed a deep obsession with opposites, building them into all his structures. Lindenbrook explained none of these were accidental, all originating from Sauniere's visions. The Abbey considered Sauniere illuminated and gave him much support.

I studied these opposites, Paul, and they are real enough. Sauniere's church renovations began outside, where Sauniere placed a cross, an altar and wall boundaries, all cleverly hidden but there just the same, a perfect mirror image of the church inside, down to the last centimeter. He built an opposite in his Villa, with a room in the windowless tower, accessed by an ascending staircase of twenty-two steps. On the other side of his villa, he placed a glass tower, leading to a light filled room after a descending staircase of twenty-two steps.

Following their initial meeting, Sauniere introduced Lindenbrook to the Priest Boudet. Boudet, another Abbey member, was funneling funds to

Sauniere. Sauniere put much credence in Boudet's book: »la Vrai Langue Celtique et le Cromlech de Rennes-les-Bains«.

This mysterious book refers to a ring of obelisks surrounding Rennes-Les-Bains, a small town near Rennes-le-Chateau. The only problem is that none of these natural stone formations are obelisks. In fact, every obelisk Boudet identifies is strictly the work of nature. In the entire region, there was only one true obelisk and Boudet's book strangely omitted to mention it even once. This bizarre inversion should have been enough to call attention to his book but his assertions went even further into the absurd. He claimed English was the mother tongue of all languages. Despite that English had evolved relatively recently, Boudet presented a strong case, by breaking English down into individual sounds and comparing these to identical sounds found in other languages.

After his death in 1914, Boudet's tombstone was adorned with a book and a single inscription: »IXOIS«. These were five Greek letters signifying: Jesus Christ, Son of our Savior God. Lindenbrook figured out that their opposite arrangement read 310X1, or 310 and 11. Boudet's Cromlech book had three hundred and ten pages and on page eleven, one could find the phrase: »The Key to the Celtic Tongue«.

What was Boudet trying to say? Why was it so important? Why did Sauniere, his compatriot in conspiracy, hint about a treasure?

Sauniere could not be hinting about a physical treasure, if you thought about it. Why would he spend a fortune pointing the way to his own treasure, a treasure he spent his life hiding? Sauniere never explained himself to anyone, leaving his mysterious structures behind to speak for him.

In 1914, on his deathbed, Boudet called Sauniere to his side and finally revealed the true extent of his discoveries around Rennes-les-Bains. Sauniere never spoke to anyone of these, except perhaps on the occasion of his own death, to Father Riviere. Riviere's reaction was not soon to be forgotten, refusing to give Sauniere his final rites. The revelations plagued Riviere, who sickened and died within a year, never breathing a single word of Sauniere's final confession.

Following Boudet's burial, Sauniere busied himself with nocturnal investigations and destructions, such as the marring of Marie Delacroix's tombstone, which we know held key information about the same „treasure“. Sauniere made further reference to this treasure, by commissioning a sculpture for his confessional, featuring a shepherd finding wealth after falling through a hole, while tending his flock of sheep.

Sauniere also commissioned a three dimensional map of the terrain around Rennes-le-Chateau, lost after his death to be rediscovered in a flea-market years later. The landscape is curious as it has little similarity to Rennes-le-Chateau. It was later discovered Sauniere's landscape was an exact opposite of the Rennes-le-Chateau terrain.

The map reveals several points of interest, in particular, the burial plot of Joseph of Aramathea, who had the care of Mary Magdalene. This clue has a

connection to real history. Mary Magdalene is reputed to have landed on the shores of France, in the town of »Sainte Maries De La Mer« in Provence, near the mouth of the Rhone. Accompanied by Joseph, Mary Salome, Mary Jacobee and the Saint Virgin herself, pregnant with child, arrived by boat, after the crucifixion of her husband, Jesus Christ. Lazarus was also said to have been with them.

This is the first of many false trails laid down by Sauniere. There are so many, that it is impossible to see through the multiple deceptions. Symbolism piled on symbolism until all sense is gone: the Statue of St Antoine of Padoue, supported by four angels, indicating the way to the Rosicrucians, the demon under the holy water bowl at the entrance named Asmodeus, who, in fact, looks exactly like the Demon »Eurynome«. False trail upon unending false trail.

Let us not forget Father Gellis, another Abbey monk in hiding, involved in Sauniere's games up to his neck. He was assassinated on Oct 31, 1897, killed by someone he knew and trusted. The killer was never caught. Gold was found hidden all over his house, an unexplainable quantity, with much more going into investments on a yearly basis. There are the multiple Templar links, directing you to the Ark of the Covenant, stolen from the Temple on the Mount. There are links to the Elohim, immortal Gods mentioned in the bible, to the Cathars, holders of deep mystical knowledge, to the Visigoths and the Merovingians, bearded and long-lived kings, descendants of Jesus Christ himself.

Searching deeper, one finds links to Nostradamus, who lived nearby, to Leonardo Da Vinci, and reference after reference to the Star of David and to the yin/yang symbol, another opposite. There is a recurring theme of chess games, Sauniere's own land being laid out as one, with both his opposite „towers“ in his villa, being placed exactly where the two rooks would be placed in a real chess game.

Finally, there is Mount Bucharach, the center of all Sauniere's cryptic messages. The Devil's armchair. Asmodeus, who fits perfectly in it but is not who he seems to be. A magnetic mountain, possibly hollow, filled with ancient tunnels, connected to the Mediterranean Sea through underground rivers and the reputed resting place of ancient immortals.

Lindenbrook and I followed every trail to its end; we exhausted all possibilities. In the end, we revealed Sauniere had left behind a map of sorts. It was partly a physical map and partly a metaphorical one. One could pick out the physical trail, follow the geographical path and be inevitably led to Bucharach, time and again.

Others found the same trail and laid it out for all to see, like Jules Verne, a contemporary, in his book, »Clovis Dardendor« and again in »Clovis Dardendor: Face au Drapeau«. He used the elements of Sauniere's mystical trail in his book: »Journey to the Center of The Earth«, revealing everything within a book of fiction. The secret was well buried within the story so few understood it was even there.

I did as Verne had, presenting the results of my investigations in code, hiding it in plain sight, built into every one of my stories. What I started with

the Hollow Needle, I continued with every subsequent novel, inserting name, time and place, over and over again. I created storylines that were duplicates of key historical events. I invented sound codes used as names, like Father Boudet did in his Cromleck book.

The more I did it, the more I had to do it. Like Sauniere, I knew others sought the treasure I held and, like Sauniere, I had to create as many false trails as possible.

Sauniere believed only one man was destined to decipher the clues properly. Unfortunately, another was out there, trying to find a way in. I had, so far, locked Hitler out and fought him off but he would never stop.

While Hitler might know of my return from the dead, he would not know the manner in which this happened. It was my one chance. He did not know of the spores' existence. All he knew was something in the caves could lead him to renewed health and vigor. This allowed Lindenbrook and me to lead Hitler on the wildest goose chase ever imagined, delaying his arrival to the caves for years.

How I became involved:

Lindenbrook and I met by coincidence or, at least, that's what we both thought originally. Both our families spent the summers in the town, meeting each other a natural consequence. We got along, regardless of our different social circles. Over the years, our meetings became more frequent. Lindenbrook eventually regaled me with a few exploits not known to most.

My own attention had originally been riveted to Etretat by a chance meeting with Father Cochet, prior to his death. His plea of secrecy and his revelations about Etretat ensured I took on his quest for the truth behind the town's mysterious history.

Cochet never revealed any connection between his lifelong interest and the Abbey, although I am now convinced that such a connection existed. I was being groomed, like Lindenbrook by Sauniere. The hand of the Abbey was in everything, manipulating people like chess pieces, moving us into carefully planned position, anticipating every move, every countermeasure. We had been involved in the Abbey's grand master plan, conceived and refined by a prescient Sauniere, assisted by his contemporaries, Boudet, Gellis, and Cochet.

Learning of my meeting with Father Cochet, Lindenbrook revealed his knowledge of the Abbey and of their centuries-long agenda. He drew correlations between his meetings with Sauniere and mine with Cochet. I had met Sauniere on occasion and remembered when he first mentioned Albert Lindenbrook's name to me, comments which now seemed false and fabricated.

Lindenbrook shortened his name to Lindon during the First World War. His exploits gave me the idea for a character I was developing. The editor at the »Je Sais Tout« magazine had given me an opportunity, if I could come up with a counterpart to the English character Sherlock Holmes, created by Arthur Conan Doyle.

I disliked the detective approach but loved Holmes' deductive ability. Many of Lindon's adventures featured curious locations, clever subterfuge and slightly illegal activities. The mix was irresistible. Lindon's knack at redefining justice using his own terms, rather than the Court's did not hurt either. A gentleman criminal. I appropriated the first initials of my friend's name and Albert Lindon became Arsene Lupin! Raymond Lindon, his son, became my contact for „Lupin“.

This is the second grand secret which I was obliged to keep hidden from you. Your family is descended from Albert Lindon, the person behind Lupin. The deception was part of the plans Lindon and I engaged in for more than thirty years, indoctrinating our families and those from the Net. This is the core of what this journal is about. Since I entered into those caves, my life has not been my own. I have been taken over by a duty larger than me.

One I could neither refuse, nor blind myself to.

Once Hitler became involved, I could not turn back. It took away a lifetime of searching for deeper answers buried within the caves. I had one chance, a single chance, that I could manipulate the sequence of events created by the Abbey. My vanity, my pride in my own flesh and blood, pushed me to consider the unthinkable: to place my progeny, my children's children into the path of the Abbey's centuries-long plans.

Once imagined, I knew it could be done. One of my descendants would regain ownership of the caves and be given a chance to learn what none other had learned before. A vain thought, I admit it, but it is what drove me to all my excesses, none of which I regret.

I did not do this alone. I was allied with Lindon and our destinies were forged together. We refined our plans beyond all other subterfuges. It took unmitigated gall but finally, Lindon and I were allowed to involve ourselves in the Plan, convincing them to use our progeny for their experiments.

Yes, Albert and I both risked everything. We took the chance it might fail, the spores might harm you, you might never make it for a thousand reasons. We did it all, for a single chance, that we might place one of you, one of us, right at the center of all things.

I am as guilty of manipulating your life as the Abbey was of manipulating mine. Hopefully, being in the position you are now, you will see the risks were worth it. It has taken more than ninety years to place you there, Paul Sirenne, but place you there we did. Your entire upbringing, every single minute of your education, of the hunts, was conceived by the clever Lindon, or by myself. When the challenge was thrust upon you, you would not be found wanting.

We created two trails of progeny. There were many reasons. It would take so little to have our efforts go wrong. Child diseases, inadvertent accidents, no, it was too dangerous. Two lines were essential. One would be obvious, mine, while the other, Lindon's, would be hidden. It was always double meaning, false trails and hidden purpose.

Saunier's vision was, at its core, a genetic revelation. He had divined the true power of the spores lay in their genetic potential. No person exposed firsthand to spores could avoid being destroyed by its insidious properties.

However, Sauniere revealed anyone exposed to the spores would be genetically changed by his exposure, his genes altered by the spores. When his descendants came into contact with them once more, their bodies would be receptive to the spore's effects like no one else on earth.

Sauniere's vision was revelatory. The spores were so strong several generations had to pass before a second exposure could be risked. It would not work on my son, or his son. It would take a full three generations before a secondary exposure would be successful.

The Abbey had been seeking that knowledge for more than a thousand years. The timing could not have been better, influencing the Abbey into accepting our proposal. The Abbey felt a certain amount of responsibility towards me because they had allowed the monster Hitler to attack me that first time.

They claimed it was part of their plan. „It was a necessary opposite“ they said. Hitler provided a counterpoint to the powers in my hand, tempering my actions. At the same time, my involvement provided the counterpoint to Hitler's headlong rush for world domination. In the end, my presence stopped him and his stopped mine.

Though I had a mind like no other when it came to developing scenarios, when compared against Lindon's bright intellect, my mind was a weak candle indeed. It was he who suggested we devote ourselves to giving Hitler as many trails as possible. We would keep him busy, wasting his every moment chasing us, looking endlessly for knowledge. It would forever elude him, his trails and their goals pure fiction.

I took up the battle earnestly, hiding codes in my books, leaving many trails for Hitler to follow. We developed a long term plan, Sauniere at the center of it. It was a circuitous route but anyone deciphering what I had hidden would inevitably be led to Rennes-le-Chateau and Mount Bucharach, following a trail laden with treasures, real and fictitious. The path would take them through historical events, to mysterious paintings, to Arcadia, to the long-lived Merovingians. All interesting places indeed, except none of them were relevant to the caves of Etretat.

In order to make Hitler's search motivating, it did aim somewhat in the right direction. Sauniere had also been thorough in muddying his trail. Hopefully it would be enough. Hitler would waste decades of time, using up resources and key men, chasing a trail of crumbs leading nowhere.

Lindon made the ultimate sacrifice by sending his youngest son to live in Canada, never to return. The whole thing was masterfully misrepresented. At first it was a vacation, there was a breakdown in communications, followed by a name change of the estranged son, to Paul Sirenne. Albert Lindon's son vanished from official records.

He was your grand-father.

After a few years, Albert sent a precious package to his vanished son. One copy of a very special »Hollow Needle« book, the key to our plan. I am sure you have long wondered about these books. Finding the fourth copy completes the first part of your task and you must now ready yourself for the

second part. You know what I refer to. I will not make it plainer, in case unwelcome eyes are reading this.

The origin of the Four Books

In 1914, shortly after hearing Boudet's deathbed admissions, Sauniere came to investigate the caves. Examining the small cave where I had died, he breathed in spore dust inadvertently. It changed him. He became what he feared, a nascent immortal.

Sauniere had been brilliant before but, after exposure, he became a near genius. He had many visions, brief windows into future events, glimpses which impelled him to seek counsel from the Abbey.

Sauniere's spore-induced visions showed him how to make their goal come true. He foresaw future events as a chess game. With the Abbey's support, he placed pawns all over the board, where he knew they had to be.

He refused further exposures to the dust, limiting his gifted brilliance to a period of two weeks. Everything was done during that brief period. All plans were written down, pawns placed, permissions obtained, everything. His mind kept speeding up, until it reached a crescendo after fourteen days.

The final night was one of true wonder and mystery.

Sauniere barricaded himself into his room. Nothing could be seen inside. A retinue of Abbey monks arrived, bearing a medium-sized lead box, covered with ancient symbols. I saw it with my own eyes.

It was very heavy, taking more than six men to carry it. The six were blind from birth, raised with the sole purpose of carrying the box should the Abbey desire to move it. It was the first time it had been moved since 1703. None other dared approach the lead box save the blind six, directed by verbal command.

The men carried the box to Sauniere's room. It never came out. The Abbey left, leaving the box with Father Sauniere, the doors shut tight. All night a storm raged inside that room, complete with high winds, lightning and thunder.

Sauniere opened the door next morning, cradling the Four Books. The spore's effects was fading, their immense energy drained by the night's miraculous events. Somehow Sauniere had created those books, using whatever had been in that box. Sauniere claimed not to remember what he had done. He was never the same man after that.

Whatever he did that night took more than Sauniere had to give. He faded visibly, day by day. If truth be told, I think he wanted to go. It had been too much for him. He never spoke of what he had seen or done, save to Albert Lindon. He gave instructions for Lindon's son, Raymond, and his other son, Paul, in Canada. Two of the Four Books went with the instructions, to remain in the Lindon family until necessary. The third copy went to me and the fourth remained with Sauniere, to be buried with my second journal. He had foreseen everything.

Sauniere weakened, his mind a shadow of what it once was, until he died of a brain seizure in 1917. His death heralded the start of the Abbeyes' final game.

Thus was your story begun.

Albert Lindon and I still had a bit more up our sleeves. The trails we had created for Hitler would only keep him busy for so long. We needed something clever for him to latch on to, once he realized he had been misled. The wily Lindon knew Hitler's anger would focus on us as soon as he realized the extent of our subterfuge.

He still would not know the true nature of immortality. We weren't about to make it easy for him. It was time for another false trail, a Lindon special. He reasoned Hitler would likely believe the worst behavior from his enemies.

Lindon hatched a plot where he and I would disagree about sharing the „secrets of Immortality“. Lindon would steal it from me, giving flesh and form to illusion. I would give chase, hiding it as other activities, such as promoting my books. I would show my disfavor when referring to my character, providing convincing innuendo about Lindon.

When examined with extreme care, the trail would reveal Lindon might have stolen the Ark of the Covenant from the good Leblanc. If someone went looking, they would find evidence of arguments, rumors of a hushed up fist-fight. A hospital visit covered up. Cars in the night, perhaps even a big truck. Others giving chase. A skid mark on the side of the road, burnt rubber over there, a broken tree trunk. Step by step, a mad escape like no other could be painstakingly reconstructed.

Lindon entrapped Hitler in the most convincing of trails, so faint as to almost not be there. A true work of art. The only pity is I have never been able to write about it.

In the end, the trail would lead Hitler to Paris, to Albert Lindon's vault, securely holding his most valuable paintings and, possibly, a large lead box. Of course, if Hitler ever reached the vault, the box would be missing. It had never been there. It did not exist.

Hitler would not know that and might continue searching for a while yet. The longer he was kept busy looking for answers out there, the less time he would have to seek them in the caves.

Of course, he will eventually arrive to the caves, seeking answers. It is inevitable. He will arrive angry and frustrated, old and tired. It will be child's play to lead him to the rigged throne with its crown of death, a fitting end to our story and to his life. His death will begin a decades-long vigil of silence and darkness for the caves. They will be cleared of all Nazi nonsense and readied for the next phase.

Your return.

We have finally come to this point. Some key questions have been answered and the long hidden story of your origin has been revealed. I can rest in peace now, knowing you will be at the helm, running a tight ship, bolstered by the strong winds of your past, of your heritage.

I am sure you have wondered why I did not partake of more spores to regain health, instead of waiting to die. The answer is simple. Immortality was not for me. I never sought it. It sought me and I survived its challenge. For me, the path of the normal human, the path of the caretaker and of the teacher.

For me, the path of the duty-bound, proud to have done his utmost in his quest.

As for you, I can do no more than I have done. I have reached across time and placed you in the path of greatness, Paul Sirenne. I would love being there, by your side, to witness your shining moment of glory. But alas, the gulf of time separates us. We will never meet, never know each other, never share our final fates. I have stood invisibly by your side, until now, guiding you, lighting the way.

Now my candle runs low, the tallow weak and thin. I have been burning it from both ends and I am truly tired. My task is done and my body yearns to lie down in my soft bed. Raymond Lindon will continue the vigil, keeping an eagle eye on our machinations. I will finally be able to rest my weary bones.

From where I sit, this very moment, I see little Victoire playing in the corner, snatching a few moments of happiness, of quietness and calm. She deserves so much more than she will receive. I know of the difficult times ahead for her, her father gone and me soon to follow. On her little frame rests such heavy tasks already, even though she does not yet feel their weight. She has just learned the little song I sang for her. Do you remember it, Paul? Your father taught it to you as well.

They were such deceptive words, fraught with the deepest of meanings:

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

*Good-Bye Paul Sirenne, and Good Luck.
Maurice Leblanc*

Chapter 16

Discussing the Journal.

Maurice Leblanc froze in place and gradually faded to nothing as the lights returned to full strength in the auditorium, ending the illusion. I removed my 3D glasses, noticing that Briar's glasses had already vanished. Coulter was the first to speak.

„Even though I did the setup, I never read a word of the journal. I wanted to keep it a surprise. Those last words of his were real tear-jerkers and I don't mind admitting it. Leblanc thinking that we'd never see him face to face and there he

was plain as day saying it," Coulter's voice trailed off, surreptitiously wiping a tear from his cheek. Raymonde was nodding in empathy.

"Still, his words held more than emotions," interjected Briar. "Much more. It is an impressive document, filling many gaps in the events which have led us, led you, Paul, to this place."

"Man, I feel privileged just being here," O'Flanahan added sarcastically. "But Briar's right, we got a lot for our dollar with this journal."

"You know, Leblanc's mention of Hitler looking for Lindon's vault in Paris strikes a faint memory. I seem to remember Hitler ordered the destroying of Paris in a fit of rage," added Briar.

"Paris was never destroyed," objected Raymonde.

"Only because some conscientious General refused to act on Hitler's orders. I think Hitler opened the vault, found it empty and, furious, decided to raze Paris to the ground. It would be just like him," clarified Briar.

"Fat lot of good it did for Leblanc to set his sting in Paris. The French didn't want their historic monuments destroyed and let the Nazis traipse in within a week. Not much delay there."

"Still, he succeeded in his attempts," supported Raymonde. "He did bring Paul here sixty years after his death, right on schedule. That can't be ignored."

"No, of course, Raymonde, you are correct. It was just a bad joke," O'Flanahan replied, properly rebuked.

"I'm glad to hear you finally admit it, O'Flanahan," Briar added. Standing up and going down a few steps, to the auditorium floor, he turned around, facing us. "Leblanc has indeed accomplished a magnificent feat. He has provided key information about the Abbey. We now understand much more about Sauniere's role in their organization. Their plans stem from his actions in 1914. This is when it all crystallized, when Sauniere's exposure to the spores prodded his brain to expand, much like yours has, Paul."

"That's a good point. I hadn't understood that," added Coulter.

"I saw the connection immediately. The powder seems to enhance whatever you started with. If Sauniere was already gifted, it is possible, even likely the powder turned him into a full blown psychic," Briar replied

O'Flanahan scoffed out loud.

"Surely you're not going to tell us that you believe in psychics, Briar?"

"I guess you don't know everything about me then. Unexplained phenomena occur regularly. I said unexplained, not aliens or ghosts, before you jump in again, O'Flanahan. I would not be much of a researcher if I refused to accept facts staring me in the face. I do not propose however, to theorize pointlessly about the possible causes of unexplained phenomena. I simply accept they undeniably occur."

"What are you saying, Mr Briar?" asked Raymonde.

"I have personally examined several cases of unexplained phenomena in my own profession. For example, I have seen psychic archeology performed in front of me. We had to excavate a buried church but our time was running out and so were our funds. My partner convinced me to hire a dowser. He swore by the man, having utilized his services before, and overrode my strenuous objections."

"I can just imagine," O'Flanahan said.

„The man proceeded to quickly identify where we should work. He did it without hesitation, marking the area precisely, telling us how deep we would have to dig. It was finished in less than fifteen minutes. All he used was a pendulum, a weight on a string. My skepticism lasted until the moment we hit the foundations, exactly where he had described they would be. Another example comes to mind, one much more pertinent to us. I met an archeologist who would go in trances while in areas where ancient battles had occurred. He claimed to find himself transported back to the times of the battles and wrote many books describing his visions. Inevitably, he was taken to task by professionals in his field, insulted by a man presenting dreams as valid archeology. Yet time and time again, new research proved his descriptions of events, clothing, and weaponry, to be highly accurate. One cannot refute this evidence so easily. So if Maurice Leblanc chooses to claim Sauniere saw into the future, who am I to argue with him?“

„I never thought I'd see the day,“ O'Flanagan replied. „Well, bravo Briar, and I agree with every word you've said. Sauniere was the instigator of this mess and it's high time we recognize it. It was his church, his villa, his tower, his damn chessboards and his demon sitting on Mount Bucharach that started it all. He, or one of his cronies, pushed and prodded Lindon and Leblanc, probably instigating the writing of the Hollow Needle. Sauniere made the Four Books, which had to have been a pretty mean trick. It's his influence we see stamped on the caves, at least for the last hundred years or so. He figured out where the Abbey had been going wrong all those years and created a plan to fix it in three generations flat.“

„Wait a minute, O'Flanagan,“ complained Coulter. „There's still tons we don't know. What about the Ark of the Covenant? And what about that immortal they're chasing? What is the Abbey really up to?“

„Don't you think I know that?“ O'Flanagan screamed back. „Leblanc's just wetted our appetites. It's eating me up. Here I was hoping his journal would explain it all, but nooo, we can't have that. Instead Mr Leblanc dangles a bunch more questions in front of our faces. When is it ever going to end? It's not fair.“

Raymonde and I burst out laughing:

„Leblanc did warn us about that. My friends, our problem is Leblanc thought we had found the fourth book. He expected us to have it in our hands, along with his journal. Someone else is involved, someone other than the Abbey or Weissmuller, who has appropriated the fourth book. We have not succeeded at our task. So congratulations are not yet in order. On the other hand, I am glad to understand how I got here.“

„Quite true, my boy. You are apparently a Lindon, now,“ said Briar.

„Thanks but I'll keep the name Sirene for a while yet. I'm somewhat attached to it.“

„There's something else no one's mentioned,“ Coulter said.

„What's that?“ I asked.

„Leblanc spoke of a hidden storyline, buried inside all his stories, a storyline echoed in Jules Vernes' books, both based on Sauniere's secret message.“

„Go on,“ I prodded, getting curious.

„Well, it's sort of weird, if you think about it. The story he seems to be talking about is your story, Paul. It's not, I mean it can't be, right? They were writing

about this stuff a hundred years ago. Yet, the elements hidden in their stories seem to be the same elements that have happened to you, Paul.“

O'Flanahan's brow was furrowed in thought.

„You mean to imply that Paul is living the story those guys were hinting at in their books?“

„Well, yes, I think that's what I'm trying to say. Look at what you've been through the last while, Paul. It's been trial after trial, endless challenges to surmount, but, like the hero in the stories, you keep rising up to the challenge, coming up with the right answers. Could their obsession with this story have pushed them to manipulate a real person to go through it? And, if they did, what's it for in the end?“

None of us could answer his question. I sat in the auditorium, surrounded by my closest friends, knowing this was the calm before the storm. We had earned our reprieve, learned some answers, and seen Leblanc one final time, wishing me good luck across the span of time.

I felt so close to him, it was as if time did not even exist.

Greyman Chronicles

The Watchers. Repeating Destiny.

„Well there's no doubt about it. They've landed in Etretat. The local teams have conclusively triangulated it. We have two pictures of them landing, one of the helicopter leaving and three of them getting in a sub waiting for them on a dock,“ exclaimed Robert from the back of the car.

Pierre, gave up looking for Etretat on the map and reached for the GPS.

They finally knew where to go.

„Let me look it up on the internet,“ suggested Robert. „Now that we have a direction.“

„Tell our friends to keep monitoring the signals from the minicam just in case,“ Pierre added.

„I'm doing it now,“ Robert shot from the back. „Seems like Etretat's a tourist town. Hey, the author Maurice Leblanc wrote a book about it called, uh, »The Hollow Needle«. It's about treasure hidden in a big needle of rock. Hold on, I'm getting something from Ottawa. It's Maria. She's confirmed Fabian Coulter bought some expensive glasses, with wireless minicams and microphones, before taking off to France.“

„I've always wanted a pair of those,“ Louis mentioned.

„She says he bought two tickets. One for himself and another for someone named Liam O'Flanahan.“

„That's the fat guy,“ shouted Pierre in excitement. „I'm sure of it. I know about him. He's a book publisher. Does conspiracies and things, I think.“

Robert continued reading the email from Nadine:

„Good gosh, it keeps getting better. A few days before he left, Coulter received a big chunk of change in his bank account, given to him by someone called Paul Sirenne. Maria says Sirenne’s an antique bookstore owner. She sent a picture of him. It’s the gorgeous girl’s boyfriend, no question about it. That’s not all. She says Sirenne’s parents were murdered by a serial killer a few months back. Sirenne took off to France within a few days, landed in Paris and rented a car. He bought gas near Etretat.“

„Well, that settles it for me. Something’s going on in Etretat.“

„I found the »Hollow Needle« book from Leblanc on the Gutenberg Project online. We can read it for free. Maybe we’ll get a clue from that.“

„Good idea, Robert,“ supported Pierre from the front. Following the GPS’ directions, Louis was driving in earnest.

„Make sure to update Ottawa about what we’ve come up with so far,“ Pierre mentioned to Robert. „We wouldn’t want to lose a single bit of data about this epic trip. Thank God for those batteries.“

Louis started laughing.

„Man, did you see that mechanic’s face.“

Robert guffawed.

„Yeah, he was looking at us like: ‘What’s going on man?’ It was pretty funny.“

„The best moment was when he held up that roll of duct tape,“ Pierre chuckled.

„I knew we were saved right there when I saw that roll,“ agreed Louis.

„Hey, you know Villa Leblanc?“ asked Robert.

„What about it?“

„It’s a bed and breakfast AND a museum dedicated to the Hollow Needle story. It’s even got a show.“

„Well, get us some rooms there if you can. We can watch the show and save ourselves the trouble of reading the book,“ Louis enthused and the other two agreed. Robert sent a request for reservations across the internet and was gratified to receive a confirmation within a few minutes.

„We’re in!“ he exclaimed.

Greyman Chronicles

The Americans.

Moment of Truth.

Bill Omaha stared at the group of officials assembled around the conference table. In a way, he had been preparing for this moment all his life. The men facing him had been briefed, so he got to it without any further preamble.

„As you know, we have successfully tracked the immortals to their lair in Etretat, France. We have confirmed we are dealing with immortals by using

our specialized detection equipment in the church, where we were affected by them. According to our theorists, the magnetic disruptions could only have been caused by immortals.“

„So there’s no possibility of a mistake then, Mr Omaha?“

„None whatsoever. This is the real deal. We have confirmed the existence of at least one, possibly two, immortals in that group, based on the strength of the fields we observed. This encounter has finally confirmed our theories about the possibility of immortals existing. We recognized the old man, whom we thought to be a local guide, as Father Plantagenet, leader of the Abbey.“

„Not him again, that meddling old fool,“ commented an official. „He’s got to be watched. No matter where he appears, trouble is never far behind. We must take precautions.“

„Sir, if I may, it was not precautions I was thinking of. We know the Abbey has long been associated with immortality. They have earned a reputation for destroying immortals, not serving as guides for them. Gentlemen, let me assure you, the Abbey working hand in hand with immortals can bring no good to anyone. No matter which outcome we forecast, none have a positive ending for us. We never expected this moment to come but, now that it is here, we must deal with the very real possibility that our days are at an end.“

„Whose days, Mr Omaha?“

„Humans, Sir, the entire human race. I do not exaggerate. You already know our planet is in ecological crisis. Unexplained earthquakes, storms of unbelievable violence, volcanoes, pandemic diseases, the list is endless. The world’s economy is near the breaking point dealing with the unending disasters. Everyone is frantic, desperate. If immortality gets loose upon the world at this key stage, then our way of life is at an end. We do not possess the immortality formula but we are convinced one exists, which is what most other countries are searching for. Historically, we believe at least two version of the immortality formula have existed. Our best origin theory points to the Egyptian priests of antiquity and involves a total re-interpretation of their »Book of the Dead«. Instead of describing an evolution of the spirit when death has occurred, the book reviews a process of change once the immortality formula has been ingested. Its ingestion was not without danger. Immortality comes at a price and sanity seems to be the coin of the realm. If followed precisely, the steps from the Book of the Dead reveal a path towards ultimate survival and understanding. The immortality option was provided only to the chosen few, the Pharaohs. It was what led to the building of the pyramids, places where immortals could be contained safely, until they gained control of themselves. If their efforts failed and madness ensued, they would never be released.“

„This is preposterous. Nothing like that has ever been found in hieroglyphics,“ objected an official who was hearing this version of events for the first time.

„But of course it has, Sir. It’s all there in black and white. There was no way to hide it. However there was a way to misinterpret it. All one had to do was change basic perceptions and those clear statements become religious mumbo-jumbo. It’s a simple trick. It’s been done time and again throughout

history. Don't try to hide the facts. That's impossible. Just present the same facts from a different perspective. If you do it consistently, everyone will end up believing your version."

"I understand the principles. I had not realized the extent to which this had been perpetrated, particularly in my own education," returned the official.

"It's understandable. None of us know how many of these *hoaxes* have been perpetrated. It's probably better that way. I don't think any of us could handle knowing how much is false. It's best we retain certain illusions, otherwise we couldn't even function. However, it would be useful to mention another such hoax briefly, as it pertains directly to this case."

"Go on."

"After World War 2, in the early 1950's, everyone knew something bizarre had happened to Hitler. Nobody was sure exactly what. At first, he had seemed like just another small country dictator, no different than a hundred before him. Overnight, his rhetoric changed. He started talking about a thousand year Reich, with himself at the reins, transforming himself into an immortal God."

"I remember all that. Something hush-hush going on."

"You bet there was. We weren't fools, not even back then. He'd been searching for something for decades, we all knew that. He sent Heinrich Himmler on expedition after expedition, investigating ancient myths and forgotten relics. His search's purpose was revealed when he and his henchmen re-wrote Germanic history. We had known he was dangerous enough before but when he began doing that, we knew his reign could lead to no good for any of us."

"Why?"

"He understood the power of ideas. He was creating a fiction, his »Master Race« concept and re-writing history to make it real. The people had no choice in accepting the Fuhrer Principle. The children never knew any different. They grew up believing the stuff. These efforts kept placing Hitler right at the center of power, as the absolute leader of his invented »Master Race«. When he started talking about immortality in his speeches, stating he would remain alive for more than a thousand years, we became convinced he knew about the immortality formula."

"Good God. It doesn't bear thinking about. An immortal Hitler. We would have been doomed."

"Exactly, you can understand our concern. His searches had focused on Rennes-le-Chateau. Himmler's team pored over Saunier's church and home. Also, Hitler was still aging. He might know about the immortality formula but he did not yet have it."

"So what happened?"

"It all went away. We still can't explain it. Oh, the Reich was still there and apparently so was Hitler but it wasn't him, not anymore. The voice recordings prove it. After 1943, Hitler never appeared publicly or spoke again. It was a double, some bodyguard, name of Maximilian Bauer. Anyway, we think the real Hitler was killed at some point in 1943. Without him driving the search for immortality, the whole thing went away."

„How come I never heard about this either? Our people kill him and we don't even get to know about it?“

„Oh, it wasn't us. We still don't know who killed him, where his body ended up. We just knew he was gone. It wasn't our hoax, it was someone else's, but we went along with it since it suited our purposes. What would we have gained by revealing to the world that, after Hitler was killed, it took us two years to stop the Nazis? We would never have lived it down. So we kept mum about it but we never forgot it and during the cold war, some of our analysts began worrying about Rennes-le-Chateau. Hitler's immortality search had intensified after his visit there. We knew the priest, Sauniere, had figured something out. He had clues all over his buildings. After Hitler was buried and gone, we wanted to put a stop to all those who might be tempted to follow in Hitler's footsteps. We couldn't call attention to what we were doing by bulldozing Rennes-le-Chateau flat to the ground, so we decided to pull the old misdirection trick again.“

„What did you do?“

„We hired Philip de Cherizee. He was a penniless artist, desperate for food and fame. Following our instructions, he associated himself with Pierre Plantard de Saint-Clair, for credibility, and went to see Gerard de Sede, a popular sensationalistic author of the time. Philip de Cherizee introduced our carefully planned misdirection to de Sede, informing him he knew the secret which Sauniere had hidden. He provided Gerard de Sede with two documents, claiming they were from a vial found by Sauniere. The vial incident was real enough but whatever knowledge it contained had long been lost. The two documents from de Cherizee were clever forgeries, designed to latch on to one of Sauniere's trails. Gerard De Sede bought the whole farce and wrote a book about it, »L'or de Rennes-le Chateau«, making use of key facts, assembled by Pierre Plantard. Anyone seeking for the roots of Rennes-le-Chateau would inevitably come across De Sede's book. They would be tricked into seeing the facts from our false perspective. It became impossible to learn what Sauniere had really been trying to say.“

„That's incredible.“

„I know. I still can't believe our predecessors were able to think that up. At that time, the idea-virus concepts were still in their infancy. It was a brilliant coup. But Philippe de Cherisey didn't stop there. He wrote a false genealogy for Plantard, titled: »Secret Documents« and sneaked a copy into the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, where it was found years later, backing up the forged documents given to Gerard de Sede.“

„Didn't Plantard come clean about his role? I seem to remember something about that.“

„Yes, he did. It was too late. The false concept was already ingrained into accepted history. Too many people believed, and preferred, the false version and so, his true version was rejected. He must have been dismayed to see his confession rejected and ridiculed. Even better, countless other theories have piled on top of the first one, making the whole thing a house of mirrors.“

„Well, I'm impressed. I never thought these techniques could be so effective.“

„You have no idea, Sir. Nonetheless, if I may return to the subject at hand, after much research, we learned the Egyptian immortality formula did exist. It was regularly made by priests during the first three dynasties. We have discovered about its travels through history. It is referred to in the ancient testament, inscribed on two stone tablets, each bearing five necessary steps to produce the powder. Both tablets were required to assemble the complete formula. If only one tablet was used to create a powder, a working prototype could be made but with serious weaknesses. The formula tablets were kept in Hathor Temple, on Mount Horeb, near the Egyptian mono-atomic gold foundry, where they manufactured the immortality powder. Moses knew this and made for the temple directly in his attempts to lead his people to freedom from Egyptian slavery. Using the fallout from a distant volcanic eruption as cover, he invaded the temple, killed the priests, and stole the two formula tablets along with a large quantity of the powder. He diluted the powder, using it to keep his people alive for forty years in the desert. Some coveted the powder for its powers, longing to become completely immortal. Moses, in a fit of anger, broke the formula tablets, rendering it impossible to replicate. They built the Ark of the Covenant, where they placed the remaining powder and the tablets, swearing never to open it again.“

„An excellent history lesson, Mr Omaha. How do these ancient stories fit in with the scientific approach? Is there any science to support the formula's existence?“

„Yes, of course there is. We wouldn't be here otherwise. What started off as nebulous myths from ancient history led some of our scientists to study immortality. It was more than possible. That fledgling research project, the study of mono-atomic elements, eventually led us to far-reaching conclusions.“

„Such as?“

„Mono-atomic powders are never pure. They are always a mix of several elements. The most common mixes are gold, iridium and rhodium, with small traces of other heavy metals. Each of these elements has different properties when introduced into the human body. Only one of these mixes can succeed in providing true immortality. Regretfully, we have been unable to replicate such a formula. However, our research has not been entirely fruitless. Our studies have revealed much about our own physiognomy that was hitherto unknown. Mono-atomic elements, iridium and rhodium in particular, seem to be an essential element for the working of our cerebrum. Iridium atoms are evenly distributed everywhere in our synaptic system.“

„What are you saying, Mr Omaha?“

„The mono-atomic iridium and rhodium soup in which our brains float allows us to think the way we do. The dense iridium atoms lend both energy and enhanced connectivity to our synaptic system. Without their presence, it is likely we might have remained brutish cavemen.“

„That's almost inconceivable.“

„We didn't always have iridium on the brain. Iridium leaves traces of its presence in the bone. After a rigorous testing program, we identified that fossils skulls contained no iridium whatsoever, prior to sixty-five million years

ago. It can be no coincidence that an iridium-containing meteorite hit the Yucatan area in Mexico, during that period. An iridium cloud covered the earth for years, impregnating every living creature. Some took to it like fish to water but others, like dinosaurs, didn't like it so much."

"Are you telling us a meteorite is responsible for our high intelligence?"

"Yes, I am. Unfortunately, that's not the full story. When our scientist studied the geological evidence left behind by the meteorite impact at the Chicxulub Crater, they realized a certain amount of mass was missing from the crater. The impact signature implied a bigger crater than could be accounted for by the meteorite fragments. It was hypothesized that a section of the meteorite was propelled into the stratosphere immediately following impact, much like a cannonball. We could even calculate how far this *cannonball* would have gone. The only thing we couldn't figure out was which direction it might have taken."

Omaha pointed at a screen behind him, showing a flattened map of the earth, with the Chicxulub Crater exactly at its center. A large red circle appeared around it, intersecting with various land masses around the world.

"As you can see, here is the distance our *cannonball* would have traveled before falling back to the earth. When we derived this information, we had no idea how important it would be. It was only in the past few days that it became meaningful."

The screen's image zoomed in to a specific area of the large red circle.

"That's the shoreline around Etretat, where you think those immortals are hiding out," exclaimed someone from the back of the room. "You're saying the iridium cannonball fell on Etretat!"

"That's right. Our immortal problems center around the likely landing point of an iridium meteorite, the same iridium linked to immortality. This is the source, the root of all immortality legends. Etretat is the place and they are in control of it. Unthinkably, the Abbey, who know more about immortality than anybody else, is in cahoots with them. It takes no great leap of imagination to forecast where this is going. We cannot stand by and let this happen. We have one chance and one chance only. We need to be the ones to strike first and take control of the situation. If there's only one or two of them, the situation can possibly still be contained."

"Mr Omaha, you aren't seriously suggesting we attack their stronghold on foreign soil. We could start a war."

"Sir, we are in discussion with the French at this very moment. They are willing to uhm, ignore a covert attack in a localized area of their shores. They are as unhappy about this situation as we are but they cannot accept sending a French team to attack their countrymen, immortals or not. They recognize the danger to their shores if it becomes known the powder of immortality is hidden there. You know how many countries would gladly begin a war if it was the prize. Think of our enemies with that power, or terrorists, or extremists. No, we must strike first and strike hard."

"What about their electromagnetic field weapon? What can you do about that?"

„Actually, a fair bit. The effect cannot be resisted without aid, but aid is available.“

Omaha opened the large box he had brought with him, pulling out a cumbersome-looking helmet.

„It’s a prototype. The production helmets will be more compact. Gentlemen, this is a portable electromagnetic field generator. If we wear this, the immortals’ field cannot affect us. We will be safe.“

„Can you get them in production in time?“

This last question came from the senior official in the room.

„Yes, Sir. The team is working details out as we speak.“

„Fine. Explain your plan in broad terms. Be succinct.“

„Yes Sir. Not only have we identified a series of caves under the southernmost Etretat cliff, we have confirmed access to these caves is strictly underwater. We will strike in the middle of night. The caves will be dark so we will bring infrared glasses. We have a compact stealth submarine at our disposal and have confirmed the specific point of entry. Advance scouts are seeking a secondary means of access. We will be using nerve gas as well as standard weapons. We feel certain we can deal with anything we might encounter. Our goal is to go in and eradicate all life in the caves. Once that is accomplished we will secure the premises and begin our investigations.“

„Aren’t you forgetting about the Immortals?“

„No Sir. Historical accounts about immortals are clear. They cannot be killed quickly or easily but they can be immobilized. We have special weapons for that purpose, such as the foam gun, which sprays sticky, rapidly-hardening foam. We also have a steel coil weapon which throws a dozen tangling coils of sharp metal. We also have experimental electrical nets, which may disrupt their personal fields.“

„Can you guarantee success? There can be no room for failure if we choose this route.“

„We have anticipated as much as we can anticipate, Sir. I must admit we have almost no local intelligence but my team is the best, each member proven in the field of battle. We know what we have to do. We have the resources and the technology to do it. If we wait, the immortals will get away from us. This is our only chance to contain them, to keep our way of life safe for the entire world. We will not accept failure as an option.“

Silence fell in the room.

„You may proceed, Mr. Omaha.“

Weissmuller Recollections, 1960-1962

Hunting the Abbey.

Part Two

I had no idea how to find St Germain. It might be easier after locating the Abbey. The members of that organization were interested in St Germain and would know about him.

The Abbey had remained invisible to the rest of the world. Now that I knew of its existence, I believed my usual methods would succeed in locating the group. I had been overlong in my Guilio Arnak skin. My experiments had been far and few between and my numbness had become intolerable.

It was time to experiment, to satisfy my long-denied urges, to feel the blood of my quarry pumping down my throat. I was eager to be traveling again, to see the countryside, perhaps a little bit of straight-line walking to stretch the legs. I would head towards France, keeping an eye open for what odd experiments might pass my way, while I sought a new historian. It was time for another lesson.

No sooner had I started on my travels that I was delayed. I had spied a convent in the distance, not quite in line with my chosen straight-line-walking direction. According to the game rules, I was allowed one diversion without penalty. I chose to exercise that option in this instance.

Nuns. In a convent.

I wrapped up my activities there after several days, feeling absolutely refreshed. My vampyric urges quelled, my numbness less of an issue, I stacked the bodies like cordwood in the convent attic, hidden behind a false wall.

I eventually found my way to the city of Saluzzo, near the Uintas Mountains, where I located a suitable historian. I did not know what specific historical events I sought, so I pestered the historian to no end, filleting his feet all the while. His answers were delectable and, eventually, something stood out amongst the mass of information he was providing.

I had reasoned that, in the past, the Abbey's presence might have been more noticeable. The church had found out about their existence but never their central location. The Church back then was powerful, with vast resources and ears in every house. Yet, they had failed to locate the Abbey.

I didn't believe it. With a name like »The Abbey«, I could assume the organization had a religious background. They had been around since the eleventh century. I could not see how the Church had failed to locate them in all that time. It made no sense. They had to be lying. For some reason, they had deliberately falsified their records.

The historian's words sparked an idea. Since starting this search, I had pieced together much of the time-line concerning the immortality powder. The Abbey was responsible for shipping it to North America, prior to 1450 and probably after 1307. The Abbey had their roots in a Knights Templar sect and were probably from the very center of that organization.

What about before the Knights Templar?

When the historian mentioned St Bruno, full name: Bruno de Cologne, I knew I was on to something. Born in Cologne Germany in 1030, Bruno became a student in Rheims, France. An ambitious man, he became Archbishop at the youthful age of forty-three. His appointment was followed

by a great controversy, hinting that Archbishop Bruno might have purchased his position from the pope. He was my kind of man.

In 1080, he pulled away from public life, shortly after meeting Raoul le Verd. In 1084, after two failed attempts, he was able to establish a monastic retreat in the mountains near Grenoble, at »La Grande Chartreuse«. In 1090, all construction finished, he was called away by Pope Urban II to *assist* him in dealing with the current crisis, over simony and lay-investiture.

Pope Urban the Second was none other than Bruno's former pupil, Eudis de Chatillon, who studied under Bruno at Rheims.

This one fact rendered the entire sequence of events suspect. Urban and Bruno had a hidden agenda. Upheavals at la Grande Chartreuse, following his departure, supported my view. His followers were fiercely loyal to him, continuing to study his teachings, after his death in 1101. Known as Carthusians, they were in the very same location today.

Shortly after Bruno's arrival, Pope Urban the Second ordered the First Crusade. Jerusalem was seized by Templar Knights Godfrey de Bouillon, Robert of Flanders, Robert of Normandy and others, after a month-long siege in July, 1099. Before Bruno's death, the Ark of the Covenant and the powder it contained, along with a large cache of treasure, was removed from its ancient resting place beneath the remnants of Solomon's Temple.

Bruno, dispatched by Pope Urban, established a second monastery in Calabria in 1091, finishing its construction just in time to receive the spoils of the First Crusade. I decided to undertake a pilgrimage of my own to this ancient monastery. It was inexplicably closed in 1903 by the French state. After much pressure, the monks had been allowed to return in 1940.

The premise of a monastery is a peaceful retreat, built on Faith and reverence. The Calabrian monastery was nothing of the sort. It was wrenched from the hands of Greek monks, dispossessed and thrown out of the country, the monastery seized because of a sudden *need* by the Papal Court. There were far better locations for a monastery in the same area, resulting in political and religious opposition against Bruno.

Ignoring the local tempest, he organized and oversaw its reconstruction himself, a change of approach for Bruno. La Grande Chartreuse, his previous monastery, had been constructed by another. Bruno kept his plans close to his vest and used only his brothers in faith to help in its construction.

When all was done, after many years, little looked different about the place. Whatever changes had been made were buried beneath the existing structure. I pressured the historian mightily to give me further details about this Calabrian monastery but I had plumbed his depths. I dispatched him with alacrity, anxious to be on my way.

I had traveled many kilometers when I realized I had not drained the historian. My excursion with the nuns had so completely sated me I had not even thought of drinking the man's blood. Admittedly, the convent scene had gone further than it usually did, my pent-up urges unable to be restrained. The tension, after two years of occasional experiments, had become unbearable.

I was witnessing the beginning of a cycle within me. My infatuation with Vampirism had become entrenched as my numbness increased. It was pushing me to greater and greater heights of excitement, my mind seeking the vanished sensations it so desperately craved. My mind was still bathed in the nun aftermath but I wondered how long it would last. How long until I was forced to wreak havoc no matter what I desired?

Calabria was in Southern Italy, South of Naples, located at the „toe“ of the Italian peninsula. I was in Northern Italy, near the French Border. My straight-line walking was put to the side, in exchange for speedier travel.

The ingestion of another cube of spores provided a furnace of energy. I wasted no further time, picking up my pace until running flat out. I jumped over simple obstructions, such as large boulders and streams but detoured around lakes, if they were too wide. It took more time to run through water.

I was seen by only one person, whom I decapitated with a rapid blow as I ran past, not even stopping to admire the splatter fountain I had caused. Arriving in the right area, I stopped at a cottage to ascertain the proper direction to the Monastery. The Diocese of Squillace was nearby, Calabria's home. Perfect. I took up residence at the cottage, after disposing of the bodies.

Calabria was a long shot at best. What were the chances the Abbey still frequented the area, after one thousand years? I needed no sustenance, no warmth, did not even need to move, which made my investigation into the monastery far easier. I was already a master in the art of camouflage and got quite close to the buildings without being noticed.

The first month seemed to be a waste of time. A bunch of boring monks went about ridiculously simple and repetitive tasks on a daily basis. Absolutely nothing was going on. Deep in the middle of the star-shaped enclave, a communal hall and cafeteria held two entrances, one on each side. Monks entered and exited from both sides throughout the day. All wore the same robes and walked in the same stooped posture, rendering them indistinguishable from each other. It was so confusing I almost gave up keeping track of them.

One day, early in the morning, during the usual hustle and bustle around the hall, the sun reflected against something. A quick flash and it was gone. The flash had come from low down, reflecting off someone's shoes. The problem was, none of these monks wore shoes. Sandals were the usual fare here. Why would a monk be wearing shiny shoes under a tattered robe?

I began counting every person who went in and who came out. It took me three days to confirm my suspicions. Some days more people came out than went in, other days less. Yet, at the end of the day, the hall was always empty. I decided to sneak in and find out where the monks went.

Getting into the hall turned out to be more difficult than imagined. Although the hall seemed empty at times, further observation revealed three alcoves where monks appeared to be staying in solitary cloisters for meditation but narrow cracks in their doors allowed perfect overviews of the hall. These were guards, not monks. Getting in was impossible without

raising an alarm and this I did not want to do. Abbey monks were, one and all, immortal-killers. It was their primary purpose as an organization.

I would not allow any action with this group to reveal my existence. Not until I could strike from a safe position. Until then, no effort would be spared to maintain my invisibility. I had to second-guess my every plan to invade their domain.

The obvious solution was to take the skin of one of them. The decision was fraught with danger. This group was highly secretive and had probably developed a significant number of protective measures over the centuries. It would be only a question of time before I revealed myself through ignorance and that was unacceptable.

Even if I solved the problem of protective measures, I did not know if I could impersonate their lifestyle for a long period of time. It seemed so terribly tedious and I was so filled with energy, I feared it would drive me irrevocably mad.

Although I could be totally still for days at a time, the thought of prayer after prayer, mumbling meaningless trifles, listening to others doing the same, would likely drive me to kill them all in an uncontrollable fit of irritation. I understood the origins of sects and the basis of religion as a control system but the mumbo-jumbo spouted by their officials drove me to unreasonable anger. It was such a waste of time. Perhaps I could see myself at the head of such an organization but never as a mere acolyte.

Most humans seemed willing, perhaps even eager to swallow religious tripe but I never had any taste for the haggis of Faith. So, no impersonating Carthusian monks, unless it became absolutely necessary. I had to find another way in. Luckily, I was not quite out of options. For example, where did these spurious monks with shiny shoes come from? How did they arrive here and how did they leave?

This was a remote location. It was accessible by road, but few came here. Farm goods were delivered once daily, coming from the local village. Apart from that, there were no visitors. The delivery truck was the only means of entry for anyone.

Although four people delivered and four left, dressed exactly the same, they were often different people. One day, I caught sight of the exchange, when monk robes were shed and villager clothing donned.

Leaving my vigil over the monastery, I followed the delivery truck to town, easily keeping pace with it. In town, the delivery truck went about its regular deliveries, the men bringing supplies to this home or that. To my surprise, when the delivery truck returned to the shop, the men were once again different.

Following them home, I confirmed they were area residents. A second switch had occurred at the homes where boxes had been delivered. Only one man had carried boxes into each home, so at least four homes were implicated.

It took a few more days to identify the home in question. The delivery truck left its dock with the real delivery men. It delivered to a dozen homes in the early morning. Early afternoon, the truck drove up the mountain road to the

Monastery, the four men different, having already switched once. The truck returned from the monastery, filled with different men yet again. When the truck made its final delivery and went back to the warehouse, the four men from the early morning back in their truck. The switch was occurring in the last house.

It was impossible to impersonate the drivers. None of them ever made it to the monastery. I was impressed. The house was never left unattended, someone always remaining present. I concluded the couple staying there were guards. They went about their daily lives in completely normal fashion. No extra people in their cars, no unexplained visitors. Yet every day, someone new would come out of those houses.

A city map revealed a restaurant as the closest building to the house. It was time for a good meal. I hadn't eaten in years.

I arrived early, choosing a table in the back of the place. I was wearing local clothing and a nondescript hat, looking like a thousand others. Lunch time traffic did not stop me from recognizing some customers as monk impersonators. Four were bodyguards. The fifth was a smaller man, the important one. The others hovered around him, their eyes darting left and right protectively. They never noticed me. Had they questioned my presence, I would have answered using the exact dialect and accent of the region. But why would they? I had fooled them all.

I ingested the food without taste and drank the wine without pulse, watching the scene play out. Four men stood up, leaving one behind. They headed down the stairs to the lavatory and never came back. The last bodyguard at the table paid the bill, left, and drove off without a backward glance.

I left the restaurant but did not go far. I turned down a side alley across the street, taking advantage of the shadows to jump up to a balcony, accessing the fire escape. Silently climbing from balcony to balcony, I reached the roof.

I settled in for a long watch. It lasted three days. I saw two more special cars arrive, following the same routine, disgorging five people, with one leaving an hour later. There was always a return trip. Every evening, a car arrived with one person and left with five, usually during lunchtime.

This complicated, orchestrated exchange, with assigned drivers and schedules, demonstrated a serious level of planning. I reasoned the entire monastery had to be a front. Unfortunately, so far, the whole of it appeared devoted to religious use by the Carthusian monks. The communal hall, which doubled as cafeteria, was an open structure, with few places to hide.

Logically, the communal hall had to be an access point to an underground compound. The idea immediately appealed to me. I decided on a plan to elicit further information. Those Abbey monks came in groups of five but the driver always left alone. I could stage a convincing accident and grab one of them. I jumped to action, scaling down the restaurant fire escape and jumping to the ground from the first floor balcony.

I took a chance on the southernmost road into the City. It alone came from the lower regions of Calabria and was the likeliest road for the driver to use. I ensconced myself between two rocks on a cliff getting a view of both the road

and the City, higher in the mountains. I recognized one of the cars around 10:30 in the morning, arriving just in time to collect his passengers at noon. I saw him drive by at 12:30, his four charges in tow.

When I saw the car drive by once more during the late afternoon, I reasoned it would return with its solitary driver, about two hours later. The sun would be lowering in the sky and the angle of its rays would shine in the eyes. Perfect conditions for terrible accidents, particularly when going down such a steep road. One could drive off the cliff. I would have to time it just right.

I worried about the road conditions when the driver returned. I didn't want to cause a multi-car pileup, it was too involved. Then it was too late to worry about anything. The car exited from the City and approached the cliff where I was crouching. I looked around quickly, evaluating the road. It was quiet. Perfect. I felt excited, a rare thing nowadays.

I jumped down, hiding behind a large boulder and waited, running out to the middle of the road as the driver turned the bend. He saw me standing there, blocking his way, and swerved around. He might have succeeded if I hadn't given his car a tremendous shove sideways when he sped by, sending it flying off the road, down the precipitous ravine. I bounded after it, landing on the car's front hood in one easy flip. Moving at hyper-speed, I crashed my hands through the windshield and seized the driver, pulling him out with one mighty pull, as the car sailed through the air.

The ground approaching fast, I propelled myself off the hood, bearing my dazed prize in my hands. I soared through the air, falling between a few small trees. The car crashed to the ground behind us, exploding in flames when its gas tank ruptured. I dropped the driver to the ground, on the moss between the trees.

This had to happen right now.

He was gathering his senses, shaking off the shock. A second explosion from the car jarred him completely awake and his eyes focused on me. He was covered in scratches from his scrape with the windshield and his shoulder seemed broken. I squeezed the shoulder hard, eliciting a strong, satisfying scream from him. I asked him question after question but he refused to speak.

I could hear the sirens, far off. It wouldn't be long before they arrived. I crushed his injured shoulder in one quick move and he nearly fainted with the pain. He tried to hit me with his other hand. I blocked him, breaking his wrist and repeated my questions. He refused to speak. In frustration, I ground the crushed bones together. My time was up.

Lifting the driver, I jumped back to the car. He twisted in my arms, trying to stop me somehow, anyhow. I threw him with all my force, exactly where we had first landed, in the moss between the trees. He slammed into it head first, breaking his neck and eradicating all evidence of our short time spent together. His spineless body bounced into the air, flopping loosely against a tree where it cracked in two like an egg. I hurried away, stepping on rocks to leave no prints. The police would assume he had flown out through the windshield when the car crashed. A simple accident. Nothing to it.

Unfortunately, I had not succeeded in my goals. Pressed for time, I had inflicted a serious amount of pain yet the driver had not uttered a single word, apart from a few involuntary moans. I had total control over his body but failed to dominate his will. It was my first time encountering such resistance

I could not risk another „accident“. It would attract too much attention. I decided to return to the Monastery and examine the communal hall once more, this time for evidence of buried structures.

I knew about such structures. I had masterminded the construction of no less than three of them. The caves of Etretat had been my third, the other two considered practice. One of them was never even used and remains undetected to this day.

Caves had one crucial need: ventilation. Deep installations needed powerful fans, requiring generators and a large supply of fresh air. If the monastery had an underground installation, where were its vents?

Arriving near the Carthusian monastery, I explored, going further into the mountains. The vents could not be placed too high up the mountains because the warm air from the caves would react with the cold mountain air, creating a tell-tale steam plume. The vent locations should therefore be predictable. Not too close to be obvious and not too high.

I found them easily. There were two of them, one intake, the other outflow. Judging by the volume of air moving through them, the installation was of significant size.

The intake vent was about one and a half meters in diameter. There was a ladder inside, probably intended for inspection. I used it for invasion. It took little time to reach the bottom, about seventy-five meters below ground. I was able to exit above the main fan, through an access panel. I found myself in a small room with dozens of air vents heading in various directions.

A normal man sliding through tight vents might make noises or get tired. It was different with me. I could move forward on my fingers and toes, travelling effortlessly forward without making a sound. I chose a vent heading into the center of the complex. I went through several bends and one tight narrowing, ending up near a screen in one room. Six men stood nearby, speaking in whispers, making it difficult to discern any word clearly.

Their meeting finished and they walked out of the room. When they passed by the air vent, I was able to make out something of interest.

„So, Lindon has done his part then?“

„Yes, exactly as agreed. His new enterprise was in operation by 1955, fitting perfectly into Saunier's predictions and he has purchased the property in question on the exact date stipulated. We can count on him and on his silence. Although an outsider, he believes in our cause.“

„Good. Project Sirene is finally underway. There is little more we can do now but wait.“

„Luckily we are good at waiting.“

They mentioned Lindon. I knew that name. Why was he mentioned here? What was Project Sirene?

I would have to find out.

Chapter 17

Reversing the Fans.

My glasses beeped, signaling an incoming call. It was Dr Phillippe.

„Mr Sirenne, I've got news. I think I've figured out something about the spores. They are full of iridium, sir, which might account for the odd fields created around your body, if my physics are right. It's early days yet but this is our most promising path.“

His revelation helped me understand what I had to do.

„Dr Phillippe, we need to meet in the filtration room beneath the fans. I'll see you there.“

Raymonde, knowing what I had decided, agreed with me internally. Thoughts were replacing words. I kissed her good-bye, our lips pressing so tightly they stayed stuck for a moment when we moved apart.

* * * * *

Dr Phillippe was waiting in front of the doorway panel in the fan room. The complexity of the installation was impressive for something out of the 1940's. The Nazis had spared no expense setting up the filtration area, automating it completely. Weissmuller had wanted no one in this chamber but himself.

I could well understand why. Once immortality was within his grasp, Weissmuller dared not lose control of it. Dr Phillippe opened the secret filtration chamber, showing me the incredibly fine screen designed to capture the most elusive of dusts.

„So explain the implications of iridium in the spores, Doctor.“

The small rotund man looked at me earnestly.

„Sir, tell me what you know of iridium. It will let me know where to start my explanation.“

„It is a rare metal, I believe, yellowish in color. I also believe it is rather abundant in these caves, due to the meteorite buried deep within. I think it is a bit like platinum. That is the sum of my knowledge.“

„Thank you, sir. You are right in all you say. Iridium, platinum and gold are part of the same family of metals. Iridium is the densest metal in the world, weighing nearly twice as much as lead. It has seventy-seven protons in its nucleus, balanced by the same number of electrons, an extremely complex atom. Its density, caused by the numerous protons, radiates a strong positive charge, pulling the electrons into its center tightly. The important thing is that we are not dealing with natural iridium. What we have in the spores is mono-atomic iridium.“

„Mono-atomic? What does that mean?“

„Like gold, platinum and rhodium, iridium is part of a strange class of metals with two completely different physical states. The first state, metallic, is an assembly of atoms in a geometric crystalline latticework. These atoms naturally

attach to each other in this particular way, giving us the metallic appearance we recognize. However, if this latticework is undone, if the grouping of atoms is broken, we are left with a mono-atomic state. Single atoms without grouping, you see. In this state, these metals present a completely different appearance, exhibiting new properties, looking and behaving more like ceramic than metal. It becomes highly conductive, a superconductor really. That is why I did not spot the iridium in the first place. It is extremely hard to identify in its mono-atomic state.“

„So the caves have iridium powder, Doctor?“

„They are chock full of it, sir. It is not surprising the luminescent lichen in the caves has absorbed it and used it in its chemical processes. So, now we know the spores contain mono-atomic iridium. Your body is covered with it, in and out, creating an isolation layer between you and the world. The thing to understand about iridium is that complex atoms like these behave in very curious ways. They have little understood properties, different than other classes of metals. They are also rarely found alone. Produced in the center of volcanoes, mono-atomic iridium is always found mixed with mono-atomic gold, rhodium, ruthenium, osmium, in a variety of ratios, depending on where it is located across the world. Mono-atomic powder is generally called *white powder gold* for simplicity. It has deep history, which most people are unaware of.“

„History? Explain.“

„Ancient people across the world knew of white powder gold and believed it had magical properties. The Egyptians, for example, had a foundry in Hathor Temple, on the side of Mount Horeb, designed to make white powder gold. Some believe white powder gold was the mythical food known as Manna. Hathor Temple itself has a depiction of manna in the form of a white powder. Of curious interest, those who ate Manna were concerned for their health because they no longer had to defecate. These words are drawn directly from biblical texts, Sir, not an interpretation. Does this sound familiar to you?“

„Yes, like apple juice.“

„My point exactly,“ the doctor continued. „I have just undertaken my research but I think we are on the right track. While we do not yet know how iridium is doing what it is doing, I believe, with a bit more time, I might piece it together.“

„You have already surpassed my expectations, Doctor. From what you suggest, I gather there may be a physical explanation for my changes.“

„Yes, Sir. The iridium atoms have very strong electromagnetic fields. I think the answer lies in that direction. The layer of mono-atomic iridium covering you is somehow insulating you from everything.“

„It's also changing me, doctor.“

„That may be because of the increasing concentration of iridium in your brain tissues. You see there is something else I find baffling. Iridium is already found naturally in our bodies, in our brains more specifically. One must draw a conclusion that human brains somehow require mono-atomic iridium and rhodium to function. If you were to increase this concentration, such as what is occurring in you, it is possible your brain might work better or faster. Your whole body in fact could be improved by the presence of white gold powder. You know they use it to cure cancer? It seems to have curative effects on a genetic level.“

„You’ve convinced me, doctor. Now before we go, I wish to attend to one more point. Can the filtration system be reversed?“

„What, you mean blow the spores back into the cave air?“

„Yes, exactly that.“

„Well, yes, but...“

„I must speak to you in all confidence, doctor. Events are approaching fast, events which may mean pain, even death, to some of our friends. Others want what we have. We simply cannot allow them to have it. The problem is we are, frankly, not ready for what is coming. The people here are scientists, doctors, people with families. There are no warriors here, myself included. We need an edge. The spores are our best and only chance. I have no other option. I need to know from you what the effect will be on the people in the caves if we expose them to the spores by reversing the fans?“

„In what type of time frame, Sir?“ Doctor Phillippe responded with a tremulous voice.

„Let’s start with twenty-four hours.“

„Not enough time, sir. In that span, most people would simply feel a lessening of their ills, perhaps.“

„What about forty-eight hours?“

„No sir. A two-week minimum would be necessary for the spores to have a significant effect on the cave residents, judging by the low quantity of spores available in my latest sampling.“

The way things were moving, I was sure trouble was quickly heading our way. I would not be taken unaware, not again. Neither would I be beholden to the Abbey. This was our responsibility, ours to shoulder alone. Etretat, Mrs Leblanc, Raymonde, the Vallin Brothers, the Net members, my three good friends, the list went on of those who had dedicated themselves to this cause.

Once again, there was only one solution.

„Dr Phillippe, what if we dropped in all the spores we have in reserve back into the filtration system?“

„The whole hundred kilos, Sir?“

Dr Phillippe gulped but, seeing my nod, pulled out a calculator.

„It would make a difference, a big difference. Just about enough. I would think forty-eight hours would be sufficient to coat everyone in the cave with a thin layer of spores. Now I wouldn’t expect miracles out of it, even at that level, but it should boost their strength, their immune systems, their resistance to harm, etc.“

„Do it.“

„I would have to get the powder. It is in the safe, back in the lab, under guard as you specified. Do you want me to have it brought here?“

„No! I want this kept between us. Let’s go get it right now.“

„Very well, Sir, follow me.“

Greyman Chronicles

The Mossad

Finding the Link

The two agents floated up the widening underwater shaft slowly. No bubbles ascended from their wetsuits, equipped with the latest re-breather technology. Finding this entrance had been relatively simple. The occupants were completely unconcerned about being covert in their actions. Apart from a rudimentary security force, comprised of untrained locals, these people took no precautions whatsoever.

„It fits into the scriptures.“

„Yes.“

They communicated on a wireless band of limited power to ensure no one could pick it up. It meant they had to stay close to each other. This was an exploratory mission for the moment, to get the lay of the land. After reporting in, they had been instructed to find the location of the immortals and investigate covertly.

The husband and wife team of Avi and Ziva Bakla had been chosen for this mission from a very short list. While political and economical reality prohibited a strictly religious approach to life within Mossad ranks, there were those who still believed in the inner truth of the ancient writings. Some scriptures contained coded information speaking of a coming Armageddon. Signs were spelled out clearly, the location of the prophesied events identified as Rennes-le-Chateau.

Avi and Ziva were specialists in the study of these prophecies and of their worldly implications. They were both light-skinned enough to pass as locals from a distance and spoke French fluently without a trace of accent.

Latching on to the American satellite signal had been laughably simple. The agents had estimated the landing location nearly an hour before the immortals arrived and been en route to that destination within minutes. Ziva had busied herself on the laptop, calling up their files about Etretat. The link to Maurice Leblanc, the author of the Arsene Lupin novels, threw up red flags right away. They had previously been led to Leblanc, through the coded use of names, dates and places found throughout his novels.

Avi had visited Etretat once before. He had felt something odd about the place, as if he were being constantly watched. He had left before his vacation time was up. These thoughts came back to him now, while the two ascended towards the surface. Their suits were not the usual black but rather of a low luster material which made them almost invisible in water.

„Is it getting lighter?“

„Yes, my Husband, but I cannot explain why. At this depth, it should be dark still.“

„A possible reason could be powerful lights from above, but how could that be? Where would the power be coming from? Surely we would have noted a drain on the local electrical grid.“

„You are right. Perhaps a self-contained power-plant?“

„When would they have brought that in? We have been observing the entire coast for years. I still can't believe we missed connecting that *tourist* submarine of theirs to its actual use.“

„Yes right under our nose, in plain view.“

„I cannot explain the bizarreness of their actions. Look at their ridiculous security force. The two leading it.“

„Jacques and Ives Vallin.“

„They are totally untrained. Why are they in such a crucial position? It is as if we are dealing with rank amateurs. But how could amateurs have such an installation? When did they build it? Their leader, Paul Sirenne, is being advised by Plantagenet. We both know the leader of the Abbey advises no one and keeps his own counsel. If he is involved, we are dealing with something very important. But Sirenne is a bookstore owner, of all things, a Canadian. Why is he being counseled by Plantagenet?“

„Perhaps the answer lies with the woman, Raymonde Leblanc. She is after all Leblanc's direct descendant. If someone were in the know, it would have to be her.“

„Perhaps. Our research has shown she too has recently returned to France.“

„We are missing something.“

„Yes, nothing makes sense.“

They ascended to three meters beneath the surface.

„Not only is the cave lit, they have apparently set their bulbs at maximum intensity.“

„Perhaps to prevent an invasion?“

„Let's go by that dock. We can surface there and assess the situation.“

The couple swam in a careful series of moves meant to hide their travel through water. Approaching the dock, they noticed the submarine assumed to be the Argos was a totally different beast.

„Is that a swastika, my Husband?“

„Yes. The submarine design is feral. Like a wolf. Is its surface gold?“

„I believe so. Such arrogant opulence. Are these people Neo-Nazis?“

„No, that I cannot believe. The scriptures would have to be completely wrong.“

„Perhaps the Nazis were here. This whole installation could be theirs. Our amateurs could merely be interlopers in a lost Nazi stronghold.“

„It is a scenario which would explain much. Look above. There are no guards, although, there is nothing amateurish about those machine gun turrets above us. They would control the entire cave if they were manned,“ Avi added.

„What should we do?“

„What we came to do. Let's climb on that sub, dry off our suits, put on our clothing, and head up that staircase. The outfits we brought should allow us to blend in. Spoken French only, from now on.“

The two had planned their arrival during the middle hours of the night.

„I can now understand the sunglasses. The brightness explains why everyone we saw wore them. I am glad we brought our own pairs, even if it was for camouflage. I already need to give my eyes a rest.“

They climbed up the side of the German flagship and used the conning tower to hide their quick change, leaving the wetsuits on under their disguises. Running along the plank to the dock, they proceeded tensely up the long staircase contouring the walls of the immense cave. The scale was impressive.

„It's so beautiful in here, my husband.“

„Yes, my wife, it is, and so peaceful. There is a deep quiet here.“

Both were thinking about the few words, decoded in the sacred scriptures, about the coming Armageddon. Two words repeated over and over again.

Tunnels and Caves.

One prophecy mentioned „the Cave of Caves“. Others, less clear, described a „river to the center of all things“. The prophecies made them think of this place.

They continued their climb, keeping a careful eye on the turrets above. Reaching the top of the staircase, they carefully peered above, noticing one man, sitting quietly at a desk, his back to the door. He was asleep.

A single guard! Unbelievable.

Avi and Ziva silently made their way past him and walked down a long corridor.

„The walls are giving off the light.“

„You are right, my wife.“

„And the air. It tastes nearly alive. Do you feel it on the wind? Against your tongue? It gives me energy.“

Avi too, felt enlivened by the air, nearly giddy.

„Perhaps there is a surplus of oxygen in the caves. We must be careful to keep control. Don't let the giddiness take over.“

Reaching the tunnel's end, they climbed a grand circular staircase with a lift in its center, encountering several people along the way. Most seemed to be talking to themselves. Several were carrying on animated discussion with thin air.

„What are they all doing?“

„I think those glasses are communication devices. It is the only explanation which makes sense.“

„The scale of this place is hard to believe. I am convinced it was built by the Nazis. The architecture is unmistakable.“

In silence, they ascended to the top level, which, according to their GPS, would position them about ten meters below the surface. Ziva felt pulled in a particular direction.

„I think we should go down this corridor.“

„Why, my wife?“

„I'm not sure.“

„What is it?“

„I feel like I have been here before. I cannot explain it.“

„Are you well? Is it a deja-vu?“

„I am shaken, husband. It is like remembering a dream I had forgotten. There is a cave nearby. A door beckons.“

Avi examined his wife. He had never seen her calm and cool state shattered like this. Emotions ran rampant across her face. Her eyes locked on his, refusing to let go, her trembling voice gasping:

„There is a door and behind the door... Oh, Avi, I am so afraid.“

„Of what? What is it?“

„I cannot explain it. Something waits for us, Avi. It waits for us behind the door. It waits for us.“

Ziva burst into uncontrollable sobs. She immediately reined herself in but the look in her eyes was unmistakable. She was shaken to her core. Something about these caves had woken something deep.

„I'm sorry, my husband. I do not know what to do,“ Avi felt Ziva's strong emotions as if they were his own.

„Let your fears go, my wife. All is well. Nothing has changed. We know our task. We were meant to come here. If your dreams are leading the way, then so be it. Let us find what is waiting for us.“

Ziva took a deep breath, seeming more composed.

„Your words are wise, as always, my husband. I am by your side. The way is down that corridor.“

She walked as if in a dream, gliding over the floor, towards a wide, dented door near the end of a hallway.

„This is the place. I cannot bring myself to open it. I am sorry.“

Avi bent down, examining the locking mechanism near the cave door, quickly bypassing the simple security protocols. The door slid open and they walked in, standing by the entrance, scanning the area. The room was huge, filled with electronic equipment. Ziva spied something against the far wall. She pointed, her hand shaking.

„Over there, Avi, what is that?“

Avi's heart jumped. It couldn't be, not here.

They took tentative steps into the room, worried about being caught but needing to know. What was on the table?

„They have three of the Four Books, Ziva,“ he exclaimed, his heart hammering and his mind thrown into chaos. These amateurs were the ones predicted in the scriptures? How could this be?

„We must leave, my wife. We must leave now.“

„What about the Books?“

„Do not touch them. We must obtain advice from our leaders. These Books cannot be here by coincidence. It is a sign. The prophecies are coming true and it will all happen here, in these caves. We must return to our base and consult. Do not forget the Americans and their rash policies of interference. Who knows what the French will do. Neither of them can be ignored.“

His wife nodded, eager to be out of the room, away from the three Books. Avi, walked out of the room, beckoning to her. They were running out of time. Hearing faint voices from down the corridor, all hesitation vanished. They ran out into the hall, moments before the approaching people turned the corner.

It was going to be close.

Chapter 18

Encounter with the Devil.

Nearing the laboratory, my sensitive ears picked up a thud, followed by a faint groan, then another, less distinct, crunching noise.

Something was up.

„Doctor, there may be danger in your lab. Contact security. Get them here on the double.“

„What about you, Sir?“

„Don't worry about me, Doctor Phillippe. Just stay well behind me and get to that powder as soon as you have a chance.“

Sweat broke out on his brow and he gulped hard as he readied himself. I hurried to the door, stepping lightly, my body charged up. Hearing a loud crash, I opened the door rapidly, crushing the doorknob in my haste, scanning across the room in a millisecond.

The place was in shambles. There was a huge hole in the wall, where I assumed the safe used to be. Near me, one of the guards lay on the ground, head bashed in, his body broken. I stood on the balls of my feet, the energy coursing through my invulnerable body like a molten river.

Across the room, I saw another broken body, looking as if it had been thrown there without a second glance. The man's head moved slightly and he uttered a groan. He was alive. Doctor Phillippe had stayed by the door but, seeing the state of the guard, bravely made his way along the wall to give him aid. Good man!

A negative head shake from the doctor told me it was too late. I looked around for the safe. It could easily have weighed three hundred kilos. Whoever ripped it out of the wall had to have the strength of ten men. Only one man fit the bill.

Weissmuller.

A plaster trail on the floor led towards a far door. I ripped it open, seeing the safe in the corner, thrown there like so much garbage. The edge of the steel door was curled back but, thankfully, the door was still solidly shut.

We were in time. Weissmuller had not yet gained possession of the powder.

An odd presentiment warned me and I jumped forward, slamming in the far wall before I could stop myself. My sudden move had avoided a powerful slash from Weissmuller, finally out of the shadows. He held a wicked-looking knife, his face a generic disguise, the eyes mad. We were finally face to face, the long-awaited moment.

The monster who had killed my father, mutilated him, tortured him, was right here in front of me.

My rage boiled over and I exploded into action, grabbing the nearest thing, a desk, lifting it over my head and throwing it at him with all the energy I could

muster. The desk broke apart in mid-flight under the stress, the pieces smashing hard against the surprised Weissmuller, sending him crashing against a cement post. He fell to the ground and I ran headlong for him, grabbing a metal chair in my rush, intent in impaling him.

The chair punched into his stomach, the back legs sinking deep into his body. No matter how hard I pressed, a force kept pushing back. Weissmuller slashed with his curved knife, slicing my jeans clean through, my legs unharmed.

Weissmuller began laughing.

It was a cold insane laugh, without rhythm or tempo.

„I can't hurt you, you can't hurt me. Stalemate.“

His voice was without human inflection.

„Help is coming. We will restrain you. You are done, Weissmuller.“

„Ha! Let them come. I will kill them one and all.“

„You will do nothing. I have you.“

„You have NOTHING!“ spat Weissmuller. In an incredible show of strength, he lifted me off the ground and propelled me backward. I flew through the air momentarily, crashing against the safe with a resounding blow. The impact should have broken my back and killed me but I felt nothing.

Weissmuller wasted no time and ran across the laboratory, intent on reaching the corridor without delay. He was foiled by the timely arrival of three burly guards, armed to the teeth. I blocked the doorway behind him.

He was cornered.

Weissmuller never stopped, charging headlong for the guards, who rushed to aim their guns. They were unable to discharge a single shot. He barreled into them, his knife slashing with horrible force. A man put up his arm. It was cut off at the shoulder, blood flying everywhere. The second man, hit by a backhand blow, dropped like a brick, his jaw crushed. Still running at full tilt, Weissmuller grabbed the third guard by the neck. I heard a distinct *crack* when he snapped the man's neck, tossing his body across the hall. He kept running without a single backwards glance, disappearing down the corridor in seconds.

Horrified by what I had witnessed, I would not let the monster get away. Screaming to Dr Phillippe to throw the powder into the fans, I took off after Weissmuller, jumping over the dead bodyguards and rushing down the hall. He was already at its end, heading for the lagoon cave below. I ran like never run before.

I had to head him off.

Weissmuller was moving at near super-human speed but I was catching up to him. I was hitting walls, chairs, but felt none of it, sending it all flying. I would not be stopped. He was jumping down the main circular staircase, taking twenty steps at a time in fantastic leaps. I took a chance and leaped across the chasm in the middle of the staircase, barely missing the lift mechanism, aiming for Weissmuller's back.

I was in mid-air, when O'Flanahan's flushed face appeared on my techno-glasses, screaming at me:

„We're being invaded, Sirenne. Those bastards are here already.“

His face obstructed my view of Weissmuller. Missing him, I crashed into the wall head first, breaking the concrete, the blow disorienting me for a brief moment.

Weissmuller cackled and sped away, taking full advantage of my blunder. Meanwhile, O'Flanahan kept ranting away, puffing hard all the while, sounding exhausted.

„Coulter saw them. They were in his caves, probably trying to steal the three books, but I was there right on time to stop them. We scared them and they ran away. Coulter's giving chase and I'm right behind him.“

Someone else was in the caves? Already? We had only just returned?

Weissmuller's presence I could understand. His eye must have been solidly fixed on our powder reserve. He had been out of the caves for so long, his supply of powder had to be running low. Who else could be here? The ones who shot the remote camera at us? Those *tourists* from the church?

I took up the chase again but I knew it was hopeless. By the time I burst out onto the lagoon cave upper landing, Weissmuller was splashing in the water below from a death-defying dive, vanishing instantly into its depths. Two other figures were running rapidly down the staircase, with Coulter, O'Flanahan and several bodyguards close behind them. Amazingly, O'Flanahan had nearly caught up to Coulter but he seemed at the last of his strength. His red face told the story.

He was all in.

Suddenly, O'Flanahan missed a step and fell forward, rolling out of control. His sprawling, sliding body crashed into Coulter's legs from behind. Coulter went down like a bowling pin, screaming in frustration. Two bodyguards fell over the tangle of bodies, the others barely avoiding the flailing arms and legs.

It gave the spies time to jump from the dock to the Nazi submarine, grab some type of scuba gear and dive into the deep waters of the lagoon. Two of the bodyguards did not hesitate and dove right in. I was running down at full speed but, by the time I got there, the two intruders were gone beneath the waves, the bodyguards searching in vain.

Weissmuller never resurfaced.

* * * * *

„Say, where's Briar in all this?“ asked O'Flanahan, a worried look on his face.

We tried raising him on the techno-glasses but neither he nor his bodyguards would link up. Considering what had just happened, this was cause for concern. Briar's caves were near the lab. Weissmuller might well have gone that way. Raymonde had arrived at the lagoon upper landing, the two Vallin Brothers and several Abbey bodyguards in tow, informing us she had not seen Briar either. A few bodyguards remained at the dock and the rest of us ran back up the long staircase. I caught up to Raymonde, leaving the others behind in my haste. We hurried back the way we had come, rushing to Briar's caves.

It started in the hallway, near his caves. First, a blood spatter on the wall, then another. Then, it was all over, huge gouts of blood staining the floor, in jets and streams, covering the walls, the ceiling, everywhere. By the cave door, three men lay motionless on the ground. My heart jumped when I saw Briar under his bodyguards. They had protected him to the last. We ran to the bodies, seeing in shock that the two bodyguards were already dead, with throats ripped open.

What about Briar?

I slid the bodies off him carefully, not knowing what I would do if I had arrived too late. In relief, I saw Briar's chest rising and falling slowly.

I was about check for wounds or injuries, when his eyes opened, focusing on me.

„Sirenne. Thank God it's you. It's Weissmuller. He's here.“

„Don't worry, my friend. Weissmuller is long gone by now. But you? Are you all right?“

The others arrived just in time to hear Briar's reply:

„Yes, I think so.“ He croaked, lifting up his hands and seeing the blood soaking his clothes. „We were returning to my caves when a noise alerted us. We turned and saw a man running down the hall quite rapidly. There was something odd about his face, as if it were a mask. My bodyguards called out to him. He never answered. The man, it could only be Weissmuller in my opinion, made for me, as if he wanted me dead in particular. I thought I was finished but my bodyguards...“ Briar paused, overwhelmed by strong emotion as he saw them lying dead beside him. „My bodyguards jumped between us, taking the brunt of his attack. He ripped their throats out and threw them both at me. I hit the wall. After that I knew no more, until I woke with you looking down at me.“

„Lucky man,“ O'Flanahan said with a choked-up voice. „Weissmuller doesn't make many mistakes but this is one time where I'm darn glad he did.“

„Well said, O'Flanahan,“ agreed Coulter. „Well said.“

„Let's get a doctor down here to check you out,“ Raymonde suggested, her concern evident.

„I appreciate that, Miss Raymonde. I'm not even sure it will be necessary. I do not think I have any broken bones, just a few bruises from being knocked about. My head is what hurts the most. Very lucky, considering what might have happened. He must have been in a hurry.“

„Yes, he was trying to steal our powder reserve,“ I replied, helping him sit up and getting covered with blood in the doing. Raymonde contacted the medical and maintenance crews to begin the gruesome task of cleaning up this bloody massacre. Seven good men had been killed in the last hour by that monster. Men under my protection. „Once again, Weissmuller was several steps ahead of us. It was pure chance we were able to foil his attempts.“

„Why do you think he chose to strike now?“ wondered Coulter.

„It is obvious in hindsight. Since we have entered these caves, there has always been someone in the power room, blocking access to that fan room, due to the required repairs and upgrades. Weissmuller couldn't get to his special caves and his precious powder. Prior to arriving here, these caves had been dormant for sixty years. Spore production has only recently returned to normal, particularly since we repaired the third fan. Weissmuller was probably depending on his original supply of spores, collected in the 1940's. He had to be close to running out. When Dr Phillippe found that powder stash and locked it in the lab, it was what Weissmuller had been waiting for. His one chance to get at the powder and retain his waning hold on immortality,“ I explained.

„I cannot get over how brutal the man is,“ exclaimed Raymonde. „He killed those people without a moment's hesitation.“

„Lives mean nothing to a monster like him,“ rallied O’Flanahan. „This is what we get for placing ourselves in the middle of real conspiracies,“ he continued, shaking his head.

„It is nearly too much,“ Coulter said quietly.

A somber mood fell upon us. What had our actions wrought?

„It is important to know that it is not us who have killed these men. There is a monster among us. He is the one responsible. It is easy to point at ourselves and say we failed. It takes far more strength to stand up and say: (NO! I will not stop my efforts, our efforts, to find the answers and to stop this monster). It was no mistake to begin the quest and I intend to see it through until the very end. This I promise to you all because I this is a quest unlike any other man has faced. We are all involved, each committed to this. There is no going back. If any of you, my friends, my partner, you, the men guarding us, have any doubts about this, dispel them here and now. The monstrous acts by Weissmuller will not stop me, will not stop us. Instead they will serve to strengthen our resolve to fight to the finish, to go the distance, to choose our side and stand firm.“

My voice had grown in strength as I expressed the feelings burgeoning in me since the beginning of this adventure. If I was meant to lead, then I had to do it. Destiny had picked me for the job, or at least Leblanc had. It didn’t matter that I felt inadequate, it didn’t matter that I didn’t know how to lead them. I simply had to accept this was the choice facing me and, if I was going to accept it, I had to be one hundred percent committed.

It was time to take a stand.

* * * * *

I entered into the fan filtration chamber, finding Doctor Phillippe in the process of dumping the spore reserve into a filtration access port.

„This should do it, Mr Sirene. We are all going to feel the effects of this soon enough. Are you going to tell them?“

„No, not right now. This is to remain strictly between us. I cannot burden our friends with this knowledge. It can do nothing for them. The spores will help them by being there and that is enough. In the meantime they will remain vigilant, not aware of the edge they have been given.“

„That is good psychology, Sir.“

„There is another purpose, a more covert one. We know Weissmuller wants the spores. He made an attempt to seize them. So I propose to set a trap for him.“

„Wouldn’t I need the spores for that?“

„No, something which looks similar will suffice. Get the safe repaired and hide the fake spores in there. Hopefully Weissmuller will be fooled into thinking we still have what he wants. He will waste his time for once instead of ours.“

„That’s brilliant, Sir. Very well, I will attend to it, and mum’s the word.“

„Thank you, Dr Phillippe. You are a good man. I knew I could count on you.“

Chapter 19

Getting Ready.

I no longer slept at all. I had too much energy for that. I still had to rest, strangely enough. We had been going nonstop for several days and my mind was overloaded. I lay down next to Raymonde and closed my eyes, trying to keep my thoughts at a minimum. She lay next to me, trying to do the same.

After a while, I entered a somnolent state, where my thoughts roamed freely. I felt Raymonde's awareness, always by my side, and we traveled the mental waves of thought together. I saw parts of my day. Weissmuller, my battle with him, the dead men all around, the spores, Dr Phillippe, Plantagenet, the Abbey, the Net, all rolling around in my head, the whole overseen by the three books.

So many things were going on, each calling for attention. It all tied together, telling me something without ever spelling it into words. It circled around the mysterious Sauniere, his bizarre church, and its connection with Leblanc, calling attention to the hole under the tower's floor, where the fourth book should have been.

Someone had taken it. It wasn't Weissmuller, because he was also looking for the book. It was why he had involved himself in our affairs in the first place. He wanted answers just like me.

And the answer to what, anyway?

What was driving me, what was pushing me? What did I need to know so badly? Was it worth all this danger, this turmoil? I had been playing a game all along without ever realizing it. A treasure game. Others were playing it, each with their own agenda, most trying to manipulate me. It always came back to me. Weissmuller, Plantagenet, Leblanc, all of them playing the game. Plantagenet's actions bothered me the most.

That white limousine.

It caused us to be noticed. The move had to be intentional on his part. Leblanc said the Abbey had allowed Hitler to enter the caves, knowing what he would do, claiming it to be a necessary opposite. Plantagenet's actions were not those of a man helping me. He was using me! The question was: did I want to continue being used by him?

I gradually slid into a dream state while weighing my options. Like my other dreams, I found myself rising above my body and moving up through the chalk cliffs. Floating above them, I looked down, feeling Raymonde by my side, though I could not see her. We were floating around the cliff, around Etretat's Needle.

I perceived another needle, inverted, deep within the cliff. The meteorite shard. Two needles, one pointing up, the other pointing down. Opposites. Both stylized triangles. Floating into the right perspective, the needles superimposed on top of each other, resembling a six-pointed star, like the Star of David.

I floated away and the image was gone. Raymonde was still by my side, as always. We floated over the beach and the town, watching everyone moving about. The monks were awake, scrutinizing every street. Two Israeli agents lay in bed together, sleeping. The town was safe this night.

I opened my eyes, turning to look at Raymonde. Her eyes were as open as mine. She had experienced everything.

It had been no dream.

* * * * *

Early next morning, Briar came in, wincing a bit, his new bodyguards taking a post by the door. I had asked all my friends to meet at the eleventh hour. Raymonde sat by my side, our thoughts intertwined more than ever. I hardly needed to speak to her anymore, our thoughts connecting on a deeper level. Her radar sense kept increasing in strength. Intruders would have a hard time entering unannounced.

I sat down. My good friends had followed through thick and thin, eager to accompany me to the end of our adventures. I could see it in their eyes, in their every move. Briar himself, after nearly being killed, was here, unflinchingly by my side.

„I called you together to discuss the things that may be facing us within the next few days. I think you all know our expedition to Rennes-le-Chateau has attracted more attention than intended.“

„It was that limousine, the one Plantagenet got for us,“ stated O’Flanahan unequivocally. „It was so blasted obvious.“

„Yes,“ I replied. „There were four separate groups watching that church, waiting for something, waiting for us. Once they latched on, they weren’t going to let go.“

„Plantagenet had to know that. The man’s no fool,“ continued O’Flanahan.

„We have dealt with Plantagenet. During the night, all Abbey personnel were escorted back to the beach. The last sub left ten minutes ago. Plantagenet wasn’t too happy. His guards will remain in Etretat, acting as watchdogs, to warn of upcoming danger. Coulter will give us a bit more information about the two spies who came in to our caves.“

„Thanks, Paul. Since our recent debacles with Weissmuller, I have been installing cameras in more of the connecting tunnels. Due to the size of the cave complex, the task is not yet finished, nor is the system entirely active. Luckily, last night, it was sufficiently active to catch several shots of our spies in action. I identified them as the two Israelis from the church at Rennes-le-Chateau.“

„Christ. How did they get here so fast?“ asked O’Flanahan.

„It’s hard to say. I assume they were tracking us long before we got back. Maybe they extrapolated our arrival location and beat us here. No matter what, it was them. What they did once they arrived was even more interesting. They took their time but they were going in a single direction. Towards my cave. The woman was leading them, as if she knew where my caves were located.“

„That’s impossible, Coulter,“ exclaimed Briar. „No one knows of these caves and certainly not what use we have put them to.“

„I agree, Briar. I am only describing what I see on the video. It doesn’t lie. She led the other Israeli directly to my caves. They went in, looked around, and then walked directly towards the three books.“

„You mean to say you didn’t lock them up in a safe?“ O’Flanahan exploded. „Come on, you can’t be serious.“

„Give me a break, O’Flanahan. We left so quickly before, I didn’t even think of it. They were deep inside the complex, sealed inside my caves. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. They didn’t take the books. They didn’t even touch them. But they knew

they were special. You can see them trembling in the video. They saw the books, then turned and left right away. We arrived down the hall a few minutes later, catching them in the act.“

„Fat lot of good it did us,“ O’Flanahan grumbled.

„What? How dare you say that? It was your fault we lost them. I nearly had them. You were the one who rolled into me. For once in my life, I almost caught someone and you messed it up.“

„You shouldn't be so quick to judge Mr O’Flanahan, Fabian,“ interposed Raymonde. „He may well have saved your life. These weren’t amateurs invading our caves. Had you caught them, there’s a good chance you might have ended up holding the tail of the tiger.“

The thought calmed Coulter down.

„You’re right, of course. I’m no fighter, I’m just a hacker.“

„There is something I must mention,“ interrupted Briar. „I think these two were just an advance scouting party. It is quite likely they were obtaining intelligence about our fortress before invading it. I greatly fear we are under serious risk of an imminent attack. It is entirely possible they now know about immortality itself. It is but a matter of time before they come back to seize it for themselves. It might have been a mistake to remove those Abbey guards.“

„I think not. I am convinced I did the right thing.“

„Me too,“ agreed O’Flanahan. „I never liked those monks.“

„It is not just that. Getting rid of the monks was necessary. This situation is for us to deal with and us alone. It is our challenge. However, do not worry I made this decision blindly. I have ordered Dr Phillippe to reverse the fans and blow the immortality spores back into the caves.“

My friends erupted in a clamor. Briar looked enraged.

„You have put us all at risk, Paul. You had no right,“ he screamed.

„Please, Jonathan, calm down.“

„I will not. This should not have been done.“

„Listen. The spores will not make you immortal. Dr Phillippe has begun understanding the cause of the immortality effect. In fact, immortality is a bit of a misnomer. The spores cover our bodies, improve our health, make us stronger, faster, sharper. With sufficient intake, we can erase the ravages of time on our bodies but, if we stop taking it, the effect fades away and we return to normal.“

„What are you trying to say? That it is not dangerous?“

„I’m saying, in short bursts, it does no harm. In fact, I am convinced it’s our ace in the hole. Dr Phillippe assures me there are now enough spores in the air to protect all of us from most injuries and health risks. If attacked, our people will have acquired a temporary protection. I don’t know if I will keep the fans reversed permanently but, for now, it is the only way I have to ensure our safety.“

O’Flanahan stood up and went to an air vent, making a show of taking big gulps of air.

„What the heck are you doing now?“ asked Coulter.

„Hey, if spores are in the air, I’m going to make sure I get my fair share. I’ve been dreaming about being immortal since just about forever,“ he exclaimed, a big smile on his face.

Briar’s face was still clouded but he slowly nodded his head.

„Very well. I simply wish I had been consulted in this.“

„I'd like Coulter to finish setting up his camera network in the caves and get them fully active. Net members should be called in to help finish the job. I want to know the moment we're under attack. No more spies sneaking in. I want the armory to be opened and weapons passed out to everyone, with orders to carry them at all times. Start manning the lagoon turrets. The fortress should be placed at high alert. Regardless of the spores, this fortress is nearly impregnable. It's time to man it properly. Let's get to it.“

„What about Weissmuller in all this? Are we just going to forget about him?“ O'Flanahan asked, as we stood up.

„That was my final reason for using the spores. In the last few hours, Weissmuller has killed seven Net members. He is already immortal, so breathing more spores will do little for him. On the other hand, it might protect any further victim from his murderous excesses.“

„That's true, Paul,“ agreed Coulter. „It makes sense. You didn't really have any choice. You had to release the spores.“

„It was the only option.“

My friends left down the hall and I headed with Raymonde back to our caves.

Greyman Chronicles

The Watchers.

Destiny Takes a Hand.

The three Watchers had settled in at the Villa Leblanc, signed in by Mrs Leblanc. The group had been in time to watch the Museum's last inter-active Hollow Needle presentation of the day. They had recently arrived at the beach, where they were expecting to meet their French counterparts in the underground movement. It was a windy day, a bit cool, so the three young men huddled at a small table in a bistro overlooking the beach. Three pretty women approached. The French Watchers.

„Hello there,“ Pierre said nervously. The women sat down after a brief greeting. He was never comfortable in the presence of beautiful women and these three defined the word. Pierre could hardly take his eyes off the brunette. Remembering his manners, he introduced everybody. The brunette did the honors for her and her friends.

„I am Denise, this is Monique and that is Michelle. We were nearby, on vacation, when we received the communiqué from headquarters. We couldn't refuse such a call. Is it really as important as they said?“

Pierre nodded. He explained what had led them here, omitting any mention of the battery incident. The three women listened with rapt attention.

„Unfortunately, we are not from this particular area of France. The Watchers don't have a Chapter in Etretat, so we don't have any local contacts. We are waiting to hear from headquarters in case they find someone.“

„What’s that sub over there?“

They peered out the window, where Louis was pointing. An orange submarine had just surfaced, letting out a large contingent of heavysset men, all wearing dark robes.

„They look like a football team for the church,“ Pierre said acerbically. Denise laughed lightly. He smiled, unable to stop looking at her. Flattered, she continued smiling shyly.

„Yes, very odd,“ agreed Robert. „They look like mercenaries, not monks.“

„Where did they come from?“ questioned Michelle.

„I don’t know. I can’t believe all those *monks* would decide to go on an underwater sightseeing tour. They must be related to Plantagenet,“ replied Robert.

The monks reached the beach and stood together briefly. Several of them were holding their fingers to their ear, or talking into their curled hand.

„They’re using two-way radios.“

One of the monks motioned to the rest of the group. They followed him to the edge of the road near the beach.

„Looks like they got their orders.“

„Yeah, stand and wait.“

Denise laughed again but her face grew serious when they saw a limousine stop near the monks. Robert had wisely brought his camera and started filming, zooming in when the rear door of the limousine opened, revealing its occupant.

„It’s Father Plantagenet. He doesn’t look happy.“

Several cars arrived behind the limousine, disgorging more monks. After some talking and arm waving, the group separated, disseminating into all areas of Etretat.

„The Abbey is taking up watch positions, I think,“ suggested Monique. „You were right, my Canadian friends, something is definitely going on here. We should alert headquarters.“

* * * * *

Pierre looked at Denise, sitting next to him on the settee. They had been inseparable during the day, investigating everything together. His friends had gotten on well with the other women but this was different. By the end of the day, the two were holding hands more often than not, hardly concentrating on the tasks facing them.

Headquarters had agreed. The events were serious. Forces were placed at high alert across the entire world. All available Watchers were being dispatched to Etretat but, for the time being, the six of them were it. The chore of collating the evidence had fallen upon their shoulders.

They had not shirked their duties and the day had been fruitful. More monks had been noted, the Mossad had been seen, and a contingent of Americans had recently arrived. The French authorities, however, were nowhere to be seen. The whole town seemed nervous, restless. The locals had been tight-lipped and uncommunicative. Through internet research, Robert

confirmed several satellites had been used to track the helicopter's movements.

This was the calm before the storm.

By the end of the day, everyone felt thoroughly exhausted and had retired.

Everyone except for Pierre and Denise.

They were tired, like the others, but something kept them going. An inner energy had come into existence the moment they met. Now that they were alone together, it blossomed forth in an irresistible tide. Words fell by the wayside and silence took reign when their eyes locked together.

They fell into each other, soul mates coming home.

* * * * *

Early next morning. Pierre was lying in bed, Denise next to him, her warm, naked body tight against his. He thrilled feeling her so close and could not believe he was here. He could count his adventures with women on the fingers of one hand. None of them had ever been like this. She was so perfect, so different than the others. Curiously, the sex hadn't been the best thing. It had been knowing he had found her.

The sex had been pretty good too.

There was a noise from the wall and he looked to see what it was. Standing in a dark corner of the room, examining them calmly, was Fabian Coulter.

„Hi there. How are you both doing?“

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Denise had woken up, freaked, then calmed down and gotten dressed under the sheets. Pierre slipped on his pair of pants, trying to figure out what he was going to say. Coulter didn't seem too angry. In fact, he seemed a bit amused.

„Sorry to barge in like this but I thought it would be best in the circumstances. There seems to be a lot of activity around town.“

„How did you get in here? How did you even know we were here?“

„I think I'll keep that little secret for now, if you don't mind. It took me a while to figure out what you did.“

„What? I mean what did we do?“

„You know, put a second wireless minicam beneath the first one. You hid it under all that sticky tar. Very clever,“ explained Coulter.

Thank you Robert, thought Pierre.

„However, once I was back in my lab, my equipment soon told me something was up. Instead of disabling the cam, I got curious. I asked myself who are these guys? I knew you weren't part of the Americans, or the French, or the Israelis. These cams are jury-rigged, probably put together in about three minutes, as far as I can tell.“

„And you're not mad at us?“

„Well, at first I was, I have to admit it. I mean, you got me good. I thought I was better than that. My wounded pride took over but, after a while, I got to thinking about it. It was the jury-rigging that clinched it. There's a certain

elegance to it. It's not just functional, it's got style, like what a hacker would do. Like me. You know what I mean?"

Pierre and Denise nodded.

„So I thought to myself, maybe instead of cutting them off, I can use the resources at my disposal to backtrack the signal. Imagine my surprise when the signal triangulated over the Villa Leblanc. I had to come see for myself. So here I am and here you are. Now, why don't you both tell me who you are and why you are following us.“

The two Watchers looked at each other, not sure what to say, how to begin, or if they should even trust Coulter.

„Hey, I can understand if you're a bit concerned about me but look at it from my perspective: you are the ones bugging me. By all rights, I should have called in the cavalry but no, I took a chance. I chose to follow my instincts. So why don't the two of you do just that. Trust your instincts. What do they tell you to do?“

Denise was the first to speak.

„My instincts tell me to trust you, Mr Coulter.“

„Me too,“ added Pierre, holding Denise's hand. „Very well.“ he let out a big breath. „In for a penny, in for a pound, I guess, eh?“

She nodded, agreeing with him.

„Denise and I are part of a huge grassroots movement called the Watchers. It started off as a bunch of separate groups, mostly comprised of UFO watchers but, gradually, the different groups were all led to the same conclusions. Something was going on, high level covert stuff. Everyone knew it but the governments involved were all acting as if nothing was going on. The Watchers formed to find out what it was. It took us a while to piece it together. Each government had a different agenda, the majority looking for some historical treasure, convinced it would lead to true power, to world domination, or to world salvation, depending on who you chose to believe. Their search was based on ancient documents, dead sea scrolls, bible predictions, common mythical events from dead civilizations across the world, a whole slew of different sources, all pointing the finger at coming events of importance, predicted to begin in or around Rennes-le-Chateau. None knew exactly what to expect, although some, like the Americans, were ahead of the others, with their steady methodology and scientific approach. Most of us watchers are just regular people, you know, so we were all getting pretty fed up with our governments, watching them enslave us more and more. I mean, they were doing it, that was a fact. The question was: what were we going to do about it? In the end we joined together to watch the watchers. These governments were waiting for a sign to lead them towards what they sought. All we had to do was watch them and they would reveal the pot at the end of the rainbow. So we watch and prepare.“

Coulter couldn't believe what he had heard.

„Are you telling me you represent a movement?“

„A huge movement, Mr Coulter. Thousands across the world, with members in each country.“

„Regular folks, not militants?“

„Well, we have our military factions like everybody, Mr Coulter, but we're not violent as a rule. It's just that we're fed up of being trampled. We won't be caught unaware. Not this time.“

„And what do you want with me?“

„We're not sure. What are you up to?“

The simplicity of Pierre's question was audacious. Coulter hesitated before answering, choosing his words.

„I think you know we have found something.“

„You have found the secret of immortality. That is no little thing, Sir,“ Denise said pointedly.

„The thing is, others know and they are here right now, looking for it,“ added Pierre.

Coulter's eyes widened in surprise.

„What, here, in Etretat?“

„Yes, Sir. The Americans arrived this morning. There are at least twelve of them, snooping around the Aval cliff, most of them hauling bulky backpacks, probably concealing equipment and weapons. There are also two Israeli agents, a husband and wife team, touring around, and the Abbey has tons of monks all over Etretat.“

„I knew about the Abbey but I didn't know about the Americans. Thanks for telling me.“

Denise added, an urgent tone in her voice.

„These are scouts, Mr Coulter. Like us, they are very curious about you and your friends. They may not be as peaceable as we are. Our headquarters have informed us attention has focused on Etretat at several different levels of government all around the world. Very little of it is good attention.“

„It is the absence of the French which bothers me the most,“ Pierre continued.

„What do you mean?“

„They were in Rennes-le-Chateau, like the others. Why are they not here? It is their country. The only reason they wouldn't be here is that they made a deal to stay away and those deals never spell any good for whoever's concerned.“

Coulter was impressed with the man's logic. Impressed and worried.

„Listen you two, it's hard for me to explain what we're up to because I'm not sure myself. I'm like you, a regular guy caught up in some pretty wild events, but I trust the guy leading this thing, Paul Sirenne. We've already had our share of problems. There's a serial killer involved, messing everyone around. We're not sure who to trust. Paul's just thrown out the Abbey watchdogs. I guess that's one big thing out of the way. I don't know what else to say to you two. You both seem pretty decent. Where do you want to go from here?“

„I think we should talk to headquarters about this meeting. Maybe we could work something out. It looks like you found what everyone's been looking for.“

„Seems like it, all right. From my point of view it's becoming a pretty hot potato," Coulter held out a small card. „If you send emails there, I'll get them right away.“

„Thanks.“

„Hang around the Villa Leblanc as long as you can. It's easy for me to get here without being seen.“

„How did you get in, Mr Coulter?“

Coulter laughed.

„Didn't you know? This is the land of secret tunnels.“

Having said that, he opened up the wall behind him and vanished into a secret passage.

Chapter 20

Coulter Steps Up to the Plate.

„That was Father Plantagenet on the phone. He says that the Americans have arrived in Etretat. They're not doing much, just looking around the Aval cliff, although they were carrying some heavy equipment. Plantagenet also confirmed the Mossad were around for a while but left shortly after sunrise. An intercepted radio message from the Americans revealed they were getting ready for something.“

„Let's call Coulter to check on the progress with the camera surveillance system," suggested Raymonde internally.

„No need. He called a short while ago, told me he'd meet us here. He did mention the cam work was done," I replied.

„That's a relief. I'll check into getting the Net to man the vid-cam stations in the surveillance room.“

„I think that's underway too. O'Flanahan took that task over.“

„He's the right man for the job," she commented.

„Ha ha, yes he is," I laughed. „Out of the way, checking everybody out, seeing who's doing what. Sounds exactly like him.“

Coulter knocked on the door and entered, a smug smile on his face.

„I know something you don't.“

It didn't take much prodding to get him to reveal his adventures with Pierre and Denise.

„Coulter, if these Watchers of yours were listening in on our conversations, they know everything," I worried.

„Yes, that's right, everything. It was useless to pretend anything else with them. We're just lucky they're on our side.“

„You think so?“

„Nothing's set in stone but in a situation between governments and us, they're going to root for the underdog. It's a given. They don't trust the governments, not a single bit. They're going to contact us through an email address I gave them. At

least the communication line's open. It's not like those Americans. They're not saying a word."

"How did you get to the Watchers."

"Mrs Leblanc told me about them."

"My mother?" asked Raymonde.

"Yes, she signed them in at the front desk. She made sure to place the leader in your old room, the one with the tunnel leading to the office. It was a perfect set-up. I couldn't resist it. We had recently reopened the blown tunnels below Etretat. It was the perfect occasion to use them. Mrs Leblanc believed they were all right, not a threat anyway. I almost fell into a love-nest when I got there. Felt fairly embarrassed about it, I have to admit. They're genuine enough. A bunch of good folks who have had enough and decided to get involved."

"Tired of being manipulated," I said. "I know the feeling. Well, keep talking to them, not much else we can do. And Coulter? I know you took some risks doing this but good job anyway."

"I wasn't so worried about the risks since I began breathing those spores. It was the first time I ever did anything like that. It was exhilarating. I feel full of energy."

"Don't let it get to you. The energy can get a bit much after a while."

"Well, it hasn't been a bother so far, let me tell you," laughed Coulter. "I've never felt so alive as I do now."

Greyman Chronicles

The Americans.

Preparations.

Omaha looked at his men, proud of what they had accomplished in so short a time. A report from the advance team had informed him the stealth sub was prepped and ready. Best of all, the helmets had just arrived.

"I want you to keep in mind that these helmets carry limited resources. Their batteries only last so long, about one hour, so far as the experts say, and we weren't able to get replacement batteries in time. Don't activate them until the last minute which, in our estimation, will be when we enter the underwater tunnel. There's a good chance the immortals will know that we are here if we wait any longer to activate them. Our entrance will take a half-hour to carry out, so we will be pressed for time to accomplish our mission. Speed is of the essence, speed and accuracy. Each of you has your appointed tasks. You have seen the images of the six people most likely to be immortal, the six from the church. They have been identified; their names are below the images. If you see any one of them, be careful. They are likely to be very strong and fast, possibly resistive to weapons fire. Finally, I'd like to spend one last moment on our special weapons. We only have two foam guns and they are definitely cumbersome, requiring a two-man team for each weapon. It cannot be used without planning. An accident could seal a tunnel with

expanding foam. We must therefore be sure of our target. We have to force the immortals to come to our guns. Don't forget our plans for this. The electrical nets have been scrapped. We couldn't get the bugs ironed out in time. Finally, the coil weapons are single-use only and give a hell of a recoil when released, so position yourselves so as not to be thrown back. Keep yourselves focused and alert. Those immortals are dangerous. Hopefully we can capture them for future study but only if possible. Our primary goal will be to release the nerve gas in the fans. It should deal with everyone except for the immortals. We have all been immunized against its effects but it should drop the Frenchmen like flies. Until then, use any and all means to incapacitate the immortals. Kill everyone else. There is only one option for us: Success at any cost. You know what this means. All right, from now on, we maintain radio silence. No chatter. Carry out your plans. Send the codes when your task is accomplished."

His speech done, he led them to the submarine, hidden beneath a luxury yacht shell. They checked their weapons one final time before taking their posts inside the sub, the last man closing the hatch tightly. The radio operator received the go-ahead from headquarters and, after a nod from Omaha, they submerged, going immediately into stealth mode.

There was no turning back now.

Sinking beneath the waves, they received the coded confirmation from the second team. They were ready to blast through whenever Omaha gave the signal.

Chapter 21

Last Minute Doubts.

The three hundred Net members in the caves were now armed. Children had been herded into the safest caves. The techno-glasses' emergency network had been activated and everyone was at high alert. I had talked to Dr Phillippe and his reports were encouraging. After a series of random physicals among the Cave population, he reported the spores were having a noticeable effect. However, the effect was incomplete. Many people were only partially covered on the outside. Internal organs seemed better protected.

It made sense. The lungs were probably the first area to get coated by the airborne spores. From the lungs, they made their way into the blood stream. Outer skin, on the other hand, would take more time to coat. O'Flanagan was overseeing his surveillance empire and Coulter was monitoring all radio frequencies, hoping to get advance notice of an invasion.

I was on pins and needles. The tension was truly unbearable. An attack was imminent and all we could do was wait. Our ace in the hole, the spores, had not yet had their forty-eight hours. I could only hope their effect would be sufficient.

Briar entered the conference cave. It had been adapted as temporary headquarters. He was without his usual retinue of bodyguards, dispatched to monitor key areas in the caves. He looked worried.

„The whole situation is going wrong. When we started this, I had anticipated we would do our research in peace and quiet, free to reveal our discoveries to the world at leisure. Now, it seems to me as if our actions are becoming impulsive, reactive to the circumstances. We are in danger of losing control. Deep planning seems to have gone by the wayside. We have even taken to following dreams rather than facts and logic.“

„Briar, I know you're upset about my decision to release the spores. I understand how methodical you are and know you think my latest decisions have little planning to them. But that's only when seen from your specific point of view, which I do not share in this instance. The spores have prodded me into a whole new state of being. I am evolving, changing. The changes bring a new perspective, changing the world around me.“

„How can you see things differently? Nothing has changed.“

„That is the amazing part. Nothing ever changes, things are always what they are, but I have changed! Look, Briar, you've always believed the world had to be controlled, understood, mastered.“

„That would be an accurate statement,“ he agreed.

„Our problem is we are faced with something which we cannot master. No amount of control, of planning can help. It is pointless to bash our heads against the walls trying to impose what no longer applies. Our approach must change.“

„I can accept that.“

„The solution, when planning falls by the wayside, is to trust your instincts. Worrying about previous actions and mistakes does nothing. Given that, we can stop wasting energy and focus with single-minded attention on what is happening right now.“

„You would never have talked like this before.“

„I cannot simply think anymore. I have to act. I have to lead.“

„Well, you have are performing that role much better than I would have believed possible. I am most proud of you.“

A tendril invaded my mind. Raymonde!

Something is happening. I can feel it.

Her mental contact was strong and clear, as if she were next to me. Using her enhanced field as advance radar, she had been alerted to an invasion.

I stood up, all hesitation gone.

It was time.

Greyman Chronicles

The Americans.

Time to Do or Die Trying.

The stealth sub slid along, hovering a mere four meters above the seabed. Sonar was being used, supplemented by satellite imagery. They now had an exact picture of where they were heading. The advance team had used portable radar equipment to map out a rudimentary layout of the cave complex. Heat imagery had informed them there were hundreds of people in the cave system along with the suspected Immortals.

Of more concern, confirmation about a large quantities of weapons being delivered to the Etretat submarine dock had come in. Whoever was in there was armed to the teeth.

Omaha gritted his molars together, a habit born out of nervousness. The situation was far riskier than he liked. He was glad they had the nerve gas. The task would be so much harder without it. Looking at his watch, he signaled the others. It was time to enter the tunnel.

* * * * *

The advance team was composed of twenty-four men, each a battle-hardened veteran. They had located a hollow area behind the old Nazi bunker on top of the Aval cliff. Their demolitions expert had placed sufficient explosives to blast a circular hole directly above the hollow.

Computer-enhanced satellite imagery was being relayed to a wrist-held, three-dimensional graphic display of the cave layout below them. Each team member would be easily able to navigate the main tunnels during the invasion. GPS satellite tracking would update the digital cave layout in real time as the mission proceeded, ensuring accurate positioning. The advance team mission was twofold and crucial to the success of the overall attack. It had to be completed within thirty minutes, the time anticipated for the stealth sub force to get into the underwater access cave.

First, the advance team had to reach the ventilation system, deep in the cave complex and release the nerve gas. It would take effect instantly, causing nausea and gagging, followed by intense cramping. If untreated, unconsciousness and death would result within minutes of exposure. Their second mission directive was to reach the stealth sub access point, a massive cave at the bottom of the complex, hopefully driving a few immortals into their trap along the way.

The advance team leader couldn't believe no one had noticed this cave network before. Their research had revealed no existing geographical studies, no archeological digs, no research at all into the area. It was as if someone had erased everything about Etretat.

A small green light flashed on his arm band.

He signaled his men, huddling close against the bunker. They had encountered several monk-mercenaries and security guards and had dispatched them without setting off the alarm. The demolitions specialist indicated he was ready and activated the trigger mechanism. The shaped explosive charge blasted downward with a muffled *WHUMMPHH*, its destructive energy concentrated in a one meter circle. The advance team dropped rope coils into the jagged hole, rappelling down quickly. Five soldiers took defensive position in the tunnels, waiting for the rest of the force, their

magnetic field helmets activated. The night-vision goggles were useless because the caves were brightly lit.

They hurried down the hall, silenced weapons bristling in all directions. They had hoped stealth would be maintained until mission end. Unfortunately, their entrance was noticed immediately. Heat-sensing satellite imagery revealed three groups heading their way.

They ran faster, almost reaching the huge circular staircase leading to the lower part of the complex before encountering their first resistance. Five men brandishing revolvers ran out from a side tunnel, arriving on them from the rear. The team dropped into formation and opened fire.

The silenced automatic weapons emitted a muffled staccato as they fired multiple three-round bursts into the five men. The bullets smacked into their bodies, the impact knocking them down. One by one, the Frenchmen slumped to the ground, riddled with bullets.

A revolver shot stopped the Advance Team's return to the staircase.

A soldier dropped, knocked down by a bullet slamming into his bulletproof vest. Two French guards were getting back up, still alive. The three others were scrambling for their handguns.

Automatic weapons barked again but, this time, the French were shooting back. Several well-aimed revolver shots hit mercenaries in the neck and head, dropping two of them. The advance team shot back with ferocity, trying to kill people who should already be dead. Only one of the five men was down, blood dripping from a stomach wound. The others were still handling their weapons, despite being shot multiple times. Reloading was the only thing slowing them down.

The advance team managed to put them down by directing concerted fire on each of the men in turn, riddling them with dozens of rounds. The Frenchmen fell but not before taking three more Americans out and forcing the use of a serious amount of ammunition. The team reloaded as they dashed down the huge circular staircase. Those men should have died instantly. Why had it been so hard to kill them?

Chapter 22

Getting into Position.

„They're in the staircase, I can see them plain as day,“ Coulter shouted into his mike, flashing the video on the monitors for everybody to see, and giving the alarm. „They've killed five of us already, so get ready.“

„Block the stairs, lock them in,“ suggested Briar. „They've got to be heading towards the power station.“

Coulter relayed the message to a team who quickly ran into position, tossing together a barricade of desks and chairs at the bottom of the stairs. I headed towards the staircase to help them, leaving Briar in charge of the command room.

„I can't feel them at all,“ Raymonde sent. „They've got something protecting them.“

That was not good. I had hoped that Raymonde's ability would have been of some use but apparently the invaders were ready for us. I hurried, anxious to reach the barricade, to give those mercenaries something to think about. It only took a few minutes to reach the stairs but I could hear the commotion long before I arrived.

It sounded like all-out war.

Greyman Chronicles

The Americans.

Breaking Through.

„Sir, they've erected a barricade. It'll take time to get through.“

The advance team leader took stock and answered the soldier.

„No problem. You three take the lead and keep them busy. The rest of you follow me.“

He headed to the floor level above the barricade, going went down the hall and directing the explosive expert to blow a hole into the level below, intending to bypass the barricade. They had to stay focused on their mission directives, not get involved in skirmishes.

Three mercenaries shot at the men cowering behind the barricade, keeping them pinned down. They crept closer, staying concealed below the concrete guardrail to avoid the sporadic gunfire from below. They tossed several flash-bang grenades. They detonated right behind the barricade, the multiple explosions causing a powerful concussive effect in the tight corridor. The French guards were blown against the concrete walls, hitting them with crushing force.

The three Americans rushed the barricade, intending to shoot their way past, when a scream caused them to spin on their heels. A man was vaulting through the air, coming straight down at them, jumping across an impossible distance. In a blur, their guns came up, shooting rapidly, throwing a barrage of bullets at the oncoming man. It should have pulverized him. Instead the bullets glanced off, his clothes ripped to tatters, exposing undamaged skin.

His expression was deadly, implacable.

„It's one of the immortals. I recognize his face, It's that Sirene guy,“ one of the soldiers shouted. They redoubled weapons fire, fear gripping them. One of them pulled a grenade but it was too late. The immortal was upon them.

He landed like a ton of bricks, immobile, scrutinizing the three men impassively.

„Drop your weapons right now. I won't ask again.“

They answered with point-blank gunfire. The bullets hit the immortal but nothing affected him. His face hardened and he pounced forward, suddenly

among them. His arms shot out like two snakes, gripping two necks and twisting hard. He dropped the bodies and looked calmly at the third man.

A coil of razor sharp steel hit the Immortal directly on the back, the coils wrapping his torso, arms and legs, effectively cocooning him. He fell forward from the unexpected impact, hitting the ground like a wrapped-up mummy. The last mercenary wasted no time and rushed past the immortal's prostate form, heading up the stairs to join his team. They had come back for him in the nick of time.

„You better hope those coils hold him. He's unstoppable,“ the mercenary screamed, rejoining the others.

The immortal stretched his arms, flexing his muscles and opening the tightened coils, snapping the bands as easily as tissue paper. He stood up and looked at the landing above.

„Back up, back up, and blow the entrance to the second floor. That'll slow him down,“ ordered the leader frantically.

The Americans retreated, tossing several grenades, sealing the entrance behind them with a thunderous explosion. The team leader looked at his men, his expression grim.

„Well, scratch one super weapon. Hope the other one fares better. At least the coils saved you, soldier.“

„Yes, sir. Thanks for coming back for me.“

„Don't thank me yet. We haven't finished this mission. Let's go.“

Chapter 23

Spreading the News.

The grenades crumpled the second floor entrance when I ripped the final coil off. The guards ran up from the barricade, looking awed.

„That was amazing, Mr Sirenne.“ one said.

„No more amazing than us not being hurt. Those grenades should have blown my eardrums out yet I feel fine. I don't even have a bump on my head,“ the second man noted, his eyes wide in wonder.

„It was a little insurance on my part. I fixed it so you would all be protected, a bit like I am.“

The men remained silent, until one of them asked the question uppermost in their minds.

„You mean those soldiers can't kill us no more?“

I grinned.

„Well, I'd still be careful but it sure is going to take a hell of a lot more to stop any of you now.“

„Heck, it took a lot to stop me before, Mr Sirenne,“ one of them said, grinning from ear to ear. „Now I'm going to be damn near unstoppable. I can't wait to tell

the others. We're going to have us a blast. Those soldiers are going to be in for a surprise."

We went back down the stairs to the barricade. Coulter provided some surveillance video showing what the Americans were up to. They were planning to blow a hole above the first floor hub and bypass our barricade. From there they would be able to access the power station, the fans and the tunnel to the lagoon cave.

"We've got to get there before they do."

I'm on my way to you, Paul.

Raymonde.

I hurried through the barricade, instructing Coulter to call in as many men as possible to stop those soldiers.

We were too late. I heard the blast of their explosives long before I reached the hub. The Americans threw several grenades, the explosions bringing the ceiling down, blocking access to them. I raged, feeling frustrated and impotent.

I was getting angry and the river of energy within me was building into a torrent.

Greyman Chronicles

The Americans. Keeping to the Plan.

"He's coming, I can see him through the rubble," a soldier screamed, cold sweat dripping off his brow. "It's the immortal. We've got to get going or he'll kill us all."

"If you don't shut up, I'll kill you myself," the Advance Team leader ranted. "Get a hold of yourself, for God's sake, man."

Hearing a noise, he turned and saw the immortal lift a huge piece of concrete and toss it to the side. At this rate, he would have the obstructions cleared in thirty seconds.

There wasn't a moment to lose.

"Time to split up. You ten go to the fans and release the nerve gas. That is our most important mission objective. You must not fail."

The mercenaries took off without another word, running down the power room access tunnel at full tilt.

"Now the rest of you come with me. It's time to rejoin the Primary Team," he screamed, seeing the immortal lift the last obstructing block of concrete. Instead of throwing it to the side, the immortal threw this one directly at the team leader.

The three hundred kilogram block of reinforced concrete blasted out of the tunnel, taking the Americans by surprise. It was an impossible throw, an incredible feat of strength. The team leader managed to croak out a barely audible "No!" before the jagged block hit him directly in the chest. Smashing

through the team, and taking another two, the block sailed through the air carrying its grizzly three-man cargo, pinned on protruding twisted metal bars.

They met their end against the far wall.

The remaining Americans regrouped, retreating into the tunnel leading to the lagoon cave, shooting concentrated gunfire at the immortal. They called ahead to the Primary team below, learning they were engaged in a firefight, and in desperate need of their support. Behind them, the immortal kept getting closer, surrounded by more French guards, all of whom were shooting down the tunnel. The soldiers let go several more bursts and took off down the lagoon access tunnel at a dead run.

* * * * *

Omaha peered up at the brightly-lit lagoon cave, his eyes blinking. Their night vision equipment was so much junk now. No one had anticipated the extreme brightness of the caves. The brief transmission from the Advance Team had come through. Despite some losses, they would likely accomplish their missions in the allotted time.

Good! If everything worked out right, this would all be over in thirty minutes.

Two machine guns began blasting from the platform above, bullets lancing through the water at a rate of more than five hundred rounds a minute. Omaha dove back under the water and headed for the dock, where better cover might be found. Some of his men shot back but with the ceiling over thirty-five meters in the air, their accuracy was minimal, the angle terrible. They were in trouble.

Was that a gold submarine over there?

More of his men joined him and they hid between the dock and the gold submarine. It had a Nazi emblem on its side, of all things. Was this a hidden nest of the long gone Third Reich? Immortal Nazis? wondered Omaha.

They assaulted the lower dock, shooting from the water. Two guards near the staircase fell down, hit by several bullets.

They did not stay down.

Crawling up the stairs, hit repeatedly with machine gun fire, nothing seemed to stop the guards. Mowed down by a hail of bullets, impossibly, they began moving again, simply refusing to die.

The turret machine guns blasting from above were far more effective than their own water-soaked weapons. Several of his men had already been killed by the merciless barrage. They only had relative safety if they remained underwater. This was going nowhere.

Where was the advance team?

* * * * *

The ten Americans ran down the power room access tunnel, encountering a single maintenance worker. He was shot simultaneously by three soldiers, a gunshot to the hip, another to the heart and a third to the head. The bullet to his head glanced off, leaving a deep gouge on the skin, the bullet intended for his heart was stopped after penetrating the skin. The hip bullet slid through

the spore's protection, smashing through his hip and spinning him around. He fell back against his work trolley, deep in shock, bleeding heavily.

Unnoticed by the rushing Americans, the flow of blood decreased steadily, the body repairing itself at an impossible speed. He would be good as new in a few minutes.

The Americans burst into the power room, quickly taking cover behind any available object, all attempts at stealth thrown by the wayside.

„We have to get to those fans no matter what. If we can release the nerve gas, our job here will be done in a few minutes. We'll only have to deal with the immortals.“

„I sure hope so. Those guards we've been fighting haven't been pushovers, if any of you have noticed. I sure hope they're not all immortals.“

„Incoming.“

Guards had seen them rushing in and were setting up defensive positions. The sheer scale of the power room was daunting. Looking around they saw no power plant to destroy, just a series of giant metallic cubes. Beyond it was a doorway leading to the fan room.

„That's our objective, men. Forget blowing the power plant for now. We don't have the time. All that matters is releasing that gas. We go for that door, no matter what it takes.“

They advanced in groups of two, jumping from cover to cover. The other soldiers provided cover fire, keeping the opposite forces pinned. Or at least they tried to. Most of the Frenchmen refused to be intimidated, returning shots despite heavy fire in their direction.

It was as if they were all crazy, heedless of the dangers of their exposed positions.

It made advancing a far slower process. The forward-most soldiers took a bullet in the neck, blood jetting from the hole in strong pulses. His nerveless fingers dropped the machine gun and he fell back against the soldier next to him. A minute after that, another shot felled a soldier who had exposed the top of his helmet. Some of those Frenchmen could shoot!

Cheering could be heard from the other side and several insults were shouted at the Americans, followed by more jeers.

They were all crazy.

Moving carefully, the remaining eight Americans pulled out grenades, throwing several and exploding the French off the railings on the left side of the power plant cave. The Americans made for the cleared section, running between the Frenchmen, halving their distance to the fan room door in one fell swoop. They only had to make their way to the far end of the walkway to reach the door.

The problem was the ten guards between them and the door.

The situation did not improve when the Frenchmen charged, shooting rifles, machine guns and revolvers all at once. The Americans were highly exposed. There was nothing to do for it.

„We have to make it. Use the flash-bangs all in a row, clear us a path. Do it now, there's no time, they're almost on top of us. Man, can those guards run fast!“

They lobbed three flash-bang grenades, then three more, quickly averting their eyes, their ears already muffled by the thick helmets they wore. There was no resisting the concussive impact of the grenades. The period of disorientation following the blasts was sufficient to allow the Americans to forge ahead, shooting rapidly at specific targets as they ran past. All aimed for body shots and tried to hit every target twice.

They felt elated, their tactic had worked. They now had clear passage to the door.

„No wait, over there, at the cave entrance, it's one of the immortals.“

„It's the youngest one of the bunch. Named Coulter.“

„He's too far away to catch us in time.“

They hurried along the landing, making for the door.

Coulter wasted no time and bounded in great jumps, holding a submachine gun in each hand, aiming directly for the Americans. As soon as he was in range, which wasn't long, he began shooting with both guns, raining a devastating hail of bullets on the American team.

They returned fire with desperation. Three more of their team fell. The rest ran all the harder for the fan door.

Coulter jumped around their fire easily, laughing with delight, shooting several more accurate bursts, dropping another two men. The last two Americans howled with rage at seeing their comrades fall and threw their last remaining grenades at the insanely fast immortal. They separated, one making directly for Coulter, guns blazing, while the other ran for the fan room door, in a last ditch attempt to finish their mission.

Coulter could not shoot at the man making for the door. The other American was blocking his way. More grenades exploded but Coulter avoided the worst of the blasts and kept moving, aiming his two machine guns again and shooting with deadly accuracy. Over twenty bullets slammed into the American, most of them stopped by his vest.

Most, but not all.

The man fell sideways, squeezing off a final few shots into the ground before collapsing on the floor.

Coulter jumped over him, his guns still firing.

Bullets slammed into a closing door. The American had gotten in.

Coulter vaulted over the railing and landed at a dead run, reaching the door in seconds, ripping it open and seeing the American nearly at the end of the hallway, about to enter the fan room. Coulter shot off several rounds, one of them hitting an exposed area under the soldier's arm.

Mortally wounded, the American only had moments to live.

Fading fast, he managed to enter the fan room, closing the door behind him and kicking his machine gun below the door, jamming the door shut. Great gouts of blood were pouring out of his wound and his rasping breath carried a fine red mist.

Coulter reached the door, slamming hard against it. The American ripped open his pack, breaking the hermetic seal with a snap, pulling an oblong object from it carefully.

His vision dimming, he pulled a tab with a weak and trembling hand. Several bullets hit his body.

His nerveless hand dropped the tube and it fell into the fan.

Hitting the massive fan blades, it exploded on contact, releasing a heavy cloud of gas. It dispersed up the main ventilation shaft, rapidly reaching every nook and cranny of the cave complex.

Coulter sniffed the air apprehensively for a moment, expecting to drop dead but, after a short while, realized the spores had done their job. The Net and his friends were safe. Smiling to himself, he sniffed the air again noting a faint scent.

„Smells like nutmeg.“

* * * * *

The remaining Advance Team burst out on the upper landing of the lagoon cave, shooting the men manning the turret machine-guns at point-blank range. Within moments, they had secured the area. They threw the guards over the thick concrete railing, letting them fall thirty-five meters to the water below.

When the machine-gun fire stopped, Omaha and his men climbed up on the lower landing. Omaha looked down in the water at his remaining men. The furthest one jerked to a halt, then bobbed down under the water.

A second man disappeared a few second later, pulled under with terrible force.

„Watch out. There’s someone under the water. Could be an immortal.“

Several Americans shot their weapons into the water sporadically but it was hopeless. Bullets had little traveling power underwater. The men hurried, trying to get out of the water but they still lost another two men, reducing their force to sixteen, down from twenty-four.

The missing men eventually resurfaced, floating lifelessly.

Whoever had been attacking them never broke the surface once. No air bubbles.

The immortal wasn’t even breathing.

Omaha had a sinking feeling in his stomach. He might not survive this. So far, all his plans had failed. Not enough intelligence. Not enough planning. Not enough men.

Not enough luck.

Yet, he was so close. He could feel it. Immortality was here, in these caves.

There was always plan B.

If you couldn’t take it, you could always destroy it.

Chapter 24

Getting Caught.

I hurried down the tunnel with more than thirty men behind me. Raymonde was close. I could feel her and she was just as agitated as I was.

Whatever they're using to stop me feeling them is getting weaker. I think it's battery-powered. There's a certain feel to the fields around them. I'm going to keep battering at them.

Although hers wasn't a physical attack, I pitied those men when their devices failed. Raymonde was very angry.

I reached the end of the tunnel and came out in the lagoon cave, lifting and tossing four mercenaries over the railing in as many seconds. I headed for the top of the staircase when a tarp was thrown back, revealing three crouching men, the center one with a tank strapped to his back. A strong jet of yellowish liquid spewed out of a tube. It swelled up into thick sticky foam when it hit me. No matter how I moved, the foam kept expanding, covering more and more of my body.

„Keep spraying, shoot it on his legs,“ someone screamed.

The foam hardened very quickly. It heated up, thickening into molasses, then soft rubber. After that, it became much more like hard cement. I couldn't move at all. At least my vision was unobstructed. I was off-balance and, no matter what I did, fell over the landing.

My world changed into a rolling version of hell. I couldn't do anything about it, immobilized by the foam. I rolled down the stairs like a giant beach ball, my only satisfaction being that I bowled several mercenaries into the water on my way down. Above me, guards from the Net were firing desperately, gaining a foothold on the top landing. Several others had been hit by the foam weapon.

I rolled to the bottom, barely missing another three Americans, before splashing out onto the water. The foam ball righted itself, floating with my head up, my eyes darting left and right in an attempt to see what was going on.

*They got me good, Raymonde. Watch out for their foam weapon.
I'm coming Paul, I'll be there in moments.*

Greyman Chronicles

The Americans. Time to Die Trying.

Omaha watched as the immortal-bearing foam ball floated away, not believing it. They had caught one of the six. He told the soldier next to him to prepare the small nuclear device, while sending three others to snare the foamed-up immortal with grappling hooks. He glanced at his watch.

The helmets batteries were going to die soon. They only had a few minutes left at most. How could time have gone by so fast? He saw one of his men, who had been bowled into the water by the foam ball, get pulled under just as he reached the safety of the dock. Then another, and another.

All three gone, just like that.

Those immortals were monsters!

He looked up at the top landing, where a ferocious battle was going on, a battle his men were losing. Those guards just wouldn't go down. They kept taking slug after slug. It was just a matter of time before they lost that position and the machine guns turrets would begin firing down on them again. He looked at the giant floating foam ball. How would they get that back to the sub, or even into the sub? The foam was too buoyant to be pulled underwater, not in the few minutes they had left.

It was hopeless. They had failed.

Omaha nodded at the soldier kneeling by the small tactical nuke. The soldier's face blanched, understanding what he was being ordered to do. His hand reached to activate the timer but stopped suddenly. Omaha asked him what he was waiting for but the man never replied. When Omaha touched his shoulder, the man fell over sideways revealing a clean hole, right in the middle of his forehead.

Where had that shot come from?

Omaha didn't waste any time looking and reached for the trigger mechanism.

Chapter 25

Unexpected Saviors, Unexpected Revelations.

I was floating on the water. Some Americans had snagged a hook on the foam. They were reeling me in when I heard a shot nearby. It came from across the landing. I was rotating on the water and saw two still forms resting on the edge of the water, in camouflage rubber suits, with equally camouflaged rifles, aiming at the dock.

I continued rotating and my eyes fell upon the dock where one of the Americans from the church was talking to a man kneeling in front of a medium-sized box. The kneeling man fell over. The American reached down to do something in the box. Before he could touch it, another shot resounded behind me and his head exploded.

The few remaining Americans had begun returning fire but they were guessing. They could not pick out the camouflage from the landscape.

There they are, shouted Raymonde in my head. *Those Americans have just lost their protection.*

Every soldier suddenly stopped moving. I felt an incredible tension in the air. The field Raymonde was generating increased in intensity, putting more and more pressure on those poor Americans. Their eyes were bulging terribly in their sockets as they vainly tried to escape their fate, unable to move.

I felt a ten-fold increase in the pressure. The power behind it was unbelievable. Every American instantly collapsed on the ground, killed on the spot.

Waves hit my foam prison and it rolled loosely on the water. By luck, it rotated to the left and my eyes fell once more upon the two camouflaged forms. They were standing up, dropping their weapons, and raising their hands up in the air but not before removing the masks, exposing their faces.

The two Mossad agents.

* * * * *

Ives Vallin had reeled me in and, after some chipping at the hardened foam, managed to get a few cracks in it, allowing me some degree of movement. It was all I needed to break free. A guard handed me some overalls to replace my tattered clothing, shredded by hundreds of rounds.

We headed to the top of the landing, where I finally met up with Raymonde, hugging her.

„I killed all those men.“

„As did I, earlier. It had to be done.“

„You are right but still...“

„Yes. Still.“

Later, we reassembled in the Command center, where Briar waited for us. He had remained there, preferring to keep on top of things rather than participate in the fire-fight. He was an archeologist, not a mercenary. O’Flanahan had done the same in the surveillance room. Four guards had just brought in the Mossad agents. Raymonde, sensing their fields, had known instinctively these two meant us no harm.

We had found the nuclear device on the dock and now knew those two shots from the Mossad rifles were responsible for saving our lives. Immortality or not, I doubted we could have survived a nuclear blast. These were the same two Mossad agents who had invaded our caves earlier. They had come here uninvited and left without explaining themselves but they had returned exactly on time to save us. It earned them a chance to explain themselves.

I gestured at them to sit but they refused and remained standing, seeming nervous to be in my presence. The woman held a wrapped package in her hands. She stepped forward, placing the package on the table carefully, stepping back quickly.

„This may help explain our presence here,“ she said deferentially, making a gesture in the package’s direction. „Please open it, Sir.“

I did as she asked, removing the wrappings in a single pull.

The fourth book!

I looked at the two agents, nodding my head in sudden comprehension. They were the ones who had found the book in Saunier’s Magdala Tower. Instead of keeping this precious object, they had risked life and limb to save our lives and return the book to the rightful owners. The man took my nod as his cue:

„My name is Avi Bakla and this is my wife Ziva. We are Mossad agents, sent here on a mission of the highest importance. Our country had long been curious about the strange goings on around Rennes-le-Chateau. We were looking for the Fabled Menorah originally but also for a mythical Book which was supposed to explain the meaning of life itself. It was reputed to have been hidden by the Priest Saunier. After many searches, we were convinced the Book was hidden under the

floor in the Magdala Tower. We eventually identified the square only to be confronted by a bizarre locking mechanism which challenged us for several years. You can imagine our surprise when we finally removed this fabled Book and found it to be nothing else but a work of fiction. »The Hollow Needle« by a French author, Maurice Leblanc, dead in 1939. It took us a while to realize this author had left behind clues in his other novels, clues about Sauniere that could lead one to find this book. But why this book? What was important about it? Eventually we found out the book was indestructible. It was treated with a bizarre substance which rendered invulnerability to the book. That wasn't all. The company which printed the books had no records of such a production run. The books were signed by the author with apparently genuine signatures but the author was dead long before the books were supposedly printed. Nothing about this book was what it seemed.“

Ziva interrupted her husband.

„We were not involved when the Book was found but we were the ones selected to do most of the investigating. We found many connections between Sauniere and Leblanc. The two worked together with a single purpose, to hide this indestructible Book, waiting for a specific person to come and find it. We were not the people intended to find it. We had just been lucky.“

„Or thorough,“ observed O'Flanahan.

„Yes, that we always have been. But somehow we had found a very special object. We knew it had a purpose we could not decipher. However, we could not ignore the object's bizarre attributes. Our physicists derived certain conclusions from their examination of the object's properties, linking it to predictions from the Ancient Testament. We were ordered to investigate further. We began to believe we were looking at predictions about Armageddon. Of course, many did not agree with this interpretation. No matter their objections, the fact remained that portents all over the world were supporting our view of developing events. Our leaders chose to err on the side of caution, lest we be right.“

Avi jumped in, his earnest eyes boring into me.

„That is why Israel resolved to wait and watch Rennes-le-Chateau. If our version of coming events were true, then a very special person would be coming to get the object now in our possession. We resolved to wait, to see who would come. We have waited. For you, Paul Sirene. After our brief foray into your caves, seeing the other three Books, we knew you had to be the long-awaited man. We were ordered to return this object to its rightful owner and to help you in your task in whatever way we were able. Israel was born out of faith, of a Covenant between our people and our God. This same Covenant has led us to you, to these caves. The Book falling into our hands was our test of faith and we will not have been found wanting.“

His wife took over without skipping a beat. It sounded like a prepared speech, which it probably was.

„Our faith has always been at the center of everything for us. It stretches back into antiquity, into the ancient testament when our Lord chose our people to carry his faith, our covenant with him. Since that time, we have endeavored to remain true to his words. We have tried to discern the meaning hidden within them. Always, our struggle has remained a test of faith. Never any proof. Your arrival has changed all that. It was the catalyst we had been waiting for. We knew you would

come and what our role would be when you did. Israel's decision has been made, not out of choice, but out of faith."

Avi continued.

"This is why the two of us have been ordered to place ourselves entirely at your disposal. We will act as intermediaries between you and our government, should you choose to accept us in that role."

"At our disposal for what?" I asked, stunned.

"That is open for discussion, Sir. Our leaders believe your goals and ours are aligned in a unique way, because of our faith. In these difficult times, we want you to know that we are on your side. And know this as well: Paul Sirenne will be protected. What the Americans have done will never occur again. Our country vows it."

I was not ready for this. They thought I was some type of special being. They were wrong. I was not. I was just some guy in the right place at the right time. Sure, I had to make tough decisions. Sure, events had made it seem as if my arrival was the result of predictions but, inside myself, I did not believe I was made of special material, nor was my destiny a prophesied one.

Perhaps, Paul, but look at how we are changing. We are not as we once were and I doubt we shall ever be again. My field is making me so much more sensitive to how we are interconnected. What has happened to us cannot be explained through conventional wisdom, Raymonde sent. She had been listening to my thoughts. Our connection was so strong that we were almost one. I replied in the same manner.

You may be right but I have never been one to jump in with both feet, particularly on the assertions of another. I like to check my facts and they are not all in yet. Dr Phillippe has informed me the iridium in the spores has bizarre properties. He implied there was a scientific basis for what was happening to us. At present, I tend to agree with him.

It was an insoluble argument and we both knew it. I felt like a Doubting Thomas. No matter our questions about these assertions, the situation was still in front of us, in the form of these two Mossad agents with their unbelievable proposal.

"Well, Avi and Ziva Bakla, I accept your offer of support. You can remain with us and help with our investigations. We will have to see where this takes us. I am glad we will do it together."

"Thank you, Sir," Ziva exclaimed.

"No, thank you, both of you. You have saved all of our lives this day. We cannot forget that. And I am not talking to your country, either. It is the two of you who are here, who saved us, not them. It is to you we owe this debt of gratitude."

I looked at them intently, making sure they understood I was extending my loyalty to them, not their country.

* * * * *

We entered Coulter's caves, where the other three books were stored. Finally, the first phase of our search was over. We had found the four books. I held the fourth copy in my hands and approached the bench, intending to place it with the other three. Within five meters of the other books, the book in my hands began tugging forward. With every step closer, the tugging increased exponentially.

When I reached three meters, it became hard to hold onto the book. It was vibrating, pulling this way and that, as if under the influence of a powerful magnetic field. The other books had all started moving as well.

Suddenly, the book flew out of my hands with incredible force and slammed into the other three. The four books rolled around in the air in a clump, levitating two meters off the ground in front of us.

„Wow, will you look at that,“ uttered O’Flanahan, his raspy voice uncharacteristically hushed.

As they rolled, they began spinning faster and faster. The four books slowly separated from each other under the centrifugal force, taking equidistant positions. The mad spinning slowed down until, eventually, the four books stopped moving, still floating two meters off the ground, frozen in position. Coulter pulled out his compass but put it back into his pocket shaking his head.

„Can’t use it. It’s spinning out of control. I wanted to check. I think I might be crazy but tell me if those books haven’t aligned themselves with magnetic North?“

„I don’t think you’re crazy, boyo,“ whispered O’Flanahan, looking at the floating books in awe.

I approached the levitating books, feeling a pressure around them.

I can feel the pressure too. It’s very strong. There’s a lot of energy there, Paul.

I lightly pushed one of the books. All four moved in unison, floating slowly away from their alignment. The energy of my push dissipated and they returned to their original position. I took hold of two of the books and tried to move them closer together. I failed.

„They are locked in this position. No matter how much I exert myself, they insist on staying apart from each other in this exact arrangement.“

„Great, just great,“ exclaimed O’Flanahan sarcastically, finally out of his reverent stage. „Another mystery instead of answers. Just what we were looking for. We got a stupid rock and four floating books for our efforts, which nearly got us all killed, I might add. Well, I don’t mind the *being immortal* bit but apart from that, it seems like pretty much of a wash.“

I laughed out loud. Good old O’Flanahan. You could always count on him.

He was, as always, correct! Once again the answers we sought had slipped away the moment we grasped for them. However, not everything was the same. We had been changed by our adventures, all of us, within and without. The world was waking up to our presence and would soon know the caves’ true role in history. Tomorrow would never be the same as a result of what had occurred here today.

There was no going back.

I had embarked on a journey that had to be seen to its conclusion, no matter the costs or where it took me. The caves had called and I had answered. I had been tested and I had survived. I still did not know where this was leading but it was my task to find out. Chosen or not, I knew that, right now, the powers of the world were positioning themselves, choosing sides. Some would come looking to me for answers.

I would not fail them.

I would go on, led by Leblanc’s coded words, by Saunier’s hidden messages, by the four books themselves, by the Abbey, bolstered by my good friends, Coulter,

Briar and O'Flanahan and joined by my other half, Raymonde. No matter where it led me, I would see it through.

Greyman Chronicles

Jacques Cartier's Purpose. 1534 A.D.

By Liam O'Flanahan

Captain Jacques Cartier lowered the looking-glass and shook his head, muttering to himself. He stood alone on the bridge of his ship, LA GRANDE HERMINE. It had been „given“ to him by King Francis the First. Cartier knew full well Francis had little choice in the matter.

He was moody this morning. The entire process was just taking too long. Time seemed interminable lately. First, they had stolen IT from him again, not that he didn't want to give it to them, it was here for that, but he had to be fair and keep playing the game. If they had it hidden and he knew where it was, he was duty bound to go after it, if only to get it out into the world again.

It was all that weasel Columbus' fault. If he hadn't gotten involved with Vlad Tepes, if Vlad Tepes hadn't found those four Abbey monks, if Columbus hadn't figured out the map, this would have been so much simpler. But now he had to go back to the New Land and see if the darn thing was still where it had been placed.

Cartier paced while looking out over the endless waves surrounding them, mumbling to himself some more. The sailors were all grouped together on the other side of the ship, trying to keep as distant as possible from the frustrated Captain. The crew had been a wild and rowdy bunch at first, looking to their Captain as wolves look to the lamb.

They had realized their error quickly. The first three who spoke out of turn to the Captain fell dead to the ground moments after speaking. All those present swore the Captain had never touched any of them, save for a quick hard look. It took two more to die in the same fashion later that day, for the sailors to realize they had boarded ship with the very Devil himself.

And the Devil was not a patient man.

It was do or drop dead on the spot. There was no arguing, no discussion. The Captain commanded and you did exactly what he said, hoping all the while, every single second, that he never once cast his cursed eyes in your direction.

Cartier sighed again, feeling the waves pounding against the ship's hull. A steady wind pushed them steadily forward, always aimed in the exact direction they needed to go, to Oak Island, where Vlad and Columbus had most likely hidden the treasure.

The only question Cartier had left was: was it still there with the treasure? Had Vlad or Columbus taken the One Book with them or left it behind, missing its significance? If Cartier was going to play the game, to obey the rules, he had to go there to find out. He couldn't cheat, not again. That always ruined things and anyway, so much time had already passed. What was another few hundred years? Still, Cartier found sailing such a slow, tedious process. He would have walked but he enjoyed breathing.

It gave him time to rant. Ranting was good. He could review all the things that had led him here. Considering what had already passed, Cartier still didn't know where it was going. He understood the basic formula well enough, that part was easy now. It was pretty much like baking: take the ingredients, put them in an oven, wait a few millennia and voila!

But he still had not managed to cook that damn cake all the way. Like those overly-complicated soufflé recipes, the thing tended to collapse at the worst times. Cartier had nearly forgotten how many times he'd failed. Still, this time, there was a chance. All the ingredients were assembled, in the right order even. It had been baking pretty well and a nice smell was starting to come out of the oven.

Cartier hoped this wasn't one big wasted trip. If he didn't find the One Book at Oak Island, there was no telling where the thing had ended up. He'd have to start digging in the back trail again to figure out what he'd missed, but he wouldn't be able to do that until he returned to France.

Another insufferable three months at sea, having to go back and crawl in front of that idiot King Francis.

The whole idea of it made Cartier's blood boil and he gritted his teeth, uselessly of course, because they could never wear down. A heavy storm was gathering behind the Grande Hermine and a blast of wind hit its sails with a strong push, driving the ship even faster through the water. Cartier smiled bitterly, the wind echoing his frustration.

The sooner this was over the better.

At the back of the ship, the sailors huddled even closer together, trembling in fear while listening to their ship's groaning protests under the wind's single-minded assault. All of them kept rolling the same thought over and over again in their heads:

The sooner this was over, the better.

The End ... For Now!

