

# Almost Eternity

by

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## Foreward

My wife, Karen, and I were discussing super heroes when I first thought about writing this story. In the movies, they keep remaking the comic book people from the 1950s and '60s. What would a new hero be like? We ran through all the common super powers, and I decided to think up a super power for a new hero. This is what I came up with.

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# Tycoon

*December 18, 1913 23 East 62nd St., New York City*

New York City Decembers almost never climb out of the forties, let alone to seventy degrees, at eight thirty in the morning. The man living at 23 East 62nd Street stepped through his doorway and squinted into the sun. He took a good long look around as his eyes adjusted and then made his way toward Central Park. Since the sun from the last few days had melted the snow, the man decided to walk into the park before catching a carriage to work. The walk to the park was just a couple of blocks from his home. He walked casually but with purpose, taking the time to watch and listen to everything. He appeared to be a typical well-off executive in his sixties, but his dress was a costume hiding a much different individual. In these clothes and makeup, he was known as J.P. Abernathy.

The man carried an ornate dragon's head silver cane that concealed a razor sharp sword. His clothes were the latest fashion tailored to hide his personal armory. His coat sleeves hugged a pair of throwing knives. Around his waist, he wore a small leather holster that held six oriental throwing stars at the small of his back. His right boot carried a large knife while his left hid a money pouch with several thousand dollars in currency and ten gold coins – he knew everybody loves gold. The newest additions to his wardrobe were two custom-made small Colt revolvers worn in dual shoulder holsters. “Chance favored the prepared” was one of his favorite sayings.

The park was confused with the sudden change of weather after a heavy snowfall. Little flowers blossomed, destined to die with the next snow. People were confused as well, carrying coats and umbrellas expecting a chill, but getting spring-like weather instead.

The man said hello to the early street vendors and stopped into his favorite corner grocery store for some cigars and a couple of apples. The shopkeeper, Mr. Anderson, welcomed him with the usual, “Good morning, Mr. Abernathy.”

Abernathy asked after Mr. Anderson's family and then steered the conversation to his business to ask if he was doing well. Mr. Anderson replied, “Worst year in the ten I've been here.” He stopped and sighed, “But, people need the things I sell so, unless everybody suddenly stops eating, I will be okay.”

They settled their business, said their good mornings and Abernathy slid back into the stream of foot traffic on the street.

The city residents had decorated for Christmas around this time the past few years, but the people he

encountered really did not seem to have much Christmas cheer. The gold reserves and European markets were experiencing a severe financial crisis. It looked inevitable that the Federal Reserve System was going to be created any time now by Congress as a knee-jerk reaction to the situation. Abernathy watched these things carefully. His railroad and shipping companies carried tons of goods heading to and from Europe. However, he knew without a doubt that whatever happened with the economy, up or down, he would weather it just fine, as always.

Abernathy loved New York City. It was truly emerging as a melting pot with districts for each culture becoming well-defined. He particularly liked that each culture had their own restaurants. He missed French cooking, but he could finally get a decent meal just a few blocks uptown. He had lived in France until six years ago when he moved here in 1907. He had to follow the economic gravity. That meant America, and that meant Chicago or New York. Chicago had the industry, but New York had the Stock Market. He had chosen New York because Chicago was just too cold.

The park was filled with nannies walking their charges and people passing through in a hurry to get to work. He stuck to the edge of the park and emerged at his favorite pretzel stand's usual spot. The pretzels were always hot and good. Abernathy enjoyed visiting with the Mr. Ricci, the stand's owner, and they conversed in Italian most of the time. But Mr. Ricci was not around that morning.

Abernathy was about to hail a carriage when Mr. Ricci pushed his cart out of the park and into his spot. Abernathy turned back and politely stood by until Ricci opened his stand. The vendor saw Abernathy waiting and said, "So sorry Mr. Abernathy. My children are all sick with colds, and I was in the toilet room all night with them."

"That's horrible. Stop by Mr. Anderson's store after you close up tonight, and I will have him prepare something to help with your sick children." Abernathy got a bag of pretzels and gave Mr. Ricci a five-dollar gold coin. Mr. Ricci showed his appreciation for the over-payment with a big smile and a tip of his cap. There were other customers waiting, so they said goodbye for the day. Abernathy caught a carriage for the ten-minute bumpy ride to Wall Street. The city was changing the streets from cobblestones to black tar pavement but had not yet reached the streets Abernathy was traveling upon.

Horse-drawn black carriages were backed up with people getting out and cramming into the financial high rises. Abernathy arrived at his building and was greeted by the doorman, Cecil. Cecil was a very sharp black fellow that was about to be offered a position in Abernathy's offices. Abernathy was always on the lookout for talented and intelligent people. You might say he invested in them by giving them employment.

Abernathy entered his offices through the main doors, and half a dozen people greeted him. When he reached his personal office, his secretary, Millie Polanco, took his coat, hat, scarf and gloves. She then herded him into his office, obviously anxious to get the day started.

His name was on the brass doorplate read "J.P. Abernathy, President." His office was a good size at 32 by

38 feet, but felt smaller with all the furnishings. There were two big comfortable sofas facing each other as he entered with a large low coffee table in the center. Several small beautiful vases sat quietly in the middle of the table. Each couch was set off by matching end tables. The end tables and couch sets were different, but similar in size and style. The Persian rug beneath was large, thick and complimented the furniture perfectly. This end of the room had walnut paneling. The rest of the room held built-in book and display cases filled to the brim, making the room look more like a museum than an office. The books were expensive and rare. At first glance, the books looked like those in any very, very nice private library. Upon closer inspection, one would find first editions of masterpieces by Voltaire, Robert Burns, Audubon, William Blake and many, many more. Personal letters written by the authors were tucked into the books here and there. The display cases were packed with things that some might mistake as nothing but old junk. But they were valuable for their historic significance. The collection included pens that signed the Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, significant treaties between nations and much more. One case stood alone and housed a handwriting-duplicating machine that Thomas Jefferson used for years. Every piece of furnishing was old, in perfect condition, beautifully handcrafted with lots of inlay and fine woodcarvings and imported from Europe.

All of this surrounded Abernathy's huge desk. It was the picture of organization. His writing supplies of paper, pen and ink were there more for display than use. The implements were little used anymore. Abernathy did all of his business writing on a typewriter now. Two typewriters sat next to each other along with stacks of paper and envelopes. Around the "outgoing" workspace were stacks of "incoming" items like newspapers, magazines, other less reputable publications, books and such items. There were special spaces for mail, telegrams and packages. The necessary lamps and niceties made the desk homier. But there were no pictures of family or friends.

The drawers were ordinary looking if opened, but every one of them had some kind of a false bottom. He used those compartments to hide serious and secretive writings. They were all unlocked with a slide built into the wood trim around one side at the top of each drawer. The rest of the desk was a giant Chinese puzzle box. It held a hidden side compartment that opened with no less than six mechanisms set precisely to unlock it. Inside was a very special and expensive personal arsenal of weapons. Pistols included ones that shot tranquilizer darts and incendiary bullets. There was even a gas propelled rapid-fire pistol machine gun.

If someone were smart enough to get into this enclosure and knew the next three things to push, pull or set, another compartment would be revealed. And that one led to another and then another. These inner compartments contained stacks, bags and pouches of gold, silver and precious gems. He considered all of these things necessary fluid assets.

Millie managed Abernathy's meeting schedule and announced that he had two meetings that day, one in ten minutes with his senior vice president, Jefferson Watkins, and one with someone named Cecil, whom she did not know. Abernathy told her who Cecil was and what was planned. She gave him her big special grin that

told him she clearly approved. Abernathy informed her that he would be behind closed doors after the meetings and did not wish to be disturbed. She was used to this, assuming he spent his time reading and opening the many publications, telegrams, parcels and letters he received.

The first meeting went quickly as Watkins summarized that Abernathy's railroads were running smoothly. He was negotiating rights to expand his routes when every other transportation company was selling theirs. He thought in very long terms and had the cash reserves to do whatever he wished. Besides, he was manipulating certain influential men in Congress and knew the future better than most. This was a balancing act that he had perfected. Abernathy gave Jefferson a list of items to purchase to keep the trains moving. It was time to use some reserves of fuel as the prices were rising quickly with the arrival of winter weather. With that business concluded, Abernathy asked Jefferson to stay on for the next meeting.

Abernathy went to the door and opened it to find Cecil waiting. He asked Millie to join them as well, and she escorted Cecil in. Cecil quietly came in looking a little fearful. Abernathy allayed his fears quickly saying, "Cecil, welcome and thanks for coming. I want to offer you a job." With that, Cecil switched from worried to excited. Abernathy continued, "You and I have spoken many times, and I have always been impressed with your keen insights. How did you come to be so well educated without attending any school past high school?"

Cecil answered with pride, "My mother made me read. She made me read everything she could get her hands on."

Abernathy nodded and said, "Yes, mothers can be driven when they truly want the best for their children. God bless her." They all chuckled. He carried on, "If you could have any job in this office, which one would it be, besides mine, of course." That got another chuckle.

"I am really good with understanding maps."

Jefferson casually said, "Why?"

Cecil replied, "We used to play a game called Pirate's Treasure, and my Daddy would make a treasure map for us. He would hide the treasure, and we would have to find it. It could take days sometimes. Then I made a game of finding things that were wrong with real maps. It was fun." Abernathy had heard enough and realized he was making the right decision.

"Millie, please prepare the paperwork for employment for Mr. McMasters here and make him a clerk in our library with a special assignment. I want him to spend six months reviewing our maps and preparing a report on his findings. After that, we will decide where his new career should take him. Cecil, a clerk makes \$80 a week. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!" The amount effectively tripled his old salary.

"Cecil, it is I who will be thanking you. I hope that you find that all our files are in order but, if not, we need to know. I am particularly interested in flood plain maps and what risks we are carrying regarding flooding rivers in Ohio."

Abernathy turned to Jefferson and said, "And let me make one thing very clear. Cecil is not to be given special treatment either, favorably or unfavorably. He is not to be disrespected in any way by anyone. Provide him what he needs to do his job with the same courtesy we give to all our employees."

He turned to Cecil, "I want your employment here to be above reproach. I'm not giving you any special favors because I think you are an honorable man and want to earn your way through your career, not have it handed to you."

Abernathy paused to let that sink in and said to Millie, "Please make sure that Cecil has enough time before he starts his new job to give proper notice to his current employer. We do not want to burn any bridges. Then please check on him every day and make sure that all is well. I would like to have a lunch meeting in my office with him in one month and every month thereafter." She nodded, and Abernathy stood to end the meeting. He shook Cecil's hand, and Cecil left a very, very happy man.

As soon as Millie and Jefferson left and he was finally alone behind locked doors, Abernathy attacked the pile of work on his desk. He read everything, typed up his letters and other papers and wrote up answers to telegrams. He spent thirty-three minutes doing what would take any other man all day. Millie would be in at the end of the day to move piles from one stack to another. Then she would make new stacks out of the correspondence that showed up in the office that day.

Abernathy got up from his desk, walked around a bit and stretched. He stared out the windows at the busy street below and sighed. Done with his quiet ponderings, he approached a bookcase. He reached into a small space between books, and moved a lever that allowed the huge case to swing open exposing a hidden room with several closets. Within the room were a makeup table and other utilitarian furnishings. He undressed and laid his clothes carefully aside, then removed the wig and fake beard that completed the Mr. Abernathy costume that gave him the appearance of looking to be around sixty. After quickly dressing in old street clothes, he suddenly appeared forty years younger and was ready to move around the city, blending in with the hard working people that were everywhere.

He left the building by a hidden staircase that deposited him in an alley. He had a lunch meeting in two hours and headed straight back to his house. On the way, he made the time to stop by Anderson's store to order a couple of bags of groceries for Mr. Ricci. He had done this many times for lots of the people who lived around him, and Mr. Anderson was pleased with the big sale every time. In this guise, he was a familiar face at the Abernathy house as Mr. Abernathy's ward, Wally, who did the maintenance on the property. His full name was Wallace Taylor Pittman, and he would inherit some of the Abernathy holdings when that identity was retired.

When Wally Pittman entered Anderson's Grocery Store, two burly men who were carrying everything they could grab pushed by him quickly, and he saw Mr. Anderson getting a broom to clean up a mess. The mess was not just a spill. A whole aisle had been torn up, and goods were scattered all over the floor. It was obvious the two men had done this. Wally assumed this was related to rumblings he had heard about a gang of tuffs trying



to extort protection money from the local merchants.

“Are you okay? Did they hurt you?” Wally was getting angrier as he asked these questions.

“I am fine. Nothing to worry about. Just a minor misunderstanding.” Anderson said this half-heartedly, trying more to convince himself than Wally.

Wally turned and left the store to look for the two men. They were just entering the park and he followed them quickly. He reached the street just as they were starting their shake-down routine on Mr. Ricci, his pretzel vendor friend. Wally dashed across the street and prepared to confront the hooligans. They looked to be in their mid-thirties and built like barrel-chested dockworkers. Wally hoped the assailants were armed with knives and nothing else.

Wally put on a London cockney accent and said, “Hold up there mates. I run this part of the city for Abernathy, and he won’t take kindly to you two moving in on his territory.”

The shorter of the two spoke while the other began to move to his right for a better position to handle this intruder. “Well, we ain’t heard of no Abernathy, and these kind folks just want our protection from folks like him anyway.”

The other man said, “And what would a skinny twerp like you have to say about it, if we were a mind to listen?”

“I would say that you are making a very bad mistake.”

Both men made a move towards Wally with one pulling his arm back to take a swing. Wally threw a sidekick breaking the knee of the man on his left while he blocked a punch from the one in front of him. As his swing went by, Wally grabbed the man’s hand and twisted until he heard cartilage tearing. Wally held on, twisting the man’s right arm as he dropped to his knees. Wally pulled out a revolver with his free hand and shoved it in the man’s face.

He casually said, “Now there’s a good lad.” The one with the broken knee had managed to pull his own gun from his waist. Wally turned his gun toward him and shot his kneecap to finish destroying it. The man dropped his gun in favor of clutching at what was left of his knee.

By then, Mr. Ricci had moved in ready to help if needed, so Wally said to him, “Would you mind gathering up his pistol, please?” Mr. Ricci reached down where the gun had fallen and picked it up. Wally continued, “Take everything in his pockets.”

Wally was still holding the arm of the other man, but he managed to pull a gun with his free hand. Wally released the man’s right arm and put a bullet through his left one. The man’s gun went flying as he dropped to the ground in pain. Mr. Ricci was watching in awe at the action. Wally said to him, “Be careful in those pockets. I’m sure there’s a blade or two somewhere on him.” He said this as he went through the pockets of the man he was standing over.

Wally found a boot knife, a switchblade, some identification papers and a wad of cash. Mr. Ricci came up

with the same.

Mr. Ricci handed it all to Wally and said, “That’s some pretty fancy gun play, Wally. Nice to have a friend like you around.”

Wally smiled at him and got back to business. “Now, here’s the way it’s going to be. You two are going back to your minder and tell him what happened here. Then you will tell him that Mr. Abernathy respectfully requests that he leave the folks from this side of the park over to Lexington alone. No harm, no foul. A nice respectable arrangement. Can you lads remember that message?”

The one with the busted knee said, “Yes, sir. A good arrangement to be sure. Yes. No trouble again. None whatsoever. Right O’Toole?”

O’Toole, the one holding his left hand under his right armpit said, “Yes, yes. We won’t be bothering these nice people again. No bothering at all. Yes, sir.”

Wally wound up the conversation with, “O’Toole, help your friend along and off with the both of you.”

O’Toole got to his feet and slowly walked around the gun still pointed at him, helped the other tough up, and they limped away.

Wally turned to Mr. Ricci and handed him the cash. “Take what is yours and return the rest to our friends who were fleeced today, please.” Then he added, “And I would appreciate it if you kept this to yourself as best you can. I don’t need the publicity.”

Mr. Ricci smiled and said, “Wally, did you see that big stranger take on those hoodlums?” His smile got slyer and he continued, “I wonder who he was?”

As Wally turned to walk away, Mr. Ricci said, “Tonight, I will thank God for blessing me with a friend like you.”

Wally turned back, smiled and thought what a profound statement that was coming from this simple and kind man. It gave Wally an idea. Maybe it was time to create a group of trustworthy friends with whom he could share ideas. Wally patted the wise vendor on the shoulder and walked away as if nothing had happened. Besides, Wally had a schedule to keep.

There were four entrances to the house. Three were obvious -- the main double front doors, a kitchen entrance from the side yard and a set of double doors onto a large back porch. However, there was also a camouflaged doorway through a brick wall in the alley. Still made up as Wally, he used the front entrance with a key. He slipped in and changed clothes into another old man disguise. This one looked to be about fifty and portly. He was quite a dandy from the South and owned a large coal mining concern. He was having a lunch meeting with his executives and bankers. He slipped out the secret alley entrance and joined the other people on the street smoothly.

The meeting was at his favorite luncheon restaurant located around the block from Abernathy Transport,

Inc. and two blocks from his southern gentleman's offices. It was an important meeting in preparation for the upcoming financial storm. His guests greeted him as Benjamin Bradley. They enjoyed an excellent lunch while they chatted about the country, finances and the markets. They were all waiting for the orders they knew were coming, and Bradley dragged the lunch out just to watch them fidget. Their livelihoods depended on him, and they were worried.

Bradley gave them specific directions on what needed to be done to minimize the impact on his coal business. He had many friends that were wise to the fiscal situation including several senators and congressional representatives. Bradley often knew things that most people did not. That was because he owned a majority of the complete supply chain. He owned an arms manufacturing company that contracted exclusively with the military, a freight shipping company that shipped the armaments, a railroad that contracted with the shipping company, and several large coalmines that provided fuel for his railroad. He owned each of these businesses as different people. You could say it gave him a leg up. It was also against several anti-monopoly laws.

After lunch, Bradley moved on to his coal mining company office. Having met with his finance team, he then met with his senior operations staff and briefed them on what to do during the next few weeks. He lied to them and told them he was leaving on a trip to Europe in a few days and would not be back for three months. Everything would be just fine. He had other matters to attend to with some inventor friends.

When he wrapped up his Bradley Coal Concerns business, he slipped back into the Abernathy offices, changed into his Abernathy costume and hurried home. He would be attending the opera that night...

*Today 23 East 62nd St., New York City*

His old house was still in fine shape though it had not been used in forty years. He rode his bike past it every once in a while just to keep watch. There were some very valuable items inside, and the security system was state of the art. Satisfied once again, he flew along to his home in the Empire State Building.

He was using his Luc St. Clair name today as he usually did while in this beautiful building. Most of the time he just went by Luc or Lucas. At least for the last fifty years or so.

Today was a very big day. He was expanding his circle by adding a computer hacker (technologist) to his team and would be dropping the mother of all secrets on him. The hacker thought he had a Top Secret clearance, and he did. However, it was about to go way beyond all that. By the way, this technologist was not just any hacker. He was known on the Net as Lancer, and he was the best of the best at what he did. Moreover, Luc and his team knew this because they found him when he tried to access the most secure files containing Luc's most important secrets. Luc's own team of computer wizards saw Lancer start his hack. The battle took a full hour while they threw everything they had at him -- three firewalls, a new encryption algorithm they developed for the National Security Agency and one self-evolving firewall. But the hacker still got further in

than any of their test attacks ever had. In the end, he succeeded in accessing only the cover data. All fake. However, that allowed the team to track him with some tricks of their own. They didn't bust him, but hired him instead. That was eight months ago.

The current members in his circle included the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Security Officer, Special Projects Officer, Executive Assistant, and Chief Financial Officer.

John Dawkins was his personal CEO and had been for thirty-eight years. He looked great for fifty-eight years of age. Dawkins was the most intelligent person Luc had ever met, except for himself. He discovered John in one of his shipping companies after he graduated from Harvard Law and further helped John along with his education. John got his PhD from Oxford in International Trade and a Juris Doctorate from Harvard specializing in corporate law. John had been at the top of his classes always. He was small in stature compared to Luc at only 5'8" with a full head of blonde wavy hair. John had always worn suits, and Luc could not remember seeing him without a tie on. John only bought his clothes from one Italian tailor. He could afford it. In fact, he could afford anything thanks to Luc. However, John's best quality was the ability to sum up a situation quickly and clearly for Luc. John could sort through data from a wide variety of sources, distill it down to relevant information, put numbers and percentages to it, and present the conclusions quickly and clearly. Luc loved it.

Luc's CSO was Gunther Adams. Gunther had only been with him for eight years. Gunther was forty-two years old and very, very fit. He was short, stocky and always dressed for action in military-looking clothes. Dressing up for Gunther meant a pullover collared shirt and a sport coat. He always had a couple of guns on him and an assortment of other toys. He was the only other person who had an internal communication unit like Luc's in his skull. When Gunther was hired, he insisted they be able to communicate anytime and anywhere.

When Luc was looking for someone to fill the security position, he called in favors from the Pentagon, and they sent him to the CIA. Gunther was at the top of a very short list. He was skilled in every weapon invented and helps invent new weapons now.

Gunther's most valuable asset to Luc was his connections. He could call his contacts and get help on the spot anytime. Gunther cultivated his network and, with Luc's resources, was very successful. He also enjoyed chasing secrets. A couple of years ago, Luc and Gunther were chatting when the subject of Area 51 came up. They decided they should see for themselves what was going on there. There was a lot of speculation between them, but they wanted the real dirt. Gunther arranged clearances and they took a field trip. No aliens, but many cool new toys were discovered.

At last count, Luc had nine research and development facilities doing Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) projects. It kept him on the front-edge of technology. Besides, he had always liked toys. Luc knew that Area 51 turned out to be anticlimactic for Gunther without the aliens. In Luc's mind, Gunther was a

lot like James Bond.

Luc's SPO was Megan Reed. She has been with him for twenty years and was forty-seven. She dressed quite ordinary in casual business attire always. She was pretty, but could sometimes look great with a little makeup. Her hair had always been short, and she would not color it so gray was starting to appear. She could keep more balls in the air than even Luc. And that was a lot. She was married to a radio basketball announcer who did college games and made radio commercials too. They had two kids that kept her busy when Luc didn't; James was fourteen and Justin was twelve. The family lived down the hall from Luc, and he helped James with his homework. They spent a lot of time talking about girls now -- James had a crush on a stuck-up rich girl that wouldn't give him the time of day. Luc would also take the boys to the local basketball courts and let them win most of the time. Without them knowing it, he fed them the newest video games and they provided some beta testing for him.

Besides Megan's project management skills, she was the one Luc counted on to help him do the right thing. She was a Christian and her moral advice was always valuable. He often decided things with a little too much callousness. You would too if you had seen what he had seen. Life becomes less of a miracle when you have lived through the deaths of one hundred billion people.

His EA was Harry McMasters. Harry had been with Luc for twenty-eight years and was his best friend. He was the best best friend Luc had ever had, and Luc had known a lot of best friends. Harry often fooled people with the butler routine. In reality, he was much, much more. He spoke four languages besides English, including Chinese, Japanese, Spanish and French. Luc worked with him on his language skills all the time. Luc particularly enjoyed his Chinese Mandarin but, when he spoke English, Harry had a quiet southern drawl. He was also Luc's sparring partner and personal trainer. Luc watched Harry's career as he was growing up. He was the son of Cecil McMasters, the retired head of his cartography department for a railroad company Luc owned. Cecil passed away several years ago and had asked Luc to look out for his son when he first became sick. Harry was a Marine Corp Master Sergeant when they met, and he and Luc instantly became close friends. Harry was black with no hair and a goatee. They talked about his father a lot. Next to his father, Harry was the most honorable person Luc had ever met. By the way, Harry really looked quite *bad*. He too packed an arsenal on him.

Luc's CFO was Mary Jo Smyth, and she managed billions of dollars, or Euros or Yen, or whatever, every day. Luc was easily the richest person in the world, so she had her work cut out for her. Mary Jo had been with Luc for seventeen years then. They had been lovers twice but were currently not. The age difference made it a challenge. Mary Jo had bright red shoulder-length hair and was still stunning when she dressed up, which was less and less frequent those days. Luc thought she should date more, but she did have a couple of guys with whom she would vacation. She was sixty years old, and she was still *hot*.

Lancer Daniel Sullivan, aka Sully, was twenty-two and the exact opposite of what you would expect a geek

to look like. He would look quite natural on the cover of *GQ* magazine, being 6'2" and slim. If Sully took the new job Luc was about to offer, he would become the Chief Information Officer.

The team revealed to Sully the truth about Luc. He was not Luc, the kid who helped around the Operations Center. He was someone and something entirely different. Including the name Luc, he used seven fake identities and made up temporary ones as needed. Luc learned long ago that anonymity kept him protected -- protected from the world. It was a lesson he had learned over the years and centuries, because he was immortal. He was Lucasiah, the fifth son of Seth, the third son of Adam, and had been alive for over sixty centuries.

# Sully

Luc remembers everything, literally everything that enters into his mind through his senses as well as every thought he had ever had. He remembered what he had for breakfast on the first Tuesday of November in the year 1818. He remembered the weather from wherever he was every day of his long, long life. There certainly are other people who have this ability, and many were driven crazy by this odd gift. Luc, on the other hand, loved it.

Luc had the ability to use the data just as everybody does when they make any decision, even the smallest ones. Normal people draw from as many as ten factors that they cross-reference when making choices. Luc ran through probably forty thousand facts from a long lifetime of experiences with each and every decision. The problem that he had was many of his experiences were bad ones, but he didn't care. During the last few centuries, he attempted to grade these experiential facts with the scale of right versus wrong. That process takes only a split second for him as it does with anyone else. However, all these pieces of data can really complicate any choice he made. It was tough having a conscious. His version of morality was very subjective. It was like trying to paint *love*. He was sure someday, or some millennia, he would reach some kind of limit on memory Input/Output and storage. Bill Gates once told Luc that he had a great memory, just bad I/O.

Luc stopped aging around age twenty. He can clearly remember living his childhood in Africa. His endless youth went unnoticed for a couple of centuries because living to be eight hundred was normal. There were no viruses or diseases in the beginning of human life. Death usually came from an act of violence or natural mishap. When he was born, there were about four hundred people in the world. When he was five hundred, the population had exploded to over fifty thousand.

Luc learned that he could not be injured when he was caught in a bloody tribal dispute and should have been killed by a knife attack. Both the attacker and he were astonished to see that the blade bounced off his chest, deflected as if he was made of stone. He had an internally generated energy shield that protected him. His side won the battle, but the incident was noticed by everyone who survived the skirmish. It became clear to his Grandfather Adam that it was time for him to move on. Besides, even with the normal longevity, people began taking notice of his endless youth. Grandfather Adam's words were law, and he felt it would be best for Lucasiah to make a new life somewhere else and to hide the secret of his eternal youth from the world. Luc became a nomad.

The shield is as natural to him as is his memory gift. He instinctively controls the shield so nothing can penetrate, but he is also able to soften the shield so he can eat and touch. He never gets sick, but he can grow hair. His beard grows in a little thin but, at present, he had a fine moustache. He does not need to eat, but he loves food. In 1894, Luc was aboard a ship that went down in a storm in the South Pacific. He spent sixteen

days treading water in the open sea while sharks swam around him taking nibbles but coming away disappointed, thanks to his shield. Overall, not an experience he wishes to repeat. He did not learn how his shield was generated until 1901, when Nikola Tesla showed X-rays to him. They were very good friends even though Luc thought the inventor was nuts. The details of his shield were not discovered until the MRI was put into use in 1977 by the inventor, Raymond Vahan Damadian. Luc had two extra organs, both about the size of a walnut -- one near his heart generates his shield, and one next to his liver that flushes everything bad from his system almost immediately. Luc had gone through every test conceivable, but he still has not figured out his longevity. His latest theory is that immortality was simply encoded into his DNA.

The day started uneventful for their new recruit Lancer/Sully. Sully's boss was Gunther. So Gunther invited Sully to a ten o'clock meeting in the Oversight Room. This room overlooked the Operations Center and had been off limits to Sully until now. If they did it right, he did not even know it existed. Luc has the ninety-third floor of the Empire State Building for his base of operations. Even with all the offices and equipment, there was still enough space for ten apartments -- really nice apartments. The building was home to all five of his circle of friends and their families. Sully could have the same living arrangements if he chose to accept Luc's offer.

The team had vetted Sully in every manner possible. Sully thought that the company worked through military contracts, which was mostly true. The entire inner circle believed he was ready for the true bombshell. However, nothing can prepare anyone for the news that a colleague was really older than dirt, was your real boss, was the richest man in the world and covertly controlled an empire greater in many ways than the Roman's ever did.

Secretly, deep down inside, Luc felt euphoric. Revealing this secret was like freeing a person from the small mindedness that comes from lack of resources. Luc hoped he was handing Sully a ticket to fulfill all his dreams. Of the twelve people he had extended this offer to, none had turned him down. There was no precedent to follow, but Luc was sure that Sully would not be the first.

The circle of friends were all standing around the room when Sully arrived. They took their seats and got ready for the meeting. Looking around the room, Sully muttered that he did not know this room existed. Then he saw the large monitor that had Luc's identities over time mapped out, complete with pictures of him in his disguises. Sully was obviously puzzled by this, and started to ask a question but stopped. The room's furnishings were mostly technical except for a couple of Luc's paintings that hung nicely along one wall -- clearly impressionistic and more than a century old. What Sully could not see was the state of the art surveillance systems that monitored the physical vital signs of everyone present. Anyone with the right access could view the readouts on a terminal, telling them all kinds of things about any guest in the room.

Gunther took the lead. "Sully, this meeting is for you. We have a very big secret to tell you that will change your life forever. This is way beyond your Top Secret clearance, and whatever decisions you make here are



inconsequential compared to your keeping this secret. Your job and much of your future life depend on that.” Gunther paused for effect and Luc could see Sully become very serious. That was a very good sign. The vitals terminal was built into the top of the conference room table, and Luc peered at Sully’s readout on his monitor. He could see that Sully was excited and very alert. Sully’s heart rate spiked and his adrenaline levels were up as well. Again, all were good signs.

Gunther continued after a nod from Luc. “The secret is about Luc.” Sully looked at Luc, and Luc waved and smiled while being studied. Sully looked back at Gunther as he continued, “Luc is not who he appears to be. He is very, very, very old. As far as we can determine, he has lived for over six thousand years. He is immortal.” Sully’s mouth dropped open as he turned and faced Luc again. Sully was trying to decide whether to laugh or not.

Luc decided to take over from there. He dropped the young Luc act and talked to Sully with his normal authority. “I can tell that you need a little more information to understand and believe what you are being told. On the large monitor on the far wall are my different identities. There are seven right now plus the real me. You only know me as Luc St. Clair. The name I was given at birth is Lucasiah.”

As Sully listened intently, Luc explained his aliases and how he would grow them from a fake birth twenty years in the past and then use them for around twenty years after that. At any time, he was preparing to retire a few identities and activate a few new ones. He saw that Sully was beginning to think this might be real.

The next planned discussion was kicked off by Luc’s statement, “Everyone, please tell Sully how long you have known me.”

John started off, “Thirty two years, and Luc has not changed since I first met him. I worked with him for two years before he dropped the bomb on me. I must say, you are taking it better than I did.”

Gunther took his turn next, “Eight years for me. It only took two months for him to reveal his true age to me, but two more months before I truly believed it. It was only when he made me shoot him at point blank range that I was convinced.”

Luc jumped back in with an explanation, “I have a natural kind of force field that protects me from injury. Are you doing OK?”

Sully finally spoke, “Yes. This is either true or the best practical joke that has ever been pulled on anyone. But you guys are serious, right?”

Megan helped out, “Yes, we are deadly serious. Luc’s secret is true and must be protected at all costs. If the world found out that one man controls as much wealth and power as he does, there would be economic and political repercussions that would be disastrous for pretty much the entire world.”

She paused and then continued. “I have been in on Luc’s secret for twenty years. He is my closest friend, and everything you are hearing right now is true.”

Harry took his turn and simply said, “I have been Luc’s executive assistant for twenty eight years.”

Mary Jo wrapped it up with this monologue, “I have been in this inner circle,” she made a gesture like a big group hug, “for seventeen wonderful years. The work we do here keeps the world in balance. We protect the lives of billions of people every day by keeping their countries stabilized or destabilized as is needed. We guide Luc’s financial and therefore political empire with planned and informed decisions. But the whole house of cards is built on his anonymity. That is paramount.”

She got up and walked to the ID monitor and pointed to a picture. “Do you recognize the name Earl Edward Davenport?”

Sully nodded and Mary Jo continued, “He is the richest man in the world on paper and is a recluse. He has not been seen in person for thirty years. He is Luc. Do you know the name Aban Hamsa Rabal, the second richest man in the world? He too is a recluse but shows up at a distance on his yacht every so often. He too is Luc. These men individually control vast industries in shipping, oil, airlines and weapons manufacturing. Imagine if the world knew that they were the same man, not to mention these other men on this monitor. Do you understand the implications of what we are telling you?”

Sully slowly got up and walked to the monitor. Luc joined Sully at the monitor to allow him to look from the pictures and then at Luc, back and forth and back and forth, working his way through all seven.

Then Sully made the leap in his head and said, “Well, OK then.”

Luc turned to the group and stated the obvious, “I think he knows we’re serious. But does he believe?”

Gunther had been watching the vitals terminal monitor that Luc was viewing earlier and said, “His vitals say he does.”

Sully walked over to the monitor and studied it for a moment before saying, “How are you reading my vitals?”

Gunther explained, “You have to first realize that we are privy to the newest technology available because our companies develop it. Every day brings a new piece of magic into our possession, and we put it all to use first right here in this complex. I will explain the technical aspects when we are done here with this more important discussion but, trust me, these readouts are you and are very, very accurate.”

Sully slowly turned to Luc and asked, “How does your shield work?”

Luc answered, “It repels everything that tries to penetrate it with no reaction in momentum. In other words, everything bounces off me without even knocking me down. Bullets bounce off, swords break or slide off, and even explosions have no effect.”

Luc took a step back and told him, “Hit me.”

Sully backed up and held up his hands in refusal. At that action, Gunther took over by getting up from the table, pulling a knife from his pocket and in the space of less than a second threw it. It landed in the center of Luc’s chest, dead on the point, bounced off and ricocheted into the large window that overlooked the Operations Center. Sully had instinctively raised his arms to protect himself but watched it all in horror, then

disbelief, and finally in dumbfounded belief.

After Sully caught his breath, Luc said to his friends, “Why don’t you give Sully and me a few minutes alone. I bet you have some paperwork to gather for the next discussion anyway.”

They were all smiles as they exited. Sully and Luc went over to the corner bar. Sully took a seat and Luc went behind to serve. He pulled out a Mountain Dew, Sully’s favorite drink. He set it in front of him. Sully opened it and took a long drink. Luc broke the silence with, “Pretty heavy stuff, eh?”

Sully nodded and finally said, “Yeah but, you know, I understand. I have had suspicions that there was more going on that I could not see. There are ghost files of directories that were deleted right before I started working here. I found a few files inside, but nothing significant. If you are going to delete files, you have to clear out the trail that it leaves. There was more, but anyway... I’m cool. This just keeps getting better and better.”

Luc waited while Sully took another drink then replied, “Oh, good. I’m glad you feel that way. Our work is critical to the lives of millions of people. And we can do so much more.” Sully was nodding and agreeing with what he was hearing. Then Luc said, “Now comes the fun part. I have a job offer for you. There are many perks that come with it. What I really need is your loyalty.”

Sully took a moment and then put a sentence together, “Yes, loyalty. You need me to go along with your program or I am no good to you. Now I really understand. I’ve been watching what happens with the work I do, and I have agreed with everything you’ve done with it. You guys set up a fixed set of walls to keep me in bounds, but I always smelled something bigger. No proof, just a feeling. So I haven’t said anything. I like being part of what we are doing, even if you didn’t let me in on the full picture until now.” He paused and stared Luc in the eyes then said, “Loyalty. I’m not going along with anything blindly. If you want my loyalty, you have to bribe me with information. I want access to everything. Only then can I support you correctly and completely.”

“Agreed. But I must warn you that the amount of data is staggering. And a lot isn’t cross referenced or even indexed.”

“I can fix that. You open all the doors and you have made a friend for life. Well, my life anyway.”

“Sully, there is more. We take military action when necessary. There are casualties. I have an army of highly trained soldiers and sailors on my staff. I want your opinions as we plan, but I make the final call and, at that point, I expect you to support me. There can only be one captain on a ship -- He listens but, in the end, he takes responsibility.” Luc walked from behind the bar over to the doors and opened them. Harry was waiting outside, and he gathered everyone back in.

When they were all settled again, John laid it out, “This is the most important commitment you will ever make so, just to be clear, you can quit your job now and get a nice severance package. The secret, you keep forever and no hard feelings. Or you can stay and help us keep this ship sailing smoothly. If you decide to stay, you will enjoy many benefits from now on, beginning with a substantial raise in salary to about a million dollars

a year.”

John had timed it so that Sully was taking a drink at that moment. Sully almost choked on the liquid and coughed up a storm. John loved doing that. He waited until Sully had quit coughing and then continued, “That really won’t matter because you can have an apartment down the hall to live in, furnished as you desire, generous vacation time with complete access to over twenty private residences around the world in the best places. You get chauffeur services and use of company jets to travel. One week a month is paid time off. You can bank it as you see fit. We are very flexible on that. All your expenses are paid all the time, so your million-dollar salary really has no use. You won’t want for anything.”

Sully was only *kind of* paying attention because he really didn’t care about the money. He was more interested in the data. “Your first assignment is to update our systems everywhere. We are using four-year-old technology in spots and we need it upgraded. We also need remote communication for all of us.”

Sully was nodding and smiling as he listened. He looked at everyone individually, and everyone gave him his and her best personal smile. John continued, “However, there is a big catch. Our work here comes first. We deal with crises that are obviously unscheduled. Stay loyal to our work and to Luc, and you can be a part of something beyond important.”

Luc was watching Sully on the monitor in the table. His vitals showed that he was now very excited and happy, but he was looking very cool. So Luc decided to have some fun and just start talking very slowly, “You see, I own so many interacted companies that we are able to keep them balanced to support each other...” Pause. “And that makes us able to react faster in the market place...” Pause. “But, that all depends on how the individual commodities markets are reacting to our previous moves...”

Everyone but Sully was smiling because they knew Luc was having fun at his expense and start smiling bigger and bigger.

Then Megan starts to giggle and Harry says, “Enough Luc. Let the man give us a formal answer.”

Sully stood, shook Luc’s hand and said, “I’m in.” Everyone cheered and clapped. After Sully had accepted the offer of his lifetime, Luc left them all to take care of the paperwork. He planned to hang with the group tonight, but would be on the road and quite busy for the next few days. He walked down the hall to his apartment for a bit a quiet before the evening festivities.

Luc’s apartment was furnished with antiques that he had made during the 18th Century in France where he owned a very successful furniture business as Jean-François Leleu. They were in the style of Louis XVI -- very ornate with gold leaf and marble tops.

Original oil paintings that Luc had painted adorned the walls. He had painted in many styles and under many different names. He had always sought out great artists and enjoyed their company. Leonardo Da Vinci was his favorite. He was Claude Monet’s patron for a few years around 1869, known as Louis-Joachim

Guadibert. He enjoyed copying both their styles as sort of an honor to them. He kept his things to himself and most of his favorites were there. Most were nature scenes depicting it at its best -- flowers, trees, rain (he loved the rain), people enjoying people, and the like. However, his favorite was a picture of Leonardo at an easel that Da Vinci let him paint in Milan in 1490. He was intense, yet peaceful in his process. Although, Luc always thought Leonardo painted very slowly. Luc always mused about the trick Leonardo did with the mirror writing knowing that was easy with some practice.

There were beautiful sculptures and smaller statues on pedestals in alcoves here and there. Off to the side was a perfect set of display cases that held some things that were very personal to Luc.

Through the centuries, Luc had acquired much wealth. Keeping his stuff protected made him perfect the art of constructing vaults. Some were like puzzle boxes to open. In the National Treasure and Indiana Jones movies, there are many fantasy treasure vaults. Some are actually realistic, but most leave a lot to the imagination and theatrics. It was quite a feat to build big stone doors that pivot or slide with the push of a hand. Luc got to where he made them quite complicated. He had caches of loot all over the world and remembered where every cache was kept. There were tombs dating back four thousand years that he had yet to retrieve, but he was about to gather and consolidate everything. Many items would end up in museums, but most were pure gold, silver, jewels, or other very liquid assets that he already moved to a remote secure facility. He was opening them now as part of a plan that he made back in 1941.

He stretched out in his favorite recliner and was quickly asleep. He woke after less than an hour, with another frightful dream. He had been having a recurring dream for the last few months and it scared him to his core. In the dream, he was standing before a gleaming man who was speaking to Luc in a low commanding voice. Luc could not understand him very well, but the message was ominous. He got one word out of twenty spoken in various ancient languages, mostly Latin. In each dream, the Speaker gave varying orders and combinations of the words, "mission," "love," "champion," "man," "war," and "end." The vision always ends abruptly when the man draws a sword and impales Luc. Luc felt something he imagined to be pain. He could only imagine it since he had never felt it. Then the dream ended in darkness with Luc feeling very, very alone.

The dream was becoming more frequent and Luc had a plan to work through it. They have a wonderful psychiatrist on staff, Dr. Ruth Nola Hanson. She helped his friends out in the past and continues to advise them as best she can without being in on the secret of Luc's immortality. Luc thought it was time to make her part of the secret.

Luc figured the business part of the meeting was over and he returned to the Oversight Room. Sully was just signing the last of the endless papers the team had thrown at him. When Luc entered the room, Sully jumped up, ran over and hugged him.

Once they broke it up and Sully was back on Earth again, Luc said, “Come with me, I have a present for you. But first, let’s take a look at your new home.”

They walked down the hall and Sully said, “I forgot all about having my own place right here. There has been so much thrown at me...”

“Yeah. It’s a lot to take in all in one sitting.”

Luc opened the door to an apartment and said, “Welcome home, my friend, welcome home.”

The place was sprawling. It was over twenty four hundred square feet with four bedrooms and three baths. Every room had the incredible view of Central Park ninety-two stories below them. When Sully finally took a good long look around he said, “What am I going to do with all this space?” It was more a rhetorical question than anything.

But Luc answered anyway, “Set up one of the bedrooms as your study, then one for a guest and one for a game room.”

“Good ideas. But I don’t know how to do all that.”

Luc grabbed his phone and made a call, “Emergency in Sully’s place. Emergency. Emergency.” He was clearly joking but, in less than one minute, everyone was there.

The women took over. They grilled Sully on what type of furniture he liked, and they decided on Mediterranean. Then they walked the spaces and got his ideas. They asked him the big question, “Would you like to start with your furniture from your apartment?”

He replied, “Give it all away.” Everybody got a good laugh out of that and then he remembered, “There is a dresser that was my father’s, which I would like to keep.”

Mary Jo finished it up with a phone call, “Hi Cindy, this is Mary Jo Smyth. How are you?” And with that, Sully’s apartment would be decorated by the end of the day. “You need to be here around noon to pick colors.” He just nodded, clearly overwhelmed.

Luc said, “Good, now that we have that taken care of, please come with me.” The team knew what Luc was doing and accompanied Luc and Sully.

They got on the elevator without a word with everyone just smiling and smiling. The doors finally opened to the parking garage and Luc led the way to a roll-up door. Harry entered a code, and the door opened to reveal eighteen cars and six motorcycles. Then Luc said, “Take your pick.”

Sully started laughing and said, “Is that an Audi?” He was looking at an Audi concept car that would never hit the showrooms.

John said, “I knew he had good taste.” They all laughed and kept walking the lineup. When they stepped up to one of the cars, John said, “This is my favorite. A 2016 Koenigsegg CCXR Trevita. Luc had to buy the company to get it.” It was a masterpiece of engineering and testosterone.

Sully stopped there and said, “Can I really have this?”

Gunther answered, “You bet. However, you have to share. We all drive all of these cars. *Owning* this car means that you get first dibs at it. If we want to use it, we give you the courtesy of asking you first. That is what ownership means to us. But Luc owns all the aircraft and watercraft. Harry manages their schedule.”

“I forgot about the travel and vacation already. I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

John said, “So take a week and go somewhere and design while you are relaxing. It would be kind of a working vacation.”

Sully smiled and said, “Really?”

All at once, all four of them said, “Really.”

Luc said, “So, who wants to show our new friend how the Trevita handles?”

John said, “Luc, I do believe you should do the honors.”

The rest of the team just nodded, whistled and clapped.

Luc said, “Sully, let’s go for a ride, shall we?” It wasn’t really a question as Luc got behind the wheel and Gunther opened the passenger side door for Sully. Luc rolled down the window and whispered something to Harry. Sully jumped in as Luc started the car. It didn’t just start, it sort of growled. They backed up and took off. When they hit the street, Luc headed for Sag Harbor on Long Island -- an hour and half ride.

Once out of the city, Luc briefed Sully on the car, and they switched positions allowing Sully to take the wheel. Back on the road, Sully was hitting eighty without really knowing it. Luc cautioned him about the speed and they slipped back to do just above the speed limit. Then the questions came flying.

“So your grandfather was Adam, the first man, like in the Bible, Adam?”

“Yep, old grandpa. My last memory of him was getting banished to the wilderness. It wasn’t really a happy departure.”

“Wow. What did you do?”

“You have to remember, at the time, I was two hundred eighty years old. I wasn’t a child. But it was hard leaving my wife and children. I understood his reasoning, and his word was law. So, I headed north to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Anyway, enough of that.”

“Ok.” Sully was respectfully quiet for a few moments, but couldn’t help himself. “Exactly, how rich are you?”

“I have no idea. It’s all computed by stock prices and a lot of other variables. I would estimate that I am worth four point five seven trillion dollars.”

“Did you say trillion?”

“Yea. I quit counting a long time ago. Oh, that reminds me. Here is a little something for you.” Luc pulled out his wallet, opened it and took out a black American Express card with *Daniel Sullivan* written on it. He handed it to Sully as if it was just a business card.

Sully looked at it while Luc held the wheel and said, “I’ve never seen one of these. I thought the gold and

platinum was the top of the line. What is this?”

“It’s called the Centurion, nicknamed the Black AmEx Card, and will pretty much open any door for you anywhere. There is no limit. With it you could buy a jet or a yacht within a blink of the eye, once the seller got over the shock of seeing it. It’s kind of fun. Enjoy.”

“Thanks.” Sully paused and then said, “Thanks is hardly the word for all this. This really is unbelievable... I guess that is a bad way to put it... since it is happening, that makes it believable.”

“It’s ok Sully. Everything will get clearer and clearer with a few months and then years.”

They were quiet for a minute and Luc said, “Hey, can I drive again?”

“Sure.” They pulled off the road and switched seats and were back on the road in another minute.

As he pulled into the traffic, Luc said, “I’ve got to make a call.” He dialed using his voice activation system, and Gunther came on the speakerphone. “Do you have a drone following me?”

“Yes, of course. Why?”

“There are two.”

“Hold on.” There was a pause and then Gunther said, “The second one is not one of ours. I’ll take care of it.”

When the call ended, Luc pulled off the road again. Then he got out of the car with Sully to see what was going on.

When the two drones came to a stop above the car, the men just watched the show. Gunther’s drone veered off and took up a position well away from the unidentified one. Then Gunther activated the internal communication link between Luc and himself and said, “Get back in the car and take the second exit.”

They did and exited onto a road that went off toward the water. When Gunther gave the word, they stopped and got out of the car to watch the second act of the show.

The unidentified drone came to a stop over them. Three much larger jet-powered drones came off the ocean and surrounded the target. Without a sound, the target fell from the sky, having been hit by pulses from the other drones. It very kindly crashed into a field only about a hundred feet away.

“We can go now.” They got back into the car and sped the last few miles to their destination.

Then Sully said, “What the hell was that about. Whose drone was that?”

“I don’t know, but we will very, very soon. Let’s forget about it for now. We are here.”

They took the second exit and turned into a secured community. Luc pulled up to a coded gate and entered numbers on a keypad. The gate swung open and they drove in. They pulled up to another security gate at a residence and Luc entered another code. It opened and they cruised into the long driveway to the house.

The house was huge and on the water with a circular driveway. Luc parked at the front door and they both got out of the car. They walked up to the door and Luc pulled out a set of keys and opened the front door. He let Sully go in first. He was greeted with the whole team and their families yelling, “Surprise!”



Everybody ran up to Sully and gave him hugs and slaps on the back.

“How did you beat us here?”

A couple of the partygoers yelled, “Helicopter!” And with that, the party was on. There was a band playing outside on the terrace and a buffet of food set up for everyone to graze on.

When everyone settled into the party mode, Sully asked Luc a question, “Is this place yours as well?”

“Yes. And only a ten-minute helicopter ride. Pretty cool, eh?”

“Yes. Very, very cool.”

“We’re all staying the night, so party on dude!”

The team had invited some of Sully’s friends of the female persuasion and everyone danced, ate, drank and danced some more. A boat full of people passed by, heard the music and pulled up to the dock. Luc knew the boat owner and invited them to join the party. These people made a couple of calls and soon another boat pulled up, belonging to a guy just a couple of estates down. One of the newcomers was a really good guitar player and joined the band after retrieving his axe. Luc sat in at the piano for a set to let the keyboardist join in the dancing. Luc waited a set and then pulled out a saxophone. They ran through all the old rock and roll standards and finished with the Doobie Brothers song, *It Keeps You Runnin’*. The party finally wound down and people faded away to their rooms.

Luc and Sully were kicked back in lounge chairs when Sully said, “Let’s go for a swim.”

They were in the pool in a flash just treading water and taking it easy when another drone began to hover way up in the sky. Only Luc could hear and see it. He woke Gunther up remotely using his linked comm unit. This time with the information they had gotten from the downed drone, Gunther’s security team was able to intercept the signal, which led back to a warehouse in the Bronx. Gunther’s team of security specialists stormed the building and rounded up twelve geeks who thought they were part of a new startup company that flew drones that monitored power lines, herds of cattle and other quite legal pursuits. Gunther’s squad confiscated the equipment and let the employees go after some serious interrogation. They held on to four of the group and put them up for the night in a hotel nearby, thinking Sully might want to hire them for his new department. The drone trail ended there.

## Mission Objective Change

Luc woke at five AM to a call from Harry saying they must move out. They took the Trevita and made it back to the city in less than an hour to pick up a few things.

Both Harry and Luc went to their apartments to shower and grab a bite to eat. They ate together in Luc's apartment, as always. Harry was joining Luc for the first part of his errands. They were off to Germany for some housekeeping chores. Their luggage and equipment had been long packed and already stored on the waiting jet, so they took the elevator to the lobby and headed outside to their limo. When they stepped onto the sidewalk, a man was standing on the corner ranting about the end of the world and warning them of impending doom. He was known around the area as Crazy Jerry. The doomsayer was probably fifty feet away from Luc, when he saw him and pointed right at him. Jerry shouted, "He's following him! He's following him!" Then he pointed to the street and shouted, "It's him, it's him." Several people looked where he was pointing and saw no one. Jerry cried out, "Forgive us. Please forgive us." And Jerry started to sob. Luc slipped into the limo with Harry and they drove off past Jerry, who was now on the ground, broken down and worn out. A couple of people were trying to help him, including a cop.

Harry commented, "I've seen Crazy Jerry have one of his shouting matches with himself before, but never interacting with anyone. He's gone over the edge. I suspect we won't be seeing much of him anymore."

The ride to the heliport was short, and they rode without talking. Luc was thinking about poor Crazy Jerry. He made a call to Megan and asked her to look after him. She got the details and ended the call ready to get on with the task, as always.

They changed vehicles and Luc pulled out a special device that looked like a big cell phone with a GPS map of the city on its display. Four blinking lights indicated surveillance drones in the air. These were Luc's. They were small bat-like propeller driven units with tiny cameras. Right now, all four were surveying the vicinity for threats. The drones were confined to a specific patrol zone and, if they passed out of the zone, they returned to whatever monitoring Gunther would have them do. The drones were backed up by an armed larger jet version called Stingrays because of the similarity in shape. Three Stingrays took the drone out on Long Island the previous night. They were thick in the middle and had bat wings and a pointy tail where a small vector thrust jet engine released its jet exhaust fire. They were about 18 inches wide and round. They also had two missile tubes on each side of the central spine. The wings did not move, as vectoring the thrust makes movement unnecessary. Thrust vectoring uses flaps on the end of the engine that aims the exhaust fire. That turns the Unmanned Air Vehicle (UAV) side to side and up or down. Stingrays were literally launched by being shot from a cannon and had a fly time of forty minutes. They could be ready to use anywhere in the city in literally seconds.

Their chopper settled down right outside Luc's private hangar. At last count, Luc had ten aircraft, two for his personal use. One was a six seat Cessna Turbo Stationair with a range of 703 nautical miles. The other was a four/six seat Diamond Aircraft D-Jet with a range of 1130 nautical miles. He also had three big comfortable helicopters, an ultra-light, and the rest were various sizes of jets built by one of his companies. Harry and Luc were taking the largest and fastest jet that day since it was such a long flight and they needed to work onboard. If all went well, they should be back in three days. Then Harry would stay in New York while Luc took the D-Jet to his next destination.

The men made the transfer from chopper to jet and were rolling in a matter of a few minutes. Once airborne, Harry and Luc set up in the big meeting room. The room was outfitted with several large displays, and they quickly had their laptops fired up and linked with the plane's display system, connected to the internet and ready to work. Harry already knew the basics of their mission: They were emptying two caches of treasures that Luc managed to acquire during World War II.

They would be stopping at a closed up weapons manufacturing plant and a graveyard. The cemetery has buried in it twenty-five paintings thought to have been destroyed, mostly works of the Dutch masters Rembrandt, Wijck and Vemeer. These were stolen from museums and private residences in Poland and France. The plant was owned by Luc, using the alias Heinrich Austerman. His company manufactured small weapons and munition for Hitler. Austerman's old office was hiding prizes gifted to him by *the Furor*. Hitler hoped the gifts would curry favor with Luc and keep his weapons and ammunition coming. There were four items in all -- a crown, a scepter, a jeweled sword with scabbard, and a bag of gold coins.

Harry thought they might need a guide who knows Berlin very, very well and reached out to an old friend, Master Sergeant Colin Summers. Colin and Harry went way back, and Harry believed Colin to be a kind and decent soldier dedicated to his country, family and friends.

Harry was sketching on a map of Berlin and said, "It is pretty straight forward. We start at the pub picking up Colin, and back to the plane for a few hours. Then we stop by the factory and finish up with the cemetery. We land just at dusk. If we time it well, we can do it all under cover of darkness. The factory is no problem since it is deserted and you still own it. With our Interpol badges, it's a walk in the park. Especially with Gunther answering any phone call about them. Forty minutes to the cemetery and we do our work. Then back to the airport and we leave by first light."

"Sounds good."

"I'll call Colin and confirm everything."

"Good. While you do that, I'm going to call Angela and clean up before we land." Angela was Luc's girlfriend and had been for a couple of years. He has been struggling with their relationship because she only knew him as Luc. Luc wanted it to be more, but he just didn't know what to do. He had told two wives about his immortality with very bad results. One left immediately, and the other hung in for ten years before their age

differences started to show and she bailed. He couldn't blame them. Luc left Harry to his call and moved to his stateroom to make his calls.

With twenty minutes left before they landed, Luc returned to the conference room and joined Harry who was syncing up with Gunther for the next part of their operation. They landed and taxied to the private terminal where they were met by four of Gunther's men. Luc introduced himself as a special advisor to Gunther, named Luc St. Clair. Harry took care of the customs people while the men moved equipment to the two SUVs they brought. When the German officials had left and they were relatively alone beside the jet, Harry and Luc open two of the cases they had in the rear hatch of each vehicle. One contained a ruggedized laptop with ports to connect to the drones in the other case. Harry got online with Gunther, and followed his instructions to get a flock of Luc's little video surveillance drones airborne. One by one, they connected each to the laptop, let it upload instructions, disconnected it, started it up and threw it into the air. The drones immediately headed for each of the two sites to provide a feed on what was happening on the ground before the men arrived. It took about an hour but, when they were done, eight of the little UAVs were up and running. These were disposable and had an airtime of about four hours. When their batteries were almost dead, they would head for the nearest body of water and impact the surface doing about fifty miles an hour. Many of the parts were water-soluble, so there was really almost nothing left within a few minutes after the splashdown.

Harry coordinated a food fest at a small bar about twenty minutes away with his friend, Colin. They had all read Colin's file and were sure they could trust him, especially with the documents the four men had brought. They closed up the cases after showing all four of Gunther's men how to operate the system. They would have to carry on when Harry and Luc were busy so that they had all the necessary coverage. They hit the road with one of Gunther's acting as a driver for Harry and Luc in one SUV and the other three men in the second SUV. Harry and Luc made small talk with Mason Todd, the driver, for the first half of the trip. Luc boned up on the four men who were on the flight and asked their driver something. "Mason, can I asked you a personal question?"

"Sure, but I may not answer it."

"I read your file and saw that you have been on six ops working for Gunther. He has a policy of letting you opt out of a mission if you have reservations on what you are being asked to accomplish. No hard feelings, no black mark in your file, no repercussions at all. To date, only four have ever made that choice, and all left Gunther's employment with honor and friendship. So here's my question. What goes through your mind when you make that decision?"

"I will be happy to answer that question. About half of the people don't even think about it. They just roll with their team leader. Then you've got a range of people from the followers to the ones who ask every question conceivable about the work ahead and then make their decision with a lot of thought and often prayer. Me? I'm the pain in the ass asking all the questions."

Harry looked at Luc and said, “Wow. A thinking soldier. What are the odds?”

Luc replied, “I hope one hundred percent of Gunther’s employees. Thanks, Mason. I appreciate your candor.”

They arrived at the pub. Two of the men checked the streets and then entered the bar to scope it out. When satisfied that everything was OK, they radioed Mason who told Luc and Harry they could go in. Mason and the other driver remained with the vehicles and equipment.

The place was a picture perfect version of a German bar. It was old, had charm and room temperature beer. The menu had the famous house specialty, kraut dogs and chips. There were no tourists, only locals and them. As Harry and Luc entered, Luc noticed that the two bodyguards had taken a table near the door. Colin saw Harry as they came in and waved them over to a booth in the back. They hugged like one would expect two old soldiers to hug, strong and manly. They took a seat and Harry introduced Luc as Luc St. Clair. Colin was around fifty years old and looked like he worked hard at staying very, very fit. He was wearing jeans and a sweater. The sweater seams looked strained around Colin’s upper arms with the bulk. A waitress was at their table in a flash and Luc ordered for everyone in German. Colin spoke no German and he was thankful to be able to continue his conversation with Harry anyway. The food and drink came and Colin was dying to know what the mission was.

Harry did the talking, “When we leave here later tonight, we are going to an abandoned munitions factory to retrieve some items. Then we proceed directly to a cemetery to do the same. This is an old Nazi treasure and we have the blessing of the U.S. State Department. That comes directly from the Secretary of State Duncan Freeborn.” On cue, Luc extracted a folder from a metal briefcase and laid it in front of Harry. He slid it to Colin who looked at the first page with Duncan’s signature on it and then at a map.

Colin said, “How do you know all this?”

Harry replied, “We are doing a favor for the Secretary and that’s all I can tell you. You need to trust me that what we are doing is the right thing. You can never mention to anyone that you helped us, ever. Are you OK with all this?”

“Hell yes. Let’s see those other maps and tell me the plan.”

Harry carried the conversation for the rest of the evening. It was nice to see such kinship between two men. That happens when bullets were flying and you were counting on the other guy to watch your back. They consumed a lot of beer, considering they would be working in four hours. Luc drank twice as much as them just to watch Colin. Luc could not get drunk, so he found this amusing at times. He had drank many men under the table on bets before, but not in a long time. Luc even liked the taste of the brew. Harry knew exactly what Luc was doing and kept a count on how many brews he and his old friend drank.

Luc fidgeted with his watch to let Harry know they needed to get moving. They were headed back to the plane to grab some sleep since it was nicer than most hotels and they would not need to waste time checking in

and out. Luc signaled the security men that they were leaving, and they moved out. Luc, Harry and Colin followed and joined everyone at the two vehicles. Luc rode with the three men and let Harry and Colin ride with Mason. They pulled into the airport and parked next to their jet. Colin was struck silent by the size of the jet and then by its furnishings. The four-man support team split the watch and two joined the group on the plane for two hours, when it was time to take their shift. The two on sentry duty hung around the SUVs and monitored the UAVs. They had to put another five bats into the sky to replace ones that died and would be ready to launch another few again shortly.

The time to start the op arrived and Luc gathered everyone into the conference room. The sentries placed motion detectors around the caravan and reluctantly came inside for the briefing.

When all were seated and Gunther was online, Luc pulled up a file and turned on a holographic projection that took up the whole table displaying the two sites on it. Everyone was suitably impressed. Luc ran everyone through the layout of the plant and the graveyard. Then he had Gunther turn on the feeds from the drones. He explained that he could update the wire-frame terrain model with “skin” from the video feeds and did so. The projection shimmered for a second and then the hard surfaces appeared. It was very cool.

They ran through the travel plan and many changes were made from Colin’s input on the local territory. The changes were mostly about traffic and routes. The security men had several suggestions too, all about their support roles. When finished, they moved out to the ground transport. Mason opened a rear hatch, pulled out several decent sized cases and opened them. The cases were filled with guns and other deadly tools. Luc took his Colt Python and shoulder holster, and the other guys helped themselves. Luc did not see the personal case he had requested and asked Mason about it. Mason retrieved the case from the front. Luc opened it and took out the toys he was used to having, strapping item after item to his body. There was a six-pack holster of throwing stars, a boot knife, two wrist-throwing knives and a thigh mounted buck knife. Mason was watching him load up and couldn’t resist making a sarcastic comment. “I can’t think of anything else to add to your armory, sir, unless you want a blow gun...”

Luc smiled and said, “Chance favors the prepared.”

Harry and Colin handled the explosives. Everyone attached linked comm units and tested them out with Gunther taking the lead. Every comm unit had a video camera, and Gunther was seeing everything they were seeing. It was time to move out.

The trip to the shutdown factory took forty-five minutes. They made it with no problems as the traffic was light, being one in the morning. They pulled next to a chained and padlocked vehicle gate and Luc got out while the others stayed in the vehicles. He opened the gate with a key on his keyring, opened it wide enough to drive through and held it while they brought in the two SUVs. He jumped in one as it went by. They drove the few hundred yards to the main building, where they would retrieve the first stash. The SUVs were parked and the team unloaded the equipment quickly and quietly.

Luc headed directly for the main doors that were also padlocked with a chain. The glass in the doors was long gone and plywood and chicken wire were neatly in place. Luc unlocked the lock and two men took up their stations as planned. One would always remain outside, who was assigned to the watch and drone maintenance. The remaining five men entered the building with their headlamps blazing and guns sweeping the area. Gunther had decided at the last minute to up the threat level on this project to “Unknowns possibly armed and unfriendly” -- which was why they were entering the building as if they were a SWAT team. When Mason gave the signal, one of the two men stationed outside came in and covered the main entry station.

The team climbed four flights of stairs and were standing in the executive management hallway. They walked to the end of the hallway and into a reception area, stopping before two large doors that led into Luc’s old office. They left another sentry at the door. Luc opened the door to his office and four of them entered the room. Luc had not been in this office since 1944 when he closed it down. He looked around the empty, dusty space and remembered it back then.

### *December 7th, 1941 Berlin*

Luc was at his desk with the war news radio playing as a special bulletin came on. Pearl Harbor was attacked. He knew the President of the United States had already gotten the news by that time. He heard it and wondered what Roosevelt’s next move would be. He guessed correctly with the declaration of war being announced shortly thereafter. It was not the loss of life or disgust over the cowardly act that got to Luc. He had witnessed far worse. It was the fact that instant communication on a global scale had reached maturity and it scared him. And nothing had really scared him before, ever. He watched the radio being invented and it didn’t take him long to know the impact it was going to have. He studied its growth and use. Of course, the military moved quickly to apply this miracle to war. At the time, Luc was using four primary identities, all wealthy moguls of industry – one German, one Swiss, one English, and one French. His enterprises in America were doing just fine with him running the businesses by wire. He provided war materials to any buyer without thinking about the consequences of double-dealing. Then radio shrunk the world. Then the airplane made it smaller still.

The next day, President Roosevelt gave his “Infamy” speech. He changed the course of history with that broadcast. As he listened, it became clear to Luc that men of wealth and power now had the tool to make big things happen from far away and quickly. He was one of those men, and he started to use it right then and there.

Two other things were factors as well. It became clear to him that Hitler was evil. There have been a lot of evil men of power in history, but none with the means to cause as much pain as Hitler had. Pain on a truly global level. The other factor was the atom bomb. Luc was well aware of the work being done on both sides of the war. He saw that humankind was on the verge of being able to destroy itself with that weapon.

By the end of FDR’s speech, Luc’s course of action was clear. He realized that all his wealth meant nothing

without using it to pay back the world for all that it had given him. There was no point in amassing more of anything. He had enough to outlast even immortality. His network of companies was close to being self-sustaining. So he did something he had not done in a thousand years -- Luc took a side. He began to help the Allies defeat Germany and Japan. He started letting the quality go downhill on the arms he sold to Germany. He started to price gouge them too. He funneled that money into helping the Allies with some very important R&D work. He even helped make sure the right minds were working for the right side.

He had never looked back after making that decision. He liked Superman when he showed up in the 1930s because he fought for Truth, Justice and the American Way. Sounded good then, and still sounds good today.

Thinking about his life before the turnabout, he was ashamed. There were no fond memories in this place.



# Merlin

## *Today Berlin*

The team waited for Luc to show them what to do next. Luc took a slow and deep look around and then went to the back wall. He used chalk to mark where he wanted the wall to be blown out. It had to look like it naturally crumbled to reveal the secret room. Harry and Colin went to work setting the shape charges just so. It was at that moment when the sentry out front heard a police call saying two local cop cars were on the way to investigate suspicious entry into the old plant. They were three minutes out. Luc put the mission on hold and headed out to handle the surprise visit. He exited the door just as two tiny squad cars pulled to a stop next to the huge SUVs.

In German, Luc addressed the officers when they approached, “Hello, didn’t expect any notice to be taken with our visit here, but I’m glad to know the area is locally protected.”

He pulled out fake Interpol credentials and gave them to the closest officer. “All I can tell you is that this is an ongoing investigation. We expected to be in and out before anyone saw us.”

Luc told him how many men were with him and where they were.

The officer examining his creds had phoned them in and was satisfied they were legitimate. They asked Luc to please notify them next time and asked if they needed any perimeter security. Luc told them that would be welcomed and that he needed to get back inside to work. They should be about another twenty minutes.

Once Luc was back inside his old office, he told Harry to blow the wall. He did, and the blast was muffled due to the shape charges he applied. The wall of bricks crumbled and, when the dust cleared, a long, thin crawl space was revealed. Luc aimed his light inside and saw the hidden items just as he’d left them. He stepped through the hole, retrieved the bag of gold coins and brought it out into the room.

He took the bag to a table near the center of the room and dumped the contents on the table. The men helped keep the coins from rolling off the old rickety table. They quickly stacked them into piles and stepped back to take a good look.

Luc and the others were intent on the gold when Luc heard the unmistakable sound of an arrow whizzing through the air. Then came the horrible sound of the arrow impacting the chest of the man stationed outside the office. Luc said, “Get down and stay put. Mason, on my six.”

They had all ducked and remained quiet as Luc and Mason eased toward the half-opened door. They could see the boots of the downed man and pushed the door open. Luc came face to face with six young men, all around twenty years old. They were armed with bows and arrows all aimed at the two men.

Luc pushed Mason back into the room and dropped his rifle. The leader of the group said in German,

“What brings you to our home?”

The man stepped nearer to the door and saw the others inside the room. “Tell your friends to set down their weapons or everyone dies, including the one outside and the one in the entrance.”

Luc said, “OK. Nobody else needs to die. Take the gold we came for and leave us. There’s enough for all of you to disappear.”

One of the others said, “Gold? How much?”

Harry, Colin and Mason had moved back to the wall away from the table with their hands up. Gunther was hearing all of this through their comms and asked Luc if he wanted the place stormed. He knew not to act without Luc’s approval and, right now, Luc was busy. Gunther knew Luc could handle this situation.

“A bag full.”

“Throw it out.”

Mason scooped the gold coins into the old bag, walked over and dropped it at Luc’s feet.

“It’s too heavy to throw.”

They all stormed the doors like hungry animals and saw Luc’s friends hiding in the corner.

One of them opened the top of the bag and pulled out a handful of coins. “This is the real thing. We’ve hit the jackpot. Let’s get out of here, permanently.”

The leader said, “Ok. Simon, stay with me. You four, take the gold back to our place and pack up. Call the others together. We are getting the hell out of this rat hole. Take only what you can carry. We separate and travel light.”

One of them tried to pick up the bag and motioned for another to help. Together, they managed to half carry and half drag the bag out of the office. The one called Simon held the doors for the bagmen. He reached down and pulled a couple of grenades off the downed sentry. He handed them to the leader as they both laughed and nodded in agreement.

The leader pulled the pins on both of the grenades and threw them under the table between Luc and the others. They turned and ran as Luc dove on the table. Its legs crumpled and the grenades exploded. Luc absorbed the blast full into his chest and, together, the table and his body flew straight up. They crashed back down and landed in a continuous cloud of dust and splinters.

Luc stood up with his clothes blackened by the blast. He was unharmed thanks to his shield. The others were unharmed but choking and coughing. Through the dust, Luc yelled, “Mason, Harry, Colin? You all OK?”

They all yelled “Yes” and Mason said, “Are you?”

Luc said, “Yes. Mason, notify your men to stay protect themselves. You guys stay put. Do not leave this room. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Luc took off out the door. He checked the man in the hall, but he was dead. Luc followed the trail of the thieves easily from the bag they were half dragging in the dust. Greed is never a good companion.

The trail got more solid as Luc reached the staircase. They were heading to the back of the expansive warehouse space, perhaps to the underground tunnels of pipes and wire. Luc reached a good place to scout the floor and saw them moving slowly into a tooling area. He dashed down another two flights of stairs and came out onto the fabrication floor. The thieves were now fighting with each other over how many shares there should be. Two of them wanted to divide it amongst the six of them and call it good. Two others wanted larger shares for finding it and killing the men. They kept on arguing as they dragged the treasure along.

Suddenly, the leader pulled out a gun and shot the other five right there. He reloaded his clip and finished off one of them clinging to life with a single shot. Luc watched all this as he moved closer and closer undetected. He slid next to an empty tool rack. One of his harness buckles tapped the rack and the lone remaining thief turned and emptied his clip wildly toward Luc. Another clip was slapped into his gun.

Luc was hit with a ricochet from one of the wild shots. The thief picked up the entire bag, close to one hundred pounds in weight, and headed for the far door. It was obvious that he wasn't sure if anyone survived when he wasted all those bullets.

Luc came out from hiding and charged the man with his gun holstered. The guy turned to fire and Luc threw both of his sleeve knives, hitting his target in the chest.

Luc walked over to the dead man, picked up the bag and said to Gunther, "We've got seven bodies to clean up here. One is ours."

Luc worked the radios and got help carrying the bag to the cars. He took Mason, who was giving him funny looks, back to the office to finish the work.

When they were halfway up the stairs, Mason said, "I saw the grenades explode and throw you six feet in the air. You should be dead. There's not even a scratch on you."

"Mason, if you think something is not right, then talk to Gunther. I'm just thankful to be here to have this conversation."

That bologna seemed to end the line of questioning, at least for now. They reached the office and Luc climbed into the tiny hidden room and brought out the three remaining items.

"You know, Mason, if those kids only knew how valuable these items are compared to one hundred pounds of gold, they would kick themselves if they could."

"What are these things?"

"I'll tell you along with the others downstairs. Why spoil the surprise." They carried the things down the stairs and out to the waiting men. One of the SUV tailgates was down and they all gathered round Luc and Mason as they came out of the building.

With everyone shining their lights on the area, Luc unwrapped a sword first. It was gold and silver and encrusted with many, many jewels. The blade still gleamed and was sharp as it could be. Then Luc unwrapped a scepter that matched the sword. The last bag contained a simple gold crown that was little more than a curved band of gold. It had only one jewel set in the center front of the crown. It was clearly masculine.

When everything was out, the men passed the items around for inspection. Everyone was online via a live video feed, and Luc said inclusively, “Everyone, I give you Excalibur, King Arthur’s sword that he pulled from the stone.” There really was nothing more to say. It was magnificent. “This was his scepter and crown.”

Harry took Luc aside, asked Gunther to turn off the linked comms to everyone except for the three of them and then asked, “Ok, tell us how you know this is Excalibur? King Arthur is a legend.”

Luc looked at his friend and said, “He was real and I was there in his court.” He paused and then told them the rest. “I was Merlin, his mentor and friend. When Hitler gave me the sword, crown and scepter, he thought they were from France. I recognized it all immediately and was amazed at the serendipity of these items returning to me after six centuries. There is an inscription under the hilt wrap that proves it is genuine. We need a frontman to discover these things and sell them off. How about we give them to Colin?”

Harry smiled and said, “I can’t think of a more deserving fellow. Gunther can you forge up some documents that prove he acquired them legitimately?”

“Sure.”

“Well that settles that, if he will work with us...”

Harry and Luc returned to the group, and Harry said, “Pack up. Let’s move out.”

They waved at the lone remaining police officer sitting in his tiny patrol car and headed for the next site twenty minutes away. It was the cemetery and should be an easy stop ... though the plant was supposed to be easy too. The cemetery was old and there were no caretakers. A heavily wooded area stood just to the north of the thirty acres and their disguised vehicle was waiting. A camouflage net covered the vehicle, which had only been there four hours. It was a large utility truck with a backhoe on a trailer.

They changed clothes and drove the truck only a quarter mile to the fence surrounding the graveyard. As they arrived, Luc told the team that he was sorry about the lost man. The rest of the work was done in a quiet reverence over their fallen comrade.

Mason drove the backhoe off the trailer while the rest of the team opened the fence by removing a section. Luc directed Mason where to dig. About six feet into the ground, he hit a metal plate. The plate covered a fifteen-foot square cement chamber. They cleared the top cover, pulled it back with chains hooked to the digger and moved it out of the way. Removing the huge lid revealed twenty-five crates, all about six inches thick and then about three by four feet. They were clearly canvas art crates. The men started handing them off to each other in a fire-bucket line. The paintings were loaded in a matter of minutes, and Mason went to work replacing the lid and filling in the hole. When he was done, they reset the fence and loaded into the utility truck.

The ride back to the airport was quick and easy. The men dropped Colin off back where he left his car and Harry was saying farewell to his friend. Luc approached them, carrying Excalibur and the bag with the scepter and crown in it. He gave them to Harry and walked away after saying his goodbyes to Colin. Luc stood close enough to lip-read Colin, "What am I going to do with these things?... I don't know how to sell them... What would I do with the money?..." Harry talked quietly for a minute and Colin said, "Really?... Anything I want?... You'll help me?... I know exactly what I want to do with the money... Exactly." Harry hugged his friend as he passed the lot to him.

As they were about to board the plane, Luc told Mason to stay with Colin until the sword and other things were put into a safe in a bank vault. Luc and Harry boarded the plane as the vehicles drove off.

Luc was just shutting the door when he heard a sound in the sky. Without the slightest hesitation and with a lightning move, Luc spun, pulled his Python, aimed it into the sky and fired all six bullets as fast as you could hear them. Harry had pulled his own weapon behind Luc and was scanning the area for targets. Luc bounded down the stairs and ran into the dawning light toward a hangar.

Harry could almost see him. Luc stopped and picked up something large. Then he ran back to the plane with his prize, a drone. It was just like the ones in Long Island.

They were in the air in ten minutes. They set up in the conference room with all the techies online to analyze the drone. It was indeed from the same group. Because Luc had blasted it out of the sky, there was no chance of finding the source of the signal. Another dead end.

Luc left Harry and headed for a long shower and rest. Somewhere in that time, Harry showed up with Luc's favorite meal; a ham and cheese omelet and a glass of champagne. They left each other alone for the rest of the trip back to New York.

A few days later, Luc learned that Colin was planning to set up a foundation that helps wounded military veterans get services provided by the government and then add more to make their lives even better. He should do well, as the sword, scepter and crown had been secretly appraised by Sotheby's. They expected the items to bring over fifty million dollars at auction. Very cool. Harry sure was a good judge of character.

# Into the Wild Blue Yonder

When Luc and Harry touched down in New York, Gunther was there to meet them and take care of customs. Then the trio talked about the trip and the outcomes with all seriousness. After the informal meeting, Harry caught his ride to the Empire State Building, and Luc prepared for the next leg of his trip. He talked to his chief mechanic about the maintenance on the D-Jet that Luc was going to fly. Once satisfied, Luc boarded the plane and went through the preflight check, updated the logs and made sure a flight plan was filed. He fired the engines and began the long taxi to the flight line.

Luc was headed to Oklahoma to catch his new space plane for a ride to the International Space Station for a five-day stay.

Luc enjoyed piloting and had flown almost every airplane ever made. The most fun he ever had flying was taking up the Wright Brothers' first plane three days after their first flights. It was all so fresh, new and, most of all, freeing. He went up in a hot air balloon with one of the Montgolfier brothers in France in 1785 and was hooked. Actually, Luc thought guiding the plane and being in control was much better than a balloon. He also loved to fly gliders. He didn't possess one at the moment, because he was planning a new variety with a small jet engine to get the craft up and flying without a tow plane. Then, they would be cut loose to parachute back to earth. Luc started working with an engineer last month to see what might be done.

After Luc was comfortable with the plane and cruising along, the boredom set in. He put the plane on autopilot. With his hands free, he opened up his laptop and got online with his friends.

He had a custom rig added to the cockpit just to hold his computer where the copilot would sit. His laptop was really cool. He designed it with Sully's help, who didn't know that he was working with Luc at the time. It was about a half inch thick, thirteen by nine inches and had eight parts -- a keyboard base, a mouse table on the right and six one-eighth inch flat screens fitted together into any size display. Luc usually displayed the screens in a three-wide and two-tall configuration. He could merge it into one big screen or as many small ones as desired because the screens were virtually seamless. He was having Sully modify it to include a 3D holographic projector as well. Now Sully was building more systems for the six of them.

Luc touched base in five-minute briefings with each member online and each gave individual reports. Everything was just fine for the most part. He made a few decisions in preparation for projects in the works and his people took the actions. There was one interesting thing, however. Harry asked John to check up on Crazy Jerry, and John sent Ruth to visit with him. John filled Luc in, "Crazy Jerry, aka Mr. Jerold Tyler, a veteran of the Gulf War, isn't really crazy; he's suffering from PTSD and isn't medicated because of his homelessness. Given the right meds to stabilize him, he could do OK in the real world again. Ruth asked about what he saw when he picked you out of the crowd. He said he saw a large man dressed like a gladiator with a big sword

stalking you. He was trying to warn you.”

“Why did he asked the man to forgive us?”

“Oh, yes. When the man looked at him, he felt like he was being judged for his life, and the first thing that came out of his mouth was to ask for forgiveness. Luc, does this mean anything to you?”

“I’m afraid it does. The description of the man sounds like the same man from my nightmare. But how can that be possible?”

John concluded the discussion with this, “That is all I have from Ruth’s notes. We’re going to help Jerold get the help he needs.”

After Luc was finished with his friends and work, he called Angela and visited for an hour. He lied to her about what he was doing and felt really bad about it. Things were going to have to change. How, he just didn’t know. She was the most special lady he had known in a very long time, and it hurt to think of not being with her. He had known her when she was a little girl and watched her grow up. Her grandfather used to sell him pretzels and he became friends with the family. That ended in 1952 when he “died” as Wallace Pittman. But he still kept tabs on the whole family. Angela thought they met at a Starbucks by chance, but the truth was that Luc planned the whole meeting. He really had no idea just how special she was until he met her face to face as an adult. Wow, did she knock his socks off. Luc always wondered where that phrase came from. He had actually seen a man blown out of his boots by cannon fire before, but never his socks too.

Luc arrived at the remote airstrip in Oklahoma and was immediately in his role for the next week as Dr. Jean-Baptiste Delaborde, a French astrophysicist. Luc had studied up the last few weeks and would conduct experiments along with the regular astronauts. Currently there were five aboard -- three Americans, one Brit and one Russian; four guys and one gal, an American. This would be the first docking of the new space plane that Luc funded. Captain Zo Furlong would take them up. He was a seasoned pilot and had been on the project for years. There were three planes and they were taking the “Challenger” up, so named by Luc in honor of the lost Space Shuttle crew.

Luc was met by a van and taken across the runway to their lone hanger. The project was way ahead of the publicized schedule and had been ferrying paying customers into space for three years. They would go into space and orbit the Earth at least five times for around forty thousand dollars. They got lots of pictures and a fantastic five-hour ride. Most threw up at some point.

Three of them were going to the ISS on this trip. Luc was making some cash from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) by carrying supplies to support the station and crew so only three bodies could go with the strict weight rules.

At the hanger, Luc was escorted into a waiting area where his companions were waiting. John Wilcox, the resident astronaut was there along with Tsubasa Saitou, a Japanese astronomer who had just won a Nobel Prize. Tsubasa was a fascinating fellow, and he and Luc hit it off because Tsubasa spoke French. Luc read his bio and

that was why he picked a French fake personality. They chit-chatted about their work while they waited and asked John, their new experienced astronaut buddy, all kinds of questions about what the flight would be like. John shared advice on different things, like where to hang stuff while you sleep. Eventually they begged him to let them both take a spacewalk. John said he would see what he could do, if the busy schedule permitted it.

After a twenty-minute wait, Captain Zo Furlong came into the room and visited with them. Zo could laugh and carry on with the best of them, but he always had a serious side that supported his super pilot mind. He was larger than most jet jockeys at 5'11". His hair was finally turning grey, but he looked great. Zo had first flight credits on no less than four aircraft, including this space plane.

Zo began their tour by taking them up to the top mezzanine where they got to look out over the huge hangar where six aircraft were parked. Three were space planes and three were T-38 Talons used as chase planes and were dwarfed by the space planes. The space planes were each the same size and looked a lot like the Concord. There were several differences -- the large rocket cylinders under the wings for one thing. The expended rockets would be jettisoned after they gave the plane its big kick into space out of the atmosphere. They fall a long way back to earth into the ocean where they were retrieved for reuse.

Luc once asked Zo how high "up" was as a joke, and he came back with the same answer all jet pilots do -- ninety-two thousand feet. Then he explained that after that altitude, it kind of doesn't matter which way was up anymore.

The planes had a very cramped cockpit and even tighter passenger compartment. Their passenger section was presently configured for the three of them. John would be staying aboard the ISS, and one of the guys up there now would be rotating back to Earth.

The fun began for Luc as Zo took them to one of the two planes they would not be taking. The plane's cowlings were off revealing the hardware under the skin in places. There were rolling stairs for the mechanics to use and Zo let them climb up and study the bay for a few minutes. Luc could see lots of areas where upgrades could be made, and he noted them in his head for later. He did this for several of the hatches while the others just milled around. Then into the cockpit they went. Luc thought this was so cool, his very own space ship. Wow.

Then Luc asked if he could take a look at the cockpit of one of the T-38s and Zo said, "Sure, why not." Luc climbed up the side and hopped into the driver's seat. It was instantly familiar and felt like it would be fun to fly. He thought that he would have to take one up soon.

The tour ended abruptly when the countdown started at three hours until takeoff. Zo said they must hurry now and took them to a team of technicians and doctors. They split the three of them up and took them to be prepped. Luc had never had eight people working on him at once. There were two asking him questions about past medical problems and any medications that he took. One was a nurse and the other was a translator.

Abruptly, Tsubasa walked into Luc's room dressed just like Luc in a gown. He walked up to Luc, bowed



and said, “I would be honored to be your interpreter. They just told me you were being supplied with a very skilled individual, but I would like to help out.”

Luc asked the interpreter in French if it was okay with him. He smiled and admitted his translation skills were rusty. Luc bowed back at Tsubasa and graciously accepted the offer of his translation skills. It was hard to bow because Luc had monitoring electrodes patched all over connected to a main harness that linked to a thin backpack unit.

A monitor listing the preparation steps was hanging on a wall. Luc memorized it as it scrolled by once and felt that he was ready to go. They had a quick briefing to cover the legal warnings that Luc required. Blah, blah, blah... Then they were packed into the plane, strapped in, connected to a comm link, connected to an oxygen system, and hooked into an electrical power system. They weren't going anywhere without the plane taking them there.

Zo and his copilot had been aboard for an hour already doing the preflight check. There would be a quick turnaround for the plane. At the station, the cargo and passengers would be unloaded. The plane would then return to Earth for another profitable cargo-load before picking them up for their return flight home. It was the first time the plane had turned around between flights, and it was a very big test of the system. If there were any hitches, a second plane would simply make the trip instead.

The plane began to move slowly as it was pushed by a tug, backed through the hangar doors and then far onto the runway. The whole process took about ten minutes. The engines were started. They were loud and the vibration was strong though muffled. Helmets were protecting the passengers from the noise, but Luc's ears were still on the verge of hurting. The bird began to taxi and Zo came on doing a bad flight attendant imitation telling them to keep their cell phones turned off, and then he just busted up. He gave them the real two-minute briefing on what to expect next. Luc had a French translation going on in his ear from Tsubasa.

They moved to the flight line and immediately hit the jets. The passengers were pushed back in their seats as they hit five hundred mph in about twelve seconds. The front wheels rotated off the ground, then the rear and they were airborne. The sensation was close to the simulator that they were in a month ago when they trained for this trip, but stronger.

The G force finally backed off and they could breathe easier. The display array in front of Luc was not unlike the cockpit, except that none of his flight controls functioned. There were eight small monitors in all and they were all programmable for any one of sixteen choices. Luc had his set to show views mostly aiming towards the front of the plane and down at the ground. They were already over Florida when over the comm Zo announced that it was sixty seconds until a one hundred eighteen-second rocket burn. It took them less than four minutes to get to this altitude. Zo came on again at five seconds with a countdown. When he hit where zero should be, the passengers were jammed back in their seats again. The force locked them in place and there was a burn countdown on one display. Again, the G's backed off and Luc gasped for a couple of breaths. While

gasping, he looked out the window and was stunned by the sight of being on the edge of the atmosphere. Half the view was the beautiful curved Earth and the rest was stars. Without the atmosphere to obscure the view, one could see ALL the stars. It was amazing. Then Luc realized that some of the stars were not stars at all, but far away galaxies. It was a humbling sight if one takes the time to consider the size of it all and then remembers that a human is just a speck of dust in the big picture.

At that moment, Luc got a little queasy because they were now weightless. He did not even notice the booster rockets being dropped. The feeling quickly passed and he enjoyed the magic of zero gravity. For the first time in a very, very, very long time, he felt like a kid again.

The jets had shut down and they were hurling through space at almost eighteen thousand mph. Luc switched his monitor configuration to look up at the Earth. The view was amazing as they passed from day to night. The city lights changed at that point and he could sense the millions of people down below and what they were doing this time of the evening. The weather systems were just as beautiful with all their power and size. Luc saw a normal seasonal hurricane forming to the west of Africa. The depression was not predicted to be a storm and was dying out already. There was a mass of clouds stuck off the northwest coast of America. It looked like another rainy day for Seattle. The Cascade Mountain range had stopped the clouds from moving East and that created a rain shadow. The sight was truly breathtaking.

All during this time, Tsubasa and Luc quietly conversed back and forth between French and Japanese. Luc thought that Tsubasa really was a very pleasant fellow. He had that rare feeling where you recognize someone that you actually like and could be good friends.

# Heavenly Host

Their space plane took four orbits to cross paths with their destination. The International Space Station was a beautiful thing. The detail of the machinery and the solar arrays were a marvel to behold. The station was a true testament of what could be done when working together. Luc had plans to build another bigger, better one that he hoped to start in four years. His would be the classic spinning spoke layout so that some gravity could be artificially created from the centrifugal force. They approached the station quickly and were docked within minutes. Zo asked the passengers to remain seated and helmeted while he ran a check on the airlocks. On a monitor Luc watched the hatch open and Zo being greeted by the entire crew. The moment was magical.

One of the crew came in and began working on helping Luc out of his seat. He introduced himself as Wilford Pickering, but told Luc he could call him Doc. He picked Luc because he spoke French. Doc was a Biochemist from the UK and his French was excellent. He seemed like a very nice guy. It took ten minutes before Luc was ready to enter the station. First stop was the changing room and Luc got to use the suck urinal. He thought it was weird. He quickly changed his clothes into the blue jumpsuit most wore on the station.

Luc was told to report to the Freedom Module for a short briefing after he got dressed. He made his way along a hallway and came to a relatively large window. He couldn't help but stop and stare at all the stars. All the others were ahead of him and he enjoyed the solitude with the view. He found himself mesmerized by the wonder of the vastness of the universe. As he was taking it all in, he started to hear quiet music and watched as the stars were joined by what appeared to be fireflies. They multiplied and the quiet music got louder and clearer. He realized that the music was not coming from the station's comm system. He didn't recognize the overture, but it was beautiful. The lightshow outside grew and then burst into a cloud in time with the music. He watched the cloud explode and then freeze in the middle of the burst. The music stopped with the frozen explosion and a male voice whispered in the first language Luc learned, "God is blessing". The language was lost around the same time the Tower of Babel was built, and Luc had not heard it in over five thousand years.

The half-frozen explosion faded back to the full star panorama. Luc was frightened by all this and grabbed hold of a handgrip to steady himself. A few seconds later, a crew member stuck his head around the corner and yelled, "You all right?" in English. Luc was shaky, but remembered not to answer in English. He just nodded his head yes and the man kept going to find one unaccounted for person. Luc moved hand over hand by the rails and reached the group. They stopped talking when he came in.

They were talking about the show and Wilford asked Luc to describe what he saw. Luc gave a description of the stars and then told them he did not understand the words. They asked Luc to say the words and he did so, but poorly. Judy Harrelson, the lone female aboard, had a mic to Houston Command Control and asked Luc to repeat the words. He did, poorly again, and the group made attempts to interpret the meaning. All the others

took turns repeating the words and all got pretty close. Luc knew they wouldn't have any luck with an interpretation. Judy ran the phrase through a computer and got something in Swedish about a horse. Good luck.

When Judy finished trying to find something on the web, she moved to another terminal to look at the recordings of the event. Finding nothing during her review, she gasped and said, "The video and audio picked up nothing. There is no record of that event on our system. How can that be?"

The Challenger had left dock and was reentering the Earth's atmosphere. Everyone was subdued for a while, and two of the men decided to recreate the event from memory using a graphics program. They had a fair replication after asking all the witnesses for input.

They tried to put the show behind them and get on with the work. Tsubasa and Luc stuck together as they went about their different assignments and experiments. Luc was mostly taking measurements of the star movements looking for Black Holes, which only show up when the light from a star is bent around the incredible gravity well generated by the negative monster. Luc was tracking twenty probable events. If he found even one, that would be great.

After three days of experiments and enjoying the view, people were relaxed around Luc and starting to speak English in front of him believing that he could not understand them. The name given to the event was "The Heavenly Host," and they were beginning to think the event was meant for one of them personally. Unfortunately, Luc knew that it was.

During the remaining days aboard the ISS, Luc tried to have a good time and did for the most part. He had not been able to tell his friends any more than they overheard from station radio chatter.

One very bright spot was visiting with Tsubasa. After a day of working on scientific nouns, they were having deep mathematical discussions on many important topics. Tsubasa really was a very sharp guy. And funny. Whenever he talked about something in space, like a planet, he ended the sentence by calling it a heavenly body, rolling his eyes and making a wolf whistle. It cracked Luc up. Luc was thinking of adding "hubba hubba" to the joke somewhere.

The day finally came when Luc got to do a spacewalk with John. Tsubasa had already went on one and talked about it at length. That had only made Luc more anxious. They were going to do several tasks on the walk, including retrieving some experiments on micro meteors and sun shield materials testing. The last activity was some maintenance on the biggest robot arm. The walk should take about three hours.

Suiting up was fairly quick and the airlock process took only two minutes. Luc stepped into the openness of floating in space attached only by a single lifeline. It was glorious. He had a tiny compressed air thruster pack that worked like a video game console. One of Luc's companies developed the thruster, and he had wanted to try it for years. John gave him the solemn speech on the majesty of spacewalking in English, translated by Tsubasa. The rest of the walk was a slow and deliberate step-by-step process. There was some fun at the end

when Luc was set free and together John and he surveyed the entire ISS tip-to-tip, side-to-side, and top to bottom -- a funny way to put it since there was no up or down in space. For Luc, sleeping in weightlessness was a special -- an amazing feeling. There was no turning on a mattress to get comfortable since you were basically in a bag touching nothing.

The walk ended as quickly as it began and they all gathered for a last meal together. Luc's return ride was on its way from Earth. Deciding to do something he usually did not do, Luc chatted a lot. He took the lead with a discussion of what Tsubasa and he had worked on. These guys were no dummies, and the conversation was stimulating and insightful. Luc had eleven modern (meaning, after 1600) PhDs and had taught at some of the finest schools, so he was not easily impressed. He ended the discussion with a short story about Galileo's work in Pisa in 1589, narrated as if he was there, and kept everyone enthralled, even with the translation. By the way, he had been there.

Luc's ride home docked and he and Tsubasa said goodbye to their new friends. They suited up, got strapped in and connected. They watched their preflight inspection, then their plane was set free from the ISS. Luc watched it drift away as they started their trip home. This ride was wild. When they hit the atmosphere, the plane skipped along for a few hundred miles then acted like it was stalling out. A few minutes later the plane was propelling itself again just like a big jet liner. After one pass across the length of the United States, they reach the airport and the landing was smooth and easy.

The plane taxied back to the hangar where post flight checks began and Luc and Tsubasa eventually deplaned. They were checked out by the medical team and quickly dismissed. Luc caught the same van that took him from his jet and, in fifteen minutes, he was beginning his preflight check. When completed, he talked to John, gave him a short version and told him he would call back after he was airborne and cruising.

Once Luc was comfortable again and had the autopilot set, he called a video conference and, not surprisingly, everyone was already gathered and waiting for him to call. They wanted details. He joked with them and stayed in his French personality. Harry and Gunther started asking questions in French back at him.

Finally, Sully said, "Okay, stop already before I turn on a translation app." They all laughed and Luc switched to English. He filled them in, minute by minute, in the detail he knew they would require. He even showed them the presentation developed by the crew. It looked very realistic. Luc wrote down the score to the music and sent it to Sully. Sully asked for a few minutes before the video would be ready to watch, and he would have the music to go with it. He would take the file Luc sent and convert it to a Musical Instrument Digital Interface format. He overlaid it to the video file, and then they reviewed it several times. Luc also included the exact sounds made by the voice and a translation in text on the video. Sully was surprised by Luc's memory and ability to recreate it precisely. The rest of Luc's friends expected it. Luc signed off and let them go to work.

An hour later, Mary Jo called Luc back for a catch up meeting. She had a few issues that needed his attention. They always started by watching one cycle of the stock exchange tickers go by. They went back and forth on different things and he directed her to watch four companies for different reasons. But the most important assignments were for the executive trackers he had employed. This was a secret company of his that watched about sixty of the most influential men and women in the world at any given time. He categorized the important executives himself and had their travel patterns logged. It was amazing what these people did for leisure, but when they start syncing up for meetings that were off the books, Luc got interested.

Luc had predicted many important mergers and acquisitions. He had made several fortunes betting on the outcome of a rigged game. But what he watched for now was any potential destruction of assets just for the liquid cash on the books, like pension funds. He especially didn't like it when jobs were lost without warning. So he intervened. He bought and sold enough to change the game or just provided a cash infusion as a white knight venture capitalist. He lost money most of the time, but it was worth it. Besides, he had reached a point where everything felt like excess. Mary Jo followed his leads and then some. Luc was focused on seriously lowering the poverty level in some important places. Haiti was his newest project.

Some of the discussions covered the issues she had, but there was one item left. It seemed that the R&D budget was yielding surprising earnings, nearly five times her estimates for their usual return on investment.

Luc commented, "Well, that's a first, but I was expecting it from some breakthroughs in computer chips alone. I have an idea. Let's get Sully and John on the line."

They rang them up and they came online sitting in their offices. Luc filled them in about the windfall and then asked Mary Jo, "How much are we talking about anyway?"

She casually said, "Six hundred and eighty million, as of last Friday."

Luc mouthed the word, "Wow." He threw out his idea. "I want you to start a company manufacturing a laptop just like mine. Throw in every state of the art, bleeding edge thing with tons of encryption software. Install every good app out there as a standard feature. Make it retail for a bundle so that it's an over-priced luxury item. Make them so that you can turn a profit, and I want the owner to be able to exchange it whenever they want for the latest model at a onetime cost per exchange or a subscription for continuous upgrades. Make this machine the gold standard. Maybe put some real gold on the cover. Make every sheik and billionaire want one. Have it interface with their homes and office environment and security controls. Hell, make them put in a security system in their places that matches our laptop. And I want you to encode backdoors for only you to access. I may remove that later, but for the first run of one hundred, I want the backdoors built in. I want to give the laptops to some special people as well as equip us. That's enough for now."

Sully looked like a kid on Christmas morning. John and Mary Jo had heard this kind of thing often and took it in stride. Sully was already designing in his head.

Luc waited for John to finish taking notes and asked the question that Mary Jo and John both knew was

coming next, “When will I see a business plan and design specs?”

John gave the answer before Sully could say anything, “I’ll have that answer in two days. And since this is bleeding edge, our target will always be moving. There will always be more. Yes, give us two days.”

Then Sully added under his voice, “Lucky there’s nothing else we have going on...”

Sully was lucky Luc loved sarcasm. He considered himself to be the master of it. That’s why he disliked email. There was no tonal inflection to show what the writer was really saying unless they added some punctuation to indicate their true meaning. Luc had heard many attorneys tell their clients that were going on the stand to avoid sarcasm because it didn’t show up in the transcript. And Luc had seen plenty of comedy skits exactly about what the attorneys warned against. Some were hilarious. Luc’s favorite was from the movie, “My Cousin Vinny” when the initial interviews with the two boys in trouble were read in court on the stand by the sheriff. One would have to watch the movie to understand how Luc felt.

Luc arrived home around 4 PM and was treated to a welcome home dinner with everyone. He could tell they had been worried about him.

## Luc's Streets Turn Deadly

Luc moved quickly on the streets and had many friends everywhere he went; shopkeepers, street musicians, street vendors, and the like. He gave himself plenty of time because he needed to check on the phony apartment he kept. Angela might decide to join him for the night. Angela got off work at 6 PM, so he had almost two hours to make his rounds and do his chores. The route only covered about three miles and he was timing it so Angela didn't have to wait. Besides, he wanted the most time he could get with her. It had been a hard week emotionally and Luc needed to be with her to find his footing. Luc felt a bit out of control and that was a strange feeling for him considering all the resources his money could buy.

As he left the Empire State Building, he notified Gunther that he was on the move. Gunther knew the procedure. A couple of their drones were moving to watch his path and his men were now on full standby to help Luc if necessary. All he was carrying was a boot knife, a very special pocketknife and his leather carrier bag that he had for the last eighty years. His bag held the usual stuff, a wallet and cell phone. It also stored a couple of other handheld devices that were made to look like phones. Luc was not going to be passing through any security anywhere, so all was well with his stuff.

He got to the corner and was greeted by the first vendor selling knock off purses. "Hey Luc, how you doin'?" Thomas, pronounced "Toe-mas," and Maggie, his girlfriend, were working the crowd of passerbys.

"I'm doing just fine now. I've been out of town for a few days and I am glad to be back home. I really missed my hug." Thomas moved to hug Luc as a joke, but Luc sidestepped him and grabbed Maggie. She gave Luc a great big hug and had to reach high to get to his neck. She was only 5'3" and quite round at about 200 pounds. She had a heart of gold for her friends and a different kind of heart of gold for her customers. She was quite good at sales. "You doing okay, Maggie? Is this lugnut treating you well?"

"I'm fine, but 'lugnut' hurt his back the other day and won't go to the clinic to have a professional look at it." This sentence was meant for Thomas to hear and she got louder as she made her point ring home.

"How about I ask Charles to take over tomorrow morning for him after you open so Thomas can go get checked out?" Charles worked another vendor booth two blocks over selling purses too, but he liked the late shift and didn't open until around 2 PM.

Thomas said, "Good luck with that. That man is lazier than dirt." Unknown to Thomas, Charles owed Luc a big favor for some basketball tickets he got him last month.

"I'll take care of that. You just be ready to go when he shows up. And no stopping at Rita's either." Rita's was a dive bar that catered to hard drinkers. There was no Rita. The bar was owned by the dayshift bartender, Willie. When Luc asked about the bar's name a long time ago, Willie told him that Rita was the owner four times ago and signs were expensive. Maggie was constantly trying to keep Thomas sober and usually did a



good job of it. Luc always tried to help her. “Make your checkup appointment as short as possible, okay?”

“Yes, Dad.” Maggie gave him another hug and Luc took off to seal the deal with Charles. He waved goodbye and kept moving. Charles’ stand was open and he was hard at work. He ran it alone and was always busy with the tourists.

“Hello Luc, how’s it hanging?” Always the same hello. It was actually comforting to hear this familiar greeting.

“Fine. How’s business?” Luc always asked the same thing. Then they both said, “Can’t complain. Nobody listening anyway.” They did a man hand bump or shake or chest hit or whatever was popular with Charles and the street at the time. The greeting could be quite complicated.

Luc told him about Thomas and Maggie and asked for his help. He responded, “No way. I need my sack time. If the sun isn’t past straight up, I ain’t getting up.”

“Come on, or have you forgotten those Knicks tickets I laid on you. You owe me. And besides, I got two more I’ll put in your pocket right now just to sweeten the deal.” Now Charles was listening and watching as Luc pulled the tickets out. “Boston, Friday night, Section 8, Row 21 at the line.” Luc knew he had him then, but needed to have some fun. “Jason would kill for these. I’ll just see if he’s playing his fiddle in the park in his spot...”

“Okay, okay. When do I gotta be there?”

He reached for the tickets and Luc snatched them back and said, “10 o’clock. A.M.”

He moaned and said, “I might as well stay up all night. Okay. Since you’re my pal.” Luc gave him the tickets and Charles had to turn to a customer.

Luc patted him on the shoulder and said, “There’s plenty of time to sleep when you’re dead.” Charles laughed and Luc took off into the growing crowd.

Luc was running short on time now, so he took the subway two stops to get to his apartment. He came up one block west of his place, hustled to his building and opened the front door with his key. He tried to step quietly inside, but still managed to arouse Mr. Stepanic, “Luc, where the hell you been, boy?”

“On a trip for work. How’s Fred?”

Fred, the dachshund, jumped down from his owner’s lap and ran to Luc yapping all the way. Luc picked him up and gave him a good petting. Then he set him back on the floor and said, “Fred’s good. I gotta run. You take care.” He hustled up the two flights of stairs and stood in front of his door. He opened his bag and took out one of his toys. He held it to the door, and the display instructed him where to position his eye for a retina scan. This deactivated the security system Luc engaged when he was gone for more than a few days. When he was in town, he just used a key. The unit blinked green and Luc heard a couple of clicks in the door. Then he used his key and entered the front hallway. All seemed fine. He walked around and headed for the fridge to see if the maintenance team had stocked it as usual. Yes, there were some new groceries in it and the pantry and

cupboards as well. He checked out the bedroom and was satisfied that everything was in order. He left the apartment by the back through a small garden area that put him on a different street. He had to run now to make his schedule. He had to be at Angela's work in fifteen minutes. But he had one more stop to make.

Luc entered a market with fruit and vegetables on display in the front and said, "Hi, Tina."

"Hi Luc. How are you?"

"Just fine. Can you give me the usual care packages?" He helped her out bagging up fruit and snacks and then separating them into five bags. Then the five bags went into one big bag. Luc paid, said goodbye and got moving again. Next stop was a mission that helped the homeless. He secretly funded the whole operation, but he enjoyed giving hands-on personal help. Everyone was busy and talking quietly. Luc slipped into the kitchen and set the bag on a counter. He left as quickly as he came. Once outside, he jogged to make his schedule. The streetlights favored him, for once, and he was one minute early!

Angela worked in a florist shop and attended college in the mornings at NYU. She paid her own way, so school was part-time. Luc really loved her, really. She was Italian by ancestry and was beautiful. She wore glasses that he thought were very sexy. She was tall at 5' 9" and paired very well with his six-foot frame. Luc didn't know what race one would call him. He thought he looked Mexican but that he could pass for a Middle Eastern easily. For all he knew, he could be a space alien and not know it.

Luc entered the florist shop at exactly six. He had called her to let her know he was taking her to a fancy company dinner, expenses paid. Angela never turned down a free dinner because of her tight budget. Luc secretly helped her out here and there, but she prided herself on making her own way. That was one thing that he loved about her, along with about a million others.

Angela lit up when Luc entered the store, as did he when he caught sight of her. "Hi Sweetie." He mouthed as he pretended to be a customer and let her finish with a woman buying several big bouquets of colorful arrangements. When the customer was taken care of, he held the door for her as she left. She barely fit out the door with her flowers. Angela called to the back to Roberta Rollins, the store owner, "Hey Roberta, I'm closing up. I'll lock the door behind me. See you tomorrow at noon."

Roberta was cutting flowers and called out, "Hi Luc. You two have fun. Good night."

Angela grabbed her coat, hat, purse, and a small loose bunch of daisies. They were finally ready to go, and then she had to spend five minutes finding her keys and locking up. Luc was quite used to these routines of hers.

The restaurant was only three blocks uptown and they took off walking at a slow pace because they had a whole hour before their reservation time. They stopped at a Starbucks and sat together sipping coffees and catching up. Luc loved the lyrical sound of Angela's voice.

Luc has had many girlfriends and wives. And hundreds and hundreds of children. He had watched while they grew old and died. And then watched their children do the same, and then their children. There were no

words to describe the emotional pain he felt. It was very complex and, after thousands of years, he had to bury it inside or it would consume him. Then on a larger but less personal scale, he had seen and felt one hundred billion people die. He has not had children in two hundred years by choice. Angela was making him feel differently about the decision.

The biggest challenge for Luc while talking with Angela was not to speak about her father and grandfather. They were Luc's special friends a long time ago. They had spoken of Angela often and, through their parental love point of view, he could tell she was special. Her grandfather died and then her father passed from cancer far short of a long life. Her mother remarried a wonderful man who cared for Angela as if she were his own.

Ten years later, out of curiosity, Luc had her tracked down and a file prepared on her. Her background was most intriguing. Her family was poor, but she was working her way through college and doing well. Her grades were very good, but she was hopping around lost between majors. She had a consistent weekly routine and it was often easy for Luc to happen to be at this Starbucks the same time as her. He waited four visits before starting a conversation with her. Luc ended that first short visit by setting a time to have a more lengthy coffee with her. Luc thought it was most humorous. Then it took two more times before they set a real date. Looking back, he probably should have felt bad about rigging their chance encounter. But, as they say, all's fair in love and war.

Their conversation that night was light and there was a lot of handholding. Angela had learned to not ask Luc about the times he was gone and waited until he would bring it up. He lied a lot to her. Luc lied a lot to everyone with the exception of his current six special friends. With all due fairness, he withholds some things from his friends. He answers any question they asked, but no one has ever asked him for things like, "all the secret interesting things you have done" or "list all the famous people of history that you have known". It just didn't come up. Luc was wondering what would happen when Excalibur was revealed. He didn't bring that stuff up in conversations unless asked -- but nobody ever asked. He was glad because he was often ashamed of some of the things he did in the past.

Becoming Merlin the Magician was something that Luc just fell into. His endless youth was convenient in propagating the myth about aging in reverse, being born old and getting younger every year. The magician part of the personality was easy. He used a lot of sleight of hand and props to perform his magic. Guiding young Arthur as a king wasn't hard either since Luc was a master at political intrigue and the strategies of warfare. Luc tried very hard to keep Arthur on the straight path, but his hormones got the best of him and he screwed up his personal life. And then let that screw up his kingdom.

When Luc and Angela finally left Starbucks, they stopped in a quiet shadow and made out for a few minutes. Angela was very sexy and obviously drove Luc wild.

The couple arrived at the restaurant underdressed to be sure and were escorted by a snobby headwaiter to a private dining room. The group had already arrived. The party consisted of Luc's six special friends, Angela,

two out of three spouses, and no children, except for John's son, John Jr. The younger John fancied himself a Wall Street tycoon, though the friends had bailed him out of trouble several times without him knowing it. John Jr. does nothing illegal unless they make stupidity illegal. He wastes a lot of money, but Luc would do anything for John Sr.

Angela was introduced to Sully for the first time, who was genuinely surprised that Luc even had a girlfriend. In the next few days, he and Luc would have some serious question and answer sessions. Luc was sure Sully was more than curious about a few things. Sully managed not to stare at Luc or take any special notice at all, but Luc noticed a few surreptitious glances. Conversation was light and fun. The food was amazing and perfect and astoundingly wonderful according to some of the diners' comments. Harry set them up with a special seven-course dinner and a wine tasting of new Brazilian fine wines. He always organized this type of dinner because they stretch the evening out in a most delightful way. The headwaiter taking care of them announced the food and wine as it was served by a staff of five. He was having fun on the last few items by pretending they were the final treat. And then he would bring one more brandy or candy or whatever. At some point, everyone in the group was feeling just fine from the wine except for Luc. He felt he didn't need alcohol to feel fine with all his family there.

His friends watched each other's back when it came to their families and using their cover stories that hid their real work. They had a special time in every briefing to let anyone talk about what was happening with their families. It helped when they interacted with each other's spouses or children. Luc started that practice when he saw the need for it after having dinner with Megan's family one night. Her two boys were inquisitive and smart. They watched and listened and were not afraid to ask questions. If Luc missed anything in the conversation and got something wrong, their antennae would twitch and they would call him on it. The "it's classified" answer really didn't work with these kids.

Luc learned to find the loud-mouthed know-it-all people (that don't know it all) entertaining and not annoying. John Jr. was one of those people. Most everyone hated him like that brother-in-law every family had. You know, the one that knows everything about everything and doesn't hesitate to share his wisdom. Luc wondered why most of those guys used to sell aluminum house siding for Sears.

Finally the party broke up and Gunther ordered up the limos to take the guests their separate ways. Angela and Luc decided to walk. She had let him know that she wanted to stay with him that night. Besides, the night was not cold, just cool, and it was only ten o'clock, so they took off arm in arm.

Luc was paying more attention to Angela than his surroundings, but still noticed a passing van driving a bit odd -- odder than anyone normally searching for a parking place. He activated his internal comm unit just as a precaution. One of Gunther's men came on and asked him if he could talk. When he didn't respond to him, he said, "Can you indicate your danger level, one to ten?"

Just then, the van sped up and screeched to a halt on the street. The side doors flew open and two large men

in black fatigues and black ski masks jump out and headed straight for them. As they approached, Luc pushed Angela as far away as he could without hurting her. Another two men slid out of the shadows and pushed Angela farther away. Good. As the masked men took Luc's arms and pushed him toward the van, Luc said, "Ten." One of the men shot a dart at Luc and connected with his chest. The needle hung in his clothes and made it look like a successful hit. Luc slumped to look like he was unconscious and make it harder to carry him as he was loaded in the van. He continued to fake unconsciousness and listened for a bit. He recognized the European accents and clearly understood their guttural German. Luc spoke almost every language, though staying up on idioms was not possible unless you spent significant time living in each region. These clowns had no idea about the trouble they were in right then. Gunther came on and told Luc that a team was on the way and less than two minutes out.

Luc was trained in every martial art and even helped develop a few a very long time ago. He worked out enough to keep his edge, but not enough to look like a body builder. He was slender, strong and fast, and deadly when pushed. He was also quite skilled in sleight of hand magic and escape tricks. He spent a year in the company of a Heinrich Basch in 1850. Basch toured with his Phantasmagoria Show and was a talented German magician. Luc decided that a gun battle between his kidnapers and his rescuers on the streets of New York was a bad idea and took appropriate action.

The fools had handcuffed Luc in the front instead of behind his back. In a series of quick moves that surprised the three men watching over him, Luc popped the cuffs off and attacked as they floundered. He killed one with a quick strike to his nose that drove cartilage into his brain. He hit another with a throat punch that broke his windpipe, and he began to choke to death. The third managed to draw a gun that Luc ripped out of his hands. Then he used that gun to shoot its former owner through the heart. Luc had the gun in his right hand and turned it on an unidentified man sitting in the front passenger seat, and told the driver in German to stop.

While Luc's was busy retrieving his pocketknife with his left hand, the driver smashed the brakes and Luc jerked forward. It would be the driver's last mistake. As Luc was falling forward, he smacked the passenger with the butt of his gun and he was out cold. The driver reached for his shoulder-holstered gun, but was too slow. Luc fell into the dash as he rolled the knife in his hand to find a button. He pressed it and released a spring blade. The weapon was a little toy that he had made fifty years ago when Swiss Army knives were very popular. Luc plunged the blade into the driver's heart with a backhand move.

All was suddenly very quiet. Death often for the most part was usually silent.

Luc surveyed the damage in the darkness and checked that the passenger was still alive. He probably had a couple of broken ribs from the seatbelt shoulder strap, but otherwise he was fine. Luc left him alive because he appeared to be the head buffoon of these five stooges.

Luc opened the side door to the van and emerged to find five men dressed like a swat team with the letters FBI on their vests. The security team recognized Luc and immediately surrounded him in a box formation. The

commander stepped forward and whispered to Luc that they should go. Luc let him know the guy in the front passenger seat was alive and to take him along. The van driver was shoved out of the way by one of Luc's team as he climbed into the driver's seat while the unconscious boss was dragged into a black SUV. The whole affair was over in less than a minute, and the vehicles took off leaving no trace of anything for a witnesses to remember. Luc asked about Angela and was told she was safe in the car behind Luc's.

The vehicles pulled into a garage and Luc and Angela were quickly spirited into offices that looked like those one would expect FBI Headquarters to look like. Luc was reunited with Angela to find her crying with fear and joy to see him. Luc held her for a long time and, as soon as she quit shaking, asked her if she was okay. She was upset, but fine and they were led into an interrogation room. Through his comm link, Gunther told him what was happening as it occurred, all scripted for Angela's sake. Luc went through the motions of acting like he was as afraid as she was. Luc told them he had no idea why he was targeted, that it must have something to do with work. Angela thought he had a high security clearance and that he worked in some sort of think-tank. He finally pleaded with the FBI interrogators to let Angela go home, and they agreed. She left Luc reluctantly with reassurances from him that he would be at her place as soon as he could get away. A male agent and female agent drove her home. The man would remain outside her apartment, and the woman agent would escort Angela inside and stay with her as she decompressed from the night's excitement.

When Angela was gone, they all quickly dropped the FBI act and Luc was escorted to the Empire State Building where his team was assembled and waiting. Luc walked in and took command, asking Gunther, "What do we know?"

Gunther rattled off the facts, "No IDs of course and fingerprints show them to be hired gangsters from the old East Germany. The living one is being interrogated and claims to not know who hired him, which is probably true. Every piece of physical evidence is being looked at. It appears they arrived in New York separately within the last week. We are hitting their hotel as we speak. It is a rundown cheap one out in Queens. Luc, I am not hopeful to find anything significant. Something may or not break."

They all took this briefing in quickly as Sully was typing on his computer during the whole thing. Sully jumped in, "There were no police reports, so we were protected on that front." They were all impressed by his quick professionalism.

Luc wrapped up with these orders, "Okay, let's go to Defcon three and get to work." They used the old U.S. Defense Condition code levels for security everywhere, one to five. One was no known threats and five was war. With that, Luc left and headed for his apartment down the hall. He called Angela, lied to her that he was still talking to the FBI, which looked like he would be all night. She understood and was grateful for the agent staying with her. Luc lingered on the phone and finally let her go. It took him an hour to calm down and think about what had happened. He wandered back to the Operations Center and surveyed what was going on in his world. Things were flying along just fine without any help from him at the moment.

## Now You Don't

Luc had his fingers in most of the shops that worked for DARPA on some of the most innovative and outrageous projects ever dreamed up. Luc made use of anything he wanted. He was investing heavily in materials research. One of his shops had significantly improved several metals making them lighter, stronger and cheaper. However, he was betting on a new carbon-based material that was akin to diamond. On the fun and practical side, his current favorite was a chameleon suit, just like seen in the latest sci-fi flicks. It took pictures of the surroundings, displayed on the opposite side of the suit making its wearer virtually invisible. There were some rippling effects when the first prototype was finished, but that was way behind its history now. It was really amazing. At Luc's suggestion, sound suppression was added by taking any sound made by the wearer and creating an exact opposite wave that negated any noise -- except voice, by the flip of a switch.

He had tested the suit on the streets of New York in daylight and in semi-darkness. It worked perfectly. He had walked into banks and then watched the security footage afterwards. There was simply no trace of him. To render someone or something invisible, you have to work against light (sight), sound (hearing), temperature (heat signature), and density (weight/volume). The next release of the suit in a couple of months would have complete heat signature suppression. However, there was still the question of density. Scanners looked at the air around the suit and mapped the area using density as the measurement choice. Until the scanners could be made a little better, the suit was nothing more than a party favor. For now, the suit was just what he needed. Very, very cool.

Luc decided to throw Sully into the fire. But first, he thought Sully deserved a little visiting time. So, he found Sully and asked him to hang around with him for a while. They started a casual conversation and Luc let Sully ask the questions. Luc provided the answers.

Sully was the first person ever to ask about Luc's photographic memory. "Do you really remember everything?"

"Yes. Everything. Anything that comes into my senses. It seems natural to me."

Sully looked at the calendar on his phone and after a second asked, "March 23rd, this year, you and I had lunch across the street. You paid. Very thoughtful. Thank you. How much was the bill, with tip?"

"\$24. You had a California club sandwich, a bag of Lay's sour cream and onion chips, and a 32 oz. Mountain Dew. And then you finished my chips when I didn't want anymore."

"You wrote out the score to the music that accompanied your starry light show. Can you play it for me on the piano?"

"Sure." Luc led him into his music room. Sully had never been in the room before and was surprised. It really was an entire studio. They looked around for a few seconds and Luc sat down at a Yamaha Grand. "Have

a seat. It's three minutes long." Sully sat down and listened while Luc played the overture. When finished, Luc commented, "It's different with a full orchestra score of course, but you got the piano version."

"That's beautiful," was all Sully said for a moment. "Where's your horns? You play sax, right?"

"Back here. Come on." Luc led him to a set of double doors in the back of the big room and opened them to reveal a huge walk-in closet with racks and racks of cases. "I've got all my instruments here. This shelf holds the saxes. This one is for clarinets, and flutes. The strings were on that wall and the brass is against the back wall. Do you play anything?"

"No, but I really enjoy old southern rock like Leonard Skinner and The Allman Brothers." He looked at some of the cases and saw the little tags tied to their handles. Then he asked, "Is this a Stradivarius violin?"

"Yes. I have two and one viola. This room is kept at just the right humidity and temperature. Want to see those fiddles?"

He laughed at Luc's fiddles joke and said, "Yes, very much." Luc pulled the three out and brought them into the studio with Sully's help. They set the cases on a table and Luc opened them up one by one as Sully watched. Luc told him to put on some disposable cloth white gloves that were on a shelf. Then Luc pulled out the first instrument and set it in his hands. He held it like it was made of glass and looked at it from every angle. While he was looking, Luc called Mary Jo and asked her to join them in his music room. Sully went through the same process with the other two instruments and then he asked the question everyone asked, "How much are these worth?"

Luc gave him the answer he gave everyone, "'Worth' is equal to the measure of some commodity against another, usually cash that someone is willing to exchange for it. Throw in emotional attachment and it gets all confusing. The last Strat violin sold at auction got seven million dollars. All of mine are in better shape."

Mary Jo walked in and said, "I thought you might be pulling those out. I can only stay fifteen minutes. You want to play that duet you wrote for us?"

"Perfect." Luc quickly set up two stands and chairs. Mary Jo donned the white gloves, took one of the violins and bow, and started to play some scales while tuning each string. Luc took the viola and bow and sat down next to her. Luc told Sully to take a seat. He then counted off and they started. The tune started very Mozart-like, then switched to a ragtime/swing melody version of the theme and ended with a wild race to the end. Mary Jo was getting really good. She had been practicing. When they finished, Sully stood up, clapped and whistled. They stood and bowed to him and then to each other. And then they made a big deal of hugging and clapping to each other, ladies first. It was good fun.

"You should have a concert for us. Can I throw a dinner and have you be the entertainment?"

Mary Jo said, "I'm willing if I get to play this old thing." They laughed and Luc told Sully to set the date, but be careful with the choice of food since everyone was picky. And then he whispered to him to just have Harry do it as a favor. Harry liked to count debts when bargaining for something. So Sully would be in Harry's



debt for a while for doing a dinner setup. It would make them better friends. Mary Jo said she had to run off and left. Sully and Luc put away the instruments and strolled back into the other parts of the home.

Luc continued to give Sully a tour of his apartment that took about another hour. Sully said “Unbelievable” a lot. Then Luc broke out the invisibility cloaks. He had one made for all his friends, including Sully. Luc told him what he had planned as they wriggled into the tight fitting pieces. Luc showed him how to connect the various parts and the controls that worked the different modes of the suit. They moved from Luc’s place to the Operations Center and scared the crap out of John. Luc talked to Gunther who was offsite at his offices down the block and let him know they were coming and how they were dressed.

They left the building walking right past several of Luc’s armed team unnoticed. The only thing that gave them away was when they opened doors. Even that was done as stealthy as possible. They had set their suits to allow them to see the other one so they didn’t continually bump into themselves. The walk was free of incident, however Gunther insisted on a quiet-armed patrol that was being guided by him to stay about ten yards ahead and behind them. The security team consisted of two pairs of a man and woman acting like husband and wife. They were very good. Luc and Sully got to the offices and headed up the elevator to Gunther’s floor.

Gunther was waiting in a secure hallway and helped them out of the suits. He reminded them that they were simply observers and not to bother the team who were frantically chasing leads and cataloging evidence. Gunther would handle the introductions and make the offer of Sully’s assistance when the time was right. It looked like the situation room at the White House, but without the uniforms. Everyone that worked there was ex-law enforcement or ex-military. It was led by a retired British General, Sir Herod Winslow. He was the commanding general of MPs for the British Army and was knighted by the Queen when he retired five years ago. He eyed Luc and Sully and took a quick look at their badges as they entered his domain. He was not impressed and clearly annoyed by their presence.

Luc was introduced to Winslow as the kidnapping victim and Sully as the new CIO of their company. The General heard and understood what Gunther was doing. He asked Sully to consider helping them out for a while. Sully said that he would of course help. The General’s aide, Pratt was called over and asked to escort Sully to a terminal after introducing him all around. The General gave Gunther and Luc an update on the investigation. Winslow repeated everything that Gunther told them two hours ago with one new piece of data. Pollen was found on two of the kidnappers that was only found on the west coast of Portugal and in only one place, Praia de Mira. A team was on the way there now and should arrive in another twenty minutes.

Winslow looked at Luc and said, “So, you’re the abductee?”

“Yes, sir.” Winslow expected Luc to be a nobody, so he tried to sound like what Winslow wanted, for now.

“Why would anybody want to kidnap you?”

“It’s got to have something to do with work.” Gunther replied.

“I want to hear it from him, sir.”

“There is no reason for anyone to abduct me. I’m not into a loan shark. I don’t do drugs. I don’t have money. It has to be work.” Luc lied to him, but Winslow was trained to detect lies.

He looked very hard at Luc and said, “Well that’s a crock. Gunther, you need to let me know what I am up against here, because this fellow is not being forthcoming.” Luc loved British English.

Gunther saved Luc again, “General, there is a ‘need to know’ side to this situation and for that I apologize. Please take Luc at his last spoken word. Everything he said was true. But trust me; he can be a very helpful friend.”

Winslow looked Luc over one more time, shrugged and said, “Well, that’s good enough for me. I know when to stop asking questions and carry on.” He put his hand on Luc’s shoulder and said, “How may I help you help us, my new friend?” Winslow was trying to be professional, but the sarcasm oozed through.

“I would like to interrogate the prisoner, please.” Winslow led Luc to the interrogation rooms down a hall. He opened a door to the room adjacent to the one with the German shackled and manacled to a table. Luc could see that it was a complete monitoring room manned by three techs. One of them gave Luc an earpiece and did a comm check. All was good with that and Luc asked for a file folder and pencil. He tucked all this into his bag and went out one door and into the other.

Luc took a seat across the table from the prisoner and, seeing that he was securely locked down, asked the two guards to leave them alone. Luc closed the blinds in front of the two-way mirror and unplugged the two security cameras in the corners. There were at least ten more that were hidden, but the German didn’t know that and was beginning to get excited. One of the techs behind the mirror was feeding the comm channel with the changes in the German’s vitals that were very telling.

Luc spent the next half hour reading the file in front of the prisoner without even looking at him. It really only took Luc a few moments, but he stopped and watched him silently for effect every few minutes or so. He closed it several times and acted like he was ready to speak and then abruptly opened the file again like he was looking for one specific word hidden somewhere in it.

The man was acting cool, but freaking out inside. Luc pretended to make several calls on his cell phone. The first one was in Italian to what might sound like an Interpol agent. He followed it with another fake call in Russian and used the acronym FSB. FSB was the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation. These calls resulted in a steady rise in the stress levels of the German. Luc read more of the file and made another fake call and spoke in German. He said his first words to the man and asked him if he spoke English. He shook his head no and Luc continued the one sided conversation in German. It again sounded like an Interpol agent. Luc finally hung up when the tech behind the mirror said that the fellow was cooked and ready to explode.

In German Luc said, “Why were you in Praia de Mira?” It was a small town about 50 miles north of Lisbon where the pollen was limited to, from a newly developed strain of wine grape. The prisoner was shocked by the statement and that was all Luc really wanted to see. This guy wouldn’t last five minutes in a real poker game.

Luc stood up and said thank you as he left the room.

General Winslow and Gunther met him outside the room. Luc pulled out the earpiece and handed it to Gunther. “Well that confirms the next move. Do we have any UAVs that we can put up to help out?”

Gunther answered for both of them, “None close enough to show us anything yet. We do have satellite imagery.”

Luc had another thought, “Our navy puts a pretty big presence around the Straits of Gibraltar most of the time. Give Duncan a call.” The General was dumbfounded that Luc would use the Secretary of State’s first name.

A team of specialists was now heading for the town and would be onsite in two hours. They would take up positions surrounding the town and be ready to move when ordered. The General turned to Luc, shook his hand and said, “Thank you.”

Luc responded with a cheerful, “You’re welcome. Anytime you want to play a game of poker, I’m in.” He turned and walked away.

Gunther walked Luc back through the security entrance where Luc wriggled into his suit and disappeared. He headed out the doors of the building and took off at a brisk pace. Per Gunther’s instructions, he took a different route. His security detail was with him again following instructions Gunther gave them by watching Luc’s location. They were all dressed as joggers now, so Luc jogged as well.

They passed by a number of outdoor restaurants. It was now lunchtime and the establishments were beginning to fill up. Luc saw two men sitting and chatting. As Luc approached, they looked up and stared straight at him. One was pointing at him and talking to the one with his back to Luc. Luc slowed and looked around to see if they were really looking at him. Luc looked at his hands and they were not to be seen so he knew the suit was working. Luc saw no one around but himself. The one with his back to Luc had moved his chair around and craned his neck to see where his friend was pointing. Sure enough, they were not looking past him, but right at him.

They were still chatting and Luc was close enough to hear them. It took a second for him to realize they were speaking a foreign language and another second to recognize it. It was the First Language, the same as the Heavenly Host. Luc was shocked. He began to understand what they were saying and was further shocked. They were talking about Luc and saying how important something was. One said that he felt sympathy for Luc and the other one said something that translated into the word ‘keeper.’ They stopped staring at Luc and prepared to leave, clearly finished with any interest in him.

As Luc left their presence, he was shaking and talking to Gunther, who was on comm. “Gunther, did you get that conversation?” Gunther replied that he had recorded every word. Luc arrived back at his building and headed for the Oversight Room as fast as possible. Everyone was there minus Gunther and Sully and he explained what had happened. Gunther was on a monitor and played the recording. The video of the recorded

conversation between the men was displayed. Luc typed the translation on one beside it. As he finished, everyone moved to protect him, and Mary Jo was quietly crying. Gunther said that he would run it by his linguists, but Megan interrupted and said that she would take the lead on this one as a project. No one argued.

Luc ended the meeting with the directive, “We are moving to the Silo, now. Let’s move out. Gunther and Sully will remain here. Gunther, Harry, get us out of here.”

# Home Away From Home

One by one and unevenly timed, the group left the building and were ferried to the airport where five jets were ready to transport them to a vacated missile silo in South Dakota. The trip started out by armored black SUVs in trios. There were several empty convoys to confuse anyone paying attention. Gunther wasn't taking any chances. Luc was in the middle convoy selected by random at the last minute. Gunther also had four Stingray UAVs patrolling.

As they arrived at the airport, each jet was surrounded by a squad of armed soldiers. The assigned jet took off moments after each party arrived. Each plane was escorted the entire flight by two Raptors provided by the U.S. Air Force as a favor from the U.S. Secretary of State, who was kept in the loop on many of Luc's operations as he warranted. Luc used his persona Everett Wittworth, President of Wittworth Systems, a major defense contractor and a really, really wealthy man. Wittworth never appeared in public and left that task to his CEO. Of course, Secretary Freeborn had never met Wittworth in person. They had talked at least once a week for over twelve years and had become good friends in spite of only knowing each other over the phone.

The flight took about two hours. Luc used the time to talk to Angela and let her know that he would not be around for a week of being protected by the FBI while they figured out why he was targeted. The counterfeit FBI agents had set up a secure video conferencing unit in her apartment, so Luc and Angela were as face-to-face as they were going to get for a while. She cried a lot but was consoled by Luc's announcement that he was taking her somewhere very special for a long weekend when he returned. Angela loved surprises as much as Luc hated them. She would never know that a team of armed guards were protecting her 24/7 and would be for a long while now.

When their visit ended, Luc called Sully to see how he was holding up. Sully managed to get in about three hours of sleep on orders from the General. He was on his game, in his element, hard at work and hurried off the line.

No sooner had Luc hung up with Sully, Gunther called. He asked if Luc wanted to watch the raid in Portugal. Luc said that of course he would, and Gunther patched the video feed through. "The village exists because of the fertile slopes that lead from the sea to the hills above. The village is common except for a villa owned by a gentleman named Bikendi Gaizka Ezkibel. He is the action front for the Basque Separatists. My best guess is that he is pissed at us for foiling a plot last year. And I think you were the target of choice because of your Luc St. Clair ID. Luc is easily identified as one of John's associates because of your comings and goings from our base at the Empire State Building."

Gunther switched gears for a moment and talked to Luc personally, "Luc, knowing all this about Ezkibel, I think the men on the street who spoke Language One are unrelated to the kidnapping attempt. By the way, we

have the restaurant video of the men from the whole time they were there, a report from an interview with their waiter, and we can read the lips of one of them. It all supports my thoughts that they are unrelated. Oh, here we go.”

The screen changed to a large display on the bottom and four smaller ones above. The event was being narrated by General Winslow. “The Mayor and Chief of Police think this is an Interpol operation and have cooperated with us from the start. Okay, that’s the go ahead from the Team Leaders. There are four teams of different sizes appropriate to the security on their entry point. They might have to deal with five roving guards as well. Sir, we need a confirmation at this point. Do we use deadly force?”

Luc answered, “Yes, and zero footprint.”

“Understood. Team leaders, acknowledge, please.” They did and no narration was required after that. The bottom large display changed to a drone’s view of the villa. The top four displays were from the helmet cams of the four group leaders. There was chatter and confirmations among the soldiers and then they all moved out at the same time. They were hiding in vegetation that surrounded the structures and, after ten seconds of very fast and coordinated movement, they turned corners, locked onto their first targets and shot them immediately. They rushed up and prepped to breach the doors. Each man had his job and executed it swiftly. Two men moved bodies, another worked on the doors and the rest watched their flank.

There was radio chatter of a whisper telling one team that an unfriendly was coming around a corner. He was simply shot with a three-round burst trigger-squeeze. Two doors had their locks picked and two had shape charges affixed around the lock. Luc heard the teams each call out ready when they were set. When the last one signaled, the ground commander gave the word, two door locks were blown out and all the teams entered the doors in a standard two-man configuration. There was no resistance at this point and that was ominous. There was just slow stealthy steps then for a full minute. Two teams, three men each, merged and came to an interior door. They stopped to study the security lock. Two men backed out and headed for the exterior porticoes where they killed the guards. They each grabbed a body and dragged it back to the door. One of the leaders held a dead man’s hand to the security palm reader but nothing happened. He tried the other hand and still nothing happened. They tossed the body aside, grabbed the other dead man and tried his right hand. The door clicked open as the second man was tossed on top of his dead comrade.

The team positioned for entry and a couple of flash bang grenades were tossed into the room. Three men were directly inside the room, holding their ears in pain. They managed to lift up their MP5s to defend against the attackers but moved too slowly and were shot dead on the spot. The team then moved to a big set of doors and tried the doorknob -- it opened easily. More flash bangs were tossed in, then the teams moved in. Two guards struggled to raise their weapons and were killed for their moves. Also in the room were two unarmed men, one cowering on a sofa with his hands over his ears, and Ezkibel was standing in the center of the room trying to talk on a phone. He was obviously in pain grimacing with one hand to one ear and the phone to the

other. He dropped the phone and raised his hands in surrender. The General's troops surrounded the two prisoners, knocked them to the floor and bound them with flex cuffs.

Gunther asked Luc an anticipated question, "Your orders, sir?"

Luc held down a button and said, "Bag 'em both and bring them to me."

Luc's plane landed and he walked out onto the deserted plain.

*November 19, 1804 Fort Mandan, South Dakota*

It was cold. Luc was under at least five blankets and furs. He finally forced himself out of his bunk and put more wood on the fire. He used the pee pot next to him and got back in bed. He couldn't think of a reason to get up yet, so more chilly rest was a reasonable choice. The days had turned into weeks and the weeks into a month. There were at least three more months until they could move out and continue with their travels. Boredom was the main activity these days and trying to find food. They had enough provisions to winter there, but fresh meat was a real treat. Luc could stand the cold easier than the rest of the group. That made him the hero in some eyes and a fool in others. But no one was passing on the protein he supplied. They had come to rely on his hunting skills. He didn't tell anyone that he would rather hunt in the bitter cold than sit around drinking and smelling the month of dirt buildup on each man. It was just too cold to wash easily there and then.

Luc's companions and expedition leaders, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, made the right decision to winter in this fort. Luc finally crawled out of bed, put on layer after layer of clothes and ventured outside. It would be a short walk across the square to the large common hall where flapjacks and coffee were waiting. He greeted the other men the same as every day for the past month. They looked at him through hungover eyes and just grunted. Luc announced that he was hunting today and wondered if anyone would like to join him. He got more grunts as an answer. That meant no.

The men knew Luc as Maurice DuPont, a special addition to the party at the last minute as a favor to President Jefferson. At first, they shunned the new French guy. That ended when they discovered his skills at delivering fresh meat and, probably just as important, telling stories.

Luc met Thomas Jefferson in Paris in 1785. They instantly became friends and corresponded for years after a couple of seasons of socializing. Jefferson told Luc in a letter of his plans to send a party to document the wilderness between the two oceans. When Luc asked to join the expedition, Jefferson quickly agreed, appreciating his involvement.

Captain Lewis came over, stood next to Luc by the fire and asked a favor, "The men are kind of low and I was wondering if you would cook us up some of those fruit crepes you like so much. Just to cheer them up..."

Luc knew that Lewis was the one who really enjoyed his crepes. Luc nodded and announced to the room,

“If I was to make crepes for my breakfast, would anyone like to join me?” They all jumped up and wanted to help. His crepes recipe was a simple batter of eggs and spices cooked in a thin sheet and folded into a roll with fruit inside. It was something new to these men and they loved them.

Luc threw out orders like a general getting ready for battle, “I need two men to clear the stoves and stack the dirty dishware by the sink, ready to be washed. Another man to get some dried apples from the back storeroom. Two men will replenish the woodpile next to the stove and big fireplace as well. And gather another dozen eggs from the hens and fresh milk from the cows. Then I want Captain Lewis and Mr. Clark to stock the flour, sugar and oil pots. I will be back ready to cook in ten minutes.” Luc had been moving to the main door this whole time and when he said his last words, he dashed out the door. Asking the expedition leaders to stock the kitchen was an insult. They knew he was kidding when Luc laughed as did the other men. He used the ten minutes to attend to personal business then returned to his hungry companions.

They had all finished their assignments and were standing around like wolves waiting for a moose to die of old age. Luc marched in and surveyed the kitchen. “Captain Lewis, Mr. Clark, perhaps you would assist me?” Luc knew the men would get a kick out of being catered by the men in charge. Together the three chefs got things ready and Luc made a show of the process. He narrated the activity and cooked up four plates of four crepes. He set them on the serving table and Mr. Clark lit the oil on them to brown them just a touch. It was part of the show. Each of the men took one and everyone wanted more. Luc dropped the narration and pumped out another batch. It too was quickly consumed. He made almost a whole third batch. Captain Lewis jumped in and lit the oil. As it flamed up, one of the men with a long beard moved in too quickly and his beard caught on fire. He screamed and everyone else laughed as the fire was patted out.

When the food was gone, Luc received several hearty pats on the back in thanks. He dropped back into commander mode and barked more orders, “Who will volunteer to clean the kitchen.” Two men raised their hands. “Who will wash, dry and put away the dishes?” Three men raised hands. “And who will be ready to clean and dress my kills that I am bringing back this afternoon?”

Captain Lewis said, “If you bring back anything in this weather, I will personally prepare it for cooking.” Lewis thought it was a pretty good bet Luc would come back empty handed. Luc accepted the challenge.

One more thing occurred to Luc since he had their attention. “I wish to enjoy my food tonight without the extra odor of dirty men.” He got hissed at by several of them as they figured out where this was going. Luc continued, “I will rig a hot shower room for myself when I return. It will take a few of us working together to help everyone return some of God’s earth back to where it belongs.”

Mr. Clark made it official, “We give up and will help. We all knew this was coming and I can’t take any more myself. My arms are sticking to my sides. Let’s take this side of the room and make it ready to clean everything. Clothes, furs, bedding, dishes, and finally us. Tell us how you want it set up; Maurice will help us have it ready.”



“If I might make another request?” Luc knew he was pushing the limits with this one. “I would like to talk to you about some ideas I have about building better boats and wagons for the rest of our trip.” Luc had everyone’s professional interest at this comment and he kept going, “So, I need sober men until after late supper. Agreed?”

Captain Lewis signed the deal with this statement, “We could use some drying out. Agreed.”

The next hour was spent preparing the room with stacks of dirty clothes, bedding and anything else that needed a good hot cleaning. All buckets, pails and tubs were dragged in and positioned for the process. Each station was set up and each man had a job. Water was constantly heated and dumped as laundry was hand washed and wrung out to dry. Luc used a pair of rolling pins to build a quick ringer that worked well enough to start the drying process. He described the showering setup he had in mind using the drying clothes as dividers to contrive rooms for a little privacy. He saw that all would be performed correctly and prepared to hunt as the work continued.

Luc was armed with his usual wrist throwing blades, a pack of six-point throwing stars, and his boot daggers. He selected two fine rifles from the company arsenal with a good supply of powder and shot. In his private weapons bag, he had three large knives and a small crossbow, quiver and bolts. He kept most of these items a secret. The crossbow and throwing stars were weapons the men here had probably not seen before. There was no reason to make a fuss over having to explain them.

He roused the sled dogs, hitched them up, loaded up and told the men helping him to open the gates. Luc checked the dogs one last time as the gates swung open and took off into the white on white scenery.

He followed a road that ran along a range of small hills. After a few miles the dogs were warmed up and moving faster and faster. Abruptly, he pulled them to a halt, pressed the brake unit and grabbed a rifle. He loaded it and walked into a meadow surrounded by trees. He stopped, listened, stepped, stopped, and listened, always scanning with the rifle to his shoulder ready to shoot. He caught the movement he was expecting and shot a rabbit at fifty yards. He collected the first prize of the day and moved back to the dogs. Off they went until he spotted another likely place for hare and stopped. After the same process, he spotted another big rabbit and shot it while it ran across his field of vision from right to left. He loved a moving target. It was all about anticipation.

Luc rode by a lake that held trout in the summer and decided it would be okay to ice fish on the way back. He finally got to the scrub pine forest where the deer were. He eased the dogs’ speed when he spotted a good place to leave them. He prepared the dogs for a significant break, knowing this could take a while, then took off on foot. Luc had hunted literally everything. It was a useful skill, but one he was enjoying less and less over the long years. He approached a small river that was mostly frozen where he had found white tail deer before. Sure enough, there was a family drinking and resting under a grove of taller trees. He circled the group looking for

the bucks that were usually not far away. He found tracks of a large stag leaving the area, no more than an hour old. He tracked the deer easily in the snow pack and came upon him twenty minutes later. Luc ran the first mile, slowed into a stealth walk and saw the deer before he saw Luc. He set up next to a tree, took aim and downed the buck easily. No wind, no falling snow. An easy track and takedown. When he approached the animal, Luc saw that he was still breathing and slit his throat.

Luc hung the buck to drain his blood and headed off to retrieve the dogs and sled. It was a long walk back. He had no choice but to risk leaving his kill. He would be able to move the sled and team to within an eighth mile of this location. He ran the whole way and was moving again with the team as fast as he could after rousing the rested pack. He parked the sled as planned and ran back to the hanging carcass. Luc was very lucky this time, because a pack of wolves was circling the body. He brought up a rifle to his shoulder and shot the alpha male. The rest scattered.

Luc quickly got the deer down from the tree before the wolf pack regained courage and returned. He dragged the deer by the rope and loaded him onto the sled. He returned for the wolf and loaded him onto the sled too. As he left the bloody site, he glanced back to see three wolves watching him. He was tempted to take another, but the sled was heavy.

Once loaded with the dogs running free, Luc pushed them to move as fast as they could. These poor dogs didn't get enough work because the other men were not really familiar working with them.

Luc's deer excursion had only taken ninety minutes, so there was time to discover if his luck would hold while fishing the lake. The spot he chose to cut a hole in the ice was only thirty feet from the parked sled. He could watch it and fish without worry.

Luc took thirty minutes to cut the hole, rig his lines and begin the waiting. As he settled in for the wait, he sensed someone watching him. He grabbed his rifle and eased around to see three young Indian braves gazing down from a ridge. They made no troubling moves so Luc settled down with one eye on his lines and one on the braves.

All was still and quiet when two of his lines twitched at the same time. He reacted quickly and hauled in two beautiful rainbow trout. They were huge and gave him a hard time for a brief moment. No sooner did he have them flopping around on the ice when two more lines were hit. He hauled them in as fast as he could and his last line got a hit too.

Soon, he had five large fish to deal with on the ice. He left them alone to flop, freeze and die as he set up all five lines again. He dropped the lines into the water and prepared to deal with the first batch of fish when he got hits on several of the lines at the same time. This time, Luc waited a few seconds until all five lines were loaded and pulled them all out at the same time.

He heard quiet laughter from the three young men watching. Luc gave out a hearty laugh as he realized what he must look like to them. He waved at them and gestured for them to approach.

They waited at the edge of the lake on the path and he began to talk to them. They stopped laughing and one started talking away. That gave Luc enough clues to their language and he tried out a few logical phrases to see if he hit on any words they understood. Luc saw that he was getting some phrases right and the talkative one started a vocabulary lesson for him on the spot.

While this was going on, Luc bagged the ten fish and rigged up the lines to catch more. He motioned for the youngsters to draw nearer and help him work the lines. All the lines were hit by the hungry fish and the foursome were hauling them in faster than they could bait and drop the lines back into the water. They were all laughing at the ease of catching the trout.

Luc had enough of the language figured out to tell one of them to start a fire. The youngster quickly did so and they cleaned several of the fish and cooked them on a rigged frame of branches. The fish cooked slowly and were very good. They chatted while they scarfed the feast down. Even with cooking their fill, Luc still had over thirty fish bagged. Luc explained who he was and what he was doing there. They corrected his language errors as he went. Then they start telling Luc about themselves.

The boys were mid-teens and working to pass tests to enter manhood status in their tribe. All the tests were endurance and skill related, all physical. They started talking about weapons and Luc learned they were limited to knives and long bows. No firearms had made it into their tribe yet. Luc decided that he liked these boys and he pulled out his throwing stars to show to each of them. He demonstrated how to throw them and chucked all six in a tight grouping into a nearby tree. He retrieved them and let each of them have a try. They missed everything with the first throws, but none of the six stars were lost.

Luc could tell they had had enough of the cold and needed to return to the warmth of their village. He split the fish in half and gave them a sack to take with them. They were most pleased. Then Luc surprised them and made a big deal about giving each of them two stars a piece. He told them he was most honored to have eaten with them and would remember them as brave warriors forever. They left with their prizes and puffed up chests.

Luc packed up, readied the dogs, and was quickly moving again.

It was late afternoon and the gates swung open as Luc approached the fort. Someone had been watching for him. He moved into the center open space but no one was around. It was kind of eerie. He slowly walked to the main hall doors and entered. All the men were lined up waiting to surprise him. They had washed, shaved, and dressed in their best for his return.

Luc took a good long look at them and said, "I am sorry; I must have the wrong fort." They laughed and circled around him. They started taking his bags, stripped him of his outer layer of furs and helped him into the bath area. He guessed it was his turn. He was very pleased to see a couple of clean tubs of hot water waiting for him and some of his clothes folded and stacked on a chair.

A couple of the men went to check the sled and came back with the report, "That son of a bitch got a

twelve pointer, a big wolf, two hares and a bag full of trout!" The men cheered as Captain Lewis said, "Okay, let's get out of these women folk clothes and get to work. You three take care of the sled, you get ready to clean the kills, you three put this room in order. Be ready to set this up again next week. I need to have a few words with Maurice. Off to it, you lazy dogs."

Luc took the time to shave and came out of the curtained washroom to see the men moving out to do the assigned work.

Both Lewis and Clark approached and shook Luc's hand with thanks for his work. "Maurice, we are very interested in the comment you made about new designs for our boats and wagons. Mr. Danforth, three glasses of ale please. Our savior deserves a reward for bringing home dinner. And breakfast, lunch and dinner and dinner and dinner..."

They took places at a smaller worktable close to the fire that had been set up for their discussion. The lines and linens that were hanging earlier were being taken down as they sat. Luc made a comment, "It would be good to leave the windows and walls covered with heavier cloth and furs to keep the heat in. And a layer of them on the floor above would help out as well." Lewis directed a man to get that organized and Luc began the lesson.

"I looked at some designs in a couple of history books as I was getting ready to join you and took note of a couple of interesting things. Let me draw them out for you." A stack of paper was on the table with a box of writing coal. Luc drew an Egyptian Nile River barge boat, a common French boat used on the big rivers in big cities, a Chinese junk, an Alaskan kayak and a catamaran from the South Pacific. When finished, he started the lecture, "Each of these vessels has one feature that could be combined to make our three rafts better. The flat bottom ones will be good for shallow areas. They must be large enough to be stable to hold our three wagons and the animals. We could build them so they could come together as one large platform or break them into three parts as three separate boats for the narrower river points. The Chinese junk has a great front end to push away anything we hit."

He went on to describe the way the boats could be connected with pins and locks on the fronts and backs. That would configure them to run end to end. Of course, the whole design needed movable rails to match how each was set up at the time. They liked Luc's ideas and brought the master carpenter into the discussion. They had three months to build their new transportation, so there was plenty of time for the iron fittings to be made by the blacksmith. The banter was very interesting and the men quickly lost track of time. Everyone was surprised when the cook announced that venison steaks were ready and to come and get them. They were overcooked a bit, but still very good.

Several of the men were anxious for the next part of a story Luc had been telling every night for the past three weeks about Cleopatra and the intrigue that surrounded her. The rum flowed and Luc was pressed into telling the next chapter. He would not begin until they finished cleaning up dinner and straightening the room

from their baths. Then everyone settled in for the long story. They thought Luc made these stories up on the spot, but he was simply recounting something that he lived years ago. The evening closed down and Luc made the short walk back to his bunk...

*Today Near Fort Mandan, South Dakota*

# Stash

The walk to the bunker was long and windy. At least there was no snow on the ground.

Luc owned about ten square miles around this empty missile silo and a huge airstrip next to it. The underground complex was massive. It was already large when he got it almost fifteen years ago. He had it redone and now it housed an Operations Center that was virtually the same as the one in New York. There were many apartments for a team of live-in security force people stationed there. There were private apartments as well. That was the easy part, because the space was huge and many stories deep. However, he had to contract some excavation for a warehouse-size room and space for vaults. The vaults were super secure bank-like rooms; three of the rooms would be equipped as clean rooms. The whole complex suited his needs very well. The only drawback was parking for large aircraft. He had to send the big planes nearly fifty miles to another landing field with large hangars, adjacent to an aircraft assembly plant. The arrangement worked fairly well. If he could camouflage hangars or put them under ground, it would work even better. Oh, well. For another time.

Luc entered the complex through a surface ramp and quickly got organized. Megan had never been there and he wanted to talk to her about her latest project, the First Language Men, as it was now being referred to. After a quick briefing that included Gunther, Luc was satisfied they were making progress. He was not sure he liked where it might take him, but it was wearing away at him emotionally. He set those thoughts aside and was ready to move on. In fact, he had been looking forward to this for a long time. He asked Megan to come with him to check on some things.

As they took an elevator down twelve floors, Luc gave Megan a new assignment. "I have another project for you. I want the treasures I have collected to be released to the world." She replied quickly, "No problem." She said that a lot and had never failed to succeed. Luc thinks he might have a bigger challenge this time. After being checked by no less than eight armed soldiers, they entered a tunnel with vault doors along the walls. The hallway was about fifty yards long with nine doors that resembled bank vaults, but with a retina scanner and a code keypad. Luc told Megan about the clean rooms and that, without suiting up, they couldn't totally enter but could look from behind glass walls.

Luc walked up to the first vault door and opened it. The massive door swung back and they entered into a forty by forty foot square room filled with shelving and some display cases. The shelves contained urns, vases, small statues, ornate boxes, pens and a lot of other knick-knack items. He walked her along and described the items to her. There were rows of urns made of porcelain and many precious stones. They were burial urns that used to contain the remains of some very special people in Luc's life, his wives and children. He had long since emptied the urns knowing full well that his family members were gone and the remains meant nothing. The vases were many different sizes and shapes. All were ornate and most are jeweled. The small boxes were

intricately inlaid with many precious materials inlaid. Some were music boxes as well. There was a collection of quills and pens. Most gold and silver, but he had many plain ones as well. They were cheap, but had historical significance. Some of his quills were used to sign important documents, like the U.S. Constitution. But the things that meant the most to him are in a case by themselves. There was a handwriting duplicating machine called a polygraph and other neat small machines. He was gifted these treasures from Thomas Jefferson when he was in Paris. Megan was reading the inventory list that was by the door and said, "I assume you want to keep some of these things. Can you put a checkmark beside the ones you want?" He complied quickly. She reviewed the list again and said, "These quills have letters from the users to verify their authenticity. These are amazing. You have six that signed the Declaration of Independence and four that signed the U.S. Constitution. We need to release these as soon as possible. Is the Smithsonian Institution okay++ with you?"

"No. Give the Declaration of Independence ones to the U.S. Park Services that manages Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The U.S. Constitution ones can go to the Smithsonian. Let's get this vault cleaned out first. These are easy decisions to make."

The next vault contained nothing but pallets of gold, silver, and platinum. They entered; Megan picked up a gold brick and said, "Wow, I never realized how heavy these ingots really are. What do the different stamps mean?"

"The stamps are part of the mold used to pour the liquid metal into and they verify the purity and weight. They all should probably be smelted again to hide their origins."

"And what would those origins be?" She had a motherly upset look on her face, but Luc had good answers.

"Some date back to ancient Egypt and Persia. It's not worth getting them tied up in history at this point. Just get rid of them somehow." She was making notes on an iPad all the time they were talking.

A clean room was next on the tour, containing books and documents. Lots of books, lots of documents. First editions and the like. Three Gutenberg Bibles were included. Original copies of the Magna Carta as well as the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution were among the documents. Most of the other documents were letters. A lot were from or to Luc. "This will take months to go through."

"I know. Contact Joel Weston at the New York Public Library and have him review the list quietly and follow his suggestions. Be prepared to move the majority now. Use whatever specialized transport company Joel recommends. The letters can go too. Everything."

The next vault contained nothing but clocks. Beautiful ornate mantel and desk clocks. Most were French and gaudy. "A good friend had a business making them and I would buy the ones I liked. Get some to my properties. Call Jonah Sawyer at the Met in New York and follow his suggestions. I already have the ones I like in my New York apartment. Most were moved from my home there when I emptied it out. Ah, here is my favorite." He took a large pocket watch out of a cabinet and looked at it. He wound it and it started immediately.

“It has 29 complications. Complications are functions. The most complicated and expensive one has 24. I had this made in 1950 in secret. When revealed, it should be worth around 20 million dollars. What do you think we should do with it?”

“Let’s let Jonah tell us.” She paused and then remembered something. “You have a home in New York?”

“Yes, 23 East 62nd Street. I haven’t been in it in years. You and I should go visit it when we return home. It’s got some surprises.” She knew not to bother asking once he had said that.

Another vault contained nothing but jewelry. As they entered, Luc gave her some background, “There is a lot of jewelry in here, and most pieces will be valued no less than forty thousand dollars today. Some are worth much, much more. I suggest you make this room a priority because John told me that it won’t be long before we can synthesize these diamonds and gems. Better dump these fast. Talk to Harrison Collingsworth at the British Museum.”

The next vault was full of drawers of raw uncut diamonds and gems. “Again, better dump these.” Luc grabbed his phone and made a call while Megan read the inventory list. “Bertram, this is Jonas. Am I catching you at a bad time? No. Excellent. Can you free up your schedule for tomorrow. Yes, the whole day. Good. I’ll have a car pick you up outside your office at 8 am. I want you to come and see some gems and stones. You better bring your own equipment and a couple of your most trusted staff. There are a lot. I’ll see you around ten. Mention this to no one please. And be ready to sign Non-Disclosure Agreements. Excellent.” Bertram signed NDAs all the time.

They continued the tour with the next clean room vault. Luc was saving what he thought was the best room for last. However, this one contained paintings and had more than three hundred unknown masterpieces from the European Renaissance. Megan was reading the inventory list and said, “These are beautiful. Look at these artists. Wow.”

“These are going to be a real challenge to you. Any one of them would make world news and there are over three hundred. How about if they are discovered when a rich oil sheik dies? Let’s talk to John and have Aban Hamsa Rabal die. It’s time.” Rabal was another one of Luc’s personas and it would be normal for him to have all these paintings in secret.

The armory was next and it was loaded with the most ornate swords, knives, guns and rifles. However, there were a few very plain ones. Megan focused on a set of dueling pistols. Before she could ask, Luc answered her question telling her he used the pistols in a duel with a minor prince in Austria in 1810, only wounding the prince. “Let’s donate all these to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. They have a wonderful arms collection. This will triple the size of theirs. Make a big deal of it and set John up as the patron. Black tie affair and all that.”

Megan had been surprisingly calm at seeing the treasures. But, upon entering the next vault, she was genuinely shocked. It was the last clean room and contained scrolls. “There are over twelve thousand scrolls.



They contain my personal writings and, most importantly, copies of the scrolls from the Library of Alexandria. At the time, this was the repository for all western documented literature and textbooks. I have read all of them and they will have a huge impact on the world. There are some amazing concepts in them for advanced warfare weapons that weren't developed until the 1900s." Luc thought he may have finally overwhelmed Megan. That would be the first time ever. "Set up a team of specialists to go through these. It should take at least ten years. Keep it all secret. Give them a facility in Boston and let them go to work. Contact Julia Whitcomb at Harvard and give her the lead position if she wants it. She's in between books now and would probably love the opportunity. Get her out here the day after tomorrow. There are pictures of each scroll on file. Have Sully show you where that is. Take any one of the pictures and text it to her while you two are talking and she will come to you immediately. Fly her out here and show her around. She'll take the job -- I know her. She won't be able to resist. Have John get everything classified as a military project."

Luc suggested she give the others a tour and that Sully should be able to help her compile the complete list with the necessary cross-referencing.

Luc steered Megan back to the elevator after she was through looking and listening. He took her down four more floors. She was not paying attention. She was talking about the vaults when the doors opened as he walked her into a huge warehouse-sized room. She finally began to take notice of the room and the four hundred crates. She asked, "And what are in these boxes?"

Luc replied, "Furniture, large statues and other sculptures." He gave her the details and she surmised that the furniture would be the easiest.

Then he gave her the remainder of the new project. "Besides all this, I have thirty-four caches left around the world; most are about a quarter in size of each of the vaults. I want you to empty them and bring the stuff here, or let them be discovered by whomever you choose to guide to them. The three in South America and Mexico could be discovered by teams of student archeologists from around the world. Referring to the bullion, we could have a gold strike in a poor country and reduce the poverty level in a matter of just a few years. You get the idea." She took no notes and said that she clearly understood. They walked the aisles in between the crates and he gave her a general idea of what was in them.

Then, he wrapped up the treasure discussion with, "That's it." They got a big laugh at this and returned to the elevator. She pushed the stop button suddenly and turned to Luc with a very serious question. "How do you feel about the way you acquired these things? Do you feel like a thief or a tomb raider?"

Luc replied, "For many thousands of years, I did and I didn't care. But then, after I knew I had more than I could ever spend, I started doing it to save the history. I became an archaeologist and a protector of history. Anyway, hopefully, what we are doing now will make up for some of my bad behavior. And wait until you see what is in one of the stashes." She didn't even ask, pushed the button and they started moving again. Luc thought she liked his answer.

They turned to the matter of the men. She had put together the pieces of the puzzle and knew who the men weren't. "They were not in any facial recognition database nor were their fingerprints. They paid with cash so there was no money trail to follow. The security cameras tracked them for a few blocks, but then they entered a building and were never picked up again. The office building was searched and no trace was found. They either vanished or simply avoided any more cameras. The linguists want to talk to you some more to build a better database so that, if we hear the language again, we can be ahead rather than behind. They think they are working on an alien language for a new movie." Luc scheduled some time for Megan and walked her back to the elevator that took her to the main floor. He gave her a hug and they headed for their homes away from home.

John, Mary Jo and Sully had a business plan prepared for the new laptop design to run by Luc. They met via video conference and laid out their plan for him. The whole concept was built on a modular design to swap upgrades in and out as required. The production cost did not drop until they hit five hundred units and even then they just broke even on the initial sale. There was a huge profit on the upgrade subscription and that was what Luc was hoping for. The model was similar to the automobile manufacturing industry. They made little on the initial sale of a new car and got the real money from the sale of parts in the future (down the road, ha ha).

They would have a design in another week and would take another week to make changes. Luc asked for a holographic model and Sully said he was intending to build one.

Luc thought it was time he told them his intention for building the back door in the software. "The back door is for us to monitor the activity of the owners if we want to. It has to be totally hidden and undetectable by the owner. And some of them will have it checked by their very best techs. Perhaps some kind of secure nightly sync with a hidden burst transmission might be a possibility. Sully, call in your best hacker friends on this once Gunther gives you the okay. I intend to give some of these to the top military, and they will have the NSA look at the machine. It's got to pass that test. Can you do it?"

"I anticipated this. The hidden snooping function is in the business plan in the security chapter. I think I can do it, but I'll have to write a whole new sync package. Fortunately, you own about twenty companies that make various apps for phones and computers. I should be able to do it with some help from them, but it is on the top of the risk matrix in the first appendix."

No one was paying attention, but while they were talking, Luc read the whole three hundred-page business plan. "Mary Jo, run some models with a higher retail price and add more real gold to the shell to justify it and see what you get. We have plenty of it laying around. Try platinum as well, but I don't think it will look as nice as the gold. Everybody loves gold." She took notes and took the action item.

Luc wrapped it up with, "Thank you. This should be fun. Please schedule the next meetings. You may proceed." Luc was very pleased with Sully's performance. He really was a catch. Luc ended up in his apartment

alone at 5:12 PM and started to get his second home organized. There was a knock at his door by James and Justin, Megan's sons. Luc's apartments were not for their eyes, so he stepped into the hall and asked what was going on.

James said, "We're kind of bored and want to know if you want to hang out."

Luc replied with a smart-aleck remark, "So when you get bored, you think of me. Great." They all laughed and then he said, "Give me ten minutes and meet me outside of room 124." They took off running and he got back to organizing for a few minutes.

Luc worked until he had to meet the boys then took the elevator to the right floor. The doors opened and he saw the boys hanging around in front of 124. Justin was bouncing a basketball. Luc walked up and snatched the ball away from him, turned and opened the door saying, "This isn't a gym. What do you think? All I can do is play a little hoops with you guys." Entering the room, he flipped on the lights to illuminate a very large workshop.

"Wow, what is this place?" James said.

"This is the company workshop. And we can hang here all we want. There is a complete wood and metal shop. We can build anything."

"Anything?" They both echoed.

"Well, we can sketch out a few ideas after I show you around. You need to get the feel for what each machine can do. And you can wander up and down the stock isles and see what there is to work with. As for myself, I think I want to build a few rocking chairs."

They spent the next hour just talking about the machines and their capabilities. The first idea the boys had was to build a submarine. Kids. Aren't they great?

The next day Luc's friend Bertram and his two helpers arrived. Luc, Megan and Mary Jo greeted them and, after introductions, they took the ride down to the gem vault. Outside the door, Megan showed Bertram an inventory list. He read through it and laughed, "This is ridiculous. No one could have all these stones without me knowing it. Jonas, what is going on?" Luc opened the vault and Bertram walked inside like this was funny. He stopped laughing when Luc opened a couple of drawers.

Luc finally spoke after Bertram started looking, "This is real, my friend, and I need your help."

"This is unbelievable. There are a couple of billion dollars sitting here." If he only knew what was in the other vaults.

Mary Jo took over. "Please review the items and make a recommendation to us as soon as possible. A general assessment is all we need. And probably some creative ideas."

"I can have that for you in two hours." He talked to his assistants and said, "Set up right here and let's get to work." Mary Jo and Megan left and Luc remained to help.

“I am sorry for this, Bertram. But, I have been sworn to secrecy for years. I’ll make today’s work worth your while as always.”

“No, don’t be sorry. This is the event of a lifetime. Okay, let’s start with the diamonds. You know our friends at DeBeers are going to be very upset with all this.”

Luc replied and said, “Screw them. They have been controlling the market for too long. Maybe we should start our own house.”

“That would be a lot of fun. We might start with about a tenth of this room just to get their attention. It won’t be pretty. They can be ruthless.” They worked on weighing the stones quickly while an assistant verified the grading certificates on each drawer.

Luc asked, “If we can work it out, how would you like to relocate to San Francisco?”

“I love the city and a change would do me good.” They talked about the possibilities and Luc became convinced that the idea was a very good one.

“I have to be honest with you -- it won’t be long before we can synthesize these. Your job could be only a few years long.”

“I can make for a comfortable retirement in those few years. I’ll take that chance.” They were done and Luc summoned Megan and Mary Jo back to the vault.

Luc ran the idea of the new exchange by them and they liked it. Mary Jo laughed at the chance to break the DeBeers stranglehold. Luc asked Megan to have John set everything up as Bertram wished. Then Luc asked Bertram, “How much do you want to take with you today?”

Bertram responded, “I would like a sampling from each grade. Say about 20 ounces.” Luc did the computations and realized it was about four million dollars’ worth.

“Keep one quarter of that for your trouble here today.”

“Most generous. That will be used to move myself and my staff to Frisco.”

“We’ll take care of that. Enjoy the stones while you can. Better hurry. Technology now waits for no man.”

Megan said she would contact Gunther to help with the transport when they got back to New York. They packed up and were gone as quickly as they came. Mary Jo gave the group the regular secrecy speech as they boarded the plane all smiles.

The next day, Julia Whitcomb showed up and Luc greeted her with Megan. He got a big hug. She was only 5’1” tall and very round. She was a brilliant historian and quite familiar with handling old scrolls and documents. She knew Luc as Luc St. Clair, a student who had been working on a doctorate for years. Megan said, “I am the manager of this entire library. Unfortunately, that is all I can disclose at this time. I found Luc and he recommended you.”

They had walked to the vault while this conversation was going on and Luc opened it with all the dramatics

he could muster. She entered the outer room and almost fainted. “Oh, my God. Luc, are these all authentic?”

“Every one. Here’s a list.” She read it and said oh my God a lot.

“I want to go inside.” Luc asked Megan if she wanted to come in. She declined and took a seat at a table. Julia and Luc entered the airlock and suited up. Once dressed, they entered the room. There was a viewing and handling table in the center and Julia looked around and selected a scroll from a container labeled “Alexandria Library.”

She laid it out with Luc’s help and they opened it. “I can’t read this. What is it?”

“Old Hebrew. I can read it.”

“Well, you are full of surprises.”

Luc proceeded, “This is a historical account of about one hundred years of the old Persian Empire written by a man calling himself Daniel. It is very well organized and lists things by referencing the first year of the reign of Cyrus.”

“Oh, my God.” They resealed it and retrieved another from across the room. This was one that Luc composed about the teachings of Socrates.

“This is about Socrates written by a man named Plavius. It is in Greek.” They went on and on for about an hour. Then it was time for dinner. They left the room and headed for Megan’s apartment. Harry had a wonderful dinner prepared. Julia didn’t even notice as she went on and on about the scrolls. Luc interrupted her and asked the big question. “Julia, what would it take for you to head up a long-term secret project cataloging and translating them?”

“Can I start now?”

Megan said, “It really will have to be classified and remain top secret until we see what is there. And the working facility we are thinking of will be in Boston where you live now. What is your estimate for a timeframe?”

“Wow. How many people can I have, and what kind of computer support will I get?”

“We’re thinking a staff of seven more besides you. As for computer support, you can have the best we have to offer, but two of your team will have to handle the day-to-day mothering of the database.”

“Eight to ten years. Can I publish when we are done?”

“You get first rights, but it does depend on what you find as to what can be shown publically. We think there are some important things there.”

“What kind of a salary are we talking about?”

Megan had been anticipating this question and slid a full-size sheet of paper with a single figure on it in front of her, “\$250,000 (Annually)”

“Wow. Can I start now?”

“I take it you accept our offer?”

“Yes, yes. Can I start now?”

“Do you mean right this minute?”

“Yes. Now.”

Luc got up from dinner and said, “Let’s go.” They walked to the vault and entered it again after suiting up. While they were dressing, Julia said, “Luc, where did all these scrolls come from, really?”

“Julia, I love you, but I can’t tell you now. Maybe someday, but not now. You’ll just have to trust us on this.”

“Okay. But someday...”

They worked for the next eight hours before Julia wanted to stop. It was almost 6 AM.

Megan greeted them as they left the room and vault and said, “It’s time for you to go home and set up your facility. All you will need is in this folder. You have four possible locations and two contractors to build out the facility. There is a check for one hundred thousand dollars as a signing bonus for you personally. Be patient with the contractors. Enjoy your money for a couple of weeks while they finish, and we will move everything when you are ready. Here is the name of a real estate agent who will help you.”

Julia was overwhelmed and started to cry, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Luc responded, “You are welcome. You have some very important work ahead. Take your time and do it right. I can help now and then, but I have other work to do.” He hugged her and she spontaneously hugged Megan too. It was good that Megan was a hugger. Julia did not try to hug John. One of the guards escorted her to her waiting plane and she was gone. Luc ventured topside to enjoy the sunrise and decompress after spending so much time with that much enthusiasm.

# Uncharted Territory

Luc had fond memories of this land.

He wandered the Americas for nearly four hundred years before the land was called America four thousand years ago. He was in what was now known as Japan when he heard a myth about a tribe who had ventured north. They returned years later with tales of a new land. At the time, he had a friend named Hibiki Karate, who knew Luc's immortality secret. Luc was training in an early form of fighting with Hibiki, who finally had enough of hitting Luc and hurting himself. Luc explained everything to him and Hibiki kept the secret with honor and respect the rest of his life.

The sparring partners spent ten years working together perfecting their techniques and moves. They named the new fighting style after Hibiki -- Karate. Hibiki started an academy and became a famous master. The price he paid for doing this was extreme. The local priests warned him about starting his school, but Hibiki held fast to his plans. The priests organized an attack against the quiet compound and were driven off, but only after two of Hibiki's sons were killed.

When Luc told Hibiki that he was going to follow the tribe north, Hibiki wanted to come. He dreamed of a new home for his remaining sons and daughters and their families. They prepared for two years. When the time was right, they brought thirty two people with them, and Hibiki started his new life on the rolling plains of what is now southern Canada.

When Luc returned from his travels to the bottom of South America, Hibiki's people had grown in numbers exponentially. They were living in villages built near both oceans and everywhere else he went. Hibiki's farm on the plains was gone, and most of the population lived on the coasts or in the foothills of great mountain ranges where the game was plentiful. It was magnificent to see the prosperous results from the work of one good man. In visiting with many of the inhabitants, Luc saw the spark of nobility and honor inherited from Hibiki.

Leaving Hibiki's new home was difficult. They had become family, but Luc had to see what was south. He had no idea at the time just how vast the land was and then he ran into another whole continent.

Luc took a wheeled sled and a team of dogs to start his next adventure. There were no horses left on the continent after the last Ice Age. Horses were reintroduced to the Americas with the arrival of the Spanish. Luc's dogs were used to the northern cold and could not take the heat of the southern regions. He turned them loose in the high plains of what is now Utah. It was just by chance that he came south through the center of North America and avoided the Baja Peninsula. The coastal route would have taken him years to discover that it had a long slender strip of land that abruptly dead-ended.

Somewhere in the southern part of what is now Mexico, Luc found gold in a creek bed. Lots of gold. He lived there by himself and gathered the gold for five years. He smelted the metal into large ingot coins and filled leather bags that were then stacked in a cave. Each bag weighed about forty pounds. Luc stopped when he had eighty-four bags. He felt good to be moving again.

However, within only four days of riding, Luc found silver on the side of a hill. He stayed in that location long enough to dig a mine and collect over sixty of the same size bags with the same size coin ingots. Luc stashed this cache and continued his journey after spending two years there.

Soon Luc hit real jungle, and the land thinned to where he could walk from one ocean to another in a day. He expected it to end, but instead it fanned out into another whole land mass -- South America. He chose to take the route to his left and traveled the east coast until he hit the Amazon River.

At times, he waited a whole summer or winter until the way he wanted to go was passable. He was in no hurry. He built boats when necessary and did so at the huge delta where the Amazon hits the ocean. He fashioned a huge canoe out of a very tall tree, stocked it and headed up river into the dense jungle. It sounds easy when said in one short sentence, but cutting down a tree and hollowing the inside with an axe and fire took an entire season.

About four hundred miles up the river, Luc made a home for himself and stayed forty years exploring the territory. He was always looking for gold or anything that might be valuable when he found diamonds. They were just laying around a small meadow that turned into a lake in the rainy season. He gathered thirty pounds over the years.

As you can imagine, Luc had lots of time to think about a lot of different things. One of those things was about how the blind must operate in the world and how difficult that would be. He decided to see what blindness was like. He made a soft blindfold, put it on and kept it on day and night. Soon, his hearing and smell became more acute and somewhat compensated for the loss of his vision. It was very revealing to live like that, and he learned a lot about a lot.

Luc remained blind for nine years.

When he took off his blindfold, it was time to move on. Luc packed up and floated down the river to the ocean. He stashed most of the diamonds there and continued southward. Diamonds are a relatively light commodity compared to gold or silver, so he retained one small full bag.

Luc always made maps when he could in those days and was beginning to get a good idea about the layout of the continents. He used the stars, the length of the days and the weather to help make his drawings accurate. Yes, he used the weather. He could identify storms from the Atlantic and Pacific and used them to fit locations relative to each other. He had sailed the Mediterranean for hundreds of years and recognized the different feel of storms, winds and tides with ease.



He reached the cape at the bottom of the continent and just kept going up the west coast. He got lost at this point because, coincidentally, there was a reverse in the magnetic poles of the Earth just when he rounded the cape. That was the only polar magnetic shift he had lived through and it screwed him up for a week. At the time, the sun and stars were behind a cloud layer for months. Luc felt things like that naturally, but he carried all the parts necessary to fashion a compass -- a needle, a magnet and some ingenuity.

After Luc reoriented himself, he made good time traveling up the coastline. The land was not very hospitable in that region, turning into lifeless desert for hundreds and hundreds of miles.

He pretty much stuck to the beach until he saw the expanse of the red desert then went to check it out. This desert was unique. If he raked the rocks a certain way, he could create an area that was a very different color. He tested a few small areas and came up with an idea. He made a straight line that stretched for a few miles. He then went into the foothills and looked down on his line. It was very sharp and easy to see. So, he made some more that intersected the first one. When he saw how nice it looked and thought about the possibilities, he decided to make a drawing, a really big drawing. One that would look like nothing but lines when you stood on the plain, but if you could look down from the sky, you would see the figure. He made a bird first. The geometry was easy after he mapped it out. He put temporary markers on the ground then filled in to make the bird complete. It was fun. It took one day to draw the bird. Luc made a lot more pictures of different things.

He thought his sand art would be blown away with the windy season approaching. He had no idea they would survive thousands of years. Luc stayed about six months before calling his play-time finished. Time to move on.

Ahead of him was nothing but mountainous coastline that looked inhospitable, so Luc took the time to backtrack two hundred miles to find trees big enough to build a small one-mast sailboat. It turned out to be a good investment of construction time. He could make a hundred miles by sea in one day and bypass the land. Coming up with sails was another story. He ended up weaving mats out of reeds and tall grass that he found inland.

The coast finally turned into jungle again and Luc abandoned the sailboat in favor of exploring a bit. He drew on his maps and, when he hit the thin zone between the continents, he felt as if he had a good picture of the whole landmass. It had been over three hundred fifty years since he had passed this place, but it still looked the same. This was where he encountered his first people.

Luc saw them well before they saw him, and he watched their village for a week before deciding to stop by and say hello. He waited until evening then just walked into the center while a crowd gathered. They were defensive at first with spears pointed at him. He took a seat on a log around the large common fire pit and started to talk to them. One of the smarter ones figured out that Luc wanted to learn how to communicate with them, and they ran words back and forth until Luc learned enough to string sentences together. He told them where he had been and where he was going. Their dialect was not easy, but not too hard either. He caught more

Polynesian than Japanese. He stayed with them two years and learned a lot from them. They taught him how to fish using pots and how to make hunting items from almost nothing. Nice people.

Further up the coast Luc found his silver. The hiding place he selected had not changed in the time he was gone. Part of the reason he decided to go exploring was the fun of being gone for a very long time. He wondered what state civilization would be in when he returned. Will the people have wiped themselves out or would there be great advances in day-to-day life? Most likely, everyone would be fine and trudging along in spite of hate and greed.

He took ten pounds of silver with him and headed out. As he was leaving, he met a group of five natives while on the beach road. Luc visited with them for a bit and they were quite pleasant. Their home village was a two-day walk straight up the coast. They told him their names and what to say when he passed through their village in order to get a warm welcome and, more importantly, a nice goodbye. Their language was different from the previous village people he had talked to, but he easily could put it together from the variety of languages in his head. Two days later, he came upon the village of the five men and said the things as counseled. He did receive a gracious welcome. Most of the men were away for their seasonal hunting, which left about one hundred women, lots of children and a few older men. The women swarmed him and treated Luc like a king. There was actually a pushing match between two of the younger girls to see who got to sleep with Luc. The uglier, tougher girl won, but Luc didn't care. It had been almost four hundred years without intimacy or any human contact for that matter. He was happy to oblige. He stayed a week until he was warned by an older woman about a problem he didn't know he had. The girl that latched on to him was married to a hunter that would return soon. Luc was gone in a flash with that news.

The coastal trail had become a small road and, within two weeks, Luc found his gold safe and sound. He camped there and used the time to build another rolling sled that he could pull along easily. He loaded the wagon with as much as it could carry and continued his trip. In the area that is now Southern California, Luc found a genuine city with farms and a thriving fishing trade. When he entered the city, he was relieved to find that no one took notice of him. He guessed there were strangers passing through often and he was correct.

He camped safely away from the town and stashed his goods nearby. He took a few silver and gold coins to town to purchase provisions to get him to the next big town. The commerce quickened his travel because of the time he saved by not having to forage, hunt and fish.

Luc made good time up the coastal road and he stopped to set up camp near nightfall. Just as he was almost set up three men came on him with long bows and spears drawn. They shot him with two arrows that had no effect, of course. One proceeded to attack by hand and Luc broke his neck with a couple of offensive moves. He killed the others with throwing knives quickly before they could run away and gather reinforcements. The skirmish

was all a blur and then he had three dead bodies to deal with. He gathered the men and weapons, and buried the bodies under piles of shale, which was plentiful. It was dark when he was finished and he moved on through the night to get as far away from the bodies as possible.

In the morning, he got rid of the bows. The arrows were good, but he could make better bows than these in his sleep. He kept moving because he wanted to make the crossing over the ice back to Asia during the winter he felt coming on fast.

The rest of the road north was easy, but he kept his guard up from there on out. He continued to make additions and corrections to his maps as he went and got a good picture of the coastlines. He had enough detail to recognize the distances between where he had been and where he was at the time. Stars were great to navigate by during clear nights. Somewhere around the Puget Sound, he realized he had to move quicker to make the correct timing to run the ice. So, he lightened his load by leaving a big stash near a volcano that is today called Mt. Rainier. He still retained fifty pounds of gold, silver and diamonds with him in a pack that he could easily carry and protect. The only thing that slowed him down was the continuous rain.

Twelve days later, the weather turned snowy and very cold. Fortunately, he made it to a small city before it got any worse where he stayed four days until the weather cleared a bit. There was a group of twenty hardy men heading north to find the crossing, who were also waiting for the weather to clear. Luc hooked up with them with a gig as their guide after showing them a map he had made and describing the land around the archipelago. Luc warned them that it would be a hard trip, but they were determined. The news of a man with a map spread and, when they left two days later, the group had grown to more than fifty.

Four months later, the group reached the east coast of Russia. Luc left the group and headed across the Siberian plains on his own. He had lost ten people in the crossing, all to fights among themselves that turned deadly before he could intervene. Murder meant less then than it does now, and it was common to kill another man to take over his family and holdings. Luc's epic trip around the Americas had been beautiful and lonely. He didn't hit significant civilization until he reached Europe two years later. It had been four hundred and four years since he left Japan with Hibiki.

Luc found that people were much more brutal than when he left. He eventually went to see his pyramids in Egypt and was pleased to see them still standing and well maintained. He settled in Persia, in what is now Iran, and was able to buy his way into a job as governor after he purchased a vast area of land with his diamonds, gold and silver. He married several times and raised dozens of children while he lived a relatively peaceful life for the next hundred and six years. He had to pretend to be four different people to get any peace about his lack of aging, but it was worth it. It was nice to stop moving and enjoy the company of people he loved again after years of exploring.

## Cowards

Luc caught his breath after Julia's whirlwind visit. He was enjoying a bite to eat and visit with Harry. Luc really counted on discussions with Harry, who could be most surprising some times. Harry's point of view added clarity to Luc's and his thoughts often caused Luc to modify his plans. Harry had a unique way of suggesting that Luc had not seen very often. Harry did it with tact and class. If he thought Luc's ideas were stupid, Harry always shared his counter-ideas without being patronizing. Luc loved it when Harry improved on a process or action that he had designed. They were quietly talking when every alarm in the vicinity went off at the same time. Somebody really wanted Luc's attention.

The alarm in Luc's head was the most annoying so he activated the comm link and spoke, "Yes." He paused and listened and then with some urgency said to Harry, "Get Mary Jo and have her join me here." Luc shut off his comm link as he moved to the video conference wall in the next room. He turned it on and displayed John and Gunther in split screen.

John spoke, "There was a terrorist attack on an oil refinery in Saudi Arabia. It took out a third of the supply system. Forty workers were killed in the explosions; at least one hundred others injured." He paused to let that point sink in. "One-third production slowdown makes OPEC unstable and, when our military moves, which they will, that will even further destabilize the markets. The Secretary is on the line and asking for your help, Mr. Wittworth." Luc took a few seconds to move himself into his Wittworth personality.

He cut the video feed and waited while the Secretary came on the phone. "Good afternoon, Mr. Secretary. Or maybe it isn't. What can I do for you?"

Secretary Freeborn replied, "Two things. First, I want you to get the son of a bitch responsible for this." He was deadly serious. "And two, I need you to prop up the oil market by releasing twenty billion barrels from your private reserve."

Even Luc was shocked with this statement. "That's a pretty big number, Sir. John, Mary Jo, do you understand why the Secretary is asking for this? They both nodded yes and Luc asked the Secretary to wait on hold while he talked to his team. Once the official was offline, Luc asked John to join him live in his location. John arrived within thirty seconds and Luc asked them to explain. They gave Luc the numbers from various reports with predictions of how the market would react to the hit. Then they showed projected reactions to the different reserve numbers they might pick. It was a balancing act betting on the future market reaction, which was based on perception, nothing more, nothing less. They recommended that both the country's and their personal reserves be tapped for five billion each immediately and added a statement that there would be another announcement to include additional reserves two hours after the market opened in New York. This was a much more conservative approach and one that could change as needed.

“Mary Jo, please make it so.” She left and Luc turned to John and asked him to let the Secretary know they would comply. Just like that, Luc had committed to sell between 30 and 40 billion dollars’ worth of oil. Luc was not accustomed to having terrorists dictate his business decisions -- This pissed him off.

Luc addressed Gunther, “Is it possible to find the people responsible for the attack?”

Gunther responded, “If I get access to every resource available and combine our intel with what we will have, there’s about a twenty percent chance of finding these people in forty-eight hours. Fifty percent in one week and then it stays there for six weeks. Probability climbs as time goes by until we kill them eventually.”

“Go ahead and set up the connections. Have Duncan give you the authority to take the lead on this in writing, please.”

Luc waited while Gunther was typing an email and then continued, “I have an idea that might dramatically improve the odds.” He told Gunther what he was going to do and signed off.

Luc had a couple of hours to kill before he would go to work so he headed for the gym. Harry was free too so they sparred a bit. Luc usually kicked his ass. They had some interesting sparring rules. At the start of every match. Harry got to choose the style. They limited the oriental ones to about five disciplines and included boxing and an American version of kick boxing. Today was straightforward boxing. Harry thought he was best in this style. They went three rounds and coached each other as they went. They stopped the clock when either one of them had a comment. Harry liked to swing just as he was saying “Go” to resume the voice-activated timer. That usually got him a good blow in before Luc could move away. Luc always let him have his fun. How do you fight an opponent that cannot be hurt or really even be pushed around? Gunther wouldn’t work out with Luc anymore. Luc never hurt Harry, but he did push him. Harry was not as fast and powerful as he used to be, but Luc never let on.

At the end of the match, however, Harry told Luc that his footwork was slowing down and ordered him to do a ten-minute drill with the jump rope. Harry specified the dance, and Luc complied while Harry counted. Ten minutes was a long time when someone was going full speed with a rope. At almost two spins a second, they added up. Luc slowed it down with some crossovers and finished it off with a burst of blur. When he put it away, the rope was actually hot where it hit the floor. Luc finished the workout and needed some time to catch his breath. Then he told Harry what had happened and what he was going to do. Harry approved. He often counseled patience, but this time it was clear. He was pissed as well. Luc cleaned up and dressed appropriately in preparation for what he had planned.

Things were set up as he had directed and their visitors were ready. Luc entered the large room where Ezekiel and his lieutenant were shackled to metal chairs that were bolted to the floor. There was plastic on the floor completing the whole effect Luc wanted to achieve. It was quite successful. Luc told his prisoners about the attack in Arabia and made his offer -- help him find their brothers that did this or die on the spot.

Ezkibel was reluctant and Luc warned him that there was no time for indecision. Ezkibel paused a bit too long, prompting Luc to pull out the Colt Python from his shoulder holster and shoot Ezkibel's lieutenant in the head. Some blood, bits and pieces splattered on Ezkibel's face and suddenly Ezkibel had a change of heart. Go figure.

Luc grilled Ezkibel about his previous kidnapping attempt. He told Luc that they thought Luc was an insider that would give them leverage with John. Ezkibel had no idea Luc was in charge. Gunther was listening and was satisfied they were safe from any other actions Ezkibel might have organized. The First Language men and Luc's attempted abduction were indeed unrelated.

Luc had Ezkibel moved to an office where he and Gunther finished the conversation. They allowed Ezkibel to make a few calls and he came back with a name and location. Gunther took the information and was gone. They had Ezkibel moved to a cell and drugged. For all Luc cared, Ezkibel could rot there for a few days. Luc would probably have him turned over to Interpol to figure out what national court to try him in. Or not. Luc didn't have time to think about it anymore. These people considered themselves guerrilla fighters and there was a fine line between terrorists and revolutionaries. Luc has found that true terrorists want innocent casualties, whereas revolutionaries want disruption of something, like commerce, to make their statement. Calling terrorism a holy war had always made him sick. Luc was pretty sure God didn't approve when religion dictated actions instead of right from wrong. He guessed it was the same as the fine line between justice and vengeance.

Luc asked Gunther to have the mess in the interrogation room cleaned up. Then he left to wash and change clothes. Luc had an appointment with the linguists.

The linguists were a group of five graduate students from Chicago University. They were hired for a top-secret project to capture information Luc was to provide for the development of a new alien language for a TV show. They thought the producer was eccentric for demanding that the speech sound like an actual language.

Luc had already provided some data via a white paper and they needed more nouns and verbs. This was the first time they had a chance to grill Luc live via video conferencing. They started out digging for information on the show, but Luc was able to sidestep their questions with the top-secret spiel.

The students grilled him for three hours before Luc wrapped up. Luc was anxious to hear how far along they considered themselves to be with the information he had provided. So, he asked for a status report.

One of the women typing on a terminal during the entire session spoke for the first time since introductions were made. "Sure, we have plenty of words to carry on typical greeting interrogatory statements. And after today, we can even carry on conversations on subjects more than the weather. You've given us almost the entire dictionary for specific items like farming, commerce, geography, physics, math, emotions, and twelve other categories." She looked very hard at Luc through the terminal and then continued. "How the hell are you doing this? No one can make up a language on the fly like you are doing."

Luc realized he had made this look too easy. He had read the bios on these people and knew exactly what languages they spoke. He switched to French knowing the woman speaking spoke it as well as German and Spanish. "I have a gift for languages." He switched to German. "And I have been dreaming this new one up for two years." He saw the others all listening and studying him intently. He switched to Russian. Two of the five spoke it. "I've just been looking for a chance to use it." Then he finished his speech in four other languages changing for each sentence. "I've consulted on many movies. When I met the people planning to make this new one, I was asked if I could come up with a totally new language. It sounded like fun. I've been sketching this out in my head and they gave the go ahead."

These words seemed to take the edge off the woman's comments and Luc even got a few smiles. Finally one of the others spoke. "Well, I believe we have all we need to finish the dictionary and the other write-ups we have to create. Thank you for your time and this challenge. None of us has ever done anything like this. For me, this has been most entertaining. If you need me to play any of the parts in the movie, I would love to!"

They all smiled over that comment. Luc thanked them all in twelve different languages and signed off by saying in English, "You know, I believe what you people do will keep the world communicating. Not that this project will do that, but it should at least make the movie more believable." This got a few laughs and they all signed off.

Gunther sent a message to Luc as he was wrapping up with the linguist group, "The cell that hit the oil refinery were all suicide bombers using black ultra-light aircraft at night. They were very well supplied with some of the latest toys. But, their leader was holed up in Pakistan about three miles from where Bin Laden hid. I will have independent verification in less than two hours. I had a couple of drones loaded on a plane and transported at 4:30 PM New York time. They can be ready to strike at 8:30 PM. That's 6:30 AM tomorrow, their time. Be thinking about it." For Luc, there was really not much to think about at this point. Blow them to hell.

Luc was reviewing some other work when Gunther called with an update. "Luc, it's been verified. And some good news, it looks like there are no women or children in the house at present. If we hit them now, we are assured of getting the one who ordered the attack. But, he will be throwing a party in a few hours to celebrate their great victory over us and five of his lieutenants are on their way there right now. The risk goes up that they will scatter if they get wind that we know what's going on. I think it's worth the risk. We could set them back years in their plotting if we succeed."

"Have you briefed Winslow, Harry, Duncan and John on these options?"

"Winslow is a go. Let me get concurrence from the other three."

"I'm good with it, if they have no objections."

"I'll get right back to you."

They hung up and Luc continued with his work for a few minutes until Gunther called back. "Everyone is

good; except Harry wants to use more firepower to make sure we get all of their security forces that are in the convoys and around the compound. I like his suggestion.”

“Do it.”

“Copy that.” And they ended the call.

Luc didn't get five minutes of work done before there was a knock on his door. It was Mary Jo, Harry, and John. They came in and Harry said, “We would like to see the vaults. Megan told us about them and we want a tour.”

“Meet me at the elevator in thirty minutes. I need a shower and fresh clothes. Some food would be good too. Thirty minutes.” They all left except Harry.

He asked, “What do you want to eat? I'll fix it while you clean up.”

“I would really like some of the fruit crepes you make. Maybe apple?”

“You got it.”

Luc entered the bathroom, stripped and looked at himself in the mirror. He felt like he was going into one of his downward mood swings. It was like being blue – he was tired all the time. Not physically tired, but tired of living. The last time he felt like this was during the Great Depression. Even with everything he did to help, there were so many people with so little. Not just basic things like food and shelter, but hope. The hope had left this country. He felt like that right then. And he felt old, very, very old.

He took a shower and tried to shake it off, but failed. He forced it under the surface and moved on to dressing. He smelled the cooking and it helped him get into gear. Harry had a plate waiting and joined him with a plate of his own. They ate in silence. Harry knew when Luc needed some time to just *be*. When they finished, Harry cleared the plates and said, “Let's meet our friends and see all this treasure.” The others were waiting by the elevator and together the group dropped to the warehouse floor. Luc thought they might as well start there. They walked out into the large space and Luc gave the same speech he gave Megan about contents of the crates. He let them wander the aisles and look at the tags on each box.

John was the first to call everyone together at an aisle in front of twenty or so very large sturdy wooden sealed enclosures. As they walked up, Luc said, “This whole row of crates contain marble statues from the Parthenon, 200 AD to 200 BC.”

Luc hesitated because the explanation was complicated, “The statues that were on the Athens Acropolis wore out after two hundred years due to people touching them, simple vandalism and weather. Half of these are worn out and half are new ones ready to replace them. There were duplicates made by the artisans. The last half are the duplicates. I bought them all at a discount at one of the many restorations the Acropolis went through.” The explanation was clear enough and John moved on.

A few minutes later, Mary Jo called them together again at the other end of the warehouse. “These crates



are statues done by Michelangelo. How did you get these?”

“I bought them. I really liked his work. All these items were either bought, made by me, or gifts from kings and queens and other nobility. Most are Persian, but some are Chinese and Indian. And there is one throne chair from a Pharaoh.”

They were done and anxious to see the vaults. They took the elevator back to the vault floor and Luc described the contents as he disengaged the security door and let it swing outward. He had the guards take a break, so the group was free to speak. He opened each vault and enjoyed the looks on his friends’ faces as they left each room.

Mary Jo made Luc tell the Jefferson story and John wanted to know about the bullion. Harry was silent and spent most of his time in the weapons room. When they were done, Luc closed each vault and Mary Jo said, “You’ve told us about all this, but I had no idea of the quantity. Luc, when will you stop surprising us?”

“I think the answer is never. Because it would take one normal lifetime for me to discuss my life. I don’t mean to hide anything from you guys, but we just don’t have time to talk about it all at length. Some topics just never come up.”

All their phones rang at once with a message from Gunther telling them to head to the Control Room. They moved out. When they walked into the Control Room, the video links were all up and running and Gunther began his narration, “The party has started. All the convoys have dropped off their bosses at the house and they are eating right now. Look at these feeds and you will see the entire compound from a drone’s view. Luc, missiles are locked and now is the time.”

“You have the order. Execute.”

They all watched in silence as two of the feeds shook and fluttered when two missiles were fired from each drone. There were four destructive weapons heading to end the lives of these cowards. The explosion was massive as all four hit at the same time. Sixteen hours since the refinery was hit and some sort of justice was served.

# Ruth

Gunther allowed them return to New York four days later and Luc let Angela know that he was back in town. He rushed to her apartment, and they spent the rest of the morning together until she had to go to work. After lunch, he called Ruth Hanson and asked her to drop what she was doing to see him. She arrived in thirty minutes. Luc already had concurrence from all his friends to bring Ruth onboard, and he decided to handle this one alone.

Ruth had been their shoulder and friend for many years. She looked nothing like the famous Dr. Ruth. She was tall, dark and very attractive. She reminded Luc of his wife in Milan in the 1490s, with Mediterranean skin and long, long black hair. Ruth had the same unruly hair as his Milan bride. She and Luc had an occasional office visit, but Ruth concentrated on the others in the group. He predicted she would take the deal immediately once she crossed that line into belief. Ruth was in a good marriage with a pediatrician husband, and they had a wonderful fifteen-year-old daughter.

When she Ruth, Harry brought her to the Oversight Room. He held the door for her and she entered the room. When she saw that Luc was the only one there, she said, “Hi Luc. Will others be joining us?”

“No. It’ll just be you and me for a while I think. I have something very important to share with you. It will be unbelievable at first, so let me tell you a story. It is the story of my life. It is quite different from the one you know to be Luc’s.”

She interrupted, “Luc, are you being serious? Are you telling me that Luc is a fictional person and that you are someone else?”

“Yes. That is exactly what I am telling you. I used the fake identity to hide a secret. You see, I was born long ago and cannot die. I am immortal.”

She smiled and said, “I guess you know how ridiculous that sounds. Please go on.”

“I am six thousand years old.” He walked over to a terminal and pulled up a big timeline chart of his life. On another monitor he brought up his fake identities through the timeline.

She got up and joined him to look at the displays. “If you are not really Luc, then who are you?”

He turned to her with all soberness and said, “I am Lucasiah, the fifth son of Seth, the third son of Adam, the first man.”

She kept smiling and said, “Oh, this keeps getting better and better.”

“John, Sully, Mary Jo, Megan, Gunther, and Harry are all in on my secret and they work to protect me. They also run my businesses and manage my money. And I have a lot of it to manage.”

She became genuinely concerned and said, “I want to talk to Harry.” Luc called and asked Harry to join them.

She continued studying the charts and finally said, “These charts are very convincing, but I need more or I’m going to have all of you locked up somewhere I can treat you all together.”

Harry came in and was all ready for Ruth. He started talking immediately, “What Luc is telling you is all true. I’ve been his friend for twenty-eight years and, in all that time, he hasn’t aged a day.”

Now she was starting to get pissed so Luc asked her this question to redirect the subject, “Can you get away for a few days?”

“Sure.” She looked skeptical and both Harry and Luc looked at a calendar. She realized they were serious and she said, “Let me make a few calls. Where are we going, Methuselah?”

“Just clear your schedule and we’ll leave.” She started calling people to do just that.

Luc said to Harry, “Please have transport arranged to Cairo and then to Rome, Paris, and Ireland. Have everything we need for a few days put on the plane. We’ll sleep on it too.”

Ruth seemed to calm down with the prospect of getting to the bottom of all this silliness. Harry left and Luc and Ruth continued their visit. She was studying the identity chart and made this comment, “Am I supposed to believe that you are all of these men?”

“Just keep all this in mind and I’ll show you the proof you need. I figured you would be a hard sell. Would you like to know why I am telling you my secret?” She just nodded her head but they were interrupted by Harry at the door telling them to move out. He escorted Luc and Ruth to the street and into a limo.

When they were alone again, Luc answered his own question, “I want you to join my inner circle of friends and help me the same way they help me. In exchange for this commitment, you and your family will get an apartment in our Empire State Building offices, a million dollar salary, access to everything I own and anything else you want. In short, you can have anything you want for the rest of your life.”

“Well, that’s a generous offer and totally in line with your delusion.”

They arrived at the heliport and were guided to one of Luc’s helicopters. The ride was short to the airport where they boarded a luxury jet for their longer ride. When they were settled and in the air, Luc pulled up the same charts on two big screens in a conference room and restarted the conversation. “I have gone by many names, but the one I want to focus in on is Job. And yes, it’s the same one in the Bible. I did many things in that life, but the one that is not commonly known is the time I worked for the Egyptian Pharaoh, Cheops and his family. I was the chief architect of the Great Pyramid.”

She actually started laughing at that statement. When she stopped, she calmly said this, “Okay, let’s assume that all you are telling me is factual. Let’s talk about how you juggle the different identities without going crazy. This sounds like a symptom of multiple personality disorder.”

That discussion went on for two hours. Then she picked out a person on one chart, Maurice DuPont, and asked to talk about his family. “I can talk about more than just my family. As Maurice, I was a friend to Thomas Jefferson when he was in Paris. We became drinking buddies and lifelong friends. He was a brilliant political

philosopher. He was terrible with money and died in horrible debt. I didn't know about his problems until he was dead, but it all made sense. He kept buying books and things from England. He paid and paid, but never caught up with his ability to buy. He never had money in Paris and I treated him to everything, even an apartment.”

Luc spent the next hour describing one wild weekend filled with women and booze. Ruth was enthralled and then asked him to repeat everything in chronological order backwards. That was an old technique used to determine if someone was telling the truth or not. He asked her if she would like it in French, she laughed and said that English would do. That took half an hour. Luc then told Ruth that they would be landing in an hour and he had to take care of some business in preparation. He left her alone and she pulled out a pad and started writing. She saw him go to the front of the plane and then a pilot came out and passed by in the corridor. This got her interest and she eased out of her chair and walked to the front of the plane to the cockpit. She opened the door and Luc was sitting in the left seat piloting the plane. She eased the door closed and went back to her writing.

Luc returned and made his apologies just as the pilot, who had returned to the cockpit, announced that they were making the approach into Cairo. He briefed them that it was ten twenty four in the morning and 93 degrees Fahrenheit. Luc then made a couple of calls. One was to someone named Duncan, and Luc announced himself as Robert Wittworth. They seemed to be old friends. Luc stood and stepped into the corridor to finish the conversation in private. He returned when the call ended and smiled at Ruth. He sat back down and they chatted until he received a call. He answered in Egyptian Arabic and had a brief and happy conversation with the caller. Ruth was watching intently now as the phone call ended.

He stood up and said, “Let's see what Harry packed for us.” He took off down the corridor and she followed. He walked her to the rear cabin, opened the closet to reveal an entire wardrobe for her from casual to formal. He looked over the clothes and said, “Good job, Harry.”

She checked a couple of the tags and said in great astonishment that the sizes were exactly hers. She held up a blouse and pants as she looked in a mirror. He said, “We will be underground for much of our time here. You may want to select something a bit more rugged.”

The plane landed and a Land Rover was waiting. Ruth watched as Luc took the keys, spoke to the person in a long dialogue of more Egyptian Arabic, further befuddling Ruth. The drive to the plateau was twenty minutes through easy traffic. They pulled up to the Pyramid Museum's visitor center where they were met by the curator. He introduced himself and said that he would be thrilled to show them around personally. He drove them to the Great Pyramid and let them know that he had closed the tours for their visit; they would be getting a private tour.

They made the hike up the trail to the ancient structure. As they got close, Luc took a good look at his creation He remembered it when it gleamed with a smooth beautiful limestone face and golden pyramidion,

now known as capstone. He sighed.

### *2650 BC Giza Plateau*

“Yes, this site is perfect, my lord. It will be a glorious monument to your kingdom. You will live forever in history and the afterlife.” The Pharaoh King and Job were walking the building site alone for a change. There were several large tents nearby that Job used as an office and living quarters of sorts.

Pharaoh looked at the blocks Job had set up to represent the corners and asked, “How much will be underground?”

“There will be one passageway that will lead down and dead-end into a workman’s chamber. Off that, there will be a hidden door into a large room with four smaller hidden rooms. I intend to use only a select handful of men to complete that construction to maintain secrecy. I will dig that tunnel only when it can be hidden from the main group of slaves. The models I have constructed do not show it and there is no written record of it either.”

“You have done well my Bedouin friend. What would you suggest I place in this very secret treasure room?”

“Why, you, my lord. History has shown that someday, far in the future, there will be plunderers. We must give them false trails and decoys that will protect you for eternity and beyond. They must believe they have discovered all there is to find.”

“I am satisfied. You may begin the work. I will provide all you need. It will be glorious, as you say.”

Job walked the Pharaoh into his working tent and told him, “The most important thing about the position of the pyramid is the alignment it has with the stars. It is very complicated.” Job proceeded to explain the astrophysics involved, but the Pharaoh was not able to understand the lesson. Job gave up and ended his dialog, “The gods will be pleased when you join them and the stars will guide you to your new life. It will indeed be glorious.”

### *Today Giza Plateau*

Their curator host was chatty and very curious about the reason Luc wanted to tour the inside chambers alone with his guest. A call from U.S. Secretary Freeborn, was the only warning the curator had less than an hour ago. Luc had not given Ruth a chance to asked questions about the curator’s comments. When they were in the Grand Gallery, Luc asked for a word in private with his guest. When the curator was gone, he walked Ruth around the room and interpreted the hieroglyphics for her. She was silent for the most part. She was finally getting the idea that what Luc was saying may be true and that he was not nuts. Stopping at one hieroglyphic story, Luc pointed to a man with a scroll in hand and said, “This is me.”

He led Ruth out of the gallery and thanked their host for the private minute. Luc asked to see the lower chamber and the curator led the way and said, “There is nothing down there except for a dead-end corridor.”

The corridor was cramped and tight with the three of them. At the end, they were lined up with their backs to one side. Luc studied the opposite wall while the others waited patiently.

He reached into his carry bag and pulled out a brush, indicated that he wanted to clean an area on the wall and asked, “May I?” The curator nodded and Luc gently brushed the area around one stone. When he was satisfied, he asked the curator to push on one side. The curator was very curious and pushed gently until it gave way and turned. He was delighted with the discovery and watched with excitement. Luc reached into the opening and pushed a lever back. The wall behind them moved a bit and pivoted on center with the left side going in and the right side coming out.

Luc told the curator to reach inside and pump the lever handle. He did and the door opened more and then more. When it was wide enough to walk through, Luc stepped into a short hall. They followed closely. The hall opened into a large burial chamber. He and Ruth followed as Luc took in the room that he had not seen in forty-six hundred years. He was the last person in the room to seal it and now he was one of the first people to enter again. He had been waiting for the right time to reveal this treasure.

In the center of the room was a stone sarcophagus. A golden sarcophagus was stored within, containing the pharaoh wrapped in traditional mummy fashion. There were many artifacts on shelves built into the walls and weapons leaning in the corners. Everything was gold and bejeweled. The story of the pharaoh’s life was written in hieroglyphics on the walls. Everything was perfectly preserved. Luc took a camera from his bag and took some personal pictures of the room and his friend’s burial arrangement. The pharaoh had been a good man. Luc touched his casket and remembered him at his best. Ruth and the curator were quiet and reverent while he looked around. Enough. This was a place of death, not life. Time to go.

Luc talked to the curator and said, “I want no mention of us as part of the discovery. My photos shall always remain private. Please wait a day until we are long gone before your announcement to the world. The three of us will never speak of this again and I was never here. Agreed?”

The man had tears in his eyes. He hugged Luc, shook his hand and simply said, “Agreed.”

Ruth and Lucasiah walked out leaving the curator alone with the tomb. Luc made the return trip to the airport as fast as he had come. Ruth was quiet and looked at him carefully a few times while they were heading through the traffic to their jet. They passed through gates, then security and were quickly in the air again. She finally broke the silence and said, “How can this be? Are there others like you?”

“Not that I know of. Let me show you my medical charts.” Luc called them up on an iPad and handed them to her.

He then gathered all the team on video conference and asked Ruth to tell them what had happened. They were all very glad she was now in on the secret. When they were finished with the story of the day, Luc told

them all of his plans for the rest of the trip. “We are going to visit a friend in Rome. Fly during the night. Stopover in Paris for the day. Fly during the night to Dublin, where we are going to retrieve the Holy Grail.” Luc paused until they really understood what he had just said. He waved off any further conversation about it just to tease his friends.

Luc asked John to visit privately with Ruth and make her the offer officially. He took a break and headed for his stateroom to talk to Angela for a while. He was again deceitful with her, as required, but felt horrible about it. This feeling was growing stronger every day. Luc couldn't lie to her like this much longer. Something had to give.

It would be 4 PM in Rome when they landed and he had something special planned. He had been meaning to look up an old friend, Jonathan Douglas Porter, from New York. Jonathan was a priest and historian at the Vatican who had helped with a doctorate thesis Luc wrote twenty years ago for his last of eleven PhDs. Luc would add some gray highlights to his hair and he would look forty easily. His friend would be eighty years old now. Luc called him when they left and promised to stop by if he would give Luc and a friend a private tour. Father Porter knew Luc as Daniel Wilkins.

They landed and a Harley Davidson Sportster was waiting for them at the airport. Luc made sure this was okay with Ruth and riding clothes and helmets were packed for them on the plane. The ride from the airport to the Vatican was about thirty minutes at this time of day, but he knew how to make the best of having a powerful two-wheeled vehicle. They had two hours until their visit with Father Porter. Ruth was having a great time and didn't care if they just rode around taking in the sights. She had never been to Rome and Luc switched to his historian-tour guide mode and narrated the sights over their helmet telephone headsets.

He made one stop to go shopping. He pulled up to a tailor's establishment called Brioni. He and Ruth locked their helmets on the bike and went inside. Luc walked up to a counter and asked in Italian to speak to Roberto. Roberto came out from the back when called. Luc greeted him and told him he was John's friend. Roberto instantly warmed up to Luc and offered them a glass of wine in the back. They obliged and when they were seated, Luc told him his business, “I would like to arrange for John to get a dozen suits of something special, perhaps something that has yet to be previewed. Or made from some material that is fresh and about to be the next fashion. Do you have any ideas?”

“That is an interesting request. John is a valued customer and good, good friend. It would be our pleasure to come up with something special just for him!”

“I also want tuxedos for John and for four other men. You pick the styles. I would think it would take three suits to cover the style spectrum. Would you agree?”

“Yes, yes. Three each will be wonderful.”

With the order complete, Luc haggled the price with him, all for show as he really didn't care. When the negotiation was finished, Luc pulled out an American Express Black card, and handed it to him. Ruth witnessed

the transaction and took note of the card. Roberto acted like he handled them for every purchase. They left with promises to return and stay in touch.

Just short of the door, Luc turned to him and said, “Perhaps you would be kind enough to deliver the suits to New York in person to adjust the fit. I will send a plane for you when you are ready if you will do that for me. Please?” Luc was humbly begging at this point to earn his favor as well.

“Yes, of course, I would be honored to visit your city. Four weeks, no sooner. If I have trouble with the fabric purchases, it could be six.”

“No problem. You are very kind. My regards to your family.” And they walked around the corner to their motorcycle. Time to meet the Father at the Vatican, three minutes away.

Ruth and Luc pulled up to a security gate and were passed through quickly with directions to where the Father was waiting. They parked the bike and Father Porter stepped out of a building door and said, “Daniel, my old friend. No, no, you are not so old. The years have been good to you. Better to you than to me at least.”

“Father, you are looking younger than when we were doing research together. I think because you live so close to God, He is cursing you with eternal youth.” The eighty year old priest’s eyes held a glint that said he still had a razor sharp mind. “This is my very good friend, Dr. Ruth Hanson.”

“Ah, a beautiful woman with my friend. The ring on your finger tells me you are married to someone besides my young protégé. He could never catch a woman of your caliber. And what would you be a doctor of, my dear?”

“I am a doctor of psychiatric medicine, sir.” Ruth took his arm as he offered it and they chatted as they entered the door into the hall. They walked a short distance out of the building, into another and found themselves standing in the Sistine Chapel.

Ruth was awestruck. Father Porter saw this and said, “Ah, you have never been here before. Let me tell you about this place.” He proceeded to give a lecture on the history of the chapel and then about the ceiling and its creation. Luc lingered behind having heard it all before. He remembered discussions amongst the artists of the time and how the work was progressing as it was developed by Michelangelo. The general belief at the time was that if the Pope’s name was evoked to help convince them to take the work, they would certainly be paid poorly. No one wanted the work, but none could refuse it either, if offered.

But whatever history or inside stories about the works that blessed this chapel’s ceiling, they were masterpieces and the complete work was a miracle of human achievement. It was truly a magnificent creation.

They toured the main cathedral and Father Porter began his lecture again. Luc didn’t know it, but Ruth was a catholic. She considered this place to be holy ground and stopped, gestured, and said the ritualistic prayers as they walked around. He did not know the emotional impact this visit would hold for her. He was pleased she was enjoying it so much.



When finished with the main tourist areas, the Father led them to the private church library where scholars can do research with the right permissions. Luc had worked here many times through the centuries. The collection was staggering. Luc even walked the hallways of the underground secure treasury before. It held the gifts to the church and the plunder as well. Many of the works Luc was responsible for while he was in Egypt were here having been taken as the spoils of conquest. At least they were safe and well preserved.

The Father saved the best for last. He led them on a long walk back to the main cathedral and up many stairs until they exited through an exterior door and onto the roof of the building. The sun had set and the city was lit up, especially the larger ruins and buildings. The Coliseum was particularly beautiful from this vantage point. Luc had never been up here and he enjoyed reminiscing in his mind over what these buildings meant to him. He remembered when they were new. It made him a little sad when he compared them from then to what they were today. But, it made him happy at the same time they were preserved in any state at all today.

Father Porter walked them around the entire dome and gave Ruth plenty of time to take pictures. Luc had given Ruth a really good camera earlier in the day to use instead of her cell phone. She was snapping away as they walked the circle. While she was busy, Father Porter grilled Luc about his family and work. All questions were answered when he explained that Ruth was going through the interview process on this quick trip for a new position with a company he worked with. He was just the one assigned to get her to the many meetings she was having. It was getting late and they ended their visit with a time of quiet prayer in the main church. A short walk and they were back at their bike and saying goodbye to their host.

Luc started the goodbye saying, "Thank you, my friend. I am most pleased to see you looking so well. Your insight is a blessing to us all. And thank you for treating this special lady to a special time. I hope that you and Ruth stay in touch."

Ruth responded by hugging and then kissing the old man on his cheeks. "I would love to stay in touch. Here is my business card. Please write or call. And thank you for the tour. You can't know what this has meant to me."

"Oh, yes, I can. I can see it in the tears you are holding back, my child." They hugged again and then Luc hugged him as well. Luc and Ruth put on their helmets and rode off into the Rome night. They stopped for dinner at an outdoor restaurant by one of the many piazzas and spent the time reviewing her pictures. Many were exceptional. She was getting tired, so they rode back to the plane and said goodnight. Luc gave the pilots their schedule. He wished to be in Paris at sunrise. He went to his cabin and slept the night away. He slept soundly not noticing when they flew, but they awoke to find themselves at the Paris airport as planned.

Ruth and Luc both woke up around six AM local time. Luc made breakfast and he and Ruth talked and talked. They tried to make some kind of an itinerary, a crazy idea because Ruth had never been to Paris either. Luc offered the same motorcycle guided tour and she declined in favor of a lazy day at the Louvre. Wonderful. He loved the museum. They got there as it opened and walked the galleries until lunchtime. They took a break

and strolled to a cozy little outdoor restaurant called Le Soufflé.

Over lunch, Luc told Ruth the real reason she was in. He described his dreams to her -- the Heavenly Host, and the First Language Men as well. He told her that her first order of business was to work with Megan and to help him personally. She started to take notes and Luc stopped her telling her that she could start in a few days. They returned to the museum and walked it until she was tired. They returned to the plane to take a break and prepare for dinner in Paris.

At 7 PM, a limo picked them up. Luc had the driver drop them off at the Eiffel Tower. They had a pleasant conversation about Ruth's family. She went on and on about her daughter, Melody. The evening was beautiful and they enjoyed a stroll over the Seine. She asked him about his life in general and then zeroed in on when he lived in Paris in the seventeen and eighteen hundreds. He told her stories about his life and the times. She was enthralled. They stopped on a bridge and visited for a long time.

Luc led her toward their destination as they conversed. They arrived at the Astrance, his favorite restaurant in Paris. He and Ruth had dressed up for dinner. Harry had packed some of Luc's private jewelry for the occasion. She was duly impressed and looked stunning. Harry had also picked out a handsome suit for Luc. They enjoyed a wonderful dinner of classic French cooking accompanied by a magnificent wine. The whole time they were visiting, Ruth took pictures of the surroundings and sent them to her family. All that she told them was that she was going away for a few days to consider a job offer. It really was a long interview about the new position.

During dinner, Luc asked about the offer and if she was going to accept. She said, "Hell yes. But, I asked to do research on the side. Is that okay?"

He replied, "Of course" and sweetened the deal by offering to let her set up her own research foundation and the use of any resource they had at their disposal.

Now there were seven.

A cover story had already been prepared. She would be heading a research lab doing classified government work with high-ranking military men and women.

With dinner long finished, Ruth was finally willing to leave the restaurant. Luc suggested a short tour of Paris before heading back to the airport and she loved it. He invited her to ask questions and she did as they took in the sights. He had stories for everything, Paris having been his home for several centuries. Once back on board the jet, they headed for their rooms for the night.

Again, they flew through the night and woke early to Dublin rain. There was an Aston Martin Vanquish waiting for them, and they drove northwest to a little village called Kells. Their destination was a church called Saint Columba's. Behind it was the usual old cemetery with several family mausoleums. Luc stopped for flowers at a local shop and they found the church easily. It was a small town.

The rain was heavy as they popped umbrellas and walked to the graveyard. They approached one of the

small burial buildings. No one was watching as they walked around to the back. Luc moved a couple of decorative carvings and a panel opened near the ground. He took out a wooden box, opened it and put the contents into his shoulder bag. He replaced everything and they left as quietly as they came. Luc slipped a thousand euro note into the outside offering box as they passed, then they were gone.

Luc and Ruth stopped in one of the local antique shops and bought a bunch of cheap church chaises and a wooden box to hold them. Gunther had made special arrangements for the wooden box to get through customs when they landed.

The trip across the Atlantic was long. Luc and Ruth hung out in the conference room and Luc conducted business. He read report after report, made calls and read some more. He discussed some things with Ruth and answered all the questions she had. She was mostly reading his files and filling in the details as she went.

Toward the end of their flight, she wanted to know where Luc would like her to begin. He answered, "Work should wait a few days. You should invest some time with the logistics of relocating, decorating and generally getting organized." She saw the wisdom in that advice and off she went down Luc's rabbit hole.

## Business as Usual

Luc and Ruth arrived back in the Empire State Building and everyone was there to welcome Ruth into the club. They also wanted to hear the Grail story. Luc made the group wait until dinner and when the time was right, he told them all he knew.

Luc put the chalice onto the dinner table and let everyone examine it while they ate. The cup itself was made of simple pottery clay and was glazed and fired a nice bright black at one time. It had been used extensively and was chipped before it became a sacred relic. The grail was shaped like an oversized wine glass with a thick stem and heavy round base and was quite ordinary and plain. Luc used to carry a similar one in a wood box. It was a custom of the times to have a shoulder bag or two with your essential personal day-to-day items if you were traveling even a short distance.

Ruth was doing most of the talking, telling them about their trip. She was giving them all a hard time about keeping the big secret. Luc would expect nothing less -- Ruth was a very outgoing person.

When the dishes were cleared, Luc began his story, "This cup was entrusted to me by a group of men who were sometimes called the Knights Templar, a fairly secret group. They all believed this cup to be the cup that was Jesus's personal possession. Supposedly, it was used at the last supper and then to catch some of the drops of his blood that fell from the wounds inflicted during his crucifixion. These men believed this to be true and they believed it enough to be willing to die for its safety."

John used the pause to ask a question, "When?"

"1350. I was in London during the Black Plague and was well known for my philanthropy during those horrible few years. I was approached by the last of the order, who were desperate for help. They were dying off quickly. I took the grail and swore to protect it. I hid it where Ruth and I found it, and I moved on. Is it the cup? I don't know. But let's start with having it molecularly dated. Then we can take it to a man I know at the Met. Gunther, can you please handle the molecular dating? Take it to Willy Jones at our main materials R&D lab."

A few days passed and Luc performed a ritual of sorts. He took in the news, reading very, very fast. He took a seat at his desk and read the newspapers that were organized just the way he liked for swift intake. He read a couple of magazines as well and was up to date on that side. A piece was repeated in several papers about the discovery of a bunch of masterpiece paintings and museum artifacts that were found in an underground bunker beneath a retired mill in Switzerland. He had been looking for the story since Megan told him that she was going to have it uncovered. A team was sent to catalog everything before announcing the discovery. They took out some things and added others per his direction. He had been planning this since World War II. It felt good. This art was too important to lose or be kept secret any longer. Wait until they saw what else was coming!

On the other side of the world, a gifted archeologist and his team of students was about to find Mayan

treasure in the hills outside of Mexico City. That would be fun. John reported to Luc privately that there was phone chatter between a lieutenant in the Ochoa Mexican drug cartel to Salvador Romero, the head of the cartel, about the discovery. Luc didn't know why they would be interested, but it pissed him off. It didn't take much to piss him off about the cartel since they started killing cops. So, he was thinking about taking some action.

Luc had Sully, who was back safe and sound with them, get him everything on the structure of the Mexican drug business and have a briefing ready for him and Gunther as soon as possible. Later that day, everyone around was filled in as Luc laid out the plan. He was going to take down the most ruthless cartel leader. It would put a short-term dent in production and distribution of the business. He was very pleased that Ruth was present, having dropped her decorating and relocation activities to join the group. She was clearly surprised by the power Luc had and the vastness of his reach. He had decided to do the killing himself. No one was happy about the decision, but they all knew it was the best option. It needed to look like a rival cartel's work.

Luc followed up with Gunther, Harry and Sully to define the mission. With the logistics laid out, he left. First stop, the airport. Luc was taking his D-jet to Mexico where a supply officer and vehicle would be waiting.

While Luc was flying south, Gunther informed him of the target's location. All was proceeding as planned and no changes to the schedule were required, yet. He landed at a private airport about fifty miles from the villa. The contact Luc was to meet was there with everything requested. There was going to be no stealth to this attack. It was going to be a bloody shootout. It had to look like another cartel had committed the attack. Once the contact took off, Luc suited up for war. He donned unnecessary body armor to look like a soldier if he was noticed on camera. He was going to destroy the compound, but wanted to make sure that the event looked as planned if any recordings survived. He took the vehicle provided and drove to the outskirts of the compound.

Luc took off and made the trip on a good road in an hour and a half. No checkpoints. No stops. At two miles out, he parked the car as planned. It was midnight and the compound was dark as he approached. Luc found a good perch and started to pick off the guards one by one with his sniper rifle. It took four men to fall before the others to start reacting. He managed to kill six more as they got into their defensive mode.

They fired blindly into the hillside at Luc, but missed by a good ten yards every time. Luc got as many as he could with the rifle and moved out. They finally saw him and hit him only once with small arms fire. When Luc was set up for the next move, he lobbed a couple of grenades into the front guard gate house. He was hit several times from the top of the high wall around the perimeter of the villa. Of course, the bullets had no effect. He walked through the front gate to an army of men with machine guns blazing away. He cleared them with his own rifle. He reloaded and walked over the dead bodies.

He reached the front door and walked the entire outside of the structure placing charges preset to blow all at once in ten minutes. When he reached the front door again, most of the shooting had stopped. The remaining men were inside waiting for him. He blew the door and walked through the cloud of smoke into the house. He abandoned his rifle and pulled two Sig Sauer P229s fitted with extended magazines and opened fire. His goal

was to set more charges on the inside bearing walls to bring down the entire house. Three men managed to make it to Luc and they attacked hand to hand. Luc took them out with a series of swift moves. He placed the charges and moved into the upstairs rooms. He had to make sure the boss wasn't locked in some vault or safe room.

Luc found Salvador Romero surrounded by five heavily armed men. After their initial thirty second blast of bullets, Luc killed them all with a few grenades. Once he had verified that the target was dead, he turned and left.

Luc was looking pretty shot up by then, but his armor was holding up well considering. He had one minute to leave, so he took off at a fast run taking fire all the way. He stopped twice to take out the men firing. No witnesses would be optimum, though not necessary. He reached the breached front gate as the villa exploded in a ball of fire that rose ninety feet into the night sky.

The car started and Luc was gone. He passed a couple of fire trucks and police cars with their sirens blaring going to the dead man's house. Luc activated his comm unit and told Gunther all was well. He told Luc the entire group watched from the infrared images beamed down from a satellite in real-time.

They signed off and Luc was back in the air in two hours. He was over the U.S. in another one and home in New York in five more.

The Mexican news media was playing the story just as they hoped, one drug lord against another.

After Luc was debriefed by Gunther and welcomed by everyone else, he spent the next hour alone swimming laps in a pool downstairs. The repetition of the laps helped him to think. In his head, he was trying to reconcile the emotional turmoil he was feeling and not having much success. Oh, well.

When he was done with his workout, Luc got out of the pool to find Ruth sitting on a chair waiting for him. He toweled off and sat next to her. She began, "I watched you kill those men. How do you resolve the moral issue of being both the judge and executioner? What gives you the right to decide who lives and dies?"

She was very angry with Luc. He tried not to return the anger since she was brand new to his secret. "Ruth, I have been doing this for years and years and years. I funded half the Manhattan Project in 1944. How many did I kill then? I value life above all else. Those lives taken last night will save thousands more lives. They crossed the line when they started killing cops. Good police officers with families and loved ones. I've been judge, jury and executioner for thousands of years. I am a vigilante. I happen to believe that separating those jobs out makes it a little too clean for my tastes. The world might be better off if we made the judge that sentences a man to death in Texas have to push the button to end his life." Unfortunately, Luc had stood up and raised his voice as he went on. He was almost shouting at Ruth. He realized this and was embarrassed.

She stood, came over to him, put her hands on his face tenderly and said, "I was just pretending to be angry. I needed to see how you really were. You carry a heavy burden, my friend. Are you okay?"

“No, not really. But at least I have you and the others to help.” He found himself crying quietly as he said those words. She hugged him as she would a small child for a minute until he stopped.

Later that day, Mary Jo and Megan wanted to talk about Luc’s loot. They started with the gold. There simply was too much of it to dump on the market without serious repercussions. Luc again suggested a fake gold strike in a poverty-ridden country that could lower the population’s poverty level. They liked it this time and jotted down some notes. They said they would begin the search. He was thinking Peru. And how about a billion or five to pay down our national debt? And how about a silver strike in the heartland of the U.S.? Again, they started thinking about a location. The jewelry was a whole other story.

Luc asked them to release the antiques to auction and give the money to the Gates Foundation. After all, most of the pieces were handcrafted by Luc himself. Then he told them he would first like the stash moved to one of his homes in California. His home in north San Diego was an estate by the Del Mar Racetrack that Bing Crosby built. It was a large sprawling home of seven thousand square feet that overlooked the sea and would be perfect to catalog the stash. He would like to see it all together before it went away. Luc wanted to give the team first dibs at any pieces and he wanted some pieces to decorate a couple of his residences, such as his castle in France. He directed Megan to go and visit the house and, if she likes it, to have it emptied and refilled.

The art was the biggest challenge, almost all being originals painted by Luc. Most were in the style of Monet and Pissarro. The real problem was that they were signed Thomas Chandon, Luc’s name at the time. Luc suggested they pass off the art as being from an unknown protégé of Monet’s and they liked it. He wondered if it was time for the Smithsonian Institution to perhaps get a new wing or new floor in one of their buildings.

Luc had not given them advice about his music. He played every musical instrument, but he liked saxophone the best and he was very good. When Adolph Sax invented the instrument in 1846, Luc paid close attention, got several of the new horns and loved them. It was not until blues and jazz came along that he really started to be a serious player. If you have over a hundred years to practice an instrument that you loved, you would probably be very good at it too. But again, he needed to avoid the limelight, so he only played by sitting in at a local jazz club infrequently. He composed, but had never had any of it played publically except for short pieces that would not cause a stir. However, Luc was now thinking about movie scores.

## Privateer

Luc loved the water. He loved to boat along the coastlines, stop, visit and then continue along. He owned four sailboats, four speedboats and thirteen yachts. The smallest yacht was a 2013 Princess V52 Sport Cruiser. The largest was a Motor Yacht Princess Penelope at one hundred ninety feet. Many of these boats were kept at Luc's homes.

Besides his working residences, the home in Del Mar and the Castle in France, Luc had villas in Buenos Aires, Cannes, Puerto Vallarta, and Istanbul. All were opulent and used by him and his friends all the time. Luc also had rustic lodges in Banff, Moscow, and China. They were huge log cabins and the one in Moscow had a great fifteen hundred square foot three-story tree house beside it. He had smaller places in about ten different locations, and a good number were in Africa. A particular one that he loved was located on a game preserve that overlooked the Okavango plain. It was magnificent and home to a great flood that turned four thousand square miles of arid plains into a wetland. The lush grass attracted elephants, deer, zebra, and buffalo. Hippos showed up when the water got deep enough.

His very favorite place was where he was taking Angela for a long weekend. He had a limo pick them up at Angela's place for their weekend jaunt. Angela and Luc arrived at the airport's private plane terminal area on Friday night; Angela was off work on Monday with no classes either giving them a three-day weekend. She believed Luc was on a courier mission for his company, carrying important scientific equipment to a lab. He had only told her that she was in for a very big surprise. They were going to Atlantis, his underwater complex in the Caribbean.

Luc had the complex built several decades ago. It was a rather simple structure only meant to be pressurized in sixty feet of seawater and simply sits on the shallow ocean floor in a pristine coral reef. There were two structures -- a lab and a twelve hundred square foot residence. Both structures were rectangular in shape. The lab contained an airlock and all access was by scuba gear. Angela had not been swimming with this gear ever, so it could be a challenge.

They boarded the jet and Angela was amazed by its luxury. The flight was about two and a half hours and no customs were involved since they were going to Nassau. Angela, excited with anticipation, talked the whole trip asking questions that Luc would not answer. It was fun to tease her and she was a very good sport about it.

They landed and Luc walked over to the edge of the runway and looked down at the harbor.

*June 20th 1702 Nassau*

There was no wind today and Luc's ship was quietly anchored in harbor. The crew was enjoying a few days of leave before they made another run out to sea to possibly intercept two French merchant ships headed for New



Orleans. Nassau was a perfect place to rest and relax. The authorities were easily bribed with cuts from any bounty and even the French navy avoided the port. Luc was known as Captain Peter Easton currently in command of Hawk's Thunder, a double-mast sturdy and fast little vessel with a crew of forty very bad men. He was a privateer, or pirate, commissioned by the British Crown. Luc's politics and allegiances changed with the wind, depending on if he liked the ruling monarchs at the time. This day, he worked for the King of England.

He turned away from the view and walked back into the town through the shacks that lined the sandy streets. Whores were everywhere looking for customers, and their managers tried everything to engage a passerby in conversation. Luc was recognized and left alone for the most part while waiting to have lunch with the governor to discuss his next venture.

The governor was an aristocrat that had no idea how to govern anything. He was, however, exceptionally good at getting his share on every transaction that happened near his island. The politician would be heading back to England in a few months and was squeezing everybody to the limits on his way home.

The real colony manager was a woman who owned half of the island property and had gotten rich by throwing her lot in with the real moneymakers -- the pirates. She kept things nice and neat for her cut and everyone was happy. No one crossed her or they'd find out why she was called the Blood Queen.

The governor set a fine table and had the best rum. His wife of some thirty years remained in England while he worked this post. There was a portrait of her in the main hall. She was so ugly that she must work hard at it. Luc could see why the governor accepted this job. The governor kept two mistresses in his house, both as lovely as his wife was ugly. Keeping this idiot happy was their only job and, with his looks and manners, their work was cut out for them. One can only fake affection for so long with someone as self-centered as this pig.

Luc and the governor had a pleasant meal of fresh-caught lobsters and eel. There was plenty of island fruit and other fare. The governor wanted to hear pirate tales of plundered treasure and blood, so Luc obliged. He embellished a lot to keep him entertained. Inevitably, the talk of business must occur while Luc amused everyone with a knife-throwing exhibition. Luc was very good with knives. With four thousand years of practice, he had it down. Luc knew the governor was getting his last cut from Luc so they agreed on the governor getting the prisoners that would be captured and would receive a nice reward for their safe return.

With business concluded, Luc took his leave and wandered back through the town stopping by each establishment to let his men know they would sail with the tide in three hours. He was really looking for his first mate, Mister Grogan. Luc found him in a hammock behind a brothel sleeping off a drunk with his steady girl. Luc roused him as usual by pouring a nearby pitcher of water on him. Grogan sputtered to life and flailed out of the hammock swinging. Luc was laughing so hard that Grogan started to as well. Luc helped him up and they went to the street to get moving.

They walked to the beach and Luc sent Grogan on his way with the first skiff from the ship. The others were approaching as they saw the crew gathering. The officer of the watch came ashore with one of the return

trips and told Luc the count of mates. They were short four and he sent men to find them. The missing mates were being detained by the garrison commander. On Luc's order, the garrison commander was slipped the price of four pardons and the men joined their shipmates.

Luc took the next shuttle boat and climbed on board his ship. The crew was already hard at work stowing supplies and rigging for departure. He checked with the three officers in charge of various details and all was going well for their two-week run. Luc inventoried the supplies and realized they were short a barrel of gunpowder and three casks of rum. He sent the chief mate to investigate and walked back to his cabin, encouraging the crew with descriptions of the booty that waited for them. Greed was a wonderful motivator.

Luc had his cabin configured for work and not rest. His center table was installed and charts were already laid out. Stevor, his black servant, had done his job well again. The servant entered and Luc said, "Thank you, Stevor. This is set up just as it should be. Excellent."

"Thank you, sir. I'm finally getting the hang of it." They both laughed, since he'd been doing this for Luc for two years.

Luc was studying the maps with Stevor and said, "My targets should be here right about now and I intend to cut them off and take them right here. If my information is good, they are both full of gold to buy American goods. And they have special passengers that the French Crown might pay well for their safe return. Your thoughts?"

"You have laid in waiting here before." Stevor pointed to the cove of an island. "Can we get there well before them?"

"If the winds favor the run around the big islands." Stevor's input was always welcome when the two were alone. It wouldn't sit well with the crew if they knew Luc's personal servant was helping him plan strategies. There was a knock on the door and Mister Grogan entered when Luc gave permission.

"Ready to sail in thirty minutes with the turning of the tide, sir."

"Has the missing barrel of gun powder been located along with the three casks of rum?"

"Yes, to the gun powder. It has already been moved to replace an empty one on the weapons bay. I only heard about two of the rums. Hmm... Who did you speak to about it?"

"The chief mate."

"He's hording again. He and I will have a private talk. I'll see to it now. The last of the men are on board and we are stowing the skiffs. I'll call for you when we are ready. Do you want to talk to the men before we shove off? Lift their spirits and all that?"

"Yes. Officially, they are partners and deserve to know what we are risking lives to get hold of."

He left and Luc returned to reviewing the maps. A few minutes later, Mister Grogan knocked again and said, "Crew's assembled and ready, sir." Luc followed him up to the main deck and addressed the men. He looked at them and they were not pretty.

“You are the most wretched lot I have ever laid eyes on. Mister Grogan, when time permits, clean the crap and vomit off of this whoring crowd and make them presentable as best you can.” He got groans from the men and laughter too. “We sail to take two French frigates headed for New Orleans. I aim to prevent them from getting there. They carry gold for the purchase of American goods and another prize, if my sources are correct. Wealthy passengers for whom the French Crown will pay a tidy ransom. If I cut the deal correctly, the Lady of the Island and that worthless governor will get the hostages, and we take the hard gold for our own. We let the ships sail on, if they don’t put up a fight. All we want is the treasure they carry. Not sure how they are traveling, together or separate, so we’ll have to stay sharp. Make ready to weigh anchor and make our fortunes!” The crew cheered and got to work.

The anchors were pulled in and the ship began to drift out of the harbor. With orders being shouted and obeyed, the sails were unfurled and caught a breeze immediately. In just a few moments, they were moving at a good swift clip.

Luc walked the ship giving encouraging pats on the backs to some of the men. To others, he gave orders, “Reposition those guns to make ready and have the powder distributed. Keep that box of fuses tied up against that wall. Look lively. Gunnery practice in ten minutes.” He continued his walk and saw his announcement rippling through the ship as the men moved to their firing stations.

Ten minutes later, he was back on the cannon deck with the cannon officer ready to time the firing.

Luc whisper to Grogan, “Pit the starboard crew against the port and give an extra ration of rum to the victor. But only if they beat the best time on record. If both sides beat it, surprise the loser with a ration as well. Let them know we honor fast hard work.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

“And watch the swells as you fire. Last outing, too many were wasted in low shots. Get the timing right.” Luc left and continued his inspection. Once on deck, he checked the sails and made adjustments. It was a forty-hour run to their cove unless they came upon the frigates first. The cannons fired again and again and again. The chief reported no records broken today because they took the time to practice accuracy. They timed the swells better and made adjustments much swifter. Luc told them both crews deserved an extra ration even without the speed record.

Night fell and they sailed on by the almost full moon and clear sky. They would round the bend and be in the shipping lanes in six hours if the wind held.

Luc had the first watch at dawn and left orders to wake him with any contacts. His quarters were reconfigured for personal rest and he hit his bunk and was out as his head hit the pillow. He was woken at 2 AM by Stevor who told him the officer of the deck had multiple contacts to report. Luc was up on deck quickly and asking where the sightings were. The deck officer pointed and described them. Three, one after another headed east out to sea. Very good -- the shipping lanes one hour early. Luc took the glass and verified the report. Then,

he turned round and scanned behind them.

“Wake the first officer and have him report to me now.” The deck officer acknowledged the order and ran to the door. Mister Grogan came to his side quickly and Luc told him what was going on, “We have a tail. My money says it’s Bergen and the Scorpion hoping to take our prize away from us.”

Grogan looked through his own glass and said, “Aye Captain, the way she runs, I would have to agree. She’s equal to our speed and staying just in sight.” Then things got very complicated.

The deck officer also had a glass to his eye and said, “Multiple contacts, sir. Two heading west. I would say, two miles apart and moving at seven or eight knots. Could be our prize.”

“Best speed and change course to north by northwest. All hands on deck, quietly.” Luc turned to Grogan and asked, “Can we catch them before first light?”

“With maybe an hour to spare.”

“Douse the lights and run up the grey sails. Let’s try to sneak up on them.”

“Changing the sails will cost us a quarter hour.”

“Do it in five minutes, dammit.”

Word passed among the men and the new sails were broken out of the hold and placed ready for the switch. When all was set, the order was given and the crew moved like lightning. The ship lost speed as the sails came down but quickly gained it back as the grays were raised. Top speed was regained in six minutes and their tail had not gained but a short distance. Now, it was a race around the big island to disappear from their blasted shadow. They were doing thirteen knots and using the wind to their best advantage. All was quiet except for the normal creaks and groans of the ship beneath them.

Mister Grogan approached Luc and said, “This is going to be close. If we take the second ship first, we give up our chances on the leader. Or we could split the crew and leave half on the second ship and then fly to take the leader as well.”

“All true except for one thing. The rear ship is a gunship protecting the leader. We take the leader from behind, get on and off in a flash with our prizes and run like hell. We’ll leave the gunship to surprise the Scorpion, if he’s stupid enough to take them on.”

“Aye, Captain. Your spies must be very good indeed.”

“Knowledge is power, Mister Grogan.”

They were both looking through their spyglasses now and Grogan said, “I count eight cannon on the rear guard and four on the leader. Damn, if you aren’t right again.”

“Make your route to intercept theirs, dead between them.”

“Ten minutes.”

They made the turn to follow the smaller lead ship and continued to fly along. The Scorpion hadn’t made the turn around the island yet. There were no changes on either ship and they could only conclude that they

were still undetected. As soon as Luc had those thoughts, their target lurched to port to turn to get help from the gunship. Luc's ship countered to block its path and she tried the same maneuver to starboard. Again, they reacted quickly and blocked that way. This captain was not great, but not bad either, considering his ship's capabilities. Then to Luc's surprise, she pulled up sails and came to a near stop. He thought her captain was stalling realizing that he could not escape. He hoped his protector could arrive before they were boarded. Luc was expecting something like this and pulled to the side as they waved a white flag of surrender.

Luc cautiously pulled up beside her and noticed that the crew and passengers were watching them like it was a parade. How odd. He hailed them in French to prepare to be boarded. Then he saw their smaller flag for the first time. This vessel was flying the colors of the French Crown. There was royalty aboard. They must believe that made them immune from attack. No one would dare! Except Luc. What made this fun was that Luc knew Louis XIV and his family.

Then, in the front at the rail, he saw Charles, the Duke of Berry and his wife, Marie. The duke was the grandson of the king and a spoiled brat. His wife was even worse, if that was possible. Both were idiots.

Luc called out, "Hello, Charles. Hello Marie."

They recognized him and yelled back, "Thibodeaux? Is that you, Henri? What in God's name are you doing here?"

Luc continued to board the ship and when he hit the deck, Charles approached to greet him with a hug. Luc stopped him with a held-up hand and said, "You can drop the dagger in your left hand, if you please." He did with a stupid smile. "I taught you that trick, remember?"

"Mister Grogan, relieve these fine people of their jewelry and escort Charles and Marie aboard our ship. Make sure their personal belongings come with us. They are our guests after all."

Luc took two men and went below. He began his search in rich-looking cabins and found a strongbox in the second room. He shot it open to find jewelry in nice velvet bags. All jewelry. The captain's cabin had the regular strongbox of wages and they left that alone. He moved into the main dining hall and discovered a whole area of recently nailed floorboards. Luc took his larger knife and pulled one up to discover leather pouches with gold doubloons in them. He figured one hundred coins per bag. He pulled out over forty bags.

"Get two more men and bring me some empty fuse boxes. Eight should do it. Step lively!"

They had the gold boxed up and ready to move when Mister Grogan yelled to Luc, "Gunship and the Scorpion in sight, sir."

They got on deck after struggling with the gold and Luc saw the two ships were much closer than he would have figured. Time to run. The gold was moved and, when they were all aboard, Luc turned the other ship free.

He yelled to his crew, "Let's get out of here!" They were under sail quickly.

Luc had the gold moved to his cabin and he asked Stevor to guard it. Luc had more important things to do.

"Make for our cove on the small island with all speed, Mister Grogan."

“Aye, sir. Looks like your dream of having them engage each other is not happening. They are both chasing us side by side.”

“An enemy of my enemy can be an ally.”

The race went on for a few minutes and they were gaining distance on both when cannon fire erupted from the gunship. The gunship had a chance at the Scorpion and were taking the opportunity. The Scorpion was veering off, but not soon enough. She took some direct hits right above the water line, but a couple were at the deck directed at the masts. A forward mast went down and she was limping away. Good for Luc, since the Scorpion was much faster than the gunship.

Luc judged the distances and saw that his ship was not going to get away before they could hide in the cove. They had to fight. “Mister Grogan, make ready to fight! Turn to port and take us on a broadside pass at our nemesis. Let’s make that targeting practice pay off.”

The men were ready and they approached the other ship. The gunship was set as well and as Luc’s ship passed, both let loose with all guns. The two ships were matched evenly, except Luc had two heavier cannons with more range. It paid off. Luc’s volley fell short, but their two large cannons hit the gun deck square on. And the battle was over just like that. The opposing ship had no stomach for any further fight and veered to the starboard to run away. Luc let them go and continued on to the cove.

“Mister Grogan, tell the crew well done. Then would you please join me in my cabin.” Luc made for it and congratulated every man he passed as he went. Luc knocked on the door and let Stevor know it was him. That was a smart move. Stevor had stacked crates and was behind them with two pistols at the ready guarding the gold as ordered. He took his commands seriously. Good man. Mister Grogan knocked and entered with permission in a few minutes. Luc had the gold stacked on the table and divided, waiting for Grogan.

Grogan looked at the bootie and laughed a hardy belly laugh. Luc said, “Per agreement, the jewelry and half the gold goes to the ship, me. The other half of the gold is shared between you and the crew. I intend to hide mine in the cove and save it for worse times. Please take half to the men and do with it as you see fit.”

“Aye. Agreed, Captain. This will be my last run, sir. With this share, I am retiring to New England.”

“Good for you. We have tested our luck enough. Time to move on for me as well.”

They reached the calm of the little bay and set anchors. Luc took Stevor and his gold in a skiff to the beach. Stevor had reloaded Luc’s gold and jewelry into one large crate. Stevor helped Luc with the box and they strapped it to a large flat bottom pallet so they could drag it. He added a pick and shovel to the pallet and started dragging. Luc followed a dry creek bed about half a mile and recognized what he was looking for. The creek bed had formed a short ravine in the stone and there was a small cave under an outcropping. Actually, it was more like a carved hole at ground level. Luc used to come to this place away from the other men to conduct his personal business. He deepened the hole another foot and shoved the chest into the opening. He placed one large boulder in front of the hole and secured it with smaller ones around the base. This would remain in place

for a very long time. Nothing would move the big rock.

Luc used the tools he brought to make a mark. There was a flat surface on a large rock that was split in half a long time ago directly across from his treasure. The rock was hard, but Luc managed to make a pictograph of a pyramid with a hammer and chisel. When finished, he dragged the pallet back to the beach and put it on the boat. They rowed back to the ship and made sail for Nassau one last time.

Once in Nassau, Luc wrapped up business quickly. His men were off and gone looking for another opportunity. Their pockets would be full for a long time. Luc sold his ship to Captain Bergen for a reasonable price. It seemed the Scorpion was damaged more than it first appeared and Bergen needed another vessel. Done. He turned Charles and Marie over to the governor to arrange for their return, which included a large reward.

Luc caught the next ship with Stevor by his side and arrived in Boston one week later. He purchased a three hundred acre farm in Vermont and set up Stevor to run it for him. Stevor received a decent percentage of Luc's ill-gotten gain when Luc left for Europe. Luc corresponded with Stevor for years through the local bank president. Stevor could neither read nor write. Luc's farm stayed in Stevor's family care for four generations. When they had enough, Luc sold it.

*Today Nassau*

# Atlantis

The beach had changed to the will of progress in three hundred years, but the feel was the same. It was still tranquil when it wanted to be, but that could change anytime. Luc returned to the jeeps that had greeted them. He thanked Angela for the moment alone. She had no idea of the memories this place had for him. The party included two helpful drivers who assisted with their stuff. Five minutes later they were onboard a thirty-foot boat for a fifteen minute ride to the complex. It was almost dark when they got to the coordinates. Angela was as excited as he had ever seen her and really enjoying the mystery. She got a crash course in working with the suit and equipment on the short ride out. Luc thought it was really cool that she wouldn't be able to see the underwater spectacle until sunrise. That would make the surprise stretch out even longer. They were all suited up when they arrived and ready to drop into the water. The two helpers also donned suits and worked the lines that took the luggage down. They stayed with their guests and made sure they were safe. Luc and Angela made it into the airlock quickly and were met by the live-in staff of two technicians and two scientists. These folks rotated hours on the clock with two more sets of staff, conducting all kinds of research and taking on visiting guests from universities around the world often. The work done here was most important. Luc had them focus on medicines and protections of the reefs. The project kicked off thirty years ago. It was John's pet project and he traveled here often.

The staff helped them remove their suits and gave Angela a long tour of the lab facility while Luc took the tube to the apartment forty feet away. He unpacked and got dinner ready. Dinner was caught that afternoon by the staff and prepared by one who fancied himself a gourmet chef. Luc even paid for culinary school in France for him a couple of years back. It was one of the best investments he ever made.

When dinner was almost ready, Luc rescued Angela from the tour, which was proceeding slowly because Phillippe, the lead scientist, was pontificating. When they were finally alone, she hugged Luc, said this was the most exciting thing she had ever done and couldn't wait until morning. They had a nice dinner and enjoyed each other's company again before drifting off to sleep. Luc got up and headed for the comm room to speak to whomever was staffing the Operations Center back at the Empire State Building.

Harry was the only one up but he roused Gunther, and Luc got a briefing from both of them. One item needed Luc's attention. He made some very big decisions, moving more chess pieces around the board.

There was a war going on in a small African country between warlords that Luc had had just about enough of. One of them was making a move on the established government too. What angered Luc most was that they were pulling their usual crap of conscripting young boys into the freedom fighter ranks and murdering villagers. John and Gunther were in concurrence on what action to take, but Luc opted to talk to Secretary Freeborn before making the move they recommended. Luc woke Duncan up on his plane between China and Australia.



Through secure live chat Luc laid out the situation and got the Secretary's off-the-record approval. Luc kept the conversation short and advised Duncan to watch his briefings for the next thirty-six hours.

Luc gave the go-ahead to Harry and Gunther, and they set the wheels in motion. A team of fifty very well trained and well-armed soldiers totally loyal to the field colonel in command were in place. The chain of loyalty continued with the colonel being loyal to Gunther and of course Gunther to Luc. The soldiers were all retired Special Forces or were bought from elite military outfits from around the globe. They had been told that they were working for a private individual and given all the facts about every action beforehand. They had a free choice to join in or hold off with every operation. So far, only a handful had refused to participate in any fight with no hard feelings and all done with respect. They had standing orders from Luc on how to engage: Limit collateral damage, shoot to kill only when ordered or they were perceiving a potential deadly threat, leave civilians to the cleanup crews, and protect their identities and the nature of their secret existence. They had air support, all the latest and greatest hardware, had yet to be defeated or even lost a single man or woman -- there were seven badass women among the fifty troops. Many had done time with the CIA or other spy outfits and assisted with those skills. They were supported by air surveillance via drones, satellites, and a traveling convoy of semi-trucks and trailers. The total number of support teams varied depending on the operation, but it was usually more than a hundred. Luc loved to watch these operations in real time, but this was minor and he was busy. He learned the next day that they cleaned out the bad guy, returned the children soldiers as best they could, took the rest with them for placement around the world as orphans and left without news cameras in sight. No footprints, no bodies for evidence, no sign of who did it, no nothing. Luc always followed up with specific aid to the villages and a stern warning to the current corrupt government that they were next if they did not clean up their act. He left the next actions up to the UN and Secretary Freeborn.

Angela stirred at first light and Luc made her a light breakfast as she got ready for the day. They sat in the main room by a large window and watched the sunrise. She chatted constantly about the beauty of it all and how great it was. They watched for an hour and Luc told her about the many fish that swam by. He was careful not to reveal his full expertise. Then they decided what to do with the day. It would be a morning of scuba diving along the reef to gather lunch. Luc ordered up an escort for them and they headed for the airlock. Their resident chef took them out so he could also check the lobster traps put out yesterday. They would use the new Hollis H-320 Scooters, underwater diver propulsion vehicles, to get there and back.

The trio stayed pretty close to the station until Angela felt comfortable. Then, they took off with their 320s and traveled along a coral ridgeline for about a quarter mile until they came upon a bunch of trap buoys. They were checked and all had lobsters in them. They would not be as sweet and big as Maine Lobsters, but when prepared correctly, they were heavenly. The lobsters were gathered up and the traps reset. The trio each took a bag of lobsters, hooked them to their scooters and headed back. When they arrived, Luc checked their air and saw plenty was left for Angela and him to take a swim right around the facility. Angela inspected everything

and especially enjoyed playing with the coral flowers that pull in their tentacles when touched. She collected some beautiful discarded shells for souvenirs. Finally, their tanks were running low and Angela was getting cold, so they headed inside.

Angela was so excited that she couldn't stop talking about everything she saw. Luc left her to wash her shells while he visited with the crew about their work for a few minutes with John on the line. Mostly Luc was anxious to see how the chef was going to prepare the lobsters. He described a wonderful bisque with a puffed pastry topping. Yummy. It would be ready in half an hour. Luc returned to Angela and suggested they go out again, but use this swim to take photographs. He had four underwater cameras to choose from and they spent lunch deciding which to use. They read up on the cameras and picked one each. Angela got a still and Luc would carry a large unit with double video cameras used to shoot IMAX films. However, this one also had a live remote feed connected back home that his guys would be watching. Sully would be using this opportunity to test out his newest toy, a live holographic generator that used the camera feed to create the reproduced scenes.

Angela and Luc wore different suits for this trip allowing them to talk while they were swimming. They had complete helmets rather than just facemasks and breathers. Angela took off and was snapping away while Luc got his gear ready. The big twin cameras were perfectly balanced with automatic buoyancy bags on the four bottom corners. He started shooting and he heard the guys in the Operations Center all saying different words that meant the same thing, wow, amazing, incredible! Luc fine-tuned the camera per the instructions given to him and they told him that it was about as perfect as it can get. The observers were standing inside the projection watching it as if they were in the water with Luc. They couldn't wait to compare the color in the digital images with the holographic projection. All in all, a wonderful time was had by all.

Angela and Luc spent the night looking over her shell collection and pictures. Many were postcard quality. She was a natural with a camera. It helped to have a four thousand dollar camera too. After dinner, they were invited to join the rest of the lab team for drinks. The staff were all interesting people, loved to talk about their work and studied the pictures the couple had taken with great interest. Of course, they got copies of everything. They also looked through Angela's shell collection and advised her to return two of them for rehabilitation by another critter. She thought that was great. The conversation began to lag and they said goodnight. Luc invited anyone interested in joining him for tether parasailing along the beach at two hundred feet in the air. Angela was in, but the others were busy finishing work before they traded off with the next crew rotation.

They went to bed. Once Angela was asleep, Luc got out of bed to go online. Their activity in Africa was making the news, but the mystery of who was responsible was a big question. The UN, NATO, the U.S. and Russia all denied any knowledge of the action. The most accepted theory was that one of the larger local countries was responsible. They all too denied it, of course, as well they should.

Markets were stable and another hoard of Nazi treasure was found in Germany in an antechamber off a

bunker outside of Berlin, where Luc had it hidden until now. It contained religious artifacts from around France and should make headlines that would cause the Africa story to fade away. The UN was making a lot of noise about an investigation, but they wouldn't really do anything without backing from the U.S. Secretary Freeborn was playing down the whole thing and discouraging any inquiries.

Ruth and Megan wanted some private time with Luc, wanting to tell him what headway they made with his problem. Ruth took the lead and recapped his dream, the Heavenly Host incident and then the First Language men. She got it right and Luc added a couple of details that might help. They were at a loss for conclusions yet, but wanted to talk about the possible meanings of the Heavenly Host's message, God is Blessing. Luc broke down the translation for them and realized that he may be misinterpreting the tense of the verb. The words may mean that God is blessing something or things presently, or that it might mean that He is about to bless something, or that He has blessed something in the past.

With this new information, Ruth spoke,

“So, let's move on. How do you feel about all this?”

Luc told her, “It scares the crap out of me. I have never seen anything that I could not explain, ever. I know every magic trick out there. But, I did see the sun stop in the sky one evening and stay there for hours. It finally started moving again. So far, that was it until this stuff started occurring. I feel like something big is about to happen and I am not ready for it.”

Ruth then sent him a text that he glanced at while they were talking asking him to stay on privately after they were done. They wrapped up some treasure details that Luc had just thought of while they were talking, then ended the feed. He waited a few seconds and Ruth came back on line.

She wanted to schedule frequent regular visits with Luc -- twice daily at the least and more like four times a day. And she wanted to put monitors on him when he was sleeping to capture changes when he had the dream. He told her that all this could start on Tuesday when he returned. Ruth was reluctant and Luc sensed her urgency, so he gave in and told her that they could talk at the same time the next night. Then they talked about her family moving into the suite in the Empire State Building. Luc was surprised when she said that the decorating was on hold while she pondered Luc's offer to have the pick of his antiques. She was trying to convince her husband that it wouldn't be like living in a museum. Luc let her know that it was exactly like living in a museum and he suggested that she take a few pieces, but furnish the suite with comfortable new stuff. Ruth had three of his paintings in mind, and he appreciated that and would love for her to enjoy them.

Ruth also gave him a report on the health of his friends, both physically and mentally. She thought Mary Jo was about to crack and that Luc should be watchful of her. All the others were in their elements and having a great life, except Sully. He needed to be shown how to relax. Luc immediately sent an email for Sully to take a few days off at his lodge in Africa. Luc told him not to take any electronic toys except his laptop to be used only when they called Sully. Luc also suggested that he take a friend along as well. Sully immediately replied that he

was too busy. Luc phoned Sully and told him he better be recruiting a backup guy already so that he could have a life. Sully admitted to being slow about that, and a message went to Gunther to get Sully his own lab with a team of handpicked people so Sully could become a dreamer instead of a doer. Gunther responded that it was already in the works and would order Sully to leave immediately. Ruth was satisfied and they ended the call.

The next day was a blast. Angela loved parasailing. They took great movies and stills of them flying behind the boat and returned to Atlantis in time for lunch. The meal was light because Angela had agreed to go out for a working swim with the techies to harvest some plants in the experimental underwater garden. Luc stayed behind to let her enjoy herself without having to worry about him. Luc went online and looked at the news and reports on his special projects around the world. He texted back and forth with the Secretary of State on some of his projects and Duncan was very pleased. He even expressed his wish that he could play outside the rules like Luc did. Luc thought, be careful what you wish for.

When Luc was finished, he felt lazy and took a break in a recliner to watch the fish swim by. He dozed off and immediately had the dream, but this time the dream was different. The man drew his sword as always, but did not impale him with it. Instead, he held it in salute, and then the dream was over. Luc woke up confused and startled. He sent Ruth and Megan the new ending to his dream in a text. Megan responded that she felt like the change was good. Ruth copied her back, agreed and said, “The change is most positive.”

Luc decided to go for a swim on his own to clear his head and enjoy the quiet solitude. The intense beauty gave him an idea. He turned around and headed back inside the lab. He found the team and ran his idea by them. Claiming that he was relaying ideas from back home, Luc asked, “What if you had more of these labs? Where would you put them and what would you do with them?” This launched them into dreaming about a string of them along the reefs. He told them to decide on places for ten more and they would talk after dinner. They immediately grabbed world maps and went to work. These structures were not very expensive since they were shallow water units. Luc was excited to get them excited. He couldn’t wait to hear what they proposed.

Angela had returned and told Luc all about her afternoon. Luc told her about the idea for more labs and she was enthusiastic. Angela made dinner from her harvest and the fresh fish that appeared in their refrigerator. It was marvelous. They finished just as the four residents showed up for after-dinner drinks and their meeting. The team suggested they all go back to their lab to use the maps on the walls. They were like excited little kids. It was great.

They laid out their plan: They suggested two more be built near this current station, spaced two miles apart. That would let them expand their work here with meds and reef health. They wanted the rest laid out on the Great Barrier Reef over a stretch of one thousand miles so they could monitor the reef like never before. The only problem was the depth in one stretch. The units would have to be in about two hundred feet of water making the construction more costly, but still doable. Luc noticed that the two deep-water units were only about two hundred yards from sixty foot depths. He suggested they put two of the shallow units there and build two

deep-water ones as well. Then connect them with a tunnel to the shallow two. They loved the idea. He scheduled a video conference with John and Megan for the next morning to kick off this new project. Then Angela and Luc retired to their unit. Again, after she was asleep, he checked in with Ruth as promised for a short and very pleasant visit.

The next morning Angela dove into working with the in-house team and helped prepare for the presentation to John and Megan. By the time the meeting started, Angela felt totally integrated into the group and even had a couple of points to make. She was great and Luc was beaming with pride. The presentation was well received since John and Megan both knew whose idea it was. They decided immediately to expand the team there with four more scientists and technicians. The team got really excited when they found out that there were two exact duplicates of Atlantis in storage in Miami where Luc had them built. At the time, three complete sets cost less than double that of one, so he had three built. There was a rule of thumb in the aerospace business that if you wanted one good working prototype you requested five: A couple would be out of spec, one would get lost, and one would go home in someone's lunch box (that was a joke). They put the wheels in motion to have the two units moved into place, which would take about two weeks. The meeting ended with a celebration, but it was time for Angela and Luc to leave. They said goodbye to the station staff and repeated the trip backwards including the private time on the jet. Angela kept thanking Luc for the wonderful time she had. She said she wished she could do good work like that every day and hoped to when school was finished. Luc again thought, be careful what you wish for.

## Del Mar

After they had settled back into their routines for a few days, Sully returned from the veldt with pictures. He took plenty of stills, but he also used the holographic camera mounted to the top of a Range Rover. It was beautiful. One could walk around the three-dimensional landscape, hear the animals and really feel there. The best part was there were no flies. It was clear that Sully was finally morphing into a happy person. The whole new life thing was sinking in.

Megan told Luc the Del Mar estate would be ready on Saturday if they would like to go. So, when Saturday came around, off they went in their security vans and separate jets with armed protectors all the way. Luc took his personal aircraft, a brand new jet. When he saw the T-38 in Oklahoma, he had to own his own fighter jet. He had a copy of the ATF-23 (Advanced Tactical Fighter) built. The was made by Northrop to go head to head with the ATF-22 in a fly-off competition for a huge contract. Northrop lost the contract, and the two F-23s were mothballed and retired. The 22 was turned into the Raptor and built in many configurations. Luc liked the design of the 23 and had one custom-built by a private company in the Mojave Desert. Crews worked day and night for twelve weeks, and the jet was all his now. The test pilot gave his okay to turn the jet over to Luc who worked with him during the tests. Luc had taken it up three times for short runs, and it was ready for a cross-country jaunt. There had been several advances since the original was produced. He blew off the stealth and weapons requirements. The plane was painted a cool red, white and blue and was lighter with a much more efficient pair of engine plants.

Luc needed a fairly long runway to take off and land, so he used his airport in New York and a private airstrip twenty miles away in the hills outside of Del Mar proper. The trip was fast and the bird handled like a dream. He went supersonic when he got out over the Midwest plains and beat his friends to Del Mar by an hour. Even with using after burners, the jet still had fuel left when Luc landed.

Luc had a 2013 Ducati Diavel Strata motorcycle in a storage facility at the Del Mar airport. He fired it up with tender loving care, closed up the hanger and headed for the estate. The ride was beautiful. There was an old joke about the easiest job on the planet being a weatherman in San Diego. Why? Because the weather was always perfect. Some of the large farm estates were now lost to gated communities of very nice homes. Luc liked his estate.

In his opinion, the house had never looked so good as it did staged with his works. He remembered every piece, the day he worked on the piece, what the weather was like, his employees. Everything. The company still existed today, building exclusive custom orders and charging appropriately. His employees were artists to be sure. This was one thing for which Luc could be proud. He often felt ashamed for some horrible things he did in the past. Giving away his furniture and sharing the rest of his treasure with the world sure felt good. He walked

to the patio in the back by the pool. He took a good look around as he enjoyed a glass of juice.

*Summer 1948 Del Mar, California*

Luc dressed for the evening in a white dinner jacket and selected a car from his garage that an industrialist like old Wally Pittman would like. It was a Mercedes 300 SL Alloy. Luc loved the gull-wing doors. The ride was short, but he had appearances to keep up. Luc had no date for the night, but he might meet someone at the party. Bing Crosby always threw a good party.

Bing had just finished the Road to Rio movie and was relaxing here for a while. Luc was right on time and was welcomed at the front door by Bing's wife, Dixie. She was gorgeous and obviously ready to be the perfect host.

"Why does Bing deserve the most beautiful girl in the land?" She was easily flattered, especially by a 65-year-old wealthy guy.

Dixie accepted Luc's chaste kiss on her cheek and said, "Wally, you are so full of it. Come on, the other guests are out on the patio by the pool. But save some time for us to catch up. It's been ages since you stopped by." She led Luc to the patio and Bing came up and shook hands warmly.

Luc turned back to Dixie and said, "I would put aside everything to spend some time with you, my dear. Sign me up for the first dance after dinner." She smiled and kissed Luc on the cheek.

Bing piped in with his wonderful voice and said, "Wally! How are you old man?"

"Fit as a fiddle. You look like hell. Are the guys over at Paramount still bleeding you for 'Road' pictures?"

"Why yes they are, as a matter of fact. And, I just signed a contract for another. I told them to make it somewhere in the South Pacific. At least I'll get a nice trip out of it. Do you like Bali?"

"Never been there. But maybe I'll buy it."

They both got a laugh out of that. Dorothy Lamour snuck up behind Luc, covered his eyes and said, "Guess who?"

Luc played along and said, "Bob Hope? No? How about Trigger?" Luc got a punch in his back for that one. He turned to receive a big hug. She was a very sweet woman. "Dorothy, you look stunning! Why do you look so good and this fellow looks like he's been mugged in Central Park?"

"Wally, leave poor Bing alone." She winked over her shoulder at Bing, took Wally's arm and walked him away, "Bing is going through a rough time. Dixie is ill."

"Oh my stars. And I was giving him a hard time. What a fool I am. I must apologize."

"Oh, no. Don't. He would be embarrassed by it. Let's just have a good time tonight and be merry and gay!" She threw her head back in jest. "Wally, if you tickle the ivories, I will sing a song for you." She knew Luc was good on the piano and that he would enjoy playing for her.

“Name that tune, my love.”

“Can you handle ‘Personality’?”

Luc snapped his fingers and they walked back to Bing. She asked if she could sing a song with Luc in the large living room.

Bing said, “That would be wonderful. Everyone, everyone! Wally is going to help Dorothy belt out a tune in the house, if you care to listen.”

On the way inside, Dorothy asked Luc, “A little bird told me that you can really make a saxophone sing. Is that true?”

“It’s my instrument of choice these days.”

“Well, I have a surprise. I made sure there’s one here for the party! Let’s have Phil play the piano and you play the sax. Okay?”

“How can I refuse Old Blue Eyes’ leading lady?”

They put their combo together, picked a key, tuned up and off they went. Luc couldn’t remember having such a good time. He begged off after three tunes and Dorothy sang a couple more. Besides, there was a beautiful woman staring at Luc since he started to play.

Luc took a seat across from her and struck up a conversation. After some small talk, she said, “I’ve been told that you are the richest man in the world. Is that true?” She was putting on a slight southern drawl and it was very sexy.

“Why, yes. I believe it is. This week anyway.” She laughed at his stupid joke and one thing led to another. She and Luc left the party together as it was winding down.

### *Today Del Mar, California*

Luc’s friends arrived and gathered in the kitchen. They asked him for a guided tour of the house and the items now within. Considering all the space and furnishings, a tour would take the whole day. They went room to room learning about every item in detail, only taking a break for a fabulous late lunch of Californian-Mexican cuisine.

During lunch, Megan told the group about the problem she had in laying out the rooms. Luc had a lot of cabinets, armoires and chairs. Luc explained the manufacturing process and that he farmed out the upholstering to a very good friend. Luc knew that the material would not hold up over time anyway. Besides, the chairs were all uncomfortable. Nobody had Barco-loungers at the time. And rocking chairs were not really in fashion. Luc never even made any, though he thought that he should give it a go now. What this all meant was that there were many rooms that held nothing but short cabinets and another with tall chests of drawers. Armoires were his favorites. They were a necessary dressing room item since no one made closets in houses during those years.



Luc made several versions of armoires that broke down for traveling. The backs, sides, top and bottom connected together with dowel pins. They were unique for the period. Many different versions were made at the end of the 1800s and early 1900s, often used aboard ships and trains. Trips were typically long because of the traveling time and many people took full wardrobes with them. Portable closets were needed for unloading trunks on extended getaways.

After lunch, the group picked up where the tour had left off. They asked questions about many of the items and Luc folded the answers into his ramblings. Once he figured out what they wanted to hear about, his descriptions changed to include something personal about each piece. As they strolled along, Megan surprised Luc by pulling out a Post-it note and putting it on a piece. It had her name on it and she commented, "This is my favorite." It was a huge cabinet that Luc built in two pieces, designed to be stacked or used separately. The cabinet was made of birds-eye and figured maple and had carved leaves and flowers everywhere possible. There was no gold or marble, and it was one of his favorites as well. Luc was glad she would enjoy it. The others followed her lead as she passed out stickies for them as well. The tour stalled while the group went back through the rooms already covered and tagged the pieces they liked. After they regrouped, Megan told Luc the next pass would be for the castle in France and that she was waiting for a complete catalog before she identified the rest. The tagged pieces would go to the group members' residences and the rest would go to museums around the world. A team from the Smithsonian Institution was getting first pick and then helping Megan place the rest. Luc told her that he would like the Met in New York to have the same option as the Smithsonian. He wanted museums in the U.S. to be preferred in placement. The rest would be auctioned and the proceeds given per his previous directions. There were over three hundred and fifty individual pieces. Many were sets such as dining room tables and chairs. There was plenty to go around.

The announcement of the existence of these items had made quite a splash in the antique business. As they walked and enjoyed each piece, Luc continued to tell stories of the times tied to the items. Prince du Conde of France loved his work and had Luc make a lot for him. Those things were still in some places in Europe and a few had made it as far as China. He'd seen many on his travels and was delighted when he would bump into them in homes or museums. It was always satisfying to see the pieces still looking good. The work in Del Mar looked like new since they had been in storage for years. Megan had valued the whole lot at around thirty million dollars. When they finished, Mary Jo surprised Luc by not wanting anything at all. And so did Sully by selecting twelve really gaudy pieces. Sully liked inlaid gold and black marble.

Luc found himself thinking about the home and family he'd had at the time. He told the group their names and what they were like. He had one lazy son, but he had three others who took over the business. It became a family operation for over one hundred and fifty years. Megan waited until Luc was finished and asked a good question.

"Would you like us to find your descendants?"

Luc had considered that before and decided not to bother. This time, Luc paused for a second and answered, “Okay, but they can’t know about it. I would enjoy seeing the success stories, but not the losers. So please keep that part from me.”

## God in a Box?

Luc had decided to make a trip to Israel. He didn't bother with a fake ID and used his Luc St. Clair identity. He was going to open a very special treasure cave. It contained the temple treasures from Solomon's Temple. Luc took these things when he was a Satrap, governor for Nebuchadnezzar. The king conquered Israel and plundered the temple. Luc protected the treasure for a hundred years as different people in the various kings' courts. Then he outright took the treasure when the opportunity came up during a bloody coup. He hid the treasure in safe places until he could build a permanent vault. The vault he prepared was in the same valley where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, placed there coincidentally long after Luc hid his treasure.

When he arrived in Israel, Luc had a team waiting that included a representative from the Israeli government named Michael Rosen. Michael was officially the Operations Officer for Israel's Minister of Antiquities, and he would end up with the treasure.

For years there had been a group of devout Jewish and Christian people who were intent on rebuilding the temple and they were close to beginning the work. The temple construction had long been stalled because the Dome of the Rock Mosque was on the site of the old temple. With a little background help from Luc, they had recently learned the temple had existed on ground well clear of the mosque. No one but Luc remembered that half of the temple hill was excavated away after Solomon's Temple was torn down. The property had been purchased by Luc through the years, and he had given all of it to these believers.

Luc was not in the Middle East when the mount was partially destroyed; he was in the Far East, what is now Beijing. However, he remembered before and after that time.

The believers had made plans in secret for the project. Luc felt the time was right to reveal the treasure that would allow the work to begin. Luc was curious to see how the items handled the solitude of twenty five hundred years.

Luc's group had to wait twelve hours until daylight to start their short trip. Luc had dinner with Michael Rosen and two of the team leaders. They had a very unusual conversation. Everyone believed Luc was working for a New York based group of wealthy Jews. He got the feeling that Michael was a very wise young man well beyond his thirtyish years. Michael was an historian with double doctorates. He told stories about the fall of a country as if he were there and even talked about a great flood in India in 1343. Luc was there and knew that account to be very accurate.

Of course, Luc could not give any hint to knowing these things perhaps better than Michael ever could. Michael wasn't boring anyone at the table. He was weaving tales about particular people, specific significant events, some intrigue and some about far away times and faraway places. He made each of them feel like he was simply chatting with them. Luc read a file on him on the plane ride that did not begin to touch on this man's

charismatic personality. The stories eventually ended just as a one-act play usually does, with a climax. His last tale was short and quiet about an Israeli soldier's redemption from a life of cruelty and selfishness to a life of serving God.

The evening ended and they agreed on a time and place to meet the next morning. They were all staying at hotels around different corners and they walked, except Michael, who had his own car.

Pleasantries were exchanged and they left to go their separate ways. It was around eleven PM local time and the bar at Luc's hotel was full. Seated right outside the bar in the hotel Luc thought he recognized one of the men who had been conversing with the others in the First Language in New York. Now this man was with a beautiful woman. He ignored Luc and remained fixated on his conversation with the woman. Luc thought perhaps he was wrong and this was just some other guy.

Luc stayed online all night at his computer and eventually wanted to talk to Ruth. She was available after only few minutes.

Luc told her about the First Language man in the lobby and Michael. For the first time she told him, she has had no success in putting together a logical explanation. Then she said,

“Luc, you must be thinking what I am about to say, so I will just say it; if all logical explanations are incorrect, these events might be spiritual in nature. As simple as this sounds, perhaps God is talking to you.”

Luc pondered about this for a moment and said, “I have thought that from the first dream three months ago but have been afraid to say it out loud.” He paused for a second to take a sip of coffee and then went on, “If He is, I want to understand it. How are the linguists doing?”

She answered, “They are done and I have a new translation app for your phone.” She told Luc how to load it, and they said goodbye.

Luc had never been big into religion. He had seen what men do in its name and it turned him off to it. He had read every holy book and been around every known form of higher power worship that ever existed. They all had their strengths and weaknesses. There was one thing that had always intrigued him. Out of all the religious books and teachings, there was only one that was written over a long stretch of time and could therefore contain prophecy, the Christian Holy Bible. None of the other holy books contained verifiable prophecy. The Bible told a story about doom and gloom events and then in a few hundred years it would happen. Luc knew. He watched Daniel and his mates make predictions before kings that came true. That was powerful evidence of something beyond our realm of thought and reality. This has been on his mind a lot lately.

The caravan of jeeps arrived right on time at Luc's hotel and they all drove into the mountains. Luc gave the driver GPS coordinates and after thirty-five minutes they were at the entrance to the canyon. The group would walk from this point on. They grabbed backpacks and took off. Fifteen minutes later they were standing in a narrow ravine. He asked everyone to stop. He consulted a map and notes, but in reality he was looking for a

rock face of a large broken-in-half boulder. It was the shape of a figure eight, like the infinity symbol. He found it quickly. It had not changed in the slightest. He had been watching this place and protecting its secret for a very long time.

*10th day of Tishri, 322 BC Jewish Holy Land*

It was hot, dry and quiet in the canyon. Luc had scouted it out for a very long time before he built a hidden vault in the eastern sidewall. The construction process had taken seventy years using labor that he brought to the site by sealed wagon every ten or fifteen years. They would uncover the entrance, dig out more of the inside chambers and seal it up again until he could return.

The vault was now complete and Luc was carrying the previously stored treasure. He had thirty soldiers with him guarding the canyon entrance on all sides. There was a monastery of sorts on the plateau not far from the canyon, but it was empty right now. Eight men would unload the wagons, who arrived locked in a blacked out wagon and blindfolded.

The treasure was sealed in stone boxes Luc had made to protect it. There was one large box that took four men to move.

The wagons were driven by soldiers that Luc handpicked as the most loyal men he had. They did not know the territory since they were Persian. At one time, Luc had killed anyone who learned of the treasure to keep it secret. He had since stopped that practice and started using the sealed wagons with blindfolded men -- not because he cared about human life at the time, but because it was simply less wasteful. Then, society thought of human slaves as possessions to be bought, sold, and discarded without regard for their humanity. It was the worst idea humankind ever developed. Luc's awareness did not change until 1349 when he saw countless lives lost as the Black Plague decimated London.

Luc brought the wagons to a stop and the soldiers unlocked the workers. Luc directed the men to dig in a specific place in the side of the canyon, and they quickly uncovered a large stone door. Luc approached the door, turned several stone-carved inset keys and pushed the door inward to open it. Luc entered and checked to see that all was just as when he last visited twelve years earlier. Luc lit oil lamps and returned to the door. He had the wagons rearranged and then had the men open the first wagon. Ten black marble boxes were within, each containing temple serving ware. Luc directed each man to pick up a box and follow him.

There were several antechambers designed to hold the boxes in carved shelves. As the first man entered, Luc looked at the box he was carrying and read the number hidden in the ornate carvings. He directed them each to a place in the shelves with the corresponding number. Each box was libaried the same way until only the big chest remained. The wagon carrying it was pulled up to the entrance. Luc guided four of the men to take up positions and slide in carrying poles. They lifted at the same time on command and moved the box into the

rear chamber of the vault. The entire vault was designed around the sizes and shapes of the boxes. Luc had the men place the heavy box into the center of the chamber. He gave them instructions to go eat and drink before the ride back. When Luc was alone with the chest, he slid the lid back to peek at the item inside. It was as he remembered it. In the quiet of the tomb, reverence was demanded in the presence of the contents. Luc was still for a few minutes waiting for something. He grew more anxious the longer he waited until he couldn't take it anymore. He quietly closed the lid and left the chamber. Luc sealed the chamber and had the men cover it up again. They loaded up and left the place as quietly as they came.

### *Today Jewish Holy Land*

Luc set out a set of posts, each about three feet tall, pretending he was taking orders from Headquarters through the cell phone bud in his ear. The men were looking at him weird, but he continued with the setup. Luc explained they were simply video cameras. Once he had positioned the five posts ten feet apart in a semi-circle around the canyon wall, Luc walked around twisting the tops of the posts. A camera popped out of each post and a laser ribbon appeared connecting the posts. These were much, much more than video cameras. They were a new idea Sully had devised. The cameras interlocked with each other to create a hologram just like the camera Luc used in Atlantis. However, because these cameras were strung in a series, a massive projection could be created in real time. The feed was going to a special studio down the block from their headquarters where an army of techs watched as Luc added each post to the network. When he was done with the initial five posts, Luc spray-painted a large door in the canyon wall dirt and told the men to start digging.

The opening took shape quickly and a stone arch was uncovered. It had a large flat door in it with inscriptions and an odd symbol in the middle. When the opening was completely free of debris, Luc approached the symbol and started to move pieces by sliding them. It was like a puzzle box and clicks were heard as each movement fell into place. At the last click, the door glided open inward.

Before they entered, Luc instructed everyone on how to work the poles and that he wanted a continuous line of them into the vault. Michael was staying behind him and setting poles, but Luc sensed no thrill in him like the others had at the wonder they were witnessing.

They reached an antechamber and Luc motioned to set poles as they entered the fifteen by fifteen square foot room. Shelves were carved into the walls that contained stone boxes that fit perfectly into the shelf openings. Luc directed two of the men to bring one box down onto a center stone table. Under the table was another box that he picked up and set on the table next to the one from the wall shelves. This box contained copper scrolls listing the room contents. Luc read it and held it up to the cameras on a post. He was really talking to the team in the studio now and showing them the scroll. They interpreted it quickly because he had schooled them on the old Aramaic writing on both the scroll and the stone boxes. The scroll contained a

description of the contents of each box and was numbered to match the box and the shelf opening. The writing told Luc what the box on the table contained. They opened the box and found sixteen solid gold plates all packed as nice as could be. Luc turned to Michael, suggested that now would be the right time to order up some armed soldiers and transports. And he might want to get his bosses and his own team out there.

While Michael stepped out, Luc opened two more boxes and found gold and silver utensils, many with fabulous jewels. When Michael returned the group stepped into the next room. It held more of the same. Same scroll box, same number of shelves. Luc waited to enter the fourth and last chamber until the moment was right. He let Michael enter first. Instead of a center table, there was a large stone box. They slid the top off the box and peered down at the Ark of the Covenant. It had a little dust on it, but it still shone like the sun. Michael immediately got out his phone and made a call. They were all stunned at the magnitude of the find. Luc wanted this event recorded in as much detail as possible and sent the workers to the vehicles for more posts. The posts were working perfectly and relayed everything in 3D holographic recordings directly back to New York.

While the workers went outside to tell the others of the find, Michael and Luc were alone. Michael was unusually silent but, considering what was sitting in front of them, it should have been expected. Luc saw there were tears in his eyes. He looked at Luc and said, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

The troops showed up fifteen minutes later and secured the area. The lead archeologist was now viewing the Ark with tears in his eyes as well. Two men were kneeling beside the box in prayer. After a few minutes of letting all the team look at the Ark, Luc told them that his people in New York wanted etchings from all the boxes and pictures of the copper scrolls. They were glad to comply. Luc also suggested that they immediately begin putting up a temporary tent around the outside of the vault door. The lead archeologist ordered up the equipment and Luc was satisfied with the security. Netted awnings were being set up already in a neat little row from the end of the road to the vault. Luc’s work here was done except for one last thing.

He asked the team of fifty people to gather round outside the vault door. When all of them were accounted for, Luc made this important speech.

“People, this is Holy Ground. Disturb the area as little as possible. This vault is of great historical significance as well. I suggest that you start thinking about building a nice church right here to protect the vault. Think about the future of this sight and preserve it with reverence and dignity.”

Luc gave some specific instructions regarding the monitoring posts. Then he asked for a few minutes alone in the Ark chamber. He walked into the room by himself for the first time in twenty five hundred years. Luc studied the Ark and waited quietly for God to speak. Nothing. Oh, well. Luc then gave Sully in New York some instructions. Luc asked him to go to a secure line with just his friends and have the other crew leave. They had code words to indicate what he wanted done.

Once they were ready, Luc gave a fifteen-minute narrative on the history of the Ark. Luc told them when and where it was moved from one place to another, how the secret was kept and who helped. Luc included the

unvarnished truth about keeping the secrets through the time from it leaving the temple until it was moved here.

Luc said goodbye to all and asked to be returned to his hotel. Luc hugged a lot of people and the gratitude shown was magnanimous. He was overwhelmed with good wishes as he left. Luc was driven to his hotel and then to his jet. When the jet took off, Luc conferenced in with his friends back in New York.

They were monitoring all communications back at the vault and recording from the posts continuously. But Luc was now more interested in speaking with Ruth about what Michael had said. After Luc described the communication, she reviewed the recordings and got it all. She was growing more and more convinced there was a supernatural force at work there. He told her to bring in the whole team. Ruth and Luc laid out what was going on and everyone took it in.

John finally said, "I was beginning to think the same thing myself. There was no other explanation. But I must add, Luc, that logically makes you some kind of higher being, perhaps what the Bible refers to as an angel."

Luc blurted out, "I'm no angel and we all know it."



## Anxiety

Luc decided this was a good place to end this line of discussion and moved back to the other treasure vaults for a situation report. Megan said, “Six have been opened, five with just country-wide notice. But the Ark in Israel will go worldwide and we predict the possibility of religious based violence in many major Middle Eastern cities.”

Luc asked, “Do we have any business or friend that will be put in harm’s way?”

John said, “I’ll have someone check right now. Please continue in my absence.”

Megan took up her report where she left off. “We decided on a gold strike in Norway and a silver strike near Boulder Colorado will empty your vaults by eleven percent. We already cashed out the max, which was eight percent. Those are good size liquidations. Your gold idea on the new laptops won’t make a dent unless you want to add a lot more.” She stopped and grinned. “We’re continuing to cash out at a rate that won’t be noticed. And we will follow along at that pace with no affect for a year or so. Twelve percent is planned to go to the Haitian banks to support the Quality of Living Vouchers there. These cards are one hundred percent secure and backed by the gold. It will be transferred and secured forever by our people, but owned by the soon to be new government there. Luc, you’re going to have to help us get more creative within the next six months.”

“I have one idea I can share now. We are stockpiling material for the planned space station. See what you can do to funnel toward that project in small quantities, a whole lot of small quantities. Gold was used in space as a lubricant. It’s also the metal of choice for circuit boards used there too. It handles radiation and other nasty problems better than any other metal. The problem is that anything we actually build now will be obsolete by the time we need it. I’ll keep thinking.”

Luc veered to a new subject, “What about my musical compositions?”

Mary Jo summed up this report. “There is a young, very gifted gentleman about to enter his third year at Berkeley School of Music. We have hired him and he is going to be quite prolific with his compositions from now on. It seems he has a gift for writing music, and we have convinced him that he is free to write his own stuff along with yours. He thinks your music is being written by a computer. He will have his calendar full directing studio orchestras if your work takes off in Hollywood, as we believe it will. If you stop writing now, we have enough for twenty major films and dozens of documentaries and TV productions. That is about thirty five years’ worth.”

“I can’t stop. It all just happens.” By the looks on their faces, Luc knew they understood him well enough to appreciate that statement. He continued after a moment, “I have a couple of important things to say. The first is regarding another treasure trove. Megan, you have handled all this wonderfully, but I have one bigger stash. It’s not really something I stashed, but I just know its exact location. In southern Africa, I know where

Solomon's diamond mine is. I'm not sure what to do with it. Any ideas?"

Mary Jo wanted to know Luc's estimate for quantity and quality. And then she could factor in the time from mining to market. Luc gave her his best guesses, she told him to let her handle it and they would get back to him. He couldn't help but remember John's warning about being able to synthesize the stone and the bottom falling out of the market.

The second item was this. "Dear friends, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your help in releasing all my loot. I have taken a lot from this world and the time is right to give the excess back. And to share my work as well. We have built a secret empire that wields enough power to make real and significant positive changes in the world and you have made it self-sustainable. Anything beyond maintaining our control is what I consider excess. And it's time to give the excess back. I love you all."

Luc cut the feed and stared out the window at the sea far below. Angela was at work now or he would call her. That left him free to ponder this new situation. Luc might really be some sort of alien. Wow. He had been treating it as a joke for so long that the idea being real was very scary. He guessed he really could be not of this Earth.

Luc found himself breathing very fast and having trouble breathing at the same time. This was new. His chest was tight and his heart was racing. He made an emergency call to Gunther through his internal comm unit and he was online immediately. Luc turned on a video feed with difficulty and Gunther said, "Sit down. Look at me. Slow down. Easy, easy. Breathe easy. Good. Calm is good." He brought Ruth online and she took over.

"Luc, I'm here, it's okay. Keep focused on me. There. Breath with me. Have you felt like this before?" Luc shook his head and mouthed the word "no." She continued, "Okay. You're okay. I'm here. You're okay." Her voice was soothing and Luc finally managed to speak again.

"Wow. What is this?"

"You have all the symptoms of a classic anxiety attack. Are you sure this is the first time for this?"

"Yes. Never before."

"Let's do some relaxation exercises. But first, tell me where your most peaceful place is."

He didn't even have to think about it, "There is a beach in a cove that is like what I imagine heaven to be. The waves are small and the wind is quiet. It is a wonderful place. Alone and still. Wonderful."

"Is this a real place or just one you imagine in your mind?"

"Oh, it is very real. It's in the Caribbean on a tiny island east of Cuba."

"Why were you there?"

"This may sound cliché, but I buried pirate treasure there once, a long time ago."

"Is it still there?"

"Yes."

"Go get it."

“What, right now?”

“Yes, right now. Go get it. Take a couple of friends. Have a good time. Relax. Go. Now.”

“Are those doctor’s orders?”

“If you wish.”

“Okay. Hold on.” He called everyone back to the conference and said, “The doctor wants me to go retrieve a pirates treasure in the Caribbean. Anyone want to come along?”

Sully was the first to answer with, “Argh, shiver me timbers. I’m in.” His pirate imitation sucked, but his enthusiasm more than made up for it.

Harry said, “Oh, I wouldn’t miss this for the world. I’m in too.”

John, Gunther and Mary Jo begged off for various reasons.

Megan said, “I’m too old for that. You boys go and have fun.”

Luc told Harry to take a plane to Nassau with Sully and make it quick. He hung up and told the pilots they had a change of plans.

When Luc landed in Nassau, he was greeted by a man from the harbor named Freddy who would rent him a sea plane. He told Luc how to access her and pointed to it down at the docks.

Freddy said, “How far you aiming to fly? It’s tanks are full, but its range is twelve hundred miles.”

Luc responded, “I’m going to the east end of Cuba. Four hundred forty miles. Should be just fine. I need some tools, shovels, picks and some other things. Where can I buy them?”

Freddy laughed, and said, “Are you digging for buried treasure?”

“No, I am a geologist. Only hunting rocks.”

Freddy told Luc where he could get the things he needed. Luc only had to wait an hour for Harry and Sully to land. They disembarked their plane and took the jeep he had sent for them down to the harbor where the seaplane waited. Luc got everything loaded and they all boarded the plane.

He did a preflight check and they took off. The flight was just short of three hours.

Sully was the first to talk after takeoff, “Okay, Luc, spill. We want the story behind this pirate’s treasure.”

Luc recounted the tale for the next half hour. At the end of the story, Sully asked, “So, what I really want to know is this. Did real pirates talk like we hear and see in the movies?”

“Of all the questions you could ask, that’s the one you want to know about? Sully, you crack me up. But, the answer to your question is no. And the Romans and Greeks from two thousand years ago did not speak with British accents either.”

They all laughed and Luc asked them, “Either of you gentlemen want to learn to fly?”

They both responded with a big yes, and Luc taught them for the next two hours. They were quick learners. Soon, they spotted the island ahead. Luc circled the cove and set up for a landing. He took it down and the

landing was smooth. He beached the plane and they jumped onto the clean sand. It felt great to be there.

“Welcome to my beach. I haven’t been on this spot since 1702.”

“Well, pull out the treasure map. Oh, I forgot, it’s all in your head. Lead the way, boss.” Sully was anxious.

“Okay, follow me.” They each grabbed a tool, Luc took his bag, and off they went. Harry and Sully had no idea how much more difficult the return trip would be carrying all the gold. After they walked almost a mile, Sully saw the pyramid carving in the wall of the ravine as Luc had described.

Harry and Sully went crazy with excitement. Luc had to admit, this was a lot of fun. Luc told them where to dig and they quickly found the big boulder. They shouldered it to the side and cleared the smaller rocks. Sully said, “Bingo!” He and Harry pulled out the chest and opened it. The leather bags were intact and they opened one.

“Oh, my God! These are beautiful. Are they pure gold?”

“Every one of them. Spanish doubloons were the universal coin in the western world at the time. Open that bag.” Luc was pointing to a larger one. Harry lifted it and peered inside.

“Oh my God. Are these real too?”

“The grandson of the King of France believed them to be. They look pretty real to me. Okay, treasure hunters, pick up the box. I’ve got the tools. Hey, don’t give me that look, I dragged the damn box here and I’m an old man.”

That got another laugh. They hefted the booty and started walking. And then dragging. And more dragging. They made several stops to catch their breath.

Luc led again and soon they were approaching the beach. When it was in sight, Luc signaled Harry and Sully to get down, be quiet and hide. There were men on the beach with automatic weapons next to the plane.

“Take the box and go back the way we came and hide. I’ll handle these guys, whoever they are.”

They thought about arguing and realized it was the best idea. They quietly returned up the creek bed. When they were safe, Luc came out and rounded the corner to the beach.

“Why hello! I didn’t think I would have company today.”

They raised their guns and one stepped forward and said, “Where are your two friends? Freddy said there were three of you.”

Luc had moved closer to the men and said, “What’s with the guns? We have nothing but rock samples. My friends are behind me and should be here shortly. Please don’t hurt us.”

Luc acted afraid and then he moved. He grabbed the barrel of the gun the leader was holding and pulled him into a punch that put him down. The other three men behind him prepared to fire at Luc. He managed to shoot two before they shot him. Two bullets hit Luc and did nothing. Luc hit the two in the legs, one shot each, and smacked the one that shot him in the head with a kick. He went down and was out cold, but alive. Luc surveyed the damage and looked at the holes in his shirt. He really liked that shirt.

He got some rope out of their boat and tied up the unconscious men leaving the two bleeders to scream and crawl away. Luc hit them both in the head with the butt of a rifle and they were still. With the men secured, Luc ran up the creek bed and called to Harry and Sully that all was clear. They were there quickly and the trio walked onto the beach to find the four men as Luc had left them.

Harry looked down at them, “Too bad they’re alive. What do you want to do with them?”

Sully said, “They were going to kill us and take the treasure, right? These are the modern Pirates of the Caribbean, right?”

“Yep. And yep.”

Sully looked at the men and picked up a gun. He shot it into the sand on a three round burst after checking the weapon. “I’m going to make this call. Get the box on the plane and drag these guys to their boat.”

Wow, Luc hadn’t been ordered around in a while. He kind of liked it. Sully walked to the boat and checked it out. He gave commands to Harry and Luc to drag the men to the boat. They threw the first one into the boat. Sully tied him to a rail with hands to one side and feet to the other. The pirate was stretched out like a hammock. He tied the rest in a line just like the first one. When he was done, they looked like a bunch of shish kebabs on a grill. “How far out will the boat have to be to start drifting out to sea?”

“About three hundred feet is all.”

Sully started the boat’s motor, they pushed it off the beach and Sully backed it out. He turned it expertly and stopped when it pointed out to sea. He rigged a rope to the wheel and punched the throttles to full speed. When it was going strong and moving fast, he dove off the side. The boat traveled into the shipping lanes. Sully was a great swimmer and was back on the sand quickly after the short swim.

They all sat on the beach and started to laugh. Harry summed it up with this comment, “Buried pirate treasure from the King of France in 1702 and pirates from today try to take it. What a great day! Anybody want a beer?” He pulled out three beverages and sandwiches from an ice chest and they had a lovely lunch. They laughed that Luc’s pirate treasure story now had a new ending.

The friends sat there for an hour and watched the boat as it went over the horizon. Then after pushing the plane around, they boarded and took off. Luc flew over the speeding boat, radioed the U.S. Coast Guard and told them where the boat could be found. In flight, they talked about the treasure and made a couple of decisions. When they landed and debarked, Freddy was waiting and looked a little surprised. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost, Freddy. You okay?”

“Yes, sir. Just didn’t expect you back so soon is all.” Harry and Sully unloaded the plane and handed the tools to a guy standing on the dock. Luc followed Freddy into his little store and signed some papers to return the plane. Freddy filed the papers then followed Luc outside where Harry, Sully and two police officers were waiting. When Freddy turned to avoid the cops, Luc punched him. It felt really good. Freddy was cuffed, manhandled into a car and taken away.

On the ride back to the waiting jet, they made a quick stop at the National Museum of the Bahamas main building. Luc ran inside and had Harry and Sully watch the old cannon fuse box. He walked up to the woman selling tickets and asked to speak to the curator. She was a little put off but made the call. The curator was an older gentleman dressed in a very proper suit.

Luc introduced himself and said, “Sir, I have a box of pirate treasure we dug up using an old map. We would like to donate it to your museum.”

The curator’s expression told Luc that he thought Luc was kidding. Perfect, all the more fun. The curator said through a big grin, “Why yes, young man, we would love to have your pirate’s treasure.”

Before the curator could say anything else, Luc said, “Excellent. I’ll go get it.” Luc turned and jogged out the front door. Harry and Sully were watching for him. He waved for them to bring the box and come in.

The three of them walked into the building and set the box at the feet of the curator. As the box hit the floor, Luc kicked it open with a toe of his sandal. Sully reached down, grabbed a bag and poured coins into his hand. Harry opened the jewelry bag showing the loot to the dumbfounded man.

This was great. The curator didn’t know what to say. So, Luc pulled out a business card, handed it to him and all three left as fast as they could. The man called to them, but they just kept going. What a hoot.

They drove back to the airport and their jet. The trio boarded and were quickly airborne.

Once settled and cruising along, Harry took out a bag from his pack. He spilled it on the table between them and they all laughed at the hundred or so coins and the five pieces of jewelry they kept as souvenirs of their adventure.

# Luc's Great Great Great Great Great Great Granddaughter

Luc returned from the trip feeling good, but soon slid into a funk again. He hid in his apartment for a few days, but still took calls on the phone. Everything was going okay with his special projects and he let his team take care of it all.

But, before long, Harry took action.

“You’ve been moping around this place long enough. John has a surprise for you. Up and at ‘em, boy.” Harry knew that would get a smile out of Luc. Luc reluctantly followed him after getting out of the bathrobe he had been wearing for three days. Everybody was waiting in the Operations Center as if it were a surprise party. The room had a brand-new space set up for smaller holographic projections. Sully told him where to stand. When he was on the spot, Sully turned on a miracle.

Instantly, an oval room with pictures and bios of Luc’s French furniture business family were displayed in a family tree format. There were a lot of people, including a few portrait paintings of the oldest, but the tree mostly displayed names. Photographs started to show up around 1870. Many people in that era had both photos and portraits. As time moved forward, the portraits disappeared and photos became the norm. Very few of the latest people did not have some photo attached. Luc walked around quietly and took it all in. It was a bit overwhelming.

Sully began the scripted narration and said, “There are four hundred seventy eight people identified in your lineage. And sixteen live in New York City right now.”

Luc looked at the faces for a while and saw his resemblance in some, but it faded as time diluted the bloodlines. Luc teared up when he read the names directly under his and whispered, “I never saw these boys grow to manhood or my daughters get married. I miss them terribly.”

After a few minutes, Luc spoke again, “I am responsible for the existence of all these people. Wow. Look, this kid is training to be an astronaut and this old guy is a retired state senator. And this family has a short line of men who were sailors. These guys were coal miners. That sucks. I’ve been there and I know it sucks. But who is this?”

Luc glanced at his friends and it was clear this was who they really wanted him to see. It was a woman who was now fifty-four, Dr. Teresa Anne Donnelly. She was a Research Fellow at the Brookings Institute and very, very well respected in her field as an economist with several books to her credit. Mary Jo knew her work and admired her greatly. Included next to her big picture was a Christmas card photo from two years ago. She had a handsome husband and three adult kids. The kids were all married with one child each in front of them, her grandchildren.

After Luc finished with her bio, he said, “Let’s contact her. Mary Jo, do you want to work with her? After

all she is related to me.” Luc made a grand gesture of bowing as a joke.

Mary Jo replied, “Oh yes, very much. Let me see what I can do.”

Two days later Dr. Teresa Anne Donnelly arrived at their offices for an interview. She lived in Washington, D.C., where a jet had picked her up that morning. Luc could tell she was impressed and that was the idea. Mary Jo conducted everything with John as her second, but they all had lunch together. Luc could not stop staring at her as they visited. He didn’t say a lot but steered the conversation to be about ancestors. Dr. Donnelly admitted that she really did not know that much past her grandparents on both sides. Luc was quite awestruck with the realization that he was responsible for this wonderful woman to be born at all.

Dr. Donnelly looked nothing like him, being quite fair with auburn hair, but she was tall. And she had a magic that Luc loved. He had seen it in many people and described it by saying they “laughed easily.” He could tell instantly that she possessed a mind of great importance, and Luc was determined to succeed in getting her on his payroll. He stepped out of their private dining room and texted Mary Jo and John to make it happen at any cost. He returned to the dining room and enjoyed his distant descendant’s company for the rest of a very long lunch.

Mary Jo was writing furiously taking notes during the interview, so John took over asking questions. They gave her all the time she needed to answer. She was lecturing at many points and modified her answers as she began to recognize Mary Jo’s and John’s knowledge. Every question became a thorough discussion between three great minds. They were speaking the same language and at the same level. Teresa explained her concepts very clearly. She was far ahead of her time in her thinking.

Luc asked his first question, “You keep describing a picture of a utopian economy and it is wonderful. Tell me how we can get there from where we are. How about using a micro-economy as a realistic example. Let’s use Puerto Rico.”

“Puerto Rico is a bad place to start since it is all confused as a territory of the U.S. and not a state. Let me use Haiti instead.” She proceeded to lay out a plan that Luc’s team had already designed and were implementing. While she was talking, Luc pulled up the project timeline. She stopped talking, stared at it and said, “You’ve already started making the changes I have described, haven’t you?”

“Yes, but I think you might have some improvements to add, if I am hearing your ideas correctly.”

“Yes, the timing is off. There are examples of a population undergoing similar changes throughout history. It takes more time than you have planned for to adjust the attitudes of a population this size and with an affluence rate this low. If you make this change here by implementing your voucher system, it will have a very good chance of failing. You need to move more slowly right here and quicker with the next big move.” She was pointing to events on the chart.

Everyone could tell that she got it and beyond. Perfect.

Mary Jo said, “You would be a welcome addition to our economics team. You could take your models and



actually put them into practice working with us.”

“How can you people do these things? These projects would cost a fortune.”

John said, “Quite true. We are at a unique point in history. The financing we need for the Haiti project is pretty much unlimited. Our resources are second only to the largest countries in the world. I think about our conglomerates as the sixteenth largest nation on the planet. The only difference is that we do not have an official territory. We own significant percentages of all the separate nations. We are a shadow force across the globe and that gives us a very special set of opportunities. We work closely with the Secretary of State and the leading financial institutions around the world. China is our only weakness. With all their cash, they have been able to exclude us out of their economy, which is troubling.”

“Give me some numbers?”

John pulled up a chart that showed only one arm of Luc’s businesses, but it was the biggest. The number below it was over a trillion dollars.

She saw it and said, “Wow. I had no idea these companies had that much value. And a lot of it is liquid. You could make moves that would control the destinies of millions of people. You could make overnight changes in poverty levels of significant sizes of populations.”

“Yes. And we do. Would you like to help us?” John baited the hook. Teresa swallowed it and Mary Jo set it.

“This is the chance you have been dreaming of. Work with us and you can stop dreaming and start doing. Give it some thought.”

The interview ended warmly. Teresa said that she was very interested and would like to talk to her family.

Luc decided to tag along on her flight back home. John and Mary Jo gave Teresa paperwork about the position and she was ready to get back. Luc met her downstairs and they rode in the same limo back to the airport. The flight was short and uneventful except for the conversation.

Luc began the visit by asking Teresa about her latest book. He let her know up front that he had read it. It was an examination of the effect of the small businesses on the global economy. It concluded by saying they were in trouble. Then there were some practical steps that could be taken to save them from extinction. Every conclusion was well founded in facts, although it was hard to connect the dots sometimes.

“May I asked you a question, Luc?”

“Of course.”

“Who are you? I know what John and Mary Jo do. But what about you?”

“I am the utility man behind the scene. I have no field of expertise. I look at things more functionally than the others. I advise on strategies down on the ground level where real individual lives are affected.”

“Nice evasive answer.”

“Okay, try this one. I am in on every discussion at the highest levels. For example, Mary Jo does not attend

security briefings. I do. Our security people do not attend business meetings. I do. I cross-pollinate and fine-tune plans as they are developed and implemented. I redline a lot of planning documents. I joke and say that I know a little about a lot of things, but not a lot about any one thing. How's that?"

"Better. A little bit. How about sharing your resume with me? That would help."

"I've never had one. I wouldn't know where to start. Most of my work is off the books, as you would say."

"More evasive answers. Here, evade this one. Where did you go to school?"

"I have a degree from Cambridge in History." That was true.

"Cambridge? History? How old are you. You don't look old enough to have finished school at all."

"I am twenty four."

Luc lied. Luc switched the topic and asked her about the book she was writing now. They talked about it at length and it was fascinating, really.

He enjoyed Teresa's company very much. She was brilliant with a very cool laid-back manner. She could describe something very complicated step-by-step or fact-by-fact in words that the average person could understand. She told Luc a lot about her kids and husband, and he could feel the genuine love she had for them. He was so proud of her. They landed, said goodbye and she was gone, for now.

## And the Truth

Three months had passed and things were going reasonably well. More vaults had been uncovered and Luc's musical compositions had taken off. While spending time at a music school in Paris, Luc grew to know the composer Igor Stravinsky very well, and much of Luc's music sounded like early Stravinsky. The composer had been a genius. For Luc, his work took music to the next level. Stravinsky had been a composer ahead of his time. The public had to be dragged into the beauty of his new sound. But, in Luc's opinion, Stravinsky's real talent was as a conductor. Luc played in an orchestra with Stravinsky conducting and he led the instruments with precision and finesse. He demanded perfection and achieved it with charm and respect.

Angela and Luc had gotten into a routine. She was spending more time at his small apartment, wanting even more.

One day, Megan sent Luc a text and said she wanted to see his old New York house. They set a time for a visit. Seeing the house was hard for Luc. That was a period of economic challenges for the community and nation. There had been a lot of waste and the lines between the haves and the have nots was emphasized by some ruthless men. The couple stood in the front of the house and Luc told Megan about the times and his life. He opened the front door after shutting down three separate security systems. They entered and lights came on automatically.

She was surprised to find the house almost empty of furniture. "You told me there were some surprises here."

"Patience. Follow me. I want to show you the cool hidden passages first." He walked her around, pushed hidden panels and opened doors that did not look like anything but walls. He talked about some of the items in the home, but there was nothing of any real significance. Luc could tell she was getting bored, so he took her to the basement.

"This is where the good stuff is." She was puzzled because it was empty too. Luc walked over to a brick wall and pushed a large section that rotated in on a vertical axis. They stepped inside his private workshop.

It was quite large and had machinery in it that would be considered antiques today. They were all in fine working order. There were a variety of saws, sanders and other wood and metal working equipment. The place was spotless and there were racks and racks of projects on one long wall. "What are all these things?"

"These here are prototype inventions from Nicolas Tesla and Thomas Edison. I got them from the workers they employed before they could be thrown away. Some work pretty well. From this point to the end of the rack are mine." He was pointing to specific place on a shelf.

"I recognize some of them, like this can opener. And this is a record player."

"Not just a record player, a stereo record player."

“How can an old record player be stereo?”

“The groove that holds the sound etchings is different on each side of the little ‘V’ wall. The needle was the hard part.” Luc told her about the problems he had encountered and saw that her mind had already moved on.

“What is this?” She was looking at a six-inch diameter metal tube about four feet long with wires and tubes coming out of it.

“A laser. Only this one cuts metal. I could never get it accurate enough with the technology of the time. It’s easy with computers now, but with hand cranks, it’s a hard problem.”

She moved to the next item. “This thing looks like a long garbage disposal. What does it do?”

“It’s a jet engine.” She was shocked by its small size.

“These things need to be in a museum. A public museum.”

“I thought you might say that. Let’s move the Tesla and Edison stuff to the museums already set up for them in their home towns. I’ll crate up my stuff for one of our R&D labs and see if there is anything valuable here. Otherwise, it’s just hobby junk. These tooling machines would make a fine display in the lobby of the California airplane plant. I’ll make that happen and then I want to sell the property. There are no fond memories here, just ones of me lying to nice people about myself. It’s getting harder all the time.”

She gave him a quick hug and said, “We can do better than just dumping it. Let me see if Gunther wants it. There are always men and women coming through town and staying for a few weeks.”

Luc was polite and went along with whatever she wished, but he really did not care.

Activity around the Ark of the Covenant had calmed down into a shouting match about the temple construction, but no more than that. Many folks felt that its discovery was apocalyptic in nature and for all Luc knew they might be right. The dreams had stopped and a calm had come over him. He was not sure if the calm was real or if there a storm was approaching.

A few days later, something new happened. Luc woke up and had a runny nose. He had never had one before and was afraid of the implications. He searched out Harry and talked to him about it. “I feel different. I think I have a headache too.”

Luc described it to him and he called Ruth immediately. She showed up and said, “I usually don’t make house calls these days.” She looked Luc over and said, “Luc, you have a cold.” Just as she said this, Luc sneezed, also for the first time, ever.

He spent the next few days with tissues in his hand. Luc was frightened by this change and yet he was enjoying the new feelings at the same time. Weird. He thought sneezing was particularly odd. It was really loud from the inside. He knew different people had different sneeze sounds and it appeared his was really loud and obnoxious. His didn’t sound like ‘ah-choo’ at all. It sounded more like ‘highchhhh’. Even Harry commented on how different it sounded from everyone else’s.

Luc stopped thinking about his cold and what it meant, when Michael called. He said he was in town and would like to visit. Luc told him where to come and what to say to get past security. He notified everyone that Michael was on the way and to stand by. It all seemed quite ominous.

Michael ran the gauntlet through security with Harry escorting him all the way. Harry was watching Luc's back as always and led Michael into Luc's apartment. They greeted each other like old friends. Luc told Harry that everything was fine and asked if he minded giving Michael and himself some private time. They took seats in the video conference room and Luc turned down the constant feeds but left the recordings running.

Luc started the visit by asking Michael about the progress in Israel. They discussed it for a few minutes until they were totally at ease. Then Michael said, "The reason I am here is to answer the questions you have had all your life. Why am I here? Why do I keep on living while others are blessed with death? Why am I alone even with all my friends?" Luc had never pondered his being as such, but he knew Michael was correctly voicing his unrealized questions. Luc desperately wanted the truth.

Michael continued, "I know that you are a lost soul and that you have been pondering about what and who you are for some time now. You made a great sacrifice for the human race that you loved so much. You asked for your memories of being in God's presence to be taken from you so you wouldn't have to suffer with that absence during your time here."

Michael paused and stood. He seemed to change with that movement, standing taller and stronger. As Luc continued to gaze at him, he felt the light in the room had dimmed and Michael was revealing a bit of his true self. Then Luc recognized him. Michael was the man from his dreams.

Michael talked with an unabashed authority that was rare in Luc's presence. He continued, "But here is the answer to your question. You are a child of God just like me." He paused an eye blink and then revealed, "We walk among these people who are God's children as well. You were sent to be the protector of these people. To keep their history and save them from themselves when the time is right."

Luc realized deep down in his soul that everything Michael was saying was true.

"And that time is now." Luc found himself nodding in agreement and understanding all Michael was saying.

Michael patiently continued, "You see, I know the answers you seek because I was there when you accepted your mission. I am Michael, God's Sword, and your brother. Your real name given to you at creation is Raguel. You are God's Friend and His Hand of Justice."

## Shall Set You Free

Luc was not really shocked by this at all. It was sort of anticlimactic for him since he had been sensing something odd for some time.

“God is pleased and your mission is nearly accomplished.” Tears were flowing from Luc’s eyes now. Michael touched his shoulder and his strength returned. “I will return in a few days and we can talk about the future at that time. But rest assured, you have been exceedingly blessed and God appreciates your sacrifice.”

With that said, Michael simply got up and left. Luc was alone with a newfound joy and peace. After a few minutes, he called his friends, asked them to join him and let them see the recording of the revelation. They listened in quiet awe and Mary Jo and Megan began to cry as it ended. Luc was hugged by all one by one and they started a quiet conversation.

“I wonder what he meant by discussing the future?” Mary Jo asked.

Luc replied, “I’m not sure, but I think it is time for me to put my affairs in order.”

He felt the best he ever had. The cloud that had followed him his entire long, long life had lifted. He realized that he never even knew the cloud was there.

“John, I want you to make plans for my absence. Decide what to do with my recluse personas and the separate entities they control.”

“Hold on, Luc.” John was getting angry. “You just received this news ten minutes ago and you’re already giving up? And why would ‘discuss your future’ mean you are going to die?”

Luc tried to say something to answer these very good comments, but was at a loss for words. John continued, “We have contingency plans in place for your absence, be it short or longer. They are good plans and we should follow them. There are more important things to think about right now.”

Mary Jo said, “What could be more important than Luc’s death?”

“We need to fill in the gaps on plans that he has inside his head. We all want to do what he wants done and we are missing some vital guidance in many areas.”

Luc saw the wisdom in John’s logic and said, “John’s right. What about this plan of action; each of you set up some one-on-one time with me and we’ll just visit. I’ll brief you on some ideas and that will have to do. How does that sound?”

“Much more reasonable.” John put a hand on Luc’s shoulder and made eye contact. “I for one have a few nagging questions.” He smiled really big and finally broke eye contact.

Ruth had something vital to say, “I talked to everyone and we all agree that you should add at least three more friends to our team -- that Angela and Teresa be two of them. Any ideas on a third?”

“Yes, let’s drag Duncan Freeborn onto our merry-go-round.”

They were in the middle of the most important discussion of Luc's life when he got a call from Roberto, John's tailor in Rome. Luc stepped away to take the call. Their clothes were ready and the tailor wanted to come immediately. Luc had Ruth arrange transportation to get him there as fast as possible. She was the only person in on the surprise of the suits for John and the other men. She called her office and they handled sending one of Luc's private jets. She came back into the room and whispered to Luc that Roberto would arrive at ten AM tomorrow. He told her to let the other women in on the secret so they could help when the time came.

Luc was having dinner with Angela the following night to tell her the truth about his life. Her life was about to change forever, for the better he hoped.

The rest of the day and night, Luc visited with his friends starting with Harry. "Luc, what would you like me to do if you leave us?"

"Harry, I don't know. What would you like to do?"

"I think I would like to start by taking care of your personal possessions. I will handle the physical items but, more importantly, I want to take care of your writings. I've read a lot and they are a treasure worth more than any gold, silver, statues or furniture."

"I can't think of a better person than you to manage it."

"Pull up the big timeline chart of your life please." Luc did so and together they studied it on the huge display in his personal comm room.

Luc admitted, "There are gaps."

Harry thought for a moment and then said, "Add your personal writings that cover history to the diagram."

"Hold on. Let's get Sully in here." Luc called Sully and asked him to join them. He was there in a minute.

"Sully, you know my personal library better than anyone since you designed the catalog system. Can you identify my writings that have an historical context?"

"Sure." Sully pulled them up on the bottom of the screen. They looked like a physical library shelf with the books titles showing. The titles were long and well detailed with dates and places for reference.

Luc had Sully connect writings to the main chart with lines. The chart not only showed a timeline, but was split into twelve geographic regions as well. There were some famous people and events shown and Luc hooked the books with a pointer to their best reference placement. A few got several reference connections.

Harry and Sully were watching intently as Luc placed all his literature. Harry asked Sully to add the new scroll files to a row below the completed writings. Luc looked at the summary counts and saw there was 521.

"Sully, what are the criteria that put those 521 on the list?"

"There was only one. You wrote it. Not copied, not repeated, not reworded, not a synopsis, etc. You thought it up and wrote it down."

"Okay, now show me the entire catalog in the same format as you have these." Sully typed a few

commands and they appeared per Luc's request. There were pages and pages of scroll files -- 12,333 to be exact. Luc wanted the list further defined and said, "Now take out the ones that are in the 521." Sully did so. "Now remove the ones that are the straight copies from the Library at Alexandria. Those were clearly cataloged before." Again, Sully complied, leaving 579. Luc started grabbing them one by one and putting them onto the shelf with those that he had authored. As he was doing this, Luc explained, "Each of these has parts that I have written. There should be a total of 899."

In just a few minutes, Sully said, "899. Do you want to tag the chapters you penned now?"

"Why not." They had been going for thirty-six minutes and invested forty-four more in identifying the chapters Luc wrote. When Luc was satisfied, he reference tagged the parts that he wrote with the big chart to complete their effort.

When Luc turned around, Mary Jo, Megan, Ruth, Gunther and John had joined Harry and Sully. They apparently had trickled in when Harry texted them what was happening.

Luc smiled at them and they all grinned back. Harry said, "Pull up the fiction now."

Luc said, "No, no, no." But 342 more books appeared on the screen. "And what am I supposed to do with those?"

Harry had this planned in his head now and said, "Put them with the correct time and place, first as to where you wrote them. Then cross-reference them into genre. We already have a one-paragraph synopsis on all of them."

Luc obeyed and was done in twelve more minutes.

When finished, Luc stepped back and looked. They all saw the same thing. There were large blank spots that should not be empty.

Harry beat Luc to the punch and said, "I don't care why there are blanks, but I want them filled in."

"Yes, you are right. I'll have it for you." Luc knew exactly why he had never written about those times and places that were blank. They were bad times and bad places. But, it was time to document those parts of his life as well.

It was getting late and they broke for the night. They slept while Luc stayed up and wrote and wrote and wrote.

He started the next day with a six AM session with John. Lots of work, and lots of personal questions as well that John always wanted to ask. He focused most of his questions on Bible stories and Luc told him what he knew. He brought all the others into one big meeting from eight to ten o'clock. Ruth stepped out of the meeting at nine-thirty to meet Roberto. At ten, Luc announced a break. Be back in exactly ten minutes was ordered. In ten minutes, the men were there, but the women were not. Luc said they wanted to move the meeting and walked them down to his apartment.

Luc was there first and opened the door for John, Harry, Gunther and Sully. He led them into the room and



Ruth, Roberto, Megan and Mary Jo all yelled “Surprise.” All four of them were confused, looked at each other and were thinking, “Who’s birthday is it?”

Then John recognized Roberto and saw the rack of clothes.

John smiled and said, “Roberto, what have you done?”

Roberto beamed with pride and said, “Your friend wanted to surprise you men with some very, very special suits. I have created masterpieces for all of you.” The women were looking at the clothes and pulling them out. Ruth was standing in front of the rack for Luc and waved him toward her. Mary Jo did the same with Sully and Megan had Harry. Roberto insisted that he would help John. Roberto continued as they admired all the clothes, “There are four beautiful tuxedos for each of you. And for my special friend, John, there are twelve of the most wonderful suits I have ever made. They are spectacular!” They were. John was going through the rack and smiling from ear to ear. He took one and disappeared into one of Luc’s bedrooms. The other men took their tuxedos and went into the other rooms to try them on.

Luc was the first one done and he returned to the room looking as good as any man could. The women oohed and ahed over how nice he looked. No adjustments were required except for the pant hems. Harry came in and looked great too. Then Roberto said, “Shoes, shoes, all of you, please fetch the shoes you will be wearing with these. Go, go, go.” The men all disappeared and John entered the room looking most impressive. Luc returned with the right shoes on and John approached and shook his hand.

He said, “Lucasiah, thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Ruth and I just happened to be passing the shop.”

Everyone chuckled and then Luc seriously said, “You do so much for everyone else, I just wanted to let you know you are appreciated. Besides, I put all this on your credit card.” John just smiled and shook Luc’s hand again. The others returned, looking fantastic. Roberto was ordering them around and his two assistants were marking the hems. One by one, they worked their way through the wardrobe. Pants were hemmed on the spot and fitted once again. The whole process took two hours. John had broken out a five thousand dollar bottle of single malt Macallan scotch and sipped away with everyone except Megan and Luc. John offered Megan a Diet Coke and a Sprite for Luc.

Gunther, Harry and Sully thanked Luc. Sully said, “Hey Boss, where are you taking us to wear these rags?”

“Well, let’s start with this.” Luc pulled out invitations for all to a Black Tie Ball at the U.N. that Friday, four days from then. The formal event was being held to celebrate an anniversary of something big. Whatever. Then Luc finished with, “We are the special guests of the President and he would like to visit with us at a private cocktail party an hour before the formal dinner starts. Duncan set it up for me.”

It was now noon and Luc had to run. He cancelled the rest of the meetings for the day and let everyone enjoy their new clothes. Besides, he had the next most important meeting of his life with Angela right now.

Luc went to her apartment and broke the news to her. She took it very well thinking that he was joking. When she saw he was serious, she became very afraid. He asked her to come with him to the office in his other apartment. She was reluctant at first, but when he told her continuously that he loved her and that was why she was learning the secret, she was a bit better. Luc knew this could go one of two ways. She would believe and love him more for it. Or she would believe and never want to see him again out of fear. She seemed to be leaning toward the positive outcome and he was cautiously happy and hopeful.

In the lobby of the Empire State Building, he hugged her and whispered in her ear describing what she was about to see. She looked up smiling and he knew then it would be okay. He took her to the Operations Center first, then the oversight room where they watched the video of Sully being told. Angela finally truly believed and handled it very well indeed. She said she always knew Luc was special and was hiding something deep in his heart from her. They ended up kissing a lot and he now must tell her the bad news about him being the archangel of justice and the protector of mankind. As he spoke there seemed to be a peace that settled over her and she even took news of the upcoming visit from Michael calmly. The only words she spoke were, "Of course."

Angela got the offer to join Luc's team and accepted immediately. However, there was one condition. Luc had to marry her now. On the spot now. Luc made it clear that when Michael returned, he could end up dead or gone. She didn't even flinch and replied, "I want to be your wife every minute from now on, be it ten minutes or ten million."

Luc agreed to her wonderful term, quickly invited everyone to his apartment and made the announcement. Cheers erupted, then lots of handshakes and hugs. It was two o'clock.

The ceremony was to take place that evening in the Holographic Projection area. Sully would contrive the wedding to take place in the reef in the Caribbean. Everyone immediately realized the urgency with the ceremony only being a few hours away. That meant quick action by everyone to plan, make calls and being frantically busy. Of course, Megan started a task list on a screen and made assignments, complete with a waterfall schedule chart that started right then.

Luc asked everyone to wait for a minute as he took his bride to his private safe of jewelry. He opened it and let her have her pick of wedding rings from about fifty. She could not decide and asked if it would be okay if the others helped. She went back to the main area and told them the trouble she was having. All of the women jumped to help and none of the men. The men wanted to throw a bachelor party.

Wow. Luc left all the ceremonial business to the women and was swept away to Harry's place. The bottle of scotch had never left John's side and was used to make a few toasts. Luc even had a quick glass. After only a few minutes of male bonding, Luc had to leave making it the shortest bachelor party in history. He had another very, very important task to do.

He found Angela in Mary Jo's apartment preparing outfits. Mary Jo tried to shoo him away, but she gave in

when he told her it was critical that he have just a few words with Angela. She gave him two minutes, “and not a second longer.” Angela came out of a bedroom with the velvet tray of jewelry. Her chosen ring was in the center. She chose one of Luc’s favorites. Faberge made this amazing ring in 1899 for Grand Duchess Maria Nikolaevna with a two point five carat flawless princess cut diamond in the center and a stair step pattern of thirty-two beautiful pink diamonds accenting the main stone. A band complemented the diamond ring with three sides covered in fifty-six smaller princess cut diamonds that matched the center large stone. The set was worth about a half million dollars. The other pieces on the tray were all exquisite. Luc quickly helped her pick out earrings, necklace and bracelet. While they were looking over the jewelry, Luc told Megan that he wanted Teresa to be included and to stand with them to round out the family. She thought that was a wonderful idea and Luc took off to shock another person. He would have fun with this one.

Luc gave Teresa a call and asked her if she was wearing pants or a dress. She answered “pants” and tried to question why he was asking. He told her that he would be down to pick her up in a couple of minutes on a motorcycle. Her office was just down the street. Then he told her to clear her calendar for the rest of the day and she would be busy until late that night.

Luc headed down to his private garage and chose a 2013 jet-black Harley V-Rod Muscle from the five bikes in his collection. It took him less than a minute to get to Teresa’s building on the bike and she was out front waiting. He handed her a helmet. She put it on as if she wore one every day, hopped on the back and they took off. She asked what the hell was going on and he teased her with, “If you like this ride, you are going to freak out with the one I am about to give you upstairs.” Luc and Teresa entered the building garage, parked and headed upstairs. They flew through security and entered his apartment.

Luc told Teresa the story quickly and she did not believe him for one minute. Then he displayed a computerized connection showing her his IDs and history, talking all the time. She was beginning to believe. Luc pulled up a two dimensional family tree chart and showed her their distant relationship. He topped off the story with the events of the last few months about Michael and getting married tonight. He asked her to stand with him during the ceremony and she agreed just to humor the crazy man talking.

Luc knew he must hurry so he called Harry to help finish the story. Harry arrived and Luc asked him to help out. Harry decided to use the knife-throwing stunt since it worked so well with Sully. He showed the knife to Teresa to let her make sure it was real and stepped away from Luc. He threw it with perfect accuracy and speed, hit Luc in the chest and watched the knife bounce off. Teresa was doing the usual mouth open in disbelief thing. She looked very hard at Luc and said, “So I am your great great great great granddaughter?”

Luc responded, “Seven ‘greats’ removed.”

She started laughing and then did something totally unexpected. She gave Luc a great big hug. Luc loved it and then he started to cry... again.

# Holy Matrimony

Teresa was in happy, happy shock when Luc called John and Gunther in, who were getting pretty drunk. He let them know about Teresa joining their special circle of friends and they gave her a five-minute briefing on keeping the secret. She brushed them off with, “Of course, of course. I’m not stupid. I figured this part out. And by the way, regarding the deal, I’m in.” With that, they all shook hands, but Luc got another hug. Then she called Luc Grandpa and he started to cry, again. He thought he would be doing that a lot for the next few days.

Teresa suddenly realized that she was going to be a member of a wedding party in a few hours and freaked out. “Oh, my God, where is the bride? I’ve got a lot to do.” Luc escorted her arm in arm to Mary Jo’s apartment and she joined the other women. As she went inside, Luc was able to catch a peek through the open door. There was at least ten wedding dresses laid out around the living room and two women helping Angela make a choice. This was great.

Luc rejoined the men and had fun watching them get plastered. John was the biggest surprise because he had actually taken off his tie. Luc hardly recognized him. Somewhere during the party, Luc told them he wanted them all to be his best men and they were all smiles. Luc thought they may have been talking about it amongst themselves wondering whom he would ask, if anyone. With that done, Luc retired to his apartment to prepare for the ceremony. He asked Harry to help him. In a drunken southern drawl, Harry said he would be honored.

When they were alone going through Luc’s closet, Luc confided in him, “Harry, I’m really scared.”

Harry replied with exactly the thing Luc needed to hear, “A wise man once told me that to worry about things that you can’t control was a waste of time. He told me the next time I found myself like that, I should roll with the punches. And then come up fighting.” Luc had given that advice to Harry twenty-five years ago.

Harry helped Luc with his tuxedo and then they sat down. They talked about Teresa for a minute and then Angela. Harry asked Luc why he loved Angela so much. Luc went on and on about Angela’s traits for fifteen minutes. Harry said that he wanted a woman just like that and hoped he would feel that way about someone someday. Luc asked him why he never dated anyone. He replied, “I’ve never met anyone more interesting than you guys.”

Luc said, “You need to get out more.” And then he remembered something and said, “I know this woman that owns a florist shop that is just super. Let me have Angela introduce you.”

Harry replied, “No, no, no.” Then he quietly asked, “What’s she like?”

Luc simply said that she laughs easily. Harry knew what that meant and agreed to a meeting. Luc grabbed his phone and shot Angela a text message. Then Harry turned Luc so he could look him in the eyes. He had a confused look on his face then finally found the words, “I don’t know how to say this, but I am proud of you.

Proud like a father and proud like a son both at the same time.” They hugged briefly and he left Luc to finish up by himself.

There was a knock on Luc’s door a few minutes later and the reverend who would be marrying them from Angela’s church was there. He came in and politely said, “I must tell you that I have never been a part in anything like this and it is very exciting. Angela has told me all about you and I was wondering if I was ever going to meet you. I am so happy for both of you.” He paused, turned very serious and said, “I have known her since she was a child and if you ever hurt her, you will have me and all the men in my church to answer to. Are we clear, young man?”

Luc replied, “Yes, sir.” He was actually quite humbled.

The Reverend kept going, “Good, now with that out of the way, this is the order of things for the ceremony.” He laid it out for Luc and asked him about his vows. Luc told him they were prepared. The Reverend was satisfied and he left telling Luc that he had ten minutes until the ceremony was going to begin.

For the first time in over a thousand years, Luc prayed and thanked God for Angela and for His forgiveness.

Another knock on the door and Teresa was there to walk Luc to the Operations Center. She paused outside the door, looked at him and said, “You turned my world upside down today. I’ve always thought I had it all figured out and then this happens. I guess I’ll just roll with the punches.”

Hearing that from Teresa made Luc remember what the Heavenly Host had said, “God is Blessing.”

Luc smiled at Teresa, kissed her on the forehead and said, “I’m ready now.”

They entered the room to loud applause from his friends. Harry was there dressed in a killer black tuxedo that he had received that morning. John was John, but a little drunk in a wonderful new tuxedo as well. Gunther was smiling like crazy and Luc thought he really was very crooked. Sully just cheered, clapped and grinned looking sharp too. Mary Jo was crying quietly, as usual these days, and looked quite stunning in a beautiful gown and fine jewelry. Luc noticed that she was wearing some of the items that Angela borrowed from his safe. Luc smiled and motioned to her that he liked her earrings and necklace. She smiled back with one of the most loving smiles he had ever seen.

Megan looked about as happy as anyone could be as she sported a necklace that was actually fit for a queen. Queen Mandana of Persia in 584 BC wore it in court all the time. It was a present from her husband King Astyages. Luc knew this because he was there. Megan looked beautiful in a gown designed by Peter Langner and custom tailored for her this afternoon. It was very lacy and brought out Megan’s natural beauty.

Luc moved down the line of friends and settled on Ruth. Her hair was artfully piled on her head with beautiful ringlets. Her dress was modest with straight lines but was bright blue. Then he noticed she wore a tiara from his safe. It had blue gems accenting the diamonds arrayed across the top and matched her dress perfectly.

She did a curtsy as he took her beauty in and they chuckled at each other. The tiara was made for a Russian czar's wife around 1600. Luc never knew her name because he acquired it in 1749 in a cash deal and her name was never mentioned. He just knew he got a bargain.

Luc took his place as ordered and his friends lined up. Sully pulled out a remote control and pressed a couple of buttons. The room turned dark and one of Luc's musical compositions began to play. Later he learned that it was a composition selected for a prequel to the Harry Potter series. The piece began with a harpsichord solo introduction that fit the mood perfectly. A few seconds passed and the holographic presentation from the bottom of the Caribbean Sea began to show by fading into the music. The scene was most magical and was completed when Angela entered the room being escorted by the Reverend. She was stunning. She too was wearing a Peter Langner original. Langner's wedding dresses were his signature items and this one was magnificent. It had a modest top of lace and silk, while the gown flowed in layered waves to the floor and a bit beyond. She wore a veil that was all lace and looked aged. She told Luc earlier that it was her grandmother's and she would be wearing it again if they could redo all this in a big church for her family. Luc hoped they could, but he did not want to think about that then. She had on a beautiful string of black pearls and matching earrings. It was most tasteful. And he loved her so much. The music faded out as Angela and the Reverend took their places. The Reverend began with his formal wedding speech.

When it was time to say their simple scripted vows, Luc interrupted and surprised all by talking directly to Angela. "Of all the choices I have made in my life, the one that brings me the most happiness is loving you. You are the kindest and gentlest person I know. I am humbled and honored that you chose me. I think you are wonderful and I will love you as long as God allows me to." She teared up as he finished. Every person in the room was also shedding a tear or two, and the women let out a simultaneous 'ahhh'.

The Reverend then nodded at Harry who handed Luc two rings. Luc was surprised there were two. They had not planned on one for him. His was a simple gold band and Angela whispered that he should read the inscription inside. He held it up and read, "I give you me. Love, Angela." Luc was sniffing now along with the tears leaking from his eyes, and John handed him a handkerchief. Luc used it to compose himself. They exchanged simple vows and were pronounced husband and wife. They kissed, everyone cheered and clapped and the music came back on to the overture at the end of Luc's score. The ocean faded and lights came on. Luc kissed Angela again and then they both got hugs and handshakes from all. Ruth took charge and told the group to follow her to the reception in her apartment.

When they got to her door, Ruth opened it to an amazing sight. And it took a lot to amaze Luc. Ruth had finished decorating and the furniture she selected in Del Mar was there. Persian rugs complemented the furnishings, and Luc's paintings were displayed nicely as well. He was touched. There was a string quartet playing some of his music quietly in a corner. He noticed three of his jazz buddies setting up next to a big piano.

They waved at Luc to say hello when he looked their way. Very cool. He saw his horns set up near an empty microphone and laughed as one of the musicians pointed to the instruments.

Tables were prepared and a catering staff was busy at work passing out champagne. Angela and Luc were steered to a portable photography setup in Ruth's dining room. Ruth told everyone to have a chair and that they would all be taking pictures shortly. They were beginning with the bride and groom. The newlyweds suffered through the photo shoot with as much patience as they could muster. Gunther appeared when they finished and whispered something to the photographer. The photographer got angry and whispered something back loud enough for Luc to hear the words, "No, no, no. Absolutely not."

Luc figured it was about security and the poor guy had no idea who he was dealing with. Nobody told Gunther no with that tone of voice.

With that activity finished, group shots were taken, then Luc and Angela posed for photos with each guest. The photographer broke down his equipment and left -- without his memory cards. A large dining room set from Del Mar was then moved back into place. The wedding attendees took places around the table and dinner was immediately served. Each of them had their own wait person. Earlier, they each were given a menu and had made selections. Luc had asked Angela to pick his dinner items, and he was pleasantly surprised when a lobster bisque was set in front of him. She told him that it was the same recipe served to them in Atlantis. It was a joy. Dinner continued to be magnificent, but Luc was busy staring at his new beautiful bride.

When dinner was wrapping up, John made a toast to the bride and groom. He simply recited the wonderful old Irish toast,

*May the road rise to meet you,  
May the wind be always at your backs,  
May the sun shine warm upon your faces,  
The rains fall soft upon your fields and,  
Until we meet again,  
May God hold you both in the palm of His hand.*

They emptied their glasses and it was Luc's turn to say something. He asked the wait staff to leave for a minute and prepared to say something when he noticed a new guest peek his head into the room. Michael asked, "May I join you?" They all stood to greet him. He told them, "Please sit down. I am here only to join the party, if you will allow me. Our other business is not yet at hand." Luc was relieved. He got up and hugged Michael. Luc officially introduced Michael to everyone and especially Angela. She was frightened at first, but Luc's easy demeanor relaxed everyone soon. Luc had a chair from the other room brought in and had Michael sat next to him.

When everybody was settled again, Luc laughed and said, "I was about to say something before I was so

rudely interrupted.” Luc laughed again and Michael did too. Then everyone got the joke and chuckled along. “I was about to say thank you all. I know that you cannot feel what I am feeling, but I mean this with all my heart. You are the best friends I have ever had. God’s will, you all, and this amazing lady,” he leaned over and kissed Angela, “I am truly happy for the first time.” Everyone was silent and touched, as they understood the depth and seriousness of what Luc had just said.

Harry broke the quiet by saying, “Hear, hear.” and clapping. Everyone joined in and glasses were clinked again in between the applause.

Ruth stood and said, “So here is how the rest of the evening will go. Some of Luc’s friends and our families are going to join us and we all know what that means. Watch what you say. The walls have ears.”

Gunther stood to speak and then sat right back down and muttered, “Enough said.”

The staff was called back in and helped the guests move into the big room where they were greeted with cheers and applause from the expanded crowd. The band started to play and the party really got going. The first violin from the string quartet had moved over and was sitting in with the jazz ensemble. He had switched from his beautiful wooden acoustic violin to a bright blue electric one. He was great. The viola player doubled on piano also moved to support the jazz musicians. She was a young beautiful Asian woman playing a shiny brand new Bechstein nine foot three-inch grand piano. Luc was in jazz heaven.

Angela had never heard Luc play anything before and asked if those saxophones were his. Luc admitted they were and she made him join the musicians on the next song. While the group finished the first song, Luc asked Sully to set up the holographic photography posts and record the night. Sully grabbed his phone and, in less than two minutes, two members of his new team arrived and set up the posts.

The song ended and Luc was asked by the lead guitarist to come up and join them. Luc grabbed his Cannonball Gerald Albright Signature Series black nickel finished alto saxophone, hooked up a mike and blew a couple of licks to warm up. The band picked one of his favorites, “The Way You Look Tonight” by Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields. Luc introduced the song and dedicated it to all the lovely women there tonight, but of course, especially to Angela.

They laid it down and Luc watched Angela and the others as most heard him play for the first time. The pianist sang as the musicians followed and then Luc soloed after the second verse three times through and ended to cheers from the room. The tune ended to more cheers. Luc set down his horn and told the band he would return in a while and hoped they understood. Everyone laughed as he left the group to zero in on a new guest.

The crowd had mysteriously grown from twenty to around fifty. Luc grabbed Angela and headed toward a lovely dark skinned woman standing in the back of the room. She was Roberta, Angela’s boss from the flower shop. Roberta greeted them warmly and fawned over Angela like a mother telling her daughter how beautiful she looked. She spotted the ring and took a good look at it, then at Luc and said, “Wow, what did you say you did for a living?” Luc laughed it off and excused himself for a minute to fetch a friend of his. Roberta knew



what was coming and was embarrassed to be sure. That all went away as Luc dragged Harry toward her. Roberta obviously liked what she saw and Luc introduced them. She was taken aback by Harry's deep, soft southern drawl and huge beautiful smile. Luc and Angela made their excuses about not ignoring other guests and left nature to take its course. Luc heard her comment to Harry about his lovely tuxedo as he and his bride meandered away.

Angela and Luc danced and he played a couple more tunes with the band throughout the evening. He even danced with his old friend Maggie and tried to make Thomas jealous. The party broke up when it got late, and Luc and Angela said goodbye to guests as they left. The crowd finally thinned out to just Luc's closest friends and their families. Luc requested slow dances for the next couple of songs. Luc wanted to dance with Mary Jo, Megan, Ruth, Teresa and last, but not least, Angela. As he danced with each one of the women, he told them the story of their jewelry and asked if they would like to keep it. They all thanked him and each refused. Besides, they all knew they could wear them any time. Later, Luc asked Gunther to make sure the women saw all of Luc's private collection.

While dancing with Teresa, Luc asked her how she was doing and she replied, "Just fine, all things considered."

Luc got a good laugh out of that. He kissed her on the cheek and said "I want you to do your job, but dream bigger. My friends will help you make all your dreams come true. Enjoy a rich, full life with your family and work. Dream big, my child, dream big." Luc left her with those words and noticed Michael was gone.

With Luc's important dances done, he had something else on his mind. Angela. The newlyweds said their personal goodbyes to everyone and headed for their place down the hall. Angela danced around the apartment for a few moments and then she told Luc what a wonderful day this had been. And that she loved him over and over again. They kissed and kissed and were soon heading for bed.

# The Diplomat

Luc and Angela stayed in their apartment alone for the rest of the night and the whole next day. The morning after their one-day stay-at-home honeymoon, they met with everyone to discuss projects. Angela had not heard of the projects yet and was very interested in each and every one. Luc's hoard of treasure was on track for dispersal to the world, but it would take several years to complete the effort. Most of the gold, silver, and diamonds would remain with them for quite some time. The Ark was making the most stir in the world as it began to spawn a religious revival on a global scale. Luc was saddened to think that an old chest could have that effect on people when the wonder of God's handiwork that was always right in front of them did not.

The construction on the new underwater labs was moving quickly. The project had grown to include earthquake and tsunami detection equipment as well as oceanographic business. Haiti was doing splendidly with the infusion of cash and permanent free housing -- the resident camps were replaced with trailers that Luc bought wholesale from FEMA. To keep crime down, Gunther's army was patrolling beside the local police. Their presence was a deterrent to the criminals who used to roam free and take what they wanted.

To Luc it appeared the new schools built by the Gates Foundation were doing the most good as people began to regain their self-respect with honest work provided by the new infrastructure. Luc had learned that a new nursing school already needed expansion. He quickly moved trailers there as temporary classrooms while the university campus increased in size.

An amnesty for the thugs was declared. Over ten thousand guns were turned in during the process. The men took legal jobs for a chance at a better life. Gunther had made several trips to Haiti to make sure all was well. They installed close to five hundred video cameras across the cities to monitor things. Their security provisions were accepted as protection rather than as part of a police state.

With Michael's upcoming visit putting a shadow on everything, a sense of urgency took hold of everyone. So, Luc made a quick trip.

Secretary of State Duncan Freeborn had shown himself to be a fine man over many years. Luc took a jet to meet him at Luc's favorite restaurant in D.C., the Occidental. The restaurant's showpiece was a collection of signed pictures of famous people that adorned every wall. Duncan's security detail learned from a message at the host stand that Luc, acting as Robert Wittworth, was waiting in a booth. When the detail approached, they asked Luc if he was waiting for the Secretary, and Luc informed them they had the right table. The security men asked to search Luc and, of course, he obliged. They also gave his laptop a once-over. Duncan finally appeared and sat down and just looked at Luc waiting for something to happen.

"Hello Duncan. Thank you for meeting with me."

“I agreed to meet face to face for the first time with my friend, Robert Wittworth. And whom would you be my young friend?”

Luc said, “I am Robert Wittworth. And I will prove to you that I am who I say I am.” Then Luc reminded Duncan of something important they did in private five years before.

“But you cannot be Wittworth. I’ve been talking with him for fifteen years and you are barely out of your teens. What’s going on here, son?”

“Duncan, my old friend, I have a story to tell you and it’s going to take some time for you to understand and believe what I am about to say. Let’s order some food.”

They took their time. Duncan was a patient man and listened politely as Luc explained. Once Luc had the story laid out, he got John and Mary Jo online and told them to take over. Duncan knew John and Mary Jo personally and had great respect for them. While they talked, Luc went outside for a few minutes. It was a pleasant evening and Luc walked past the White House across the street.

*September 15, 1945    Washington, D.C.*

President Truman was throwing a black tie affair at the White House and Luc was attending as sixty year old Wallace Pittman, President of Western Arms. Luc’s limo joined the queue of cars entering by the front gate. Luc’s secretary, Maud McAllister, accompanied him. She was 56 and thrilled to be attending. Luc knew she would act exactly as he hoped -- a handsome woman who still could turn the heads of younger men. Luc needed the cover to avoid attention. He usually shunned these affairs, but the President insisted he attend.

They finally reached the front of the line. Their doors were opened and they were greeted by some very rough looking fellows. They checked Luc’s invitation and prepared for a security search. Fortunately, Henry Stimson, the Secretary of War, was outside smoking and saw Luc. He intervened and Luc and Maud were escorted by the Secretary personally into the Ballroom.

Luc saw a friend, Robert Oppenheimer, and headed straight for him. Robert was by himself as usual and greeted Luc warmly. He was clearly uncomfortable and was glad to be with a friend. They made small talk; Maud got bored and excused herself to go to the ladies’ room.

As soon as the two men were alone, Robert asked, “So, what are you going to do now that the war is over?” He was asking because he knew Luc made guns for the US Army and the orders would quickly shrink.

Luc replied, “It will be business as usual for me. The Army wants a new sidearm and they want a million for the first order. I will be just fine. How about you?”

Robert lowered his voice and practically whispered to Luc, “The President is forming the United States Atomic Energy Commission and wants me to head it up. Should I accept it?”

Luc thought about it for a minute and answered, “Hell, yes. It would give you the platform to set the rules

for your new bomb's use. You could guide the policies that will govern the weapon for decades. You could fix the things that are bothering you most."

Robert had shared with Luc several times about the guilt he had for the deaths of so many. He took another sip of champagne and said, "You are right, of course. It all just scares me. I sometimes forget the practical uses for the theories we devise. Everyone wants to turn everything into a weapon. The energy could be used to provide electricity cheaply and safely."

Luc put his arm around Robert and whispered, "Please try, but be ready for behind-the-scenes opposition from the oil and gas folks. It will not be easy, but I will back you up all the way. Although I am afraid it will be for naught."

Robert looked defeated already and warmly said, "Thank you, Wallace."

Luc danced a couple of dances with Maud and regaled her with tales about the people in the room. She loved hearing the dirt on these pillars of society and government. In the middle of a dance, an aide tapped Luc on the shoulder and asked to dance with Maud. He was young and handsome and she immediately began to flirt with him. The aide whispered to Luc that the President would like a word in private. Another young man escorted Luc to the Oval Office where President Truman was waiting.

He greeted Luc, "Ah, Wallace, please come in and have a seat." They sat down across from each other and Truman began, "I have something for you." He reached into his inside coat pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. He handed it to Luc and recited this speech, "On behalf of a grateful nation, I would like to present you with the highest civilian honor our country bestows, the Medal of Freedom."

The President stood and Luc followed suit. He shook Luc's hand officially. "I created this award with you in mind. It will go to several others, but you get the first one. Of course, this is all classified Top Secret. Please tuck it away in a drawer and take a peek every few years."

They both laughed and Luc said, "Sir, I am honored." They chatted for a minute and Luc warned the President that the Soviets would be a problem now that Stalin has gotten his way on almost everything he wanted. "Moreover, when they get the bomb, it will become a challenging balancing act to keep the world at peace." Luc got the distinct feeling that Truman did not care about that right now, Luc said thank you again and rejoined the other guests. He gathered up Maud, who was getting somewhat drunk, and they left the estate. Luc had the driver stop and let him off outside the gate. Luc wanted to see who was hanging around the Willard Hotel.

*Today Washington, D.C.*

Luc rejoined the Secretary. Duncan looked at Luc very closely for a long moment, laughed a real gut laugh and

accepted the team's offer immediately, but asked to be a rover and not stationed in the Empire State Building. Luc deferred to John who was still online. John conferred with Gunther for a second and agreed to the terms.

Then Luc wanted to get down to business and the two men talked for hours about the past and the future. Somewhere in the discussion, Duncan truly realized how the possibilities could be achieved with the resources Luc was putting at his disposal. He actually became quite giddy as he was thinking of things he wanted to set right.

Just for fun, Luc walked Duncan around the restaurant and showed him pictures of himself in several places. Luc was present in several group photos, but the one Duncan got the biggest kick out of was seeing Luc with the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk. Luc was standing at the far right in a line with others and wearing a derby and duster. The evening ended and Luc left a very, very excited man who was making notes on napkins as fast as he could write. Luc could not wait to read the report that he knew would follow.

Duncan resigned his post as Secretary of State the next morning and joined the team in their offices for the next few days. He was a man of action and intelligence. It took him only twenty-eight hours from when Luc revealed the secret for him to start acting like a partner and not a new-bee.

Michael finally called and advised Luc to gather his friends.

## Door #3

When the team members were gathered, Luc tried to make it a party. They met in what was now Luc and Angela's place. Angela acted as host with food and drink until Michael arrived. Talk was light with the uncertainty about Luc's future on everybody's mind. It was clear that all there cared about Luc greatly. He loved them all just as much. They had talked through what might be in store for him and he seemed to feel that it was time for him to move on. Where? He had no idea. God had a plan and he was ready to follow it. He was sad to think that he would be leaving his new wife and old friends, but happy that he was now assured of being in God's good graces. Luc felt confident that his good work would continue with these fine people.

Security notified them when Michael arrived and had a companion as well. When the newcomers entered, Luc recognized the second man as one of the First Language men, the same one he saw in Israel. Luc offered them chairs but they declined as Michael said he thought this would be a very short visit. The other man had changed from Luc's first encounter at the restaurant and was all smiles now. Luc was standing facing Michael and he noticed that all his friends had stood in a half circle beside and behind him. When they were all prepared, Michael introduced his friend, "This is Gabriel, God's Voice."

Gabriel spoke for the first time. His voice was commanding and kind. "Your life of immortality is over." Luc prepared himself for death, but that was not what God had planned. "Because you have proven yourself to be the Champion of Mankind, you will be known as Lucasiah Champion. You will age, die and return home. Live long, Luc Champion. Your work here is not finished. You have mankind's future to build." Gabriel and Michael touched his shoulders and he was changed.

The End