

The One Book of Eternat

The Sirenne Saga, #3

by Matt Chatelain, 1960-

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To Louis and Julie

Prologue

Greyman Chronicles.

By Liam O'Flanagan.

**Time: thirty-six thousand years ago
Location: the caves**

The Neanderthals came out of the hole in the ground, in groups of two or three. More and more kept coming, obstructing the cave entrance in their haste, carrying everything they owned. They were leaving their home, their caves, never to come back, the decision made by the elders. All looked ill, even the children. Most were breathing in thick, clogged rasps, heavy mucus blocking throat and lung. Soon, there were several hundred Neanderthals, huddled in small groups, waiting for the last few stragglers.

They had lived here for four generations. When originally found, the caves had seemed like a haven from ever-increasing dangers. Apart from the usual rigors of living, a new threat had appeared in the form of roving groups of hairless apes. The Neanderthals had tried to coexist peacefully with them but their every attempt had failed. They were simply too different. The hairless apes communicated with sound rather than physical gestures, making exchanges between the two races almost impossible. To make things worse, the hairless apes were aggressive, taking what they wanted, when they wanted.

It wasn't long before the attacks had turned into an endless series of murderous rampages. Killing the hairless apes served little purpose because more always kept coming. That was why the caves had seemed so perfect. Their entrance was small and hard to find, making it easy to defend. They could house a large community inside the bright caves and, far below, there was a tunnel leading to an isolated cove, where they could fish, safe from attack.

It had been perfect until the sickness came. It began with just a few of them but spread quickly until all were infected. Babies were born with the sickness. Everyone was weak and feverish, fighting the growing infection. After much deliberation, the elders decided that the sickness was from the caves. It could not

be denied something was different in the air. Something had changed and they were no longer welcome. The community would leave the caves, despite the dangers out there.

There was little choice. Their group had already dwindled to low numbers, with fewer births and more deaths than usual. As the exodus got underway, five tribesmen stayed behind to fill in the tunnel at the cove and to close the entrance tunnel on top of the cliff. It was important to protect others from the badness in the caves. The five tribesmen were supposed to catch up with the group when their task was done. They never did.

No sooner had the southern exodus begun, heading to the big rock by the water, that perils appeared, in the form of bands of hairless apes roaming the land. The landscape was barren of animals, overhunted by the apes, and it was difficult to search for edible plants while travelling. Arriving at a vast plain with too many apes to cross safely, the Elders remembered caves to the west, where brethren had once lived. It was decided to head there, if only to rest and forage for food.

By the time they had arrived, almost a quarter of their group had been lost either to sickness or rigors of the trip. To their happy surprise, the caves were still inhabited. They were welcomed with open arms, the women tending to the frail and sick, while the men helped the rest get settled. The disease spread unseen in the night. When signs of sickness began showing in their brethren, the Elders realized they had brought death with them unwittingly.

They left soon after, resuming their exodus for the warmer climates of the south. Behind them, the sickness continued spreading from group to group, infecting everyone, dooming the Neanderthal race to extinction. The travelers' troubles were not over. In their quest for an elusive safety, they were obliged to cross six mountains ranges and untold bands of apes. Meanwhile, the sickness continued to take its toll, weakening them and reducing their numbers.

Suffering quietly, they learned to travel at night, hiding in daytime. They kept a constant lookout for the roving bands of apes and avoided crossing their paths whenever possible. They became adept at living on little food, their bodies growing leaner.

They survived the long exodus, arriving at a body of water with no end. Traveling along the coast, they came to an incredible sight, visible far inland, a large rock sticking up from the landscape.

Arriving to it, they saw caves up in its cliffs and knew they had found a new home. It didn't take them long to find a way up. The caves were dark, unlike their old ones but this darkness felt welcoming. Their group numbered less than a hundred by then. The sickness had receded into the background, with most of the children born resistant to its effects. However, unknowingly, they had all become carriers. Whenever any of them traveled out to find more of their kind, the sickness went with them, leaving death in its wake. They soon learned to stay near the Rock and its relative isolation.

The rest of the Neanderthals succumbed to either the sickness or the incessant attacks from the apes. Despite their survival, the tribe in the rock somehow knew they had brought death to their kind and the knowledge tainted their souls. They stopped looking for more, knowing none would be found.

Their extinction happened so slowly, they hardly noticed. In their hearts, they had died long before anyway.

Paul Sirenne

Chapter 1

The Energy Within.

The four books floated in front of me, aligned in their cross formation. I had once more spent the entire night looking at them, sensing and probing their immense energy. We'd had three of the books almost from the very beginning of our search. The fourth book had been given to us by the Mossad agents, Avi and Ziva Bakla, shortly after our caves had escaped destruction from a covert attack by a group of American mercenaries. Already, the United States were back-pedaling, their diplomatic envoys trying to pacify us, explaining their intent had been for the good of all and other such trite nonsense.

Their words did little to hide the fact that they had attempted to obliterate us with a small nuclear weapon. Only the timely intervention of our Israeli friends had saved us. After consultation with my friends, Fabian Coulter, Jonathan Briar and Liam O'Flanahan, I reacted to the covert attack by releasing an internet video of the American's brutal actions. Although secrecy had been our motto up to this point, everyone knew the secret was blown. Several countries knew about the caves and it was just a question of time before everyone was in on it.

By releasing the video, we had taken control of the situation, changing our position in world dynamics at the same time. Coulter had made sure to insert several scenes where spore-protected members of the Net had survived sure death, and some few actions of my own, displaying impossible strength and invulnerability.

The secret of immortality, kept hidden for thousands of years, had finally escaped into the open. Now, no country would allow any other to approach us, lest any one get the advantage. We had something everyone wanted. At our request, Israel had mobilized its army to establish a ring of protection around the caves. The French, shamed by their previous inaction, had given their approval to the military action, insisting it be a joint effort in order to save face. Less than a day after the attack, Etretat was surrounded by the fledgling army. A day after that, the nearby waters were being patrolled by both French and English Navies.

It took the possibility of covert attacks completely out of the equation.

Whatever I was here for, whatever this whole thing was about, there was no escaping it now. My face was known across the entire world. We had been contacted by just about every country, intent on starting discussions about getting their hands on what we had. Not all countries shared the same positive outlook on

the events. Several seemed belligerent and aggressive, a few almost unreasonably so.

Even though only two weeks had gone by since the American attack, a worldwide hysteria about our caves was rapidly building. We could well understand why. The entire world, our planet, was in dire straits. The pollution it had long suffered at our hands was having serious, deleterious effects on air quality and weather. The warming of the atmosphere, due to the greenhouse effect, had accelerated melting of both Polar ice caps. Already the ocean levels had gone up more than one meter, causing massive flooding on a worldwide scale. Holland was being evacuated as well as other low-lying places.

The problems did not stop there.

A new pandemic had made its appearance. This one had emerged in birthing wards all over the world. Babies were still-born, in every country, without exception. The stealthy virus had slipped by the disease control centers, disguised as a variant of the common flu. It had seemed similar to several existing strains and its effects were milder than most. However its DNA had contained some unexplained anomalies.

A month ago, a scientist linked those anomalies to a little-studied hormonal effect on the ovaries. It took another two weeks for researchers to realize the hormonal effect would induce a change in the gestational process which would invariably kill the unborn child. Worse yet, the change was genetically permanent, staying behind after the flu had run its course.

The disease was a race killer!

Inevitably, the news had leaked. That was one week ago. The entire world was reeling. Biological warfare accusations were flying between countries. To calm the record-high level of tension, an international investigation had been launched to trace the origin of the genocidal flu. It was hoped they would find answers quickly. If no cure was found, this generation might well be mankind's last.

Frequent storms had begun occurring out of their normal cycles, each more powerful and destructive than the last. Earthquakes were happening with increasing frequency. Several volcanoes had unexpectedly erupted. The cost of dealing with the unending list of disasters was having a deadly toll on the fragile worldwide economy which had already been teetering on the edge of failure after the recent stock market collapse.

In short, things were not looking good.

Then we had arrived on the scene with our power of immortality shining bright, looking like the answer to everything. It was no such thing, of course, but in a world increasingly without hope, it seemed to be the way out to most people. Unfortunately, they were looking for hope in the wrong place. While it was true that the cave spores provided those exposed with physical invulnerability and health, an immortality of sorts, the spores were in short supply. The spores were from a fungus uniquely indigenous to these caves, which had so far resisted any attempt to transfer it into other environments. It was inconceivable to think a sufficient quantity could somehow be provided to protect the entire world. At best, perhaps five hundred people could be helped this way. A drop in the bucket, when compared to the billions of people clamoring to be saved.

Another problem existed: there were two ways for the spores to affect you. One was by ingestion or absorption, requiring regular intake to maintain the effects, while the other method was through genetic change of your offspring. This genetic effect had been predicted by Berenger Saunier and used as part of the Abbey's plans to place me here.

In the early 1900's, Maurice Leblanc had been exposed to the spores, as had Albert Lindon. This had caused the genetic change in their children, a dormant one which could only be activated after three generations, through a second exposure to the spores. When Raymonde Leblanc, the woman I loved, and I had first found our way into the caves several months ago, the spores had immediately entered our bodies, starting an irreversible process of genetic change within us.

We were now both becoming true immortals and we were the only ones in the world with the genetic ability to do so. It made us stronger, faster, invulnerable to harm, our physical needs entirely eliminated. It was also changing our minds, generating new abilities. Unfortunately, this process could not be transferred to anyone else for a minimum of three generations. In the wake of the pandemic, it was uncertain anyone would be left alive by that time.

I found it hard to accept this situation had been intended by Maurice Leblanc. Yet, he, Lindon, Saunier and the Abbey had definitely planned my involvement in all this. I had to assume they did not anticipate the recent disasters, although they had undisputedly managed to time my arrival at a key point in history.

As far as I knew, their goal had not been to insert me into world events but rather to lead me to collect four mysterious books, identical copies of Leblanc's *The Hollow Needle*, which had bizarre and unexplainable properties. We had just completed that task and now, I would have thought I was supposed to begin the next step, already spelled out in a coded message found at the end of Leblanc's first journal. I was now supposed to *read between the lines*, and then *look for the lost caves*. There was nothing in there about becoming the focus of just about every country in the world.

There was one more reason the spores could not be a true solution to the world's problems. All who had used them for extended periods in the past had eventually become incredibly violent and destructive, no matter what their original intentions had been. The cause seemed to be an all-pervasive, increasing numbness which would eventually drive the sensation-deprived immortal insane.

Both Raymonde and I had noticed this growing numbness but its effects were not as important because of an inner connection between us, begun shortly after our exposure to the spores. Along with the connection, I had developed a greater level of mental clarity. Raymonde had developed a powerful radar-like ability, some of which had been transferred to me, through our strengthening connection.

The inner radar sense provided an alternative to the sensations the numbness had removed. It wasn't the same but it was better and clearer. Raymonde, with her more developed radar, was able to feel every living thing around her, her sense like a field, its range had lately begun expanding by leaps and bounds. She could exert a strong influence on most creatures within the field, from making them feel happy, to making their body systems shut down. The only exception was when people were affected by the spores.

So far, we had managed to keep her growing abilities a secret. We were not exactly sure why we had made this decision but it still felt like it had been the right thing to do.

A call interrupted my thoughts. It was Fabian Coulter.

„Still not sleeping, Paul?“

„No. Sleep is totally gone. Sometimes I get into a somnolent state where I dream a bit but that’s about the best I can hope for... There’s just too much energy inside me.“

„I know what you mean, I think... When I was exposed to the spores, I felt some of that energy. It was like there was nothing I couldn’t do. The feeling is nowhere as strong now, though...“

„It wouldn’t be. Just before the attack, we dumped our entire reserve of spores into the cave air supply, in order to affect everyone rapidly. By now, the spore levels have dropped back down to a lower one, so the effects should be far less intense, probably simply boosting health levels for most people. You and the rest of our original group might be closer to an invulnerable state, since you have been in the caves the longest. Still, numbness should be minimal, if even present.“

„It’s just as well. I wouldn’t want to become a full-fledged immortal, not if a stronger numbness was involved. I couldn’t stand it... The reason I called, by the way, is that the Watchers have been in touch.“

„The Watchers? Are they still around?“

„More than ever. With everything falling apart the way it has been, people have had even more reason to pull together. But with the Watchers, it’s something more. They believe all of this could have been stopped if our governments had acted properly. Some of them are still holding on to the hope that we could be saved from this mess.“

„I’m not sure how. I’ve been thinking non-stop about the failing ecology, the collapsing economy, the pandemic... It seems hopeless.“

„Sorry to hear that, Paul, because the Watchers seem to think that the answer to it all is you!“

„Not that again. Listen, Fabian, if I’m the answer, what is it that I’m supposed to do to save them all? This talk of me being a savior is utter nonsense.“

„Believe me, I understand your frustration but the thing is, they really, really believe this. They’re not even listening to your objections. They know they are right... and they aren’t the only ones, either. The Jews think you’re the true Messiah, That’s why Israel is backing you, you know that. India thinks you are an Avatar of some sort, coming to save the world...“

„Coulter, look at me... I’m just a regular guy. I’m still who I’ve always been, the Paul Sirenne you’ve always known.“

„Well not exactly, Paul. You are immortal, after all,“ he pointed out.

„I know that, I can do amazing things, think really fast but I can’t save the world.“

„Are you telling me that they’re all wrong?“

His question made me pause.

„No, not exactly...“

„So you admit...“

„I don't admit to anything... It's just that they might be seeing it wrong, that's all. All along, we've been forced to admit there's more than one way to look at what's happening. They think I'm their savior, well maybe I am in a way but that doesn't mean that I'm some type of deity. It could just mean the trail I am on, the trail prepared by the Abbey and company, will lead me to answers that will end up helping the world somehow... That's about as far as I'm willing to go.“

Coulter was nodding his head in sympathy.

„Well, you've got my support, no matter what you think.“

„Thanks, Coulter. You've always been a good friend.“

He smiled broadly.

„I hope so, after all the things I've done for you... Anyway, I was hoping you had time for a visit and another look at those four Books.“

„I'm sitting here, looking at them right now. Come on down. I could use the company.“

„I'll be right over.“

Coulter disconnected. I stood up and put on a pot of coffee, knowing he would want a cup as soon as he arrived. Being a perpetual night owl made Coulter good company during my sleepless nights. Raymonde spent much of her time with me, as she could no more sleep than I, but tonight she had gone to assist the midwife with a difficult birth.

A knock at my cave door told me Coulter was here. He had arrived with a surprise in tow.

„Dr Phillippe. What are you doing up at this late hour?“

The small, rotund man smiled tiredly.

„Oh you know me, always burning the candle at both ends...“

„I met him wandering the halls when I was coming over. He looked a bit lost, so I asked him to tag along.“

„I hope I'm not in the way.“

„Nonsense, Doctor. I'm glad you are here. It seems all three of us are having a white night. What is bothering you so much that you are prodded to walk around at three in the morning?“

„Everything, Mr Sirenne, everything. I've even missed my supper and my evening snacks, so worried have I been over this,“ he exclaimed in an exasperated tone.

I laughed a bit, then stopped, seeing the discomfited look on his face. He tried to explain.

„Surely you remember when we met for the first time?...“

„How could I forget that impossible medical exam.“

„Exactly. Since that day, I have been on an unstoppable quest for answers. Normally, I would thrive on this type of challenge but of late, I have found it somewhat taxing, I must admit.“

„Why is that, Doctor?“ I asked.

„The iridium started it. I found it in the spores, then I began researching it. I assembled a team of ten of the best physicists in the world to help me with this task. I have had to learn concept after concept, only to discard them moments later, as other concepts took their place. My brain is stretched to its limit, Sir.“

„Would you like to have someone else take over for you, Doctor Phillippe?“ I suggested out of concern. His face immediately took on a pained look.

„What? How could you even suggest that, Mr Sirenne? ... No, I will never quit. This is the search of a lifetime, an incredible opportunity. I am just momentarily at a loss as to how I should proceed.“

„We were going to examine the four books. Why don't you stay and work with us for a while? Perhaps it will help you get things more organized in your mind.“

„I'll take it as a welcome break. I've been wanting to study them anyway. They are certainly the most fascinating item in the caves at this moment.“

„Let's get to it then.“ I suggested.

We walked over to the center of the large cave where the four books were floating. According to Maurice Leblanc, these books had been created by the priest Berenger Sauniere, shortly after he had been exposed to the spores. The exposure caused a state of prescience in the man, lasting for almost two weeks. His mind had begun jumping from understanding to revelation, climbing ever higher, until, in a fit of driven insight, he had taken the Abbey's most treasured possession, a unique golden Scroll, and transmuted it into the four books. This precious golden Scroll, known as the One Book, was rumored to be the original copy of the Ancient Testament, brought down from Mount Sinai by Moses, along with the two tablets bearing the Egyptian version of the immortality formula.

Leblanc's coded instruction, to *read between the lines*, implied all I had to do was to look at these books and somehow, I would reverse what Sauniere had done. While I had to admit my mind was much more powerful than it had ever been, I had not yet managed to find anything between any line.

With a sigh, doctor Phillippe sat down into a plush office chair, rotating himself towards the levitating books. Forgetting his previous concerns, his eyes brightened with interest.

„Wow. Look at them. It's incredible. How high are they levitating?“

„Exactly two meters above the floor surface.“ answered Coulter promptly, handing the doctor a cup of coffee. „This should help get your mind going.“

„Ha! I don't know if I need extra mental energy at this point. I'm fairly stimulated already... Say, you wouldn't have a pastry to go with this coffee, would you?“ Dr Phillippe asked with a pleading look as he accepted the cup. „So the height remains constant?“

„Exactly constant. And the books keep to that cross position, which always aligns itself to magnetic north.“ answered Coulter, handing the good doctor a box of donuts.

„There is an electromagnetic field around them. I think that's why the book formation orients itself that way,“ I explained.

„Why do you say that Mr Sirenne? Have you tested it?“ asked Dr Phillippe, selecting a chocolate donut and returning the box to Coulter.

„I can perceive it. Ever since I began changing, I have become more sensitive to electromagnetic fields... I think...“ I replied.

„Electromagnetic, eh?“ pondered Dr Phillippe, deep in thought.

„Paul is right. It is electromagnetic. He may not have measured it but I sure have. It was the first thing I did when I got my hands on them... and let me tell you, that field is strong, very strong...“ Coulter revealed.

„...And it seems precisely shaped. I can sense a sort of magnetic ball surrounding the four books, not quite round, a bit stretched out in the middle. It has a tail which goes down to the floor, ending just above it.“

„An EM field would possibly explain the levitation, particularly when we consider that iridium is involved. Magnetic levitation experiments have been successfully carried out in laboratory, based on superconductivity theory. For the experiments to work, only a specific family of metals can be used, of which iridium is one.“

„How convenient,“ Coulter exclaimed sardonically.

„Terribly convenient,“ agreed Dr Phillippe. „...And I don't buy it. There's too many coincidences. Iridium seems to be at the center of all these phenomena and there has to be a reason for it. It is the very thing which has been bothering me.“

„Why?“ I asked.

„You handed me quite a task, Mr Sirenne, when you asked me to find out what was happening to you. At first I thought the answer would be straightforward. Unfortunately it has been everything but. First, we found the spores. Then we found the iridium. Mono-atomic iridium to be precise, not the standard variety. We researched the element, finding some features of interest, such as its use in medical research. Iridium seems capable of assisting the body to fix itself, going right down to the DNA level to effect its repairs...“

„Is that even possible?“ exclaimed Coulter.

„Apparently so. But then I found the iridium in our brain. Before that, I still felt I had things under control, working towards a relatively straightforward solution. But after this discovery, more and more disturbing questions popped up. Why was the iridium there in the first place? What was its role? Then I learnt iridium had made its appearance in mammals exactly sixty-five million years ago. It was brought to us by a meteorite...“

„Weissmuller referred to that meteorite in his journal. It is the origin of the giant inverted needle buried in the center of our caves. Some of the iridium it contained must have pulverized into the atmosphere as it traveled over the ocean, before it crashed into the seabed.“ I interjected.

„Yes, Mr Sirenne. That's the one. My problem with this is simple. I cannot accept the presence of this iridium in our brains as a coincidence. Not when we discover that the source of immortality is also iridium. No Sir! I will not accept it. There is a link between the two. I am sure of it.“

„I'm not sure that I see the problem, Dr Phillippe,“ questioned Coulter.

„To find this link, I have been obliged to dig deeper into the nature of iridium. What I am finding has me increasingly afraid of the answers. Throughout history, we have made certain assumptions about our origins, mistaken assumptions. You see, I believe that we are here, cogitating on these issues, precisely because of that iridium.“

Doctor Phillippe had straightened his back when making his dramatic statement. Before either of us could say a single word, he launched into a follow-up.

„...I do not say this lightly, as you can well imagine. I am being forced to this conclusion when I examine the reason iridium has an effect on human cells. Iridium has an incredible amount of energy packed into its nucleus. It is the

densest metal we know... but its density is bizarre. It should, by all rights, behave and appear like aluminum, a weak, lightweight metal. Yet, somehow, this atom has been compressed down into an incredibly small space, finding a uniquely stable formation. Following the laws of conservation of energy, when the atom shrank in size, its electrons increased their spin rate proportionally. As a result, they are now travelling at nearly the speed of light. It is this incredible velocity which gives iridium its energy and it is this which I believe has given our brains the ability to think. The mono-atomic iridium particles in our brains act as electrical accelerators, speeding up our rate of connection and amplifying it. It makes us able to process things far more quickly than we should. This processing speed may be what has given rise to our intelligence, to our very unique self-awareness..."

I understood why he was overwhelmed. Our search for answers was leading us into unknown territory, where we had to abandon all preconceived notions in a bid to solve our questions.

I looked at Doctor Phillippe with sympathetic eyes.

"Don't worry, Doctor. Give it some time. It'll come to you. I know you're on the right track. I can feel it deep inside."

"Yeah, Doc, forget about all that stuff and let's focus on these books instead. It'll give you a change of pace," supported Coulter, offering more coffee and donuts to the doctor. The doctor refused the coffee but selected two more donuts.

"Good idea." I added, sliding the levitating books across the floor until they were positioned above the center of a lab table. We each sat on a side, with an unimpeded view of the four books.

"So you believe the answer lies in those books then?" asked Doctor Phillippe.

"The next answer anyway, if we are to believe Maurice Leblanc," I responded.

"...I am far more interested in how they manage to stay apart from each other in that cross position," Doctor Phillippe responded.

"I can see lines going to the center where they join together in a small ball. There are other lines connecting directly from book to book, making a sort of diamond shape... It's hard to describe..." I said.

The other two looked at me, shaking their heads.

"I am blown away by your developing abilities, Paul. What lines are you talking about?" Coulter asked but before I could reply, Doctor Phillippe jumped in.

"It has to be magnetic lines, it just has to be, a part of the field."

"Yes, I think so... They are positioned like I would imagine magnetic lines to be placed," I continued.

"But how can you be seeing them? That's what I want to know," wondered Coulter.

"I don't think I'm really seeing them... at least not with my eyes... There is a general field, which I can perceive around me..." Raymonde's field if I were to be precise but I stayed mum about that. "I can see all of you in it, glowing a bit, if that's the right term..."

Doctor Phillippe was nodding his head.

"That makes sense. All living creatures generate an electro-magnetic field. With the increased quantity of iridium in your brain, you could well be able to generate a powerful field around you..."

„I see where you're going with this, Doc. I heard of something too... about really sick people... that they could see magnetic fields, meaning we might have a rudimentary EM sense ourselves...“ Coulter supported.

„Exactly so. The more iridium you have in you, Mr Sirenne, the more of a generator you are going to become... It might well make you sensitive to all electromagnetic fields within your, uhm, your sphere of influence, shall we say. By the by, those books are entirely covered with the same spores that have invaded your body. It makes sense that they would also be generating a strong magnetic field. The way the books have aligned themselves in relation to each other might be explained using standard magnetic theory, if they were viewed as opposite poles...“

I looked at the four books again, this time *feeling* them with my EM sense. I focused in, the way Raymonde had taught me, closing my eyes to help me visualize. I could *see* better that way, which I found surprising and a bit disturbing, as I could perceive everything in a 360 degree arc around me.

The books were there, within my field. I could sense them easily. They were emanating a fair bit of energy, much more than everything else. Lines streamed from one book to the other, moving in a steady flow. The more I concentrated on the lines, the easier it became to notice that single lines were, in fact, a multitude of smaller lines, each one emanating from a different part of the books.

I brought my focus in on the uppermost line. I could feel it right there, just below my *viewing point*. My magnetic field isolated and enveloped the line. I tried to tweak it. It felt like a muscle I had never stretched, weak and faint. I somehow managed to send a focused pulse to the isolated line, making it jump up.

„What did you just do, Paul?“ Coulter exclaimed excitedly.

I snapped my eyes open to see all four books floating with one major difference. Whereas before they had been closed, now all floated with their front covers open. I relaxed the pulse and the covers closed in unison. Another tweak and they opened again.

„Incredible,“ exclaimed Doctor Phillippe. „I assume you are doing that, Mr Sirenne?“

„Yes. Your explanation about EM fields helped me clarify what I was perceiving. I think you are exactly right about the iridium. I can connect with the books and tweak their magnetic lines. The four books are connected together so if I do something to one, it happens to all of them. Look...“

I focused within the field again, feeling more confident this time, and did several tweaks in a row, watching the books snap open and close several times in succession, each time faster than the last. I kept increasing the speed, until it became a blur, generating a loud continuous popping noise. I suddenly noticed my friends holding their ears and stopped my exercise immediately.

„...Good gosh Paul, what was that noise?“ Coulter asked loudly, shaking his head.

„I think it was the sound barrier being broken by the speed of the books opening and closing. Mr Sirenne, I don't mind saying that your display was a bit much. Your developing powers are alarming at times, you know. Now, I'm not saying you're a danger, no, of course not, but do you realize how fast you were making those books open and close? Impossibly fast, that's how fast. The human mind

usually can speed up its processing speed to perhaps a hundred conscious perceptions per second but only during moment of great emotional intensity, when adrenaline flow is increased to peak levels. What you have just displayed tells me that your brain seems to be operating at more than ten times that speed...”

Doctor Phillippe was nearly hyperventilating as he spoke. The poor man had not had much of a respite this night. He managed to continue, anxious to make his point.

„...But your display has also provided us with a new tool to study the books. Your ability allows you to manipulate them. It seems a bit of fortuitous luck has fallen into our hands, Mr Sirene. This EM power of yours could possibly yield us some solid answers. Now you need to familiarize yourself with this power. Try to discover what you can and cannot do with the books, for example...”

„...And as long as you're thinking about new powers, you shouldn't forget to look at this either,” mentioned Coulter, holding up a lump of rock in his hand.

I recognized it immediately as the miniature version of the Devil's armchair. We had found the small rock hidden below the floor in Sauniere's Church.

„I've held on to this thing since we found it, you know. Been playing with it more than with my pet rock. You know it's an exact replica of the real chair, found on Mount Bucharach. Right down to the smallest detail. Every pock, scrape, mark, natural color swirl, everything is identical. At the same time, I can guarantee you that this piece of stone is entirely natural. It was not touched by a single tool. This is its natural shape.”

„That's impossible, Mr Coulter,” objected Doctor Phillippe.

„Impossible, yes. But it is also a fact. The stone is indisputably here in my hands, just like those floating books are there, which is why I'm bringing it to your attention, Paul. We already believe the four books were made by Sauniere a few weeks before he died. The same man hid this stone in that recess in his church, hidden for decades, waiting for you, Paul, to come and find it. He thought it important enough to place there. Could its importance be related to its impossible similarity to the Devil's chair?”

„Once again, Fabian, you have come up with a valid point. Let's place it on the table, below the four Books. I will try to examine it with the EM sense.”

I closed my eyes once more and focused in on the rock. It was surprising how much detail I was getting from the rock by using my new sense. I was able to move my awareness to any position within the field. I could look at objects from any angle or position I desired, able to zoom in or move far away with the speed of a single thought.

I no longer needed my eyes.

The different perception disoriented me slightly, making me lose my position in physical space. I had to re-open my eyes to bring myself back to where I was. It gave me vertigo at first but I got used to it quickly enough. I returned my attention to the rock, zooming in all over its surface. Opening my eyes and returning to my body, I discussed my findings.

„It seems just as Coulter says, an average rock, like any other... on the surface. Below the surface is another matter. Like the books, this rock emanates a strong magnetic field. There is something odd about the magnetic lines themselves. They

seem highly compressed all over its surface. This rock was not made naturally. I can sense massive amounts of energy, coiled within the rock.“

„Can you move the rock? ... Like you did with the books, I mean?“ asked Coulter.

I reached out and sent lines beneath the rock, then more still. Stretching my attention out further, I located the magnetic lines of the Earth, using them as a base to support my growing mass of magnetic lines beneath the rock. Gradually, slowly, the rock, increasingly buffeted by magnetic lines, had no choice but to move.

„Good gosh, it’s levitating,“ exclaimed Doctor Phillippe, wiping some crumbs from his vest.

I opened my eyes, returning to their limited perceptions, and saw the rock floating a meter above the table. I experimented with it briefly, making it move sideways and back. It was getting easier with every passing second. Doing this was helping me understand what Raymonde perceived all the time. When she killed the American mercenaries, I was convinced this was how she had done it, by using a powerful EM burst, effectively shutting down their bodily functions.

„It’s just floating there. Is it hard to do?“ asked Coulter.

„Not with the rock, no. I can manipulate it and the books but I can’t seem to move anything else... I think it’s because I have an affinity for them due to the spores...“

„...Or you are just discovering your ability and need to give it time to grow. That is another distinct possibility,“ added Doctor Phillippe, pulling the last donut from the box.

„Yes, perhaps, Doctor. I may also have detected a difference between the rock and the books.“

„What’s that?“ asked Coulter.

„I do not think this rock is invulnerable to harm. I can see spores all over the four books, coating every square millimeter of their surface. With the rock, I perceive no spores at all. My conclusion is that, while the rock might have been made by Sauniere, no spores were used in its creation. Therefore it may not be an invulnerable object.“

„Do you think we can test that theory?“ Coulter asked.

„Test?“ interjected Doctor Phillippe, a worried frown on his face.

„You know, chip a piece off or something, just to prove that we can?“

„Perhaps I can do that,“ I suggested. „...And I can try doing it without even using my hands.“

Coulter laughed.

„Right, that way the blame will not fall on you if anything goes wrong.“

„I hope nothing does. I’m not sure this is a good idea,“ objected Doctor Phillippe. „If this is truly made by Sauniere, it is absolutely unique...“

„No, it isn’t. There’s another rock just like it in the Berenger Sauniere museum. We haven’t tried to get our hands on that one yet but it’s there. I’ve seen pictures. I think Sauniere might have made that one too...“ Coulter informed.

„Fine. It isn’t totally unique. I think my point remains, Mr Coulter. We have no idea how that object was made. We should be careful. You have just told us there is something bizarre about its magnetic lines. What more proof do we need? Do

you know how much energy is required to alter magnetic lines? It is not an inconsequential amount, let me tell you.“

Doctor Phillippe took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. Failing that, he reached for another donut as a second option but found the box empty. I tried to reassure him.

„I will be very careful, Doctor. Allow me to examine it briefly, before doing anything to it.“

„Fine,“ he replied.

Once again, I closed my eyes and focused in on the rock. I hardly saw it as a rock anymore, more an accumulation of magnetic lines. I zoomed in on its surface until I was sensing it at a molecular level. I could zoom in no closer. Beyond the molecular level, I only encountered greyness, which I could neither penetrate nor see beyond.

„There is definitely something strange going on inside the object but I can't see it. My sense is being blocked somehow.“

„Describe it to me, please,“ asked Doctor Phillippe.

„I can see right down to the molecules but there, it thickens, becomes a solid, which I cannot penetrate. It seems quite dense.“

„Does it have a color?“

„No, it is simply grey.“

„Hmmm.“ The doctor looked pensive. „Physics say that the smaller you go, the more space there is. The molecular level is a bit crowded but not terribly so. Going to the atomic level, there is almost only space. You shouldn't be encountering a wall there. Is this greyness everywhere?“

„Yes, I believe so... no wait, I can see something. There is a fine line. I can see it going around the rock.“

I put as much focus into the line as I could. Now that I had found it, I could see the magnetic lines all converged onto this one area. It was why they were so tightly bound around the rock. They were being pulled tight by the central line. Zooming in, I detected a faint bit of light leaking through the exact center of the line.

„I can see a light there. I will try to...“

„...No! ... Wait for a moment...“ exclaimed Doctor Phillippe.

My mind poured into the light, trying to drive a magnetic wedge into it, to crack it open just the slightest bit. Suddenly I felt something give, almost like a snap but a snap of unbelievable force. I pulled back from the rock slightly, watching it begin to rip apart like a balloon. Light started pouring out of it in unbelievable quantity. There was enough power being released here to kill my friends and probably blow up the entire town of Etretat. My mind speeding up, I snapped my EM sense down around it, trying to contain the blast.

More and more light exploded out of the rapidly-vanishing rock, its skin folding back in onto itself as the energy inside pushed out with unimaginable force. The skin vanished, leaving only brilliant light, growing ever stronger, wanting to expand and obliterate everything in its path.

I clamped down on the explosion desperately, trying to shield my friends from the destructive power I had unwittingly unleashed. The light pushed against my magnetic field but I would not let go.

I would not stop fighting it. I had too much to lose.

Unfortunately, the energy had to go somewhere. This was a fight I could not win, not if I allowed it to continue escaping. Despite my apparently limitless energy, in the end, I would only succeed in holding it back for a short while.

Desperate, I tried to compress it down, back into the small shape it had come from. I managed to expose the remnant of the rock-skin, crumpled up, almost invisible. Using more magnetic lines, I stretched it out, coaxing it back into its original shape. I stretched the skin around the energy, finally enveloping it totally. I had just managed to seal the edge, when I heard my friends scream out in unison, both holding their hands up to their eyes, tears streaming from them.

„What just happened, Paul? It feels like my eyes were just burned to the retina. All I can see is a bright pinpoint of light. It's still hurting. It was so bright.“ exclaimed Coulter, blinking frantically.

„I'm so sorry. I thought I had it under control. The rock exploded apart. I barely managed to get it back together. I'm not even sure how I did it. Doctor Phillippe was right. I should have left it alone.“

The Doctor had stayed quiet through our exchange, rubbing his eyes all the while.

„I shouldn't complain too much, if I were you, Mr Coulter. Physics are rather clear about how much energy is contained in matter. If Mr Sirenne had not managed to return the energy back inside the rock, we would likely all be dead. Most of the coast of France might have been destroyed as well. The question, of course, is how did you manage to do that, Mr Sirenne?“

„I don't know. I acted out of desperation. I had to get it back together. I pushed down on it, pulled the skin back, forced it closed. It's just a thin layer of matter. There's nothing inside. It's hollow, filled with energy.“

„Well, you have just performed a miracle, Mr Sirenne, I don't mind telling you that.“

„I sure hope my eyes are going to be all right,“ Coulter complained again. „What about yours, Paul?“

„Mine are fine. I am unaffected physically by what just happened. I'm not even sure that I would have been killed by the explosion. That's what makes it even worse. Here I was fooling around with something that could have killed all of you, not even thinking of the consequences. I feel guilty.“

„Don't. It's not your fault. You didn't know what was going to happen. But it is because of you that we survived, so drop the self-blame,“ bolstered Coulter. „However, I do think that this spells the end of my evening. Research is only good if you can see it. I think I'm going to need some shut-eye, no pun intended.“

„We should be fine. I believe that what we got will amount to a bad sunburn. Not too bad but a bit painful on the retina. I have some drops that could help. But you are right, Mr Coulter, rest and darkness are required to allow our bodies to recover,“ the rotund Doctor added. Although his words were intended for Coulter, it seemed to me he was trying to reassure himself.

„Darkness might be hard to find in these caves,“ Coulter mentioned jokingly.

„True but I have some eye patches which would suit our purpose in this instance.“

„Why don't I drive both of you down to the medical caves?“ I suggested, out of concern.

„That sounds perfect, Mr Sirene.“

* * * * *

The automated golf cart dropped us off a few minutes later. Leading my two friends into the medical caves, I noticed Raymonde sitting in a corner.

She was crying.

I left my friends in the care of the nurses and ran to Raymonde, giving her a big hug.

„What happened?“

„The baby was stillborn. Nothing we could have done. It’s the fault of that damn disease.“

She broke down, crying again, her words mingled with dry sobs.

„It was so small... so innocent... it just didn’t deserve this... to be deprived of the very chance to live before it even began.“

I hugged her tighter, my arms feeling glued to her. I never wanted to let her go. She calmed down, her mind slowly returning to its usual clear state. She sensed something had happened to me as well and sent me a mental query. I replied in a flash, bursting with the news of our near-disaster.

She took the news well enough, berating me for endangering our friends and then running to them to ensure they were fine. I joined her and, after a quick word with Coulter and Doctor Phillippe, we left the medical caves, intent on returning to the books. We talked while walking.

„I was unable to help them. The spores are preventing me from fixing them,“ Raymonde exclaimed.

Her comment surprised me.

„Do you mean to say that you could have helped them, had the spores been absent?“

„...Well, in a word, yes, I guess I could have. This field, my radar sense, is far more than that. Remember how I was able to locate each person within my field?“

„Yes... In the helicopter, you let me perceive the field through you. It’s what began our connection.“

„Since then, I’ve learned to interact with people’s fields in an increasingly delicate manner. I’ve learnt to move their inner field energy, to manipulate it.“

„That’s what allowed you to stop those soldiers, saving us all.“

Her eyes dropped down.

„I didn’t mean to kill them. I was just trying to stop them.“

„I know. You had no choice.“

„Anyway, the interaction between my field and those within it is far stronger than I originally believed... except when people are protected by the spores. The more spores in them, the less I can affect them. Even basic detection becomes hampered. I certainly cannot influence them, or read them, in any way. Those of us who have been in the caves the longest, such as our closest friends, have become literally invisible. If they are in front of me, I see them with my eyes and can perceive the... hole... they make in my field but that is about it.“

This was a new revelation. My powers were more in my head, in an ability to visualize things intensely, a photographic memory, an enhanced ability to connect

things together and the new EM power. I suspected my EM sense might be an amalgamation of our new abilities. Both of us were clearly still growing.

„Are you saying you have begun using your field to heal people?“ I asked, looking for confirmation.

„I have. It happened by accident at first but I eventually figured it out. It's what led me here, to try and save that poor baby. I thought I might be able to help it, while it was still in the womb, hopefully unaffected by the spores. Unfortunately I arrived too late. The baby had died before my arrival. The baby was dead and I couldn't bring it back... I just couldn't,“ explained Raymonde, a sad tone in her voice.

„That pandemic is one of our most serious problems,“ I sympathized.

„All the problems are serious and getting more so by the minute. It seems like the whole world is falling apart. We've got to do something,“ she returned rapidly, almost frantically.

„We are doing something. I almost killed everybody doing something,“ I exclaimed loudly, the flaring emotions surprising both of us. „I'm sorry. I didn't mean to let it come out that way. I know we're both trying. Every day, it feels like there's more pressure on our shoulders. We have to accept that we can't do any more than we have time for. Heck, we're both at it almost twenty-four hours a day now. We're asking a lot from ourselves.“

„I know but so much depends on our success.“

We arrived at the research caves, where the books were kept. Sitting down at the table next to each other, we examined Sauniere's rock and the levitating books. Raymonde picked up the small rock gingerly.

„So this is what almost killed us.“

„Yes. I've been thinking about why that happened... Matter doesn't usually fall apart like that and I think it's because this isn't matter.“

„What do you mean?“

„If we are to accept that Sauniere made this object, we have to ask ourselves how he managed it. We know it was made before the four books. We also know he made another rock, just like this one. Why make two identical rocks... and how did he make them?“

„You keep saying *make*. I don't think you're using the right word and I think you know it. You're avoiding using it, because you have trouble accepting what it implies. Well, I'm not going to avoid it. I think he created those rocks... He made them out of nothing... I can't explain how he did that but it must be connected to our EM sense.“

She was right. Sauniere created these rocks. He created the books.

„Raymonde, once again you have pushed me in the right direction. What Doctor Phillippe has been telling me about the iridium is starting to fit in. Our changes are not just about immortality... It must have been the same for Sauniere. Only, he wasn't like us, not genetically prepared. He was unique, naturally prescient. The exposure to the spores must have briefly propelled Sauniere to the ultimate of his precognitive abilities, infused with a nascent EM sense. He went beyond merely sensing his environment, directly past healing others, and began manipulating matter itself.“

„Is that even possible?“

„It must be, if Sauniere did it. The proof is right in front of us, with that rock and those books. I just don't understand how he did it... not yet anyway...“

„Why did the rock explode like it did?“

„It's not stable, not like regular matter. I don't think Sauniere knew what he was doing. He was learning the ropes, figuring it out. As far as I can tell, that rock you are holding is only a few molecules thick. If you use your own EM sense, you can go down and see the barrier.“

„Let's do it together.“

The idea appealed to me instantly. We stopped talking and closed our eyes. Immediately our perspective changed. I sensed everything around me. Things were very bright nearby, getting darker the further away it was from me, as if I were a source of light. I peered around, looking for Raymonde, but could not perceive her near me at all.

„I'm right here, Paul,“ she laughed. „I'm inside you, or rather we are both in the light. This is how I see things most times.“

„Well, this way of perceiving things is still new to me. I am just learning how to move my sense of focus through the field.“

„I remember doing that. It seems like ages ago.“

„Perceiving things together in this fashion helps a lot. I learn much faster this way. When we separate, I always take away something from our shared experiences. It's how I was able to use the EM sense to play with the rock in the first place.“

„Okay let's go to the rock...“

„...But let's do it carefully. I don't want a repeat explosion.“

We zoomed in, Raymonde taking over our movements within the field. She had an ability to orient herself in the field that was beyond me.

„I am the center.“ she explained. „It's a question of perspective. When I look for something, I always build a reference based on my position in the field. I can always find it after that.“

„Fine, I get that but how do you find it in the field in the first place? That's what I have trouble with. There's so much around us, so much to take in. It's too crowded to find anything.“

„Stop thinking about it. Tone down the detail of individual items. Let the general sense of things take over your awareness. Spread your awareness thinly over everything you can reach. Then you can find everything easily.“

Her directions seemed straightforward but I was locking somewhere between the first and last step.

„Don't worry about it. I had the same problem. Your mind will adjust. If you let it, it can... uhm... expand its capacity. But you have to stop wanting to be aware of everything specifically. You have to keep it at a general level. Just let me do the driving for a while and try to catch on. Now enough of this, back to the rock. We have things to solve.“

She saw the limit in the rock. There was just enough material to make a surface. Inside, it was hollow, its shape kept by a dangerous amount of energy. Sauniere had created a skin but couldn't assemble enough matter for the insides. Most of it remained energy.

„Where does all the energy come from?“

„The amount of energy inside matter is massive. Releasing the power from a few atoms gives us nuclear bombs. The compression and heat necessary to make that matter came from the center of a sun. I don't think Sauniere did that type of thing with the rocks. He probably couldn't understand it well enough. He took basic energy, which I suspect he pulled from radiated solar energy, compressed it into a ball and then wrapped it with the thickest layer of real matter he could manage. He barely succeeded. As soon as I touched that line in the rock... you see it there? ... it let go.“

„How did you manage to contain it?“

„I still don't know. I was desperate, I don't mind admitting it. The energy just came pouring out of it. My mind speeded up instantly. The whole thing can't have taken more than half a second in real time. I wrapped it with magnetic lines and clamped them down like a vise. I instinctively knew that, if I let it go beyond a certain point, I wouldn't be able to push it back down. I was braced against the magnetic lines of the earth...“

„You were? How did you do that?“

I led her mind to the lines crossing the room, lines coming from the North Pole.

„Good gosh, I never even saw those. You see things so differently.“

„I keep learning that. Must be a man-woman thing.“

„You just keep thinking that,“ she laughed.

„I will. How about we look at the books now.“

„Okay.“

Our focus zoomed upward, stopping directly over the center of the four floating books. I showed her the magnetic lines controls, snapping the covers open and shut a few times. I even managed to make a few pages turn. As always, the four books did everything in unison. I opened them at a random page and Raymonde moved us all it, looking at everything. As with the rock, our ability to focus in was blocked when we tried to go beyond the molecular level.

„There's nothing there, Raymonde. All four books are exactly the same... no wait... stop, go back to where you were... yes there... that's it... look at that. Do you see it?“

„Not really...“

„Okay. Slide into my mind for a second.“

I felt her focus come to rest within my awareness. We were so close, it felt as if we were one.

„I'm here. Now what?“

„I'm going to rebuild what I am seeing in my mind. We are at the upper right hand corner of the northernmost book, looking at a single letter of type from the first line on the page...“

„I can see your image of it. It looks exactly like the original...“

„The advantage of a photographic memory. Now let me bring in the image of what we saw about five minutes before. This is of the same corner but on the southernmost book. On the surface they look the same but not below the surface. There you might notice this...“

I superimposed the two images.

„Look at that, on the edge. They don't match,“ she exclaimed.

„No, they don't. Let's look at the other two books.“

I assembled the rest of the images until all four were superimposed. Each corner was slightly different, the difference creating a shape, a hollow within the images. When I looked at the void inside, I could see it wasn't empty. There was something in there and it seemed very bright. Even though it was just a single strand, it felt made of living energy. I didn't dare touch it.

We zoomed out, separated as much as we could, and opened our eyes.

To my surprise, we were locked in the tightest embrace possible. Our lips were locked together and we were looking at each other, literally eye to eye. Our chairs had pulled close and we had unknowingly hugged. Another surprise came when we tried to pull apart. Everything was sticky. Our lips in particular. All parts connected together seemed to want to stay that way.

It took a fair effort to separate ourselves. Raymonde burst out laughing.

„That's bizarre.“

I laughed in reply.

„I think we've been magnetized somehow.“

Moving our hands closer, we could indeed feel an attraction between them. The closer they got, the harder it was to pull them away.

„Finally, our strange draw to each other is being revealed,“ she exclaimed with a grin.

I gave her a sticky kiss in reply.

* * * * *

We were interrupted by a call from Liam O'Flanahan.

„Hey, Paul, sorry to bug you but you gotta come down here. I found something.“

We hurried down to Coulter's caves, entering as Jonathan Briar arrived from another entrance.

„All right, O'Flanahan, what's the big discovery you alluded to?“ Briar asked impatiently. Of late, Briar had been heavily involved in deeper cave archeology. Something he had found was bothering him but he would not speak of it until he was positive of his findings. His team of archeologists had been equally sworn to silence. His concerns left him morose and moodier than normal.

„You all remember when Coulter set up his video cameras over the caves? Well, setting them up was fine and all but they still had to be monitored and there just weren't enough people to do it. Do any of you know how many miles of corridors there are down here? ... Too many to keep track of, that's how many. Anyway, my point was that I got Coulter to train me on how to use his video equipment and I have been following a certain theory of mine...“

„And what would that be, O'Flanahan?“ Briar responded, finally more interested than irritated.

„You all know we have suspected that our old friend, Weissmuller, the immortal serial-killer we have all grown to love, is walking among us, right here in these caves. The evidence certainly points to it. He seems able to come and go as he pleases, appearing in the most unexpected places. For example, during the recent attack in the lagoon cave, against those god-forsaken American mercenaries, a camera taped this video...“

He pressed a button, starting a video on the main screen. The camera had been located high up in the lagoon cave, giving it complete coverage of the space below.

„Now watch in the middle of the lagoon and focus in on that guy there, swimming in the water. It’s going to happen pretty fast.“

The video showed a mercenary bobbing around, trying to avoid being shot, in the middle of an insane scene of mayhem. Suddenly, the man vanished into the water, pulled down by something. O’Flanahan speeded the video forward, to show us the same thing happening to another man. Both mercenaries came floating back up to the surface after a few minutes, lifeless.

„It happened to at least four guys. It’s pretty clear to me that Weissmuller was the one doing it. If you look carefully, you can see him moving around underwater, going from man to man. It had to be him. Who else would be doing that? He obviously didn’t need to breathe... He never surfaced... So he had to have another way to get back up into the caves...“

O’Flanahan stopped talking, looking at each of us expectantly. When none of us said anything, he started talking again, this time a bit louder.

„Don’t you get it? Look, guys, it’s obvious as all get out. There are secret tunnels in these caves... There just has to be, no other way around it. For Weissmuller to get around unseen, he has to be using secret passages...“

„He could be disguised as someone we know... that is another distinct possibility, O’Flanahan.“ objected Briar but O’Flanahan was ready for him.

„Even if that were true, which it may well be, it still doesn’t matter. Look, for a while we had teams roaming the entire complex, looking for him. The Abbey sent in their men, all experts in black ops. They found nothing... not a single thing. That tells me Weissmuller had a way around them... and who better really? After all, he built this place. If anyone would have knowledge of secret corridors, it would be him.“

„I have to admit, Mr O’Flanahan's theory makes sense,“ supported Raymonde.

„Thanks, Miss Raymonde but it’s not just a theory. I found proof. You see, there’s another problem to these caves. There seems to be only one way in, by way of submarine. Now, that always seemed damned awkward to me. Particularly for a guy like Weissmuller, who liked to roam the countryside unnoticed, whenever the urge to kill struck him... No, he had to have a way out, his own way out... and I found it. Look at this...“

He started another video but paused it immediately, bursting into further explanations.

„It took a long time for Coulter to get every tunnel covered. Even when we got attacked there were still some areas without cameras... and lately, there’s been absolutely no word or sighting of that monster. It’s as if he went completely underground after the American attack... So I had to go back, to earlier recordings and check every one. You see, I reasoned that if he had a way out, it would have to be in the upper levels, somewhere closer to the surface. His exit outside would have to be some permanent feature in the landscape. An old tree stump wouldn’t do. Whatever it was couldn’t be distant but not in the center of things either. There just aren’t many places around like that, on top of the Aval Cliff. So, I took some time and walked around the countryside. I found only one possibility. The ancient brick wall below the fort of Frefosse.“

„Not the same wall featured in Leblanc’s *Hollow Needle* book?“ I asked in surprise.

„Yes, that wall exactly. It was so obvious, who would suspect it of being true? It's a historical feature, ensuring Weissmuller's trap door would never be removed or destroyed accidentally. But I couldn't figure out how to open it. I had to go back to poring over every video of every corridor in those upper levels, hoping to catch Weissmuller leaving...“

„O'Flanahan... Please, enough of these explanations. I can bear no more. Tell us what you found, if anything,“ begged Briar.

„Oh I found something all right. Here it is.“

He hit a button and the video started up again, showing a view of a non-descript corridor. There were three caves openings along the corridor, two on the left and one on the right, their doorways covered with curtains of some sort. Probably storage caves. Everything was still. There was nothing going on.

„Well? ...“ inquired Briar.

„Shush. You'll miss it.“

Suddenly a fast blur went past the video. It was over in less than a second. O'Flanahan pointed at the furthest cave opening.

„Watch.“

After a brief moment, no more than few seconds, we saw the curtain in front of the entrance move slightly. O'Flanahan froze the video.

„There. Wasn't that amazing?“

„I'm still not sure where this is even going...“ started Briar.

„...I've been to that corridor. Do you know what's at the end of it? Nothing, that's what. It curves over to the left, then it stops. That blur we saw was Weissmuller. I slowed the video down and played it over and over. He was running top speed down that corridor. No one else can run that fast, apart maybe from you Paul. Anyway, he goes to the end of that corridor, just out of sight and he doesn't come back. I reviewed all the videos of this corridor for the next three days... So where did he go? That movement in that curtain gave me the answer I needed, because it was caused by a draft. Where did the wind come from if it's a dead end? I think Weissmuller opened his hidden door at the end of that corridor, just out of sight of the camera. When he opened it, air came rushing out, moving the curtain. It's the only explanation that makes sense.“

Briar let out an exasperated sigh.

„So in fact, you have not found this suspected door of yours. You only have these two minute pieces of video footage and you feel this is enough to bother us?“

„It's not my door, Briar, it's Weissmuller's... and it's there. It has to be. We just have to go there and Paul can figure out how to open it,“ O'Flanahan replied smugly.

I laughed at O'Flanahan's easy assumption. He seemed to have such confidence in me.

„Don't worry. I suspect our combined EM sense will help us. Let's go check it out.“ Raymonde sent, using our inner connection. I agreed with her, welcoming the diversion.

Weissmuller Recollections, 1962-1967

I had just returned to Etretat, after being gone for almost twenty years. The evidence of war was mostly erased. There was nothing left of the greatness which had almost become. Too bad Hitler had been so weak. I went up the Aval cliff, finding an updated golf course occupying most of the surface. I wandered near the edge, following the path down to the old fort of Frefosse foundations. I pressed both trigger bricks, pushing the left one in first, then the right, to a depth of twenty centimeters. The wall clicked open and I entered into my caves.

None had been here since I left, the seals I had placed still intact. I wasn't surprised. I had installed strong springs into the door release mechanism, requiring strength far greater than any normal man. None but an immortal could press those bricks.

It felt good to be home. The darkness was nearly total, the bioluminescent fungus in a dormant state, still deprived of oxygen after all these years. Leblanc had planned well. Of course, his plan would have failed had I not assisted it. Leblanc could never have anticipated the venting system I would install. It would have cleared the carbon dioxide and oxygen absorbers within a matter of weeks, had I not installed automatic shutoffs to the outside vents. I had set them to be triggered shut by the same mechanism which would activate the release of the gas into the caves.

I had yet to re-open those vents. My supply of spores was still plentiful and the high levels of carbon dioxide within the caves ensured the death of any accidental intruder. As for the darkness, it did not bother me in any way. My eyes were so sensitive I could perceive everything clearly. I headed deeper into the silent complex, pausing briefly to examine Hitler's mummified body in the throne room, before heading down the stairway.

Arriving in the power room, I entered the corridor leading to the fans. I paused once more to head into a side corridor, to examine my long-dead double, the man I had trained to take my place, anticipating Hitler's treachery. Hitler had shot him in the back, an unimaginative act if I had ever seen one. Still, it had served the purpose. I returned to the main corridor and entered the vent room, walking to the end and pressing the three studs to open the access to the filtering chamber.

Once below, I opened the second hidden door and descended to the spore filtering room. I examined the collector but there was no trace of spores, as expected. I walked to the back of the room and pressed the three studs there, opening the final passage to access my personal complex of caves.

There were over forty of them, arranged in a tight circle, around a central cave of quite acceptable dimensions. The first thing I did upon entry was to refill my depleted stock of spore cubes. I had previously stashed a supply outside the caves but it had finally been depleted one year ago. I examined my favorite caves, fondly remembering the wonderful experiments I had performed here.

Those were more innocent times, during my pre-immortal period. Killing still meant something then. Now my interests had... broadened, the thrill of individual killing engulfed by the pervasive numbness haunting my every

feeling. It always came back to the numbness. The damnable numbness of absolutely everything. I had thought it would pass but it never did. I had comforted myself slightly by recognizing I was not alone in this plight. During my research, I uncovered that Vlad Dracul had used a man-made version of the immortality powder. History recorded the bloody excesses to which that formula had driven him.

I now feared a similar fate waited for me.

I could feel it inside, pushing, prodding, numbing me more all the while. It was screaming out for me to explode into a wild rampage, to kill without thought, without purpose, simply to prove I was alive, not stuck in this endless dream of numbness. Every day, the craving for violence grew stronger. I knew giving in to that need would inevitably sow the seeds of my own destruction. Such wanton acts of mayhem would attract the attention of the Abbey, who were sworn to kill all immortals roaming the earth. Partly because of this, I had spent my entire life living in the shadows. A second reason I remained there was that it was who I was, who I needed to be. It provided strength and protection. Now these insane urges to run amok were threatening to undo all that.

It was enough that I had succumbed to the allure of Vampirism in order to satisfy these numbness-imposed cravings. The pulse of the prey's blood sliding down my throat was the only true feeling I had left. I could no longer refrain from answering its call, addicted beyond all control.

After leaving the Carpathian Mountains, I had tried to wean myself from vampyric killing. It left a pattern behind, something I had never done before. I failed in my attempts, returning to Vampirism again and again, unable to resist its sweet siren call.

Over time, I did manage to channel the urges somewhat, by limiting them to specific periods of the month. I disposed of the drained bodies in ways to prevent them from being found or identified. Dismemberment, followed by a thorough bone crushing was a tried and true approach, if I had the time. Unfortunately, I had not always taken the time. All because of Vampirism.

I did not know if I should curse the Abbey, whose presence prevented me from acting on my numbness-induced murderous urges, or to thank them for giving me a reason to keep myself in check. No matter why, the Abbey was now a constant concern. My time spent at St Bruno's monastery, haunting the vents, had confirmed my suspicions about their devotion to immortal hunting, which they believed a sacred duty. Although I found the concept laughable, it had kept the Abbey motivated for more than a thousand years. None could scoff at their results.

They not only captured immortals whenever they came along, they had also been quite busy erasing the very knowledge of the immortality formula from mankind. For a thousand years, they had toiled behind the scenes, funding themselves with Templar riches, killing and controlling, trying to achieve their manipulative goals through the centuries.

It hadn't started out as a general extermination. Their earlier plans had been centered on cornering one particular immortal, *The Greyman*. He had masqueraded as St Germain, using that incarnation to try and expose the

Abbey, almost managing to take over one of the Abbey's public organization, the Freemasons at the same time. The Greyman was not above playing games with the Abbey, taunting them in a multitude of fashions, such as the name *St Germain* itself, whose letters could be rearranged into Greyman, when one took account of the original spelling of the name: *St-Germayn*.

Probably the oldest immortal among us, the Greyman's presence could supposedly be traced through a series of well-known historical characters, such as Christian Rosenkreuz, Roger Bacon, Merlin, and even Hiram Abiff, if one were to believe the Abbey's assertions. After his *St Germain* skin *died*, little had been heard of him.

In 1883 everything changed. A priest named Berenger Sauniere joined the Abbey's order. He became a respected member, amazing all with his brilliant insights. He recognized the importance of Rennes-le-Chateau and arranged for his appointment there, supported, as always, by Father Boudet. Over the next two decades, his insights began verging on prophecy, as Sauniere developed the power to predict future events. His abilities continued to increase in scope, reaching a crescendo briefly before his death in 1917.

Few of the conversations I overheard mentioned anything from this period, save to confirm that this was the origin of the Abbey's present-day plans to capture the Greyman, which they called Project Sirenne. Raymond Lindon's name had been mentioned as a key part of their plans, a name I had encountered before, right here in Etretat. He had been the Jewish mayor of the town during the 1940's.

I had been uninterested in Lindon's fate or his activities following the end of the war. Those events had stopped having any significance to me, the moment Hitler had died. What I couldn't fathom now was what Lindon's involvement could be in Project Sirenne. I could not forget Maurice Leblanc and Lindon had been as thick as thieves when they prevented me from gaining access to the caves during the First World War. Did this mean Leblanc had been involved in the Abbey's affairs? Did the Abbey know of my caves? None of these questions would let me go.

In the end, I left the vents of St Bruno's monastery and returned to Etretat. It was time to investigate Lindon. He had purchased land crucial to the Abbey's plans. That would be my place to start.

* * * * *

I hired a private detective for the first time in my life. Finding him in Paris, I chose him for his reputed lack of morals. Paying him in cash, I asked him to assemble all the background on Lindon he could without arousing suspicion. It was an easy way to obtain the information I sought, letting him use his ready-made contacts.

I had a secondary reason to use him: I needed a new skin, in order to move about more openly. The decision was not lightly reached. The Abbey was still out there, on the lookout for immortals. At present, that meant me, though they might not know it. They knew what signs to look for and how to capture an immortal once they found him.

All immortals would eventually succumb to the numbness-induced cravings. It was simply a question of time. They only had to wait for the immortal to reveal himself through some act of carnage, and then, they would pounce mercilessly. They had eyes and ears everywhere, on the constant lookout for any information which might lead them to an exposed immortal, or for researchers seeking the immortality formula. Investigating immortality would, in fact, shorten their lives.

The Abbey's presence forced me to be on a perpetual alert, knowing that I was doomed by the numbness if I did nothing. I needed to save myself before it was too late. I found it quite ironic that I, an immortal, should be running out of time. I resolved to take control of the situation instead of being controlled by it. The best way to do this was to inveigle myself into the Abbey's plans until I knew everything about them. Even if I failed in this endeavor, I would still end up armed with sufficient knowledge about the Abbey to expose them, or better yet, to destroy them. Another possibility was that, by defeating their grandiose plans to capture the Greyman, I would gain his respect and get one step closer to becoming his ally.

In order to put all this in motion, I needed to deepen my investigation into *Project Sirene*, starting with everything about Raymond Lindon. The private detective was my way in. I haunted his office while he did his work, familiarizing myself with his habits and his methods. The minute he gave me his report, I killed him, getting rid of his body in the usual manner, and took his place.

My first act, as the private detective, was to initiate legal proceedings to change his name to Robert Ragmeny and to rename the detective agency to „Ragmeny Investigations“. The name changes were carefully chosen to sow a specific false trail, should the Abbey begin sniffing around. Satisfied, I finally felt able to wander the streets openly again.

I used the detective's report to plan my next step. He had located a publishing company, called *Edition Minuit*, opened by Lindon in 1955. It wasn't a particularly successful company but its doors were still open today. I wasn't sure what importance *Edition Minuit* played in Project Sirene. The report indicated Lindon had used the company to publish many of his own books, a possible trail.

I found details of a property purchased near Ambrumesy to be of far more interest. An old castle, it had to be a part of the Abbey's plans. This was going to be my next destination. I stayed in Paris only long enough to close down the Agency, completing the last few investigations the detective had underway before he became my skin. I'm afraid my closures were not particularly appreciated by all those involved.

I left Paris quickly after that and straight-line walked to Ambrumesy, using the time to plan my approach. I intended to use my new status as a detective to ferret around Lindon. If the Abbey, or Lindon, discovered my involvement and investigated my background, they would dead-end at Ragmeny Investigations.

In order to have complete victory over the Abbey, I had to avoid any hint of my involvement. It was inevitable my presence be discovered at some point,

no matter how careful I was. My skins had always served me as constant protection in this matter. I was able to drop them in an instant and fade into the woodwork, leaving no trace, no hint of who had really been there.

This time, however, I had added further misdirection to my standard practice. Knowing the Abbey's goal of catching the Greyman, I had decided to send them in his direction whenever the opportunity presented itself. If they were seeking an immortal, let it be him. The name Ragmeny Investigations would send them squirreling in his direction, wasting their time looking for the wrong man where he had never been.

This was why I selected several St-Germain personality traits for my detective skin. By emulating known traits of the Greyman's most famous skin, the Abbey would conclude Ragmeny had to be the Greyman. Since I intended to keep the Ragmeny skin for a maximum of two years, planning to be long gone before they caught on to my presence here, the Abbey's investigation could only leave them with false surmises and incorrect theories. It was a perfect plan.

I arrived in Ambrumesy late in the evening and settled in at a local bed and breakfast, going up to my room, apparently to sleep. I hadn't slept since I first imbibed the spores in 1943. I placed some pillows beneath the blankets, implying a sleeping body, and opened the window, looking out into the silent night. No one around. I jumped down to the ground, heading silently into the direction of Lindon's castle, eager to begin my investigation.

I steered clear of contact with anyone. For once, I did not feel like doing any experiments.

I found the castle easily enough. It was in a sad state but I saw repairs underway in several areas. Large quantities of building materials were piled under a temporary storage structure, located in one corner of the parking lot. Someone was spending a lot of money here. I noticed several guards walking the property. I avoided them easily enough but their presence indicated all was not as it seemed. I was on the right track.

I found my way into the castle, through an area under construction near the rebuilt Chapel. To my surprise, the inside of the castle was a shambles. I noted structural concerns in the sagging of some beams. Yet nothing had been done inside the structure at all. The whole of the renovations were being done outside. It struck me as an odd thing to do.

I returned outside, examining the renovations with a fresh eye. The Chapel had seen the most so far. Entering it, I found a central room, with two side chambers. In the center of the floor was a raised area, intended to be the base for a large rectangular object not yet installed.

I returned to my bedroom briefly before sunrise, scaling the outside wall and entering through the window. In the morning, I had a brief talk with the landlady, introducing Ragmeny's character. I knew the strength of local gossip, providing her with just enough information to get her imagination going.

I indicated I had come here to rest and recuperate, on a sabbatical from various investigations as private detective in Paris, my nerves strained to the breaking point. I let it be known that I would not be opposed to a few minor

cases, to occupy my time, should any come up, of course. The St Germain traits I had chosen presented an eclectic, memorable character.

The approach was successful, as I had known it would be.

I decided to remain at the bed and breakfast for the time being. I would use the nights to find out what Lindon was up to and the days would be spent on further research into the Abbey's plans. I could not allow myself to forget Lindon was not my final goal. This was all about the Abbey. I believed Lindon's involvement to be due strictly to Maurice Leblanc. If I wanted to understand Lindon, I had to understand Leblanc.

Maurice Leblanc had been a formidable opponent, from the very first time I came up against him, during my Weissmuller days. He successfully anticipated Hitler's every move and repulsed every one of our attacks. In the end, I did not even manage to kill him myself, only his son. Leblanc died of old age and poor health, hidden away in Perpignan. His mind had lost none of its edge and he fought us until the last breath left his body. He had been a worthy opponent, far better than Hitler in many ways.

As the result of Leblanc's work during his life, a legacy had been left behind. He had left a trap to kill Hitler and close down the caves. He had organized a group of people to haunt the shores of Etretat. They were there to this day, still loyal to Leblanc's ideals, watching out for unwelcome intruders.

I started an investigation into Leblanc by reading his novels. After all, it had been his book, *The Hollow Needle*, which alerted Hitler to the presence of the caves in the first place. Reading it, I knew I was on the right track, as soon as I found the reference to Lindon's Ambrumesy castle, in the first chapter of the book. The chapel itself featured prominently within the story, a sure sign for those in the know. I resolved to track the chapel renovations until I found out what Lindon intended to do with it.

In the meantime, I continued reading Leblanc's books. By the time I completed my task, I had become convinced there was something odd about every one of his stories. Part of the oddness was in the choice of certain character names. Some were recurrent, others were bizarrely constructed. Certain numbers and dates crept up with disturbing frequency. Locations. Subtle background storylines. All of it at odds with the rest.

I took notes, tracking each oddity, until I realized the notes were revealing a story of sorts. It began at a precise point in history, 800 AD, and ended in the early twentieth century. It described a search for lost knowledge, covered up long ago. There was mention of a woman's tomb, Marie de Negres, of Merovingian Kings, of Mary Magdalene landing on the shores of France.

It dawned on me that I had uncovered hints of an ancient conspiracy, hiding the presence of Mary Magdalene and her offspring, here in France. They had apparently landed in the town of Saintes Maries de la Mer, in Provence, accompanied by Lazarus, Joseph of Aramathea, Mary Salome and Mary Jacobee. The three Marys. The name of the town became self-explanatory. The mention of Lazarus had not escaped my attention. Biblical accounts indicated he had been resuscitated by Jesus Christ but I tended to believe spores had been involved, or perhaps another man-made formula.

More hints of immortality at work, this time involving Jesus Christ... or was it the Greyman?

It was possible to re-interpret Christ's life as being the Greyman. Just like the St-Germain skin, Christ had tried to bring new lessons to a jaded crowd. He had come back from the dead himself, at the very end. Compared to that, Lazarus' presence on the shores of France was merely icing on the cake.

What was the Greyman trying to do and why did the Abbey hate him so? If he was truly as old as they claimed he was, he had to have solved the numbness problem. He seemed to revel in involving himself in human affairs, using his powers to place himself in key positions. This was a complete opposite to my approach of remaining in the shadows. An alliance between the Greyman and I was an increasingly remote possibility.

To satisfy myself about these conjectures, I left Ambrumesy for a brief period and traveled to Saintes Maries de la Mer. I wasted no time in finding a local historian and kidnapping him. I brought him to an abandoned shack and proceeded to spur him to educate me on the subject. Apart from the removal of two of his fingers, I allowed him to speak unmolested, as he was quite old and had a weak voice. A poor choice for experimentation, really. My urges were telling me to rip him apart but I waited until I had learned what I could.

Then I ripped him apart.

It was a good lesson, regardless of my personal dissatisfaction with the prey. Not only did I find clear indication that the three Marys had indeed arrived here, almost two thousand years ago. It was even known where she lived out the rest of her days, in Saint Maxime, a few kilometers distant from her landing point. Her skull could be seen at the Basilisque de Saint Maxime by the faithful if they were so inclined. I was not.

I was convinced the Mary story was not conspiracy-mongering but rather a distorted version of historical events. Their arrival predated the Abbey's conception by almost one thousand years, bringing knowledge of immortality to these shores long before the warrior monks began their hunt for it. I did not think the Lazarus resuscitation was induced by the Egyptian immortality powder.

It had to be yet another version of the immortality formula, perhaps provided by the Greyman, something more akin to the spores. Today, no knowledge of it remained. The Abbey had totally expunged this trail, apart from these ancient traces found in small French towns. The historian had revealed another point of interest. There existed a map which pointed to Joseph of Aramathea's tomb. The old historian had heard of it by accident. By that point in the session, he was desperately providing me with any information he thought I might find useful, trying to delay the end of my lesson and his life.

He had heard of the map, a three-dimensional miniature of a real landscape, when a man had offered a reward for its discovery. The map-maker was named Sauniere, the same Sauniere who joined the Abbey and became their visionary. I would track the map down but not now. I had been away from Ambrumesy long enough.

That night, I returned to the castle just in time to witness the arrival of a large stone sarcophagus intended for the chapel. From that moment on, my attention became single-mindedly focused on the activities around Lindon's castle. My every night was spent ensconced in a narrow crack between two large branches of a massive tree, a position overseeing the castle and, more importantly, the chapel.

The sarcophagus was quite ornate, covered with carvings, scenes of a man's life, most of them exaggerating his importance, whoever he may have been. There was no name inscribed on it. The coffin itself was empty. Despite its apparent age, I began entertaining the belief that the tomb was a fake, made to look like one thing while being something else entirely.

One item in particular convinced me. The base beneath the head of the sarcophagus had a deep, cylindrical hole with odd, partial grooves carved within the cylindrical walls. I could make nothing of its purpose but it was not standard fare for tombs. The lack of a name on the sarcophagus also departed from standard practice. Why such extravagant expense on someone unknown?

The answer to my questions came three nights after the sarcophagus' arrival. A man arrived under heavy guard. My keen eyes identified him as Raymond Lindon. He was accompanied by two men, each carrying a bulky object, one, a heavy spring, and the other, a cylindrical tube. Both would fit handily in the circular hollow beneath the stone coffin.

One of the men inserted the heavy spring into the hollow, as anticipated, followed by the cylinder. They set it in with extreme care, adjusting it several times, until Lindon declared himself satisfied. I could see the relief in his demeanor when he left the chapel. He had considered this an important task.

For about a week following the cylinder's insertion, the chapel was kept under heavy guard and I was unable to venture near. During the second week, I sneaked in unobserved, getting my first chance to examine it. I was surprised to find a carving on the end of the stone cylinder. It was the mythical creature, Ourobouros, the snake which ate its tail, a symbol representing the cyclical nature of time. Was this a clue about immortality?

I moved the face of the cylinder, trying to force it out of its recess. I could push it in, feeling the resistance of the spring behind but I couldn't get it to come out. Remembering the grooves carved in the hollow gave me an idea. Placing my hand near the edge of the cylinder face, I moved it from side to side. After a few attempts, I figured the right rhythm and got it to jump its grooves several times, until the cylinder popped out, propelled by the spring behind it.

Picking it up, I felt something slide around inside. It was hollow. Further examination revealed a tightly fit stone plug on its bottom, made of different stone than the cylinder. I could not pry it out. I decided to put the cylinder back for the time being, until I figured out what to do. I could not simply steal their stone tube. My involvement would be immediately discovered.

I decided to make a duplicate carving of the cylinder. I didn't even need the whole thing, just a face plate resembling the original. It was only intended to deceive for a short while. Of course, I didn't have the skills to make such a

carving myself. I forced a sculptor to do it, from drawings I had made. Whenever he objected, I sculpted a bit of him. After a while, he just carved.

He did a pretty good job of it and I put him out of his misery quickly as reward. The activity was a good relief valve for me but it did not satisfy me and I ended up roaming the countryside looking for further victims. I wandered far that night, knowing instinctively to keep my preying away from my regular haunts.

I performed four experiments before I managed to rein my urges in. Somewhere along my rampage, I fell back into vampyric practices, sucking two of them dry. Deep in the background, I knew I should stop drinking their blood. It could be used to track me. No matter the reasons to stop, I had to do it, I needed to do it.

The one good thing about Vampirism was that it left a clean kill. No bloody mess. I had no objection to blood, of course but it took such a long time to clean up. As an additional bonus, if the area where I left my experiments was in any way dry, the drained bodies tended to desiccate rather than rot. This usually minimized the smell element, allowing me to hide them more effectively.

I tended to be quite imaginative about finding interesting locations to leave the bodies. It amused me to think of those finding them and the unanswerable questions it would leave them. Still, all humor aside, I couldn't kid myself about what had happened. I was losing control. I had known I needed to keep a low profile, yet had still acted on my urges, powerless to hold myself back.

My other side had to be reined in. The situation was made even more difficult when, next morning, as Ragmeny, I was begged by a local woman to investigate the disappearance of one of those I had killed. I used the opportunity to cast the blame on some poor innocent, who ended up taking his life in shame.

I helped him a little with that.

I returned to the castle with my false carving, the very next night, managing to replace the original and leave the chapel unobserved. I had to admit I felt less tense since my last experiments. It was, admittedly, an argument in their favor. When I was far enough from the castle, I settled down in the woods and took some time to examine the cylinder and its bottom plug.

Made of different stone than the cylinder's marble, it had the look of slate, though I was no expert. Different stones had different expansion factors. I reasoned I could create a gap between the plug and cylinder wall with a judicious application of heat.

Unfortunately, I was not aware that slate did not appreciate strong heat. I had built a small fire, well hidden by the thick brush. When I had a goodly pile of hot coals, I placed the cylinder plug directly above it. The marble expanded slowly but the slate plug reacted violently to the sudden heat. I didn't notice the plug's first cracking sounds, attributing them to the fire. Eventually, the stone plug cracked loudly, raising the alarm. I hurriedly lifted the cylinder away from the fire but it was too late. The slate plug exploded

into smaller pieces, falling into the ardent embers along with a wrapped package.

It exploded instantly into flames. I instinctively grabbed it, smothering it tightly against my chest, trying to put it out. The object, wrapped in oil cloth, refused to be extinguished, setting fire to my clothing. I frantically ran to a nearby stream and jumped into the water, putting the blaze out. Pulling the soggy mess out, I discovered it was a sheaf of papers, now partially burnt and damaged by water.

I managed to make out the first few words, by the firelight: this was a journal from Maurice Leblanc and I had all but destroyed it.

* * * * *

For the first time in my life, I felt anger directed towards myself. I had never done such a terrible blunder. It was too dark to examine the document, to see the full extent of the damage. I stamped out the remaining embers of my fire with my bare hands, fanning the flames of my anger further still. I ran back to my room in Ambrumesy, bearing the cylinder and soggy manuscript, hiding both under my bed.

Thoughts were circling endlessly. The entire situation was a mess. I could not return the cylinder until I replaced the slate plug. I had killed the only stone worker in the area and I was unskilled when it came to carving. Looking at the sheaf of papers and seeing the extent of the damage was terribly frustrating. The only good thing I could say was that Leblanc had written his journal using a pencil, so the writing had been mostly preserved when the pages had been soaked in the water.

There was no way, however, that I could return Leblanc's pages to the cylinder in their present state. I would have to copy it. This would take much longer than expected, increasing the risk of discovery. I could be found out because of this one stupid mistake. My rage returned even stronger than before. My hands kept opening and closing into fists uncontrollably. I wanted to hit someone, to kill, to maim. In the back of my mind, I knew I was losing control. A massive rage was building, deep inside. I had enough sense left to understand that, if I exploded here, I would wipe Ambrumesy off the map. Yet, I could no longer stop it. The rage was coming and taking my mind with it.

I had to get out of here.

I ran downstairs, mumbling whatever words I could to Mrs Landry, the landlady, and hurried out, knowing my eyes were wild and my expression haggard. I began running, trying to put some distance between Ambrumesy and I. It was my last conscious act. At some point, I was screaming out loud, my anger echoing through the countryside. My running changed into a frenzied race, into an insane game of straight-line running, my mind blank, madness overwhelming all reason.

I raced like an automaton with a deadly purpose. Whoever I encountered was going to die. It was that simple. I passed into Italy, my heedless running taking me into the mountains. The rage just kept growing, eating every

thought in my head. I bashed through trees, jumped over small hills, my energy expanding to meet my insane needs.

Inevitably, I ran into a town. I later learned it was named Longarone. No matter. I broke through the first door I came to and ripped the five people there into pieces, in as many seconds, my mouth opening and closing all the while in wordless rage. I ripped the back wall apart and continued on to the next house, killing everyone I met there with a speed I could not believe. I could not be sated. I would not be sated.

I wanted more.

The intensity of my emotions filled me, almost bringing sensation back to my body. I was alive! I reached the end of the town, a lake of blood behind me, everyone dead. I still wanted more. I was standing there, staring blankly at the mayhem I had wrought, when I heard a strange whistling. A wind whipped up, growing louder. I thought my mind had totally snapped but then I saw trees thrashing around violently, the ground rumbling ominously. This was real, not in my mind. I began running at a speed I had never run before, knowing something was coming, something massive. I did not know what it was but I had to leave here now.

No matter my rush when I left the town, the wind kept increasing in strength, turning into a veritable maelstrom. I chanced a look behind me and saw an immense wall of water rushing inexorably closer. I tried to run faster but even my immortal energy could not match the speed of the water. I desperately kept running, no matter the hopelessness, not able to give up. No matter my efforts, the wall of water engulfed me and I was swept up and around, swirling madly in the dark waters.

What followed was pure insanity. I was pulled helplessly along, smashed into buildings, boulders, trees and anything else in my path. I was totally out of control. I simply rolled myself into a ball, closed my eyes and let the waters do their worst. For once, I blessed the numbness which prevented any impact from truly getting to me. My rage vanished somewhere in the middle of my travels, returning to a calmness I had thought lost forever.

I ended up on some mountainside, lying amongst piles of debris, unable to move, my mind overwhelmed by what I had done. I saw how my actions had led to the rage but once awakened, the intensity unleashed within had been beyond anything I could control. I finally understood what the Abbey feared and now, I feared it as well. Going the way of the rage led to true madness and the spores were taking me there, no matter what I wanted.

I would have been caught as well, the alarm raised with the Abbey by my murderous rampage, but fate had intervened. I later learned a landslide of some sort had overwhelmed the dam above the town. All evidence of my killing spree had been erased by the floodwaters. A miracle of a coincidence. I was safe from the Abbey.

For the time being.

I started on my way back to Ambrumesy, totally drained, within and without. For the first time since I began ingesting the spores, I could see where I was truly headed. I had allowed a moment of inattention to almost

destroy everything I had worked so hard to accomplish. This was no joke. My search for answers was turning into a life-or-death quest.

I could not allow my vigilance to waver ever again. Not like that. Unbelievable luck had been with me, when that dam had burst. It had saved me at the exact right time I needed it. It felt like I had been helped somehow. I had never been one to see meaning in accidental occurrences but this truly defied belief.

It gave me a bolstering of purpose. I found, in my narrow escape, a new determination to seek the answers I craved. I couldn't help but feel there was a deep meaning to what was happening to me. I stopped briefly at a farm to wash up and obtain new clothing, my old ones reduced to tatters in the flood. I buried the family in the fields to feed the corn. It looked in need of nutrients.

By the time I arrived in Ambrumesy and my waiting rooms, I had regained a modicum of control. I swore to myself that no such outburst would ever occur again and formulated a plan to assist me. Not only would my vigilance be unwavering but I would apply some of St Germain's principles to keep my emotions in check.

I was referring, in particular, to the meditation trance. Through the use of meditation, I could learn to impose an unwavering calmness upon myself. I would restrict experiments, so they would only happen as part of my plans, with solid purpose behind them, not berserker urges. Through such mental exercises, I would learn to vanquish the numbness.

I took up Leblanc's journal and worked on it, as my first therapy. I always had good penmanship and found his small cursive style easy to replicate. Some words were gone, burned away but I was able to extrapolate what they had been by the context of the sentences. Hardly anything of what he wrote was lost in my improved version.

The journal was an eye opener but, in the end, did not provide as much information as I had hoped. It gave me interesting background, such as Leblanc's state of mind when he fought us in our first encounters and even an explanation for building the deadly trap in the caves. However, there was not a single mention of immortality, and nothing about the Abbey, convincing me it was an inherently false document. It might have truthful sections, as all convincing falsehoods do, but everything leading to immortality had been removed or presented from an alternate perspective.

At the end of his journal, I found a Post-Scriptum, a seemingly purposeless series of numbers. By then, I was well used to Leblanc's codes and tricks, having studied all of his books. Although the code at the end of his journal was difficult to break, I did succeed within a week. Once I had the key, the secret words were revealed within minutes:

*Find the Four Books.
Read between the Lines.
Look for the lost caves.*

At last, I had confirmation of my suspicions. Leblanc was truly part of the Abbey's plans, of Project Sirene. I now knew what the project was about. It

referred to a plan rolling around a person named Sirenne. Leblanc's journal was intended for one of two people. Either his son, Patrice Leblanc, whom I had killed, or another man, not named in the journal. It had to be this Sirenne, possibly Lindon or Lupin's son or some such. Leblanc had written his false journal as part of a plan to return the caves to his descendants, or to Sirenne.

Hitler had been an interloper all along, messing with Leblanc's plans. He and Lupin had to remove Hitler before they could go on with their quest for answers in the caves. Everything had been put on hold, until this was done. When the time came, the returning descendant would be given specific tasks, in order to reclaim their destiny.

Unfortunately for them, I had found the trail first. I would find these four books before them and read between the lines and see what could be inferred. As for the lost caves, I was sure I knew where they were.

Paul Sirenne

Chapter 2

Secrets of the Torah.

We had found the hidden entrance prepared by Weissmuller and changed the mechanism for an easier one, allowing people to access the caves without using the sub. Raymonde had been right about our electromagnetic ability. We had easily detected the entire mechanism within the walls.

My new sense had continued increasing in strength and I could now perceive most of the caves, looking at everything as agglomerations of magnetic fields. Since the training session with Raymonde, I found it easier to locate any particular object within my field's reach. I could always sense the four books.

Raymonde had returned to the medical caves, to see to the woman who had the stillborn child and check in on Coulter and Doctor Phillippe. The death of the baby had deeply affected Raymonde. She wanted to use her skills to help find the origin of the virus responsible for this horrible genetic mutation. I was heading to the conference caves, where Ziva and Avi Bakla were waiting for me. I met O'Flanahan on the way there. He had heard something was up and wanted to be in on it.

We arrived to find the two Israelis in an alarmed state.

„Ziva, Avi... What's going on?“

They quickly kneeled down when I entered, frustrating me to no end.

„Please, both of you, none of that. Get up and stop all this genuflecting. We don't have time for nonsense.“

Both appeared contrite as they stood up.

„So sorry, Mr Sirenne. We can hardly help it, knowing who you really are. But we will do as you ask,“ replied Ziva.

„Coulter told me that you had something important to relate?“

„Yes. Our superiors have informed us that events are reaching an explosive point in the Middle East. While many countries are behind you, some are not so accepting. The Moslem nations in particular. They are vehemently refuting Israel’s assertions about your divinity and the talks are getting heated. It has rekindled a long-standing argument about ownership of the Temple on the Mount. It is likely discussions will break down soon. Violence will follow any breakdown. Tempers are simply flaring too much,“ explained Ziva.

„God seems pretty high on the agenda these days,“ commented O’Flanahan cynically.

„All these arguments are useless, this talk of divinity pointless. The world is falling apart. There are more important things to concern ourselves about,“ I objected, feeling frustrated again.

„Sir, nothing can be done about the state of the world. We cannot control natural disasters. All we have is our faith that these events have some meaning. You must recognize that you are at the center of all of this. Talk of divinity is inevitable...“ continued Ziva. Avi interrupted her.

„...And not so foolish either, Mr Sirenne. We didn’t come to these conclusions by losing our senses, you know. My wife and I are experts in ancient prophecies of the Torah. Our conclusions were reached after years of study. We know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Torah contains all the answers to our questions. In fact it is the book you seek, without knowing it.“

„What do you mean by that?“ I asked.

„Ha! I should have known. It’s all about the codes of the Torah,“ exclaimed O’Flanahan.

„This puzzle of the four books, thought up by the prophet Sauniere, is leading you to the One Book, the first copy of the Torah. Of this we are positive,“ answered Ari.

„How do you know that? ... And why would the Torah be so important, anyway?“

„Have you never heard of the codes hidden within the Torah, Mr Sirenne?“

„Not really, no.“

They nodded at each other in understanding before replying.

„That may explain why you do not recognize your true rôle, Sir. Perhaps I could give you a quick history lesson. It might make things clearer for you.“

„Please do. Anything to make more sense of the situation.“

„Wait, wait wait... I know about this stuff. Let me start this off...“ interrupted O’Flanahan. Without waiting for approval, he launched into a ramble, speaking rapidly and loudly.

„If we are to believe the most ancient myths, the Torah is said to have come down Mount Sinai with Moses, along with the two tablets holding the immortality formula. On the surface, the book appeared to be the history of the Jewish people. In the myth, it was given to Moses, by God, in the form of a golden scroll, containing a continuous series of 304,805 Hebrew characters. There were no breaks in between words, which was the tradition back then. The golden Torah was seen by the Jewish people as the physical representation of their Covenant with their God. However, it was always believed by the learned that deeper secrets

were hidden within the Torah, in the form of codes. Many Rabbis devoted their lives looking for them...”

„You are correct, Mr O’Flanahan...” said Ari, trying to regain control. O’Flanahan wasn’t about to be stopped so easily. He simply ignored the comment and kept going, speaking louder still.

„...It was none other than the illustrious Sir Isaac Newton who started the ball rolling, with his affirmation that a code lay hidden in the Torah, calling it a *cryptogram set by the Almighty*. He set himself the task to *read the riddle of the Godhead, the riddle of past and future events, divinely fore-ordained*, then spent half his life looking for it, unsuccessfully I might add. It wasn’t until this century that the first recognizable code was found, by... uhm... some guy called Rabbi Weissmandel, about fifty years ago. After years of failed effort, the man resorted to counting letters in his desperation, an act which succeeded where all else had failed... As you may know, the Torah is separated into five books. In order, the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Rabbi Weissmandel discovered that an equidistant letter system, or ELS, had been used to hide the word TORAH in the first two books. He found it by identifying the first T in the book of Genesis and then counting forty-nine letters. The fiftieth letter is the next letter in the word Torah and so on. The third book, Leviticus held the word YAHWEH when one used an ELS of seven letters. Seven is, of course, the root of forty-nine. Finally, Weissmandel found that the last two books held the word TORAH once again, also with an ELS frequency of forty-nine but this time with the word TORAH spelled in reverse.”

O’Flanahan stood up from his chair and began pacing while he continued. I had to admit he was an excellent storyteller.

„...Overall, this could give you the impression that the first two books were pointing towards the center book, as were the two final books with their reversed TORAH. But it took another man, Dr Eliyahu Rips, a world class leader in the mathematics underlying quantum theory, working with another Israeli, a physicist, Doron Witztum, to expose the true extent of the mystery. Working together, the two men developed a computer program to seriously test the assertions of codes hidden within the Torah... For the first test, they chose the names of thirty-two great sages out of Jewish history, intending to determine if they could find their birth and death dates. The tests were a unanimous success, finding the names and dates consistently encoded together. After several other such grueling tests, Drs Rips and Witztum published their results in a leading American mathematics journal, *Statistical Science*. Because of the outlandishness of his assertions, the results and calculations presented in the paper were checked by three experts before publication. No errors were found.”

O’Flanahan stopped in his tracks, peering at each of us intently, making what he obviously felt was his strongest point.

„In fact, every mathematician who has attempted to find fault in these codes has ended up convinced of their existence instead. Of course, all manner of tests were carried out, including using Hebrew versions of countless other books, such as Dostoyeski’s *Crime and Punishment*, to learn if chance alone could create these codes. Only the Torah held meaningful information embedded within its text...”

„But how can that be, Ari?“ I asked, trying to return the conversation to its originators. Avi jumped right in, getting in just ahead of the obstinate O’Flanahan.

„How indeed? If codes were truly in the Torah, who could have put them there? God? Not man, certainly, we don’t have the technical ability to hide codes that complex. We cannot forget the codes deal with history that happened long after the Torah was written. How could anyone know of future events? You can bet that all experts scoffed at these assertions, just as you do now. But time after time, as Mr O’Flanahan asserts, the experts have fallen, their arguments repudiated by their own tests. There is another point to be made which relates to this unique book: the Torah is the only book to have travelled through time unaltered.“

„How do you know that?“ I asked.

„The first argument which was presented against the presence of codes in the Torah is that books are altered every single time they are reproduced, thus the codes are merely a cosmic coincidence. Normally this would be so, as ancient books often ended up completely changed after centuries of copying. Errors in transcribing previous versions and even conscious changes were made by inattentive or overzealous scribes almost as a matter of course. However, in order to transcribe the Torah, a scribe had to follow twelve exact steps, as required by tradition. No exception could be made. These steps ensured no changes could be made unnoticed. The process was so grueling that, if the state of mind of the writer was suspect, the copy would be buried, following a specific ritual. Through these steps, the Torah has remained virtually unchanged since the beginning of days.“

„Fine. The Torah has remained unchanged. Why would that be important?“ I enquired. Ziva was the one who replied.

„In order to learn the answer, one must ask why these twelve steps existed in the first place. Who put them in place? Ancient history says they were edicts from Moses himself, who stated the Torah should never be changed lest we bring about our own end. Back then, no one understood the true meaning of his words. Throughout the intervening millennia, Rabbis could not avoid returning to what the Torah itself asserted, in the prophecy from Daniel, that a sealed book existed which would only be revealed in the *End of Days*...“

„I see what you’re trying to get at. You’re saying the Torah is the sealed book, and that the hidden codes within the Torah are actually the secret book everyone has been looking for...“ exploded O’Flanahan, getting overexcited.

„Exactly, Mr O’Flanahan,“ responded Ari. „But what you seemed to have missed, is that these codes could not have been deciphered before the invention of the computer. The seal, to which the Torah refers in its prophecy, is a time seal. And that seal has been broken. The computer has begun deciphering the codes and the answers imply the Torah holds all of history within its pages and maybe more. There are some who have theorized that history exists only because the Torah itself exists. It is possible that all human development has been predicted and prepared for us, as presented within the Torah.“

„You’re telling me that the Torah held knowledge of the future within its pages. I don’t believe it... It’s just impossible,“ I riposted.

„Is it, Mr Sirenne? The problem is that the codes are there, presenting an impossible yet unassailable argument for that very case. This is why so many have

tried to prove the codes wrong, just as eager as you to disprove this frightening argument. As the power of our computers keep increasing, so too do our abilities to break more complex codes. Some believe that we are on the point of breaking another level of codes within the Torah, where all information might be concealed... The answers to everything.“

„You really believe the Torah is what holds reality together?“

„Yes. We see it as a book of rules, the rules of everything, given to us by our God. Don't forget in Hebrew, the word Torah means Law. This could be interpreted to mean all laws, which would include natural law, the realm of physics and science.“

„Come on, Ari, Ziva, you can't seriously believe this?“

„I don't know, Paul, their arguments do make some sense, particularly that bit about the computer,“ interjected O'Flanahan.

„Sir, the world's most expert statisticians and mathematicians have tried to disprove the existence of these codes and they have failed. The conclusions we are led to are inevitable. Please do not forget the codes are not the whole story here. We are dealing with the original copy of the Torah, written onto a gold scroll, historically hidden in the Ark of the Covenant. The Torahs we hold today are but copies of this one original, the One Book. It is still out there, lost to man for millennia, and is what we were searching for in France, near Rennes-le-Chateau...“ Ziva explained. Avi added:

„Imagine our surprise when we managed to unlock the floor panel in Saunier's library, led there by an intense examination of Saunier's actions in his lifetime, convinced he had found the One Book. But it was not that book we found, it was *The Hollow Needle*, by Maurice Leblanc.“

„You can well understand our consternation upon uncovering it. We researched its history, discovering Leblanc had been heavily involved with Saunier and that his books were replete with codes, leading to Saunier's location. Eventually, we realized Leblanc's book was invulnerable to harm. We found its bizarre electromagnetic field and the odd hexagonal cells covering every inch of its surface. We had stumbled onto something connected to our search for the One Book. We were not the only ones hunting for answers. The Chinese, the Russians, the Americans, the French, the list went on and on. Some were seeking the cause of the invulnerable effect, to use it for their own purposes. Others seemed to be protecting it, in particular the organization named the Abbey.“

„You uncovered a conspiracy. Wonderful!“ commented O'Flanahan.

„Yes, we had. The oldest conspiracy in the world. It took years to put it together; we still don't have all the facts. Our search revealed that many countries were doing their own investigations into immortality. The Abbey, with their hooks in all the secret societies throughout history, were controlling knowledge and thought, while remaining in the shadows...“ said Ari.

„...All of it centered on either finding the One Book or keeping it secreted away.“ continued Ziva. „Eventually, we reached an impasse in our research. The Abbey could not be confronted directly. It knew where too many skeletons were buried. We were reduced to a waiting game. Our one ace in the hole was that we had the special *Hollow Needle* book in our possession. It was intended for you, Mr Sirenne, though we did not yet know it, back then. The Book's invulnerable state spoke to

its mystical origins and we believed the Abbey would be incapable of completing its plans without the Book's return..."

"...All we had to do was wait and keep an eye on the point of origin, the Church at Rennes-le-Chateau. Someday, someone would come looking for what we had taken. Imagine our surprise when you arrived with the leader of the Abbey in tow. Our instruments measured magnetic fields off the scale, coming directly from your direction, Mr Sirenne. In the church, we felt your powerful influence, when we were slowed down. We had found the one to whom the invulnerable book belonged and we knew the Abbey's plans were nearing fruition," Avi added.

"We contacted our superiors for orders. There was never any real doubts as to what those would be. We had to return the book, to side with you. You know, we used the codes to look up your name, Mr Sirenne. The answers we got were unquestionable. The word Yahweh went directly through your name, the first time we had ever encountered this case... I will never forget it. I knew, in that moment, that we were entering the End of Days and that our God had returned to us."

"Surely, you don't believe all that from one word crossing my name?"

Ari shook his head.

"Sir, It was not the only word, not by far. It was only the first one we saw. There were also the words Armageddon, Opposites and Greyman... a name we were just beginning to know. There was also a date, one which is fast approaching. December 21, 2012."

"That's when the Mayans predicted the end of the world," O'Flanahan exclaimed.

"Yes, as did the Egyptians, the Indians, the Chinese, the Sumerians, and countless others. All pointing the finger at that one date as the end of the world."

"No, husband, you must be precise. It is seen as the end of this present cycle..."

"True, but it is also the last cycle. No other is predicted. It must mean that it is the end," Avi added.

"Perhaps. We can never know the answer to that," she replied. "Nonetheless, what is sure, Mr Sirenne, is that you are indeed the One. Of that there is no doubt..."

"Seems convincing to me..." commented a sarcastic-sounding O'Flanahan.

"...So, while we understand your disbelief, we remain certain you are the Messiah, come to us as predicted. It is our role to help you open your eyes to who you truly are."

"I would already know it, wouldn't I? If I were really your Messiah, I would know it."

"You do know it, you just haven't accepted it consciously yet."

There was no winning with these two.

I could not agree with their statements. There were too many assumptions in there, too many theories instead of facts. The whole thing seemed a bit slanted, one-sided. However, there was no denying something was going on and that I was right in the middle of it.

"Listen, I appreciate what you are trying to do. But in the end, I think this debate is rather pointless. We simply do not have the time to decipher anything more than the immediate task at hand. For me, that's figuring out the location of the One Book. Period. For the two of you, it's to work with your country to keep

the peace around the caves long enough for me to do that. I have to trust the next step will become clear before that happens.“

They shook their heads in agreement.

„We will do as our role requires. You may rest assured, Sir. We will remain here as long as we can, to fulfill our duty.“

My glasses beeped. It was an excited Doctor Phillippe.

„Ah, good, Mr Sirenne. I believe I have figured it out. I may truly have done it, yes Sir. Incredible but true...“

I couldn't help but laugh at his exuberance.

„Calm down, Dr Phillippe, you will give yourself a heart attack.“

„I probably will, after the shock of all these discoveries. I can hardly bear it. I must have some tea to calm down... and a pastry... Anyway, you must come down to the auditorium cave, where I have prepared a presentation. I am inviting your friends, Coulter, O'Flanahan, Briar and, of course, miss Raymonde.“

„I will be down as soon as possible.“

I had just run out of time.

„All right you two, it looks like the trail has started up again. I'm off. Good luck with your superiors. Try to keep the peace as long as possible out there. I think we're going to need every minute.“

The two headed off, leaving O'Flanahan and I alone.

„Well, if that wasn't a mind-blower, I don't know what is, eh Paul?“ stated O'Flanahan.

„You said it. I hardly know what to think of it,“ I responded.

„I'm sure you never expected to be facing this type of situation. I'm not sure what I'd do, if it were me... but I do know one thing, me boy... I've watched how you handled things so far... and you've done it mighty well. You've kept your cool and faced everything face on... Best of all, you've refused to accept what people are telling you. You've always figured it out for yourself... and I think that's the only way it should be...“

„I guess.“

„No guessing about it. In my line of work, I've learned a thing or two about the people that end up making a difference... it's the people that go the distance, the ones that don't give up and keep pushing through thick and thin while maintaining the right attitude, they're the ones that count... That's you, Paul, you're that guy. No matter why or how, this is where you've ended up and I have complete faith that you're the one who's going to end up going all the way...“

I was moved by his support.

„Thanks, O'Flanahan, I don't know what to say.“

„Nothing to say, you just gotta keep plugging is all... Now, let's get ourselves down to that auditorium. I can't wait to find out what Doctor Phillippe's cooked up...“

„I couldn't agree more. It does seem like he's finally on to something. Let's go.“

Chapter 3

Dr Phillippe's Presentation.

I felt Raymonde's presence before I entered into the auditorium. Her field kept pulling at me like a huge magnet. If anything, it felt stronger than before. She had noticed me, for the same reason, when I entered with O'Flanahan. We tried walking calmly towards each other but instead, we both began half-running despite ourselves, ending up with a solid slam into each other.

Luckily, no one else seemed to have picked up on how odd our *hug* had been. O'Flanahan was already with Coulter on the other side of the auditorium. Raymonde and I managed to disengage ourselves, after a quick sticky-lips kiss. Separating and keeping ourselves separate required a constant, conscious, physical effort. Distance seemed to help, so I ended up sitting at the far end of the auditorium, with Coulter and O'Flanahan.

Coulter spoke up as soon as I sat down next to him, a wide smile on his face.

„You'll never believe who I met... this girl... from the Watchers, Carol Flint. She's just amazing. Anyway, we've been talking. The Watchers are really worried. They think things are getting ready to blow. They want to formalize some type of agreement between us and them, just in case things get really bad. They've asked me to meet up with them at their headquarters in Paris... and it'll give me a chance to meet Carol in person at the same time... What do you think?“

The news surprised me. I had never imagined Coulter to be anywhere else but near me. I realized at that moment how much I counted on his support, on his friendship. Coulter saw my face and understood immediately.

„Aww, man, don't worry. I'm not jumping ship... but it's me they know, and I figured you were already way too busy to take this on... I'm not sure what more I can do here, anyway. You're totally invulnerable. There's an entire army around the caves. No one can touch you. You can't be in two places at once, you know,“ he stated.

He was right about that. For now, at least.

„Do you think it's wise for you to go, Fabian?“

„Look, Paul, they represent the biggest grass roots movement around. They are the closest thing to the regular people out there, not like those deceitful leaders who keep trying to bribe immortality out of us. No matter what's coming, the Watchers can be an incredible asset... and they can reach just about everyone within seconds of notification. I think they can become a last ditch army, if we end up needing it, or they can be there to help those in trouble, all over the world.“

„Going out of the caves will expose you to danger.“

He laughed.

„Oh don't worry too much about that. Dr Phillippe has given me some spores to take with me, if that's okay... Not much, mind you, just enough to keep me protected while I'm gone...“

„Talking of Dr Phillippe, where is he? The darn guy calls us for a meeting but when we arrive, right on time by the by, he's not even here,“ interrupted O'Flanahan.

„Apparently, he is still involved in some last-minute discussions with that theoretical physicist team of his,“ replied Coulter.

„A team? How come he gets a team and I don't?“

„What possible use would a team be to you, O'Flanahan? You'd just waste their time, like you waste mine,“ added Briar, who had just arrived.

„Hey, that's not fair. I coulda used a team hunting out that secret exit of Weissmuller's, let me tell you. Took me days to find it... Anyway, you can't blame me for this one, Briar. It's all Dr Phillippe's doing... Say, why is Miss Raymonde sitting way over there?“

O'Flanahan's question made me remember none of them knew of the strange connection between Raymonde and I. They were aware that we were in love but that was all. All along this adventure, the two of us had inexplicably felt compelled to keep our connection and Raymonde's genetic immortality hidden. I had deceived my friends several times in order to achieve this. I still felt guilty about it. Yet, there was nothing to do for it. I had to continue lying and hiding it, because, deep down, I was convinced this connection was our biggest strength. Its secret had to be protected at all costs. I could not explain my feelings but I was learning to trust them. Experience had proven them right time and again.

„She's still upset about that still-born baby. She needed a bit of solitude.“

„At least that's true Paul,“ Raymonde sent me.

„Yes, not a lie, just not the complete reason,“ I responded.

„I'm simply too attracted to you, Paul,“ she laughed. „They wouldn't understand.“

„Well, that's just terrible,“ replied O'Flanahan. „I'm going to have to go sit with her and that's that.“

„Suits me just fine, O'Flanahan,“ added Briar, while he seated himself near Coulter and I. „You go do that.“

Coulter muffled a snicker.

„I will, Briar. Don't you worry yourself about it,“ replied O'Flanahan huffily, making his way along the row of chairs towards Raymonde, muttering all the while. Before he could reach her, Dr Phillippe walked in, followed by his assistant, Jean-Claude Vilmiers. His arrival elicited a final remark from O'Flanahan, as he sat down next to Raymonde, patting her on the shoulder in unmistakable sympathy:

„Finally. We've been waiting for you, Dr Phillippe.“

„So sorry everyone. I just had to make sure of the final few facts, before I came here to present them... and that is what I am going to present to you... facts. Not surmise, not theories, just straightforward and totally unbelievable facts...“

Dr Phillippe hurried to the center of the podium, directing his assistant, with another of his exaggerated arm waves.

„Quickly, set up the slides, and get ready to start them on my command. Come on, come on, Jean-Claude, we are all waiting.“

He turned back to us, dropping the frown he'd had, replacing it with a very serious look.

„Before I go on, allow me to thank you for coming here on such short notice. I know you are all so very busy. I also know it is unlikely we will continue to have the opportunity of all being together like this, considering the time pressures on each of us. It is exactly because of this, that I felt I had to convene this meeting before it was too late.“

The small, rotund doctor stopped his rapid delivery, when a matronly woman entered, pushing a tray with coffee, tea and pastries.

„...Ah, perfect timing, Mrs Marchand...“ he exclaimed, licking his lips at the sight of the tray. „I took the opportunity to order some tea and pastries from the kitchen... My throat was simply parched and I have not stopped at all today, barely having had time for breakfast and lunch. I'm sure you understand... Will any of you join me? This will take no time, I promise.“

Neither Raymonde nor I felt any type of hunger and so, declined, but O'Flanahan, Briar and Coulter all stepped down and served themselves. An impatient Briar took the opportunity to approach the rotund doctor, attempting to pry information out of him. Dr Phillippe remained resolutely mute, gulping down his hot tea and swallowing pastries at a rapid rate. Finally, looking somewhat refreshed, Dr Phillippe regained the podium, still holding a small piece of pastry, waiting as the others seated themselves. Noticing his assistant standing at the ready, he began talking.

„Jean-Claude? Could you start the first slide, please.“

A picture appeared on the large monitor behind Dr Phillippe, showing a small pile of whitish powder.

„There it is, folks, the beginning of it all. That is 33.75 grams of the purest mono-atomic iridium ever found. It was obtained from one human brain. We all have approximately the same amount, except perhaps for you, Mr Sirenne but we will leave that for a bit later in the presentation... Since the very first moment I was tasked with understanding what is happening here, I have been plagued with the challenge of having to break down just about every single axiom of science I knew, in order to figure out the answer...“ Dr Phillippe paused dramatically for a moment. „...But I do believe I have indeed figured it out... I know what is happening, really happening... and it all has to do with electromagnetic theory. It was your new ability, Mr Sirenne, which finally gave me the push in the right direction. I had been roaming around it, without ever seeing it. After what happened in the conference room, when that rock exploded and rebuilt itself right in front of me, I knew where the answer would lie, had to lie. It was almost blindingly obvious...“

He chuckled briefly at his own pun and went on.

„As you may know, electromagnetic theory is the linchpin of our entire society. It is what has allowed the development of all that is electric, of electronics, of computers... But electromagnetic energy is actually responsible for much more than that. In order to make this more understandable, please bear with me while I present a bit of a history lesson on electromagnetic theory. Jean-Claude, next slide, please.“

A picture flashed up of two formulas, next to a picture of a large, bearded man.

„It was James Maxwell who got the ball rolling, by developing these two famous equations, one to represent electricity and the other to represent magnetic energy. By then, the world suspected the two were related but it took the unparalleled genius of Maxwell to solve the riddle. Of course these formulas concealed another astounding discovery, one Maxwell had not originally anticipated. No one could forget the historic release of his 1864 paper, *Electromagnetic theory of light*. In it, Maxwell combined displacement current with some of the other equations of

electromagnetism and obtained a wave equation with a speed of 299,792,458 meters per second...”

„The speed of light,“ I exclaimed.

„Exactly, Mr Sirenne. The speed of light, buried within Maxwell’s formulas. It took a while before the true significance of this discovery was established. The speed of light could finally be explained, as it was not, in fact, the speed of light at all. It was the speed of all particles and waves of the electromagnetic spectrum, of which visible light was an infinitesimal part. This discovery also enabled us to explain the great mystery of how light could travel here in the first place. Slide.“

The picture changed to a star field. I recognized it as our galaxy, the Milky Way.

„A question that had seemed so simple in the first place had turned out to be quite difficult to answer. How could light travel through the vacuum of space? It really couldn’t, according to our accepted models of cosmology. Not unless the vacuum wasn’t a vacuum after all. After years of attempted solutions to this problem, there was only one possible answer left. There had to be a matrix for light to travel through and, out in space, there was only one candidate: electromagnetic fields. Eventually, this theory was proven by measuring magnetic fields in space, using some of the most advanced telescopes in the world. It wasn’t long before we confirmed EM fields covered all of space, giving light a pathway to travel... So when God said: *Let there be light*, he might have been slightly inaccurate. He should have said: *Let there be electromagnetic fields and then let there be light*. Slide.“

The picture flipped to an image of the planet Earth, surrounded by various closed lines.

„Yes, the speed of light was in fact the speed of the electromagnetic spectrum... but so what, some of you might say...”

„I was just going to,“ exclaimed O’Flanahan.

„Exactly. Allow me to deepen our exploration of electromagnetic fields versus humans then. How important can those fields be to us? Why should we care? If you look at the image behind me, I will give you the first of many good reasons. What you are looking at is the electro-magnetic field of the earth. It is generated by a rolling ball of molten iron deep within our planet. Its presence is the only thing between us and certain death from our sun, which is blasting a deadly stream of particles down upon us, every second of every day. Our beautiful aurora borealis is a visual side-effect of a life-saving, electromagnetic mechanism, protecting us by ejecting those particles back into space. Slide.“

A standard sinusoidal wave was displayed on the monitor.

„But what is an electromagnetic field anyway? It is an invisible energy which surrounds all of us. We’ve all become used to radio, to cellular telephones, to microwave dish receivers, well, those are, one and all, electromagnetic waves. The planet’s magnetic field is also all around us, moving in a constant wave pattern. Present theory postulates that the waves are composed of tiny particles, which themselves may be discrete packets of energy, rather than matter. No matter what the waves are composed of, EM energy comes to us only in the form of these waves. The difference between the various waves of the electromagnetic spectrum is called frequency... Change the frequency of the EM field, how many waves per second and you get different things, like light or radio. You may have heard of the

term *Hertz*, which we use to describe the number of waves per second. On earth, there is a frequency of eight waves per second. It is started by our planet's EM field and maintained by a regular bouncing off the higher parts of the atmosphere. Incredibly, this frequency is found to exist in all forms of life on earth, forcing us to conclude that eight Hertz is the frequency of life. Slide."

The image changed to an old man.

"Speaking of life, let's examine what started all this, immortality. By all rights, every one of us should be immortal right now..."

"I couldn't agree more," exclaimed O'Flanahan.

"...Thank you Mr O'Flanahan. But I am not suggesting, as you are, that we should all be immortal as a some type of vague, futuristic hope... Remember, I am here presenting facts, not theories. These are conclusions, which our most learned specialists have come to..."

"All right, all right. I'm sorry for even interrupting," harrumphed O'Flanahan.

"...Fine. As I was saying, we should really all be immortal, not dying of old age. When our researchers began examining our DNA, they found everything to provide the building blocks of life. All the instructions to tell us how to assemble and differentiate cells, how to grow the body, everything to bring us to adulthood. The one thing they did not find was instructions to make us age past maturity. Nothing at all. Telomeres were suspected for a while, but they were only a symptom, not the cause... So why were we aging then? Slide."

The picture changed to an image of the earth again, this time bombarded by tiny arrows of light.

"The answer came from space, from the vacuum..." He chuckled a bit. "...Which is no such thing, as I have already explained. It is filled with EM fields coming from all over, carrying with them, all manner of energetic particles... Some of which are deadly... known as cosmic rays. They cause us to age, by passing through our cells, damaging them or forcing them to mutate. No matter the protective force of the Earth's magnetic field, these particles have the energy to punch right past it, through our bodies, ripping us apart at the atomic level. We can't see the cosmic rays, we can't even feel them, not consciously anyway but our DNA certainly knows about them. It's being sliced apart by them. The trillions of cells in our body have learned how to defend themselves, how to repair the damage but no matter what, some end up with broken or mutated DNA. With time, more and more damaged cells begin replicating, causing tumors and cancers, or stop replicating altogether, until the body can no longer survive. That's old age. So, Mr O'Flanahan, we would do well to be concerned about the presence of EM fields, after all. It seems to be a matter of life in death, particularly when we take the latest geologic upheavals into account. They indicate that our planet's EM field is failing. Our protection may soon vanish. Slide."

The monitor changed once more to our planet, this time with a meteorite aimed right at it.

"We must now jump back sixty-five million years into the past, when a meteorite hit the earth, bringing with it the end of the dinosaur age. Along with that, it brought iridium. Lots of iridium. So much, in fact, that the thickness of its layer around the world was used to locate the original impact crater in Mexico. This iridium has had much more effect than was originally presumed. We are all aware

that these very caves were created by a shard from that meteorite and that the iridium brought with it was used by the local fungus to create the first natural source of immortality powder. But the meteorite-borne iridium had another overall effect on the planet. For years after the collision, a fine iridium powder was blown everywhere over the Earth, eventually becoming absorbed by all living things. Unfortunately, after the planetary upheaval following the meteorite's impact, few creatures were left alive to benefit from this. For those that did however, the mono-atomic iridium eventually found its way into the brain. The bigger the brain, the more iridium was there to be found. Slide."

The picture returned to the pile of white powder.

"So that brings us right back to iridium. Why would iridium be of interest to our brains? Why should it bring about immortality and health? These two questions had to be linked. Furthermore, that link had to have something to do with preventing the cosmic rays from touching us. Again and again, I was being returned to electromagnetic fields as the common factor. I examined iridium for its physical effects on the human body. This quickly became more complex than I could have anticipated. Slide."

The image changed to a graphic representation of a complex atom.

"The iridium atom is composed of seventy-seven protons at its center and seventy-seven electrons orbiting around it. Right away, when looking at it, a problem becomes evident. The atom is just too small. It should, by all rights, be a much looser assembly, much larger. Yet, somewhere, in some ancient galactic supernova, the pressures and temperatures managed to compress what should have been an aluminum-like metal into one of the densest atoms known to man. When you compress particles down that much, the energy has to go somewhere. The answer is within the atom itself, where it boosts the speed of the electrons orbiting around the atom's center. With iridium, that translates into a spinning electron speed that very nearly reaches the speed of light. The time-distorting speed imposed a new stability to the atoms, making them obtain a very respectable half-life. Slide."

The image changed to a side view of a human brain, showing a myriad of points all over with a larger agglomeration near the brain's center.

"Looking at iridium's effects on the human brain, we had to ask ourselves where the iridium was going. Our tests revealed iridium had a tendency to locate itself near the brain's synapses, its net of switches, and in the pineal gland. A high concentration was found there. When we began looking at iridium's properties near the electrical synaptic discharges of the brain, we had our first true revelation. Slide."

The monitor revealed a graphic display of electromagnetic fields interacting with each other.

"Here you can see what is actually happening in our brain's synapses, thanks to mono-atomic iridium. The incredibly high speed of the iridium electrons creates a powerful magnetic field. It is only evident at extremely close range but then, this is exactly what this is. When electrons come near iridium, such as in the case of our synapses, they are accelerated by the iridium's induced fields..."

"Good gosh, you're saying the iridium atoms are acting as amplifiers," exclaimed Briar suddenly, looking shocked.

„I see you understand, Mr Briar. Yes, amplifiers. That is exactly what they are. Iridium atoms are amplifying our brain waves. Our thoughts are being given a boost of energy, speeding up the synaptic process tenfold. We are being made to think faster and with more strength than normal. Another effect of the iridium is that our brain cells receive electromagnetic protection from cosmic rays, allowing us an additional measure of cell survival in our most important organ, the brain... Iridium energy can be measured in the body's own electromagnetic field, once you know what to look for... At the same time, iridium explains immortality itself. A stronger dose of mono-atomic iridium could create an electromagnetic field strong enough to repel all cosmic rays, not just in the brain but over the entire body...“

It might also explain the magnetic attraction between Raymonde and I. Doctor Phillippe had mentioned at the beginning of the presentation that I might have a large quantity of iridium within me. The same was surely also true of Raymonde. I returned my attention to Dr Phillippe, who was speaking louder, building towards his main point.

„...Our brains are full of amplifiers and I believe that it is what has given rise to our unique state of consciousness. Our brains have reached a certain size and a certain concentration of iridium that is synergistic, giving rise to higher levels of consciousness than would normally be possible. Without iridium, we would be no different than our Neanderthal predecessors. Brutes with small brains and thick skulls. Iridium has given us awareness and consciousness...“

„What about whales and dolphins? Their brains are bigger than ours. Shouldn't they be conscious like us too?“ asked Coulter.

„Certainly. According to many reports they are exactly that. Probably more so in the case of whales, simply because of sheer size. However, they are seriously restricted by their environment. It's been different for humans. We have a higher percentage of iridium in our brains than any other living species, even whales. Why would that be so? The only explanation is that we have been exposed to it before, that we have an affinity to it. Something about us, about humans is different than in other animals...“

„Perhaps I can help with that point,“ exclaimed Briar, who got up and walked down to the podium, joining a surprised Dr Phillippe.

„...Doctor, if you don't mind the interruption, I think it will be highly pertinent. I was going to wait until all the results were in but I think that, considering your revelations on the matter, it is time for me to expose some of my conclusions about my own research.“

The good doctor graciously accepted, sitting down and taking the opportunity to select another pastry and refill his tea.

„As you all know, I was able to retain a team of the most expert archeologists to work under me, examining some of the lower caves, many of which were used as burial grounds. It is there that we found the earliest Neanderthal bones. However those were not the only things we found there. We can now definitely say that there were two periods of Neanderthal habitation of the caves. So far, we have only managed to examine the most recent period, between thirty and thirty-five thousand years ago but, we believe the older period could be as much as 125,000 years ago.“

„What do we care with a bunch of dusty old Neanderthal bones?“ objected O’Flanahan.

„Please, O’Flanahan, could you not listen, just this once?“ begged Briar.

Seeing O’Flanahan’s reluctant nod, Briar continued.

„It was hard to see any correlation between all these bones. That’s what took so long. We had to investigate everything. Eventually though, a picture did emerge about the life of the last Neanderthals. I say that, because I believe that’s what they were: the last Neanderthals. As a group, they remained in the caves for no more than a hundred years, long enough for three generations. In bones from the third generation, signs of sickness were apparent, a genetic lung disease causing eventual death. Despite its genetic nature, it seemed to spread rapidly among them, as if it were brought about by some virus. Shortly after this period, the Neanderthals left the caves and never came back. The dating of their exodus coincides with the extinction of the Neanderthals, the last of which are believed to have died near the Rock of Gibraltar. Now, I don’t know about any of you but the coincidence of finding a deadly race-killing disease in the Neanderthals, when right now a similar disease is busily wiping out our civilization, is too coincidental for me. When Leblanc entered into these caves and began his decades-long plan to return his progeny to them, he brought about the end of mankind at the same time.“

„That’s not a fair statement, Jonathan Briar and you know it,“ Raymonde exploded, her voice choked by emotion. „Yes, my great-grandfather knew this was coming. But he wasn’t the one who brought it about. If anyone is to blame, it’s the Abbey... and that monster, Weissmuller.“

Briar tried to backpedal.

„I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that like it sounded. Of course Leblanc did more than that. I wasn’t thinking. Nonetheless, my conclusions are inescapable. They are not intended to cast any blame on anyone. They just are, you understand. It seems quite clear that exposure to the spores will cause genetic mutations, after about three generations. Some of those mutations seem beneficial, such as in your case, Paul. But others seem rather deadly.“

„Well, I can’t agree. I won’t. I’ll prove you wrong, Mr Briar,“ Raymonde exclaimed, apparently unable to face the truth. „Paul, tell me it isn’t so,“ she pleaded with me verbally.

Internally, Raymonde’s projected thoughts were revealing a different concern.

„Don’t worry, play along with me. I am upset about this, just not as much as I am making out... but the truth is that we cannot stay together much longer, not if this magnetic attraction continues increasing between us. I can hardly hold myself in place as it is now. One of us has got to get out of here and put some distance between our bodies. It may as well be me. Besides, I do need to find out about that virus... particularly after what happened to that baby.“

„I understand,“ I sent back, replying verbally. „I’m sorry, Raymonde but his logic does appear sound. It might be true.“

„No. It just can’t be. That would mean all those dead children would be our fault. I can’t accept that. Coulter, I want you to set up a meeting with that international group studying the cause of the disease. I want to go help them. I’ll leave in the morning. The rest of you can finish your discussion about

electromagnetic energy but I have to find out if this is true. Paul, I'll talk to you later in our caves."

She stood up to go, wavering for a second. She gathered herself and walked up the walkway to the auditorium doors, holding on to the chair backs for support. I knew her wavering had nothing to do with feelings. As soon as she stood up, our magnetic attraction had flared up another degree and she had almost lost her footing, fighting against the powerful forces pulling us together. The only reason I hadn't gone flying towards her was that I was holding on to my bolted chair for dear life. By then, Raymonde had managed to pull herself along, using the backs of the chairs and carefully made her way out of the auditorium. As she headed down the corridor, I could feel her go, the pull lessening all the while. Seeing her tonight would be interesting.

"Paul, I'm sorry about Raymonde," apologized Briar once more.

"It's okay, Jonathan, she'll be all right... I hope. She does seem pretty shook up by all this..."

"...And who wouldn't be. We've had no cease of these revelations," stated Coulter. "It is getting a bit hard to take."

"Yeah, they have been raining down on us pretty hard, lately," agreed O'Flanahan.

"I'm afraid, we're not quite done with them yet, gentlemen..." exclaimed Dr Phillippe, who was holding his stomach gingerly, wincing when he stood up. "Darn pastries... why do I eat so many? ... Anyway, if you are finished, Mr Briar, perhaps I can resume, as I was still only in mid-presentation."

"Gosh, you mean there's more of that gobbledygook?" complained O'Flanahan.

"You would do well to pay attention, Mr O'Flanahan. I am trying to explain how reality works..." riposted a stern Dr Phillippe, who was briefly interrupted by Briar.

"I am almost finished, Dr Phillippe. I only wanted to add that the reason I mentioned this was to confirm that Neanderthals and perhaps, by extension, humans as well, were exposed to mono-atomic iridium, long ago in the past. We already know, through Paul, that iridium is attracted to those with a genetic affinity to it. It is possible that all of us already have this genetic affinity to some lesser degree. That is all."

"Excellent point, Mr Briar... and yes, it does add to my conclusions somewhat..."

"...You're just being nice. We all know Neanderthals did not give rise to the Homo Sapiens race. There's no proof that humans were ever in these caves, not that long ago anyway," argued O'Flanahan.

"Actually, that is only a theory. You yourself must admit that what few Neanderthal facts we do have are sown together liberally with loose theories. I must argue that it is quite possible humans have evolved from Neanderthals. It's just that most humans don't like the idea, so they dispense with it," Briar shot back.

"That's nonsense. We're not Neanderthals, never were," stubbornly insisted O'Flanahan.

"I didn't say we were."

„Gentlemen, please, that’s enough,“ I broke in. „I need to hear what Dr Phillippe has to say. This argument already seems interminable. Perhaps we could return to it at some later point, if it actually ever becomes important.“

„Sorry,“ said O’Flanahan sheepishly.

„Of course, Paul. Dr Phillippe, please go on.“

Briar returned to his seat. The doctor stood back on the podium, then thought better of it, still rubbing his tender stomach, and drew up a chair, sitting on it.

„All right... can you bring up the next slide Jean-Claude? Thank you. You can see from the picture behind me, how the iridium could generate a much stronger field around the body. Measuring your EM field, Mr Sirenne, tells us, through a simple calculation, that you have an incredibly large quantity of mono-atomic iridium within you. This is where your unending energy is coming from. The iridium has so suffused your body that every cell is being accelerated, amplified and protected... In fact, I believe that you should weigh about seven hundred kilograms right now, based on how much iridium is calculated to be in your body. Slide.“

The monitor changed to reveal an image of the brain once more, this time with a highlighted pineal gland, along with a second illuminated area near the upper back of the brain. The doctor prepared to continue but I had to interrupt him with a question.

„Excuse me Doctor. You just mentioned that I should weigh seven hundred kilograms?...“

„Iridium is extremely heavy, Mr Sirenne...“ he mentioned.

„Yes I understand that but I remember when you weighed me. I did not weigh seven hundred kilograms, I weighed my usual one hundred and ten.“

„Yes you did appear to weigh a hundred and ten kilograms... However, my calculations are clear. You must weigh about seven hundred kilograms, or more, right now... yet you do not. A curious fact, don’t you think? ... A fact which I think is also related to EM fields. One simply has to step out of the box in order to see the real answer... However, that point is the main point I wish to make at the end of this presentation, so allow me to delay its delivery a short while longer.“

„I shoulda known,“ exclaimed O’Flanahan. „You may as well get on with it then, Doctor. Some of us are getting tired of waiting for the finale.“

„That is the very thing that I am trying to get to, Mr O’Flanahan... Very well, back to the brain. To the pineal gland, more precisely, with its overabundance of iridium... and to this other spot, right here in the back of the brain. These are our magnetic senses... When Mr Sirenne explained his development of an EM sense, I was baffled. I did not think we had such physical senses. However, upon some research, I was proven wrong. It turns out that not only do we have EM senses, we have three distinct levels of them. The pineal gland is one. I’m afraid that I do not know as much about this gland as I would like, except perhaps to say that it seems to perform the brain function of collating and processing information about EM field perception in the body. Historically speaking, this gland has been referred to as the third eye, or the window into the soul. It activates exactly forty-nine days after conception, on the same day as sexual differentiation takes place. It also seems to activate just before death, releasing a large quantity of the hallucinogenic drug DMT within the dying body. Some believe that this drug causes out-of-body

experiences, which may in fact be enhanced EM perception... So the pineal gland collates information about EM fields. But where does this information come from? Some of it comes from that spot in the back of the brain, as outlined in the image behind me, where magnetite strings are located. These help us locate magnetic north. We, along with pigeons, have been using this generally unrecognized sense to orient ourselves on our planet, actually sensing the Earth's magnetic field. Slide."

The image flipped to a display of the human nervous system.

"Do you remember when I mentioned we generated a magnetic field? Good. You see, it's not a simple field we generate. Every organ generates a different frequency. Our nervous system is part of an electrical system, moving EM energy all over the body, all of the time. Every part uses this system to communicate with other sections. It is the root of the acupuncture principles, as well as various reflexology approaches to medicine, and known as what they call the *Chi* in eastern medicine. Slide."

He rubbed his stomach a bit more, before going on, belching briefly.

"Sorry. My stomach is terribly upset..."

"Would you like to take a break?" asked a concerned Briar.

"No, if I could just go on and get this finished with, it is so important..." Dr Phillippe replied, looking distinctly unwell. "The new picture shows you our skeleton and our vascular system. It may be surprising for you to learn that bones are assembled along a crystalline matrix. Crystals have amazing properties, the most curious one being the piezo-electric effect. When bent, crystals release an electromagnetic burst. When bones are exposed to external EM fields, they are similarly affected. Therefore our skeleton is an EM sensing device. It should be no surprise for you to learn, following this, that our blood is in fact, a type of liquid crystal, another EM sensing device. Slide."

A picture appeared showing our DNA.

"...And now we come to our third and final sense, our DNA itself. It was discovered that only seven percent of our DNA busies itself with building and regulating the body. The rest, a whopping ninety-three percent, is occupied with receiving and emitting EM fields. Not just from the body but from the outside as well. This final sense confirms our entire body is occupied with sensing EM fields and exchanging information with them, all of it occurring subconsciously. Our five basic senses are almost an oversight when compared to this. The most profound implication of all this is, of course, that we are using EM fields to exchange information with external fields, confirming in one fell swoop that all theories about extra-sensory perceptions may be real after all. Slide."

A picture came up, showing an outline of a human body surrounded by an ethereal glow.

"Of course, I'm sure, by now, you're all asking yourselves how the EM fields are managing to communicate. The answer is: with light! ... That's right. Our organs, our brain cells, our entire body, create, exude and receive light. Of course, none of us can see it. It is light in a spectrum which our eyes do not perceive. Luckily, science comes to the rescue and the picture you see behind me is a photograph of the light our bodies emit. Slide please."

The image changed back to deep space.

„And now we are back to the so-called vacuum of space. I have explained how our bodies are sensing EM energy. I have shown that life itself is enabled by EM energy. I have shown that all matter is suffused with EM energy and, in fact, is believed to be composed only of EM energy... So now, I must introduce you to the science of QED, or Quantum Electro Dynamics, if you will. QED is the ultimate theory of electromagnetic energy. It was developed while we were searching for dark matter and dark energy, which was supposed to be found in the vacuum. We were led there, because our calculations told us that it had to be there, although it seemed impossible...“

He paused a moment, to rub his stomach once more, letting go another belch.

„Sorry... Gentlemen, what I am going to tell you about QED will seem outlandish, yet I assure you that every word has been proven through scientific experiments, such as the Casimir effect, and the proven concepts of broken symmetry and parity violation. QED theory made what seemed to be an impossible prediction: empty space, what we saw as vacuum, had to be replete with energy. So much energy, in fact, that it bordered on infinite. The physical expression of this energy is the creation of matter itself. Slide.“

The image changed to a graphic displaying a vertical line with two small circles, one on each side of the line.

„It was proven that a process was happening, at a quantum level, creating matter, which you can see demonstrated on the graphic behind me. It appears that, everywhere in space, matter is being created and annihilated back to nothingness. Don't forget matter does not follow the same laws of physics in quantum space than it does at our scale. QED explains to us that two particles, one negative and one positive, will be created using energy borrowed from the very near future. The particles almost immediately recombine and vanish back into nothingness. Slide.“

Doctor Phillippe suddenly belched much louder than before, holding his stomach painfully. His cheeks reddened, clearly embarrassed by his involuntary outburst. His forehead was covered in sweat. The man looked distinctly unwell.

„I'm terribly sorry. I just can't understand what I could've eaten... Well, I can't stop. I must finish this presentation.“

He tried to stand up again but failed, regaining a crouching position on his chair, rocking back and forth slightly. His voice wavering, he valiantly continued his presentation.

„The picture behind me shows you a black hole, which has now been proven to be at the center of every single galaxy in the universe.

„They create massive EM fields, which bathe surrounding stars for hundreds of light years. QED theory suggested matter creation would be affected near bodies with intense gravitational fields such as black holes. Careful examination of the black holes we found in space proved that when the negative and positive particles were created at the quantum level, the massive fields around the black hole would draw one of those particles into itself, while repelling the other. Thus positive matter is being created by EM fields in the vacuum of space. It must be understood that this matter creation can only occur due to the existence of the EM matrix covering the entire universe. Without that, matter would not exist at all. Slide.“

The picture changed to a graphic display of the big bang explosion.

„So now, we are seeing that Electromagnetic fields are the underpinning of absolutely everything in the universe, that matter itself is but spinning particles of energy, an illusion floating on an EM matrix. We now have confirmed the universe is a flat universe, meaning that it comes from zero, that all the mass around us was created from nothingness, from the vast energies of empty space. We also know that we ourselves are made of EM fields... AAARRRGHHH, MY STOMACH!!...“

Doctor Phillippe had shot upright, looking very pale, sweat streaming off his brow. He fell back down to the ground, letting go another tremendous belch which left his body trembling. We rushed to him but no one was faster than his assistant. Still, Doctor Phillippe protested.

„No it's all right... NNNGGGNN... well, maybe not all right but not as bad as it seems. I simply need to go to the washroom... for just a moment... I'm sure I'll be fine shortly. Jean-Claude, give me a hand. You can wait by the door, while I... uh... while I am occupied. Gentlemen, please, do not worry yourselves, I'll be right back.“

With that, the short, fat man wobbled out of the auditorium's rear exit, heading down to the restrooms, Jean-Claude Vilmiers in tow.

„I hope he gets better in a hurry,“ mentioned Coulter removing his technoglasses and rubbing his eyes while squinting at the auditorium's bright walls. „Things have just taken a turn for the worse. Ziva has informed me that talks have just broken down between the Christians, the Moslems and the Jews. Most countries have begun taking sides. The pandemic virus has everybody spooked. There's an emergency meeting being convened tomorrow, by the Americans, to try a last-ditch attempt to prevent all-out war. You've been asked to attend, Paul.“

„Me? Why me?“

„Paul, the whole thing is rolling all around you. I don't know why but your immortal status has propelled you into a figure of worldwide importance. Almost everyone is looking to you for answers,“ O'Flanagan added.

„I don't have any answers, damnit. I'm still looking for them,“ I objected angrily.

„Well, advice then... I don't know what you've got to give but they sure are clamoring to get it and soon,“ Coulter added.

„I don't have the time to do this,“ I argued back. „I'm convinced I have to keep my focus on those books.“

„I understand that. All I know is that they are landing a helicopter on top of the Aval cliff tomorrow morning and they expect you to be on it. Ziva tells me there's not much room for negotiation. The Americans were very insistent, saying they had uncovered something important about the pandemic. Both Ziva and Avi are planning to go with you, of course...“

„What is taking that doctor so long?“ wondered Briar impatiently. „It's been minutes.“

„Geez, Briar, give the guy a break... he looked about ready to toss his cookies,“ O'Flanagan responded.

„I don't like it. Something's not right,“ Briar retorted.

„Come on, Briar... Now it's you who's seeing conspiracies everywhere,“ joked O'Flanagan. „I've finally seen everything.“

„Can't you ever be serious?“ Briar snapped back. „I don't know what it is... something about him falling sick like that... and I'm not going to wait here to find out. I'm going to check on him... just in case...“

„Do you want me to go with you?“ asked O'Flanahan.

„Good gosh no, why would I want that?“ replied an exasperated Briar. „You just wait here, with Paul and Fabian to... uh... to keep them safe... it's probably nothing anyway.“

Briar walked off quickly, a concerned frown on his face, heading out of the auditorium, following Doctor Phillippe's footsteps.

„The guy's becoming downright deluded,“ exclaimed O'Flanahan. „What can happen here, anyway? There are cameras everywhere, right Coulter?“

„Pretty much everywhere, yes... and it's all recording automatically. Of course, it's a lot of video feeds to watch...“

„Don't I know it. I coulda used a team to help me but no one offered anything...“ O'Flanahan started, interrupted by Coulter, who had a worried look on his face.

„...Now that I think of it, I never put any cameras in the restrooms...“

„What?“ exclaimed O'Flanahan.

„Well, it's a private area... and there didn't seem to be any real need.“

„Now I'm the one who's getting worried,“ returned O'Flanahan.

Suddenly, our techno-glasses pinged and Briar's feed appeared, showing us a scene of mayhem in the restroom. My eyes took in the horror as I heard Briar's screams.

„He's been killed, they've both been killed... Oh my God, it's so horrible... Look at them... Look at them...“

We could all see that Doctor Phillippe and Jean-Claude Vilmiers had been brutally murdered. It looked like every bone in their bodies had been crushed. Their throats were ripped open. There was no sign of blood anywhere, only the limp bodies in their impossible positions. I turned my glasses off, unable to bear the sight any longer. I ran to the door and hurried to the rest room where I found a shaken Briar, leaning against the wall, next to the restroom.

„I had to get out of there. I couldn't... I just couldn't...“

„I understand, Briar, it's okay,“ I said, trying to comfort him. O'Flanahan and Coulter arrived, rushing in to the restroom. They came back out instantly, a look of horror on both of their faces.

„Did you see anything, Briar?“ asked O'Flanahan.

„No, not a thing. By the time I had arrived here, I had almost convinced myself to turn back... but something made me check... It was too quiet...“

„Do you think we could check the video tapes for this hall?“ I asked Coulter.

„Well, there's the camera right over there... the red light's on, so it's running... Wait a minute... I don't like the angle it's at. It's not pointing at the restroom door anymore. I'm sure I didn't set it like that... I don't know what we'll get...“

„Why try to figure it out? Let's go find out, instead of standing here, wasting time,“ exploded O'Flanahan.

We hurried to Coulter's caves. Coulter ran to the control panel, pressing a few buttons, calling up the video feed from the hallway camera and putting it on the main screen.

„I'm going back about thirty minutes, that should be enough.“

The video began and we examined it intensely, looking for any clue of the doctor's killer. O'Flanahan started talking, unable to help himself.

„What I don't get is why he got killed? Why now? How did the killer, who's got to be Weissmuller, no choice there, even know about the doctor's presentation?“

„Perhaps he overheard the doctor's original call to us, before the presentation,“ suggested Briar. „That might have given him time to prepare, while we were all inside the auditorium, sitting there like idiots... I agree that it has to be Weissmuller. It can be no one else. You saw what he did to those poor men. Their bones were broken, their blood sucked out, they were so pale, so pale...“ Briar shook himself, trying to dispel the images. „Why would he do that? How could he even have found the time?“

„Forget that, how did he get in and out again? I mean, you were right there, Briar, he couldn't have had more than a few minutes,“ exclaimed O'Flanahan.

„Look, there's our answer,“ stated an excited Coulter, freezing on the image of Jean-Claude Vilmiers leaning against the wall, near the restroom door, which was just out of sight. „The two of you were so busy arguing that you almost missed this. Let's look at what happened just before.“

He reversed the video a few seconds. I saw the entire camera field move suddenly to the left.

„Weissmuller must've just moved the damn camera, so he could get into the restrooms without being seen,“ concluded O'Flanahan. „Look, there's his shadow.“

I could indeed see a shadow moving, right on the edge of the camera's field of view, made by someone sliding along the illuminated wall.

„The bastard's staying just out of sight. He's got it all planned... Oh no, Vilmiers has just seen him... Why isn't there any sound on these damn things?“ screamed O'Flanahan in frustration, as we watched Vilmiers move away from his position and walk across the camera field, directly towards the shadow. „This is unbearable. That guy's about to get killed. Why doesn't he know that's Weissmuller?“

„He's probably wearing a disguise,“ said Briar.

„Him and his damn disguises... Oh no, look,“ exclaimed a shocked O'Flanahan.

We could see Vilmiers' body lifted brutally in the air, his limbs flailing about loosely. We looked on helplessly as the poor man's head lolled back at an impossible angle, his throat ripped open.

„His blood was just sucked out of him... that's so fast... Good lord, Weissmuller is a vampire... How much worse is this going to get?“ screamed O'Flanahan.

Despite the fact that the video showed us past events, I felt appalled seeing a man's life extinguished right in front of my eyes.

„The shadow's started sliding along the wall again. I can see the monster's holding Vilmiers up by one hand... Gosh, he's strong... There, he's just gone into the restroom...“

We waited for another interminable minute before a shadow told us that Weissmuller had come back out.

„Do you realize Weissmuller did that in less than two minutes?“ observed Briar.

„Yes, he was pretty efficient about it,“ I replied. „There he goes back down the hall, where he came from.“

A few more moments passed and then something else happened on the screen.

„Look, it’s you, Briar,“ exclaimed Coulter.

We watched as Briar walked along the corridor, seeming to hesitate a bit.

„That’s right, I’d forgotten. I was looking for Dr Phillippe’s assistant. I would have thought he’d be waiting outside the restrooms. That why I went in... something seemed too quiet..“

„But how could you have missed Weissmuller? He was going your way. He was there seconds before,“ argued O’Flanahan.

„I’m sorry. I didn’t see anyone, didn’t hear anyone... and I don’t mind saying that I am a bit relieved about it, considering what happened last time I met Weissmuller. That man almost managed to kill me.“

„Probably has another one of those secret tunnels,“ mentioned O’Flanahan. „I have to admit he’s a cool customer. The way he gets away with things every time... and we still don’t know why he did it.“

„I’ve been thinking about that. I think Weissmuller was trying to prevent me from hearing the end of the presentation,“ I said.

„Why do you believe that?“ asked Briar.

„I need answers. It seems to me Doctor Phillippe was on to something. He was getting to some point and I think it might have been important. All that EM stuff... Perhaps important enough for him to be killed for it.“

„That seems like a fair possibility,“ Briar retorted. „Perhaps his team of theoretical physicists could help us put things together? At least, they are not dead..“

„Not yet, anyway,“ stated O’Flanahan. „But that’s a good idea, for once, Briar. Why don’t we go check them out?“

„I’ve got a much better idea. Time is moving along here. It is rapidly becoming a commodity in short supply. Those physicists won’t have it all figured out, like Doctor Phillippe did. Someone’s going to have to collate their information, to come up with some conclusions. I could do that, far better than any of you, except for Paul, perhaps...“

„Briar’s speaking some sense, Paul,“ supported Coulter. „I need to get things ready for my trip to meet up with the Watchers, Raymonde wants to go join that investigative committee and you have to get ready for that meeting. Plus we still have to figure out those four books. Maybe it would be best if each of us did our own thing and we could meet up in the morning.“

We agreed to do exactly that and then separated. Briar went to see the physicist team, O’Flanahan went off to get the two bodies attended to, while I headed back to my caves and to Raymonde.

Magnetic Raymonde.

Chapter 4

The Dream.

Where was I? I felt confused, unclear about how I had gotten here, wherever here was. I tried to look around but could not even feel my eyes. I tried to use my EM sense but, although I could feel it, I failed to detect anything within it or without. Trying to get my bearings, I realized I could not even feel gravity's pull on me.

Where was I?

A feeling of panic crept in but I clamped down on it instantly. I simply wasn't going there. There had to be an explanation for this

A dream!

This had to be a dream, although it was like no other dream I'd had in my life. There was emptiness around me, an endless nothing... At the same time, everything seemed mixed in there somehow. Everything and nothing at the same time. This was a very strange dream.

It made me think about all of my previous dreams. I'd had them since the beginning of these adventures and they had consistently guided me towards the answers I sought. Yet their messages had always been cryptic. Opposites kept recurring. Now, this dream was the ultimate opposite: everything and nothing.

What was this dream trying to tell me? How had I even gotten here?

I tried to focus back on what had been going on before. I had been at the auditorium... Raymonde... I had gone to meet her in our caves... I had felt her even before I had opened the door, her magnetic field stronger than ever. I had tried to guard myself against the pull when I entered but it had flared up the closer we moved towards each other. No matter what we tried, the pull had kept getting stronger and we had begun to inexorably slide closer.

We had both realized what was happening but there was nothing either of us could do to stop it. There reached a certain point of closeness where the pull overwhelmed our every effort and we literally fell towards each other. Things had gotten stranger after that... my memories seemed disjointed... or I was unable to interpret what had happened.

I had felt a sense of powerful acceleration as I fell towards Raymonde, who had seemed to be no more than a meter away from me. Yet the faster I fell, the longer it seemed to take to reach her, almost as if she were getting infinitely further away. I could see into her eyes all the while, sharing her every thought, her every emotion.

The speed had kept increasing and her eyes had kept getting bigger. I began falling into them, until... until I was here.

„Hello?“

„Who's there? Who said that?“

„Paul? Is that you?“

„Raymonde!! Thank God. I thought I was all alone here.“

„I've been here for a while, trying to move around...“

„...But there's nowhere to move to...“

„...No, there isn't... We were in our caves, weren't we, before... before this?“

„I think so. I think this is a dream.“

„Some dream. What am I doing in it?“

„If I understand this right, I believe we are magnetically glued to each other, back in the caves. Remember earlier on, when we first discovered the sticky-lips? I think both of our powers have been increasing in strength since that moment. Our

powerful EM fields and our inner connection have turned us into giant magnets. We have literally become opposite poles. When we joined in the caves, I think our two fields became one.“

„That’s all fine and dandy but how come we can’t perceive anything?“

„I don’t know.“

„Great.“

„But I do know that these dreams are usually here to teach us something.“

„It seems hard to believe we can learn something from all this nothing.“

„Have you noticed it’s not just nothing?“

There was a pause, while Raymonde tried to extend our combined EM sense outwards. I could hear every thought she had. It was as if we had become one mind taking two different points of view and carrying on a conversation with itself.

„Yes. There is something else out there, like a... potential of something...“

She had pegged it, as I knew she would.

„...As if everything was out there, along with the nothingness.“

„Yes... that’s it exactly. I sense it now...“

„...Maybe we can use that. If everything is out there, we just have to get back to it, to reach it somehow,“ I stated.

„How do you suggest we do that?“

„I think we have to separate.“

„What?“

„Yes, I think we need to split our fields apart again. Our united fields may be preventing us from sensing the real world around us.“

„Okay, I’m game, Paul... But how are we going to do it?“

„I’m still working on that.“

I perceived her laughter all around me. There was a calmness and a serenity here that I was starting to appreciate. Raymonde felt it too.

„Should we leave here so soon? It’s not so bad when you get used to it.“

„I think we have to... There’s too much left unresolved, too many people counting on us. We’ve got to get back and find our answers... and I think I know how.“

„What did you figure out?“

„Look, we have nothing to work with here, except for our minds and our combined field. So let’s use those. Maybe we can just will ourselves to separate.“

Sadness emanated from her.

„Don’t worry, I don’t think we’ll disconnect completely. I’ll never leave you. Okay, are you ready to try?“

„I guess so.“

„Just visualize yourself pulling away from me.“

As soon as we tried it, I knew we were on the right track. For the first time, I could feel something. A discomfort I might once have labeled pain. The more I tried to pull away, the more the pain grew. I felt our united field stretching apart, like two cells splitting. The discomfort was overwhelming everything. I stopped fighting the feeling and let it flow through me instead, understanding it was caused by the separation of our united soul.

„Keep pulling away...“ I screamed. „... We’ve got to succeed.“

She redoubled her attempts and the field significantly expanded. As the stretched area linking us began to thin out and form two separate fields, I felt other things creep in, as if the nothingness was re-becoming something. At the exact moment of separation, a blinding light exploded between us, enveloping and carrying us apart. We fell away from each other with ever-increasing speed. The light surrounding us seemed to bring along everything with it, the universe, our galaxy, our planet, our caves.

We were back!

Standing at opposite sides of our home cave, we stood there looking at each other, our magnetic attraction held in careful check. The first thing I noticed was how different everything felt. I was having trouble focusing, as if I were seeing from two different points of perspective.

„I'm seeing from your eyes.“ we both exclaimed at the same time, then laughed together.

„We're still together,“ we said in unison, with matching looks of surprise.

We stopped speaking out loud, trying to figure out what was happening. We had both been significantly altered by our experience, having come out of it with a united mind. We began sorting out the different parts in our united consciousness, sending those bits that had belonged to Raymonde into her body and the rest in mine. I built a mental wall, to keep her parts from rejoining mine. She was still there, we were still us, but, internally, we had created an artificial localized separation. I slowly reconnected to my discrete body, moving on my own once more. The entire process was extremely strange. I tried speaking again.

„Hello Raymonde.“

„Hello Paul,“ she answered from across the room, smiling a bit. „It worked. I'm not seeing from your eyes anymore.“

„No but it's not far away either... I have to keep myself focused to stay separated from your perceptions and your mind. Our connection is very strong. I feel like I have all your abilities...“

„And I yours,“ she replied. „I don't think we will ever be separate again, Paul. I can move into you whenever I desire.“

I felt her mind shift over into mine, then back again into hers. We were no longer two people but, rather, one entity in two bodies.

„So, what do we do now?“ she asked. „Good gosh, look at the time...“

It was nearly morning. The helicopter would soon be here to pick me up.

„Paul, I've been thinking about this meeting convened by the United States. It's happening near Jerusalem. The Jewish, Moslem and Christian officials will all be there, as well as the Americans. We know their arguments are going to be about you and what role you play in their individual religions. Travelling there in person is asking for trouble. Wouldn't it be wiser if I went as your emissary, while you continued your examination of the books, here, in the caves?“

She made sense in more than one way. Raymonde had a powerful gift for soothing people, using her radar sense. She was as immortal as I, so no harm could come to her and she could draw on immense power if she was threatened. With our bi-location ability, I could be with her, even when I was not. Like her, I didn't feel good about leaving the caves with Dr Phillippe's murder unresolved and Weissmuller still at large, playing his deadly games. There was another reason:

„Coulter mentioned the Americans had uncovered something about the pandemic. By going there, you might learn the answers you were seeking.“

„Yes, you may well be right. Nonetheless, we both know the situation in Jerusalem is a powder keg and the fuse has been lit. There is no time to lose. We must act soon,“ she replied.

„Agreed. Very well, we will...“

A call from Coulter interrupted us. He sounded out of breath and alarmed.

„Oh thank God, Paul, you're here. I thought you had vanished like everyone else. This is the tenth time I've tried calling. Where are you? ... Is Raymonde with you?“

„Yes, she's right here. We're in our caves. What's going on, Fabian?“

„It's been hell and I don't mind admitting it. The entire team of physicists has been brutally murdered, Weissmuller's work again. O'Flanahan and Briar have both vanished into thin air. I think Weissmuller may have had a hand in that as well. I thought the two of you had vanished too... Where the heck have you been? I went to your caves twice and could find no sign of you.“

„We're not really sure... but we're here now...“

„That's not the worst of it. Something's going on with the brightness of the caves. It's been increasing since late last night. Around two in the morning, it became so strong that eye damage was a real possibility. With Weissmuller roaming around and you guys gone, I made the decision to evacuate the caves. It's underway now, should be complete soon. I had thought to keep a skeleton crew but the light took another jump up in brightness about thirty minutes ago...“

That was when we came back from our dream.

„You did well, Fabian. What about you? Can you still handle the brightness?“

„Not really, no. I can hardly stand it right now and I've got the darkest shade of techno-glasses I could lay my hands on. I think I'm going to have to join the rest of the people on the way out. Is the light bothering you two?“

I looked around and noticed that it did seem unnaturally bright. Rather than hurting my eyes, I found it restful, as if it brought clarity to everything.

„No, I think my powers are shielding me. Raymonde's all right for now...“

„...I also went back, right after we separated, and collected the rest of the spores from the filtering room, in case Weissmuller went after them.“

„That was smart thinking.“

„I just did what I thought had to be done. I've got enough spores for me but I don't think I want to hold on to the rest of the powder...“

„I'll meet you up top and you can give it to me. I'll keep it safe. You sure about Briar and O'Flanahan being gone?“

„I'm just as baffled as you about that. I looked through their caves, just like I looked through yours. There was no one anywhere. I tried to call them and trace their techno-glasses but I got nothing... on the other hand, there wasn't any blood either, so maybe there's some hope, not like with those physicists. That was a bloodbath. I think Weissmuller tortured them before he killed them. What's wrong with that monster?“

„I don't know but I swear I will find him and wring some answers from him.“

„Good luck with that, Paul. He may be a monster but he's been pretty hard to catch so far. I thought I might see him in action on the security cams but once

again he outwitted me. He somehow managed to turn off all recording at the main board in the video room. So, as usual, we don't have a clue where he is. I can only hope the brightness is getting to him but, knowing him, he's probably fine with it."

"I'll meet you on top, Fabian. Be careful with those spores."

"The sooner they're in your hands, the better."

Raymonde and I left the caves along with the final few stragglers of the evacuation. I closed Weissmuller's once-secret entrance behind me, locking the caves down, the last official person to leave. The only one still in there, if anyone, was Weissmuller. Coulter handed me the spores in a solid bag. The spores were heavy. I attached the bag to my pant belt.

"The helicopter is due to arrive in about five or ten minutes," mentioned Coulter, as he scanned the people on the golf course.

"I didn't realize how many people we had down there," I exclaimed.

"I'm glad the French army is here with the Israelis. With all our friends exposed outside of the caves like this, we need their protection more than ever," Raymonde added.

"You're right, danger seems to lurk everywhere these days... specially when Paul is heading off to that meeting and I'm leaving the caves," Coulter added.

"Ahh... about that..." I continued. "...Raymonde is going to go to the meeting in my place... I'm going to stay here and work on those books."

"Are you sure you want to do that? Someone could attack her."

"She is just as protected as you by the spores, Coulter, if not more..." I replied. "Don't worry yourself on that account..."

"Of course... and I guess it does make a kind of sense. Going to the meeting where they want to discuss you might not be such a good idea after all."

"That's our thinking as well. We don't trust the Americans, even when they are on a diplomatic peace-keeping mission," I explained. Coulter nodded his head in agreement.

"I can't say they're going to be pleased about it. They were pretty clear they wanted you there, not Raymonde... But I don't trust them either, so who cares what they want. Are you going to be all right by yourself, Raymonde?"

"I am sure I will be fine, Fabian. I am not as weak as I appear... and the spores will protect me."

Coulter moved away to give us a moment of privacy, before the helicopter arrived, joining up with Avi and Ziva for a brief update. Since our separation, we had been trying to get used to our new state of being. I now had full control over Raymonde's radar sense and she had control over my EM sense. The two abilities completed each other, giving us a three dimensional spatial sense of everything within our EM fields. I could expand the field to cover a large area and that area was growing as I became more accustomed to my new power. With our increased strength and control, Raymonde and I could now keep ourselves apart easily, despite the constant magnetic attraction. The numbness was still there but had become completely inconsequential through the use of the combined radar/EM sense.

I could perceive everything through the new sense, with a vividness and clarity which so overshadowed my previous senses as to make them trivial. I felt like I didn't even need to use my eyes anymore, although I still did, through force of

habit. There was something to be said about eyes, particularly when they looked at someone like Raymonde.

„Well, I guess this is it. We will be separating soon,“ she said. „I can feel the helicopter approaching.“

„We will never be truly separate again, but having you here physically will always be better than our connection, I must admit.“

„I can feel so much changing, within us and without, I hardly feel human anymore.“

„Concentrate on what has to be done. I am a bit lost too. We must try to do the right thing, to see this through to the end... There is no stopping this now... You know it as well as I do...“

„Yes... I see that now.“

„Take solace in the knowledge that we will survive this and remain together... of that I am sure.“

„Good bye, my Paul.“

„Good bye, my Raymonde.“

I turned away from her without any physical contact, knowing where that might lead, and headed back towards the cave entrance. I talked to Coulter one final time before going in.

„Fabian, I can't express what having you with me has meant, since the beginning of all this. You've been a true friend... and, in many ways, the only one I could trust to always have my interests at heart...“

„...And I still do...“ he replied with a choked voice. „Paul, things are going out of control in the world and I don't know where this is leading us... but I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else. We're making history here...“

„...We can only hope someone will be left to record it.“

„Hey, there will be, one way or another. I think mankind will never disappear no matter what... and let's not forget the story isn't finished yet. There's still hope. I'm going to cling to that and keep pushing. I can only hope I will do the right things.“

„I know you will, Fabian. Good luck with the Watchers... and keep in touch.“

Coulter laughed, tapping at his techno-glasses.

„These babies are connected directly to a satellite now. I'll always just be a call away, Paul. Be seeing you.“

I gave him a solid handshake, knowing that, if I could still release tears, I would be doing it now.

I headed back into the caves, into their deceptive quietness. The four books were waiting for me in there... and so was Weissmuller.

Greyman Chronicles

Norton Goes to Church.

„Hey, Norton, get your ass down here. The Chief wants to see you.“

„What's the Chief want to see me for?“

„Never you mind. Just get to his office.“

„All right, all right. Just because I'm below your grade, doesn't mean that I have to run whenever you say so. I might be busy.“

„Actually, I think it means exactly that... and are you busy?“

„Uhm... no... I'm not, as it happens.“

„Right. You just get down there... This could be your big chance...“

„You serious?“

„Might be... but you'll never know unless you go talk to the Chief. He might change his mind and pick someone else for this.“

„Fine. I'm going, I'm going.“

Norton put the phone back down on the receiver. He'd never been called to the Chief's office before, at least not like this, but, ever since his supporting work in the Danberry thing, they'd been giving him a better selection of cases. The way it was going, he might make Inspector before he was twenty-five. He put away the reports he was completing and hurried down.

Despite the jovial banter, Norton was usually tense. He had always been high-strung but had managed to turn a potential problem into an asset by channeling his nervous energies into observational skills. His attention to detail was beyond belief. His honed eye was what had enabled him to figure out who William Danberry's murderer was, before anyone else even had a clue the man had been murdered.

He arrived at the Chief's door and gave it a quick nervous knock.

„You wanted to see me, Chief?“

„About time you got here, Norton. Plant your ass in that chair and pay attention.“

Norton did as asked.

„All right. Norton, you been with the department for what... two years?“

„Two and a half, Chief.“

„Right. Well, I have to say your work's been pretty impressive from the get-go. Not only that, you've never been afraid to put in the hours. Now, we got ourselves a doozy of a situation. We can't send in the regular boys because the newspapers are all over this one... They don't know anything's happened yet and we want to keep it that way... We can't take any chances, not with this case. So we decided to send you instead. None of those newshounds know you, so you'll be able to get past them without raising the alarm.“

„You sure, Chief? ... I mean, I'm grateful for the chance but I haven't received all my training yet. I might miss something.“

„The day you miss something, I'll eat my hat, Norton. I heard what Brown and Chancy had to say about you. You noticed more details before we began training you than our fully trained men did. But listen, there's no fooling around here, no mistakes. We're not sure what we're dealing with and the Pope was clear that he wanted this kept quiet.“

„The Pope? What's the Pope got to do with this?“

„A body's been found in the Vatican. Seems like it's been there for a while, maybe ten or twenty years, so the killer's long gone. We need to get all the details and all the Inspectors agreed that you were the best man to send, so

I'm sending you. Now, grab a car from the pool, I've already authorized it, and get yourself to the Vatican... And remember to keep a low profile."

"Got it, Chief."

Norton was thrilled and curious at the same time. He picked up a camera from the forensics department and headed down to the garage. He'd already decided to go into the Vatican dressed like a tourist, positive his non-descript appearance would keep him under the radar. He'd be able to use the camera at the murder scene to catch what he didn't.

Once in the vicinity of the Vatican, he took his time parking in one of the lots reserved for tourists, then paid a ticket for a tour, like everyone else. He started a conversation with a woman in the group, just before going through the admissions entrance, giving the illusion of being part of a couple. His care was rewarded by a quiet entry into the Vatican.

Once inside, he casually left the group, heading for the restrooms, eventually veering off and heading to the Vatican Polizia Office, where he identified himself.

"Sergeant Norton, thank you for coming. I am officer Natamos. If you will come with me..."

Norton followed Natamos down a hall to a change room, where the officer handed him a set of worker's overalls.

"What's this?"

"You'll need to put these on, in order to get you up there unnoticed."

"Up where?"

"Weren't you told where the body was, Sergeant?"

"Uhm... no, actually."

"It was found by a maintenance crew working on the vent system up on the roof of the Vatican."

Suddenly, it became clear to Norton. The Inspectors hadn't selected him out of respect. None of them had wanted to go up on the Vatican's roof and they had decided to send the rookie instead. He felt like a complete patsy. He was sure they had all broken out laughing the minute he'd left the office. He'd actually believed them.

Norton chuckled to himself, finding a small amount of humor in the situation. They had gotten him good and he had to admit it. Probably more than one of them knew about his fear of heights. He'd be razzed about it when he got back but deep down, he knew that, if he aced this investigation, and he damn well would, he'd at least be able to walk into the office with his head held high.

So he put his workman's suit on without objection and followed Officer Natamos outside, where he was directed towards a distant set of scaffoldings.

"They're waiting for you there. Sorry about the scaffolds but it's the only way for you to get up there without attracting notice."

When Norton arrived at the scaffolding he couldn't help but look upward, feeling a shiver go down his back at the thought of going all the way to the top. He had resigned himself to the coming ordeal by the time he met the two workers at the bottom of the scaffoldings.

„We got some stairs built right into them, Mister. Should be easy enough to get up to the top but don't lose hold of the handrails and keep yourself clipped to that safety line.“

„Right you are.“

As the man had said, the climbing was easy. Norton's only problem were his nerves, which flared up ever more strongly, with each flight of stairs he climbed. He tried to avoid looking down, or sideways even, in order to maintain his countenance as much as possible. His left hand was vigorously claspng the handrails, seemingly on its own, and he was having trouble getting it to release in order to grasp the next one.

What had started off as a simple practical joke now seemed deadly serious, as Norton's heart hammered loudly in his chest. When the wind grew stronger, gusting powerfully around him when he reached the top of the scaffold, he worried he might be swept off his feet. The feeling only worsened when he reached the final level and saw the exposed plank-way he was expected to walk across, in order to step onto the roof.

„This is nuts,“ he complained to himself, feeling his legs locking tight in response. „How can anyone sane be expected to do something like this?“

He felt a wave of dizziness as his eyes swept downward, drawn by the bottomless precipice below the planks. His hand convulsively clasped onto the handrail for dear life and he felt as if he would rather die than cross that insane chasm. He managed to generate a bit of saliva and wet his dry lips.

„I've got to do this,“ he whispered to no one in particular. „I'll never live it down, if I don't.“

With that single idea bolstering him, he launched himself towards the planks without another thought, keeping his mind rigidly blank and his eyes straightforward, as he raced across. Within seconds he was on the roof, where another two workmen were waiting.

„Over here, Sir.“

He was led to an open vent on the rooftop, where he tried to slow his hyperventilation.

„Our key didn't work.“

„What's that?“ he huffed.

„Our key didn't work when we came to open the lid over the vent access. It was weird. We knew the lock was old, heck, we hadn't come up here in more'n twenty years, according to the records... Would have been another twenty if it hadn't been for those new regulations... But the key didn't work. It didn't even fit... and the lock was different from the other vent access over there. They should have been the same.“

Norton had pulled open his pad and started taking notes.

„Okay. What happened when you did open it?“

„Well, you'll have to see for yourself. It's almost impossible to describe... but I have to give you fair warning: whatever it is, it's not pretty... not by a long shot. If I never see it again, that won't be a moment too soon, let me tell you.“

Norton put away his pad and approached the open vent access, looking down into the gloom. It was hard to see anything, even with the flashlight.

„You have to go down.“

„Go down? ... In there? ... You're not serious?“

„Yes, Sir. We've got a harness over here and we can lower you down with the ratchet tripod. You won't have to do a thing, except hold on. It's not that far down really, about ten meters tops.“

Before Norton could object, they attached a harness around his waist, connecting a steel cable from the tripod to a metal ring on his harness. His heart was thumping again. He didn't like this. Not one bit.

„All right. Just sit down on the edge, while we move the tripod over the vent. It'll only take a second.“

Norton gulped, sitting down on the narrow metal edge around the open vent. He swiveled his left leg over into the vent. It took him a while to convince himself to slide his right leg to join the left, completing what seemed like a near-suicidal move. Would this day never end?

The workers finished positioning the tripod and immediately began ratcheting the wire up until it became taut, slowly pulling Norton. It felt to him as if the wire was trying to drag him off the edge of the vent. He was going to fall! ... He had a moment of panic, looking around for anything he could grab on to. Ironically, the only thing he could find was the steel cable, the very thing pulling him into the vent.

„Relax, Sir. The cable's not going to snap.“

Despite the man's reasonable words, Norton found it hard to believe him. The cable kept pulling, until he could hold on no longer, and he slipped off the edge, swinging wildly above the vent. The two men quickly stabilized him.

„Easy there, Sir. We've got you... All right, we're going to lower you down. Use this walkie-talkie to tell us when you want to stop.“

Norton simply nodded, unable to speak at that precise moment. The worker flipped a toggle on the ratchet mechanism and slowly turned the ratchet handle. Norton grabbed on to the cable for dear life, as he lowered down into the vent. He switched his flashlight on, lighting up the gloom. It didn't take long before he noticed something odd on his left, a dark mass, with four reflective diagonal strips.

The closer he got, the harder it became to take his eyes off what he was seeing, although part of him desperately wished to look away at the same time.

„Stop. I'm there,“ he radioed up to the workmen.

Norton sat in the harness, suspended in mid-air, moving his flashlight over the object. The four diagonal strips he had first seen were strips of metal torn from the vent walls. They had been used to wrap the body, securing it in its position on the small ledge. He looked more closely at the metal strips, wondering how the killer had ripped them out from the walls.

„He'd have to punch a hole into the walls and then cut up to make those strips.“ Norton whispered to himself, a habit he'd acquired long ago. He found it useful when trying to solve a mystery. „That would take a hell of a tool.“

He aimed his flashlight down at the tears in the vent walls, looking at them more carefully.

„No tools were used for that, those are tears. It looks like he ripped the metal with his bare fingers... but that's impossible...“

Norton took a photo of the rips, talking to himself all the while.

„I'd swear I can see the outline of a man's fingers in those rips... and the strips themselves look like they were pulled away, just as if someone were ripping strips of paper. How strong was this guy? ... And how did he get here, anyway? I have to hang in this contraption in order to examine this spot... so how did he do it?“

Norton started gesticulating on his cable, trying to make himself turn around, flashing his light over the walls, looking for any clue. He found one readily enough, seeing two depressions on the opposite vent wall.

„So, somehow he climbed up the vent, put his feet over there, pocking the metal in, and he leaned over the vent here. This vent's pretty wide. To be able to hold himself like that, he'd have to be almost two meters tall... But how did he bring the body up here with him? Was he holding it with one arm? That hardly seems possible.“

Norton swung himself around again, flashing the light over the body once more.

„That's a big guy, or at least it was when he was alive. Holding him by one arm wouldn't have been easy... Not at all. Gosh, look at that.“

Norton leaned in, examining the man's shoulders.

„The body's all mummified but I'd swear his shoulders are broken. There's no way to hold them that close to your body... Hmm...“

He continued checking the body, concluding that many of its bones were broken.

„This guy's body is all smashed up. When did that happen? ... And where? ... It can't have happened here, there would be blood everywhere... and we're suspended in the middle of the vent... There would have to be a bloody trail...“

He flashed his light over the vent walls again.

„All right, so where is all the blood then?“

Norton returned to the body, finally seeing the gash in the man's neck.

„He was drained of blood... the killer drained him before he brought him here. That might explain why the guy's mummified like that. But where could that have been done? This is the Vatican. Something would have been heard... And why leave him here?“

Norton took several photographs while trying to figure it out.

„Those clothes look like guard clothes. They're all dusty and ripped but I can still make them out. This man was a security guard. What were you guarding? ... and where did the killer get you from? ... We know he was suspending himself in the air to secure you here, so he had to come with you from down below or up there. Up there makes no sense... so...“

Norton activated the walkie-talkie.

„Drop me down lower, please.“

The cable lowered again, bringing him to the bottom of the vent.

„Stop.“

Norton could see that the vent split into three smaller vents. The fan motor was below him, protected by a solid grill. Moving his flashlight around slowly, he caught a lucky break, noticing the left wall was bowed in the third vent opening, as if something big had been dragged through it. He sent a beam of light down the vent in question and was quickly satisfied that the body had come through here. There were little marks and abrasions all over the place. He could see far enough down the small vent to see where light was coming in, through a screen of some sort. Perhaps the body had been pushed in through there.

„All right. Pull me up.“

The workmen pulled him back up, eventually helping him get seated on the edge again. He uttered a sigh of relief when he felt his feet back on the solid Vatican roof and not dangling in mid-air. He headed back across the plank walkway and down the scaffolding, with hardly a thought, so absorbed was he by what he had uncovered. He returned to the Polizia headquarters and asked if he could be brought up to the corridors leading to those vents.

„There is nothing there, Sergeant. Believe me, we have looked.“

„It's been as much as twenty years, Officer Natamos, so I'm not surprised if you found nothing. But I'd like to look anyway, just to see for myself.“

„Very well, I will arrange it.“

Norton ate an apple while he waited, reflecting on what he had seen. He made a further request from Officer Natamos, to begin checking the Vatican records for any unexplained disappearance of security guards. Finally, after having donned his regular clothes, he was taken on a circuitous route until he arrived in the appropriate corridor, near the vent opening he had seen from above. Norton couldn't help noticing it was near the Vatican Archives' restricted documents section.

„So the guard was here, keeping an eye over the restricted area. Might be a reason for his death, if the killer came here to steal something...“

Looking at the vent opening, Norton came to another conclusion.

„A big man could never get through that hole. It's just too small... but that's where that guard's body went in, of that there's no doubt. So the killer had to make him fit... That's why he broke his bones... and maybe why he drained him of blood...“

This thought made him ask a question of Officer Natamos.

„Was there ever a report of unexplained blood stains found anywhere up here?“

„No, never. Not up here anyway... but we have uncovered a report of a missing guard. Your suggestion to review our documents was a valid one. I have been informed that a security guard was reported missing after showing up for his shift, more than eighteen years ago. The door bolt to the secure section was found sheared off that same night but nothing was reported to be missing. A thorough investigation was carried out. The guard never resurfaced.“

After a few parting words with Officer Natamos, Norton returned to his car, deep in thought. Starting the long drive back to headquarters, he continued his solitary conversation.

„Well that was damned weird. None of it makes any sense... No, actually, that's not true... Some of it does makes sense. The killer, whoever he is, wanted something from the restricted area of the Vatican Library. He came in through the venting system, broke through a locked door, shearing the bolt. He got caught by the guard and murdered him.

He drained the guard's blood somehow, broke his bones, stuffed him up the vent and left the body hidden there, tied by strips of metal ripped from the vent walls with bare hands. Then he took off without his booty, if the Vatican Polizia is to be believed.“

Norton hit the brakes, almost causing an accident with the car behind him.

„Shit... Sorry, sorry...“

Norton started up again, this time driving more slowly while looking for a place to turn around.

„The question I should be asking is how did this killer get up there in the first place? It wouldn't have been easy to climb those sheer walls... and he didn't have the benefit of a nice scaffold staircase, either... So, how, then, did he get up... and off... that roof?“

Norton speeded up, anxious to return now. He located a cross-section between the highways and made an illegal u-turn, causing yet another driver to swerve dangerously.

„...And it isn't like he could just throw some ropes up there and begin climbing. There are guards everywhere... most time he'd have to scale the wall would probably be a few minutes. Can anyone even climb walls that fast? ... And there's still the issue of how the killer did all those things. What did he do with the blood? How did he manage to lift that guard up in the vent like that? ... And rip those strips of metal off the vent wall? ... No one can do any of that... He had to be strong... crazy strong... Ah-hah, here we are, back on familiar ground.“

Norton navigated the tight roads, bringing his car to the road circling the Vatican outside walls. He drove along slowly, looking at the religious enclave's outer walls, trying to see anything out of the norm.

„The killer sure went through a lot of scheming and effort... So, why would he leave without taking anything? He knew exactly where he was going and how he was going to get there. Surely he also had an idea of what he was looking for... The guard was the only thing that got in his way... and he dealt with that problem handily, if impossibly... The killer could think on his feet, that's for sure... Seems to me like he had it all planned. Maybe he had some inside info, or he scouted the Vatican library before he went in to take nothing... hmm... I just don't buy it.“

Norton almost hit the car in front of him, his attention riveted on the walls instead of the road, his tires screeching when he hit the brakes in a hurry. He decided to park, managing to find a spot easily enough for once. He got out and started a slow amble along the sidewalk, able to examine the walls at a more leisurely pace.

„Yet, the Vatican officials state nothing was missing... And they never made a big deal out of that disappearing guard either... Something's not right about any of that... It's all too coincidental. I'd have been worried if one of my

guards went missing. I'd have done an investigation... Logically, they must have done one as well. But if they did investigate, they're not admitting to it," Norton stopped walking for a second, struck by the obvious realization. „They covered it up... That's what they did... Maybe something was missing after all, something they didn't want anyone knowing about. Hey, what's that?“

He'd been standing there, looking at the wall absent-mindedly, when his eyes had picked out a triple series of two dots in the stone, one above the other at regular intervals, starting about ten meters in the air. He couldn't make out what the dots were from his vantage point, so he walked up to the wall and looked straight up. Unfortunately, it was just too far up for him to make out what they were.

Flashing his badge at a passing tourist, he borrowed the man's binoculars and took a closer look at the three sets of dots. With the binoculars' magnification, Norton saw that the dots were holes in the stone blocks. Looking further up, he noted the last set of holes was a mere meter from the top of the wall.

„Those holes look rough, like spikes were hammered in there, then ripped out violently.“

He returned the binoculars to the tourist, thanking him, then walked back to his vehicle, pulling out his Vatican map from the glove compartment. He unfolded it over the hood of his car and located his exact position.

„If I'm here, then those dots are there, on the corner of that outer wall... So, let's see where the Vatican library is, in relation to that spot... Well, well... Will you look at that... that's pretty close... and mostly in shadows at night, I'll bet. That corner would have been in the shadows too... I guess our killer likes the shadows... He certainly was never seen... Say, I wonder if... if I'd find dots like those on the Vatican Library building itself? I wonder what that would mean if I did?“

Norton folded his map back up and ran like mad to return back inside the Vatican. It seemed like hours dealing with the throngs of tourists but he managed to maintain a low profile. He even paused long enough to buy a trinket for his sister, Helena. Eventually he made his way in and, orienting himself easily, managed to reach the likeliest location for the killer to have scaled the Library building wall.

„So if the Shadow-Killer came here, using the same method he used out there to climb the walls, then I should be able to spot it easily enou... right THERE! ... YES! ... And up there, another one... Well that settles it, this Shadow-Killer is becoming more real by the minute... coming out of the shadows, so to speak, he-he.“

Norton hurried back to his car, leaving the Vatican enclave without another word to the Polizia.

„What's the point? They'd only lie, if they're covering it up. Well, an autopsy of the body might reveal more information, I'll have to arrange for that as soon as I get back.“

When Norton arrived at Interpol headquarters however, he found himself directed to the Chief's office once more.

„Norton, good, you're back. What's this about an autopsy?“

„We’ve got to do one, Chief. Something’s really weird about this whole case. Things don’t add up...“

„...Sorry to burst your bubble Norton but there’s not going to be any autopsy... That body is going straight to the morgue as a John Doe... And there’s not going to be any investigation either...“

„...But, Chief, come on, there’s...“

„Just shut up and listen Norton. I’ve been on the phone with the Vatican all morning. They want this kept quiet... And they are pulling some mighty big strings. No matter what you or I want, this investigation will be closed. Anyway, we’ve got way more important things to deal with than a twenty year old killing... The perp’s probably dead from old age by now.“

„Chief, there was something about...“

„I don’t want to hear it. We sent you out there, because we had to send someone. There was never any intent to open an investigation... We just had to follow established protocol, you understand... Listen, Norton, don’t be shocked, it’s not that I don’t care about that guard’s death but we need to be realistic about this... We don’t have much chance of catching the killer and it’s probably too late anyway. We’d best be focusing on more urgent matters... Plus, if we do what the Vatican wants, then they owe us one... a debt like that can be useful, if you know what I mean. Now get back to your desk and file the report. I want it on my desk in the morning and it better be all about nothing... You get me?“

„Sure Chief, I get you.“

„Good. Now get on with it.“

Norton headed up to his office, muttering all the way.

„Fine, he wants me to play ball, I’ll play ball... but that’s doesn’t mean I’m going to forget that Shadow-Killer, not by a long shot. A guy who can kill like that and do those things is too dangerous to allow to roam free, no matter what the Vatican wants. I’ll give the Chief his report but I’m going to open my own file on the Shadow-Killer and I won’t close it until I either find him or learns that he’s dead.“

Weissmuller Recollections, 1968-1974

I had been in my Robert Ragmeny skin for four years, two more than I had planned. I was putting myself at risk of being found out by the Abbey and I knew it. My time had not been wasted. Far from it. Yet, no one would be more surprised at the direction my life had taken than I. What I was doing by 1968 would have been unthinkable for me, just a few years before.

I believe the whole process of change started the day the flood waters from the dam hit me. The spores protected me from physical harm but the tumble through the turbulent waters had mightily disoriented me. I had ended up on the side of some hill and lain there for more than an hour, trying to stop my head from spinning and get a sense of what had just happened.

It was the unbelievable coincidence of the flood hitting at the exact time necessary to hide all evidence of my mad excesses. No matter what I tried to do to avoid it, my mind kept returning to this one point, until it was obsessing me. How had this happened? Why had this happened?

I could not investigate it, totally ensconced in my Ragmeny skin at that point, and returning to the scene of my madness was unthinkable. I satisfied myself by reading what few accounts I could find in the local French papers, which presented the flood as an accidental dam breakage, with no mention of my activities. Of course, they were seeking someone to blame. This or that person was named depending on the article I read but, in the end, none of them seemed to have been aware of what was coming.

Still, the coincidence of it kept nagging at me. I felt as if I had been... saved somehow. It was an unexplainable feeling which I could not shake.

Returning to Ambrumesy and my small rooms at the bed and breakfast, I had taken up sculpting as a hobby, a pretense to provide me with the skills to build a replica plug for the damaged stone cylinder. I had also busied myself reproducing Leblanc's burnt manuscript. Once both tasks had been completed, I returned the rebuilt cylinder to its home in the Castle's chapel.

Only then had I allowed myself to breathe a sigh of relief, all of my mistakes having gone undiscovered. My respite was slight because the completion of these tasks gave my mind time to return to the flood. The numbness was also back, as strong as ever, if not more, distancing me from everything. I could open my eyes, breathe, move, speak, do anything but none of it hardly meant anything anymore. I craved sensation more than anything, yet had to resist every impulse to seek any such desirable activity, lest unwanted mayhem return.

I threw myself back into my research about the Abbey, immortality and the Greyman, trying to surround myself with something familiar, anything to anchor me to a world which felt increasingly remote. I was heartened by having some degree of success, when I decided to once again examine Lindon's old villa in Etretat.

I had been led there by the clues from Leblanc's manuscript, directing me to find the four books. My problem was that I did not know which four books were being referred to. However, I could assume that these four books, if they were that important, would have to remain with, or close to, the descendants of Leblanc and Lupin. Further to this, I knew the Abbey was involved, or rather, that Leblanc and Lupin had become involved in the Abbey's plans.

This is what had led to their plan with the four books, a plan the Abbey called Project Sirenne. Raymond Lindon was involved and possibly his father, Albert Lindon. When I had been in charge of the caves during the forties, I had taken the opportunity to thoroughly investigate both of the Lindon and Leblanc Villas. At the time, I had only been interested in tunnels. I wasn't looking for books, a fact Leblanc was surely counting on. Only Leblanc's villa had held any secret tunnels, so I had lost interest in Lindon's home.

My search in his villa took the better part of a month, since I only travelled to Etretat occasionally as Ragmeny. In the end, I found what I was looking for under the servants' kitchen floor. The decoded message from Leblanc's

journal had specifically mentioned chess notations and that kitchen floor was the only one with a tile pattern like a chessboard. The chess notations themselves gave me a few clues and I finally found the right square, under which a book was hidden. It had been hidden there when the floor had been installed in the twenties, an embarrassing realization, because I had walked across it in 1940 and totally missed it.

I did not examine the book until much later, after I had returned to my rooms in Ambrumesy. I was surprised to discover it was a reprint of one of Leblanc's books, *The Hollow Needle*. I re-read the book but found nothing changed in the story. However, the book itself presented a few oddities. For example, one could find Leblanc's signature in a book apparently printed in 1955. This was quite a feat, as Leblanc had been dead for at least fifteen years by then. As for the printing date, it too was a falsehood, the book having been hidden in Lindon's Villa long before then. I suspected Raymond Lindon's opening of his printing company might have been done strictly to give the book an outwardly legitimate publication history, should anyone investigate.

Examining the binding of the front cover taught me something else about the book. It was invulnerable to harm. Looking for hidden compartments, I had tried to cut the stitching of the cover but had failed, breaking my clippers in the attempt. This had led to a series of increasingly extreme attempts to do any type of damage to the book. Everything I tried failed. It was as invulnerable as I and that meant spores had to be involved. The conclusion was inescapable. Somehow, these four books, or at least this one, had been exposed to the spores.

Since these books were connected to both Leblanc and the Abbey, I now had proof of the Abbey's involvement with my caves long before either Hitler or I had ever heard of them. Yet, they had allowed us to take the caves from Leblanc, without assisting him. Despite their many resources and their thousand-year plan, they had allowed the caves to fall into enemy hands.

None of this made sense to me. I was starting to feel as if I had been manipulated all along by the Abbey, while they carried out their bizarre plans to trap the Greyman. It angered me to think that the Abbey were probably still at it.

Other things were happening. When I had originally selected the Robert Ragmeny skin, I had done so in order to be both a detective and a false Greyman. In order to succeed in this goal, I had examined St Germain, and selected many of his odd personality features to espouse as my own. In the doing, I had ended up studying the eastern philosophies St Germain had followed in life.

I had never really cared about such things and only did this as part of my thoroughness in embodying a skin. Yet, when I came across the principles of meditation, I instinctively knew this process might help me deal with the all-encompassing numbness. It took me a while to learn how to do it, despite its apparent simplicity, but once mastered, it was something I ended up doing daily to maintain a modicum of control over my endless cravings for mayhem.

Finally, one last item was added to my changes, also caused by having become Robert Ragmeny. The locals had learned I was a detective. Despite supposedly being on a sabbatical and recuperating, I was approached several times by locals to solve mysteries. A few of them proved far more involving than I would have imagined. By the end of four years, not only had I garnered a reputation as the person to go to when in trouble, I had also garnered a level of respect from the local populace, a type of respect I had never before experienced.

Certainly, I had commanded men before, when working with Hitler but their obedience had been impelled by fear and military training. This new respect was different, something I could never have forced. The people liked me and strangely enough, I had grown to enjoy the feeling of being appreciated. This was partially why I had stayed overlong as Ragmeny.

All these things had caused a deeper change within me, a change of understanding, brought about by looking impassively at all the events. Most of all, in the peaceful, introspective state induced by the meditation, I found myself confronted repeatedly by memories of the flood, always as vivid as when it first happened.

The wall of water rushing towards me. My insane flight to avoid its oncoming certainty. The very moment when I was taken up by it, thrown flat, then swept up into the swirling madness. The endless spinning in the dark waters. That was where I still was, perhaps had been all my life, spinning in the dark waters, lost, without aim, searching for a goal, for my reason to be. The numbness only made my disorientation worse, distancing me from anything which might make life more real.

I could see my craving for havoc in a different light. It felt as if, behind it all, I had simply been looking for life itself. I had been desperately seeking for a missing connection, always ending up more disconnected from everything instead. For a long while, I had tried to find answers inside the bodies of those I experimented upon... to find the secret of life, the meaning of everything.

Why did I not share it with others, why did I always feel so apart, so alone?

The spore numbness was not the cause of my cravings. Deep inside, I had always been numb. Numb to everything, to everyone. Nothing had ever meant anything.

It had been all so meaningless.

That was my life, what it had been... but the flood had changed that. I had been saved, despite that I deserved no saving. To me, slowly but surely, this had come to signify I meant something after all, that I did have a purpose. I had yet not been ready to face it... and now, I was being led to it, not through endless experimentation but through the process of meditation.

The flood had been no accident. It had been a sign. I was being told to wake up and look around. This was my chance to do what I was here to do. I had been prepared all my life for this, created for this. It was why I was special; it was why I had been given the chance to become immortal, it explained everything.

I was placed here to defeat the Greyman.

I already knew the Abbey would not succeed, no matter what they tried. Their efforts were doomed to failure from the day they started. How could they succeed by banishing the power of immortality? They had to embrace it, like I did. Only an immortal could hope to defeat another immortal. This was obvious from the beginning. The Greyman would defeat them all. None could succeed in this but I.

My arrival into Transylvania had not been so aimless as I had originally thought. I had been directed to re-discover the links to immortality that Vlad Dracul himself had found and, from that, to find out about the Abbey. Then, from the Abbey to the Greyman. None of this had been accidental. I had thought I had been simply keeping myself occupied but this was not so. I was being readied. I was meant to find the spores and to be the only one to use them.

Only I could achieve this monumental task. I was the only one cold enough to do it.

I had finally found my true purpose.

I remembered when Hitler had brought the meaning of purpose home to me. It now seemed like I had merely been playing with it back then. With true purpose lighting the way, all others paled in comparison. It was time to begin what I was placed here to do. I would use meditation to keep myself in control and develop a plan like no other before, using my beloved shadows, hidden from everyone, yet there for all to see. I would find a way to become part of the Abbey's plans without them ever being the wiser. I would place myself at the center of all things, waiting for my chance to strike. Nothing and no-one would be able to stop me.

How could they? No one would even know I was there.

* * * * *

With purpose prodding me, I planned my attack. My first place to start was the four books. I was convinced they were at the center of both Leblanc's and the Abbey's plans. I believed that, as a whole, they concealed something. Unfortunately I was at a loss to explain what that could be. The only thing I could do at this point, was to seek out the other three books. I had found one in Lindon's home. Now, I had to figure out where the other three could be.

For that to happen, I had to solve a problem.

Leblanc had stated in his journal that Arsene Lupin, the fictitious character, was based on a real person. However, Leblanc's journal had never named him, an attempt to keep me in the dark about his identity. However, despite his secret identity, Lupin had been a thorn in my side for many years. When I had been with Hitler, still searching for the mysterious treasure of the caves, Lupin and Leblanc had left us a false trail, started by a supposed argument between the two, which had led to a separation of the long standing team. We had been led on a merry chase after that. At the time, we had believed Lupin had taken the true secret of the caves with him, stolen it, in fact. In the end, that chase had led us to an empty box, hidden in a bank vault in Paris. The result of years of dogged research had been a complete waste of time.

But that vault had been owned by Albert Lindon, not Lupin. At the time, I had thought Albert Lindon had been assisting Lupin but now, with the benefit of hindsight, I felt I had seen the Lindons' involvement in these affairs too many times. Might Albert Lindon have been Lupin? It was just like Leblanc to hide Lupin in plain sight. A close friend to Leblanc's, Albert Lindon, was an excellent candidate for the role.

Raymond Lindon was still working on the preparations of Project Sirene to this day, obviously carrying out either his father's bidding or the Abbey's. It didn't much matter which. Either way, the Lindon father might well have been Lupin. I would begin my search there. I had the benefit of time on my side. None of those I was watching seemed inclined to hurry. They were working on a long-term plan, which might not come to fruition until long after they themselves had died.

I did not have to suffer that fate. I had eternity on my side. I could take decades to do this, slowly nailing down every single detail. As always, my shadows would protect me, obscuring my true purpose from everyone.

Greyman Chronicles

Norton Finds the Nuns

Months after he had been ordered to close the case by his chief, Norton had returned to the scene of the crime to talk once more with Officer Natamos. Natamos had also been upset when the case had been closed and the two had gradually become partners in an unofficial investigation that had lasted years. The reason for Norton's latest visit was Natamos' frantic call about a discovery.

„All right, I'm finally here, Natamos. What did you find?“

„You were right all along, Norton...“

„Inspector Norton, if you please...“

„You mean you made the grade? ... Congratulations. I knew you could do it.“

„No thanks to that old Chief of mine... but the new one's a bit better... Gave me a fair chance anyway...“

„Maybe he didn't know what you've really been up to, eh?“

„Probably not... Anyway, you said you found something?“

„You bet I did. You were right to get me to check into other odd activities around the same time as the guard's disappearance. It's taken me years but I finally hit pay dirt last week. The Vatican had a researcher, name of Guilo Arnak, who stopped coming in suddenly. My investigation revealed that the man had completely vanished, leaving all his possessions behind. No one could explain why he would have left. Foul play was suspected but no body was ever found.“

„Very odd indeed, Natamos.“

„Yes... but I managed to ferret out a bit more. I made some discreet enquiries into Arnak's past. It seems he had suddenly taken an interest in working in the Vatican, about six months previous to his disappearance. Despite that his experience and education were more than sufficient for the post for which he applied, Arnak had never before evinced any interest in working with Vatican documents. A few friends found him distant in the last few months of his life, unusually so, in fact...“

„What are you trying to get at?“

„It seems to me as if, maybe, we're not looking at this Arnak fellow the right way... Maybe Arnak didn't vanish when the guard vanished, maybe he vanished six months before that, if you get my meaning...“

„What, you think my Shadow-Killer took Arnak's place six months before the break-in?“

„It would fit your theory that the Shadow-Killer had to have been familiar with the Vatican Archives section in order to plan the break-in. If he killed Arnak first, in order to get into the Vatican, then he would have had plenty of occasions to check the place out. After he was done, he didn't need the Arnak front anymore and dropped it like a hot stone.“

„That sounds much more devious than I had imagined but I must agree with you that the theory does fit. Why would anyone be willing to spend six months living as someone else, in order to plan a robbery?“

„Perhaps what he sought was very important to him.“

„Maybe... I don't know... Listen, no matter why he did this, if he did impersonate this Arnak fellow for six months, then, he had to be a pretty good actor, if no one picked up on it.“

„Sure but there's some things he couldn't hide... I mean Arnak had to look something like the Shadow-Killer for it to work...“

„...Say, that's true... The killer had to have picked Arnak for his education but he would also have had to make sure that they were at least physically similar... That's an excellent point, Natamos. Do we have a picture of Arnak?“

„We do. This picture was taken while he was at the Vatican, about two months prior to his disappearance.“

„That would mean that we are actually looking at our killer then... Imagine how brazen he is to wander the streets so openly, hidden in the clothes of another... At least this picture can give us some basic physical characteristics for our Shadow-Killer.“

„I thought we were mad when we started this, Norton. But, with every passing year, this killer of yours becomes a little bit more real... and more mysterious at the same time. We can think these theories all we want, we have scant little evidence to prove them.“

„What are you saying? ... That you want to give up?...“

„No, of course not. I believe the killer is real all right. But I fear our job is not going to get any easier.“

„No, I never said it would be easy. I just said we couldn't let a monster like that roam the streets and nothing we've found has changed my mind...“

Norton's encounter with Natamos had been followed by months of fruitless research. Eventually, Norton began despairing that he would ever find

another trail of this vanished murderer. Chance looked his way when he was alerted to a gruesome discovery in an abandoned convent in a small part of France.

He took the train there, supposedly on vacation from his regular investigations. Upon arrival at the small train station, he was picked up by the local constabulary, who drove him up to the remote monastery.

„It used to be full of nuns,“ the driver explained, eager to share the gossip. „...Then, one day, no more nuns... They were all gone.“

„Didn't they look for them?“

„Sure they did, they looked everywhere... I remember the search when I was a little boy... but they never found anything... Later, the church officials came and decided to close the monastery down... It was all very sad.“

„Right, I'm sure it was.“

„You know, there were a few break-ins, teenagers and the like, but the monastery was usually left alone because there was always talk of ghosts.“

„Ghosts?“

„Yes, screams in the night, ghostly nuns running through the halls, their faces full of fear, all sorts of stories... People around here learned to leave that place alone.“

„Are we almost there?“

„Yes Sir, it's just up over the hill.“

„Good.“

The car stopped and the two men got out. Norton looked around the area for a moment.

„It's pretty desolate up here... and cold.“

„Yep, it sure is. It never gets above zero this high up. The only reason there's not more snow is the constant winds. It blows everything away and chills you to the bone doing it.“

„Yes it does,“ Norton agreed, buttoning up his thin coat and trying to reduce his shivering. „Let's get on with it.“

The driver took the lead and began the walk up a narrow path, which eventually lead them to the monastery's broken entrance door. They entered and made their way through the destroyed building, Norton still puffing.

„The place is pretty rundown. No one has been taking care of it for at least thirty-five years, I reckon,“ the driver commented, his voice echoing slightly.

„...And where is this discovery of yours?“

The man pointed at a narrow, circular staircase nearby.

„It's up in the attic. The roof had been leaking for years. It'd gotten pretty dangerous over the years but some boy got himself enough nerve to get up there just the same. He's not about to do that again, let me tell you. Seems a false wall had been built in the attic and the water from the leak had broken a hole in it, revealing a hidden chamber beyond. I'm told that boy is still having nightmares about what he saw in there. It's no wonder those nuns were never found. We had all been looking in the wrong place. They were hidden behind that false wall in the attic.“

„Hidden?“

„Far as we can tell, it was done deliberate. Whoever did this, killed the nuns, bled them dry, then stacked them like cordwood in the chamber behind the false wall, as neat as could be. That’s not a sight you see every day, let me tell you.“

They reached the top of the circular staircase. Norton met up with several police officers, busy dismantling a part of the false wall, trying to make an opening big enough to get through. They had laid some planks on the floor over the most damaged areas. The driver introduced Norton and the men stopped the work in order to give him time to examine the scene.

It was as grisly as had been described to him over the phone. The nuns were frozen stiff, had been since they were placed here. Stacked one on top of the other, just like they had said. Each had their throat torn open, a neat lateral gash Norton had seen before, on the mummified guard in the Vatican. This was the work of the Shadow-Killer.

„How many are here?“ he asked one of the officers.

„We’ve counted twenty-four.“

„Where were they killed?“

„We’re not sure. We found nothing to indicate any particular place might have been a murder scene. There was no broken furniture, nothing out of place, no blood...“

„No blood?“

Another similar point with the Vatican guard.

„Well, almost no blood. We did find a few drops but they are hard to explain.“

„Why’s that?“

„... It’s in the privy... It’s over here, if you’ll follow me.“

The officer led him to a small chamber off the side of the building, pointing out two holes in a stone seat.

„It’s not much but if you’ll look on the edge of that first hole, you might see a small dark stain. If you check the edge real careful like, you might make out a drip that goes down the side of the hole in the rock. We think that might have been a blood drip. We looked underneath the lip of the stone hole and there was a small stain, directly under the drip. We found a few more, all of them around the hole, exactly the same as the first one. When we looked down below, we found that everything had composted into dirt years ago. Rich dirt, mind you, but just dirt... So, we didn’t have much to go on to explain the tiny stains, you understand. Lots of theories were suggested, some... uhm... wilder than others.“

„Couldn’t the blood have been from one of the nuns during her... monthly times?“

„We thought of that but Johnson remarked that these holes used to have wooden seats over them. That drip had to have been done when the seat was up...“

„...And no nun would leave the seat up. A man was here...“

„...And apparently pissing blood.“

Seeing Norton’s confused look, the officer explained.

„I know, I know, it didn't make much sense to me either when I first heard the idea but the more you think about it, the more it looks that way... just picture yourself as the killer, standing over that hole, doing your business. It shoots out to the side and pools for a second, before you correct your aim. That would explain it perfectly... We even think there might be some additional splatter drops around that first stain I showed you but it's guesswork after all these years... Anyway, for it to pool like it did, enough to drip down like that, the guy had to be close to bursting, if you get my meaning.“

„Are you telling me you think the man who killed all those nuns, drank their blood and then pissed it down the toilet?“

„Yes sir, I think I am. Seems impossible... and disgusting... but what else could it be? If he was peeing blood, he had to be drinking it... Either that or there's a room full of blood in this convent that we haven't found yet... Now, I admit the guy could have been using pails to collect the blood somehow and then coming here and pouring it down the hole... but the stains are wrong for that... He'd have to be using a funnel with a narrow spout... and why would he do that? ... Not to mention that there are sinks which would have been closer and easier to use.“

„...Yes... I guess...“

„No matter what you think of, you keep coming back to it. Nothing else makes as much sense.“

It did make sense to Norton, in an odd twisted way. It might explain what the Shadow-killer did with the Vatican guard's blood. He drank it like... like a vampyre... He was also strong like a vampyre was reputed to be. Those holes, where Norton thought the killer had scaled the Vatican walls, had to have been made by something striking the stone with extreme force, yet it had to have happened on the fly, another seeming impossible contradiction... And those rips in the metal vent walls, as well as the way he had broken all the guard's bones and then held his crushed body with one arm while he climbed up the vent. All impossible acts, requiring impossible strength.

Always operating in the shadows, killing by sucking blood and demonstrating inhuman strength.

Norton barked out a short laugh, trying to shake the nonsensical idea out of his head. He didn't believe in monsters and Vampyres. The idea that the Shadow-Killer was something supernatural was not acceptable. The facts had to indicate something else.

The only problem was Norton couldn't possibly imagine what that might be.

Weissmuller Recollections, 1975-1980

My patience and resolve had paid good dividends and, through diligent investigative work worthy of the skin I inhabited, I had confirmed that Albert Lindon was indeed the likeliest person upon whom the character Arsene Lupin might have been based. I had also learned that one of Lindon's sons,

Gregoire, vanished a while before my arrival in Etretat during World War Two. An argument of some sort, causing a family rift. The boy had never been heard from again.

The whole situation had a familiar ring to it. An unconvincing ring. Another game from the master of games, this time involving his own flesh and blood. It was suspicious enough to start looking into it. My first move was to put out feelers with various travel agencies, on the reasoning that, for someone to vanish so effectively, one had to travel to another country. Eventually I came up with a possible lead, a ticket on a transatlantic liner. I directed my contact to continue digging.

The information was old but I had good reason to hope. Everything else had come to me so far, so why wouldn't this? My faith in my true purpose was only being strengthened through small examples such as this. Little things, every day, confirming my path was right.

While I waited for that search to pan out, I tried to formulate a plan which might allow me to catch a glimpse of the Greyman in action. Ever since I had begun this quest, searching for the oldest immortal in order to conquer him, I had been baffled about how to get within sight of him. It was most difficult to find someone who could be anyone. I should know, it worked for me. So the answer couldn't be to go looking for him.

You had to make him come to you.

However, I felt it was much too dangerous to be seen by him, not until I was ready to act. I needed to control events from a distance, watching the actions unfold from the safety of my shadows, not to be in the middle of the fray. I also wanted to get more information about the Abbey's methods. I came up with an idea which might achieve both aims at once.

During my incarnation as Ragmeny, I had read all of Leblanc's books and had been struck by the oddity of certain recurring phrases or names. While in the German army, I had briefly worked in the cipher division and was well aware of the process whereby codes could be built into seemingly innocuous sentences. Such sentence construction was often forced, in order to make certain words fit. Leblanc's books had a similar feel to them, as if fabricated to fit around inserted elements.

Applying my knowledge of ciphers to his books, I had revealed an underlying storyline, taking me on a historical and geographical journey, leading directly to a small town in France, called Rennes-le-Chateau. This buried storyline implied the presence of treasure, with a possible connection to the Templars. There was also mention of lost knowledge, waiting to be found.

All this reeked of immortality and the Abbey. I knew, from my time spent lying in the monastery vents, that the priest Saunier was involved with the Abbey and, therefore, with Project Sirene. Saunier lived in Rennes-le-Chateau. The question was why had Leblanc encoded a message about the Abbey's plans in his books?

All along, the Abbey had tried to eradicate any trail leading to immortality. In order to achieve this, they had to keep their own organization hidden. I wondered what might happen if I were to call attention to them in a more

overt way than Leblanc had done. How would the Abbey react? I suspected they would try to stop what I was doing. No matter what they did, their actions might give me a lead on how to further penetrate their plans.

As for the Greyman, I figured he'd be interested in exactly the opposite. He'd want to make sure that information would get out, just like he did when he was masquerading as St-Germain. However, there was no guarantee that either the Greyman or the Abbey would behave as I surmised. It was a chance I'd have to take. The gains seemed to outweigh the risks.

Once I was decided, it didn't take long to pass to action. I left the Robert Ragmeny skin behind, knowing it was far safer to return to the anonymity of my shadows for the time being. I began looking for someone I could use to achieve my aims. I eventually decided on an author named Joseph-Richard Vareilles. My main reason for choosing him, apart from his choice of subject matter in his books, was that he had a wife and child to whom he was much devoted, a fact I knew how to use to my advantage.

It took a while to complete my preparations but, by the late seventies, everything was in place. I approached Vareilles in a bar, one evening. I had called him at home the previous week, telling him I had a lead on a new story. He had eagerly agreed to meet, not even questioning my false identity. I soon managed to get him into a deserted factory. He hadn't come willingly. No matter his objections, by the end of it all, he was securely tied to a chair, looking rather distraught.

I started by showing him a picture of his two young daughters at school and one of his wife working in her garden at home. Having gotten his attention, I explained to him what I wanted. He was going to submit an apparently innocuous non-fiction book, to be published through the Grenoble University press. The book, titled *Filatures*, which I had already written, was similar in style to other writings by Varseilles, so would not seem out of context for him to publish. It focused primarily on the codes in Leblanc's books, revealing their hidden story and, by extension, pointing the finger directly and overtly at Rennes-le-Chateau.

There had already been much written about that small town, most of it spurious. My, or rather, Vareilles', thesis explained the reasons why people should be interested in Saunier's ancient parish. It would not send people scurrying in a variety of ridiculous directions but, rather, focus them specifically on those issues involved with the Abbey's precious *Project Sirenne*. For the Abbey, a book such as this would be tantamount to a direct provocation and should set alarm bells ringing in their camp, loudly and clearly.

It should also get the Greyman's attention, for exactly the same reason. He would know the Abbey would come out of the woodwork to deal with this and he might be interested enough to make an appearance himself. I hoped to be there to witness exactly that.

Prior to the article's publication, Vareilles would submit a series of news releases about his upcoming book, also written by me. They would reveal just enough of the codes to get the Abbey's ears up. All I would have to do is sit back and watch them try to stop Vareilles from publishing his book. The

situation would probably incite the monks to talk much more about Project Sirenne.

Anticipating such an event, I had briefly returned to their main underground hideout and gone back into the vents to install a series of recorders, which would tape whatever they talked about. This would give me needed intelligence about Project Sirenne, hopefully enough to figure out how to insinuate myself into their plans more directly. At the same time, I would observe their methods in preventing the article's publication. How far would they go? How far were they willing to go?

As for Vareilles, he was but a cog in that plan but, still, he had to perform flawlessly. He could not, at any point, allow himself to think he could do anything but what I required of him. He could not ever reveal what he was being forced to do. I described in a fair amount of detail what I would do to his two daughters, in front of their mother, before doing the same to her. To ensure he took me seriously I removed one of his toes, the smallest one from the left foot.

I did it with pliers, taking my time, in order to convince him completely. Once it was done, I briefly cauterized the open wound, stopping the flow of blood and then sowed the skin back up over the stump. The experience seemed to have been sufficient for him and he became extremely co-operative following that. I gave him a convincing story to explain the loss of his toe and sent him on his way.

I made sure to follow his progress, revealing myself to him at unexpected times, in order to keep him on task. I forced him to introduce me to his family and had supper at his home several times. I knew how to instill fear and I used every bit of that knowledge to ensure that Vareilles never once deviated from his script.

I arranged it so that the news releases would hit the streets three months before the publication. This made it very difficult for the Abbey to react subtly. I expected they would come in heavy-handed. Vareilles had no idea what he was getting into. He simply did what he was told, hoping to come out of it with his family intact. It wasn't a likely scenario.

* * * * *

The Abbey didn't waste time. Calls came in to the publisher, each trying to put some pressure on them to stop the printing, for this or that reason. The calls were merely a delaying tactic. I had noticed a series of new arrivals to the district, all keeping a low profile. It wasn't long before they assembled together. I'm sure they never imagined that someone could have followed them and come into the same room as them, literally hanging from the rafters.

They were from the Abbey all right, a group of trained mercenaries, discussing their options, down to a limited few. They had originally attempted to bribe key workers to sabotage the printing run, having abandoned the more legal routes. The group seemed baffled by something. Despite having apparently succeeded several times, by convincing this or that personnel to sabotage the printing process, no sooner was an agreement reached, that it

was broken in the oddest manner. Invariably, the next day, the would-be saboteur acted like he knew nothing of their special arrangements. In fact, they seemed to have forgotten about their agreements. They even bribed one man twice, with the exact same results.

It was infuriating to the mercenaries, powerless in the face of such impossibility. I could take no responsibility for it. I was as baffled as they were. This aspect of the situation, along with the increasing pressure of time, was convincing them to act more directly. I listened to their plans, which were set to happen on the Sunday of the following week. They were going to hit both the Vareilles home and the press at the same time, killing the author and destroying every copy of his dangerous work in one fell swoop.

Another arm of the Abbey was working on a cover story for the mercenary action, preparing their contacts in the local police and newspaper in order to ensure their version of events was the one which became public. Everything seemed perfect. All in all, I was impressed. They had anticipated every event and had adapted to all situations.

I worked hard for the next week, trying to be everywhere at the same time. There was so much to watch. As the years had advanced, so had technology and I had the wealth to take advantage of the very best. I still couldn't be in every location. I had to choose which place to be, the press or the Vareilles family home. My first desire was to stay by the home, to see how they carried out the more personal acts of killing.

However, I knew my search for knowledge would best be served by being at the press. There I would see how they dealt with the search for the original manuscript and the destruction of the machinery. How precise would their attack be? In the end I opted for the press, as my purpose required.

However, I was to be disappointed. The attack never materialized. I waited for hours, until I had to recognize that something had gone wrong. I went back to their original meeting location that evening. The scene I found was one I would not soon forget.

I entered as before, through the upper hallway window. I stood there for the longest time, in the shadows, listening. A deathly silence surrounded me like a shroud. Something was wrong. I cautiously made my way to the main room.

They were all there. Each dressed in black, weapons and specialized tools hanging from belts and straps. At least twenty of them.

All dead.

I made my way to the lower floor, looking at the bodies. All were on the ground, fallen where they stood. I examined each body in turn. I could see no obvious cause of death. It wasn't poison gas. I searched the building and found no evidence of it.

I returned to the bodies, looking at their faces. No fear, no horror, just blankness. I could not understand what had happened here. This was not normal. I heard a noise outside and went to investigate, remaining in the shadows. It was someone from the Abbey, coming to find out what was going on. He appeared just as baffled as I was. He moved quickly, calling in some help to do a clean-up. His work was calm and efficient, going from man to man, checking for signs of life.

He made another call, this time trying to check on the second team, which had been dispatched to attack the house, a group of five mercenaries. I had forgotten about them and decided to quietly leave and go to the Vareilles home to learn what had happened there as well. I arrived just in time to see an Abbey clean-up team picking up bodies, from the Vareilles back yard.

None of them had made it into the house. I would have thought they might try a second attack but, apparently, the Abbey was not inclined to do so. If anything, I would have said that they seemed scared. Someone had come here and stopped them cold and no one had any idea how it had been done.

The one word I heard repeated however, gave me both theory and solution at the same time:

„Greyman!“

* * * * *

By the time I had returned to their main building, all evidence of their presence was gone. The Vareilles manuscript was published as planned. I thought about killing Vareilles and family but in the end, decided against it, worried that, somehow, the Greyman would learn of it and come after me. I had no idea how he had known of the Abbey's plan against Joseph-Richard Vareilles, I never noticed a single thing out of the ordinary. His presence had been completely invisible.

His murders had been perfect, leaving no clue behind, no explanation.

If the Greyman had been watching the Abbey, then he had also been watching me. I had remained unaware of his observation. I, who thought myself the master of shadows had been outdone and easily at that. The Greyman had run circles around me, while I fumbled in the dark.

Why he had not killed me?

Perhaps my immortality protected me from him. This had to be the truth of it. He was an immortal, like me, but a much older one, with many more skills. He had evaded the Abbey's clutches for more than a thousand years. He had abilities I could not even imagine, such as his technique of killing without contact.

It was time to leave Grenoble University and its press and head off to the Abbey's Carthusian monastery to retrieve my recorders. No matter what had happened here, it was sure to have inspired looser lips in their headquarters. They usually never talked about Project Sirenne amongst themselves but I was positive this event would have gotten them to become more vocal.

Greyman Chronicles

Norton Digs Deeper

Norton got out of his car, Natamos doing the same from the passenger side. One of Norton's contacts had called him upon hearing of an odd find in Italy,

at the site of an archeological dig on the town of Longarone, which had been covered up by a flood almost thirty years earlier.

During the last decade, Norton and Natamos had been busy. Their search had not been easy but they had successfully pieced together the travels of a monster, both geographically and across time. It had happened almost by accident, getting their first real break when one of them had the idea of drawing a line between the nun murders in France and the Vatican. Using that as a guideline for their searches, they found a series of unexplained disappearances along the way.

It was always the same. Someone went out and never came back. It always happened at night. Of course, both investigators knew that, statistically speaking, people vanished here and there. The disappearances they were tracking were too numerous to be explained by a statistical average. It was Norton who suggested they look for other unexplained disappearances across Europe to see if any similar patterns appeared. It was grueling work, involving travel to many countries and sitting in endless dusty offices, looking for a needle in a field of haystacks.

Both of them grew to have a sense for what they were looking for and, eventually, their patience had paid dividends. By placing each potential disappearance in a graph covering both distance and dates, Norton and Natamos had discovered their killer's footprints through time. He had started his killing spree in France, in the mid-forties, just after the Second World War.

He had killed frequently at first. Later he had begun traveling north as the countries began recovering from the ravages of war. The killer had meandered all through Europe, always with an eye for forgotten places, where he might be less noticed. Later, he had travelled into Transylvania.

Norton had immediately drawn a connection between Transylvanian vampyre myths and his Shadow-killer's desire for blood. After Transylvania, the Shadow-Killer had travelled into Italy, then later, back into France, always killing invisibly along the way, managing to avoid being seen a single time in over thirty years of killing.

The Longarone discovery had come out of the blue. A small university had undertaken an archeological dig on the destroyed town. Everything had proceeded as planned, until the body parts were found. During floods as violent as this one had been, it was normal to find bodies damaged by the raging waters, but the level of damage to these bodies was beyond anything expected.

Natamos noticed the tents near the excavation and they made their way there, arriving just as two students approached, carrying a large container, filled with a variety of broken bones. The two officers identified themselves to the archeologist in charge, who wasted no time in showing them what they had found, still agitated by his discovery.

„If you'll come over here at this table, you can examine a skeleton which we have managed to reassemble. We found the bones scattered all over. It is a miracle that we have been able to find most of this man's bones.“

Norton looked at the table, seeing bones showing a variety of serious breaks. The doctor went on, his quivering voice betraying his emotions.

„None of those breaks happened naturally. It seems to me, after a thorough examination, that these bones were first crushed in areas... such as this one here... then the limbs were torn apart. I cannot imagine what could do that but it would require great strength. Considering the spread of the bones across the landscape, I believe he was killed before the flood. All the skeletons we have found to date show similar signs of this appalling destruction. I could accept a few bodies damaged like this but not all of them. It's just not possible.“

Norton and Natamos thanked the archeologist and spent more time examining other skeletons. Eventually they headed towards the dig site, a grassy field, all traces of the original town erased. The two discussed their suppositions.

„I'm not sure if coming here was a waste of time or not. This place is not anywhere near our plotted travels of the Shadow-Killer, Norton.“

„I know, I know... Nothing about this site and those horribly crushed bones provides us with a direct link to him... and yet, I can't help but think it is connected. The brutality fits his profile.“

„Let's say, for the sake of arguing, that you were right, that the Shadow-Killer had come here and ripped apart all the people in this town. What would that mean?“

„I don't know... just like always in this stupid investigation of ours. All this chase has done is hurt both our careers. My superiors don't buy my *Shadow-Killer* theory and they certainly don't buy the vampyre angle. I'm sure they think I'm going nuts and I've been told in no uncertain terms to lay off what they consider to be a *monumental waste of time and resources*... Coming here after that warning will probably look like a slap in the face to them.“

„Hey, don't blame me, Norton, you're the one who started all this. We can stop anytime you want, you know that.“

„I'm not blaming you, Natamos and I can't stop, not after all the years we've put into it and certainly not after what we've found out about that monster... and I don't care what my bosses think, I know I'm right... They've got nothing to complain about anyway, I bring in the results, you know I do.“

„Sure, Norton, you're probably their best Inspector but that doesn't make them like you any more.“

„Ha-ha, no, it sure doesn't... Anyway, it's the flood that bothers me... it seems damn convenient that the dam burst just after the Shadow-Killer came here and killed all these people.“

„I read about the flood on the way here. They believe the likeliest cause was a man-made error... but whether it was or not, that error happened long before the dam broke apart. If someone planned it, they'd have to know the Shadow-killer would come here years later. Seems unlikely.“

„Okay, so the flood was unrelated, just a stroke of luck for our killer...“

„...If it was him... all we've got here is broken bones. That's not proof of anything.“

„No, you're right. Once again, we have no solid proof of his presence... God damn it.“

Norton kicked at a rock, sending it flying. His minor tantrum did little to vent his anger.

„How many people is that now? Two hundred and fifty? Three hundred and fifty? When is he going to stop? He's been killing for at least thirty years nonstop and we can't get anyone to believe he even exists. It's so maddening... Everything we find is old news, things he's done long ago. Not once have we ever gotten close to him. I've spent half my career looking for him and I feel like time is running out.“

„Calm down, Norton. Your outbursts serve no purpose but to anger you further. You keep forgetting that, without you, no one would know about him at all... But listen, you've given me an idea.“

„Oh? Like what?“

„We've spent most of our time looking at old police records all over Europe, trying to find out where he's been. What if we did it again but this time to try and figure out where he's going?“

„What, you mean to project his future movement from his past ones?“

„You got it.“

„We'd have to focus on the more current disappearances to get usable data... It'd be quicker to access, might not take us all that long to figure out a likely direction of travel, at least. We could take a new look at all our old data and use it to infer as much as we can about his motivations, try to get in his mind... I like it, Natamos.“

„I knew you would.“

„Well, what are we wasting time here for, then? Let's get going. We've got a lot of work to do.“

Weissmuller Recollections, 1981-1983

Part One

It was during this period that I realized someone was following my footsteps.

In retrospect, it was inevitable that it happen. I had worried about this very possibility all along, because of my obsession with Vampirism. Despite its irresistible allure, Vampirism had one fatal flaw: it left drained bodies behind. During the more recent years, I had taken excessive precautions with the leftovers of my Vampyric experiments, by ripping the bodies into tiny pieces and scattering them across large distances.

This had not always been the case. When I found an old newspaper article referring to the discovery of a convent full of murdered nuns, I knew my past had come back to haunt me. I had done that experiment on the spur of the moment, when I was a new-born immortal, unaware of what time truly

meant, still looking at it on a human scale. When I had hidden the nuns in the attic, it had not yet sunk in I would be around for their discovery. By normal standards, I should have been a very old man by this point.

It was an advantage in my favor, if someone was chasing me. Thanks to the Abbey's thousand years of effort, no one would ever seriously consider that anyone might truly be an immortal. They would think the killer of those nuns was dead of old age. I simply couldn't take a chance on that assumption. All it would take was one policeman to put it together and my shadows might dissipate at the time when I needed them the most.

My visit to the convent and the nearby town confirmed my worst fears. Someone from Interpol had indeed come here, a man named Inspector Norton. I did some careful checking, enough to put a face to the name. He was an experienced investigator, with a reputation for doggedness. I was tempted to kill him, simply as a precaution but my Purpose prevented me from acting impulsively. I wasn't yet certain the Inspector knew what he was looking for. He might not even be chasing me. I decided to wait until I learned more. Then I would kill him.

On the other hand, my attack on the Abbey had paid incredible dividends. Not only did I now have proof of the Greyman's existence and a confirmation of his terrible powers, I also had obtained extremely valuable information from my recording units, hidden in the vents of their Carthusian monastery, near Calabria. The sensitive microphones had done their work and caught several of the monks talking freely about Project Sirenne.

The Abbey had attributed the Vareilles attack entirely to the Greyman. Apparently this was not the first time he had done things like this. As a result of their mistaken assumption, my key role in the attack had been completely missed, exactly as planned. Additionally, their loose lips had informed me of the time scale of Project Sirenne. All along, I had been worried about when their plans would come to fruition. I knew they were trying to trap the Greyman. For that to occur, many things had to be in place. The question was: when would everything be ready?

I had made an educated guess, based on Leblanc's actions. He had put a long-lasting poison gas trap in the caves. Although he had used it primarily to kill Hitler, I was convinced he had also intended to shut down the caves for at least sixty years. Time enough for people to forget about the caves. Then, either his, or Lindon's, great-grandson could come back to the caves in utter anonymity. Such was my theory anyway.

Now, my theory was proven fact. The recordings had confirmed the date of sixty years. By calculating how much time had passed since the Sirenne Project's inception, I now knew that I had twenty-five years left before their plans reached culmination, plenty of time for me to find a way in.

Leblanc and Albert Lindon, had managed to insert their progeny into the Abbey's plans for the Greyman's destruction. Now I had learned where to look for that progeny. The monks had been worried about many aspects of their complicated plan when my attack had begun. They frantically checked on every concern, confirming that all were still safe from discovery. One of their phone conversations informed me about Albert Lindon's son, Gregoire.

Prior to this point, I had thought he was the black sheep of the family, having left his father decades ago, after a serious argument. A contact had confirmed Gregoire Lindon had booked passage on a transatlantic steamer heading to South America. I had known no more. Now I had learned this had been entire subterfuge. Lindon had sent his son to Canada as part of the Abbey's plan, to Ottawa, in fact. From there, his son had established a new family line, under a false name, one that made everything make sense.

Paul Sirene.

The conclusion was inescapable. If I wanted to find the four books of Project Sirene, I would have to go to Canada and hunt out the Sirene family. I was not quite ready to go there yet. The monks had unwittingly revealed to me the location of yet another of the four books. It was in Rennes-le-Chateau. They had not mentioned it directly but their concern about that location made it clear it was highly important to them. What other reason could there be?

So I now had a good idea of the location of three of the books. With this knowledge in hand, I could infer the location of the final missing piece of the set. I had managed to kill Leblanc's son during World War Two but a wife and children had remained alive. Leblanc still had descendants out there. One of them was sure to have the fourth book.

Overall, my attack on the Abbey could be qualified as a total success... and why should that not be so? Everything was arranging itself for me. I had three different leads to follow up and the only glitch in the plan was Inspector Norton from Interpol. I decided it was time to hunt him down and find out what, if anything, he knew about me. The sooner I knew what he was up to, the quicker I would be able to dispose of him.

Greyman Chronicles

Norton Gives Up.

Norton arrived early for once, beating Natamos to the restaurant, a rare occasion. They had known each other for longer than either of them cared to remember, their acquaintance begun through a mutual desire to find the Shadow-Killer. In the intervening years, they had become solid friends, despite living in different cities. Not a month went by when they did not find a reason to visit each other. Sometimes, Norton's sister, Helena, would accompany them, if she was feeling well.

Tonight was a special night. Norton had finally decided he was going to end the chase.

That was why he had arrived early. Nervous, he had driven faster than usual. He felt unsure about how Natamos was going to take it. No matter what Natamos said, Norton knew he had to do it. He was glad to see his friend's car pull up outside, waving to him through the window. The suspense

would be over soon. Coming in, detective Natamos took off his coat and hung it on a rack before sitting down in the booth, across from the Interpol inspector.

„Hey Norton... Long time.“

„Yeah, it's been real busy lately.“

„You're not kidding. I heard you've been assigned a new case... a big one.“

„Oh... You heard about that, did you? ... Yeah, well, it's high profile all right. I'm going to have to be careful where I walk. Lots of toes to step on in those circles.“

„You're finally getting to the big times, partner.“

„It seems like it, after all these years of plugging. That's the reason I asked to meet with you. With that new case, I really gotta watch what I say... and my hands are so full lately...“

„Why do I get a feeling you're building up to something?“

„Maybe it's because I am, Horatio...“

„...Hey, how many times have I told you not to use my first name?“

They both laughed at the old joke but their faces quickly fell back into a more somber state.

„Sorry... Natamos... I was trying to build up to something but you caught me out. You know me too well, I guess.“

„Just tell me, Norton. What's rolling around in that ugly head of yours.“

„Fine, fine... Listen, I want to drop the investigation... Actually, it's more like I need to drop it, if you want the honest truth.“

Natamos hardly reacted to Norton's statement. He simply nodded his head slightly.

„That's fine by me. I was sort of thinking the same thing, anyway. It's not going anywhere lately.“

„No, it's not. We haven't found anything new to add for at least two years... I was so busy last year I hardly even looked at the case.“

„Your boss might be glad to hear you decided to stop chasing the Shadow-killer.“

„That's the other part, the big part really. You know he thinks I'm nuts to keep going after my invisible killer... Heck, they all think I'm nuts... but they're right in a way. I've been obsessed about this monster for years. I dream about him practically every other night. All the evidence we have is basically inconclusive, we both know it, no matter our conviction that the guy is real...“

„Like you said, we haven't found a fresh trail on a long while... Our trick of looking at missing people to find his travels seems to have petered out. If he's still out there, he's stopped killing... or has changed his pattern... No matter what, the guy has been doing his thing for at least forty years that we know. He's got to be getting too old for that kinda shit. He might even be dead now.“

„Yes. It's all those reasons. I've had that monster on my mind, in one manner or another for more than twenty years. It's driving me crazy. For years, it has affected me at work, particularly when they wouldn't believe me but who could blame them... I don't believe me.“

„Ha-ha, me neither Norton... Look we both know the facts and some of them are very strange indeed. I was almost tempted to agree with your vampire theory at some point...“

„You never told me that...“

„Hey, I said almost...“

„Oh yeah.“

„Anyway, the facts were the facts, we couldn't very well refute them. We were never able to come up with a realistic theory to explain them. It was always a problem for both of us. I learned to keep my mouth shut about those weirder aspects, when I was around my superiors.“

„Well, you know me, I was never good at keeping my mouth shut.“

„...And look at the price you paid for that. Your career is only just beginning to get back on track. No, Norton, giving up on the case is fine by me. We gave it a good run, that's for sure... and we can't forget it was how we met. That counts more than any serial killer in my book.“

„Aw, Natamos, cut it out, you're going to get me all teary-eyed.“

„You? ... No way. Listen, as long as we keep in touch and get together every now and then, we can throw the case in the garbage, for all I care.“

„Well, I wouldn't go that far... That file of ours represent a heck of a lot of work.“

„Ha-ha... I know you too well... Say, how's Helena in all this?“

„My sister's not that good. I had to move her in to my place two months ago... Heck, it's too big anyway, since my wife left me. Still, no matter how she feels, she manages to get up every day and do a little bit of cleaning. She's a pretty good cook, too... way better than me...“

„That's good...“

„You're telling me. You know, having Helena move in was the deciding factor for me. I felt she should be in a peaceful environment. The Wall of Murders in my living room was not exactly conducive to that. When I took it down, I thought I'd set it up elsewhere but I realized that I didn't have room left for it anywhere in my life.“

„Well I'm glad you called me, if only for the reason that we got together. It's final then, the Shadow-Killer is history... Hey, how about a toast to the occasion?“

„Great idea.“

Norton lifted up his glass and clinked it against Natamos'.

„To the Shadow-Killer...“

„...May he be well and truly dead.“

„Amen to that.“

The two men sat down and sipped at their drinks quietly, reflecting on how life had brought them here and wondering where it would take them next.

Weissmuller Recollections, 1981-1983

Part Two

Luck was with me as always, reminding me that I was following my predestined path. I had not only located Inspector Norton easily enough, the day I began following him, he travelled to a restaurant, where he met up with an old friend of his, a man by the name of Horatio Natamos. Norton had apparently come here to admit to Natamos that he wanted to abandon a case they were both involved in. A Vampyric monster they called the *Shadow-Killer*. It had to be me. The Inspector seemed concerned about his sister, Helena Norton and his position at work, which he considered valid reasons to end his chase.

The two men had kept the case mostly between themselves. The Vampyric nature of my experiments had acted in my favor, as none of those involved could bring themselves to publicly admit what seemed to be impossible theories. I felt it would be safe enough to remove these two men.

One thing held me back. I had noted with curiosity that both his sister, Helena Norton, and his friend, Horatio Natamos, had names which bore the same first initials. Interestingly enough, these initials were those of the books I was searching for, *The Hollow Needle*. The more I thought about this odd fact, the less I thought of it as a coincidence. It had to be a message of some sort, prepared specifically for me. I just didn't know what it meant yet.

I decided I would leave Norton and his HN friends alone for now but I knew in my heart I would be seeing them again. I spent a while doing meditation, calming down my ebullient spirit. I was getting overexcited at all the possibilities which had just sprung up. I returned to calmness within a few days, armed with a decision. I would go to Rennes-le-Chateau.

I did some straight-line walking, reveling for the first time in a long while in simply being immortal. The numbness seemed almost meaningless now, replaced by the Purpose. I was unique in the world, a shadow-immortal, born specifically to destroy the oldest immortal in the land. It was time for change and I was going to be the instrument of that change.

Once he was gone, I would become the new Greyman, master of all and fearful of none. I would learn all his tricks and the Abbey would cower in front of me, the only immortal left in existence. My shadow would spread across the land, bringing the entire world within my grasp. I would become as a god to them. All I had to do was to keep myself in control, reduce my urges and keep directly focused on my Purpose.

In Rennes-le-Chateau, I found the chess board pattern repeated in both the Church floor and Saunier's home, the Villa Bethanie. Although both held a hollow space hidden in a similar location, I could open neither of them, as they were both securely locked. I spent more than two months trying to vanquish the lock intricacies but for the first time since I began following my purpose, I failed.

I was unsure what that meant. Eventually, I came to understand that perhaps there was an order to opening these hidden recesses. I might not be able to succeed in opening these until I had found the other books. Perhaps I would find the key along the way. I could rip the floor apart and get at what

was hidden but I would reveal my involvement. It was not the time to for that. I was satisfied one of the books was hidden here. I could always come back later.

Since I was in France, I decided to locate the descendants of Leblanc's family, which was easy enough, as most of them were still living in Etretat. One of them was Victoire Leblanc. She was Leblanc's granddaughter and had been with him in 1938 when he ran away from Etretat, an old man by then, afraid of death and dying.

Thinking of Leblanc as an old man made me wonder why he had let himself age in the first place. He knew of the spores, yet he had chosen not to extend his life. It was the same for the Abbey monks, all of whom were required to vow not to partake of the boon of immortality. It baffled me. Why would all these men refuse to live forever, and instead, toil like insects, to die as quickly?

There was the numbness, of course but was I not proof it could be vanquished? Was not the Greyman proof? Why would they all fear immortality and allow themselves to die? I could not understand it. Their fears worked to my benefit. I was able to use immortality to its full advantage, unfettered by any worry of competition.

I learned Victoire Leblanc had repurchased her grandfather's Villa and remodeled it into a bed and breakfast. She had opened a small museum on the first floor of the *Villa Leblanc*, as she called it. It was about Leblanc's *Hollow Needle*. HN. It was surely a sign, something they used to signal to each other. This time I found the book with the greatest of ease. It was located, unbelievably, in her library, the very same one hiding the tunnel access into the caves.

I roomed one night, at the Villa Leblanc, staying there as a guest. Late at night, I snuck out of my room and headed towards the library. No one noticed me, no one stopped me. I took the book and returned to my room, examining it. I was quite excited at first, holding another book of the set. It was as invulnerable as the other, identical, down to the last detail.

Despite my exultation, I returned it to its shelf. Its absence would be noted when the next morning arrived, again announcing my involvement. I could return and steal it again, as I just had. Funnily enough, when returning it, I was almost caught by Victoire Leblanc's daughter, a small bubbly child named Raymonde, roaming the hallways at night.

It was a close thing and I only avoided discovery by hiding behind a set of drapes at the last moment. It was a good thing, for the little girl at least. I would have been obliged to dispose of her. Over time, I had learned children could not be reasoned with. Pain or fear was not always sufficient to control them. You could trick them easily enough but that didn't mean they were stupid. A quick, painless bloodletting and fast disposal was always best.

After my visit to the Villa Leblanc, I embarked on my first plane trip, destination Ottawa, Canada. I had stolen someone's identity, using it to cross the borders. Amazingly, I didn't even harm the man. He was never even aware of the theft of his wallet. I was proud of my inner control, having stopped myself from drinking the man's blood.

I would never have hesitated in the past but I was moving past the idea of killing for the sake of experimentation. I had experimented enough. I was an immortal now, on a different type of quest, one that mere experimentation no longer satisfied. I was vanquishing my cravings, heading towards a place where richer fields abounded. I was learning to remain in my shadows, meditating and planning, acting with the pondered slowness only an immortal could master.

The plane landed and I disembarked anonymously, vanishing into the crowds. I had brought no luggage, needing nothing but the clothes on my back. I had wealth secreted in all major world banks so was never far from a quick withdrawal. I used the simplest device to locate Paul Sirenne, the local telephone book. There was only one Sirenne and he was the owner of an antique bookstore named The Heuristic Niche, specializing in philosophy and history.

What a coincidence. I just happened to be looking for a few books.

Paul Sirenne

Chapter 5

Raymonde Goes to Jerusalem.

A brief note—

Once we separated, our individual bodies did different things. I went into the caves, while Raymonde headed to Jerusalem with Avi and Ziva. When I later tried to recollect what had happened in order to write this memoir, my memories of both lifelines were arranged sequentially. I distinctly remembered what happened to Raymonde first and all of my events second.

I had trouble explaining why this was so. In the end I concluded this occurred simply because it had to. My physical mind was not built to experience two different lifelines happening simultaneously. When I tried to remember the separate events, my mind had to present them sequentially instead of concurrently.

Since I remember Raymonde's adventures happening first, I will present them in this manner but please remain aware in the background, like I did, that her events were occurring at exactly the same time as mine.

Paul

The helicopter lifted up, taking with it a few disgruntled officials, along with Raymonde and her two Mossad friends. Avi and Ziva had become completely loyal to Raymonde and Paul. If Raymonde wanted to go to this meeting in Paul's stead, the two agents would help her in any way they could, no matter how much their superiors objected.

The flight was scheduled to land in Paris, where a jet waited to take them to an airport near Tel Aviv. From there, another helicopter would transport them to the Haj conference center, located on the outskirts of Jerusalem. They would be accompanied the entire way by four military jets, two from France and two from Israel. Raymonde allowed them to do their thing and let herself relax, using the time to reflect on where she was going and what might happen when she got there.

She wasn't Paul and her way of looking at things was different. He tended to be logical, while she was more emotional. He was scientific, where she was spiritual. Since the dream, these differences had merged. Despite having created an artificial separation between their two minds, Raymonde was having difficulty finding herself. Unfortunately, the events were occurring at a blinding pace, robbing her of the time she desperately needed to process what had happened, what was still happening to her.

Everything she had known as a person was being called into doubt. Since meeting Paul during that plane flight, she had been pulled into a whirlwind which had never stopped speeding up. The spores had become mixed into the story and everything had seriously changed after that. Everyone had focused on Paul, leaving her unnoticed, exactly as the two had planned. Despite remaining in the background, her transformation had been as dramatic as Paul's.

Her first inkling that things were different was when she began feeling things moving around her when her eyes were closed. She wasn't hearing them. She could sense them moving around her. People, animals, everything living. At first, it had only been people immediately nearby but the distance grew further out every day. The feelings sharpened and strengthened, until one day, she could sense all inanimate objects around the living things, which appeared smoky, transparent.

Living things were vivid, coruscating patches of light in comparison. Fascinated by the bundles of light, she had watched their energy flow for hours. Whenever she opened her eyes, she correlated the energy shapes she perceived with her mind's eye with the living things around her. Animals and bugs maintained small energy shapes, tight to their physical body, unless they were scared or threatened. People's energy shapes tended to be larger than their bodies.

Raymonde assumed the energy shapes she perceived had historically been called auras. They had different colors of various intensities flitting over their surface. Spending more time with her friends from the Net, she found she could look deep into the bodies, discovering various fields of different colors. She instinctively knew they represented organs of the body. Sometimes, the organ colors would appear in darker shades than they should be. Rarely, a person's entire aura would turn black. Raymonde was seeing disease with her inner eye. She had become able to tell a person's state of health at a glance.

At times, auras behaved differently. They became more controlled, tighter around the physical body, making it harder to penetrate the outer shell and see the inner details. Raymonde suspected people's moods and personality were reflected in their aura. Extroverts had large, excited auras, while introverts had quieter auras, held nearer to their bodies.

As Raymonde's experience with perceiving auras grew, she became aware that her own aura had expanded outward from her an incredible distance, when compared to other people. The living things she perceived were strictly within the

confines of her own aura, explaining why she was able to perceive them in the first place.

Unfortunately, she did not just perceive them. She also influenced them.

It had happened subconsciously at first. By then, Raymonde's ability had strengthened to the point that she was perceiving auras even when her eyes were opened. What her eyes saw had become subverted to the more powerful aura perceptions. She was able to keep her focus outside of her body, roaming anywhere over the area her aura covered, while her body moved around, on automatic, as if she were driving a car while thinking of something else.

One day, she was walking along the corridor, towards the medical caves, when her expanded focus latched on to an aura in distress. A woman was having problems with her heart. Dark red colors were roiling through it, the whole thing pulsing with unnatural violence. Raymonde focused on the heart, surrounding it with her own energy. She tried to restore its balance by rolling her aura around it in pulses, inducing the heart to move the way it should move, projecting calmness into it. The heart aura responded, changing its violent pulsations to calmer, more natural ones. Raymonde pulled away from the person, returning to her body, afraid of what she had done. She entered the medical caves, looking around. A young woman over in the far left corner had been in serious trouble. A team of doctors and nurses around were around her and one of them was holding electrical paddles.

They weren't needed anymore.

The young lady was sitting up, a big smile on her face, explaining she felt much better all of a sudden. Raymonde never said anything and left the caves, baffled. How had she done that? She remembered other incidents where she had tweaked this organ here and that one there. Small things overall, all happening in the back of her mind, as naturally as if she were breathing.

She was curing people, fixing them.

Instead of being overjoyed at her new ability, she had felt troubled. Did she have the right to fix them? Did they want to be fixed? Why were they sick in the first place? ... And how much was she fixing them? Worried she might be changing others excessively, she constantly examined how her aura interacted with those within her realm of influence.

Her increased focus on people's auras sensitized Raymonde sufficiently to show her how information was being exchanged at that level. Auras could telegraph people's intents. If people were deceitful, she could see it in their aura, as obvious as words in a book. There were exceptions. Some people had their auras under more control, so they didn't... flare up... as much as others. It made things harder to notice. With time, Raymonde picked up increasing levels of nuances in the auras she perceived, until she could tell everything about a person with a single, inner-eye glance.

She made a conscious effort of restraining herself after she had saved the young woman, only intervening in the direst of cases, which, luckily, had been few enough. Her concerns didn't stop her from continuing to test her radar sense limits. The task was difficult because her limits kept increasing. Every day, she could stretch out further, touch more living things, oversee a bigger domain.

The spores gave her so much energy, it not only expanded her radar sense, it increased its strength as well. Anything within her sphere of influence was being bathed in her energies, whether they wanted it or not. Not even she could stop it. No matter what Raymonde tried to do consciously, her subconscious kept at work, perceiving things within her aura as extended parts of her ethereal body and trying to fix anything it interpreted as discordant.

Eventually Raymonde accepted there was little she could do about it. Her radar sense was an active, projective force instead of a perceptive one. The best she could hope for was to keep a tight rein on her feelings and her thoughts, in order to minimize the impact on her environment. It was crucial for more than one reason. She had to remain unnoticed.

Her ability had finally come in handy. If Raymonde wanted someone to ignore something, they ignored it. Her aura was literally pushing them to do her will. They simply couldn't resist her touch, her pressure. Eventually, all auras responded to her desires. Animals were even easier to influence.

Over time, her manipulative radar sense had caused Raymonde to feel separated from everyone else, except for Paul, of course. For weeks now, she had been feeling as if she was hovering above everything, floating at the center of her expanding aura, the mistress of her domain and everything in it. Living things responded to Raymonde, as if they had become a part of her. She had increasing trouble seeing them as real people.

This frightened her more and she exerted a tighter control on her powers, trying to let people just be what they were and not constantly tweak every little fault. What was worse, she knew she had done it in the past. From the moment she and Paul had gone into those cave tunnels and the spores had invaded them, she had been influencing those around her.

She could not forget that day on the beach, when Inspector Norton had tried to kill Paul. After Briar had saved Paul and killed Norton, the Net had confronted them. It could have turned out far worse than it did. In fact, Raymonde suspected it should have turned out worse. She could remember her aura touching people, broadcasting a desperate wave of agreement and conciliation over Net members, making Paul's words seem so much more reasonable. Their suspicious natures had been subverted by Raymonde and the threat of violence had vanished.

The memories weren't clear, a dream beneath the surface of things, but Raymonde was convinced her recollections were accurate. All along, things had gone exactly their way, always leading them to safety, always finding the next step. Although Paul had been the one doing the visible work, she had been there, in the background, constantly helping them move closer towards their goal.

Could she truly blame herself for this? She hadn't even been aware of doing it back then. Just like Paul, it had taken her this long to figure out what this was about. Still, Raymonde felt propelled even further into her estrangement from humankind. Almost nothing of her past with Paul was natural, all of it controlled by her radar adjustments.

Eventually, she had accepted there was nothing she could do about the past. It was what it was. She had to let it go, not allow it to overshadow the present or the future, still out there to be experienced. In the end, life kept moving forward, no

matter what she felt or worried about. She had to accept her changes and try to make the right choices, just like Paul.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the helicopter landing and subsequent transfer to a French military jet. Her attention was attracted to the mayhem in the Paris airport. Every aura she encountered was agitated and emotional. Fear was omnipresent. A huge storm had declared itself along the south coast of France. It was bearing down on Paris, having left a swath of destruction in its path. People were frantic to get away.

Natural disaster had become almost commonplace, overwhelming most nations' ability to cope. Emergency systems were already operating at their maximum and it might not be enough. Supplies, put away for a rainy day, were dwindling at an accelerated rate, reducing mankind's margin of safety to less than a week. This peacekeeping mission was almost a joke, when compared to worldwide events.

Almost.

The Middle East had always been a source of religious upheaval. The latest events, had pushed the confrontations up to an explosive level. If Briar's conclusions were right, Maurice Leblanc might have unknowingly brought about the pandemic threatening to eliminate the human race. The thought horrified Raymonde. She might somehow be responsible for the death of millions of babies.

Something hadn't been right long before this. It was why she had tried to help that pregnant woman. She had tried to save one of those poor babies that were being killed by the virus. Her inner eye had been unable to see anything wrong with the baby, or the mother. Everything was just fine.

But the baby still died.

Raymonde had been watching when it happened. The baby's aura had simply winked out of existence. One moment it had been there, the next, it was gone, leaving behind an inanimate object. Humbled by the experience, she had realized even her powers could not do everything.

Raymonde knew her ability had a dark side to it as well. She had learned of it one day, when an animal had been hit by a car nearby. Her radar sense had picked up the animal's pain as a wild, red flare. Instinctively, Raymonde had zoomed in on the poor thing to help it. Unfortunately, there could be no help. It was too damaged. Raymonde had soothed the animal's pain, slowing down its aura until it... stopped.

It was done before Raymonde had time to realize it, her subconscious at work again. Trying to do the right thing, Raymonde had learned she could kill with her radar sense. She could induce the slowing down of any aura within her field, by slowing of her own energy around it. With the pressure she could bring to bear, no living thing could resist.

When she and Paul had gone to the church in Rennes-le-Chateau, Raymonde had grasped she could apply her *slowing* ability with a varying amount of force. After discussing it telepathically with Paul, she had used her radar sense to isolate three Americans, two Mossad agents and two agents from the French military in energy *bubbles*, slowing down their auras. As long as she maintained her attention on them, she could keep them feeling as if no time was passing. She was able to control them until fairly distant from the church.

The Church had been the first time she consciously applied her radar sense's projective ability. The hardest part had been concentrating on several targets at the same time but, here too, she had been prepared. Keeping a generalized attention on everything in her expanding domain had trained her focusing ability.

The generalized attention provided an impression of everything around her, just below her consciousness. When something happened, anywhere, her attention was drawn to it in a more active manner. With practice, she had learned to keep the generalized attention going while focusing on other things. Over time, it had taught her to focus on more than one thing at a time.

The only way for people to avoid her influence was to move beyond her sphere of influence or to be taking spores. Spores created a field, isolating those taking them from Raymonde's radar sense. The more they had taken, the less she could affect them. There was also one other way for someone to evade her influence: if they had help... like the American mercenaries who had attacked them.

The mercenaries had somehow anticipated her power, coming equipped with helmets projecting an impenetrable field about their bodies. As long as those helmets were working, she couldn't affect them. She could perceive them clearly however, because the projected fields were much brighter than normal auras.

When the attack started, Raymonde had undergone a series of intense emotions. Anger, fear and indignation had left her determined to protect her home. She had isolated every one of the bright fields in one of her bubbles of energy, surrounding them in a powerful ball of increasing pressure.

Once she started, she never let up. She didn't have to move her body at all, letting her ethereal mind do the work while physically sitting down in her cave. Her mind was suffused with spore energy, giving her an unending supply of power. She used it to keep increasing the pressure on the mercenaries. Their helmets did their job, and the mercenaries continued destroying the caves and everyone in it.

After about thirty minutes, Raymonde had felt a weakening of their fields. It felt artificially projected, almost electric. This was a portable device and its energy source was failing, due in no small part to the load Raymonde was putting them under. She redoubled her pressure, then doubled it again, draining the helmets at an ever faster rate.

The fields kept getting smaller. She kept applying pressure, hammering at them, probing for any weakness. Paul had been stuck in that bizarre foam and could do nothing but watch. She could stand it no more and, in a frenzy of desperation, had increased the pressure a hundredfold, a thousand fold. She would not stop until the helmets failed.

And they did.

No longer able to bear Raymonde's projected pressure, the helmet fields collapsed, all at the same time. Raymonde's energy pressure rushed in, pushing down at each mercenary's aura... until they were gone. Raymonde pulled back on the pressure but it was too late. They were dead.

Raymonde had killed them all.

She had hardly been able to face her friends, knowing what she had done. She had never wanted to hurt anyone. Paul had taken the public blame for it, claiming he had used his powers while stuck in the ball of foam. For once Raymonde had

been happy about their deception. It had allowed her to avoid facing all the stares she would have received. All she could feel was guilt.

Guilt about the pandemic, guilt about her influence over others, guilt about murder.

„Easy there, Raymonde, I can feel you from where I am. It’s not that bad.“

„Paul, you are ever the optimist.“

„It’s not only that and you know it. This is not our fault. We’re playing our part, like everyone else. You didn’t just stop those men, you saved all of us, don’t forget. As for the pandemic, we have to trust there is a reason for it. We just don’t know what it is yet.“

„I know, I know. I just wish we didn’t have to deal with all these issues.“

„What else are we going to do? We can’t run away. We had that choice, in our dream. We could have stayed there, all safe and sound. Neither you nor I could do that. We had to return to find our answers. There is no turning back.“

„Maybe that’s what the dream meant to teach us.“

„That’s possible. No matter what, we must bear this load. I am not only resigned to it, I am driven by it. If life is going to throw all this my way, then I am going to run headlong for it. I feel the guilt too, Raymonde. I have also killed men. Not like you but they ended up dead just the same. I was overwhelmed by it, just like you. However, think on us as immortals. We might still be alive after all is said and done, reflecting forever and a day on what we had or had not done. Now is the time to act, no matter our personal feelings. It is imperative we do everything we can right now to find the answers. Humanity demands it of us.“

„You are right.“

„I’ve got to go. Things are happening over here. Keep your spirits up.“

„I will. I love you, Bye.“

Raymonde returned to her thoughts, uplifted by her mental exchange with Paul, the guilt dispelled by a renewed sense of purpose. The jet was getting ready to land in Tel Aviv. It was time to start focusing on the task at hand.

Even before they landed, Raymonde could sense the general mood was more frantic than it had been, back in Paris. The tenseness was palpable to Raymonde. She sensed how suspicious and worried everyone was. Weapons were everywhere, making the situation worse. Most of the officials were unhappy Paul had not come but the same could not be said of the populace, held at bay by a cordon of armed soldiers.

She had tried to keep a low public profile but everyone knew she was Paul’s chosen life-partner. It had automatically propelled her to a high-profile status, no matter her efforts to the contrary. She was the First Lady to these people and was being accorded a level of respect like few others before.

Raymonde felt shaken by the strong emotions emanating from the multitude of auras within her domain. Their turbulence was disturbing and she had to consciously prevent herself from calming everyone. She hurried through, minimizing her interactions. Ziva and Avi acted as a bodyguard detail, keeping everyone at a safe distance. Raymonde was soon ensconced in the second helicopter, heading to Jerusalem, no more than an hour away.

As the helicopter lifted up into the air, her radar sense expanded again, increasing her reach by yet another increment. It had been happening ever since

the dream. Paul's EM sense and her radar sense were melding into something much more than they had been alone. Raymonde wondered when her growth would end.

Nearing Jerusalem, storm damage was visible everywhere the eye could see. There were thousands of destitute people walking on the roads, carrying everything they owned. Everyone seemed to be heading in the same direction as their helicopter.

„What is going on down there, Ziva?“

„It is an exodus, Miss Raymonde. Like none have seen before. They are all moving towards safety.“

„They're heading towards Jerusalem...“

„It represents a spiritual safety rather than a physical one. They are less worried about their bodies, resigned to the coming end of things.“

„Do they seriously believe that?“

„I cannot see why they wouldn't. These events have long been prophesied, Miss Raymonde. Religion is much more important to us than to those in the West. Everything that has happened so far is fitting in to biblical predictions of the End of Days. Such knowledge changes everything. All babies are dead, to spare them the coming suffering. We have little future left, barely enough time to prepare for the end.“

„If all that is true, why are you here with me?“

„I have chosen to be here. This is my role. To bring you to Jerusalem and to prepare you for what you are going to face.“

„What do you mean?“

Ziva paused before answering, her eyes glued to the devastation and the unending streams of people below.

„I always thought I would be bringing Paul Sirenne to the meeting. I thought he would be the one to save us when the time came. Now, I know I was wrong. Paul Sirenne has other things to do. He will not be our savior here... You will, My Lady!“

Ziva's words sent Raymonde's heart racing.

„How can you know that, Ziva?“

„I cannot and that is the truth of it... Yet, deep inside, I know it without any doubt. You are the one who will be there when the time comes. You are not as all the others, you are different like... like Paul Sirenne is different. You affect people, My Lady, I have seen it.“

Ziva stopped for a moment, afraid she had said too much. A supporting nod from her husband gave her the strength to go on.

„I am sorry, Miss Raymonde. I know you have decided to hide your abilities and we will carry that secret to our graves, should that be your wish. None but the two of us know... I was in the caves that day, when all the Americans died. I could see Paul Sirenne. He did not kill those men, no matter what he later said. Someone else had done it... and it could only be you.“

Ziva braved looking into Raymonde's eyes, seeking forgiveness and confirmation. Raymonde could refuse neither.

„I do not know if I will save anyone as you suggest, Ziva, but I am as Paul is. I am a true immortal.“

Tears streamed down Ziva's face.

„My Lady! I knew it, I always knew it.“

„Please Ziva...“

Ari put his hand on Ziva's arm, comforting her. He was also struggling to maintain his composure.

„These are stressful times, My Lady. There are some things you must know before we land. Time is pressing...“

„Go on, Avi, I'm listening.“

„We do not believe all is *as it seems* as you have said. The Americans organized this meeting and they were most insistent on Paul Sirenne's presence. We believe they have a hidden agenda.“

„Not much of a surprise there, I must say,“ Raymonde noted.

„No, My Lady. You may be aware the whole issue revolves around the Temple of the Mount. You might have been led to believe only Jews and Moslems are involved. You would be wrong. There is a hidden group supporting the Jews in their efforts, following a different goal. This group, who call themselves the Adventationists, believes the end of the world is near. They are anxious for it to arrive, as they believe the end of the world also heralds the return of the Messiah. Adventationists are not opposed to helping the end arrive a little faster, by supporting anything that could help the prophecies come true.“

The mass of people on the roads was getting thicker as they neared Jerusalem. Raymonde saw people travelling across the entire countryside. She had never seen so many people before. It impacted upon her how important the coming meeting might be.

„What are you trying to say, Avi?“

„The presence of Israel itself is due in no small part to this secretive group's efforts. They are also behind the push to rebuild Solomon's temple on the Mount, fomenting further trouble. They know the Moslems will never accept the rebuild. Such a request can only lead to an all-out religious war. The Adventationists do not want the American peace talks to conclude successfully. It is likely they will do anything they can to stop that from happening. We think the American peacekeeping committee may be part of that group. If this is true, we may be facing a more difficult challenge than anticipated. Look, there is the landing pad. Our time has run out.“

The helicopter swooped down, landing deftly on the pad. It was surrounded by a platoon of armed men, guns at the ready. Raymonde stepped down, following Avi and Ziva to a bulletproof limousine. She was once again strongly assailed by the general tenseness around her. Her senses at a heightened level, she expanded her aura, allowing her focus to rise above the limousine.

The city was in a state of absolute pandemonium. Barely repressed hatred and violence was simmering everywhere. The streets leading to the Temple of the Mount were packed with thousands of believers, Jewish, Moslem and Christian alike, rubbing shoulders and bristling with resentment. No one was without a weapon, each with a restless finger on the trigger.

With feelings running as deeply as these, could anything avoid the coming fight? Could Raymonde stop what seemed inevitable? She could make people feel what she wanted but there was a limit to her reach. She returned to her body, allowing herself to be led to the Haj Conference Center.

Raymonde was briefly introduced to a series of officials from a variety of concerned groups, the last of which were the Americans. Something was wrong with them. They were protected by artificial fields. The fields were more compact and tighter than before, probably a second generation device.

Raymonde could not see any helmets and assumed the devices were hidden somewhere on their bodies. No matter where they were, they prevented Raymonde from affecting any of them. She was unable to perceive their intent.

She didn't like it, not one bit.

They were up to something. Last time, the caves had almost been destroyed. What did they have planned for an encore?

She decided to be the first to act. She would not sit idly by and let them set their trap, whatever it may be. She tightened her projected aura until it covered only the assembly hall and, sending messages of peace and conciliation to those not protected by electric fields. She made her projections strong, knowing the people affected would be incapable of resisting her impulses.

With the Americans, she did a different thing. She thickened her field around them, building it up heavily, then, slowed everything down within it. The effect was a powerful deadening of the space between the Americans and the rest of the assembly. Sound was slowed going through, creating an odd delay between them and everyone else. She could not truly affect the Americans but she could make it very hard for them to be heard. She might be able to collapse their projected fields but she might kill them at the same time, something she did not wish to do.

Her radar sense was having a strong effect on the rest of the officials. None could keep their eyes off Raymonde, each enveloped in a bubble of absolute peace and serenity. The tense mood had vanished. The Americans tried to begin their scheduled introduction but Raymonde beat them to it, standing up and walking to the center of the room. When she spoke, she pushed out reams of energy, making her words irresistible.

„Paul Sirenne was invited to come here. He could not and asked me, his consort, to come in his stead. It is neither his goal, nor mine, to involve ourselves in your affairs. However, arriving here, I am compelled to say a few words. All of you have come here with contradictory beliefs, placing you at odds with each other. Yet these beliefs, at their core, are about the same thing, the same person, the Messiah. Each of your religions has taken the same bible, the same God, claiming he was yours alone. You chose the same place for this home, on the Mount, bringing about this inevitable confrontation.“

She increased the radiance around her, lighting up each aura in the room like a candlestick. She could feel the Americans fighting the slowness around them but, so far, the induced isolation still had them befuddled. They found it impossible to get anyone's attention. It was riveted on Raymonde. She looked at everyone in the room in turn, making sure each felt as if she was speaking directly to them.

„You have forgotten the core of your beliefs. Your actions have brought shame to your home. Recognize the true meaning of peace and love... of respect and acceptance. Look upon your book of Laws and reflect upon it anew. Can any here say they have observed it as they should? Can you say that to me?“

She blasted them with a massive rush of energy, creating an overwhelming impact to her speech. Tears were streaming down faces, eyes were filled with guilt

and sorrow, each person forced to re-examine their life. One after another, the eyes lowered in shame.

Except for the Americans.

One of them, a general, seriously struggling, had managed to reach a large box sitting behind them, and, in a last burst of determination, activated it. A powerful EM field exploded outward, flooding the assembly hall with a strong dampening effect. Raymonde's aura was compressed into her body, her focus point thrown into her physical mind with a jarring shock, unprepared for the brutal assault on her senses. The American general who had activated the EM field generator wasted no time, jumping to the fore and taking over the conference.

„Listen to me, all of you. She is not who she says she is. She has you all fooled. So does Paul Sirenne. And we have proof... If you will only listen to us. We know what she is doing and how she is doing it..“

The general moved forward, walking around to the front of his table.

„You all know me. I have spent my life representing my country, right here in the Middle East. You know I understand and respect your concerns. Give me this one chance to explain what we know about Paul Sirenne and his consort... About the two immortals... That's right, she's one too, the EM fields around her confirm it without a doubt... This meeting is not what you think it is about. She is controlling you all... or, at least she was, until I managed to turn on that machine behind me. It is the only thing stopping her from controlling you this very instant. Immortals have very strong EM fields and they can use them to control things... to control people, like you and me. They are not human anymore, if they ever were. Immortality is not a godsend, like you all seem to believe. It is a pestilence, brought to destroy us all. A pestilence like the pandemic we have suffered so much from... The pandemic which has killed every one of our children, dooming our race to an unnatural extinction.“

Raymonde was rallying back, pushing her aura out, forcing it to expand. It was difficult to do but she had an unending amount of energy at her disposal. She knew how to channel it, directing all of it towards that box. The American officer knew his time was limited and he talked faster.

„You all know I was part of the international committee investigating the origins of the pandemic. We have now finished our work and the conclusions are clear. The pandemic originates from the caves of Etretat, the very home of the Immortals. Now you can understand why we must stop them, before it is too late. They are the ones who have brought about the end of mankind. They are not our Saviors, they are our Destroyers...“

„NOOO!“

Raymonde had screamed out in shock, the anguished sound striking at the heart of everyone there. The general looked at Raymonde with disdain.

„That's right, it came from your caves, you monster. We knew all along something genetic was at work with the virus. It was the common cold, or it should have been. Something had changed it, exactly like you were changed, by the spores from the caves. The spores are what made the common cold become a super-virus, able to kill all our children.“

„It can't be right...“ she refuted with a whisper, shaking her head.

„You can feel our auras, right? ... At least that's what the experts tell me. Listen, I'm going to take a chance, so don't kill me on the spot all right?“ stated the general with bravado. He switched off his personal protective shield. „There, you should be able to read my aura. You'll know I'm telling the truth.“

She looked at him and saw that he was.

She almost fainted from horror when she realized the extent of what she and Paul had wrought upon the world. She felt an intense, dizzying pressure. It kept growing in her, leaking outwards inexorably, pushing against the EM generator, pushing against the truth in her mind.

Unable to bear the immense load, the generator exploded, showering the American team in a flood of sparks, several men jumping out of the way to avoid injury. The general never moved, keeping his attention on the collapsing Raymonde, the look of victory reflected in his eyes.

„Look... Proof of her powers... She has blown our generator. She will be able to affect us all again... Fight against her now, before it is too late. We must protect ourselves.“

The officials, aghast at the general's revelation, were overtaken by the desire for revenge, revenge for all the dead children. Raymonde simply stood there, looking at the floor, trying to find something to hold on to, lost in a well of depression, the knowledge of her role too horrible to deal with. Soldiers burst into the assembly, aiming their machine guns at Raymonde.

„Shoot her, shoot her now!“ screamed the general, diving out of the way and re-activating his portable field generator. Raymonde made no move to protect herself and the soldiers opened fire.

Chapter 6

Chaos Building.

I was alone in the caves. The silence was overwhelming. For months now, I had been used to seeing it filled with people and noise. Despite being internally connected with Raymonde, she was physically gone. Briar and O'Flanagan had both vanished. Coulter was gone to Paris to meet with the Watchers and work with them.

While Raymonde headed off to Israel to prevent World War Three, I was tasked with solving the problem of the four books. All along, my goal had been to figure out their mystery. I had been prevented from this by a myriad of demands on my time, from an unending variety of sources. Even now, time was still a precious commodity. The Abbey leader, Father Plantagenet, had asked to meet, indicating there was some urgency.

The increase in brightness in the caves had continued unabated, having reached a point where normal humans would be blinded by it. I had taken to walking around with my eyes closed, giving them a rest from the overdose. I could navigate through the tunnels with an internal mind-map of the caves.

Since the dream, my EM ability had been melding with Raymonde's radar sense. I could now project a huge field, approximately half the size of the caves. I was able to perceive and manipulate all EM waves within it. Using the radar aspect, I could detect material objects in the field, for the first time. They appeared wispy and translucent, unlike the bright glow of living creatures.

This was nothing like visual perception. It was a new way of seeing, using disturbances in the electromagnetic field projected over and through my environment. It gave me an all-encompassing, three dimensional perception of the world. No one could sneak up on me with this sense.

I could move my consciousness anywhere within the expanded field and zoom in on any object, focusing on the smallest area with incredible detail. I could go down to the atomic scale, although at that level, the object tended to become unimportant. Thinking about the books again, I remembered I had found a difference between them, by zooming in past the molecular level.

My photographic memory called up the moment and I replayed it, remembering everything with uncanny vividness. Raymonde had been there helping me. We focused on the books together. Zooming in on a specific spot in one book and using my projected memory of the other three, I had found an area differently shaped in each book.

By mentally arranging the four shapes over one another, I had formed a hollow, shaped like a letter, perhaps from an ancient language. The hollow had inexplicably radiated light. Only someone with my EM sense could have noticed the hollow. It was buried within the molecules of paper, impossible to find through normal means. If Sauniere had done this, it was a work of genius.

A ping from my techno-glasses alerted me to an incoming call. It was Coulter.

„Hey Paul, how's it going?“

„Good. I'm heading out from the caves right now. Plantagenet called me and wants to meet. Says it's urgent. What's happening with the Watchers?“

„Aww, Paul, it's really bad here. Paris is being drowned by that storm. The amount of rain coming down is unbelievable... and frightening. From my viewpoint, if this isn't the end of the world, then I don't know what is. They've begun evacuating already and I'm going to be joining the effort pretty soon. With my strength, I should be able to help a lot of people.“

„Be careful not to overextend yourself.“

„Hey, with those spores in me, I've got energy to spare... and time. I don't even need to sleep anymore. It's great...“

„Yeah, well, that pales after a while, let me tell you.“

„I guess, but I'm not there yet. I've been just about everywhere these past two days. Anyway, let's go on to more serious things. The Watchers are the only worldwide organization who has been able to get a true picture of the real state of affairs... and the willingness to tell it as it is... It's not pretty, Paul. Something's happening out there, something real bad.“

„Hey, take it easy, Fabian.“

„I can't. Hardly anyone knows how bad it is, except for us right now... I can't help feeling that's a good thing. If the world knew what we do, they'd be freaking worse than they are already. Knowledge like this can't help them... Sorry, Paul, you're right. I've got to pull myself together... Listen, this is what the Watchers

have been able to piece together using reports from their chapters all over the world. The first thing is the disappearances.“

„Disappearances?“

„Yes. They're happening everywhere, men and women alike. A lot of them. No one's really sure who's responsible. It's possible it's politically motivated but really, it doesn't seem likely. No evidence of anyone kidnapping those poor people has been uncovered to date. It seems like they are just vanishing into thin air. We're still working on it but I've got to tell you, it has everyone spooked.“

„I don't blame them. What do you think is causing it, Fabian?“

„I don't have a clue, wish I did, but it's happening at an accelerating rate, if the numbers coming in mean anything. Hopefully, someone's going to see a disappearance in progress. Maybe then, we'll get a clue... And that's the least of our problems, really. It seems the tectonic plates have begun moving at an accelerated rate. It's what's responsible for the destabilized weather patterns and the increased earthquake activity. A night or two ago, everything accelerated even more, as if it had reached a turning point. The Watchers have confirmed most governments are working together to keep that bit of info suppressed. They can't explain it. It's as if whatever was keeping the plates stable is unraveling.“

„Is the earth's core heating up?“

„Yes, it is. How did you know that?“

„I've felt something about the EM waves coming from the earth's field... The way they're moving... It's hard to explain.“

„I can't believe you can feel magnetic waves. Why haven't I felt EM stuff yet?“

„Perhaps you need to give it time but I think it's because I'm a genetic immortal. Taking the spores isn't enough. I'm not sure what's happening to me, so advice is difficult to give.“

„I guess... Anyway, due to the ecological disasters, the countries are scrambling for survival. Resources are vanishing and tension is mounting. It's not just the problem in the Middle East, where Raymonde has gone. It's happening everywhere... and people aren't thinking clearly anymore. Riots are rampant, murders commonplace. Martial law is now the rule, rather than the exception. The need for food and survival is changing all values and morals are just about gone. Law and order is going to collapse, if it hasn't already.“

„I hadn't realized how bad it was.“

„You've been hiding out in those caves... but don't blame yourself. This stuff is happening so fast, no one could have anticipated it. It's as if the power's been turned off. Everything seems to be unwinding and order is fading to chaos. By this time next week, most of the people in the world will have died and civilization as we know it, will have ended.“

Coulter burst out laughing. I found his reaction odd.

„Yes, I know, seems odd to laugh, but, in the middle of all this, I've found love. I'm actually happy, despite the circumstances.“

„Are you telling me that...“

„...Yep...You remember the girl I met online, from Ottawa?“

„Yes. You told me you liked her.“

„Well... I might have understated that a bit... Anyway, as soon as she knew I was coming to Paris, she hopped on the last intercontinental flight to leave Canada and made her way here, just to be with me.“

„She sounds like a determined woman.“

„Is she ever. Raymonde has nothing on her... Anyway, I knew she was my soul-mate the minute she walked into the room. Actually, I should tell you, I gave her some of my spores... I hope that's okay?“

„Why shouldn't it be, Fabian? I trust your judgment.“

„Good, I'm glad. I had to do it... I couldn't very well stop taking them myself, not right now, and I couldn't take the chance that she'd get hurt... Plus, it allows us to give up our food rations for someone who might need them more, since we don't eat anymore.“

„You don't have to justify yourself. I'm happy for you. I just wish it could be under better circumstances.“

„You just keep your wishes for your own tasks. Paul. Solve the riddle of those books and find the answers we need. I can only hope they will save us before it's too late.“

„I'm working on it. I think I have a lead on what to do. Anyway, I've just gotten out of the caves and I can see Plantagenet surrounded by his bodyguards, at the far end of the parking lot. I'm going to have to let you go. You take care of yourself and keep that love of yours safe.“

„You know I will. Thanks for everything Paul. Catch you later.“

Weissmuller Recollections, 1984-1985

I had located Paul Sirenne's bookstore. It was in the glebe section of town, on Bank Street. It seemed a nice shop, from what I could see from the outside, devoted to antique books with a focus on philosophy and spirituality. I hadn't gone in yet, not wanting to give anyone sight of me until I was ready. I had managed to catch a glance of Sirenne, finding him to be a rather average looking person.

I started my usual process, of investigating my prey while remaining completely in the shadows. I broke into his home several times, looking for information. On my third break-in, I found the *Hollow Needle* book, secreted inside the man's safe. It confirmed he was indeed Lindon's grandson and part of the Abbey's master plan.

Yet, to all outward appearances, Sirenne was not involved in anything but the mundane chores of daily life. If there was a secret schedule to keep, he was not in any hurry to go about it. I left the book in the safe and retreated to my shadows to reflect on my latest lead. I now knew where all four books were. Sirenne had to be the key to the Abbey's plans. Otherwise, they would not have called it Project Sirenne.

If ever there was a chance for me to get involved in their machinations, this was it. Leblanc had done it before me and I was going to do it again. However, now was not the time. I had to think much more about this one. My plan

would have to be perfect. At some point, it was likely Sirenne or rather, his descendant, would be sent to bring the four books together again.

Anything after that point was pure conjecture on my part. Leblanc's coded message indicated one had to find a message hidden within the books which was then to be taken to some lost caves. I was convinced they were located deep below the cliff, where only an immortal could go. What had to be done to get there would become clear only if all steps of the plan were completed.

The Abbey's plans were aimed at the Greyman. I had yet to figure out how he could possibly be killed. He seemed far stronger than I and quite a bit cleverer as well. If the Abbey had figured out a way to stop him, I would be well advised to take advantage of it.

While I was deliberating on the proper course of action, I continued shadowing Sirenne, getting to know more about him. One night, I witnessed a very interesting scene. The occasion was the young boy's ninth birthday. He was also named Paul Sirenne, exactly like his father. They were throwing a small party. I watched the whole thing from the back window.

At the end of the night, just before bedtime, Sirenne pulled his son aside for one final gift. To my surprise, it was the book. Sirenne was giving him the special copy of the *Hollow Needle*. He intended his son to be part of the Abbey's plans. I calculated how much time was left to the Abbey's plans and compared it to the young Sirenne's age. The plan would come to fruition when the boy was in his mid-thirties, an acceptable age for a man to embark on an important mission. Young enough to still have energy, old enough to have some maturity.

I concluded Sirenne's son was the one chosen for the Abbey's plans. He was the one I would have to get closer to, in time. At this point, he was still much too young. That was fine; it gave me time to plan. It was difficult to take on a skin for much more than ten years. Longer than that and people would notice I wasn't aging. No matter what make-up I used, some things couldn't be disguised.

I wouldn't select a skin for a while yet. It was too early in the game. This skin would have to be my ultimate effort. I would have to be perfect at it, not only to gain Sirenne's confidence but to fool the ever-present Abbey. Luckily, I knew all the tricks. This was what I had been made for. I would begin looking for skin candidates in a few years.

In order to take over the Abbey's plans, I would have to create some additional disturbance, to allow me to slip by unnoticed. I thought I had found just the right thing. Inspector Norton from Interpol, with his sister Helena Norton and his friend Horatio Natamos.

I had found the coincidence of those two having the same initials as the title of the books I was chasing, as exceedingly curious. It had finally come to me that this had been placed right in front of my nose, specifically for my use. Inspector Norton was going to become a key pawn in my plans. His fascination with my ancient murders would be his undoing and he would be my decoy. I would point him right at Sirenne and the Abbey's plans. I would never be noticed.

This was something I could set in motion right away, so I returned to Europe on the next flight. I meditated all the while, looking at my plan from every aspect to determine if there was any flaw. I could see none. I knew how to motivate people from long experience with the use of fear and pain. I knew I would have to perform several experiments, which my numbness found dangerously exciting but they would be in the context of my goals. I felt I would be able to keep myself under control.

My cravings were still there, just under the surface, held at bay only by the knowledge of my true Purpose and by unflagging dedication to self-control. I had no choice anymore. Unless I wanted to lose control of everything, I had to keep going with my plans. I had to kill Norton's sister and his friend Natamos, to focus his attention on the letters HN. I couldn't even use Vampirism as a method. It would be simply too tell-tale.

No, these would have to be perfect experiments, done to both prod Norton and to isolate him from his peers. He would end up alone with his doubts and beliefs. It should be easy to mold him after that.

Greyman Chronicles

Norton Vows Vengeance.

„Chief? Got a minute?“

„Oh Norton... uhm... Yeah. Come on in and close the door behind you.“

Norton did as he was told, biding his time. He was livid.

„What's this I hear about Jordan taking my sister's case?“

„Listen Norton, you know I had to do it. She was killed in your apartment... while you were sleeping, for chrissakes. You know I can't assign you to the case, no matter what you want.“

„I don't care about the damn rules, Chief. That was my sister...“

„And what's this Jordan said about you being a light sleeper? How could you sleep through what... what was done to Helen? ... At least the coroner says most of that stuff was done after she died. He doesn't think she suffered much.“

Norton's shoulders started shaking and he tried to wipe away a few unbidden tears, unable to answer the Chief's question, just like when Jordan had first asked the question. He should have woken up. He couldn't explain anything.

„Christ, look at yourself, Norton. You can't even stand up. You're in no fit shape to take on a case, let alone come in to work. Take a few days off... That's an order, you hear me? ... When you get yourself back on your feet, we can talk about what you can work on.“

„Come on, Chief, I'll be fine. I just need...“

„...A few days off. Now go, and I don't want to see you back here... and don't you dare pester Jordan. Let him do his work. You say you want to help,

well you know you'll be useless the way you are right now. I know you're hurting. Helena was a good woman. She didn't deserve this."

Again, the Chief's words brought unwanted images to Norton. He wished he had never seen her like that. It tainted every memory he had of her, to have seen her so mutilated. He exploded into tears, feeling ashamed to be doing it in front of his boss.

"Aww, Norton... It's going to be okay... You just got to give it some time. Listen, you go on home and get yourself some sleep. You want me to get Connors to drive you?"

Norton pulled himself together, wiping the tears off his face with his sleeve.

"No Chief, thanks... I can drive on my own. I'll do as you say. I'll get out of here. I can't have the others seeing me like this. But, I swear to you, I'm not letting this thing go. Whoever did this is going to have to pay..."

"...And they will... There's plenty of time for that. For now, go home..."

"You keep saying that but I can't go home, Chief, it's a goddamn crime scene," cried Norton out loud. "...Sorry... I didn't mean that..."

"You know I meant the hotel room they assigned you. Just go get some rest, Norton."

"Fine. I'll be back soon, Chief."

Norton ran out of the office, his eyes blank, barely taking anything in. His mind was nearly unhinged and he was trying to find anything to hang onto. The only thing he could think of was Natamos but his friend wasn't answering his phone. There was no way that Norton was going to go to a hotel room and sleep, not when there were things to do.

He decided to drive straight to Rome and catch Natamos at his place. He was probably still sleeping. Norton used the driving time to try and put things in order. He had woken up groggy, as if he'd been drugged. He could hardly remember anything from the night before. He'd found his shoes covered in mud, as if he'd been out but he knew he'd had no plans.

His senses had been on high alert, despite the grogginess, and he had gone out into the living room and stood there, trying to understand what was alerting him. He'd called out to Helena but had gotten no answer. She should have been up by then. Feeling cold dread in the pit of his stomach, he had run into her room but was stopped on the doorstep, frozen by the sight of the carnage within.

Her body had been ripped into pieces and left in a mound on the bed.

His world had collapsed. Since his wife had left him, Helena had been the only stable constant in his life. Her sickness had drawn them closer than they had been in youth and he had begun finding life almost bearable, knowing she was around, needing to be cared for. Now she was gone and he didn't have a clue why.

His foot pressed down on the accelerator and the car jumped forward. He needed to get to Natamos' house. The drive seemed endless. When he got there, he couldn't help noting that someone else had been here before. There were footprints in the mud leading up to Natamos' house. Comparing them to his muddy shoes, Norton found them an exact match.

The pit in his stomach returned and his heart began pounding. Had he been here last night? Why couldn't he remember anything? He ran forward and hammered on the door, his own head thumping in echo, screaming out Natamos' name. Silence answered him. With desperation, Norton scrambled back down the steps and kicked the plant pot over, where the spare key was hidden. He ran back to the door with it, and rammed the key in with shaking hands.

As soon as he opened the door, his nostrils detected the coppery odor of blood. Shaking his head, trying to dispel the reality imposing itself, he hurried upstairs to Natamos' bedroom. He could see the muddy shoe trail leading up to it, his muddy shoes. What was going on? Reaching the bedroom, he pushed the door open slowly, almost unwilling to go the last few steps. Deep down, he knew what he would find.

Five minutes later, Norton came back down, and sat briefly on the edge of a chair, trying to calm his raging thoughts. Someone had killed Natamos and his sister, the same someone, the same way. Whoever it was had drugged Norton and used his shoes. This couldn't be accidental. This was done by someone who had an agenda, probably against Norton himself, for some unknown reason. The worst thing was that the killer had left obvious clues pointing directly to Norton.

He knew Jordan would pick up on those, when they connected the two murders together. It was just a question of time. Tons of people knew Natamos was Norton's friend. Norton realized he had to distance himself from this murder. He couldn't afford to become a suspect. Not now. It would make the investigation of his sister's murder too difficult.

On the spot, his mind unable to process things clearly, Norton decided to hide any evidence of his presence here and began a frenzied cleanup. Later, on the way home, he threw away the muddy shoes in a lake on the side of the highway. Once safely ensconced in his bed in the hotel room, he tried to sleep but it did not come easy. He had crossed the line this night, hiding evidence in a murder case. There was no going back for Norton. He had no one to stop him, no one to argue him out of his foolish actions. He was all alone now and he had only one reason left to live.

To find the killer who had done this. To find him and kill him.

Paul Sirenne

Chapter 7

Plantagenet's Instructions.

While walking towards Father Plantagenet, he noticed me and approached, signaling his bodyguards to stay where they were. His progress was slow,

indicating his age. He was gasping for breath when he reached me. We were near a park bench, so I helped him to it and we sat down.

„Thank you Mr Sirenne. You are thoughtful as always. These old bones of mine don't have much endurance left in them. My time is coming soon, I fear.“

„I could give you some spores if you wanted.“

„No, Mr Sirenne, I have forsaken the use of the spores, as have all the Abbey members. It is a prerequisite to joining...“

„...And yet you maneuvered me into getting exposed to them,“ I commented, curious to see his reaction.

„Yes... and I am sorry for that but it was necessary. Our plan dictated it.“

„I only have your word to take for it. You have yet to explain your actions.“

„It has always been critical to hold our cards close to the chest, particularly during these trying times. It is why I called you here. The recent events in the world are confirming our plans were not a waste of time. The end of the world is coming, Mr Sirenne...“

„What? No, I'm sure there is still...“

„Come now, Mr Sirenne, you must open your eyes. The events happening today were foretold long ago. There is nothing you or I can do to prevent them. However, there is something we can do to the monster that caused it, the one whose caves you inhabit.“

„You are talking about the Greyman?“

„Yes, the Greyman.“

„Who is he, Father?“

„He is the Devil on earth, Mr Sirenne, the Devil on Earth... and you were put here to help us defeat him. Our world may be ending but he will not survive to enjoy his anticipated rewards. The Abbey has been hunting him for a thousand years, trying to stop him from bringing the world to the brink of total destruction. Despite all the Abbey's efforts, I and my predecessors have failed in our endeavor. There was one glint of sunlight in the dark clouds surrounding us. One hundred years ago, Berenger Sauniere had a vision about the days to come, these days we are experiencing right now. With his God-given help, the Abbey was able to put in place one final, desperate plan to stop the one who had evaded us with such ease through eternity... and you are the one who will make it all happen.“

„If he is truly who you say he is, how can you expect me, despite my new abilities, to defeat him?“

„Oh no, Mr Sirenne, you are not his destroyer. No, you will lead us to the one who will take on that task.“

„What? ... But, I thought...“

„...As you previously mentioned, Mr Sirenne, the Greyman is indeed too powerful for anyone like you or I. A very special person is needed for the task. To date, we have never been able to find this... Other... in time. Thanks to Sauniere's incredible vision, we now have a way to find the Other... but for that, we need you to find the One Book.“

„I don't have it yet... I'm still working on it.“

„You must work faster, Mr Sirenne. Time is of the essence. We need the book to find the Other, or rather you do. The process of recovering the One from the Four should tell you where the Other is located. The One Book must be recovered,

before it becomes too late. We cannot... no, the world cannot wait much longer. Sauniere was adamant you would achieve the goals we have set. Was he wrong? Have all our plans been for naught?“

„No, Father, they have not. I am sure I can do it. I found something last time I looked. It may be the answer.“

„I truly hope so, my son. It is time for a miracle on this poor Earth of ours. We all need it.“

„Why do you think it is so important?“

„When our world ends, a few humans will survive, enough to begin mankind’s adventure anew... but so will the Greyman, haunting our steps through eternity. Not only does he seek to destroy us and our world, he keeps doing it, binding us in an unimaginable cycle of terror, pain and death.“

„If we survive there is some hope.“

„Yes... Hope... An important concept these days, something for humanity to hang on to... but is it enough? Does hope save us in our time of need? No, Mr Sirene, the time for mere hope has been and gone, swallowed by the Greyman and his evil goals. What we need is not hope but action... and it was Sauniere, blessed Sauniere, who showed us the way... Through him, God has given us a path which may end the Greyman’s dominion over us and free mankind from his endless tyranny...“

„You mean to stop the cycle...“

„We do... We will no longer play the Greyman’s game, no longer dance to his tune. If Sauniere’s vision is right, we will stop the Greyman, allowing our next cycle to be liberated from Evil... Perhaps it will herald our long-awaited return to the garden of Eden, the serpent’s poison gone from our veins.“

„What do you mean *Perhaps?* ... Aren’t you sure?“

Plantagenet allowed himself a slight smile.

No one is sure of anything, least of all me. I suspect certainty can only be found within God himself. Despite Sauniere’s visions, despite all that life has taught me, I must admit to being a Doubting Thomas. We have been so long under the Greyman’s yoke that I can only see our plan, this final, crazy attempt, as our one last chance to succeed... Our one way through the maze confronting us.“

„Yet you go on.“

„...Because God gave us one thing above all others... Choice... He gave us choice... and in that lies our potential salvation. The good Book says *God saves those who save themselves*. and those words have been my lighthouse. It is up to each and every one of us to choose to fight, to continue seeking the answers despite incredible adversity... and perhaps... if enough of us work together, we can vanquish the unconquerable... If we want to return to heaven, we are the ones who will have to get there. None of us will succeed by sitting in our chairs and closing our eyes. If we want freedom from Evil, we must be willing to sacrifice everything to attain it.“

„How does the One Book fit into all this?“

„God wanted to help us find the way out. That is why he created the One Book and gave it to Moses for safekeeping. If we ever became ready, we would be able to use it to free ourselves from the oppression we have been placed under. The Abbey retrieved it from Solomon’s Temple before the Moslems could lay their hands on it.“

We kept it safe for centuries, until the Greyman tried to get his hands on it again. We managed to hide it in North America for another two centuries but it was found again by Christopher Columbus. He gave it to us in exchange for his life, a wise choice on his part.“

„Columbus? I never heard about that part.“

„No, the Abbey has always been good at keeping things quiet.“

„I'll say.“

„We managed to keep it hidden for the next three hundred years by constantly moving it around. No matter where we hid it, the Greyman kept getting closer. It was Sauniere who saved us, by figuring out how to hide it within the Four Books, until we were ready to bring it back.“

„How did Sauniere do it?“

„It was a miracle from God, a heaven-sent message telling Sauniere exactly what to do. He did it, knowing the effort would kill him in the end, the exertion too much for any mortal man.“

„What about me. Won't it kill me too?“

„You are no longer mortal, Mr Sirenne. Sauniere also saw this in his vision. He understood the true nature of the spores and divined their genetic effect. He knew you would be changed and that the change would give you an inner strength, powerful enough to survive the process of returning the One Book to us. Sauniere told us the act of returning the Book would teach you all of the answers within it at the same time, giving you the information we have been seeking: the location of the Other.“

„Who is the Other?“

„I can speak no more on that subject, save to say it is the Greyman's only true enemy. Only the Other can destroy the Greyman, of this we are certain. It was central to Sauniere's vision. The Other must be found and only you, Mr Sirenne, can do that. Now go and do what you were prepared for. Go and find the One Book and return it to me. I will be sitting here, waiting for you. With the One Book in hand, we will have our answers. We are so close. Do not fail us now. The fate of all Mankind rests on your shoulders.“

„Father, I don't have a clue how long it will...“

„I have faith you will succeed exactly when you need to. When you are done, return to me. I will be waiting.“

After that, he would speak no more. Once again, the Abbey leader had been parsimonious with his words, choosing to reveal only what he felt was necessary. Despite my frustration I understood the necessity. If he told me everything, I would not have to strive for the answers. They would be meaningless without the actual process of research and contemplation necessary to find them on my own.

I could only hope I would be able to do it in time. I had a feeling Plantagenet was right about one thing. We were running out of time. I had to stop wasting it.

I was going back into those caves and would not come back out without achieving success.

Weissmuller Recollections, 1986-2004

Following the successful startup of the Norton phase, I remained in Europe for a few more years, hunting out other people with the initials HN. After I had accumulated a good list, I developed a variety of methods to get these people in contact with Inspector Norton.

I reveled in coming up with approaches, bordering on obsessive deviousness. To Norton, it must have seemed as if HN people were coming out of the woodwork, each with a seemingly valid reason for being in touch with him. Once introduced, I would wait a specific period of time, thirty-seven days. There was no reason for this number, apart that it would be something Norton would notice. I hoped he would drive himself mad trying to explain it.

After thirty-seven days, I would invade Norton's home and drug him with a soporific gas, ensuring Norton would never be able to account for his own movements. I would go collect my latest HN offering and dispose of them. I varied the disposal methods to ensure the murders would seem like unrelated events to anyone but Norton. I always left some subtle piece of evidence which might lead a clever investigator to suspect Norton. I selected items from Norton's home as my weapon of choice, returning the murder weapons to his home, covered in evidence.

I had to keep at it for a while, to ensure that Norton was well and truly obsessed with the letters HN. He knew that someone looking hard enough could be led to him. As a result, he was forced to keep quiet about what he knew, isolating him further from his peers. Of course, Norton had never been one to keep quiet and, inevitably, it resulted in explosive confrontations with his superiors, leaving them seriously wondering about his sanity. A satisfying outcome to a well laid plan.

Eventually, it was time to return to Canada. I had, at last, found an appropriate skin for my use. I had ten years left before the Abbey began their final phase. The process of finding my new skin had been terribly tedious. I had needed someone who resembled me closely. I did not want to resort to make-up as I had on prior occasions. There was simply too much chance of being caught.

As well, I wanted an archeologist or a historian. Not an absolute necessity but I was quite knowledgeable in both those fields and could easily pass myself off as either one. The additional criteria had made the search harder but the results were worth it. The one I eventually settled on had degrees in both fields. He had been in Africa for a period of seven years, on a joint French-German archeological expedition, examining the oldest known homo-sapiens site in Olduvai Gorge. His family was from good German stock, which was why our features were so similar. I had twice taken a trip to Africa, seeing his features harden over the years, until he had literally become my double, which, unfortunately for him, sealed his fate.

He was planning to vacation briefly in Germany, before going to Ottawa, Canada, where he had been offered a lucrative position at the local University. This had been my doing. I intercepted him in Germany, two days before he was due to take his flight to Canada.

I spent those two days productively, forcing the man to reveal his personal information and habits, using those methods which I was so fond of. I hadn't experimented with anyone for years, apart from the Norton things. Those had been a necessary part of the plan and not my favorite type of experiment. It wasn't the same thing. This was the first time where my plans coincided with my past habits, of kidnapping a specialist and forcing him to give me a lesson. It brought me back to those innocent times, working with Hitler. I made this the best session I could, knowing it was likely to be the last one for a very long while. I even permitted myself to end the experiment with my beloved Vampirism.

I did it slowly, trying to drink in his very soul and looking deep into his eyes. I saw him leave exactly as I felt his heart go, deep inside. It was perfect. In that moment, I knew I would succeed. This had been a sign.

When he got on his plane to Ottawa, I was him and he was gone.

It was the perfect setup. He was new to Ottawa, so if I deviated in his personal habits slightly, no one would know any better. I intended to change his character over time, until it suited my plans better. Travel to a new continent would simply make it easier. After settling in, I wandered into Sirenne's bookshop to make his acquaintance. His son worked there, obviously being geared to eventually take over the family business.

I walked over to the counter, using my well-rehearsed line:

„Hello... I was wondering if you could show me to your section on archeology... and perhaps history? I've just started at the University of Ottawa and their library is horrendously under-stocked. I need to add some new tomes, to bring it into the present century, at least.“

The man smiled as his son approached.

„Certainly. If you would follow me, I'm positive we can find something to your liking. By the way, I'm the proprietor. My name is Paul Sirenne.“

„Glad to meet you. My name is Briar, Jonathan Briar.“

* * * * *

My skin's age was supposed to be a generic fifty, making me more of a contemporary with the father. It would be easy to develop a friendship with him and, through him, I would reach the son. I returned to their bookstore often, using every opportunity to involve Sirenne senior in discussions, always seeking to develop common interests. Over time, these talks ended up around a coffee table and our relationship deepened. I grew closer to his family.

The man had a habit of playing with codes. He was an expert code-breaker, able to solve the most complex puzzles in minutes. He was equally skilled in logic or physical brainteasers. He worked at developing long challenges, consisting of a series of linked problems, a mystery or code, whose solution would lead to the next step. When he had finished preparing such a series, he would present it as a game, for his son. He called these puzzle expeditions *Hunts*.

I came to understand this odd habit was not obsession but, rather, training. The father was engaged in a subtle process with the son, preparing

his mind to become skilled at figuring out codes. The boy had also received specialized private schooling, ensuring a thoroughly rounded education. The school he had gone to was linked to the Abbey. It all made sense, when seen from my unique perspective. Sirenne was getting his son ready for the Abbey's plans.

The whole thing remained hidden under the surface, never talked about, never alluded to. Still, the boy had received one of the four books, although he was unaware of its true value. More evidence of the Abbey's obsessive need for secrecy.

I accompanied the two on many of their *Hunts*, helping the son figure out several challenges. I found the young man quite intelligent, extremely so, in fact, well above the standard range. He had the ability to find connections between things which seemed unrelated. It made the *Hunts* interesting, teaching me the son's strengths while revealing the father's goals.

I spent the next ten years ensconcing myself into Jonathan Briar's life, always working myself closer to the Sirenne family. However, I did have one problem. Sirenne's wife. She was a meddling fool and had not liked me from the beginning. Some people were like that, particularly women. Nothing I did could allay the unease they felt in my presence. I usually killed them quickly to solve the problem and found no reason to change my attitude in this instance.

A benefit of killing her would be that both the father and the son would draw closer to me, if I was properly positioned in their milieu. There was also a chance I might glean some information from inadvertent admissions during their times of sorrow. All in all, I could see no reason not to proceed. I only had to exercise one caution.

It had to look accidental. There could be no hint of wrongdoing in this death, no evidence of my involvement. A simple thing to achieve, with my years of experience. I took my time planning her elimination, meditating heavily all the while to control the inevitable cravings.

To all, she died in a car accident. I was with both Sirens when they received the news, an amazing feat of timing. I took full advantage of the opportunity, providing timely support wherever possible. I was invited to almost all of their private functions after that. Within a mere month, I had become as a brother to Sirenne senior and a mentor to Sirenne junior, my plan a complete success.

All along, I maintained a vigilant watch on the two of them, always looking for evidence of the Abbey's involvement. I knew the Abbey was ferreting around. I had seen some of their monks involved in the investigation of the mother's death. I was even interviewed by one of them. That had been quite the exciting moment. It had gone off without a hitch. They had investigated my background, finding it above reproach. They never suspected for a moment the person in front of them might not be completely real.

I had not only passed a close examination, I had become accepted as a valued friend of the family by the Abbey itself, an unanticipated benefit of the mother's death. The path was clear to proceed with the next phase of my plan. I was going to build a wedge between father and son.

After his wife's death, the father had lost all interest in the family business, giving it to Sirenne junior and retreating from general involvement in regular life. After about six months, the father met another woman. It had been my doing, of course. I had selected her out of several candidates, looking for particular features I knew would appeal to the father. She was happy enough with the amount I paid her. I arranged several *coincidental* meetings between them. After that, it took only a few sentences in his ear to convince him to give love a second chance.

At the same time, I was with the son, going over the mother's death in whatever manner was necessary to evoke further mourning and sorrow. When his father announced his new engagement, Paul Sirenne felt betrayed. I took advantage of his feelings, giving him slanted advice and support. Slowly, my efforts had the intended effect. I grew closer to the son than the father.

I kept returning to Europe on a semi-regular basis, in order to send other HN victims to Norton. By now, my HN offerings had unhinged the Inspector's mental state somewhat. His repeated attempts to get his superiors to look at his invisible serial-killer had convinced them something was wrong with the man. He had twice been ordered to undergo psychiatric examination. He had barely gotten through the second one and his status as inspector had almost been revoked. As it was now, he was under close supervision.

Eventually, the long-awaited date grew very close indeed. I was convinced Sirenne's thirty-fifth birthday was the day when all would be revealed to the son. I arranged for Norton to be invited to Ottawa for a seminar on new forensic procedures. His superiors were only too glad to send him, if only to have an end to his antics for a short while.

As soon as Norton was sleeping in his hotel bed, I drugged him and then went off to have a final talk with Paul Sirenne senior. He was surprised to see me at such a late hour. I hit him once, a blow sufficient to render him unconscious. I used the time to get his new *wife* and place her in front of him, restrained in a chair. My plan was to use her pain to motivate the man to tell me all that he knew.

I failed in my attempts, no matter the extremes I went to. Sirenne senior remained resolutely mute, never uttering a single word. Despite his frustrating resistance I managed to make use of them both for my plan, setting a trap for Inspector Norton from Interpol, by positioning their body parts into the letters HN. Norton was about to begin his final investigation.

Greyman Chronicles

Norton Fears the Worst.

Norton lay unmoving in his bed, his breathing deep and heavy. The phone on his bedside table began ringing. It wasn't until the twelfth ring that the man moved his hand towards the annoying sound. It took two tries before he

managed to get a hold of the phone, his mind too groggy to understand what was going on. His hand instinctively brought the receiver to his ear, as he lay in his bed, eyes closed, still unmoving.

„It's the front desk. This is the wake-up call you asked for.“

„What?“

„It's the front desk, sir. I'm calling to wake you up, sir.“

„Who is this? What's going on?“

By now, Norton's eyes had cracked open and the light, coming into the room through a crack in the curtains, had blinded him, sending his brain into a paroxysm of pain. Once more, he was waking up with a nightmarish headache. His heart jumping in his chest, he knew what that meant. Somewhere out there, someone else had been killed.

„It's Andrea, calling from the front desk. This is a wake-up call, sir. Are you all right?“

„Yes, yes... I mean no... Uhm, listen, can you send up some aspirin or something? My head is just blasting.“

„Certainly. Would you want some breakfast with that?“

„No, just coffee... Make sure it's strong.“

„Yes, sir. I'll have it sent right up.“

Norton sat up in the bed, holding his head with his hands, almost overcome with despair. It had happened again. Shaking himself, trying to rid himself of the heavy torpor in his limbs, he turned his torso and slid his legs over the edge of the bed until they touched the ground. He tried to stand, feeling the room spinning madly. Grabbing on to pieces of furniture for balance, he made his way to the bathroom, where he turned the water on and quickly showered, feeling the cold water dispelling the grogginess.

He was drying himself when he heard a knock at the door. It was a bellboy with coffee and aspirin. Giving him a tip from the change on the bedside table, Norton swallowed four of the aspirin with a gulp of hot coffee. The scalding liquid did the final job of waking him up. He took another mouthful as he walked across the room towards his suitcase, looking for fresh clothes. Instead, he almost choked on the coffee when his eyes landed on an object that should not be there.

It was a knife. A big, bloody knife, with a heavily serrated edge, almost a saw. It was lying on the ground, stuck in last night's clothes. Norton dropped the coffee and grabbed his head again with both hands. This time it wasn't pain but horror at how this was happening all over again. He started shaking, speaking to himself all the while.

„It never stops. I pass out, I can't remember anything. I wake up and there's been a new murder, another crazy, thirty-seven days, HN murder. Once more I find the murder weapon in my house, left in plain view, always taunting me. The Shadow-killer haunting me... but are they my shadows? Am I the killer, somehow? Always, I have refused to accept that possibility, looked deep into my own soul... but no... I'm not a killer... I'm NOT!“

Norton was furious. He continued ranting while dressing hurriedly.

„No, damnit, I'm not. I can't be, no matter what the evidence says. I know who I am and I didn't do these things. I can't have. If I didn't, then that says

the Shadow-Killer is here, in Ottawa, the bastard. When is the guy going to die? ... It can't be the same man as before, it's just that simple. It's just someone who's got it in for me... and he sure is doing a damn good job of it... He's almost convincing me... but I won't fall for it... I won't... I'm just going to do what I always do... It's worked before and it'll work again... I'm going to put my nose to the ground and start following those damn leads. I'm going to keep plugging and I'm going to get the proof I need and figure out who the bastard is and then... Then... Yes, damnit, then I'm going to kill him... even if I die doing it!"

A look of madness glinted in his eyes when he said the words out loud, the words he had been thinking for so long. He was right to have uttered them. It was time to end this, once and for all. He picked up the phone and began making calls. Somewhere out there, the latest Shadow-Killer's victim was waiting to be found, with fresh evidence, untouched as yet. Norton had to find a way to get involved in the local police's investigation. He no longer cared what he had to do. This was a fight to the finish.

Weissmuller Recollections, 2005-Present

Part One

The process of removing Sirenne's father had been a necessary one, an intrinsic part of my plan. The Abbey was about to begin their own scheme. My move was intended to destabilize it. I was going to start the ball rolling sooner than they had anticipated, about six months before their startup date. Sirenne senior had inadvertently confirmed it, with his overemphasis on his son's thirty-fifth birthday.

The entire goal of this exercise was to keep Paul Sirenne unbalanced and in the dark, dependent on me for answers and direction. In order to assure this aspect of my scheme, I sent him a package containing the one book I did have, taken from the Lindon Villa. I added a letter, apparently from his father, directing him to investigate the burgeoning mystery and to assemble a team from his most trusted friends.

Entrenched as Sirenne's trusted mentor, I knew I would be selected as part of the team. With his father dead and a deranged inspector from Interpol on his tail, he had few people left which he could trust. I had tried to anticipate who else Sirenne might choose as member of his team, which was why I was not surprised to learn that Fabian Coulter had been selected. He was Sirenne's closest friend. It was Sirenne's third choice which had baffled me.

Instead of two other far superior choices, he had selected an irritating idiot named Liam O'Flanahan. I had already met him several times and each occasion had been less pleasant than the last. His general disrespect for just about everything left me instantly desirous of putting an end to his miserable existence. The only thing holding me back was that it wasn't part of my plan.

I bided my time, promising myself that, one day, I would be rid of him. Until then, I would endure his presence as best I could.

After our initial meeting, Sirenne asked each of us to do some investigating, which, of course, I had no need to do. I already knew everything. I used the time to keep an eye on Norton, who was rapidly losing any cooperation from the local police with his crazy antics. This lack of trust might also have been instigated by some rather blatant evidence at the HN murder scene, pointing at Norton. The police were getting suspicious and Norton was getting increasingly nervous. It was perfect.

I rejoined Sirenne and the other members of the team on a Sunday night, when we had our first official meeting as a team. I used it as an opportunity to give them reams of historical information about Etretat, whatever I thought might prove useful later on. Coulter's research provided me with a perfect opportunity to introduce the possibility of caves, by focusing their attention on the fort of Frefosse. I was less pleased by O'Flanahan's topic, the Oak Island mystery, which might have led them to the powder of immortality. Luckily, none of them knew enough to see the correlation between the two topics.

Then came one of the most unpleasant discovery I had come across in years. When I had originally examined the invulnerable book stolen from Lindon, I had opened it from the front. Determining that its surface could not be damaged, I had stopped examining it for secret compartments. Sirenne had started his investigation by examining the back of the book. Such a simple difference. By doing so, he had found something I had entirely missed: a hidden pocket, containing a message from his grandfather.

I was quite enraged that I had missed something so important. I had to do some unobtrusive meditation to avoid killing them all right then and there. The discovery ended up having a good side to it, as it opened up our investigation, leading us in the exact direction I wanted to go, to Etretat and the caves.

Sirenne decided he had to travel to France first-hand to find out what was going on. A perfect outcome. In the meantime, Coulter and O'Flanahan teamed up to do some research. I went off to apparently do some as well. Instead I switched my focus back to Norton, returning to his hotel room and drugging him once more. Randomly selecting a local businessman, one Harry Styles, I performed a quick experiment, leaving the usual clues. As added precaution, I left the man's bloodied business card in Norton's hotel room, knowing it would prod him to begin yet another frantic and secretive investigation.

He would find clues in Styles' home, implicating him. He would know the police would seek to arrest him, forcing him to leave the country. More pressure, less time to think. I had a plane ticket using Styles' identification. Norton would follow my trail and end up on that plane, along with Sirenne.

On the flight, Norton was seated behind me to my left, trying to remain inconspicuous. Sirenne was seated in front of me, to my right. Once we landed and disembarked, I evaded Norton, giving him no option but to follow Sirenne. I contacted Interpol, pretending to be the deranged Inspector. I

ranted rather madly, making sure to mention key facts about the Harry Stiles murder.

Norton would officially become the one hunted for the HN murders. If anyone, including the Abbey, went on the hunt for the Shadow-Killer, they would now be led directly to the maddened Norton. I would remain in the shadows, closing off the only trail leading to me.

Feeling secure, I contacted Sirenne, using a pair of electronic glasses, provided by Coulter. They contained wireless cameras and microphones, connecting each of us by satellite. It was a heaven-sent idea. The glasses allowed me to be anywhere while still keeping in touch with them. None would know where I truly was.

I waited until Sirenne was en route to Etretat, before connecting up with him. I told him I had been studying Leblanc's books, creating an opportunity to reveal information about the secret codes built into each of his stories, knowing it would prod Sirenne to suspect a deep conspiracy. Of course, that would not be enough. I had to add many of these small pushes before Sirenne would come to the right conclusion and do something about it.

I had always found Sirenne very clever in certain intellectual respects but he tended to be slow to act, always maintaining a deliberate pace. Having followed his life for more than a decade, I understood this came from years of training by his father. It had become part of his character. As a result, the man seemed incapable of hurrying, incapable of being hurried. I found it infuriating in some respects, forcing me to lead him by the nose so that he would find what I wanted him to find within a reasonable period of time.

Another of his faults was that he had a total lack of guile, an inner innocence leading him to trust blindly in the people around him. It was this innate lack of suspicion which had enabled me to inveigle myself as his mentor. I could not understand why the Abbey would have selected such a man. Perhaps they had no choice.

After prodding Sirenne, I headed to Etretat to maintain a lookout for Norton. The Inspector had continued hovering around Sirenne, convinced it would lead him to the real killer. I could not understand how the man avoided facing the possibility he himself might be the killer. I had done everything to prove it to him.

During the first night of his stay, incredibly, Sirenne found an old letter from Hitler in Leblanc's study, likely planted by the Abbey. No matter the reason for its presence, it made things easier, enabling me to suggest to Coulter that he figure out why we had not heard of all this before. His research would expose the missing information around Etretat, leading him to evidence of my earliest involvement, as Weissmuller.

Playing this type of game created an excitement I had thought vanished long ago. I was balancing on a fine wire which could snap at any moment. I was walking around the enemy's camp, making friends with them and leading them to my caves. As long as I remained invisible, I could keep controlling everyone, pulling all the strings.

To lead them into my secret domain would be to walk that much closer into the Abbey's trap for the Greyman. I felt exhilarated, alive for the first time in decades. How could one ask for anything more?

* * * * *

Almost immediately, several unwanted complications presented themselves. The first was that Sirenne met a woman, Leblanc's great-granddaughter no less, Raymonde, by name. He became romantically involved with her within days. I tried to break the burgeoning relationship apart quickly, by forcing a lie about the wireless glasses to come out. My ploy failed, achieving the exact opposite. I had no choice but to accept her presence. The only good thing was that it might keep Sirenne preoccupied on more physical matters than was wise. Less focus on me.

The second complication was Sirenne had discovered someone else involved, apart from the Abbey. While on his way to Perpignan, Sirenne had noticed two men following him, in a rather blatant and threatening manner. With little time to plan, Sirenne had acted decisively, by driving straight over a cliff. It was quite an impressive feat for a man who had seemed so devoid of initiative.

Sirenne eventually identified the two followers as a pair of locals, descendants of Old Man Vallin, the first person Hitler had ever killed. It provided a reasonable explanation for their involvement. O'Flanahan, the third complication, had proved to be more of an irritant than anticipated, making comments that implied he knew about my secret activities. Every time he opened his mouth, I would get enraged. My usually cool demeanor had a tendency to suffer in his presence.

I finally realized the fool was simply obsessed with conspiracies and saw covert plans in everything. His comments were shots in the dark which happened to be right, through no skill of his own. I returned the favor, by twisting his words and using them to reveal further information about Norton, to link him with the Shadow-Killer.

O'Flanahan argued the point as a matter of course but it didn't matter. It was too late. I had succeeded in planting the idea and that was enough. It would grow on its own, like a virus infesting their minds. Later, I revisited the topic, locking it in. Using the same technique, I connected the clues to Etretat and the Fort of Frefosse. Already primed about the possibility of caves, it was time to prod them to look further.

Coulter's investigation into Etretat's missing history and geology had aroused his suspicions. Further analysis revealed a disturbing pattern of disappearances and thefts. I suggested increased secrecy, hoping to cement our ranks tightly. Despite the various complications, I had maintained control over their research and discoveries. Coulter's wireless glasses had been the key to my success, making it possible to interact with the team while orchestrating all the events around them.

When Sirenne arrived in Perpignan with the team in electronic tow, he quickly deciphered Leblanc's unimaginative clues, left behind in his

apartment. It aimed Sirenne towards Ambrumesy, a place I was intimately familiar with. The Abbey's plans and mine were about to collide.

Sirenne made his way there in all haste, easily discovering the stone cylinder in the Chapel. Norton showed up shortly after their arrival, almost messing my carefully orchestrated plan. Although he might be unhinged, the Inspector remained clever and perspicacious. Sirenne impressed me by saving the day, punching Norton in the jaw and breaking his foot, getting away clean, cylinder in hand.

Maybe Sirenne was the right man after all.

The next morning, I had reason to doubt that assumption, when Sirenne found the cylinder was gone. His reaction was quick, locating the hidden passage in the bedroom wall, leading him to Leblanc's office. The cylinder's disappearance was worrisome. Leblanc's manuscript, hidden within the cylinder, was necessary for the team to move forward.

Another prod got Sirenne to figure out the opening sequence of the deeper tunnel entrance, hidden behind Leblanc's office bookshelf. Along the way, Sirenne noticed another book from the set of four, sitting on a shelf, where I had known it would be. The discovery prompted further discussion. I used it to focus on Norton once more, to convince them he was the Shadow-Killer. O'Flanahan argued, as expected, but I came back with a strong case. In the end, I felt I had succeeded, sealing Norton's fate while liberating mine.

After an investigation of the tunnels, Sirenne had a talk with another local, a man named Bequilles. I remembered him. He had been with the resistance but had not been involved in the deadlier activities of that group. I had no reason to dispose of him back then. A fortuitous decision because, today, he exposed my original involvement with Hitler, as Weissmuller.

Sirenne's conversation with Bequilles convinced him Old Man Vallin's two descendants were involved in the cylinder's disappearance. He decided to retrieve the cylinder from the Vallin brothers. I worried. There was a chance Sirenne might get hurt. It would seriously hamper my plans. My worries proved groundless. Once more, Sirenne acted at the right time, tackling the bigger of the Vallin brothers and saving the day.

I was quite impressed. I knew how little experience Sirenne had with physical confrontations. It had taken immense resolve to throw himself at a man two times his size, holding a shotgun no less. Yet he did, succeeding in his attempts, foiling the killing shot and knocking the man out.

Once he had everything under control, he questioned the Vallins, the entire team participating wirelessly with rapt interest. I had been baffled about the Vallin brothers' involvement, wondering if they might be part of the Abbey but they were nothing of the sort. Two meddling fools who knew less than us. Had I been in charge, I would have disposed of them on the spot, killing two birds with one stone.

Sirenne demonstrated how different he was from me, by eliciting cooperation from the very men who had been trying to kill him. While not my preferred method, I had to admit his solution was effective. The Vallin brothers accepted his offer of allegiance, strengthening our team and providing access to local resources.

However, Sirenne's actions illustrated how difficult it was to stay in control of the situation. It was impossible to anticipate how every event would develop, where each permutation might lead. Fluidity of reaction was called for, the ability to improvise, which was not possible when acting through others. It was time to come out of the shadows. Through a bit of fortuitous timing, Coulter and O'Flanahan contacted me, by means of the wireless glasses, providing an easy solution.

They had decided it was time to travel to Etretat, to be on hand to help Sirenne in case other dangerous situations developed. We agreed to meet in Etretat. I told them I would make my way there on my own, as I still had a few things to do at the University. Coulter informed me he would contact Mrs Leblanc and coordinate everything with her.

My one remaining concern was Norton. If I joined Sirenne as Briar, my role as the Shadow-Killer haunting Norton would come to an end. Norton still had one thing in his possession which I had yet to retrieve. A file folder he always carried with him, all of his collected information about me.

The file could provide a valuable lead to the Abbey. I had to remove it before anyone thought of looking for it. If I waited too long and became locked into my Briar skin, I might not be able to take the file from Norton. The time to act was right now, before joining Sirenne.

Greyman Chronicles

Norton Finds Himself.

The door creaked open slowly, letting in a shaft of light from the hall. The man entered, holding a small cylinder containing a powerful soporific gas. He had already released it in the room, through a small plastic tube slid under the door. He looked at Norton lying in bed, snoring loudly.

The man searched for what had to be there. He saw it, a thick file folder, sticking out from Norton's overcoat, thrown carelessly over the desk. He was picking it up when he heard a click from behind him.

„Don't you dare move a muscle, Mister. I've got a gun on you.“

It was impossible. Norton should have been deep in a drugged sleep.

„...All right, turn around, you monster. I've finally got you and I'm going to get a good look at you. Did you think you could keep drugging me like that without me figuring it out? How stupid do you think I am? ... I SAID TURN AROUND. I can always shoot you in the back and look at your dead face later.“

The man did as Norton asked.

„That's it, nice and slow... Wait a minute... NO, NO, NO, that's not possible... You can't be... You can't be ME! ... Noooo...“

The man, taking advantage of Norton's dismay, sprinted for the door with surprising speed, file in hand. The shocked inspector tracked his fleeing double with the gun but his finger refused to squeeze the trigger.

He simply could not shoot himself.

Norton let out a below of rage. His file was leaving with his double. He grabbed his pants at a run, ignoring the pain from his broken foot, suffused by anger.

„He's not going to get away... He's not... That was brilliant thinking, coming here looking like me. He fooled me good. It can't be me. It's a disguise, that's what it is, a clever disguise...“

He ran out of the room in his underwear, panting and desperate, but found no one on either side of the hallway. It was deserted.

„Where could he be? He didn't have time to run all the way to the end. Did he break into one of the other rooms? How could he move so fast? Damn it, damn it, DAMN IT!...“

Norton's shoulders slumped and he collapsed against the hallway wall. It was useless. The killer was gone, escaping further with every passing second and there was nothing he could do about it with his stupid broken foot. His only option was to go back after that pathetic Sirenne and his team of geeks.

The look changed in Norton's eyes, a glint of curiosity. His previous comment was wrong. They weren't all geeks. Coulter was a geek. O'Flanahan was an idiot but that Briar fellow seemed more solid than the rest.

„That's right, I was so focused on Sirenne, I forgot all about that team of his. How could I make an amateurish mistake like that? ... Maybe all I need to do to is to check out his team... Particularly Briar... There's something about him, about his face, like I've seen it before... Damn it, why did my file have to get stolen right now when I need it the most? ... It's not fair... Wait, wait, I remember something... A picture I had of the Shadow-Killer in disguise. Natamos gave it to me... The researcher from the Vatican... What was his name?... Giulio Arnak? ... Was that it? No matter, it was a picture of the Shadow-Killer, we were sure of that. No matter what disguise a man uses, there's some things you just can't hide, like your height and body frame, the eyes... and I saw the Shadow-Killer disguised as Harry Stiles too... He had to hunch down to be Stiles' height, he was so tall... Just like Briar... just... like... BRIAR!“

The thought energized him, giving him a new direction. He shook himself off the hallway wall and straightened his back.

„I need to get a picture of Briar... I can hardly remember what he looks like... It would be just like that monster to hide in plain sight, if only to taunt us, the bastard... Sirenne never had anything to do with it. He's was a patsy, like everyone else, me included. The Shadow-Killer was there all along, shadowing him in the full light of day... but why would he do that? I thought he was focused on me and the letters HN. What does Sirenne have to do with that?“

Norton ran into his room, babbling nonstop. He grabbed his few possessions, looking at the meager amount of cash he had left. He wouldn't be able to get far with it. His emergency stash was just about gone. He

couldn't call anyone he used to know, they all thought he was the killer. If he surfaced anywhere, he would be arrested within minutes.

His only option was to go underground and keep pushing. He decided to go after Sirenne and haunt his footsteps. Maybe through him, he'd catch sight of Briar, or at least figure out what the hell was really going on.

He walked out of the room after wiping it clean of prints, closing the door behind him. He'd have to hotwire another car, breaking yet another law. The lines were all becoming blurred. He was acting like a common criminal. How long would it be before he killed someone, becoming what he hunted?

Unless he was the killer.

His shoulders slumped at the thought, then straightened out again, as he fought against the horrendous possibility.

„I'm not the killer. I'm not playing games with myself in my own head, no matter what the evidence says. HE's the one playing games, not me. I cannot believe it, I will not... It's Briar, or, or Coulter, or O'Flanagan... but it's not me, damn it. I have to believe that, or else what's the point? I might as well just shoot myself in the head and end it right here... but I'm not going to do that. I couldn't shoot my double and I can't shoot myself... No, I'm going to go steal a car and get myself to Etretat. That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to find Sirenne and I'm going to solve this thing once and for all... Now buck up, Norton, this is your end run and you know it. There's no going back. Forget about your stupid foot and your bruised jaw and get on with it. You've got a job to do.“

Weissmuller Recollections, 2005-Present

Part Two

The next morning, the incriminating file destroyed and Norton chasing ghosts, I waited covertly as the two brothers, Ives and Jean Vallin, joined Sirenne at the Villa Leblanc. Connecting in as Briar through the wireless glasses, I listened while the two locals provided us with some background. It provided a satisfactory explanation for their involvement. At the same time, it demonstrated how much effort Leblanc had put into preparing his plans. I followed the Vallins' story with a few revelations of my own, informing everyone about the simplistic codes hidden in the notes from the back of the books.

Sirenne's family name was an anagram. It had been assembled from the letters in *Arsene Lupin's* name. I hoped revealing this to Sirenne would predispose him to distrust whoever had engineered the plan. In the end that would be the Abbey. No one liked being manipulated.

The team decided to open the cylinder. I was at the ready with an improved method but the impulsive Ives Vallin simply smashed the cylinder apart, an

idiotic act requiring absolutely no thought. Admittedly, it did work, and Sirenne was soon reading my copy of Maurice Leblanc's journal.

It was entertaining enough to once more return to the events of my past, although Leblanc had altered certain facts to suit his purpose. The reading later generated a discussion with Sirenne, which I used to push him in the right direction, towards the caves and, always, against the Abbey. I was pleased with my progress. Sirenne's final decision was to seek a way into the caves.

He had made his decision in less than four days since his arrival in Etretat. So far, we had stayed mostly below the radar. There was a fair chance the Abbey was still unaware their plans had already been set in motion. We might collect all four books before the Abbey even realized anything was going on. I had to get Sirenne to move faster.

Next morning, Norton showed up, catching Sirenne unaware yet again. His interruptions placed my plans under great strain. He was beginning to put things together. He had figured out the HN thing had been a manipulation designed to aim him at Sirenne. Luckily, he was rambling rather disjointedly, making it impossible for Sirenne to understand what he was really talking about.

I was forced to remain hidden, hoping Sirenne got away before Norton said anything truly troublesome. I need not have worried. Sirenne proved quite resourceful, escaping rapidly from the inspector's clutches, long before Norton's ranting made any sense.

There were a few tense moments where I worried for Sirenne's survival during his escape, when he ran precipitously down a steep ravine, but he outdistanced the wounded Norton easily, reaching the beach unharmed. The tenacious Inspector kept up the pressure for a while but it turned out to be the last push of an exhausted man. After a few poorly-aimed shots, Norton ended up in deep water with a broken foot. Sirenne was back on the beach with the Vallin brothers.

After a few desperate strokes, the Inspector appeared to drown in the turbulent waters. From my vantage point, hidden high up in the cliffs, I saw Norton's shape slicing beneath the water expertly, using the chaotic waves to hide his travel to the other side of the Needle, where he clung for dear life until the coast was clear.

I could not go after him. Too many witnesses. I would deal with him later. Coulter and O'Flanahan were already on their redeye flight to Paris. I felt it prudent to meet them in the Paris airport, rather than here, in Etretat. I didn't want to give either of them the impression their teammate Briar was anything else than what he said he was.

After the team's surprise arrival the next morning, Sirenne showed his mind had lost none of its sharpness when he took the clues we had accumulated and came up with the right answer. We would find the caves by going underwater. Coulter proved his resourcefulness by obtaining an ingenious self-propelled underwater camera, using it to examine the bottom of the channel, from the safety of a stable ship. With hardly any prompting,

they found the underground passage into the caves, dormant for more than fifty years.

On our way back to the beach, things took a turn for the worse. Norton was there, waiting for his chance and at the end of his rope. He attacked openly, brandishing a small gun. This time, everything he said, and the way he looked at me, told me the Inspector had somehow figured out I was the Shadow-Killer. The situation had the potential of unravelling everything I had worked so hard to achieve.

My first move was to step close to Sirenne, so it would appear as if Norton's ranting was directed at him, instead of me. The little Vallin proved his worth by throwing a knife into Norton's gun arm. The big Vallin followed that up by seizing the exhausted inspector, lifting him bodily into the air and shaking him into submission.

I liked nothing about the situation. Norton was screaming out what he knew, that I was the killer. I kept myself close to Sirenne, hoping none of them caught on. It was intolerable. The inspector had to die and I was stuck in the insipid Briar skin. Norton solved my problem by trying to stab me. His desperate move almost made me laugh. He still had no idea he was facing an immortal.

He was using his last reserves, putting everything he had in a final bid to kill the one who had so haunted his life. Too bad it was a pointless effort. Even better, he stopped talking, stemming the flow of potentially destructive knowledge he held. I remained close to Sirenne, to ensure the attack would seem directed at him. When Norton was about to veer towards me, I moved in front of Sirenne, as if I were blocking him from harm. It brought me closer to Norton and prevented Sirenne from seeing what was happening between the Inspector and I. For a single moment, I had a crazy impulse to bite down on Norton's throat and drain him dry.

I restrained myself, maintaining the implacable control taught me by meditation, allowing Norton to stab at my chest, using the knife he had wrenched out of his own arm. I twisted easily out of harm's way, grabbing his knife hand and crushing it. I turned his knife back on him, stabbing it up into his heart, through the fleshy stomach. I looked directly into his eyes as the light died, leaving him without any answers, and leaving my secrets intact.

Little was I to know the day had yet more in store for me. No sooner had Norton's heart stopped beating that we were confronted by a group of men. I was baffled by their actions but Sirenne made sense of it quickly. They were descendants of the Net, a group organized by Leblanc to protect Etretat from Hitler and me. Incredibly, they were still active after almost one hundred years.

The situation had already been partially defused by Sirenne's quick thinking but it was ended by the arrival of Mrs Leblanc and Bequilles, the war veteran Sirenne had talked to earlier. More evidence of the Abbey's machinations. Bequille's timely comments to the unruly crowd confirmed Paul Sirenne's arrival had been expected, though not so soon, proof that the Abbey was off-balance. It would take them time to recover, giving me the

opportunity to consolidate my presence and to further distance Sirenne from their clutches.

When all danger seemed to be past, the most unexpected thing happened. Sirenne collapsed. He became sweaty, weak, and would have fallen to the ground had Ives Vallin not been there to catch him. He seemed emotionally overwrought. I had seen this weakness in Sirenne many times before. The man might not have the inner strength to finish what I had started for him.

I decided to confront him about his breakdown, hoping to shake him out of his lethargy. I found the perfect opportunity the next morning after breakfast and struck while his defences were down, using his uncertainty to implant my own directions. Although my words were intended solely as manipulation, I found a certain truth in them.

Though the Abbey had chosen Sirenne for their plans, it was I who had spent years with him, watching him grow into the man he now was. It was I who had formed him, hardened him, gotten him ready for the coming challenges. I was the one who was directing his growth, taking over where his father had left off.

I had never sired offspring. My interests had simply never gone that way. In fact, in those early days, it would have been surprising if any woman that caught my eye survived the nine months necessary to give birth. I would also have to have bedded them, another ridiculous thought.

However, I had never encountered anyone like Paul Sirenne. Despite all of his obvious weaknesses, I had seen a strength growing in him, slowly but surely. Deep down, I knew his strength was there because of me, because of my actions. For the first time in my life, I felt kinship with someone who was supposed to be my prey.

So, I told him what he needed to hear, to get ready for the onslaught that was sure to come. Watching him, I saw the strength enter his eyes again. When he thanked me for my words, I made little of it but, inside, I felt a flush of comforting warmth. I was proud of him.

Coulter had arranged for a submarine to be delivered and we used it to go down into the caves through the camouflaged underwater tunnel. It felt good to return to them after so long but it was admittedly strange. These caves had been my solitary domain for so long, it was odd to have others with me.

It led the group to the appropriate conclusions about everything they encountered, building their image of the ancient events in exactly the right way. I prodded them in the proper direction when necessary, which wasn't often. Sirenne was figuring things out on his own.

O'Flanagan wasted our time, as usual, by forcing us to go look at the stolen art in the storage areas. Hitler had insisted they be hidden there, the cream of the crop of his obsessive collecting. I thought the pursuit rather frivolous. I had never placed much value in material possessions. I had always found my interests to lie elsewhere.

Within short order, we arrived in the throne room and found Adolf Hitler's mummified body. It only took a few words from me to help them figure everything out. There was still one essential aspect of my plan left to complete

however and it didn't seem as if I would get an opportunity to make it happen, until Coulter started talking about the generating room.

I supported his curiosity and we were soon on our way. I led them directly to Weissmuller's dead body, or rather my double, waiting with his contrived journal. This particular body would prevent them, and the Abbey, from suspecting my survival. I had to remain above suspicion, after all. Weissmuller's journal was my final touch to that part of the plan.

It had been designed to convince them of a certain sequence of events. Of course, the plan did not go off entirely without a hitch. O'Flanagan was there with his thoughtless comments. He somehow noticed I looked like the dead Weissmuller, a connection I had hoped would not be made.

I brazened it out, ignoring the comment. Still, it was a close thing and all due to O'Flanagan. I certainly felt a serious dislike for that conspiracy-minded buffoon. A fair amount of meditation time was spent coming up with valid reasons to avoid doing away with him. I was failing.

Still, it was a minor fly in the ointment. I had succeeded in everything I had attempted. My presence was now undetectable and I was in the middle of the Abbey's plans, exactly where I had planned to be. I felt there was a chance this might work out properly.

I had no idea how wrong I was.

Paul Sirene

Chapter 8

Briar's Advice.

I put the phone down, a feeling of loss overwhelming me. The Watchers had called. Coulter and his new love had vanished. Their disappearance had been one of many. The Watcher's organization had instituted an all-out investigation but there was little hope they would be found.

Their phone call had been a plea for help and, once again, I was unable to do anything. Events had speeded up and I was playing catch-up. I wanted to go out there, in the world, with my new-found powers and search for my friend. He had been with me since I was seven. My closest friend. I trusted him more than anyone. Now he was gone, vanished into the ether.

It all felt so hopeless, to always be so far behind. Coulter... Not my friend... Not him.

„Hey Paul, it's okay, I'm here. He may be gone but I'm not. I'll never leave you.“

„Raymonde...“

„I know... He's gone... I can feel it. Our connection with him has been severed.“

„He was protected by the spores. He should have been invulnerable to attack... The same with his girlfriend. She had taken spores as well... And why are the

disappearances happening in the first place? Who is taking them? Where are they ending up? No one has turned up again, dead or alive.“

„I know. I’ve been thinking about that. I wondered if it was connected to the virus somehow.“

„You think?“

„I don’t know... All I’ve got are theories. Ziva was telling me most of the people believe Armageddon is coming. Each person has a story wilder than the other. If Ziva is right, most of them believe this is the beginning of the end.“

„Do you believe that?“

„Perhaps before all this started, I might have. Now, I don’t know. My own actions have been tainting everything.“

„What do you mean?“

„I am affecting everyone with my aura. It’s hard not to. Avi and Ziva believe it is I who is their god, because of that very influence. I know I’m not but with powers like mine, how can they think otherwise? If their opinions can be so easily swayed, mine can be no different... I am not even sure what the end represents. Is there a God? Are these horrendous events occurring because of religious prophecy, or is it you and me making it happen?“

„You think we caused this? I can’t agree with that. We’re trying to fix it... Yet, deep down, I feel the same as you. With the EM and Radar senses combining, I have trouble blindly accepting what I have been taught. It’s not fitting with my perceptions. Even Dr Phillippe’s theories fall short, failing to explain what is happening to the two of us. Nothing in physics has prepared me to a world where matter might be manipulated by my mind. I am flying blind.“

„You are not blind, Paul. Your eyes have been closed for so long, you no longer know how to see properly. Trust in your new sense. Follow its lead. Forget your worries about the meaning of things. Concentrate on what you have to do right now. You will find the answers exactly when you need to.“

„I know, the worrying is pointless. It only stops me from getting on with things. I just wish the process wasn’t so difficult, so painful. We lost Coulter, Raymonde, they took him from us.“

„Just give it some time... He still lives on in our memories... He’ll never be truly gone.“

„They’ve all vanished. The team is gone... First Briar, then O’Flanahan and now Coulter. There’s no clue about any of them but it can’t be coincidence. They have been taken from me and I can’t do a damn thing about it. I have to keep going, exactly like you say... I have to shoulder all the responsibility and just get on with it.“

„Yes... yes, you do, as do I. There is no more shirking, no evasion. We have been chosen and we have accepted. No matter our personal feelings, we are committed. There is no going back.“

I knew she was right, deep in my heart. I straightened my shoulders, bracing myself to face the world and do what I was brought here to do. Raymonde’s mind left me and I headed down to the four books.

They were calling me.

* * * * *

Walking along the corridor, I heard a noise. Expanding my aura, I looked for the cause. I located someone moving but could not identify who it was. The person's aura was slippery and I couldn't grasp it, the effect of someone taking spores, according to Raymonde. Was there an invader in the caves? I wondered how they dealt with the increased brightness. Was it Weissmuller? There was only one way to get an answer.

I hurried down the hall, letting my EM field precede me. The person was at the top cave level, by Weissmuller's once-secret entrance. It took moments to reach the area.

It was Briar, wearing an extremely thick pair of sunglasses, used for welding.

„Sirenne... Thank God... I've found you.“

„Briar! ... Where have you been? Coulter said you'd vanished? Why is your aura opaque?“

„My aura? ... I'm not sure what you mean... Oh, wait, perhaps I do. I've been taking a surplus of spores for a while. Maybe that's it.“

Raymonde had mentioned Briar's opaque aura before. It was my first experience dealing with it.

„I thought you were against using them?“

„Well, you took that choice out of our hands, didn't you? ... When you released the spores into the caves?...“

„That was to protect us, you know that.“

„Yes, your intentions were laudable, I'll give you that. Once it was done, I felt that whatever harm spores might do to my system was outweighed by the protection they provided. I obtained some few spores from Dr Phillippe before he... before he was killed... As for what happened to me, that is another story entirely.“

„Coulter said both you and O'Flanahan disappeared at around the same time. Do you know what happened to him?“

„No, I'm afraid not... although his disappearance is what prompted mine. We can't forget the Shadow-Killer might still be haunting these walls. If you remember, the last time we talked, I was going to Dr Phillippe's team and get them to explain about the poor doctor's theories.“

„Unfortunately, I got there too late. They were all dead, massacred to the last man. I ran down to the deeper caves, to locate my own team of archaeologists but they, too, had been killed.“

„Coulter's vanished now, although I can't see how the Shadow-Killer might be involved in that.“

„He might have outside agents but I would suspect the Greyman.“

„The Greyman?“

„Yes. It's just like him to work in the shadows. He's more of a shadow-master than the Shadow-Killer, in my opinion. He's been working against mankind for millennia and none even suspect his existence, save the Abbey, of course.“

„Of course... The all-knowing Abbey.“

„No, not all-knowing. They are fallible. They've just been at it much longer than either of us. Anyway, after seeing my murdered team, I realised this might be what the Shadow-Killer had been planning for all along. He was going to kill everyone except for you. It was just luck that most people had evacuated the caves because of the increased brightness. Otherwise, they might have all been killed.“

„You think so?“

„I’m positive this was his intent. He began by killing the ones with the most important information. Then he went after your close friends. In this case, that meant O’Flanahan and me. I tried to warn O’Flanahan of the impending danger. I found a pair of extra-strong sunglasses in a mechanic’s shop, allowing me to return to the caves in spite of the brightness. No matter my personal dislike for O’Flanahan, I had no desire to see him disembowelled by the Shadow-Killer.“

„What happened?“

„I was too late. The killer changed his style, taking O’Flanahan with him. At least that’s what I think. The whole period is rather unclear. Everything happened so fast. I got there, in time to hear someone running away. I checked O’Flanahan’s caves but he was gone. I took off in the direction of the running footsteps, proceeding cautiously. Remembering my last run-in with the Shadow-Killer, I had little confidence in my own ability to survive a second encounter.“

„I can well understand that feeling. He’s defeated me every time as well.“

„In the end, my caution was for nothing. I never caught up to him. He was too fast. However, I did manage to stay on his tracks and discovered he had left the caves, by travelling through the tunnel under Etretat. He exited in the small valley at the end, breaking open the locked gate and taking O’Flanahan with him. I worried I might be on his list of desired kills so, once I had left the tunnel, I erred on the side of caution, remaining hidden in the woods near the tunnel exit for the rest of the night. If the killer returned, I might surprise him, and if he did not, I would avoid getting kidnapped in turn. In the morning, I had thought to go to the top of the Aval Cliff but it was packed with evacuees. There was too much chaos. I bided my time and eventually managed to access the Shadow-Killer’s secret escape door, and here I am.“

„Well I’m glad at least one of my team is still alive.“

„There might still be hope for O’Flanahan. I never saw him dead.“

„I hope your optimism is justified.“

„Me too. What are you up to now, Paul?“

„I was planning to take one last look at those Books. Time is pressing. I have to solve their mystery.“

„Why don’t I accompany you? Two heads have always been better than one.“

„Come along. Is the light in the caves not bothering you?“

„The welding glasses are helping for now. What about you?“

„I don’t even notice it. I’m generally walking around with my eyes closed anyway.“

„What?“

„I know, it’s weird, isn’t it? This EM sense is so powerful, I don’t even need to use my eyes anymore.“

„It must be strange to have a new sense develop like that.“

„More than strange. Its presence is unbalancing all my previously held conceptions about reality.“

„What do you mean?“

„I seem to be developing the ability to control or manipulate matter. According to physics, that ought to be utterly impossible.“

„Yes, it ought to be, if physics were a complete science... but it's not. Physics are a jumble of theories, particularly when dealing with quantum physics. It's almost completely theoretical... and we cannot forget what Dr Phillippe was driving at before his untimely death. He was trying to tell you EM waves were underlying everything, that matter itself was a result of their presence. Einstein was the first to understand this, with his theory of $E=MC^2$. He was saying matter equals energy. You are developing an EM sense, which is giving you the ability to see the underlying energy he was talking about.“

„You're saying I shouldn't have problems with that?“

„Of course, it's natural for you to have problems dealing with it. It's the same challenge theoretical physicists face when trying to explain their impossible theories. Most people never realize quantum physics fly in the face of what reality appears to be. You are no different than them... Well, you weren't before the spores got a hold of you... Perhaps, you should just keep working on the small details and let the big picture work itself out.“

Briar was right. Raymonde was right. Here I was, wallowing in self-doubt and twice now I had been shown the way. There were things out there that I couldn't understand and it was stopping me from moving ahead. I had to stop worrying and keep plugging.

„Thanks Briar. Your words mean a lot to me.“

„I'm just glad to be here. You may not realize how special you really are, Paul Sirenne. Your humbleness and self-deprecating ways have always made little of your accomplishments but they are many and you should not forget it. You are the first one to make it this far. I have faith in you, my boy. You will succeed.“

„I hope so. Faith seems in short supply.“

„In this instance, I believe it is warranted. Look at the events which have led us here. Can you honestly say none of it implies a deeper Purpose?“

„Oh, I see that all right. I'm just not sure that purpose comes from man or God.“

„I've faced that very same question. God isn't one to leave messages on your answering machine. You must imply his existence through a million experiences, little clues scattered along the path of life... and then, even that may not be enough. God requires you to take a leap of faith. Without it, you will never get to where you need to go. So stop holding back, Paul Sirenne. Forget about physics, about the pandemic and the disasters. Forget about me, Coulter and all the others. Give yourself the chance to move forward, allow yourself to discover what has been placed in your path. Go in there and find the One Book. I will wait here.“

Briar's words ended exactly as we arrived to the conference caves, where the four books were waiting. It was time to go in and open my eyes, perhaps for the first time in my life.

Weissmuller Recollections, 2005-Present

Part Three

After the discovery of the caves, Sirenne once again made decisions I would not have made. Unfortunately, by this point, I was powerless to prevent him. No amount of argumentation would convince him to undertake a different course of action. My caves were invaded by members of the Net, Leblanc's ancient group organized to protect Etretat. Secrecy had gone out the window.

Slowly but surely, my domain of old was returned to life, albeit differently than it used to be. I was torn by these differences, yearning for the orderliness and calm I had imposed on the caves when I had been their master.

The moment my presence was no longer required for the distressing process, I traveled to England for a few weeks, where Briar had been invited to participate in an archaeological dig. The invitation had arrived in such timely manner I found it impossible to refuse.

Going to England had really been to distance myself from the irritating O'Flanahan, if only for a short while. He had developed an unexplainable fondness for Briar, dogging my steps ceaselessly, and babbling every single moment of it. The only reason I did not hear his voice in my sleep was that I did not sleep.

However, once I became involved in the English dig, I learned the innocent-seeming invitation had a hidden purpose: to uncover the ultimate origin of the immortality formula. Had anyone else but I been there, it is quite likely the clues would have been missed.

All along, I had been baffled by the appearance of man-made versions of the immortality formula. Who had developed it in the first place? The powder in the Ark of the Covenant, known to man as Manna, was stolen from the Egyptians. Where had the Egyptians gotten it from?

It was not sufficient to suggest the Egyptians had discovered it themselves. There was simply no evidence. It seemed far more likely the formula had arrived amongst them, ready-made, and was probably the cause of the first Pharaoh dynasty. It explained why all Egyptians had considered their Pharaoh a god. With the powder in his body, he had been a god to them.

The immortality formula would have been made by a much more ancient civilization, one who had the skills and sufficient knowledge to synthesize such a formula. Civilizations like that were far and few. I suspected the Sumerians but they too had gotten their knowledge from an earlier period. Had I not gone to England on impulse, I would never have found the answer.

It was the Atlanteans.

The proof was positive. It took a while to ferret out but it was there all right. I was led on a merry chase to confirm it, along with the seven hapless archaeologists who had invited me to their dig. When it was time to return to Etretat, I was presented with a quandary. What was I to do with the archeologist team? I could not kill them; it would attract too much attention. I could not let them go, they knew too much about the immortality powder.

The simplest solution was to force them to return with me, as my team of archaeologists, to work in the cave digs. They were somewhat fearful of me, so the convincing proved easy, which was good for them. They would not have appreciated the alternative.

The expertise and manpower they provided proved invaluable in getting my work done, leaving me free for more important preoccupations. I never let them leave the deeper caves, terrorizing them to keep them toeing the line. The process was instrumental in helping me see how not eliminating people could be a valuable thing to do.

Immediately following my return to the caves, my carefully laid plans began unravelling, no matter what I did to stop it. The nosy Coulter proved, from a video still, that Norton had been on the same plane flight which Sirenne, Raymonde and Harry Stiles had been on. O'Flanahan put two and two together, concluding Norton could not have been the Shadow-Killer. He followed it up by blatantly accusing me of killing the wrong man.

I defended myself strenuously, going on the offensive and using whatever argument I could come up with to explain my actions. I barely succeeded. O'Flanahan just wouldn't shut up and kept coming up with more conclusions, all leading directly towards me.

The team took O'Flanahan's suggestions to heart by figuring out everything about the HN victims I had sent to Norton. They pulled up more video of Norton's ramblings, making sense out of them. They realized the whole Norton thing had been manipulation by the Shadow-Killer and that the goal of the entire exercise had been to trick Sirenne into acting quickly. My plans were being laid bare.

I tried to remain calm but inside I was raging. I had hoped the Shadow-Killer would vanish with Norton's death. It would have given the team the impression they were safe. The investigation into the caves could have proceeded at a more controllable pace.

Now, it was all ruined. The Shadow-Killer had been resuscitated, a serious threat to their goals once more. I was committed to my place as Briar and could not change that position at this late stage. I had no choice but to brazen it out, hoping to stay ahead of their growing suspicions. I agreed with their conclusions but tried to unite the team against the monster out there, while re-enforcing the need for secrecy and speed.

A few hours later, Coulter, O'Flanahan and Sirenne took off to investigate Lindon's Villa, hoping to find the last of the four books. I stayed behind, working with my team in the deeper caves, using the time to think things through. To my surprise, the archaeology ended up being far more interesting than I would have anticipated. What I saw beneath the thick layers of dust, revealed how impactful these caves had been on mankind.

I had known from the very beginning that man had not been the first to inhabit the caves. I had come across many graves filled with Neanderthal skeletons, some relatively recent and others far older. The second wave of Neanderthals had left the caves about thirty thousand years ago, the exact period when the Neanderthal race died out.

For thousands of years, the Neanderthals were pushed out of Northern Europe by the encroaching Homo sapiens, coming out of Africa in endless droves. Our analysis of the ancient bones had confirmed a deadly genetic disease was raging through the Neanderthal ranks, shortly before their extinction. It seemed quite acceptable to suggest the disease had started in

the caves. The spores might have other effects than immortality. Deadly effects.

Was this the reason for the Abbey's caution with the spores? Did they know of the dangers?

I ordered my team to keep working until they had answers, while I worked in my office. None should disturb me. I sat in solitude, my thoughts flying around in a maelstrom. My plans were at risk. I needed to do something, anything to gain back control.

One possibility occurred to me. What if I removed Raymonde Leblanc? The rest of the team had gone, leaving her unprotected, exposed to the Shadow-Killer. What if I killed her? Her presence had already caused Sirenne to pull away. I wanted him dependent on me, not her. The idea was daring. It was unplanned but it felt right. I had time to do it. Sirenne was in Lindon's Villa, about to learn the book he sought was missing. He would be there for at least a few hours more.

The chessboard clues on Lindon's kitchen floor had been based around a particular game, attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte. The game hinged on a key move, killing the queen or not, the proper choice dictating the winner. In Lindon's Villa, the right decision led you to the hollow where the book had been hidden, before I took it.

I could mimic Napoleon's game, here in the caves, by killing Sirenne's *Queen*, making it a tactical move by the Shadow-Killer, intended to remove an important source of support from him. We would pull closer as a team, trusting no one again. Sirenne's sorrow would leave him vulnerable to my ideas. I could not fault the plan.

I quickly attached latex pieces on my face to approximate Sirenne's appearance, inserted contact lenses and applied a bit of make-up. Heading up to Sirenne's level, using one of my secret tunnels, I managed to get within four meters of Raymonde before she turned around, baffled by Sirenne's presence. I kept walking towards her, taking advantage of her confusion.

Close enough, I abandoned all pretence and jumped towards her, arms extended, intending to end the game quickly. She surprised me with a quick jump to the left. I had never seen a normal human move that rapidly. Not wanting her escaping alive, I pulled out a knife. She once more moved with inhuman speed, heading down the corridor.

I hurled the knife with all my strength, an excellent throw, powerful enough to ram the knife through her chest. Unbelievably, instead of skewering her against the wall, it bounced off, clattering to the floor. She turned around unharmed, picked the knife up and threw it back, an accurate throw that would have killed me, had I been human. Something was wrong.

She moved like an immortal, yet, she had ingested no spores. The team didn't even know about them yet. Raymonde took off, reaching the end of the corridor. I ran after her, barely able to catch up. She disappeared into my storage caves, a poor choice for a hiding spot. I tried to catch her in the first room but she sneaked into a tunnel connecting to the back cave. She was planning to escape through a second tunnel, so I hurried back out, accessing the next cave from the corridor.

I reached the tunnel at the back as she came out of it. I ran straight at her with my knife. She stopped me dead. Her reactions were so rapid I could hardly follow them. She knocked my feet out from under me and jumped to the side, ramming a specimen table into my waist. I was knocked back by the force of the impact, falling into the access tunnel. Before I recovered my balance, she had raised the table up and wedged it in the tunnel entrance. I wasted valuable time smashing the table out of the way. By the time I reached the corridor again, she was at the cafeteria doors, where safety awaited. I had failed.

Running back along the corridor, I returned to my secret tunnel, and got my wireless glasses back on, just in time to get a breathless message from Coulter. Sirenne was back! I ripped my disguise off, feeling quite frustrated. None of what had happened had been possible. How could Raymonde have become immortal?

Unfortunately, I had little time to reflect on anything, because I had to show myself as Briar. I smudged some dirt on my face, picked up my digging trowel and hurried back up to the cafeteria, only to learn another bit of disastrous news: the Abbey had finally shown its face.

I had no choice but to roll with the punches. Raymonde's description of my attack spurred O'Flanahan to suggest one of the team was the Shadow-Killer. The comment was infuriating. He could only be talking about me. He knew I had been the only team member in the caves, apart from Raymonde. I immediately went on the counter-attack, redirecting their suspicions outward once more.

Sirenne unknowingly dealt me the worst blow of the day, by assigning bodyguards to all team members, in order to *protect* us from the Shadow-Killer. As Briar, I could not refuse his decision reasonably. I had to accept the protection, knowing I had just been made a prisoner in my own caves, my every move under observation.

Sirenne was also showing signs of immortality, though he did not yet know it. Neither O'Flanahan, nor Coulter, nor the Net, had shown the slightest sign of being affected by the spores to date, which was all as it should be. My hidden filtration unit was removing them from the breathable air. I could therefore not explain why only Sirenne and Raymonde were being affected.

Still, I reasoned the situation was not all bad. I had managed to avert outright suspicion, surviving O'Flanahan's almost direct accusations. I was still a trusted member of the team. However, I was forced to play a balancing act which would only become more precarious as time went on. Despite the problems, I still felt able to deal with whatever was thrown my way.

Except for the bodyguards. They simply had to go.

I spent the night in the deeper caves, exhorting my archaeologists to work harder. I watched them toil, joining them for a few moments, anything to keep my mind off the day's disasters. The morning came, bringing no answers. I allowed my team to get some sleep and nutrition, sealing them in their caves, while I joined Sirenne and the others, hoping the next day would be better. It wasn't.

Most of it was O'Flanahan's fault, making me regret my earlier decisions to spare his life. He seemed dedicated to an all-out attack on the topics most dangerous to me, starting off with my own journal, the one I had placed on Weissmuller's double. Although it was mostly fiction, O'Flanahan had somehow produced a logical series of conclusions leading him to believe Leblanc had died in the caves and had somehow been returned to life.

Ignoring my desperate arguments, Sirenne spotted the link between that and the effect of the spores suffusing his body. I learnt another note had been found, in the third book, warning Sirenne of the Abbey's arrival and proving the third book was the one missing from Lindon's Villa. The unpleasant revelation left me enraged. Yet more evidence I could have used but had missed because of my own incompetence.

I tried to calm myself down but was prevented by O'Flanahan's second attack, this time flashing light directly into my shadows. I threw back objection after objection at him, seething at his open accusations. Suddenly, he moved on. His comments had meant nothing to him, just more of his irritation. I hated that fat toad and wanted to squash him.

I had hoped none of them would catch on to immortality before the fourth book was found. That wish was dashed when Sirenne revealed Lindon's note had led him to a short treatise, written by Raymond Lindon, which had given the secret away. O'Flanahan returned to the fray, getting everybody worked up about the secrets of immortality, to the point where it was impossible to avoid it. Dr Phillippe's wireless call sealed the case by pointing the finger at the spores from the bio luminescent-fungus in the caves. The secret of immortality was out.

It was futile to try and fight it so, instead, I steered their discovery in as safe a direction as possible. I sent them to Leblanc's blood stain, where Coulter proved Leblanc had indeed bled out on the stone floor a hundred years ago. They realized the spores in the thick layers of dust must have re-animated him. Now they knew why Hitler had been so obsessed with the caves. I had my first chance to extol Weissmuller's virtues, by demonstrating how his vent system had ensured Leblanc's plan to poison the caves would succeed.

O'Flanahan unwittingly provided a solution to my problems, by figuring out that Weissmuller was not dead after all. It was something I could not have revealed, considering my position. When O'Flanahan began spouting off his conspiracy-minded conclusions about Weissmuller having a double just like Hitler, I instinctively knew I could use this to my advantage.

If Weissmuller was still alive, then he could be the Shadow-Killer. They would stop worrying about me. I was back in the game. I argued with O'Flanahan, merely for appearance's sake, knowing it would prod him to go further. O'Flanahan obliged, like the fool he was. They were convinced in moments. All I had to do was make sure they always thought of Weissmuller as the killer out there and I would remain above suspicion.

O'Flanahan did not remain in favour long however, because his next comment hit the heart of the mystery still baffling me. He wondered about the

differences between Sirenne's immortality and Weissmuller's. Why him and Raymonde? Why only him and Raymonde?

Coulter was the first to suggest a viable theory. He suspected genetics as the cause. I felt he had to be right. He thought being exposed to the spores might leave a genetic marker, which could have an effect on later generations, if they were exposed in turn to the spores. It made sense, fitting into what I knew of the Abbey's schemes. It also connected with what my archeologists had discovered about the Neanderthal bones. They had been genetically changed by the spores.

If Coulter was right, it would explain why Raymonde and Sirenne were affected, since both their ancestors had been previously exposed to the spores. Neither Coulter nor O'Flanahan were aware of her growing abilities and neither Sirenne nor Raymonde seemed inclined to reveal it. I made a probing comment about Raymonde's lack of powers, simply to see how Sirenne would react.

He came back with a weak explanation, something he had just thought of, intended to throw me off the scent. It didn't work. However, if he wanted to keep his secret, that was fine by me. Secrets could be exploited. I didn't mind if he tricked the others. They were fools anyway.

* * * * *

The Abbey had shown themselves but my work with Sirenne had its intended effect. He did not trust them. I hoped the mistrust would delay the monks' plans, while strengthening mine. Unfortunately, after Sirenne revealed he wanted to go to Saunier's church, he suggested the team enlist the Abbey's help to get there.

I protested strenuously but was outvoted. In the end, I had to stop arguing, forced to hope for the best, not a situation I enjoyed. I was on a rollercoaster, barrelling along at top speed, unable to steer. At least, my boredom was gone.

We headed to the Aval cliff, where the Abbey's helicopter arrived, bringing Father Plantagenet. I had heard his voice a few times, while hiding in the vents under the Carthusian Monastery but this was my first time meeting him face to face. I looked him straight in the eyes and nodded slightly. He nodded back curtly, seeing the innocent Briar. I had passed the acid test.

Even so, it was a nervous moment, sitting in close proximity to him. This was the leader of a group sworn to destroy all immortals. Worse yet, he now knew the Shadow-Killer was prowling around and that it was an immortal Weissmuller. I could feel his suspicious mind casting about, his beady eyes resting on me all the while. My only hope was that he was unprepared. It would take him time to get up to speed, time he did not have.

I maintained a low profile, which was easy enough in the noisy helicopter cabin. After an interminable period of time, we landed next to a white limousine and more bodyguards. The limousine was as glaring a call to attention as could be imagined. Plantagenet was smarter than this. He knew remaining invisible was a key component for secrecy. Why was he advertising our arrival like this?

It had to be a deliberate act. Plantagenet intended to be seen. It was part of his plan. I didn't like it, not at all. The idiot, Sirenne, was blind to what was going on but I was wise to the Abbey's ways. I was proven right in short order, as soon as we approached Sauniere's church. Several groups were walking towards us and joined us inside the church. They pretended to be tourists but they were nothing of the sort. They were spies, watching our every move.

Then, something odd happened. Sirenne told us to get ready, bent down and unlocked a tile in the floor, using the key the Abbey had given him. He pulled out an oil-cloth covered object, too small to be the fourth book. We then simply walked out, while the spies stood there, unmoving. Sirenne later claimed he had done it, being vague about how the effect had been achieved.

This bothered me. It implied a new ability, conferred upon him by the spores, an ability I did not have. How could this be? Why did the spores give him special abilities and not me? This difference did much to explain the Abbey's plans. The immortality they had created within Sirenne was different. It was why they did not fear him as much as they would a regular immortal.

On our way to Mount Bucharach, Doctor Phillippe called with very unpleasant news. He had found the secret access to my spore filtering chamber, collecting my hoard of spores along with it. I needed those spores.

It was my fault really. I should have made a greater effort to collect the spores but the opportunities had been few, since the caves had been re-awakened. When the caves had been closed down by Leblanc, the fungus had stopped spore production, due to lack of oxygen. I had accumulated a large reserve which had lasted me for the past fifty years. Unfortunately my supply had been exhausted two days ago, when I had consumed the last spore cube in my possession. Luckily, Sirenne directed Dr Phillippe to store the spores in the science department's safe. I knew exactly where that was.

We landed at the base of Mount Bucharach, having gone there after learning the object from Sauniere's church was a miniature version of *the Devil's chair*, located on Bucharach. The expedition proved a waste of time, revealing nothing new. We headed to the Villa Bethanie, Sauniere's home and the location of his bizarre tower. Within short order, Sirenne opened another tile with the Abbey's key and found it empty as well, save for a journal left by Leblanc. I felt increasingly frustrated. Time was pressing and Sirenne's efforts were proving to be useless. What could the Abbey be thinking in creating a nonsensical plan like this?

Sirenne was solving the puzzles properly but we weren't finding what we were supposed to. Returning to the caves, Plantagenet left us, to my relief. He hadn't suspected me yet but he knew about Weissmuller's and his immortality. I had no doubt he would direct the Abbey to review all that had happened since 1945, when they thought Weissmuller had died.

It was only a question of time before they pieced together what I had been up to. However, my tracks were well hidden. None could lead to my takeover of Briar. Still, if Norton had figured it out, eventually, so would the Abbey.

O'Flanahan had not stopped his jabbering either, releasing a constant stream of complaints. His grating voice added to the unending irritation until I began entertaining the thought of throwing him directly off the staircase. He

would fall deep into the lagoon. If I hit him just right, I would break his neck at the same time, ensuring a quick and painless end to my suffering.

It was simply too risky, out in the open like that, with the Abbey sniffing around. That delightful experiment would just have to wait for a more propitious time. I tried to get him to shut up but failed, somehow goading him into further complaining. I walked faster but he matched my pace, keeping up his unceasing tirade. I felt my blood boiling inside my veins.

I received no respite from O'Flanahan, until Coulter called us to listen to Leblanc's journal. The boy had set up a viewing room and insisted on making me wear a pair of 3D glasses. I felt distinctly ridiculous wearing them, believing an immortal should be above such things.

No matter the technology, hearing Leblanc's second journal, one I had not known to exist, was revelatory. It finally helped me understand the Abbey's machinations and Leblanc's role in them. I found myself admiring the man, and Albert Lindon along with him. Both had developed plans of incredible complexity in order to ensure one of their progeny would end up at the head of the Abbey's plans.

I myself had made the primary choice between the two, by eliminating Leblanc's son. True, his daughter remained but none had considered her worthy of the ultimate prize, reserving that for the one male still alive, Paul Sirenne, Lindon's descendant. They had concentrated their efforts overseas, preparing for Sirenne's return.

Once again, I had played a key role, by upsetting their timetable. The Abbey was rallying rapidly but it would not be fast enough. Their guards were being sent out of the caves by the suspicious Sirenne. He did not realize he was reacting to my control, like a puppet on a string.

Plantagenet and his monks would be stuck outside the caves, unable to stop or observe me. They were losing their hold on the reins, letting them fall into my hands. It was about time. I needed to get my spores back from Dr Phillippe. This was my best opportunity and I would not miss it. Unfortunately, I still had two bodyguards assigned to protect me... from me. They had been my constant companions for long enough. It was time to end our relationship. But it had to be done right. My chance would come when I entered Briar's caves.

Those caves were close to Dr Phillippe's lab, a pure coincidence, but one which suited me perfectly. As soon as we entered Briar's caves, I grabbed one bodyguard by the throat, lifting him up bodily into the air, while I sucked the blood out of the second. It took me less than thirty seconds, a personal record. I took longer with the other, enjoying the moment.

Tossing their bodies aside, I ran to the back of the caves and opened up a secret access, leading down a narrow tunnel to a smaller cave, used as a small make-up room. This small cave had another tunnel at the rear. It went to the deepest caves, below sea level, where I suspected the real secrets were located. Right now, I needed a disguise. I stripped, replacing my clothing with non-descript peasant clothes. I inserted contact lenses to change my eye color, then glued a few rubber pieces over my cheek bones and nose, changing my facial structure sufficiently to avoid being recognised as Briar.

My disguise complete, I hurried back along the tunnel to Briar's caves. Leaving the dead bodyguards hidden there, I ran down the left corridor, arriving at a hub. I continued straight ahead, reaching the lab quickly. The fools had not even locked the door, believing guards to be sufficient. I tossed both men out of the way and made my way to the safe in the back wall. I had once known the combination but it had been changed. Frustrated, I rammed both arms through the walls, on each side of the safe, and ripped it out, throwing it through a doorway, at an exposed wall in the other room. It hit the rock wall with a resounding blow and fell to the ground with a crash.

I ran into the room, slamming the door shut behind me, and jumped onto the safe, trying to rip the door off with my bare hands. I managed to latch onto a corner of the door and bend it back, getting a glimpse of the spore powder bag inside. Shaking the safe madly, trying to get it to fall out, I heard a noise from the other room.

Dropping the safe, I jumped into a corner, barely in time to avoid being seen by Sirenne, when he burst through the door, his eyes fixed on the safe. How had he gotten here so fast? I took the one chance I had and rushed him, pulling out my knife. I slashed at him viciously but he jumped away with incredible speed.

I was facing another immortal, a truly dangerous opponent, inspiring both caution and excitement. His first move was to grab a desk and hurl it at me, his throw so powerful the desk broke apart in mid-flight. The individual pieces hit me with such strength that I was physically lifted off the ground and propelled backwards into a cement pillar. I felt it crack with the strength of the blow and I fell to the ground, disoriented. Sirenne was very strong. For once, I thanked the numbness.

Before I could raise myself, Sirenne was upon me, wielding a chair as weapon. He rammed its legs into my stomach and chest, intending to push them right through. His face was contorted by a rage I had never seen before. I almost felt hurt by it. Didn't he realise how much I had helped him? He wouldn't be here, if it wasn't for me.

I laughed it off, slashing at his legs, using the distraction to throw him away. I jumped up and ran out of the room, throwing a last, longing glance at the safe and the spores inside. Sirenne couldn't kill me but I couldn't stop him either. He was much too powerful. I would never win in a fight against him. We were too evenly matched.

The thought was disturbing. If Sirenne was too much for me, what chance did I have against the Greyman? I ran out of the cave, intent on vanishing into the shadows again. Three guards thought they could block my way. I disposed of them in seconds, not giving them a second thought. I could not head towards Briar's caves, with Sirenne in close pursuit. I had to find another escape route.

I headed for the lagoon cave. It was my only chance. There were secrets tunnels underwater. Sirenne was on my heels, no matter my speed. I took risks, leaping down the stairs in mad jumps, nearly losing my balance. At one point, he almost had me, when he jumped across the chasm to shorten the gap between us but something disturbed his attention at the last minute and

he missed me completely, smashing into the wall instead. I took advantage of his mistake and scampered down the last flight of stairs, heading for the lagoon cave access tunnel.

Coming out of it, I dove over the railing, falling into the water thirty-five metres below, in as controlled a dive as I could muster. Just before hitting the water, I noticed a commotion on my left. O'Flanahan, Coulter, and a handful of Net guards, were running after two other people. Then I was into the water and going deeper, desperate to outdistance Sirenne.

I headed toward the back wall of the lagoon lake with all haste, knowing the underwater tunnel was there. I had to return to my Briar caves quickly, unless I wanted to be exposed. I swam into it, rapidly locating the secondary tunnel. I soon broke the surface, into air again. It was darker in these caves. There was little oxygen here. My eyes were used to the darkness and I navigated easily through the various nooks and crannies.

I finally arrived at the river cave. This was the place where the underground river, flowing beneath Etretat, intersected with the caves. Over in the corner, the river could be seen raging by, through a large opening in the cave floor. This was where spores had fallen into the water in times past, giving rise to its miraculous healing properties, noted by Raymond Lindon.

I ran past the opening and hurried into a small tunnel nearby. It had a sharp incline, taking me up several levels, until I was back in my small make-up cave. I stripped out of my wet clothing, removing contact lenses, rubber pieces and makeup. Dressing into my Briar clothes, I ran back up into the Briar caves, knowing my time was about to run out. The others were probably wondering where Briar was and were likely on their way here.

Moving frantically, I lifted the two dead bodyguards, one in each hand, and hurried out into the hall. Now, I needed blood and it was all inside me. There was no subtle way to do this, so, dropping the two guards briefly, I pulled down my zipper and went at it.

I sprayed blood everywhere, covering the guards, the walls and the ceiling. The flow weakening, I zippered up. Grabbing the two bloody guards and, dropping to the hallway floor, I draped both of them over me. I did the last thing necessary, vomiting the blood remaining in my stomach, making sure it splattered over my face, neck and upper body.

I lay my head down just in time. They were running along the corridor, Sirenne leading the pack. He fell for my staged scene, as I knew he would. Opening my eyes when he bent over me, I made up a story of being attacked by the Shadow-Killer. He bought it. I was safe as Briar but the problem remained. I no longer had a supply of spores. In two weeks or less, I would become human again.

I resolved to get my hands on them at some later point but Sirenne foiled my burgeoning plans, when he released the spores back into the caves, to help protect everyone from the coming attack by the Americans. I had a moment's loss of control upon hearing the news, almost breaking out of character. I barely managed myself in, ranting in anger at Sirenne. I needed those spores. I had to remain immortal. My true Purpose remained to be done.

Still, with the spores released in the caves, I would also inhale my share. As long as I remained in the caves, I would continue to extend my immortality. It was not a situation I liked but it was acceptable for the moment. Something else had come up. Sirenne commented that the spore's effects did not cause true immortality. He claimed ingesting spores only stopped the effects of time on those ingesting them. If he was right, true immortality had to be genetic immortality.

I had thoughts this myself, after learning of the different types of immortality powder. The Egyptian version was different from the caves', with dangerous side effects. Sirenne's immortality was new type, one I knew little about. According to Sirenne, powers were developing within him, powers I did not yet have, after more than fifty years of spore ingestion. His mind was sharper than mine, constantly speeding up. He perceived things differently, the spores providing a new way for him to sense the world. What did that mean for me and my true Purpose? The concept seemed almost laughable now.

Genetic immortality was changing Sirenne's demeanor daily, while I had not ever changed in any way. I had been frozen in time, in fact kept unchanging, the very opposite to Sirenne's constant dynamic growth. The things he could do I would never accomplish, no matter what I tried.

I realized I need not despair completely. We were both still heading in the same direction. Both of us had been led here for the same Purpose. To destroy the Greyman. We were just going about it in a different manner. Sirenne's path did not necessarily invalidate my own.

Each of us was being led to the same place by the same inner drive. It could not be coincidence. Whatever was out there directing me, was doing the same for Sirenne. Purpose was looking out for both of us.

That's what was happening. We were being made ready for our Purpose. I didn't have to understand why, or how. I just had to go along with it. Despair or worry had no place in the equation. All would be made clear when it was necessary and not a moment before.

I felt a renewal of hope. My quest was not folly after all. Somehow, I would end up where I was supposed to go. All I needed was the alertness to see the path when it was shown to me. For now, that path was to be by Sirenne's side, helping him. My own role would be made clear to me soon enough.

I had little chance to do any further analysis. Events took yet another turn for the worse. The Americans attacked. We'd had reports they were festering about. They had obviously discarded the diplomatic approach early on in their decision-making process. My new bodyguards had been dispatched to man the machine gun turrets in the lagoon, so I was left blissfully free to act as I desired.

I told Sirenne I was in no fit shape to fight, after Weissmuller's attack. I went back to my caves, supposedly to rest. Minutes later, I was down in my make-up cave, changing into my Weissmuller disguise. Funnily enough, the end result looked nothing like Weissmuller, because Weissmuller looked like me. A series of loud explosions and shaking walls told me the American attack was underway. These intruders were attempting to destroy my caves

and attack the people under my control. I didn't like that, not one bit. If anyone did any killing, it was going to be me. I had my Briar alter-ego to think of, so my efforts would remain in the shadows. I would have to trust Sirenne to deal with the brunt of the attack.

I hurried down the narrow tunnel at the back of the make-up cave, and soon found myself back in the underground river cave. I navigated the maze, locating the submerged tunnel leading to the lagoon. I slipped in and swam intently, until I exited into the lagoon lake. Remaining underwater, I noticed American mercenaries flailing about on the surface, unaware of my presence.

I propelled myself upwards until I was below one man. Reaching up, I grabbed on to his left foot, holding it steady for a brief moment. The mercenary, aware that his foot was being held, tried yanking it. I yanked back, pulling him underwater until his face was aligned with mine. He tried to bring his machine gun to bear. I hit him once in the chest, pulverizing his heart.

I let him go and went in search of another one. I kept at it, until I sensed a stop to all activity above. Swimming to a far corner of the lagoon, I carefully broke the surface, looking around in disbelief. Every American was dead, fallen where they had been standing. Over to my right, I saw two people in camouflage suits. The two Israeli spies from the church.

Sirenne was floating around, stuck in a huge ball of foam, caught by their trap. He might be smart but, tactically, he was useless. Nonetheless, things were under control again and my help was no longer needed. I hurried back to my make-up cave and, shortly after, returned to Briar's caves, just in time to receive a wireless message from O'Flanahan that I could come out of hiding.

Joining the team, I learned, to my horror, that the Americans had brought a nuclear device with them. They had been moments from using it. I had been playing underwater, while we were almost blown to bits. I had seriously underestimated the situation. Those mercenaries had been playing for keeps.

I couldn't understand how the mercenaries had died. Sirenne said he had done it, with his developing powers, but I didn't believe him. He had been floating around uselessly in the water. Nothing about his new abilities hinted he had this type of power? I was shown bizarre helmets the Americans had been wearing and told they stopped him from getting at them. No matter what Sirenne said, I didn't buy it. He was lying and I knew what it was he was lying about.

Raymonde Leblanc. She was becoming an immortal, no matter what they pretended. I could not forget the strange slow-down effect on the spies at Sauniere's church. Sirenne had seemed too preoccupied then, just as now, to deal with that. No, Sirenne did not have this ability, it was Raymonde. If so, her abilities were developing in a different direction than Sirenne's. They had now conferred upon her the ability to kill at a distance.

I had seen another instance of this power before, when the Greyman had killed those monks from the Abbey, during my little publishing game. He left them fallen where they stood, not a mark on them, exactly as with the American mercenaries. Raymonde might be more dangerous than Sirenne.

Perhaps it was she who had the ability to destroy the Greyman. Maybe this was why they were hiding her.

Following the American attack, the two surviving invaders, the Israelis team, changed everything by handing us the fourth book. It was a baffling move, their explanation roving into ancient prophecies and religious beliefs, again another indication of various groups being led to the same place.

When the four books were brought close together, they reacted powerfully, ending up floating impossibly in the air, in fixed positions relative to each other, aligned to the magnetic poles of the Earth. I began to believe, for the first time, that whatever was out there leading me, whatever it was, was truly real. With a shiver, I realized I had been the one selected by that power. I felt honoured and vindicated for all I had done, all I had suffered through. It had been worth it.

My Purpose was real.

Paul Sirenne

Chapter 9

The One Book.

I entered Coulter's caves and walked towards the four books floating in the corner. Briar had refused to come in, insisting I do this alone. My eyes were already closed and I only saw the books in terms of their EM energy. The level of detail I could perceive was astounding. I had never seen such an agglomeration of EM lines. In the EM world, these books radiated like small suns.

I had trouble understanding why they had begun radiating so much power until I realized that it was not they which had changed, it was I. The process of melding with Raymonde had improved my EM sense, giving it a depth which had simply not been there before. By comparison, my prior sensing attempts had been amateurish and incomplete.

The last time I had examined the books, I made an amazing discovery, finding a physical difference between the four identical books. The molecules were arranged in the books slightly differently. When I mentally superimposed the first page of each book, one over the other, a hollow had been formed.

A letter-shaped hollow.

The hollow had been filled with light, as if intense energy was stored inside. It could only be one thing: a letter from the One Book. This was how Saunier had done it. He had hidden the One Book within the four, in such a way that no one could find it, unless of course, they were genetic immortals, with a photographic memory, an EM sense and they knew what to look for.

Still, finding that letter did not make a book. I had trouble understanding how the Book could be pulled out of there, if I could only see the shapes its letters

made. More examination was needed. I tightened my radar sense around the four books once more, tweaking the EM lines to make the books open up simultaneously.

Focusing on the superimposed front pages again, I located the first letter readily enough, using the same trick as before. As soon as I closed in on it, the hollow became more defined, allowing me to perceive the light emanating from within it once more.

It was there all right.

Something about it didn't make sense. This was happening in my mind, not in the real world. I was visualizing those pages. I wasn't superimposing the real paper. In fact, it would be impossible. There was no way to bring those four specific locations physically together closely enough, hidden as they were, within the molecules of the paper.

How could I pull that letter out of my mind's vision into reality, let alone an entire book?

There was another problem. The light in the letter. I could imagine this mystical original book might be filled with energy but I could not understand how I could see that energy in my mind when I was playing with imaginary copies of those pages. I was missing something.

From the shape of the hollow, I identified the letter as *Bet*, from the Hebraic alphabet. It fulfilled the role of either the *B* or *V* letters in the English language. I was on the right track. The Abbey had said the One Book was the original copy of the ancient testament, the Torah, written in Hebrew.

I thought of the incident with the rock, calling up the vivid memories. There had been a lot of energy in there too. Sauniere had used the energy to act as *stuffing* for a thin layer of matter. He had stretched a single layer of molecules over the energy, the most he could manage at the time. He had constructed it in two stages, first the basic shape, then adding a bit more definition and thickness to the surface, giving the rock its final shape and color.

He'd been practicing. He had needed the experience before taking on the creation of the four books. He had started by creating two identical rocks, preparing himself for the real task ahead. I'd gotten some practice too, although it had been a tad unexpected, when the rock blew up in my face. I had moved the EM lines instinctively, encapsulating the exploding energy, containing it. I'd then used other lines to stretch the *skin* back over it.

I had also levitated the rock by using EM lines.

Connecting levitation with Dr Phillippe's last presentation, made me realise what he had been driving at. It was all about electromagnetic lines. EM forces weren't part of nature, they underlay it. Dr Phillippe had been insisting EM forces were the beginning of it all. Matter was secondary, EM energy was primary.

We'd had it wrong all along.

Everything re-organized into a new configuration. The key was in my EM sense. Proof could be found in my impossible weight. Dr Phillippe had insisted I ought to weigh almost a ton, because of the amount of iridium in me. Yet the scale showed my regular weight. The explanation was that I did weigh a ton but something stopped the weight from expressing itself. The answer, according to Dr Phillippe,

was that I believed I was at normal weight. Subconsciously using EM energy, my belief was preventing my body from being heavy.

I was influencing not only matter but the very force of gravity.

I took my mind off the books for a moment, focusing it on myself, looking for proof. The EM lines appeared, bunched in groups below me, flowing over everything like water, waiting to be noticed. More importantly, my blinders removed, I now saw masses of EM waves intersecting with the waves generated by the Earth, many more than before.

It explained how gravity could be subordinated to EM energy. The EM energy matrix was behind everything. Gravity existed only because of the presence of matter and matter was, at the core, composed of spinning EM energy. My weight was altered by the density of my EM field. It all made sense.

I looked at the spinning EM waves beneath my feet again, seeing how they were supporting me. I removed them, one by one, weakening my field. The soles of my shoes compressed down with an audible sound. The rock groaned and cracked beneath me, not used to supporting such a massive weight.

I replaced the lines I had removed, removing the dangerous pressure on the floor. On impulse, I added more EM lines to the waves, increasing the density, just to see what would happen. Before I knew it, my feet had left the floor and I had floated up to the ceiling. I was levitating! I moved myself around, getting the feel of sliding through the air. It was exhilarating. Calming down, I returned my feet to the ground.

Bringing my attention back on the four books, I finally saw them for what they were: a clever containment field for the one book. Saunier had made the same breakthrough and had applied his newfound knowledge expertly. All that remained for me was to find the trigger which would release the containment field, as with Saunier's rock.

I visualized the four books again. The four books snapped open, on the exact page I had just visualized. There was now a link between the physical books and those in my mind. Closing my eyes, I returned to the first letter I had found, instinctively knowing it was the place where the unraveling would begin.

This was the first letter of the first Book, written by someone unknown, supposedly to guide us through the ages, to prepare us for what was coming. No matter its origin, or its antiquity, its complexity bespoke of overwhelming knowledge at the time of its making.

A feeling of awe suffused me.

My mind filled with a mix of excitement and apprehension, I seized upon the first letter, poring over its every little detail, looking for the trigger point. Right there! How could I have missed it before? Two intertwined EM waves, flying off from the letter, heading deep into the book. I chased them, floating my awareness over the two curling, spinning waves, racing along to see where they would lead me.

I was in a different world, composed of spinning atoms in a vast space, double EM lines spinning between them. The whole reminded me, for some reason, of a giant, electrical circuit. The lines I chased were intertwined between the atoms, flowing around their connections and flying off further still. I felt something in the

distance. It seemed to be another sun, a powerful brilliance, the second letter of the book. The twined EM lines were heading directly towards it.

As I approached, I slowed down by latching my attention onto the spinning EM lines, using them as a brake. My action sent a massive pull on the lines, reverberating backwards towards the first letter. It hit with a jarring impact, dislodging the letter and sending it careening towards me. It flew out of the void at a fantastic speed, scooping me along with it, on its insane flight towards the second letter.

I felt an acceleration as the letters neared, two gigantic suns each more massive than the other. The spinning EM lines were being reeled in, pulling us together with ever-increasing speed. After a final, unbelievable burst of acceleration, the two letters smashed together, binding themselves to one another in a conflagration of immense power.

Their impact sent another shock wave flying along two more spinning EM waves, heading off to what had to be the third letter of the One Book. I felt the return of the shockwave, setting off another rewinding reaction, and we were off, chasing the EM lines to the third letter.

It continued with ever-increasing speed. As the aligned letters increased in number, their pull magnified geometrically. Once started, the process was unstoppable and I was along for the ride. I could no longer sense my body, nor return to it. My awareness was glued to the letters as if my very fate were intertwined with them.

Since the process had become automatic, I had little to do except reflect on my situation. Saunieres method had been designed to unravel automatically. A tiny prod was all it had taken. Stretching my awareness upwards, I was able to pull back from the accumulating letters, looking at them with a new perspective.

The letters were forming a strand. A long, twisting strand.

Although I had never studied Hebrew, I could somehow understand each letter. On the surface, I seemed to indeed be reading from the Torah. Below the surface of the text, it was another matter entirely. Each of these letters was replete with meaning, a million sub-contexts all rolled into one.

The shape of each letter was as meaningful as the symbolism it expressed. The whole brought with it a unique vibration, almost a palpable sound, expressed within the EM waves. Each letter vibrated on its own but also joined its vibration with that of its neighbour, making a song the likes of which I had never experienced, with notes of a pureness not intended for human ears.

I was transported by the emotions of the song, completely lost to it.

The meaning built into the song expressed itself in a way no words had ever achieved, teaching me, showing me where we had come from, how we had begun. As each new letter attached itself to the ever-lengthening string, I was taken on an incredible adventure, mankind's adventure, through endless generations, filled with challenges and difficult choices.

We kept learning and growing up, finding out more about who we were and what this world was all about. We built and explored, deepening our understanding all the while. When we thought we knew it all, history taught us again, never stopping our education. No matter what challenges faced us, we never stopped, never gave up, driven by an inner spark.

It was not only mankind's story, it was the story of each of us. Each person was a unique adventure contributing its parts to the whole, adding its insight into everything. Everyone was there, all those I had known and those I had not, the entire past, right to the present. Somehow these words from the Torah held all history, all knowledge, within their vibrating, spinning masses. No human could have put that all there.

The story was designed to bring the reader to this very moment. I wanted to read on into the future, absorbing all I could, but I was disturbed by the next letter. It was brighter than the others had been, different, the last letter. There was no future. I watched it accelerate towards me, bringing the end ever closer. When I smashed into it, the story stopped cold, leaving me hanging, a story without an ending.

The last letter had released a phenomenal amount of energy, causing the giant strand to snap like a whip. My end was sent flying into an arc, returning me to the beginning of the strand. We hit, fusing both ends together. The looped strand twirled around itself, everything spinning madly. Order appeared out of the chaos, the twirling strands connecting together at regular intervals, forming an endless ladder spiraling away into space.

The interconnections brought past and present close together, everything feeding in on itself, reacting to its own changes. Our history was not dead, it was alive. It was all still there, available to each of us, built into this woven matrix, information flowing back and forth, connecting everything together.

I realized the strand looked like DNA.

Dr Phillippe's words came back to me, when he said our DNA was an EM receiver/transmitter. DNA was our link to ancestral history. It was built right into each of us, a physical representation of the spiritual link connecting us together, through time and space.

An overwhelming peace overtook me. The revelations spread, changing all they touched. I reached out and touched the strand. I could now hold it. I saw how the energy stored within the letters was waiting to be released.

I let it out slowly, not knowing what to expect. I need not have feared. The energy spun out forming a crystalline matrix beneath the letters, expanding and joining with the surrounding letters. Slowly, the matrix expanded into a solid shape, gelling into a reality that kept increasing until suddenly something was there that had not been before.

I opened my eyes, released from my task and returned to my body. The four books were gone. In their place, an amazing sight, bathed in a gentle radiating light, illuminating me within its restful glow.

The One Book.

Weissmuller Recollections, 2005-Present

Part Four

For almost two weeks following the American attack, the underground fortress was in utter chaos. I maintained a low profile by spending most of my time working with my team of archaeologists. Despite the pressures I kept them under, they were getting extremely excited.

Earlier, they had made an astounding discovery. A terrible disease had ravaged the last crop of Neanderthals to inhabit the caves. The disease had appeared after three generations, the same period of time required to bring on the immortality effect.

It could not be coincidence.

Somehow, thirty-six thousand years ago, the caves caused a genetic change in the Neanderthals, bringing on a deadly disease. Neanderthals had died out around that time. Were the two facts linked?

Had the spores caused the extinction of the Neanderthals, paving the way for men? What about the pandemic raging across our world? Was it related? It appeared three generations after our exposure to the spores. Could the Abbey, in their stupid machinations to capture the Greyman, have accidentally brought about the end of the human race?

No matter my disdain for the average human, the world would be a different place without any of them in it. Their absence could well drive me mad. The numbness would take over and I would lose myself in the shadows.

The only thing left was to continue exactly as I had done so far, to prepare for my confrontation with the Greyman by remaining in Sirenne's shadow. The task might prove challenging. O'Flanahan's ferreting had uncovered my secret exit out of the caves. Coulter had played a hand, with his installation of security cameras in most corridors. Although free of annoying bodyguards, I was increasingly constrained to those activities Briar might do.

Dr Phillippe invited us to the auditorium, intent on explaining his developing theories about the immortality spores. While I was interested in what he had to say, I worried about what this knowledge might do to Sirenne. While his abilities were powerful, he was still unable to use them properly. Dr Phillippe's talk could change all that.

I wanted Sirenne dependant on my advice, not listening to the clever Dr Phillippe. I detoured down a different corridor, going past a cleaning supply closet containing what I sought. I was barely delayed, just enough to be fashionably late at the auditorium. I seated myself near Coulter and Sirenne, primed for the first opportunity to deal with Dr Phillippe.

An opening presented itself almost instantly. A woman rolled in a tray filled with pastries and other refreshments, giving us an opportunity to serve ourselves. I used the occasion to approach the doctor and ask a few questions about his upcoming conclusions. He refused to elucidate.

It sealed his fate. No matter what he was about to say, it was too dangerous to let him say it. Refilling his tea while talking to him, I surreptitiously added several drops of bleach, from the supply closet. Bleach was normally too caustic to be swallowed unnoticed but I knew the numbing spores would dull the sharp burn and taste of the bleach in the mouth and the throat. The stomach was another matter. Dr Phillippe was not sufficiently

imbued with spores to protect his stomach long from the bleach. He was sure to be incapacitated in some way.

My plans almost fell to naught. It took at least ten minutes for the bleach to take effect and Dr Phillippe was barreling towards his conclusions. I interrupted him, discoursing at length about my theories concerning the Neanderthals and their coincidental deadly disease. By happenstance, my comment offended Raymonde Leblanc. Much time was wasted dealing with her emotional flare-up. She eventually left, so upset that her walk was unsteady.

I continued by arguing with O'Flanahan, wasting yet more time. When all was said and done, to my delight, Dr Phillippe was looking distinctly unwell. My delay had done its job. It took a little while longer but I was quite satisfied when he fell to the floor, unable to continue. Accompanied by his assistant, he hurried out, intent on reaching a nearby washroom.

My window of opportunity was exceedingly narrow. The bleach would not keep Dr Phillippe occupied forever. As Briar, I became overly concerned about the doctor's state and went to check on him. Hurrying down the hall, I killed both of them, searching Dr Phillippe's body quickly. I found a lonely cube of spores, perhaps intended as part of his presentation. I ingested it immediately, feeling the welcome boost of energy. I ran out of the washroom, keeping close to the wall.

Once out of camera range, I turned around and came back into view as Briar, pretending to find the dead bodies in horror. The trick was blatant. I could hardly believe it when they fell for it. Once more, I aimed their suspicions towards Weissmuller, ensuring they would not suspect me.

Our conversation continued in Coulter's caves. I took advantage of the situation by turning off his security cameras from the main control panel. Now, my movements would be entirely unmonitored. I offered to go see Dr Phillippe's physicist team, to figure out what was left unsaid from his presentation.

Of course, I had no intention to do any such thing. Those physicists had to die.

I attended to the task quickly, spending only what time was necessary to ensure all were dead. I destroyed their files and headed down to the lower caves to my team. Isolated as they were, they had remained unaware of what was occurring in the upper caves.

Upon my arrival, they surrounded me, amazingly excited. Another discovery had been made, in the oldest Neanderthal graves, dated more than one hundred and twenty-five thousand years ago. This morning, they had found the bones of the baby. The Neanderthal, a female, had been pregnant when she died. Inside her were the bones of a tiny human baby.

Humans had arisen from the Neanderthals but not through the process of evolution. Our human race had been created by the spores. The ramifications kept piling up, latching together as neatly as could be. Once humans had been created, the spores had killed off the Neanderthals, with a pandemic disease.

We owed so much to these caves. At first, the iridium meteorite had removed our competition, the dinosaurs. The iridium had soaked into the mammals, sparking our evolutionary growth, bringing about our eventual awakening into consciousness. Neanderthals had been removed, improved humans created.

It reeked of Purpose. The spores were following an agenda and I was its end product. What I had suspected all along was true. God was real. He was out there, working hard, showing me the way.

I could not fail him.

The moment for hesitation was gone. There was no stopping these events or what I had to do. This was the night when it would begin. The time for shadows was gone. Soon, I would step into the light.

I eliminated my team, torturing them perfunctorily. Anyone would assume this was more of the same from Weissmuller. Leaving my team's bodies where they had fallen, I went off to deal with the rest of the people in the caves.

To my surprise, I found it unnecessary. Coulter had called a general evacuation, due to the increasing light. I had noticed the brightness but light had long ago ceased to harm or bother me. Average humans, even if partially affected by spores, could not hope to experience such protection. Coulter was evacuating the whole group, saving me the trouble of eliminating them. This then, left me with only one objective.

O'Flanahan.

I ran down the corridor to his caves, hoping he hadn't left the caves yet. That idiotic buffoon had been plaguing me since the first day I met him. His opinion had always been a counterpoint, giving Sirenne alternate points of view, perpetually messing with my plans. It was time to remove him, once and for all.

Reaching his caves, I heard a faint noise. Turning, I saw O'Flanahan in the distance, disappearing around a tunnel corner. I ran all out, eager to rid myself of that pest. When I got to where I'd just seen him, he had somehow managed to reach the far end of the next tunnel, already vanishing around the corner of it.

I screamed out his name but he never answered. I ran even faster, reaching the end of the tunnel in seconds but once more, O'Flanahan had managed to reach the far end of the corridor. This was impossible. Perhaps the brightness of the light was causing illusions. Was I even following O'Flanahan, or was it some imaginary ghost?

I kept up the pace, chasing him relentlessly. He always stayed ahead of me, apparently not even aware I was there. He never seemed to hurry, walking nonchalantly, like he didn't have a care in the world. I raged at him, running and running, trying to catch him, like a mouse in a maze.

I stopped running. This was insane, it was driving me mad. If I wasn't careful, I would end in a numbness frenzy and that I did not want. I had to remain in control. My goal had been to remove O'Flanahan and I had failed. I wasn't even sure I had been following him now, perhaps inventing his presence in my eagerness to be rid of him. He had never answered me, never turned around, never changed his pace.

Wherever he was, I had failed to find him, deluding myself into chasing a ghost. I returned to O'Flanahan's caves, looking through his things, trying to figure out where he might have gone. I found nothing, which surprised me. I would have thought a man like O'Flanahan, obsessed with conspiracies, would write everything down.

I continued to search for him, ending up in the long tunnel under Etretat. I continued on, reaching the small glade at the end of the ancient tunnels. I felt out of control, unnerved by O'Flanahan's disappearance. Had he joined up with the Abbey? Was he hiding somewhere, scared out of his wits?

I waited in the glade through the night, taking the time to finish jotting down my experiences, not sure I would ever get another chance. Long ago, I began writing these memoirs to leave some explanation of how much I suffered and what I had to go through in order to fulfill my Purpose. Now, here I am, at the end of my long trail. I have faced all the trials successfully, navigated all the dangers.

I am not sure I will ever return to these journals. I hope whoever finds them will know how important they are. Now, it is time to leave all that behind. My preparations are over. I have reached the endgame, the shadows are gone. The caves are empty, leaving only Sirenne. I will now go and do what I can to help him.

He has to find the One Book, so I can take it from him.

Paul Sirenne

Chapter 10

Raymonde Saves the Day.

Raymonde simply stood there, horrified by her connection to the pandemic. The soldiers sensed this was their only opportunity and opened fire. A dozen machine guns exploded into violent fury, sending hundreds of bullets towards Raymonde.

Not a single one hit her.

Her aura, hovering just outside her body, was roiling with contained energy. Every bullet entering the aura was deflected automatically, bouncing the lethal hail back towards the soldiers.

„Raymonde? What's going on?“

„Oh Paul, We caused the pandemic. It comes from us. We killed all those babies.“

„Aww, Raymonde... no...“

„I learned it from that American General. He spoke the truth... I knew it before, deep inside. Something was going on behind everything but I just couldn't face the

truth, the horrible truth... I'm the cause, with my aura changing things all the time."

"Listen Raymonde, those soldiers are shooting at you. There might be a better time than now to deal with this issue."

"They can't touch me. I'm immortal... Doomed to live forever with the knowledge of what I have done..."

"Raymonde, that's not true. You are forgetting all sorts of details in your sorrow. We did not know about this. We are not the originator of these plans in which we are embroiled..."

"I know you speak the facts as you see them... but the magnitude of this crime, to bring about the death of humanity... It is a stain upon my soul... I cannot stand it."

"I know it hurts now. Just remember: until we hold all the answers, we will not know the true meaning of things. Perhaps the death of those children was necessary."

"What could make something like that necessary?"

"I do not know... Perhaps to spare them the coming calamities... Listen, I know your heart is wounded but there must be a valid reason, there has to be... Now stop those soldiers from shooting at you and take control of the situation..."

"Okay Paul..."

"I'll be right here, if you need me."

Raymonde looked up, her exchange with Paul over in less than a second. She uttered a single word.

"STOP."

The word exploded from her with a thunderclap, a wave of energy careening outward. The remaining soldiers fell backwards, the guns dropping to the ground from their nerveless fingers. She stood among the officials, glowing with energy, impervious to harm. Her radar sense had now completely melded with the EM sense. She was getting exponentially stronger, her control extending to inanimate objects, everything a dance of flowing energy.

Raymonde looked deep into everyone in the room, sensing their mood was mixed. Some wanted to believe her, others hated her. Many did not know what to think. Raymonde knew this was her chance to fix things but she was still struggling with the recent revelations.

Something else was going on outside. It had started far to the west, a deep rumble pushing at her aura. The faint vibration increased rapidly. Everything began shaking.

It was an earthquake.

The magnitude of this earthquake was beyond any ever recorded. Raymonde instinctively knew it had started along a fault to the north of the Mediterranean Sea. A tendril of cracking ground had snaked off the shaking fault, gathering speed and energy along the way, racing along the land until it reached the Mediterranean. The water had fallen into the gaping crack, pushing its sides and forcing it wider by the second.

Driven by the power of the Mediterranean falling into it, the widening fault had begun curving towards Israel. In Jerusalem, the shaking of the ground kept

increasing in intensity, bringing buildings crashing to the ground, shaken to pieces as the ground gave way under their foundations.

People were running out of the conference hall, its roof breaking apart. Many were killed where they stood by falling debris, unable to escape in the chaos. Nowhere was safe. Raymonde ran towards Avi and Ziva, still crouched behind the podium where they had hidden during the shooting. She arrived just in time to deflect a large, falling piece of masonry.

„Come on, let's get out of here, this roof is about to collapse entirely.“

Holding her two friends by the arm, she walked steadily, moving as if she were unaffected by the earthquake. Raymonde noticed her strange stability, when she maneuvered deftly through a shaking minefield of debris, while holding her two friends aloft. It felt as if her feet were rooted to the ground.

„How do you think I am doing that, Paul?“

„Can you see your EM waves emanating everywhere around you? You are using them to stabilize yourself... Look below you. Can you see the Earth's massive EM waves? Do you see how yours are floating just above them, using them for support? ... Of course... that's what Dr Phillippe must have meant... Why didn't I understand this before?... Raymonde, look behind you, what do your footsteps look like?“

She turned and looked.

„They're really deep...“

„Like you weigh a ton, right?“

„Yes, exactly.“

„Dr Phillippe thought I should weigh almost one thousand kilograms. The problem was that I didn't...“

„Something else is happening out there Paul... The earthquake is just the beginning... We've got to get out of here...“

Raymonde warned Avi and Ziva to hold on tight and jumped forward in huge leaps, avoiding falling debris with ease. Her two friends held on for dear life, when Raymonde, in one final jump, cleared the building and landed on a large pile of rubble, giving her a good view of the horizon. Looking towards the west, she located the Temple of the Mount, far away, still intact in the center of a ruined Jerusalem.

She watched in horror as the Temple broke apart, the huge golden dome collapsing into ruins, the sacred Mount ripped into pieces by a powerful shaking of overwhelming violence. The earthquake had ripped the city of Jerusalem in two, a widening chasm left in its wake. Raymonde saw the massive crack continuing to expand, racing in their direction, increasing in speed all the while. They had only seconds before it reached them.

„Paul, do you see that?“

„Yes, of course I do. I am using your eyes after all.“

„What are we going to do?“

„I think I've got the answer. Look at your EM waves. We have both been using them subconsciously. We are able to change our weight by increasing or decreasing our attraction to the waves of the earth...“

The crack speeding towards them was widening by the second. Raymonde, Avi and Ziva would fall into it in moments. The shaking had reached an unbearable

level, making it nearly impossible for Raymonde to jump with any accuracy, no matter her stability.

„Hurry up Paul...“

„Give me control of your EM waves... There... Now let me mass a bunch under you. Okay... Here we go, I'm going to increase the strength of the waves...“

Suddenly, Raymonde grew taller, her body rising up ever so slowly. She tightened her grip on her two friends.

„Hold on,“ she screamed over the noise.

Paul frantically pushed more EM waves below her until, suddenly, her feet left the ground. Raymonde floated into the air, just as the land mass broke apart and fell away below them. She dropped a bit when the chasm deepened but, throwing more EM waves below as Paul had shown her, raised up again, until she was hovering effortlessly. Avi and Ziva, hanging on for dear life, looked down into the bottomless abyss.

„My Lady... You can fly!“ exclaimed Ziva, overcome by the impossible display.

„Apparently so. Just in time too, it seems. All right, let's try to get to safety.“

Raymonde moved some of her EM waves to one side, creating an imbalance in the field around her. She slid sideways, moving slowly towards the closest rim of the newly-formed precipice.

„That's it, I'm getting it, Paul,“ she exclaimed, reaching the edge.

„You have it under control now?“

„Yes... I can't believe it but... yes, I've got control of my flying.“

„Okay. I've got to go. Try to save as many as you can. I'll try to solve things from here.“

„Good luck.“

„You too. It looks like you'll need it.“

Paul's presence faded. She increased the strength of the EM fields, raising herself higher in the air, using the increased height to scan the horizon.

„Do you see all those poor people? Look at the chaos everywhere. We've got to do something to help them. I'm going to drop you somewhere safe and bring some people to you. Will you be able to help them?“

„We will do what we can, My Lady.“

Raymonde located a higher plateau that seemed more stable than the rest and sped up towards it, flying at a high rate of speed. She had to slow down as some point. Avi and Ziva were having trouble dealing with the intense winds buffeting them. With every second, she found it easier to fly, her mind managing the EM waves subconsciously.

After dropping her two friends near a small stone building that had escaped damage, she flew off, heading back towards the chasm. Prior to this, there had been too much mayhem to do anything but try to escape total annihilation. Raymonde had managed to keep an eye on her two friends but she doubted she could have handled more.

Even now, she still only had two hands. There was only so much she could do. She resolved to do the best she could, as fast as she could. Speed was certainly something she had in plentiful supply. Her manipulation of EM waves was almost instinctive now. She was able to swerve and swoop around effortlessly with barely a thought.

Using her expanded radar sense, she located the auras within her domain. Those unharmed were imprinted with instructions to help the wounded reach the plateau where Ziva and Avi waited. It was a solid location, a big old piece of rock that had already shown its ability to survive strong seismic shock.

The imprint she forced on the auras below multiplied her efforts. Everyone felt compelled to help everyone else and head towards the place of safety. The vision was overwhelming and clear.

Help your brothers in need. Head to safety.

She then hunted for the auras too damaged to move. Identifying their individual wounds quickly, she healed them and sent them on their way, imprinting them with the same mental message. Head towards the plateau, where safety awaits. If she encountered someone too far gone to heal, she eased their pain and helped their passing, releasing their tortured souls.

Some were in places where they could not get out of. Raymonde flew down to them, grabbing as many as she could manage, floating them to safety. She projected an aura of serenity and peace to keep the wounded and frightened calm. She had no time to pamper anyone.

Raymonde knew the tremendous earthquake would not be the end of things. There were powerful aftershocks coming. As well, the chasm had come from the Mediterranean, with its waters pouring into the deep chasm. At some point it would hit bottom and an immense shockwave would bounce back. Sooner or later, an immense wall of water was going to come this way, destroying everything along its path. Anyone left alive would be drowned in its wake. Every city, every town would be swept away. Most of central Israel would be eradicated.

She was also afraid of another repercussion. The American's revelation about the pandemic's origins had been a planned event. There was no question in Raymonde's mind that this information had been simultaneously released worldwide. Many more people would come to see the Immortals as enemies to the people. She was worried about Paul and his safety.

„Don't worry about me. Everything's going just as it should. You just keep saving those people.“

„There's so many, Paul. I can't save them all.“

„No, you can't. Concentrate on saving those you can. Everyone you protect will be one more who survives this chaos. I also think you are right about that coming wave, so you'd better hurry...“

Their conversation was interrupted by the first aftershock. The shaking was severe and everything not already destroyed was laid asunder. However, Raymonde's plateau had been a good choice. It rode the shocks like a cowboy on a bucking bronco, always moving in a way to minimize the impact on the people there. She did what she could to help, expanding her EM waves over it and using it to soften the most brutal blows.

After the worst was passed, Raymonde rushed back in, saving three people from certain death, pulling them up and heading back to the plateau. Arriving, she noticed few had actually managed to climb to the top. Many had been killed by avalanches of rock. Flying over the edge of the plateau, she swooped down to the

bottom and began ripping the rock apart with her bare hands, throwing the heavy chunks left and right.

She continued moving up the slope steadily, carving a ramp for the people. She felt frustrated with the slowness of the task and began pushing frantically at the rocks with her EM waves, trying to move them along faster. It had an effect, the rocks almost moving off by themselves, requiring minimal effort.

Finally she was done. The people ran up the ramp, heading towards the imprinted destination, the stone hut. Raymonde flew to Avi and Ziva, warning them people would soon arrive. The two had been busy, gathering material for fire and repairing the roof of the small building.

Raymonde knew water would be on everyone's mind, so she expanded her aura downward, looking deep into the ground. She found a water source, an underground river, not too far from the surface. Taking Avi with her, she flew to the spot, about half a kilometer from the building. Dropping him off, she focused on the shallowest layer of rock over the underground river and began pounding the earth with EM waves, breaking the bedrock and sending it flying. Her efforts were rewarded, a powerful blow causing a crack to the rushing river below. A jet of water shot skyward, flying up to a height of twenty meters, before falling back into the large depression Raymonde had made. The depression filled quickly and Avi filled a water pouch, drinking from it in wonder.

„The water is so pure, My Lady. I have never tasted better. It is a miracle.“

„Hurry back to Ziva. She will need you. I will return when I can.“

With that, Raymonde flew up into the air, heading off to save more people.

Chapter 11

Weissmuller.

The One Book floated gently, its golden surface resplendent in the fungus light. I could hardly take my eyes off it, feeling a strange kinship, the very sight evoking ancestral memories. My EM sense took in its sun-like appearance, its rays reaching deep into my DNA, blasting it with its message.

I could understand how this Book would have affected any whose eyes rested upon it. We were all within its spell, had always been, since the very beginning of time. I felt as if I were bathing in the words of God. No wonder the Abbey had tried to protect this artefact from the Greyman.

I tweaked my EM lines and the Book slid towards me until I could grasp it in my hands. It stopped floating when I touched it and I felt its considerable weight. Strangely enough, the One Book wasn't a book but a scroll, made of golden cloth. There was iridium here, lots of it, mixed with iron, giving it a soft yellow color, reminiscent of gold. However, it was far heavier than gold.

I unrolled the thick, metallic cloth, examining the text inside, looking at the letters previously only seen in my mind. They were assembled in blocks of forty-nine lines, each line containing forty-nine letters. There were no stops or breaks

between any of them. Each letter was so sharply defined that it appeared pressed into the metallic fibres, rather than written.

I looked at the ancient words, reading them as if they were from my mother tongue. The process of manifesting the One Book had connected me with its inner knowledge, giving me an understanding of history, and the races of man, unlike any before me. I remembered all I had experienced, as if I had been there, in every one of those moments in history. I would understand every tongue spoken to me, having lived in every tribe, every city.

I suddenly felt old, older than was possible to imagine. What had the Book done to me?

For once I knew the answer. The Book had opened a door within me, a door which had always been there. I had just not been ready to look at it. It connected me with everyone else, my DNA acting as a transceiver to everything. They were talking to me and I to them, on a level beyond any human experience. Deep within, we were all connected.

I thought of the Greyman. What was his connection to this Book? Why did he seek it so? I looked to the Book for answers but for once it gave none. The Greyman was not within its words. Whatever he was, it was outside the history of man. Yet, one thing was revealed by the book. The Greyman was somehow bound by the Book.

He was not only bound by it, he was protected by its very existence.

The Greyman could never be destroyed, unless the One Book was destroyed first.

This was why the Greyman had sought the Book so desperately, why Sauniere had hidden it, the reason for all of the Abbey's tricks along the centuries. If anyone learned the true secret of the Book, that it conferred a protection to the Greyman, he would become vulnerable. His grip on humankind could finally be broken. The only problem was that the One Book was indestructible. Sauniere had found a trick to hide it but he had not destroyed it. He never had the strength. All that had powered him were a few grams of spores.

Sauniere was not me.

I had so many spores in me now, that I was more iridium than flesh. More than that, the One Book had shown me the method of its own destruction. I had seen it in the first letter, long before I knew what I was looking at. There was a way to free ourselves from the shackles placed upon us by the Greyman.

The story had begun when that meteorite had hit the Earth, sixty-five million years ago. A shard had shot out of it and, crashing down on the bedrock, created the caves of Etretat. A shard made of iridium and iron. Like the One Book. The shard was where the One Book originated. To destroy the Book, I had to return it to the shard, hidden deep within the caves. It was why the Greyman had claimed the caves as his. He knew the seeds of his destruction were hidden here, waiting for one such as I.

This was my true task. Not the one the Abbey had planned but, rather, the one my training told me needed to be done. My father's training, teaching me to think for myself, to make my own decisions. Behind that training lay another reason, harder to express. My changes were showing me such a different perspective to

reality that I had started to believe there was a deeper meaning to what was happening.

It spoke of purpose, deep purpose.

Manifesting the One Book had proven reality was not what I originally thought. Someone had written Mankind's history, long before it had occurred. Someone had seen into the future and coded it into the One Book. Space and time, matter and gravity, all were subordinated to his will.

It was difficult to believe that this Someone was anyone else but God. I felt crazy admitting God had selected me for this task. Why me? Now, that question no longer mattered. The question had become: would I have the nerve to do what I felt I had to do? There was no concrete proof this was the right decision, no signed order from above.

In the end, making the final choice was left up to me.

Someone cleared their throat behind me. I whirled around, noticing Briar standing there, surprised he had managed to come so close without my detecting him. When had he come in? I examined the smoothness of his field. The spores within him made his field slippery, hard to perceive or pin down. This was odd. It took a large dose of spores to achieve this effect.

„You've done it, Paul. It's incredible. You found the One Book. Where was it? How did you do it?“ he exclaimed, with forced joviality.

„Briar... uhm... Well, it's a bit hard to explain. I guess it was hidden in the four books after all, exactly as Leblanc said it was. It just took me a while to pin it down. Why are you full of spores, Briar? When did you get the opportunity to take so many? Did Dr Phillippe give that much to you?“

„Yes, he did. The spores help me deal with the bright light. I figured, if I took more, it would be...“

„You're lying. That's not the real reason. I can feel it. What are you lying about? Why lie anyway?“

Something was off. Briar was looking at me oddly, a fierce glare in his eyes.

„Paul... really... You've known me for years. There's no need for these questions. Allow me to explain... It's all because of the Abbey.“

„The Abbey? What does the Abbey have to do with you taking tons of spores?“

„Oh, Paul, how can you be so blind? The Abbey has everything to do with it. They hate the spores... and they hate immortals. They would have killed me instantly if they'd known I was immortal. They hate you too, you know.“

There was something I was not getting. What was Briar talking about? When had he become an immortal? ... Unless... unless...

No! It couldn't be, yet... yet, it had to be.

„Weissmuller.“

„Ahhh, finally... Yes, Paul... Weissmuller,“ he grinned. „Right here, in the immortal flesh, standing before you.“

As he spoke, Briar stood up straighter, the move somehow changing his entire posture. His face hardened, his gaze became monstrously cold, and Briar was gone, as if he had never been. This was an impostor. This was Weissmuller.

„That's right, you finally see me as I really am, after all this time. The big reveal, eh?“

„Bri... Weissmuller. Why? ... My father, the attack on Raymonde, all the killings, what was it all for?“

„I'm terribly sorry about all those things. They were all necessary, part of your training.“

„My training? What training?“

„You were so soft when I met you, Paul. I couldn't believe you'd make it through to the end. I had to toughen you up, give you something to motivate you. It was all in a good cause, I assure you.“

„A good cause? Are you totally insane? You killed my FATHER, you ripped him apart, for Pete's sake,“ I screamed, having trouble restraining my feelings of betrayal. This was Briar, my mentor, my friend... and now, he was gone, eaten up by the monster that had haunted me from the very beginning. It made me question everything about my life. How much of it had been my own? How much of me was me?

„Hey, calm down, Paul. There's no need to get so upset. The situation is really very simple. I had to do what I did. Now it's done and we're here. It's in the past. What counts now is what will happen today,“ he callously stated.

„Why are you here, Weissmuller?“

„I've come for the One Book. I need it to destroy the Greyman.“

His comment surprised me. Weissmuller was after the Greyman too? If he was, it explained a great many things.

„The One Book is not for you, Weissmuller.“

„Give it to me.“

„No.“

Weissmuller grew silent, looking quietly at me, as if he were in a quandary. His mouth squeezed tight and released several times before he managed to utter a reply.

„I've always liked you, Sirenne, right from the beginning. Sometimes I have felt that you were the son I never had, even taking over as mentor when your father was gone... I've never had feelings like that, not even with my own family... But now that we come to it, Paul, whatever I have felt for you pales to insignificance when compared to my true Purpose. It was I who brought you here. It was I who prepared you. You owe me. You cannot refuse me the One Book. It has been pre-ordained that I should have it. It is my Destiny!“

„You're off your rocker, Weissmuller. The One Book has nothing to do with you. It was up to me to bring it back from where it was hidden and now, I know what must be done with it. It must be destroyed and I am the only one who can do it.“

„You're WRONG!“ he screamed. „The Book can't be destroyed. It has to go to me. God prepared me all my life for this. The Book is MINE... and I will have it, one way or another.“

He lowered his shoulders, crouching into a jumping position, his hands held out like claws. This was getting serious. He intended to take it from me by force. I'd already fought him off once and had no desire to repeat the experience, even if I was now much more powerful. Luckily, I knew something he didn't.

„You can't even hold the One Book. I'm the only one who can. Look, I'll prove it to you.“

I tossed the One Book to the floor at Weissmuller's feet, apparently giving it to him. Piling EM lines over it, I added immeasurable weight to its already significant mass. Weissmuller, unable to see the lines, looked at me disbelievingly, not sure what I was up to.

„Go ahead. Pick it up. It should be easy if you are truly its intended keeper.“

He bent down, keeping his eyes on me, suspecting an attack. He could not look at the One Book directly, its radiance too bright, even with sunglasses and immortality protecting him. His hands slowly lowered until he felt the edge of the Scroll. He clasped onto it convulsively and tried to lift it. Nothing happened. He tried again, exerting himself to his utmost, but failed, his magnified strength no match for my EM pressure.

His eyes flying about wildly, he screamed wordlessly, returning to the book and pulling on it desperately, trying to move it in any way. Giving up, he fell on his haunches, seeming ready to cry. I moved the EM lines from the book, sliding them underneath. The One Book lifted gracefully into the air and slid lightly into my open hands.

The display of power did something to Weissmuller. He shook his head, grasping it with trembling hands, repeating the word *no* over and over again, as if the litany could erase what he had witnessed. His repetition continued non-stop, getting louder, until he was screaming at the top of his lungs.

His whole body vibrating with his screams, he jumped around madly, hands still clasped to his head. Eventually, he stopped speaking and just stood there. The only things moving were his eyes, rolling madly in their sockets, looking at everything but seeing nothing.

Then, they too stopped, coming to a focus on me. I looked deep into them, seeing no reason, only malevolent anger.

He launched himself at me.

The suddenness of the attack took me by surprise, his body slamming violently into my chest. I was thrown back, smashing into the wall. It ripped apart like rice paper. I flew through it, coming to rest on the far side of the corridor, along with a jumble of rocks.

„Weissmuller, stop...“

He wasn't listening, his mind gone, taken over by a berserker rage, perhaps the insanity the Abbey had alluded to. Jumping back up, he punched me, his arms moving so fast they became a blur. The jackhammer impacts pummelled me left and right, disorienting me briefly. I tried to stand up but he redoubled the ferocity of his attack, his feet joining in to the fray, launching an insane barrage of hits.

I felt nothing of it, my aura protecting me automatically. EM lines absorbed the blows, dissipating their energy. I sat for a while, watching Weissmuller going at it, then decided enough was enough. Fighting would get neither of us anywhere.

I shrugged him off, sending him flying down the length of the corridor, and stood up, gathering EM lines for stability. Increasing my weight and cradling the One Book in my arms, I began walking down the corridor, my feet leaving cracks in the stone floor.

I was going to take the Book to the deep, hidden caves. A chamber waited down there, calling to me. It was time for the Book to come home. Step by step, I walked

forward, slowly and resolutely, looking at the fallen Weissmuller with a steady gaze. Despite his insanity, he knew what I was up to.

Hitting me physically was useless, so he tried another tactic, seizing whatever came to his hands and throwing it at me. At first, it was storage cabinets, small tables, chairs, an electric golf cart. I continued walking, a step at a time, ignoring the objects crashing against me, ignoring Weissmuller. He raged in frustration, knowing his wildest efforts were not even slowing me down.

His source of ready munitions exhausted, he twirled on his feet and ran away, heading towards the main circular staircase. Wondering what he was up to, I hurried, almost catching him when he reached the staircase. Seeing my approach, he jumped over the railing, falling straight down the central shaft. He plummeted to the bottom, seventy-five meters below, crashing explosively into the concrete floor.

The dust settling, Weissmuller stirred, stood up, vacillating a bit, stunned by the impact of his fall. Shaking it off, he ran down a side tunnel. I raced down the stairs, knowing this could bode no good. I was halfway down when Weissmuller returned, brandishing several heavy gauge weapons. He'd broken into the armory.

Dropping the pile at his feet, he raised a machine gun and emptied its magazine directly at me. I perceived the bullets slicing through my radar field. Thickening the lines into a funnel shape, I forced the bullets into its center, slowing them down until they stopped moving, a meter from my body. Dropping the lump of lead to the ground, I resumed my walk down the stairs.

Weissmuller never stopped, lifting two bazookas and shooting them from a hip position. I thought his aim was off when the two projectiles shot right past me, missing my head by at least a meter. Down below, Weissmuller tossed several grenades at the staircase base and jumped to safety down an access tunnel.

Everything exploded all at once. Blown apart by the rockets above, and the grenades below, the staircase collapsed. Huge blocks of concrete hitting me, dust obscuring everything, I fell precipitously. Closing my eyes, my EM sense provided a crystal-clear view of everything. I reduced my weight until I was no longer falling but floating. The debris continued on its way, crashing to the ground explosively.

Weissmuller had not moved from the access tunnel, waiting for my reaction. Concrete debris littered the bottom of the staircase well, blocking all access to the first level hub. Floating to the bottom, I tracked Weissmuller's field. He was lying in the tunnel, unharmed but unmoving. I slid closer to investigate when he exploded into action, jumping up with the nozzle of a familiar looking object.

The foam gun.

He let go a torrent of the sticky, expanding stuff, jerking the nozzle around, intent on covering me as rapidly as possible. It was a good plan. The last time it had been used, the foam had hardened instantly, sealing me in a cocoon. This time however, the foam refused to stick, sliding off like pancake batter in an oiled skillet. My EM lines were acting as an immaterial barrier through which nothing could pass. I could not be trapped. I could not be killed.

I could not be stopped.

Weissmuller howled in rage, dropping the foam gun nozzle and kicking it away, seizing rock after rock and throwing them. He repeated the same movements over and over again, his mouth unconsciously opening and closing in arrhythmic

spasms. All reason was gone from this man. It seemed a sad sight to me, suddenly. Weissmuller was truly lost, his plans and aspirations come to naught.

I had wasted enough time. I needed to get to the deeper caves. I swivelled around in mid-air, examining the blocked access to the lower hub. It seemed pointless to try digging through it. I rotated my body until I was on a horizontal plane and accelerated right through the rubble.

I blasted through with such speed that my passage reduced the debris to dust, leaving a hollow tube behind. I headed towards the lagoon cave, reaching the access tunnel and floating through it, foregoing walking entirely. A noise told me Weissmuller was back on my trail. I continued on, ignoring him, convinced he could do nothing further.

I hadn't understood what his desperation could make him capable of doing. He came running, scrambling at a mad pace through the tunnel opening I had made, going down to the armory one more time. He came back out, holding a medium-sized pack.

It was the nuclear bomb the Americans had tried to use to destroy our caves.

„No, Weissmuller, don't. That's insane. Think about what you are doing,“ I screamed. He kept running without saying a word, getting closer and fiddling with the package, trying to activate it. I slid away from him, floating out to the center of the lagoon cave, until I was hovering about thirty meters over the water. I was not even sure if I could survive such a blast. I was sure Weissmuller couldn't.

He no longer cared. He was embarked on a berserker, numbness-induced rage, from which all logic had fled. He reached the edge of the platform, near the machine-gun turret, and, screaming at the top of his lungs, tossed the nuclear bomb, as he pressed the trigger button.

I had less than ten seconds.

No matter what my fate might be, I was unwilling to let the people in Etretat die. Seizing the falling bomb with EM lines, I shot it upwards towards the roof of the lagoon cave, with as much energy as I could muster. The bomb shot up with such speed that we experienced a sonic boom, followed by a rapid staccato crack when it shot through the rock strata above the lagoon cave, impelled by the implacable force of my will.

It began exploding six miles into the atmosphere, seven second after Weissmuller had launched it. I gave it another desperate push of acceleration, sending it off into space, where its explosion could do no harm. Satisfied, I began a slow descent through the air, still cradling the One Book in my arms. Above, Weissmuller looked at me in disarray, having done his all and failed.

Part of the roof structure collapsed, exposing the lagoon cave to the elements. Rain slashed in, from a monstrous storm outside. Lightning was flashing constantly, the crashing thunder overwhelming all other sounds. Ignoring the storm, I dropped lower, reaching the lagoon water and sliding into it. A splash told me Weissmuller had followed, still intent on stopping me.

I ignored him once more, sliding into the underwater tunnel and heading towards the underground river cave. EM lines showed the way, as clear as an arrow. I felt pulled forward by them, my floating body moving almost by itself, navigating the tight corners and turns of the underwater access tunnel.

Reaching the cave, I examined the jagged crack where the underground river flowed. Weissmuller arrived, stepped out of the water, his maniacal eyes broadcasting his murderous intent.

„Weissmuller, please. Stop this. You cannot stop me. Surely you can see that.“

„I... Will... Never... Stop,“ he articulated slowly, barely able to form words. He was preparing to launch himself at me once more. As he started his desperate leap, I suddenly understood how pointless this all was. Weissmuller had no power over me. None. I did not have to endure his attacks.

„STOP!“ I stated in a low voice. The word felt like a thunderclap, EM lines coming out from everywhere, following the word, and rolling tight around Weissmuller. He could not see them but he felt their effects when he was lifted up into the air and held there. He tried running, jumping, anything to get away but it was entirely ineffectual, his grasping limbs finding only air for purchase.

He continued flailing away, raging all the while, his body gesticulating madly. His movements increased in frenetic speed until, finally, after a final burst of insane movements, he gave up, letting his limbs drop to his sides, his head lolling about on his chest. The only sound coming from Weissmuller was a chilling laugh, devoid of any thought or reason.

Thinking he might have calmed down, I lowered him but, the moment his feet neared the floor, he began scrabbling at it, trying somehow, anyhow, to get at me again. He was impossible. I couldn't destroy him and I couldn't convince him to stop. The best I could achieve was a temporary stalemate, by keeping him floating out of harm's way.

Returning my attention to the crack in the ground, I saw a jagged opening and a raging current flowing by. When I closed my eyes, the scene changed completely, my EM sense revealing a multitude of lines, forming stairs, going down into a large corridor. More lines flowed invitingly on the floor, pulsing with energy, beckoning me on.

Cradling the One Book gently in my arms, I went down the staircase. In real life, I knew I was entering a raging river, a tube flowing with an unstoppable current of water. None but a true immortal could travel here. As I moved along the underwater corridor, Weissmuller was pulled along, still held by my EM lines.

It was only moments before he too was submerged, adding a slight drag to my progress. I tried to ignore it but he made that impossible by somehow latching on to a rock projection. I tried to pull him off but he resolutely dug his fingers into the rock wall.

I had no choice but to let him go, if I wanted to keep moving forward. Relaxing my EM lines, the current took hold of Weissmuller, sending his legs flailing behind him. He held on desperately to the rock projection and, with a herculean effort, folded his legs back in towards himself and pushed them down onto the bottom of the tunnel, carefully bracing himself against the current.

His balance regained, he let go of his anchor, pushing against the current with all his might. He took a careful step forward, his hands arcing towards me like claws. I had no time for this nonsense. What was with him? Why wouldn't he just give up? I sent a pulse of EM lines his way, feeling sure the river's current would do the rest for me.

The pulse hit him harder than I had intended, bowling him over head over heels, and he was gone, just like that. Using my radar field, I followed him for a while, watching him tumble out of control, pushed along by the terrible current, impelled irresistibly further away. He eventually moved beyond my range and I returned to my task.

With my eyes closed, I felt no water, no current. I was in an open corridor, shining with EM lines, leading me on with their gentle pulsing glows. I forgot all about Weissmuller.

Walking through the magical corridor, I saw a magnificent opening up ahead, glowing with a brightness so heavenly I was no longer sure I was alive. It bathed me in its glow and I yearned to get ever closer. This was the Book's home. This was where Mankind had originated. This was the center of things, the Caves of caves.

I floated towards the door. At some point, I ascended over a staircase, leaving the river behind. An entrance loomed before me. I could resist its call no further and entered. EM light was everywhere, flowing from a central source, the tip of the meteoritic shard, sticking down from the ceiling of the cave.

It looked like an inverted conical pyramid, glowing with energy that could not be contained. It was something primordial, predating everything. It had travelled through space for eons before arriving here. Something had come along with it, something from the beginnings of time, and it had chosen to come here.

It had brought the One Book, with all its history and its rules. I sensed that it had also brought the Greyman and... something else... No, someone else... The Other. It was nebulous, hard to clarify, but I knew it was all related. The Greyman, the Book, the Other... and me, brought here to end it all.

For that was what was facing me, facing us all: the ending. I could feel it deep inside my heart. Returning the One Book, the Scroll, to the shard would begin a process from which there was no return. Deep down, despite my personal terror at ending all that was familiar, I knew this was the right thing to do.

I lowered my feet back onto the ground, wishing to feel at least one familiar thing. I held the Scroll up, seeing beautiful EM lines flowing from it and heading directly into the shard. The One Book yearned to be put to rest.

I took the final step, reaching the shard's tip. The Scroll, pulsing with a fierce glow, lifted from my hands, unrolling at the same time. The two ends met, forming a large circle. Doing a bizarre dance, the ends spiralled inwards in opposite directions, forming a smaller tube. The text blocks lined up with those above and below. A dance of words, of knowledge, the dance of life, the whole pulsing with the heartbeat of the universe.

The heart at the center of things.

I saw it through the tube for a mere moment but it felt like an eternity. Then the dance was done, the tube was gone, the Scroll slowing back down to a large circle. I was bathed in its ardent emanations and I lost myself to it.

I watched as the Scroll floated towards the shard tip, wrapping itself into an orbit around it. Flashes of EM lightning sparked everywhere between the shard and the Scroll surface, and the One Book began its final dance. Its ends slid ever so slowly in opposite directions, tightening into a conical tube, getting ever tighter, the EM lightning flashing endlessly, until suddenly, it fused with the tip.

An impossibly bright, soundless flash exploded out of the shard, flying through me and passing on, expanding outwards in a ball of energy that grew ever bigger, expanding beyond the caves, beyond Etretat, Europe, the entire world, until it dissipated somewhere in space, far beyond our solar system.

When the energy flashed through me, something went with it. I couldn't tell what was gone but something was no longer there. The closest I could come to describing it was as if all boundaries had just vanished. I wasn't sure if this was a good thing or a bad thing. No matter what it was, it was done.

The heavenly light faded from the shard, dimming down until it was gone. With the shard complete again, the energy it had emanated vanished back into itself and its beautiful glow disappeared. I found myself looking at a normal cave, save for the shard tip sticking down from the roof... and a small table and chair in the corner.

It was such an incongruous sight that I thought I was hallucinating at first, but they were well and truly there. I approached the desk. It seemed plain and ordinary. Why was it here? Looking down, I noticed a small drawer below the desk. Sliding the chair back a bit, I opened the drawer and looked inside.

I saw several pencils, a sharpener, a well worn eraser... and a small journal, the Star of David drawn on its cover. Closing the drawer, I placed the journal on the desk, opening it as I slid the chair forward and sat down. I recognised the script immediately.

It was Maurice Leblanc's third journal.

Maurice Leblanc's Third Journal

Paul Sirenne:

Congratulations. I knew you could do it. I'm sure it was difficult enough but you got here just the same. If all I have planned has gone properly, the One Book has been destroyed, and it is you who have done it. As you may surmise, I too have found the Cave of caves, though not, I gather, through the same means you employed.

Six decades and my death separate us, my dear Paul, yet I feel I know you as well as if I had been there, by your side, all along your life. Like a novel in which I have carefully built up my most important character, I have developed who you would become. I was not alone in this endeavour, as you well know. Lupin was with me, as he has always been, helping guide me along the right path.

We were given the opportunity to choose one child each, who would participate in the Abbey's grand adventure. Both were considered excellent candidates. My son was killed, to my eternal sorrow, by that monster, Weissmuller. But Lupin's son lived on and through him, through you, I have been able to shape my dreams. I have placed you in the center of things and led you to the Cave of caves.

I was led to this place, like you, shortly after my resuscitation, while still affected by the spores. As soon as I entered here, I knew my life would no longer be my own. I saw it all laid out before me. I was to be a cog in the wheel of life, destined to prepare the way for another. I had the choice to refuse but how could I?

How could I say no to the power which had created us?

My path was that of the writer. I wrote stories to entertain and mystify my readers. At the same time, I developed another story, which would remain unknown to all, save you. The story you would live. Lupin sat by my side and became its co-author. We invested our entire lives to ensure its success.

There could be no other outcome, impelled as we were by the spores. I knew mine would be a different immortality, living on through my books, while my body fell to dust, the fate of all mortal men. It was a choice I gladly accepted, for it was a good way to live on. As I sit here, penning these words, I know I made the right decision.

I would never have had the fortitude to withstand the trials and tribulations which have faced you. I was not sufficiently prepared and, of course, I wasn't a genetic immortal. Three generations were needed to bring about the required changes. Three generations and a return to the caves.

And so, now, after all this time, you are here, reading my final words. I am sitting here, as you are, sending these words across the span of time, reaching you directly, as if nothing separated us. I can feel you here, right beside me.

I'm sure you now understand every step of your life has been premeditated, planned to the last detail. The Abbey wanted me to prepare you for the coming challenges by giving you an education which would leave you familiar with the Abbey beliefs and attitudes. This I have done.

I must admit to going a slight bit further, doing something they did not ask but something which Lupin and I felt impelled to add. I provided you with the training to think on your own, to make balanced decisions. I did this, because, in the end, I did not trust the Abbey. Something about them has always bothered me, something I have never been able to pin down. So, I erred on the side of caution, giving you the best chance to judge this by yourself.

We all seem to be part of a grand plan, the Abbey included. Yet, each has the ability to make a choice, to refuse the path chosen for us. I knew the Abbey would request you to give them the One Book. I hoped you would question their desire.

The fact that you are here, reading my words, is proof you have seen what I have and made the right decision, to return to One Book to its point of origin. Despite all the Abbey has done, you know, as I do, that they do not have the whole story. They are guessing, trying to do the right thing. They may be on the right track but they are missing a key element.

Unfortunately, I do not know what it could be. I only know the Abbey is not aware they are missing something. It has allowed me to prepare you. Don't accept their words blithely. Always keep an open mind and look for the truth of things.

I suspect it will not be found in the words of men.

We have both been touched, you and I. By pure luck, we have ended up in the center of things, following the most important path. I have toiled endlessly to place you there but now, my task is ended. I can do no more. You have reached the point where my vision fails.

This is your quest now, Paul. It is no longer mine. Achieving my task taxed me to the utmost. It pushed me to heights I never thought I could reach, making me a better man. It also showed me my limits. Some of the things you are dealing with are beyond my comprehension and I must admit I am glad I was not the chosen one. I do not think I could have gone where you must go. I am not ready.

Admitting this is no easy thing but it is the truth of the matter. I am imperfect, as are all men. The challenges before you require a man stronger than I. Do not falter in your search, Paul Sirenne. Persevere and push, never give up. I may be the only one who truly understands how difficult this will be for you, so believe me when I say you must continue on, no matter what you feel, no matter your worries, your doubts, your fears.

So Paul, it comes to this, my last advice, my last words before we part company for the final time. Keep yourself balanced and calm. Make your own decisions. Follow the path which your heart shows you and you cannot fail. Trust that there is a reason to it all, as I have.

Now go and find the answers.

I am preparing to leave Etretat. I will be writing my other two journals along the way to Perpignan and Raymond Lindon will hide them for me, along with the last of the four books. He does not know about the Cave of caves. No one does. Only you and I. I ingested a few spores to give me the strength to return here, this one final time. I had to gaze upon the glowing tip of the shard, to be reminded this was all worth it.

Soon, Hitler will die, the clock will start, and in sixty years or so, all will be set for you to begin your grand adventure.

Lupin sends his love and his regards, from the grave. He paid the ultimate price for his participation in this adventure but his last words were that he believed it had been worth it. He played a strong role in your preparation and paid a strong price. He sent his son away, never to see him again. Don't ever forget his sacrifices were for you.

Good-bye, Paul, and good luck.

Maurice Leblanc.

Paul Sirenne

Chapter 12

The Decision.

„Sirenne.“

I stood up from the small desk at which I had been sitting and turned around, surprised. Yet, I shouldn't have been. It was Weissmuller, somehow returned from his tumble down the underground river. He had both of his arms up in the air and an air of supplication on his face.

„No, please, Sirenne, hear me out... I'm all calmed down now, see?“

„What do you want now, Weissmuller? Another demonstration of my power over you?“

„No, please... Paul... I just want to talk... I need to talk... please...“

His hands fell to his sides and his shoulders slumped down in apparent despair. Violence seemed to be the furthest thing from his mind.

„All right, fine... You want to talk, let's talk. How did you get back here anyway?“

He laughed briefly, the sound without trace of any humour.

„No matter what, I'm still immortal. All my tumble down the river did was to knock some sense back into me. I was in a total rage before, barely conscious of what I was doing. Last time that happened to me was in the sixties. It's that damnable numbness, always plaguing my every moment, driving me insane... Anyway, I was smashed down the river, until I was disgorged into the channel, where I floated for a while, trying to recover, to understand what had happened. I barely remember our confrontation... and I'm sorry for it, real sorry...“

Weissmuller broke into dry sobs, his immortal body unable to shed tears.

„Hey easy there. What's going on with you? I've never seen you like this.“

„I don't know. I can't seem to grab hold of anything anymore... I feel lost... I had to come back. I swam back down into the submarine tunnel and made my way back here. Listen, Sirenne, there's no easy way to say this, so I'll just say it: I've got to go with you, you understand? ... I've just got to...“

There was no threat to his words, only desperate supplication. The monster who had plagued my steps since the very beginning actually wanted to join up, after failing to kill me.

„Why, Weissmuller? ... Why would you even think I'd consider your request?“

He sobbed a bit more, shaking his head.

„No, it's not like that, you don't understand... All right, all right, I know I can't force you to take me along, you've proven that. You have powers I can't begin to comprehend. I don't stand a chance against you, I admit it, but, there's more to this than physical strength and you know it... It's the Greyman out there... He's our real target, yours and mine, don't you see?“

„What do you know about the Greyman?“

„More than you, obviously... and about the Abbey... I know all about them, Paul... I could help you, I know so much...“

„Wait, wait, slow down. What are you getting at, Weissmuller?“

He grabbed his head suddenly, trying to squeeze it with his two hands, as if he were suffering from a terrible migraine, his eyes squeezed shut.

„I don't know, I don't know...“ he whispered, almost to himself.

I realized he was truly lost. Our confrontation had done something to him. He seemed broken.

„I’m sorry, Paul, for everything, really... You suffered through things I did, I know that... but I had no choice... and I’ve been trying so very hard to do the right thing all along. I was on a path, you see, a path that impelled me on, no matter what I wanted, always bringing me back to it, no matter where I went. It was always waiting for me... What could I do but walk upon it? The more I walked, the more I felt it had been laid down for me, that I had been chosen for this task...“

What was he talking about? Weissmuller had been chosen? Who had chosen him?

„...At first, I talked myself out of it. Nobody was leading me along. No one knew about me... But someone did... or something... Do you understand, Paul? ... Something was showing me the way, helping me... protecting me... It took the flood to show me the truth.“

„The flood?“

„Sorry, Paul, you wouldn’t know about that, would you... Yes the flood, the first time I succumbed to the numbness, I had totally lost it, unprepared like an amateur. I ran and ran, mindless and raging. Then I fell upon that small town... where... where I killed them all... every last one of them, laying the town asunder... It would have been my downfall, the Abbey would have found me... but I was saved... Yes, saved, by the flood. It showed me the way, Paul.“

„What are you trying to tell me here, Weissmuller? ... That you found God?“

He laughed drily, his eyes serious.

„God? I don’t know what God is... But something is out there, that I know. Something was orchestrating a grand plan and I was part of it, in fact, I felt... no, not felt... I knew I was a central part of it. It was why I did all the things that I did... I even stopped doing regular experiments... I could only do things as part of my True Purpose. For example, since I began what I was doing, I’ve killed less than fifty people... and that includes all the American mercenaries that attacked us... That should be proof right there of how committed I am to this.“

„Weissmuller, you’re not seriously trying to convince me by telling me you’ve killed less than fifty people?“

„Come on, Paul, killing people means nothing and you know it. You’ve done it yourself. Has anything changed? No, it hasn’t... All my life, I’ve been doing experiments. It took a long time to understand why but eventually it came to me: I was looking for the meaning of it all. Something was missing, you see, always missing, something I just didn’t get, no matter what I tried. But I had to keep looking, I mean, what else could I do? It wasn’t until I found the spores that I began suspecting there was a meaning to it all. It wasn’t to be found in life and death. Those were meaningless, I had proven that. No, true meaning must be found in the here and now, in this quest of ours, the same quest which impels both of us to find answers.“

„Go on.“

No matter his rambling and skewed perspective, he was leading towards a point, letting me see into him at the same time. I wanted to hear where this was going. It felt important.

„I changed when I followed my path. The purpose I followed became meaningful to me. Eventually, I realized I had been created to fulfill this purpose. I had been chosen to destroy the Greyman.“

His statement hit me like a ton of bricks. His goal was mine.

„But then, everything fell apart when... when I faced you... I brought you up, Paul, I was your mentor for decades. Of all the people in the world, you were the one I felt closest to. But my purpose had placed you in my path, because I needed to get the One Book. I was convinced it would give me the information I needed to destroy the Greyman. When we began fighting, my heart wasn't in it but my Purpose gave me no other choice. As I fought on, I realized your powers were so far above mine that I stood no chance... You ignored my every attack as if I were a fly... How could this be, if the True Purpose was mine?..."

Weissmuller was shaking, wrestling with intense emotions. Suddenly he exploded.

„How could my Purpose fail me? ... How, Paul? ... My entire life had been woven around this path. It gave me a reason to go on, to keep pushing through the endless years but that reason was ripped from me. The One Book was so clearly yours and the thought was destroying me... I was lost, Paul, totally lost, I had nothing to hang on to anymore... That was when... the rage took over... I wasn't even there anymore..."

He collapsed to the ground in a heap with his admission, a sad sight really. His head lifted up, his gaze piercing.

„When I was thrown backwards by your burst of energy, tumbling head over heels in the underground river, I came back again. My body was doing what my mind was, tumbling all over the place... Slowly, it found an island of stability. It was you, Paul. My True Purpose had led me to you. It had helped me prepare you, to lead you here. Now, it was you who would teach me the next lesson. I had never known where this was going to go, always acting on faith that I would find the right way.“

He stood up, taking a short, hesitant step towards me.

„No matter what happens to me, I know my True Purpose is real. It has to be. The proof is that, in all my turmoil, it did not abandon me. In fact, it opened my eyes, for the first time in my life. I was wrong all along, my conceit and ego hiding the truth from my gaze. Having come this far, I cannot stop. I must find the answers I have sought for so long. If it is you who is to go and seek them, then I ask to go with you, to be by your side. I know I have no right to ask, after all I have done... Yet ask I shall, as I have no other choice. My purpose makes it imperative. I must go with you... We can face the Greyman together. United, we cannot fail..."

He stopped, letting his hands drop to his sides, waiting for my answer.

Weissmuller was begging to join up with me. On the face of it, the concept was mad. Still, it deserved some thought. Our confrontation had demonstrated one thing. I might immobilize him but I could not destroy him. If I let him go on his way, there was a good chance he would follow me anyway, wreaking mayhem everywhere he went.

Perhaps I should do well to listen to the ancient proverb of keeping your enemies close.

On the other hand, this was a monster. Even now, his perspective of things was skewed. He might still be planning some trick, hoping to catch me unaware. Admittedly, no matter what he tried, he could do nothing. I was beyond all his tricks. I could simply float him up in the air at a moment's notice.

So, it came down to whether I could handle having him near me.

My father's killer, a monster so terrible he still did not see the act as wrong. A manipulator, living in the shadows, looking at the world as if it was a stage in a puppet show. He seemed repentant and his explanation had given me insight into him. Perhaps he had actually changed. But was it enough? Did he deserve another chance?

In the end, I had no choice.

„All right, Weissmuller, you can come.“

His eyes flashed, stunned for a moment, then his face exploded into a smile I had never seen, not from Briar, not from Weissmuller. The man was transported with joy.

„You won't regret it, Paul, no you won't, I swear it... I knew it all along... My Purpose wouldn't let me down. It was all worth it. I was feeling such despair, I didn't know what to do, where to turn but suddenly, there it was... the one path, the only way I could go... I tried the unthinkable and now, suddenly, here I am, here we are...“

„All right, Weissmuller, all right. Just remember, I'm keeping an eye on you. I'm not forgetting for a second who you are and what you've done. Any sign of nonsense and this agreement is over, you understand?“

„Absolutely. But you don't have to worry. I'm only here to help.“

I had a feeling our definition for that word might be different. I held out my hand. He reached out and shook it. Neither of us could feel the clasp, yet, I couldn't help but feeling something had been forged by it that would never be broken again.

„Well, Weissmuller, what do you say we get out of here?“

„Yes. You've really destroyed the One Book, Paul?“

„It's gone. Like you, my path led me here. It had to be done. I think it's the beginning of everything unraveling for the Greyman.“

„You're not sure?“

„When have I ever been sure? I've been following my gut feelings since the beginning. Things are always moving so fast, I can hardly keep my balance.“

„Sounds familiar. I suspect it would be useful for us to compare notes. I have been studying this for decades longer than you. Wait until I tell you what I know of the Abbey, those bastards. They're immortal-killers, did you know that, with a team ready to go and everything?“

„I've never really trusted them but they certainly are intent on achieving their goals. I don't think they're all that bad but I do agree with you about comparing notes. It never hurts to be informed about your partners.“

He gave me a look.

„I know I manipulated you, Paul, and kept you in the dark. I had no choice back then, I couldn't trust anyone.“

„Fine. It's in the past, let's leave it there. Shall we go?“

„Sure.“

We walked out of the darkened room, the tip of the shard looking like just another rock now. We stepped down the stairs, sliding into the raging waters. As before, I didn't even feel the current, while Weissmuller found it difficult to keep his balance. I used some EM lines to push slightly against him, providing him with more stability.

„I don't know what you're doing but thanks. It's helping,“ he admitted.

We made our way downstream until we found the side exit, leading us back into the river access cave. From there we slipped into the underwater tunnel to the lagoon cave. Arriving in the lagoon, we burst out into the air, floating above the water's surface, and looking at the devastation around us. Our fight had left the lagoon cave destroyed, several pieces of the cavernous roof having collapsed.

A huge storm was raging outside, the thick roiling clouds so heavy it looked as black as night. The darkness would have been complete had it not been for the incessant lightning. I looked at Weissmuller.

„Come on, let's go.“

I floated up, seizing Weissmuller with EM lines and pulling him behind me.

„Wha... Oh, this is incredible, Paul, I'm floating...“

„Don't worry, I've got you. We've got to get out there. I don't think there's any time to lose.“

„Those storm clouds look pretty bad.“

„I know.“

We floated past the lagoon ceiling, through the jagged hole, exiting into a hellish scene. Inside the caves, we had felt nothing of the chaos raging out here. The first thing I saw was the stormy channel, with massive ten meter waves. There was a constant rumbling, the ground shaking violently.

The rain was lashing down with unparalleled ferocity. It would have blinded us, had it not been for the EM field's protection. Weissmuller gasped, drawing my attention to the town of Etretat.

The channel waters were driving into its port, the huge waves crashing ever higher. Already the first row of houses had been annihilated. It wouldn't be long before the rest of the town was destroyed. Lightning was flashing everywhere, the thunder so loud we could not talk to each other.

It felt like everything was falling apart, order eaten up by chaos.

We had to hurry.

Greyman Chronicles

Time: 125,000 years ago

Location: the caves

The Neanderthals came pouring out of the upper cave entrance in a swarm, making an incredible racket. They continued coming out of the tunnel on top of the cliff until all had left the caves. No Neanderthal had had to face the situation confronting them now.

It had come upon them slowly. At first, it had been only the one birth. The baby had been a monster, horribly deformed, thin and hairless. It might have survived had it not been for the mother instinctively killing it, by bashing it against the rocks, knowing there was no room for a sickly child in such difficult times.

Then it happened again and again, until it became apparent all children were being born in this way, each afflicted with the same sickness. A decision was made to rear the young, despite their bizarre appearance. None of the children seemed unhealthy. It was just that they were built differently, their bones thinner, their muscles smaller with almost hairless skins.

The biggest difference was found in their faces, much flatter than the Neanderthals were used to.

Increasing numbers of the strange children had been born, until eventually more than a third of the tribe was composed of the thin ones. Although smaller, they were extremely bright, fast learners all. Unfortunately, they also seemed to think differently than their stouter parents. Their rapid brains gave them insights into things the Neanderthals had never imagined.

The children questioned everything, even the sacred rituals, upsetting the daily routine. They were never satisfied, nor were they respectful. Gradually, an enmity developed between the two different groups. In spite of familial attachments, most Neanderthals started to see their offspring as a monstrous aberration. Discussions began, in the dark of the deepest sacred caves, about whether or not the decision to let them live had been a mistake.

Many parents thought they were being punished. Others felt it was a sickness from the caves, although none had fallen sick for at least three generations. In the end, all agreed there was something wrong with the thin ones. They just didn't think the same. The problem was what to do about it.

Their shaman went into a long trance to find their solution. For three days, he sat unmoving, looking as if he were dead. On the morning of the fourth day, he took a deep breath and croaked out a rallying cry.

His questions had been answered.

His face grim, the shaman told them what had to be done. They were to leave the caves, never to come back. The two cave openings would be sealed, so that no other would fall prey to the sickness, for sickness it was. The Shaman had foreseen the distant future:, if the thin ones were not killed, all Neanderthals were doomed.

They could not bring themselves to do it directly. These were still their children. The thin ones would be banished to the far, dry Southlands, where their fate would be decided by the harsh conditions of the desert.

The Shaman's vision had stunned them all but, in the end, they agreed. They would do what had to be done. The thin ones argued, of course, but they were still young enough to be manageable. While the men closed up the beach cave opening, the women on the cliff top made some difficult decisions. Many of the thin ones were too young to fend for themselves. The mothers knew their children would not survive the trip. Eventually it was decided to send five women with the group, intended to act as caretakers. The five

remaining pregnant women. The Shaman had been clear. All thin ones had to go, even the unborn ones.

From this day on, all thin ones born would be killed, even if it brought about the tribe's own extinction.

The oldest of the children was no more than fifteen, with most others in their early teens. None understood exactly what was going on but it was something serious. They kept their heads low and did as they were told without complaining. The men emerged from the cave tunnel and work was begun to fill in the cliff-top entrance into the caves.

They worked hard and without cease but it still took more than a week to complete the task to their satisfaction. When they were done, none could tell an opening had existed here. There was a final supper, where all the mothers hugged their children one last time and bade them good-bye. It was a difficult night, leaving no eye dry.

In the morning, volunteers were asked to lead the children to their faraway destination. The chosen ones knew this was a task from which none would return. The lands they sought were too far, the risks of travel too many. In the end, five hunters volunteered, coincidentally the mates of the pregnant women chosen to go. The elders were not fooled but they allowed the decision to stand.

Thus was begun the exodus of the banished children.

The hunters knew the trek facing them would be arduous. One of them had been as far as the Big Rock by the water, where many of their kindred lived. It was decided to head there, where they would negotiate the big river. During the first days of the trek, their main concern was to find sufficient food from the bare lands they travelled through.

Unfortunately, this relative peace did not last. They entered the lands of the big-toothed lions. These monsters were huge and extremely voracious. They were also territorial, challenging any who dared invade their domain. The Neanderthals' general policy was to avoid them completely. Unfortunately, their intended destination forced them to travel directly through the lion-infested lands.

Their travel slowed to a crawl, the hunters imposing strict guidelines, necessary to avoid confrontations with the beasts. Inevitably, one of the lions got wind of the troupe and investigated. When it saw what was moving through the valley below, the lion began circling, trying to identify the best prey.

The two hunters covering the back of the group sensed something was wrong, long before either of them caught sight of the monster. With a shout, one of them gave the alarm. The five hunters conferred quickly about the right approach. Three argued for a cautious retreat, leaving the animal's territory quickly. The other two claimed it was too late for that, advising attack as the only solution. They had to hunt the hunter. Otherwise, they'd be picked off one by one. At least, it was only one lion facing them. It gave them a chance. Not much of one but a chance nonetheless.

They set off in a loping run, the women herding the children against a nearby cliff wall. One of the hunters had noticed a depression in the cliff face,

giving them a chance to shelter and better protect themselves. The hunters fanned out into a wide semi-circle, trying to encircling the lion, hoping to attack it from all sides at once.

They approached in complete silence, staying downwind, and so, their plan almost succeeded. The vagaries of the changing wind provided the lion with a faint scent of the hunters. Instantly on the alert, it crouched down, sniffing the air and scanning all it could see, remaining perfectly still.

It located one of the hunters right away, then another, missing the other three. The three seized the opportunity, sneaking closer, while the other two acted as decoys. Eventually, there could be no better position for an attack on the monster. The two hunters on top of the hill gave a whoop, attracting the lion's attention long enough for the other three to throw their spears.

All three spears hit their intended targets. The lion screamed in rage, badly wounded. Despite the mortal wounds, it was still very dangerous. Two more spears hit it from the front, one of them striking a lucky blow, through the mighty chest between its front legs, sliding between the vertebra, and nicking the heart.

In its dying throes, it pounced onto one of the hunters, who had inadvertently gotten too close. Biting down with its bone-crushing jaws, the lion ripped out a huge chunk from the upper shoulder. A second savage bite tore off the Neanderthal's throat, killing him in seconds. Then, with a great roar, unable to stand on its weakening legs, the beast collapsed.

Two more well aimed spears finished the beast off but it was too late for their friend. He was gone. After a quick burial, they cut as much meat as they could carry from the great beast and returned to the group, waiting by the cliff face. They stayed there for a few days, curing the meat over a fire, then left without looking back, knowing this was probably the first of many such confrontations.

Over the next weeks, the roving band was sorely tested. They lost two more of the hunters to wild animal attacks, as well as three children and one of the women. They had to stop when one of the women gave birth, getting back on the road the next day. The worst attack came unexpectedly, when their own kind confronted them, the day they neared the Big Rock by the water.

The sight of the thin children had frightened the other Neanderthals, instinctively knowing they were a threat. Despite many entreaties to let them pass, the resident Neanderthals refused, sending them back on their way, to return whence they came from. This the band could not accept. They attempted to sneak around the camp later that night but the alert sentries had given the alarm.

The force facing them was overwhelming and it was unlikely that the band would survive a confrontation. It seemed as if the thin ones' exodus would end there.

Just as the attackers were about to fall upon the band, a noise was heard. Something was crashing through the trees to the right. All stopped, seeing another thin one appear, pushing trees apart as if they were twigs. Unlike the other thin ones, this was a full grown man, in complete possession of his faculties, radiating menace towards the attacking horde. He kept coming at a

steady pace, until he stood between the two groups. Looking fiercely at the attackers, he waved his hand over them. They dropped where they stood.

For a moment, none in the band knew what to do, but the thin children could not hold back their curiosity, rushing towards the thin man, who smiled and embraced each of them in turn. They thought the attackers were all dead but they turned out to be sleeping, a sleep from which they could not be awoken.

The thin man took control easily, leading the troupe to the waters safely. No matter where they went, the Neanderthals they encountered were always asleep. They reached the beach, where they got to work, under the direction of the thin man, building a platform of logs laced together with vines. None of them had seen the like before but followed the thin man's direction nonetheless, knowing instinctively that he was leading them to safety.

They piled on the finished rafts and paddled across the span of water. The children relaxed, knowing nothing would happen to them, now that the thin man was here. What had begun as banishment, an exodus to the dry Southlands and a sure death, had become a travel to the Promised Land.

The thin ones would survive, and grow, and multiply. They would populate the Southlands, the dry savannahs and stay there for a long time.

But they would return.

Protected by the thin man, they would return.

