

The Curse of Dracul

By

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Foreword

I was watching a movie the other day, a remake of Ghostbusters with an all-female cast. Several of the women were sitting around and one asked another about what got them interested in ghosts. She gave a nice answer about an elderly woman who lived next door to her as a child who had died and haunted her. But, what if her answer was, “Because I am one”?

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The Claremont Hotel

The ringing of the phone startled everyone in the office. It had not rung in over a week. They were accustomed to long days without any calls. Their business was not well advertised except for a growing presence online from their website. They got many site visits, but passed on the advertising potential because they were well funded by grants (or so the story was told). Leslie Bartok, a grad student at the University of San Francisco, looked at Basil Demeter, the electronics whiz kid, and then they both looked at the boss, Dela Samuels.

Dela saw them both look, smiled and picked up the phone, "Unexplainable" was all she said and proceeded to listen for the next minute. She took quick notes and mumbled, "Uh huh" a lot. Then she said the sentence that got Leslie and Basil up and going, "We'll be there in an hour." Dela hung up, got out from behind her desk and blurted out, "Let's go!" Then she answered the question she knew they were thinking, "We're going to have lunch at the Claremont in Berkeley."

They grabbed their bags and packed essential supplies that were necessary for their trip -- laptops, cameras, etc. They were out the door quickly, leaving their Nob Hill office in San Francisco, a first-floor office in the three-story 1930s home owned by Dela. She lived alone on the top two floors of the fully restored four-bedroom house conveniently located directly between the three main city exits, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Bay Bridge and the Bayshore Freeway South.

Once Basil had gotten the company car out of the street-level garage, they piled in and took off. As they drove through the city to the Bay Bridge entrance, Dela filled them in. The Claremont Hotel in the Berkeley hills had another event last night and management needed something to tell the public.

The *event* was a sighting of an apparition that appeared at the hotel every so often. Dela was a paranormal investigator -- she hunted ghosts.

They all were very familiar with the hotel's reports of strange, unexplainable sights and sounds. Dela had been in the hotel many times over the years, but she told Basil and Leslie that this was only her second visit. It opened in 1915 and has been a jewel in the hills of Berkeley ever since. They brought the usual equipment -- tape recorders, video cameras and some other basic atmospheric measurement readers. Usually, the most important thing they needed to have with them was a caring and open mind toward the people who had called them in the first place. Dela called it being a kind and compassionate listener no matter what you were hearing. The three of them had worked together for a year now and had a routine

down. Basil was clean cut with a goatee and dressed very preppie. He was good looking in a nerdy way, and in good shape at an even six foot tall. He was 26, dated a lot, but currently did not have a girlfriend. He lived on the other side of town from Nob Hill and took the bus to work every day. The 28-year-old Leslie was small at 5'2", slender and very pretty. She also dated, but not much and was also currently unencumbered. She lived only a few blocks away from the office in an apartment she shared with a couple of friends. Dela thought it odd that Leslie and Basil never gave dating a shot. Dela too was pretty but in an ordinary way. She had long curly dark hair and looked to be about 35 years old. She wore little makeup but, when she dressed up, she was a cover girl knockout. She was 5'8" and weighed a slender 130 pounds that was all muscle. She exercised a lot in her down time, mostly swimming in her stationary pool in the little court yard that came with her home.

The traffic through the hilly streets to the Bay Bridge was easy this time of the morning and the drive over the water even easier. But once they hit the East Bay, they slowed to a crawl due to a double whammy of construction and an accident. A half hour later, they pulled into the Claremont Hotel driveway, parked with the valet and entered through the grand main doors.

They stopped in the waiting area between the door and the front desk and Dela told Leslie and Basil to take a seat, she would handle the greeting. She walked up to the desk and asked for Mr. Dembro, the manager with whom she had spoken. A quick call from the receptionist and he appeared. They said their introductions and Mr. Dembro suggested they move into the lounge, which was closed at the moment. Dela gathered her group and they all walked downstairs to the large lounge. The outside curtains were drawn and the lights were dim when they entered.

Dembro turned on the lights and said, "This is the room where two of the cleanup staff saw the manifestation. It was around two a.m. and they were just finishing up. They said they saw a woman in a ballroom gown dance around by the windows over there." He pointed to the right towards a bank of windows that looked out on the swimming pool. "Then when the two housecleaning ladies got over being frightened to death, they stood and quietly watched the woman dance for three minutes before she walked out the door over there." He pointed to the door by windows where the woman was dancing.

"Can we talk to the housecleaners now?"

"Yes. They just started their shift." He got out his cell phone and dialed. He spoke briefly and ended the call. "They are on their way."

"Excellent." Dela hesitated and said the difficult phrase that had to be said, "Mr. Dembro, it is the policy of our firm to work diligently with the client to understand what is going on. We maintain strict confidentiality and share nothing without your written consent. And even then, you get to approve the text. Agreed?"

“Agreed. And appreciated. Personally, I would like an explanation.”

“That is our ultimate goal.” She paused and finished, “Let me give my friends some directions while your employees come down.” She turned to Leslie and Basil, pointed at the ceiling and said, “How about three cameras, one there, one there and one there.”

Basil studied the layout and suggested a change and angle to the center camera. Basil asked Dembro for a tall ladder and he had one brought up. The two ladies arrived and were introduced to everyone. Both were older Asians and spoke excellent English. Dela had one sit down at a table on one side of the room and the other woman far away with Leslie. Leslie would interview one, while Dela interviewed the other. Both ladies received a notice of confidentiality stating that their identities would not be released by the Unexplainable team without their written consent. They started the recorders and conducted interviews for twenty minutes with both Dela and Leslie taking notes the whole time. Then they got the two women together and let them compare stories. Together, they fine-tuned the ghostly tale.

Basil was done with the installations of the video cameras just as the interviews ended. Mr. Dembro was asked to join them and he instantly appeared. The women were thanked over and over and told they would not be alone tonight when they had to clean this room again. Dela arranged for the three of them to return tonight when the lounge closed and the women began their work to see if last night’s event would reoccur. When everyone was leaving the room, Dela asked for a moment alone in the lounge. The others headed for the main dining room for lunch while Dela quietly walked back into the dark room.

She went to the middle of the space and stood quietly with her eyes closed for a brief second. Her body quivered ever so slightly as she closed and opened her eyes. She looked around the room turning as necessary to take in the entire space. She closed and opened her eyes a second time with the same quivering. She turned back to the door and started to walk out. As she was walking, she mumbled to herself, “Nobody home.”

Dela joined the table with her friends and Mr. Dembro. They did not discuss the reason for their visit, but simply made small talk about the history of the hotel. Dembro fancied himself an expert historian on the building and showed no humility to let everyone know how he felt. The lunch was excellent with Dembro picking up the check. They left with a promise to return later that night.

The Unexplained crew drove back across the bay to San Francisco and returned to the office. They parked and went inside to talk about the plan for the rest of the day and night. Dela let her two employees go home to return at 11 p.m. for the drive back to the Claremont. And suddenly, she was alone.

She meandered through the downstairs office, checked for calls (there were none), read her various email

accounts and shut down the computers for the afternoon. She went upstairs and changed clothes into shorts, a tee shirt and sandals. She walked through the kitchen and checked the refrigerator to make sure there was something for dinner. Leftovers always remained from eating out. She grabbed a bottle of water and took it into the room down the hall she used as an office study. She took a long pull of water and began working on the computer.

Her computer was built into a glass desk with three monitors. It was custom-built for her by some friends at Stanford and they added every techno-toy to the multi-core arrayed processors system. The system was always on and sprung to life with the move of the mouse. She glanced at the running stock market ticker on the left and frowned. She looked one screen over and saw her bank accounts. They were just going under her asset threshold and that meant she needed a cash infusion for the first time in a very long time. She would worry about that later.

She read her personal email, deleted a few and replied to a couple special friends, one in London and one in Prague. Her London friend was a paranormal psychologist and they shared case notes and consulted with each other often. He was Dr. Nigel Thromburg and had a private practice in SoHo. Dela's Prague friend was photojournalist for the Czech News Agency named Jindrich Nornik. She met him in Munich a few months ago when she was there working with a client and on holiday. They were staying in the same hotel and were eating at the hotel restaurant, each by themselves, when they struck up a conversation. They had begun their dinner conversation in German; Dela spoke several languages including German, while Jindrich's German was barely passable. As soon as Dela figured out that he was a Czech, she switched to the Czech language. They continued through dinner and the rest of their time together in that tongue. One thing led to another and they have stayed in touch ever since. Jindrich was planning a trip to San Francisco in a month or so and Dela was looking forward to seeing him again. They were emailing more and more and Dela loved it. She had not had a boyfriend in a very long time.

Dela spent another fifteen minutes poking around on the internet and then went for a half-hour swim. When she was finished and cleaned up, it was dinnertime. She thought about the leftovers and decided to go out to eat. She needed a couple of things from the corner grocery store anyway.

Dela grabbed a coat -- it was October after all and the air was beginning to chill a bit these last few weeks. She locked up and walked one block down and over another to the store. She said hello to the clerk as she walked in and he responded with a pleasant, "Hello, Dela." She picked up a basket and gathered the things she needed. She checked out paying in cash and said goodbye to the clerk by his name, Ernie.

She walked three blocks into China Town and found her favorite restaurant -- too crowded with the wait too long. She went down a few doors where there was no wait and had a pleasant meal by herself.

She worked her cell phone while she waited for the food and cleaned up a few things, but nothing too interesting. The food was exactly what she wanted and she smiled the whole time she ate.

Dela walked back home after dinner and put the groceries away quickly. Then she left again catching a taxi to the shadier side of town. The cab driver let her off with a kind request to be careful. She walked a bit until she found what she was looking for. Across the street and a half a block away, a couple of hookers were manning their designated street corner. She knew their pimp would be nearby and spotted him in a car a few doors away from the women. Dela walked close enough to see the license plate number of his car and kept going. She hailed a taxi after walking another block and took it back to her home a few miles away.

Once inside and settled again, Dela worked her computer to find the name and address of the person that owned the car the pimp was in. Once she had the information, she committed it to memory and filed it away for another day. It was now almost eleven and Leslie and Basil should be there any second. She changed clothes for the night ahead and went downstairs just as they both arrived. They grabbed their bags of equipment and hit the road for the same drive they made that morning, back to the Claremont. The traffic was light this time of night and they avoided the construction that had slowed them down earlier.

The valet at the hotel took their car and helped with their bags. The night manager, Sheila Stetson, a tall, proper person who appeared to have no personality besides the business one she was putting on. Dela dumped her as fast as possible after asking for the cleaners' schedule. They would not be working in the lounge for an hour and a half. Dela told Ms. Stetson to have the ladies knock when they wished to start work. And the three of them went down to the lounge alone.

When they were in front of the closed doors, the Unexplained crew started their standard operating procedures. Dela entered the room alone for a few minutes to *feel* it. She never claimed to have psychic power to anyone and was simply conducting first-in and last-out sweeps of the area. She came back to the door in a few minutes and opened it for her teammates. They quickly set up per Dela's orders, ran some tests, made some adjustments, got out their water bottles and settled in for the long night ahead.

The rules of this game were that they would be as silent as possible. Communication was completed using a pad and pencil. They made a game of it to pass the time often. They remained mostly separated around the room and silently reading or writing. No computers were used because of the clicky keyboards.

After almost two hours, the two ladies knocked on the door. Dela let them in after greeting them warmly in Mandarin Chinese. Both ladies were surprised by her knowing their language. They all came in and Dela let the women start to their work. They told her that the process usually took three hours. Dela, Leslie and Basil went back to their quiet spread-out positions and vigilant boredom mode. The two

Chinese ladies went about their business, but were afraid to vacuum where the apparition was dancing the night before. Dela walked alongside one woman giving her confidence that the ghost was not there tonight. With the vacuuming complete, the women changed the linen on the tables, reset every table and finished quickly. Dela, Leslie and Basil all moved out of their way while they finished the job. None of the equipment indicated any changes to the space at all except for a three-degree fluctuation in temperature as the night got colder outside. The women finished, gathered up the carts, said goodbye and left the room obviously grateful for not being alone.

At 4:32 a.m., the temperature in the room started to drop quickly until it settled at 55 degrees. In the four seconds, it took for the drop to occur, Dela and Leslie moved to Basil's table. They watched the room and the instruments but there were no other changes, except the room's HVAC system kicked on with no effect to the temperature in the room. After one minute and twenty seconds the room started to warm up. It took four minutes for the room heaters to get the space back to 72 degrees and turn themselves off.

No one moved the entire four minutes. They just stood, listened and watched with all their concentration. They did not hear or see anything at all and none of the equipment registered anything but the temperature change. When it was over, they relaxed a bit and eased back to their seats and waited again in quiet. At 6:30 a.m., the sun was coming up and sunlight was streaming through the curtains. The hotel manager, Dembro, knocked on the door at 6:45 a.m. and Dela let him in. They talked for a bit and decided to call it a night. They packed up, Dela took care of her final room check alone, and they all had breakfast at one of the restaurants with Dembro again before heading home. The traffic would be bad for the next hour, so they stalled breakfast as long as they could before leaving.

Finally, the trio left and made the trek across the bay. They dumped their stuff at the office and headed for bed. They would take the rest of the day off to recuperate for being up all night. After Basil and Leslie left, Dela started the data transfers from the recording equipment to their computers in the office and then she went to bed after a shower.

Around two, she woke up and got dressed. She made herself some lunch and ate in the little yard next to the pool. It was a very pleasant day with the temperature staying just above sixty. She wore a warm sweater and wool pants and stayed outside for more than an hour. Once she finally decided to come in, she cleaned up her dishes quickly and went downstairs to make sure the data transfers were complete and everything had gone well.

Dela stacked up the mail that had arrived into the box on Leslie's desk. She pattered around cleaning up a few things and wandered back upstairs to her private computer. She checked her email and found that Jindrich had sent a message. He had finalized his schedule for his San Francisco visit in just three

weeks and two days from then. She found herself excited by the message and thinking about what to do during his weeklong visit. She would start building a schedule during the next few days. After all, there were tickets to shows and concerts to buy.

Dela gave a friend a call and they met for dinner an hour later. They went to Union Square to the Blue Water Grill, one of Dela's current favorite places close to her house. While eating, they ran into two other friends and all visited for a half an hour. Around nine, they all went their separate ways and Dela quickly found herself back in the clothes she had on that afternoon and sitting in front of the TV watching a favorite show about building tree houses. She went to bed around midnight and slept until her usual wake up time of six. She cleaned up, ate breakfast, and walked downstairs to find both Leslie and Basil working away.

Basil had just started to review the recordings created at the Claremont. He scanned the sound graph of the audio file and saw a spike. He said, "Hey, it looks like we have sounds on the recording when the room was closed up for the night and right before we showed up."

That got Dela and Leslie up and next to him to listen to the sounds. Basil queued up the file, turned up the volume on his speakers and started the audio snippet. The playback was silent until a clear and distinct woman's voice said one word very clearly, a name -- "Ruxandra." It was not repeated and the speaker seemed to be calling this person. It was a name that Dela had not heard in a very long time. She recognized the accent as old Romanian, which was fitting since the name was used around the country in the Fifteenth Century. It was not a popular name, but it was not uncommon to hear it or some variation during that period in that place -- the time the Dracul family ruled a part of what is now Romania.

Dela pretended it was the first time she had heard the name and that she was clueless as the others about what it might mean. Dela knew exactly what it meant. Someone was calling her.

Getting Away

The report on the Claremont investigation was written and posted on their website and delivered by email to the hotel. This investigation was considered open as far as Dela was concerned. They never closed a case without being able to clearly establish that the events were not of a paranormal variety.

Dela switched shifts with Leslie and Basil and took the work-all-night-mode for the next few nights. Dela went to the Claremont every night for the rest of the week and hung out in the lounge after hours to see if anything happen. She recorded every night, listened, and watched for any movement or sound. After three nights of nothing, she gave up and stopped for the time being.

Leslie and Basil staffed the office while Dela slept upstairs during the day, watching the phone and answering some of the many emails they received.

Leslie took the one call -- Horton Swanson called every six months about disturbances in his apartment in the Tenderloin district of the city. The man was older, lived alone and drank a lot. Nonetheless, Dela and Leslie had befriended Horton and visited him every so often. They listened and took notes. They even posted the case on their website much to the pleasure of Horton. Leslie and Basil made the trip together this time and spent three hours visiting with him. Horton let them know that he had contracted cancer and the prognosis was not good. He bluntly told his guest that this visit would probably be their last and that he appreciated them very much. It was all sad and depressing, but they tried to stay upbeat and talk about the disturbances, which consisted of things being moved while he slept. Leslie was pretty sure it was just a case of forgetfulness.

Things were slow the rest of the week and there were no calls whatsoever. They all met late Friday and decided there was nothing to do for the weekend. They would get back together on Monday to start a new week.

With all of Friday night and the weekend free, Dela decided to get away to Lake Tahoe by herself. She had a former client, now friend, who owned a nice cabin on the north side of the lake. The friend let Dela use it anytime and with very short notice. A couple of text messages later and all was set. Dela packed quickly and was on the road beating the traffic northeast out of the city. She would get there around nine p.m. and that was just fine in the October warmth of the mountains. Snow was not expected for another month or so. Dela had been wanting to visit the known haunted sites in Carson City for a few years and this seemed like a good time to get away and think. She was quite familiar with all of them, but thought that a fresh visit might turn up something interesting.

She took the company car, her black 2017 Jaguar F Type SVR Coupe. It was a dream to drive and, right now, that is exactly what she wanted to do, drive. It was a three and a half hour one-way trip with Carson City only twenty miles away. She knew a great place to stop and eat, the Heyday Café in Placerville. She loved the chicken Marsala with rice and vegetables.

The drive leaving the city was easy with only a few slowdowns for impatient drivers that were cutting into lanes to pass a few cars in an attempt to get home twenty-two seconds earlier. Dela mostly thought about the *haunted places* she would be visiting this weekend. The cabin she was staying in was the first on her haunted list, since it had definite signs of activity in the past. Robert and Sandy Travis called Dela five years ago when they were in their new vacation home for the first time. They lived in Sacramento and dreamt of having a getaway spot on the lake. Their dream was shaken their first night in the cabin when dishes that had just been put away in a china hutch started to fly out. The Travises came downstairs to witness the doors on the hutch open with one plate at a time sailing across the room. They called 911 and the police arrived five minutes later, two minutes after the dishes stopped sailing away. Robert called Dela the next day and she drove up to the lake immediately. She did the proper investigation, but the dishes never moved again and no other signs or events had occurred since. It appeared to be a one-time problem.

Dela wanted to visit three spots in Carson City. Two were probably a bust because the rooms where the sightings had occurred were inaccessible to the public on such short notice. One was in the Governor's Mansion and the other was the Carson City Mint-Nevada State Museum. The mansion had tours all the time and the museum was open for general business. She could probably get the people at the museum to take her around for a behind the scenes tour of the ghostly rooms. The Brewery Arts Center was a town theater where music groups and other traveling acts played all the time. She was pretty sure with a phone call she could get anywhere in the theatre building. She knew all the places well having been to each several times before.

She stopped in Vallejo for gas and a drink and kept going. The Sacramento traffic was light at seven thirty when she passed through the city. The Placerville dinner stop came up quickly after that and she stopped for her chicken Marsala feast. It did not disappoint and would keep her going until she stopped at a grocery store in Tahoe before reaching the cabin.

The night was clear and dark with no moon, but she could still make out the forests on either side of the road getting thicker the higher she went. She finally reached South Shore and then passed across the state border and hit the high-rise casinos. It was fairly quiet for a Friday night and she kept going not at all tempted by the hustle and bustle of the gaming establishments. She crossed back into California and reached the town of Kings Beach. She stopped for snacks and wandered into the hills for just a mile before reaching the cabin. It had a beautiful view of the lake from the front porch and she stopped to

enjoy it in the dark before getting settled in for the night. She would miss the moonlight most of that weekend, but the stars made up for it.

She unloaded her things and groceries and locked the car and the house for the rest of the night. She built a fire in the great room's fireplace and prepared a snack and some wine. She brought a large hardback book to catch up on her pleasure reading, about the Ottoman Empire written in Turkish. She cuddled up and read until she fell asleep on the couch in front of the fire around midnight.

At 2:38 a.m., she was startled out of her sleep when a single dinner plate crashed into the wall next to the fireplace. Dela jumped up and turned on the desk lamp next to the couch. She looked at the smashed plate on the floor and then across the room at the china hutch that had one door hanging open. She waited for another plate to fly and shatter, but there was no movement. Dela closed her eyes briefly and reopened them. She scanned the room and neither saw nor heard anything. She closed her eyes, quickly opened them and looked around again. Nothing. Who or whatever broke the plate was gone.

She couldn't go right back to sleep, so she put another log on the fire and read some more. She could not be sure, but she thought she fell asleep again around five a.m. Dela climbed out from her comforter and got ready for the day. She ate some food and wrote up a report on the event from last night. She went for a short early morning walk around the cabin and down the road to the lake. Dela got back to the cabin around nine, packed a couple of things and took off on the short drive to Carson City.

Carson City holds a rich and colorful history as the capital city of Nevada. The city was named after the pioneer west scout Kit Carson. He was the scout hired by John C. Fremont for his exploration party of 1843. In 1859, the Comstock Lode was discovered and gave Carson City its first growth spurt. Many fortunes were made including one by George Hearst, a miner turned politician who was the father of newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst. A few Carson City casinos are thriving, but without the fame of Vegas or Reno. With the mines pretty much run out, the main industry of the city is the state government that employs more than ten thousand people.

Dela pulled onto the main street at nine thirty and headed directly for the Governor's Mansion. She bought a ticket for the first tour of the day. She waited fifteen minutes for it to start and walked around the gift shop to use up the time. She found a couple of cool things and bought them for the office and home. She purchased a gag can of spring worms for Basil and a nice set of silver nugget earrings for Leslie.

The tour started with only an older couple and Dela in the group. The tour guide, Rose, was an older volunteer woman who had a wonderful litany of interesting information about the mansion. About half way through the walk and narration, she mentioned the hauntings. Dela asked a couple of questions and that got Rose going on and on about the ghostly history. The last sighting was at least ten years ago. Dela even got Rose to take them down some roped off hallways to see the exact spots of the sightings. Dela

concluded that there was nothing to see at this point, so she left when the tour was over and went to find lunch. She found a nice place, the Carson City Black Bear Diner, and had a huge bacon burger, fries and a vanilla milkshake.

Over lunch, she thought about the two recent events that were so close together in time, it was very odd. An entire year would pass without discovering anything tangible and for two events to occur only a week apart was very odd indeed.

She opted not to take a tour of the Mint museum and walked the displays by herself. She was only there for an hour before she had seen everything. Nothing out of the ordinary there.

Dela parked and walked up to the closed Brewery Arts Center. She went up to the will call booth that was manned by a very young high school boy and asked him if the manager was working inside. Just as Dela supposed, the manager was in and working to set up for a show that would start in a few hours. The boy called the manager, and he came to the front door quickly to talk with her.

When he opened the front door, he greeted Dela warmly and invited her in. She told him she wanted to put up a picture spread of the theater on her website and wondered if she could look around a bit. He was glad to show her around and they walked through the lobby, the large seating area and the stage. Finally, she got around to asking about any paranormal sightings and he was glad to talk about them all. He was a good manager and knew that any publicity was good publicity. The last sighting he knew about occurred three years ago and was the appearance of a small crying boy in one of the dressing rooms. She asked to see the room and he escorted her there immediately.

He took her backstage down a long corridor of ten small dressing rooms. They were numbered and he stopped at number five. He opened the door, reached inside and turned on the lights. He let Dela go first into the room and she stopped after only one step. The manager followed her in and bumped into her when she stopped abruptly. Seated on the floor of the room to the right was a little boy of perhaps six and he was quietly sobbing. He was dressed in street clothes from the 1950s with a wool cap on his head. His arms were around his legs, pulled up to chest with his head resting forward on his knees.

Dela motioned for the manager to be quiet and back out of the room. He did and she closed the door never taking her eyes off the boy. She pulled a chair from a dressing table and eased herself into it facing the child. Still, the boy ignored her and continued to cry.

Dela whispered, "What's wrong?"

No reply. "Why are you so sad?"

Nothing.

Dela closed her eyes and opened them up to the world the boy lived in. Then she said, "What's wrong?" again and this time the boy looked up at her and stopped crying.

Then he said, "My ma left me here."

Dela smiled at him and said, "Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry."

"I have to wait for her to come get me."

"No you don't. She's not coming back. You don't have to wait any longer."

He looked up at her and said, "I don't? I can go now?"

"Yes. You can go now."

He stood up and said, "Thank you, Ruxandra. I mean, thank you, ma'am." He started to fade and vanished in less than a second.

Dela was shocked and dazed. That name again. She stood up and closed her eyes. She opened them to a quiet and empty tiny room. She reached over and opened the door to find the manager standing there waiting. It had only been one minute since he opened the door for Dela and it was obvious that he wanted to hear what had happened.

Dela said, "The boy is gone now." She walked past the man down the hallway back to the front stage and he followed. "I don't think he will be back."

"Did you talk to him? How do you know he won't be back? What happened in there?" Dela kept on walking and he kept on asking questions.

Finally, she had to deal with him and stopped, "I talked to him and told him he didn't need to wait here anymore. And he was gone, just like that."

"Wow."

"Look, I'm going to post this on my website." She handed him her business card. "I will let you read everything before it goes up. Thank you for your time; you have been most kind."

"And that's it? Should we stay out of that dressing room? Should I call my bosses? What should I do?"

She opened the front door and said, "If I were you, I really wouldn't bother telling anyone. At least not until my story gets out there. No one will believe you anyhow." She walked out into the cool afternoon sun and walked the couple of blocks to Cactus Jack's Senator's Club, a smaller casino that catered to the older cheaper crowd. On the way there, she thought over what the little boy had called her. How could he know that name? She didn't know *his* name.

She opened the front door, found the first bar and ordered a diet coke. She walked the floor until she found what she wanted, a \$20 black jack table. There were only two open, each with two players. She picked one and sat down to the far right of the other two players. She pulled out five one hundred dollar bills and cashed them in for chips. She started playing and breaking even with the minimum bet for the first half hour. At some point, she started to win more than lose and upped her bets. In a matter of

minutes, she was up almost five grand. She kept plowing along betting big on winning hands and less on the losers. When she had eighty-five hundred dollars' worth of chips in front of her, she stopped playing, tipped the dealer and went to the cashier window. She cashed out and left the place.

She walked across the street to the Nugget and headed straight to the \$20 tables. The casino had many to choose from -- this was a much nicer place than Cactus Jack's -- and she quickly found a table she liked. She played exactly as she did before with small bets to start and then larger as she started winning. It only took her a few minutes to get in the groove. A pit boss made a call as he was watching her play and she knew it was time to wrap it up. Another couple of bets and she was up nine grand. She cashed in her chips and left to find her car.

She drove east to the Lucky Strike and proceeded to do the same thing. She knew that the pit bosses talked to each other from casino to casino about players suspected of card counting. Also, if you crossed the ten thousand dollar mark, the casinos had to make you fill out an IRS form. Every pit boss knew that as well and watched for players who were playing to that profile. Dela zipped through all the casinos quickly before they could anticipate her walking in and keep her from playing. She figured that after four scores, the town would be watching for her.

She hit the Gold Dust West and then changed clothes and hairstyle before moving on to the Wyndham Garden and Dotty's Casino. She played them out and changed her appearance again. Dela completed the night by stopping at the Casino Fandango and Bodine's before driving back to Lake Tahoe around midnight. She was up a little over seventy thousand dollars. That cash infusion would keep her away from her big money and she still had the seven or so casinos that she liked in Lake Tahoe for tomorrow. She made this type of visit to the gambling meccas of the world only once or twice a year and never to the same town in a four-year span. Casinos had long memories.

Dela slept upstairs in the master bedroom with the door open listening for the sound of crashing dishes downstairs. She cuddled up and was asleep quickly. She slept well with no disturbances from the first floor to bother her out of a good night's sleep. The next morning, she pattered around and went for a walk by the lake. It was cooler this morning and she did not dress for the chilly wind coming off the lake. She cut her walk short and went back to the cabin at a good pace to try to generate some heat.

She cleaned up the house, packed up and left for the first casino of the day. It didn't matter what time of the day it was, the casinos were pretty much busy 24/7. She got to the first one, the Hyatt Regency, parked and started into her usual routine. She had changed her appearance again with a ponytail and glasses and walked out with nine thousand and no one paying obvious attention. There was always the eye in the sky problem and she tried to make it a quick in and out.

The Crystal Bay Casino was the next stop. All appeared to be going smoothly there and she was up

around five thousand. She was alone at the table when the pit boss and another gentleman asked to speak with Dela in private. They stepped over to a side walkway and she was told the management was simply asking her to leave. They walked her over to the change windows where she cashed out and they escorted her to the door. She was busted and now flagged as an undesirable card counter at all the Nevada casinos.

She had to pass on the Nugget, the Mountbleau, Harrah's and Harvey's, but that was okay. She had thirteen thousand from today to add to the seventy from yesterday. She figured that was a pretty good run this time around.

She picked up her car and started down the mountain toward home three hours away.

Dela stopped and had the same meal at the same place as on the drive up the other day. The traffic was light and moving well. She made good time until the inevitable slow down coming into the city. She crossed the Bay Bridge and drove to a storage facility a couple miles from her house. She entered her access code and found her 20x20 room quickly. She opened the roll-up door, turned on the lights and closed the door.

The whole room was lined with cabinets, lockers and safes stacked to the eight-foot ceiling. The only thing out on the center floor was a motorcycle covered with a white sheet. She opened a desk caddie and laid out the cash from the casinos on the extended shelf. She counted out twenty thousand dollars, put it back in her purse and put the rest into a small safe built into the cabinet. She would buy ten thousand dollars' worth of silver, deposit nine into her bank accounts and keep the change for walking-around money.

She closed everything after doing some maintenance on the computer built into the desk. It just needed to update and restart, but that took a good ten minutes. To kill some time, she took the sheet off the motorcycle and looked it over. It was a 1922 Ace Four motorcycle, gloss black with gold accents and a sidecar, all in like-new condition and probably worth a hundred thousand dollars if Dela ever wanted to sell it.

She started it up and heard it roar to life. She listened for a moment and shut it off. Dela climbed off and put the sheet back over it. She finished with her computer chores and locked up the place.

Dela drove home and relaxed the rest of the night before going to bed early. She could not help but feel that there were forces at work beyond her control and that scared her.

The Hearst Castle

The Hearst Castle in San Simeon, California is a tourist destination for thousands every year. William Randolph Hearst started building in 1919 but the project was never really finished. It is more of a Spanish mission style than a European castle and is really a complex of buildings sitting on a 127-acre hillside covered with terraced gardens, fountains and pools.

San Simeon's nearest metro city, if you want to call it that, is San Luis Obispo, still fifty miles away. It is a remote place of beauty on the Pacific Coast and truly a place of early Nineteenth Century decadence and opulence.

Basil showed up first to the office Monday morning and got everything going with bagels and cream cheese from the corner market. He had coffee made when Leslie got there. Dela came downstairs when she smelled the coffee and joined them around the table that centered the large space they used as a conference room. When they were all seated, Dela told them she had a surprise bonus for them and gave them each five hundred dollars. She did this every so often and said it was to make up for the lousy salary she paid them. Basil and Leslie both gave Dela hugs and thanked her over and over. After that, they caught up on their weekend activities with Dela going last. She gave them a brief recap of her visits and experiences with everyone knowing that the first order of business was to document everything and publish it on their website.

They plowed ahead and were almost finished when the phone rang. Dela answered it and handled it per the script they had developed over the years. She said little, took notes and agreed to a schedule all with a minimum of words. Leslie and Basil were waiting for her to get off the phone to hear what Dela had committed them to this time.

She told them the caller was the curator of Hearst Castle and that they had experienced a *disturbance* last night. Two of the security staff had seen an apparition of an old man walking down a hall. It lasted for one whole minute by both of the men's accounts. And what was better was that it was caught on a security camera. The security camera footage was inconclusive because the apparition was so far away. It only appeared to be a soft glow in the middle of the long hall. It did however last a full sixty seconds just as the witnesses described.

Dela recanted the entire story and they talked over the options of what to do next. Basil threw out the idea of just him making the trek and setting up a remote network of instrumentation that they could watch remotely from the office. There is just no easy way to travel to San Simeon's remote location from anywhere. They decided that Basil would suffer the four-hour drive alone and return straight away after

setting everything up. Dela let him take the Jaguar and he packed quickly. He needed to stop by a Best Buy on the way out of town to pick up a few things so Dela gave him a credit card.

Then, Basil was gone and Dela and Leslie were at a loss to find something to do. There was the few minutes it took Leslie to post the rest of the web items and Dela decided to give Leslie the rest of the day off since she had to return that night to watch the show from Hearst Castle. They were hoping Basil would have everything running by nightfall. It would be close with perhaps the weather being the deciding factor. A strong October storm was coming in from the middle of the Pacific Ocean and would hit in the next few hours, right in the middle of Basil's drive. Driving the Pacific Coast highway is usually beautiful in the daytime. Night was a bit more risky, but not usually a problem. A storm however could bring all kinds of challenges.

The storm hit Basil just as he passed Big Sur around noon. The rain slowed him down and probably meant that he would not get to the castle until after dark. He, Dela and the curator stayed in touch by cell phone and kept updating their plans as the day went on. Everyone's best guess was that Basil would be arriving just after six thirty, which was exactly sunset in San Simeon this time of year. The GM agreed to put Basil up in a cottage for the night and he could work as late as he wanted when he arrived. He also kindly set Basil up with food and drink throughout the night from the many kitchens that were on the property.

So, Basil arrived to full stormy darkness and found the directions he had been given were great. A security guard at a gate was expecting Basil and let him pass immediately, giving him clear directions on where to park. He was able to park in an automobile portico out of the rain that showed no signs of letting up. It was not too chilly or windy, being sheltered by hillsides, walls and buildings. The curator, Stephanie Sutcliff, a woman in her forties, came out to greet Basil as he pulled up. She had with her two of the security staff to help carry in packages and equipment boxes. The trunk and backseat were full and it took all of them a couple of trips. Once inside, they properly introduced themselves again and talked about the trip down the coast in this weather.

One of the guards, Oscar, obviously the senior person, soon went into the narrative of last night's sighting with his partner, Stew, nodding his head in agreement as the story was told. The tale did not take long and, when finishing up, they were standing where the two men stood and watched the night before. Once Basil got a feel for the camera placement, he added them to the control panel overlay of the building map. The system ran on an easy app with hopefully an easy setup. Basil discussed the layout, listening to input from people in the castle. A couple of folding tables were set up per Basil's request and they laid boxes and cases of equipment on them. They also had a ladder for Basil to use to install cameras near the tall ceilings.

Basil was hungry, so the curator showed him where to get food and then to his cottage on the other side of the building. After setting some things down in the room, Stephanie left, and Basil set off to find some food in the building next to the main building where he would be working. He ordered from a menu at a cafeteria -- a nice salad and shrimp linguini pasta with a good glass of wine -- then went back to the other building to start work.

Oscar and Stew showed up as soon as Basil arrived back at the worktables and they wanted to help. Their job was obviously boring and any change in the schedule was welcome. It was now eight o'clock and Basil wanted to be done by twelve twenty, the time of last night's sightings.

First, they picked a room to store the Wi-Fi equipment, a good-sized closet in an office that no one used. Basil dismissed the guards for a bit and went to work on setting everything up on his laptop. The application software on his phone was easy to follow other than a couple of wordings that Basil would have changed, obviously translated from another language. After several trips back to the equipment tables for cables and at least five reboots of the system, he was ready to start connecting the cameras, microphones, motion sensors, temperature sensors and a few more things.

Basil started with the sensors in the outside office since he was standing in it. He set up the ladder in the corner of the room with help from Stew. The equipment needed to connect to a normal AC outlet, so Basil ran an extension cord hidden behind an enclosure strip that matched the paneling on the wall. He used removable double-back tape so things would stay in place without someone taking it down. The first set of sensors were set up and linked to the system. Once it was online, he sent a message to Dela and Leslie to get them set up with a link to the monitoring app. They would watch and listen as he brought more and more stations online. They had been waiting for the message and got set up in just a few minutes.

It was now nine thirty and Basil moved into the main hallway. Oscar returned to help with Stew. Basil showed them the layout of what to include at the various stations. Not all stations had cameras, some just had audio and temperature equipment. The first two were easy and quick. The next station had a bad sensor but worked fine when replaced.

Basil and Stew had just moved the ladder to the next location when Oscar screamed. He had been startled by the appearance of the figure of an old man standing across the table from him. Of course, Basil and Stew were also surprised and jumped a little themselves when they saw the old man from thirty feet away. Basil eased down the ladder and told Oscar to set down the things he had picked up and back away. Basil began to walk toward the man and the image turned and looked directly at him. Basil stopped and said, "Hello, my name is Basil. What's yours?" He got no reply except a blank stare and little movement. Then the man shifted his cane to the other hand and turned to walk away. Basil implored, "Wait. Please

come back.” The man walked toward the end of the hall and blinked out of view in an instant. They saw no fading, glow or sparks, just a solid man dressed in a dark suit from the 1930s. He was older and distinguished, quite dashing in his suit and accessorized with the cane. And that was that.

Oscar called Dela and Leslie and talked it over. Nothing was gotten on the remote feed since the cameras were far at the other end of the long hall. There was no sound or temperature change, nothing. After taking a break and calming down, the fellows finished installing the rest of the equipment around two in the morning. They cleaned up and Basil accompanied Stew on his scheduled rounds. Stew gave him the inside tour of the place as much as his schedule allowed. There were two other pairs of guards so Stew only covered about a third of the buildings. The tour was great and Basil finally got to bed around three in the morning.

Basil got up with the sun around six thirty and checked the network from his laptop before venturing out to find some breakfast. He showered and went back to the same cafeteria he had found the night before. They were expecting him and prepared a nice omelet breakfast for him. After he was finished, he retrieved his things from the cottage and moved them to his car. He went into the wired building and talked to the guards on station now. Everything was moving along as it should be with no disturbances to report. It was still raining, but it had turned into a muggy mist. He touched base with Dela and got the word to begin the drive home.

He left around eight thirty and started the trek home up the coast road. He checked in with Dela and Leslie as he drove and they started interviewing him to write the report. There was very little for him to add to it when he arrived just after lunch. They spent the rest of the day learning the new monitoring network system. This was the first time they had tried anything remote and Dela thought it might be a step forward in the investigation science. The network was tuned to set off alarms through the app and Leslie, Basil and Dela each enabled the alarm notifications on their phones.

Nothing happened through the rest of the day and night, so Dela asked Basil to go back to the Claremont and rig up a network there just like the Hearst Castle. Dela took a break at one point and ran an errand to her storage facility, where she rigged up the same network, got some cash, and then drove to the bank to make a deposit just short of ten thousand dollars.

A few days later at the castle beginning at two forty a.m., one by one, the eighteen cameras were moved to aim up at the ceiling instead of the hallway. The movement was not violent or rough, they just were turned one after another over a four-minute period. Dela was the first to see it when she was up late to monitor everything. At first, she thought it was a system failure and then she replayed the exact start of activity. This was a deliberate act by something that could approach the cameras unseen and reach eleven feet off the floor to redirect the lenses.

No alarms were triggered since the cameras did not fail nor were there any other changes, just the simple camera adjustment. Dela set up a message to Leslie and Basil and told them they could deal with it when they got to the office.

Everyone got to work early to talk about the new development at the Hearst Castle. Stephanie Sutcliff, called too and so they set up a conference call for eight. With everyone online, Basil played the videos from the events and showed what had happened. After a short visit, it was decided that Stephanie would have her team reposition the cameras and see what would happen next. Dela was ready to drive down, but hoped to wait another day until the storm passed through.

Stephanie got her guards working quickly and had all the cameras turned back to the correct position in just a few minutes. When that was finished, everyone went back into waiting mode for the next event, with the expectation that something else would occur.

Nothing happened for the next two days and nights at the castle. However, there was some activity at the Claremont Hotel. One night at 3:46 a.m., the camera caught twenty seconds of the woman in white dancing in the lounge. No sound, just the video of her twirling and spinning as she danced her way across the floor.

The sightings were so far apart that Dela did not feel a live stakeout was appropriate. Then back at Hearst Castle, the cameras were turned again, this time at noon on a Tuesday. Dela hit the road.

She had the castle crew leave the cameras out of position this time. She wanted to reset them herself. The weather was cloudy and the ride was easy. She got there around five in the afternoon and was met by Stephanie, Oscar and Stew. She was shown around quickly and Stephanie waited to eat with her in the cafeteria before showing her the reserved cottage. They ate and chatted about work and family with Dela revealing almost nothing of her past. She gave vague responses to where she was from and what schools she had attended. It was just enough to not raise any suspicions about her past. Dela simply kept the light dinner conversation focused on Stephanie and the castle history.

After dinner, Dela and Stephanie returned to the hall. Stephanie took off for her commute home to Cambria just ten or so miles away. She promised to return if needed as the night went on. Once Stephanie was gone, Dela had a long visit with Oscar and Stew. She had them set the ladder under one of the stations in the center of the hall. She walked the area for a good fifteen minutes and did her closing and opening her eyes thing only to feel that there was nothing present besides her and the guards.

She stood below the ladder and surveilled the area as she started to climb up. She stopped and looked around as she got higher and higher. She reached the camera and made the correction. Still no reaction from anything or anyone. Stew and Oscar offered to help, but Dela insisted she drag the ladder around by

herself at this point. She repositioned two more cameras and was on the fourth, when the suited man appeared at the bottom of the ladder. She was startled at first, but then slowly climbed down the ladder watching him the whole time.

When she was down, she was no more than two feet from him. He looked as solid as any person and was watching her intently. She said, "I'm Dela. And who might you be, good sir?" He did not reply, but did not make any move to leave either. She stepped a bit to her right to see if he would track her with his eyes. He did and she walked down the hall away from working cameras. He did not follow at first, but just watched her walk away. She paused, looked back and beckoned him to come with her. Then he took a few steps to catch up and together they walked side by side until they were clear of the cameras. He seemed to know as well as Dela that they were now truly alone.

She closed her eyes and moved herself into the shadow world of greys where the man lived. She opened her eyes and looked at him again as they kept walking. She repeated her earlier statements, "I'm Dela. And who might you be, good sir?"

In a beautiful baritone voice he said, "Dela. A beautiful name. I am Alfred Tannenbaum, at your service." He put out his hand and she shook it warmly.

"Mr. Tannenbaum, may I ask you another question?"

"Why yes, my dear, as long as it is not my age." He smiled and she did too.

"What is today's date?"

"Oh... I thought it was going to be a tough one. It is May 17, 1930."

"Yes, of course. What brings you to this magnificent place?"

"Oh, I am here on business. I am one of Mr. Hearst's bankers, down from San Francisco."

"Well, if you are going to conduct business, I cannot think of a grander place to conduct it. I just came from a meeting with William and he told me to tell you that your business was finished and you could go home."

"Well, I would certainly like that. My family is probably beginning to worry. Yes, I would like that..." His voice trailed off and he blinked out of existence. Dela was standing there alone and started to cry.

She walked back into the field of view of the cameras she had corrected and she called the office. Leslie and Basil put her on speaker phone and she told them the story of the encounter. At the end of the conversation, Dela told them both to go home and that she would be back to the city around noon the next day.

She visited with Oscar and Stew and asked them to fix the cameras when they had the time. She went on a couple of rounds with Oscar and got the same private tour Basil had a few nights before. Then she

went back to her cottage and watched TV until she fell asleep.

Before he left work, Basil reviewed the instrumentation records from Dela's encounter. He saw nothing until he replayed a camera at the far end of the hall where Dela talked to the man. It was really dim being in the dark and so far away, but he could make out the two figures walking away from the camera. He saw Dela's outline disappear at some point and then reappear a few moments later without the man. Basil enhanced the video and with some work could clearly make out the shape of Dela before it vanished and, then again, when it reappeared. He studied it many times and finally came to the only logical conclusion; for a period of forty seconds, Dela had been invisible.

The Convention

Basil wrote his report and had it ready when Dela showed up at 12:30. She changed clothes from the drive and ate some lunch before joining them downstairs. Basil showed Dela and Leslie the video recording and let them work through the whole enhancement process with a little pushing from him. They came to the same conclusion as him with Dela unable to explain the mystery any more than they could. Basil let it go and they spent the rest of the day writing reports and updating the website.

It did not take long to learn the story of the Hearst banker, Alfred Tannenbaum. He died a few days after his return to San Francisco from his May 1930 meetings. Nothing unusual, just getting old. He was seventy-two at the time of his death and left behind a normal family of two children and four grandchildren. His wife had passed several years earlier. By all accounts, he seemed to be an honest banker helping his very special client. Nothing indicated why he was hanging around the castle, except for a meeting he ended up not having. Nothing indicated that the meetings and subsequent events involving Mr. Hearst around that time was out of the ordinary. There were no hard conclusions that could be drawn from anything and that is where Dela left the story.

But, not Basil. He opened a personal note file on a laptop he kept off the network and entered some new facts. The folder was called Sensor Calibration Logs and it was buried deep in a series of technical subdirectories. He had hidden the file within other files because he wanted it kept from Dela. It was about her. Personal odd observations that Basil had witnessed. Things that didn't add up. He was not doing it to be mean. He was just curious about his boss and started taking notes. Then it got weird. And, these last few weeks, it got even weirder.

He looked at his notes and added two more languages to her skillset, Mandarin Chinese and Czech. Already on the list were English, Spanish, French and Romanian. These were just the few he could verify. He suspected she spoke German and Russian as well. At least five foreign languages -- five foreign languages is not unusual. However, for such a young person (he figured Dela was thirty-five), this was odd because she never talked about it. Her past was a mystery. Basil couldn't find her actual birthdate record. Dela had said that she always lived in San Francisco except for some lengthy stays in Europe. She said she inherited her house, but he found records that seemed to indicate otherwise. It was all hard to untangle and a side of him felt that the intrigue was kind of cool. Then there was the mystery about her ability to sense things beyond the normal construct of reality. Now he had tangible proof of something actually magical about her -- a video file showing her turning invisible to the camera, blinking away and then back again.

Their remote monitoring was running well at the two locations with nothing to report at either site for the last 48 hours. Dela was caught up on everything and needed to plan for an upcoming event and Jindrich's visit. The upcoming event was a convention Dela had organized for paranormal investigators. It was all set up and paid for using an agency to handle the details. About a hundred people signed up with no shortage of speakers. The convention would span two and half days, starting on Monday at the Moscone Convention Center. Friends of Dela were coming in the weekend before to visit and see the sights. Today was Thursday and her first commitment was on Saturday night with a friend from New York.

Jindrich was showing up the following Saturday morning and Dela had given Basil and Leslie the week off for vacation. She planned local day-trips filled with many train rides. There are many excursion trips by train around California and Dela was determined to ride all of them with Jindrich. He had dropped that he loved riding trains and wanted to go on more vacation and sightseeing rides than just trying to get from point A to point B. He wanted to enjoy the ride rather than just the destination.

She bought a couple of concert tickets, one for the symphony and one for some jazz. Diana Krall was playing at the Davies Symphony Hall and the San Francisco Symphony was playing Stravinsky. Dela identified five train rides that were close enough to get to the starting point in time for the ride. Three included food and one only had a bar. She booked all five events to keep them busy while Jindrich was in town.

Friday morning came and the Unexplained office received a call they knew they would get someday. Horton Swanson, their friend across town had died and the apartment building manager was giving them a call to let them know about the service. The building manager had met Dela and Leslie several times when they visited and had taken their number just in case this day ever came. It was going to be a small service at a local church given by a preacher who did not even know Horton. The ceremony was scheduled for Saturday afternoon. Dela told the apartment manager that she, Leslie and Basil would be there.

They stayed busy with convention business the rest of the day, but the mood around the office was dampened by the death of their friend. They went home a bit early and agreed to meet at the church for the service right before it was scheduled to start. They met outside the church as planned and went inside together. They were just a few minutes early and said hello to the building manager as they sat down in a pew a few rows back from the front of the sanctuary. A few lone people were scattered around, but the number attending was less than ten.

Right on time, a pastor took his place to start the service, and a few hymns were sung. Then, he read a short prepared paragraph about Horton's life, which was dismal because no one really knew anything

about Horton. They had his birthplace and birthdate right, but there were huge gaps in Horton's life that were sad reminders for all to feel about their own lives. It was like going to church and feeling that God had the pastor give the exact sermon you would get. Once that painful reading concluded, he told a nice short story on the Golden Rule.

At the end, he invited those in attendance to share a few words. Leslie stood and talked about how kind and funny Horton was in his own way. No one else said anything. The service was over in thirty minutes and Dela, Leslie and Basil went their separate ways home.

Dela killed a couple of hours wandering home. She went by the street corner where the hookers and their pimp were the other night and found the area empty. It was still midafternoon after all. They would probably show up at sunset to start the night of work ahead. She went by her storage unit and got some cash from one her stashes. After that, she stopped by the grocery store before going home. She was to meet her friend in a few hours at the Top of the Mark at the Mark Hopkins hotel for drinks before dinner.

Dela's friend was a woman she had met four years ago at an informal conference on paranormal research in Rhode Island. The woman, Wanda Ford, was not an investigator. Wanda lived in New York City and was a psychic that claimed to have some success with contacting the *other side*, as she liked to call it. In other words, she could speak to the dead as an intermediary for a loved one. She had even helped local law enforcement with a few troubling cases.

They met right on time and Wanda couldn't be happier with the selection of places to meet. The Top of the Mark was only five blocks from Dela's home and the weather was nice so Dela had walked over. They ordered drinks and sat down for a long catch-up visit. They ordered food and finally got around to casework. They both began trading stories until they had sufficiently heard enough. Besides, it did not take too long before men started to notice the two attractive women having a drink. The band started to play and people began to dance. It was down to mingle or change venues and Wanda wanted to dance and party. Dela begged off after a while and walked home.

The next day, Sunday, held three conference committee meetings for Dela. They went by easily with many volunteers jumping in and taking care of the details. A few last minute changes were made, but everything came together nicely. Although Dela was the organizer and sponsor, she would end up with very few responsibilities. She was sitting on a panel on the morning of the last day, Wednesday, to share a couple of case descriptions, but that was it. At last accounting, she was actually going to make money by sponsoring, but she would start an account and let the conference fund itself from here on out. She would formally announce this at the closing business meeting.

Dela had dinner while working with a committee around seven and then joined a group of people

afterward for a drink at Jillian's across the street. Dela left around ten and went home for the night since it would be an early start tomorrow and for the next few mornings. She was looking forward to sleeping in the following week when Jindrich was visiting. She got home with no trouble, took a shower and watched a bit of TV before turning in for the night.

Dela woke up early, got ready and headed for the early breakfast meeting with the main committee. It was at the conference center and she had no trouble with traffic this time of day. She valet parked at the center and found her way to the meeting where she was greeted warmly by a representative of the company that had handled the convention logistics. The nice young woman did not know Dela, thinking she was another guest, and looked on a clipboard. She directed Dela to her meeting and then helped another person behind her and on it went.

Dela found her seat at the head table and was greeted by the two people at the table with her, a man from Spain and a woman from New Orleans. She knew both of them from the meetings the day before and asked about their time so far in San Francisco. They chatted while Dela set her things down and then went to grab some food from the buffet. She brought her food back to the table and more people had showed up. They all got settled and the meeting began while they ate. Dela welcomed everyone and immediately turned the hosting over to the woman who volunteered to emcee the affair.

The emcee went through the agenda; everything was going as planned and, so far, there were no more last-minute changes. One very nice thing was that Wanda was seated next to Dela at this table and they whispered quietly during the breaks. The meeting ended and Dela mingled for a half hour before the first presentation began.

Everyone wanted to thank Dela personally for getting the convention going after so many years of people talking about it but doing nothing. Leslie and Basil showed up ready to go after meeting with their committees. This size of convention group was the smallest the Moscone Center would take on so the convention floor was packed. The emcee got up and started everything off by introducing Dela to say a few words. Dela kept it short and thanked everyone before slipping away gracefully.

After a few minutes of administrative announcements, they got down to business with the first speaker. Dr. Harold Neurum was a professor at Arizona State University and the Director of its Laboratory for Advances in Consciousness and Health. He had just released a new book and started his latest book tour so the timing to speak at the convention was perfect.

Neurum was a very gifted speaker and passionate about his speaking subject. After his speech, there were two breakout sessions before lunch. Each timeslot had three separate topics and speakers, and several topics were repeated to accommodate the number of people wanting to sign up.

The management company had done its very best to pull the conference off, but the vendor booths

seen at most conventions was just four in number here. Two were electronics manufacturers of WIFI and recording equipment. Basil had made that suggestion and it was a good one. Everyone wanted to hear about the remote setup that Dela's team had done and Basil was sought after by the techies there to learn his technics, products and security procedures. He had everything written up in a white paper and had it available on Unexplainable's website, if you knew the right code to enter. One booth was an elderly Native American couple selling natural herb medicines and *spiritually sympathetic* herbs, whatever that is. The last booth was a woman selling CDs of music she had written. Her *songs* sounded a lot like any spooky movie soundtrack, but with a couple of quiet ones that were rather pleasant and soothing.

Tuesday morning was Dela's first Case Presentation workshop and it was well attended. When Dela gave her two cases, the Carson City little boy and the Hearst Castle account, they were short and straightforward. Beside the facts of the events, Dela gave a description of her feelings as the narration proceeded. Then she turned it over to Basil and let him describe the setup configurations regarding placement of monitors and sensors, connections and all the other technical things. He made sure they all understood this setup was common in security layouts and the only difference was the sensors they included as well, such as environmental ones and odd spectrum video. They ended the presentation by showing a live connection to their Hearst Castle and Claremont Hotel remote monitoring sites.

Some producers of the many TV shows on the paranormal hosted private mixer parties. They were always looking for people to come on and give their story. The Tuesday afternoon speaker was one of those producers and he was entertaining -- but it really was just one big plug for their show. In the middle of the afternoon speaker's presentation, Dela got a call from Horton's apartment building manager. She desperately wanted Dela to come over. The people cleaning Horton's apartment for re-renting had witnessed a man sitting in a chair and the description was that of Horton himself.

Wanda was sitting next to Dela when she got the call and they decided to go to the apartment after the presentation. Dela figured that taking a medium along could be fun. The presentation ended and they disappeared from the convention. Dela retrieved her car and the two women drove the mile or so to Horton's apartment on Ellis and Jones streets in the heart of the Tenderloin District.

After taking a few trips around the block searching for a spot, they parked and went to find the manager who had called Dela. The manager was in her apartment and walked them to Horton's old apartment. The place was half-cleared of Horton's old furniture and it was evident where the workers had abruptly stopped after seeing the apparition.

The main living room was still full of furniture with Horton's favorite easy chair placed next to a table aimed directly at the TV. Dela and Wanda moved a few packing boxes and aimed two chairs at the

lone easy chair where the workers claimed Horton was sitting.

As soon as things were in place to sit quietly and wait, Wanda said, "I feel a presence here. Do you?"

"Nothing," Dela responded.

"It's a man. An old man."

"Horton was eighty-five."

They sat in a triangle with Horton's empty chair. Both women were as still as possible and talking in whispers.

Wanda closed her eyes as she tried to reach into the *other side*. Dela sat and watched everything. She got nothing from Horton.

In a quiet but strong voice, Wanda said, "Horton, I'm here with Dela. Are you here?"

Wanda kept her eyes closed and said to Dela, "He is here. I can sense his presence. What a nice man."

Dela could not stand it anymore and closed her eyes, moved into the *other side* and then opened her eyes to see Horton sitting in his chair and smiling at her.

Wanda screamed and jumped out of her chair. Dela closed her eyes and moved back to the normal world. She reopened her eyes and Wanda screamed again as she reappeared. Wanda was standing in the corner now very afraid. She pointed at Dela and said, "You vanished and now you have come back. I could not see you."

Dela didn't know what to say and just sat and looked at her friend. Wanda continued, "What are you?"

Dela still did not know what to say and just stared at her friend with a smile on her face now.

Wanda eased back to her chair and touched Dela on the arm to make sure she was really there. Dela finally broke her silence, "I died and now live in both the other world and yours. I'm not sure what I am."

"You're a ghost. That's what you are." Wanda paused as she realized her bluntness was rude to her friend. She lowered her voice and then said more kindly, "When did you die?"

"1537. In what is now Romania. My name was Ruxandra Dracul."

Wanda was shocked and clearly believed every word Dela said.

Then Dela said, "Wanda, I've never told anyone this before. You must keep my secret, please."

"Of course, but I want to help you. You are what you are for a reason. I want to help you find that reason."

"Okay. It's about time I trusted someone." They hugged after Wanda felt Dela again to see if she was real or not.

Then Dela said, "Wanda, I need to help Horton."

“Yes. Go. I’ll wait right here.” She had calmed down and just waved dismissively at Dela.

Dela blinked herself into the other world and saw Horton sitting in a chair across the room with his head in his hands. She said, “Horton, its Dela. I want to help. What can I do?”

Horton looked up and smiled at Dela, “You were always so nice to me. Thank you.”

She smiled back and said, “Horton, it’s very easy to be nice to you.” She held her ground and waited.

Finally, he said, “I like Wanda. She can help you. And so can Basil and Leslie. Hell, you help everyone all the time. Its time you let somebody help you.” He smiled as he said these things and faded away to nothing with his smile continuing to grow.

Dela smiled back and teared up a bit. She blinked and came back to the living world. Wanda jumped as Dela reappeared and immediately comforted Dela after realizing she was crying. They hugged for a moment as Dela composed herself and left the apartment. They stopped by the manager’s place on the way out. Dela told her that she would not be having any problems from now on, left her a card and said goodbye.

When they were back in Dela’s car, Wanda said, “Okay, so what’s the plan?”

Dela looked stunned and replied, “What do you mean, the plan?”

“Well, are we going to get to the bottom of your mystery? Are we going to figure out what is going on?”

“I have been trying for five centuries.” She sounded tired and dejected, but then said, “But, I never had anyone helping me before.”

“What did Horton say?”

She hesitated and then answered quietly, “He said that he liked you and that you could help me. And then he said that Basil and Leslie could too. And that I helped everyone all the time and it was about time that I let somebody help me.”

“Good. That settles that. Now let me see...” She was looking at the conference schedule and found what she was looking for. “We go back to the conference for drinks and a buffet social. Tomorrow is open until you and I are on the last panel. It ends at 4. We can talk to Leslie and Basil tomorrow night. Let’s go for drinks before dinner at your place. They freak out, we all go to dinner. I fly out on Thursday morning.”

And just like that, it was settled.

They parked at the convention center and wound their way back to their conference. It was just ending for the day and the happy hour sessions sponsored by the TV networks were about to start. Wanda and Dela stuck together for visits to each of the three suites. Everyone had to let Dela know what a smash the

conference was and how much they appreciated her effort. She fought off three producers who wanted her to do short segments on their shows with a little help from Wanda who gladly took the opportunity to get the gigs for herself. They ran into Basil at one of the parties and let him know the schedule for the next day. Then they found Leslie and filled her in as well. Everyone was having a good time as Dela said goodnight and slipped away.

It was close to midnight as Dela pulled out onto the streets away from the parking garage. She drove to the section of town she had checked out before where the prostitutes were plentiful. She parked, got out of her car and walked to the corner across the street from the ladies who were closing down for the night. She stood in a doorway, watched and waited.

The two on the street disappeared and Dela knew to wait for the two out on night calls. One returned a few minutes later, she walked across the street and down a half block to a waiting limo. Just as she got in, the last girl arrived and, once she was in the huge car, it pulled away. Dela took off walking in the direction the car went. She knew it made the rounds dropping off girls at their homes and then returning the pimp to his penthouse. Dela was walking toward the penthouse that was just six blocks away. It wasn't in a great part of the neighborhood, but it was still a penthouse apartment with a killer view.

She arrived just as the target entered the building. Again, she waited across the street in a doorway. She saw the lights go on in his top floor windows. Fifty minutes later the lights went out and she waited some more. Finally, at four a.m., she shifted herself into the other world and walked across the street completely invisible to anyone or any cameras that might be watching. She passed through the locked front door, walked across the lobby and through a door marked *Stairway*. Dela slowly climbed the stairs to the eighth floor and walked into the hallway outside the target's apartment.

She walked down the corridor to his front door and passed through it into his apartment. She walked carefully down a side hall and into an office. There was a large floor safe sitting in the open that she ignored. Instead, she moved to a bookcase and pressed a hidden release button that allowed the case to swing wide open revealing the real safe. Dela moved quickly to a security panel and turned off the alarm. She turned her attention to the safe and opened it with the correct combination she had seen once before as she was getting ready for this heist. There was a stack of cash inside that would take a suitcase to move. Dela pulled a canvas bag from her large purse and filled it with all the cash with not an inch to spare. As she was finished, she saw a bonus and put some gold and jewelry into her pockets. She closed the safe, threw her bags on her shoulders and walked out of the apartment and the building. The streets were still quiet as she walked the eight blocks to her car and drove home.

Sharing the Secret

Dela got up after a few hours of sleep and got ready for the convention. She gulped down a quick cup of coffee and drove over to the center. She had a breakfast meeting with some committee and officially handed over the chair spot to the woman who would oversee the event next year. Dela felt she had done her part by getting the first convention organized.

Dela met up with Wanda and another couple of friends for a short discussion on who was going where. They split up afterwards for the breakout sessions each wanted to attend. There was a closing lunch banquet and again they all separated for the last two panel sessions. Dela and Wanda were both on the panel of the last presentation; both shared a couple of case studies and that was that. The attendees and staff all mingled around for a bit and said goodbye. Dela drove Wanda back to her place for drinks with Leslie and Basil. They had reservations at Keiko à Nob Hill, a Japanese-influenced French restaurant near Dela's house. But first, Dela was going to share her secret with her friends and employees.

When Dela and Wanda walked in the front door, Leslie and Basil were right there in their office space to greet them. Everyone said hello and Dela invited them upstairs for cocktails and a visit. Dela helped everyone with drinks and got them settled on sofas in the main living room. The sun had just set and lights were automatically coming on around the rooms.

Wanda started the conversation, "Dela and I went to talk to your dear departed friend, Horton's, landlady. It seems Horton was still hanging around."

Leslie said, "What? Horton is haunting his apartment?"

"Yes. Dela and I went into his home and waited. When we had waited a few moments, Dela," she stopped and pointed at Dela who was looking very guilty, "vanished. She was gone a few seconds, then she reappeared." Wanda watched Leslie and Basil and then said, "Scared the hell out of me. It seems Dela has been hiding something from us. Our ghost chaser friend is herself a ghost."

Leslie and Basil started to laugh, but when Dela and Wanda stood their ground, Basil caved in and said, "I thought there was something special going on with you, Dela, but a ghost? Come on."

Dela said, "It's true. I'll show you when you are ready."

Leslie looked at Basil and nodded, "Okay, show us."

And Dela vanished. Basil was sitting next to her, waved his hand where she had been and found nothing. Dela brought herself back and startled everyone, even Wanda who was expecting it.

Leslie jumped up and backed away frightened. Wanda quickly said, "It's okay, Leslie. It's okay."

Basil reached out and touched Dela, this time getting the solid body. Then he said, "Where do you go

when you turn invisible?”

Dela quietly said, “Into a place between this reality and another. I’m not sure, but many of the sightings we have seen are in that *neither world*. I don’t even know what to call it.”

Leslie reclaimed her seat but was still very scared. Wanda started the conversation again, “The reason you are being told this is that Dela needs our help. Dela does not know why she is special and she needs to understand what the hell is going on. Why is she not like others who are stuck between destinations. Please, help. Please.” She was pleading at this point and Leslie sensed the frustration.

Leslie finally spoke, “Dela, make yourself invisible and reappear over there.” She pointed to the other side of the room. “And let us know where you are somehow.”

Dela had done this parlor trick many times and immediately shifted herself, watched as they all gasped, got up and walked to the other side of the room clicking her heels on the hardwood floors as she went. She watched them move their eyes along with the footfalls and when she was at her destination, she shifted again and reappeared to the others. No one flinched this time. Dela walked back over and took her seat on the sofa.

Basil summed it up, “Holy shit.” And he just started rambling. “I knew there was something weird about you. I knew it. I got some readings on you when you were at the Hearst Castle and nobody speaks as many languages as you do without studying for years. I counted seven the other day. Now it all makes sense. Yes. Sense.”

Leslie gathered her wits about her and said, “How old are you?”

Dela said, “I was born in 1498 in Romania.”

“Do you have any clue why you have been around this long?”

“No. I have been searching for an answer to your question for a long time. Our friend Horton thought it was about time I got some help. And he said he thought you two and Wanda could help me figure this mystery out.”

“I’m in.” said Basil

Wanda smiled and said, “Excellent. Now, I’m going home tomorrow and wrap up a few things, then,…”

Dela cut her off and said, “There’s one thing I would like to get out of the way now that you have agreed to take my case.” They laughed and Dela went on, “No, I mean it. I want you to treat me like a case. Nothing I’ve tried ever worked. I just can’t remember some things.” They all looked at each other and then all nodded. “And I don’t want anyone to worry about money. Wait here.”

She left the room, was gone a second, and returned with the bag from the other night’s theft. She set it at her feet and pulled out stacks of bills all nicely banded. She tossed a stack of twenties to Basil and

said, "See how much that is." He quickly counted and reported it to be one thousand dollars. Dela pulled out more stacks until there was sixty-five thousand dollars on the table in front of her. "There you go. Here's your retainer. Let's go with a five thousand dollar signing bonus to each of you and then fifty to cover all expenses, for starters."

Wanda verbalized what they were all thinking, "Where did this cash come from?"

"I stole it from a pimp. It's pocket change. I have millions. I just don't like pimps."

She said this so casually, that no one bothered to think of it again. Leslie reached over and gave Basil his money and Wanda hers. Wanda wrapped it up by saying that was enough business for tonight and she was hungry. Wanda could be a real authoritarian when she felt like it and, obviously right then, she did.

They called a cab and took it the eight blocks to the restaurant. Everybody went in where they were greeted like old friends and seated immediately. Drinks were ordered; it was no surprise when Basil ordered a very stiff drink and told the waiter to keep them coming. Once the waiter had left, Basil said, "So tell us about your life. Who are you?"

Dela knew that they would never get through dinner without covering this ground. So she started, taking breaks as the drinks were served, dinner was ordered and the meals delivered. "Like I said, I was born in 1498 in Wallachia, what is now Romania, near Transylvania." Everyone except Dela pulled out a phone and looked at a map. "My name is Ruxandra Dracul. I am a princess as I am the granddaughter of Vlad Dracul, Vlad the Impaler."

She knew she needed to let everyone understand. Leslie was the first to ask, "Your grandfather is *the* Dracula?"

"Yes. He was the model for Bram Stoker's character."

Wanda finally chimed in and simply said, "Wow."

"I grew up in castles with soldiers and servants always around. My father and his father ruled Wallachia, sometimes for the Ottoman Empire and sometimes against it. I was married three times, all arranged. But, thank goodness, I never had children."

Wanda said, "Three times? I hope they were good looking."

"No, they were all older and really married me for my position as a princess of the House of Dracul. The first was to Bogdon III, the One-Eyed of Moldavia, when I was just seventeen. He was a nice man." She paused and looked away, obviously thinking of him. "I was his third wife and his last. He pretty much left me alone after a while. He died." She looked away again, came back and continued, "And then I married Radu de la Afumati when I was 20. He was my distant cousin and a Wallachian prince. He was a good and kind man. I truly loved him. We were close for the twelve years we shared. He was always busy, but never too busy for me. When he died, I married another Wallachian prince, Radu Paisie, in 1530

when I was 32. He was much older than me and was content to work on his restoration projects around the countryside while I played my role as the princess he wanted me to be in court. He restored and reestablished the Tismana Monastery among other wonderful buildings. I was at the monastery visiting when a man stabbed me to death while I was praying. I died when I was 39 and I pretty much have looked my age since then.”

Basil said, “Thirty nine? I thought you were about twenty nine.”

Dela said, “Thanks.” She smiled at Basil and finished up, “The assassin was a Turk and said that I was paying for the sins of my grandfather with my death.”

Just then, the waiter walked up and Dela quit talking. He asked about the food and if they needed anything and then left. When he was clear of the table, Wanda said, “Paying for the sins of your grandfather? What does that mean?”

“My grandfather was not called *the Impaler* for nothing. He would take the corpses of his defeated enemies and impale the bodies on stakes in front of the castle. At any given time, there could be hundreds of them. I never saw the fields empty. Dead bodies were always hanging there.”

They were almost done eating at this point and Dela went to the bathroom for a break. She came back and concluded the speech with, “That’s it. That’s my life. Now, from then until today is another whole set of stories.”

They wrapped up dinner talking about schedules, travel and how to get started with this work. When they were all talked out and Basil was pretty drunk, they eased out front and caught taxis all going their separate ways.

Dela slept better than she had in a long, long time. Just knowing that something positive was happening lifted her spirits. The mystery of her afterlife had begun taking a toll on her inner peace the last fifty years or so. She felt tired. She went down to the office around nine and found both Basil and Leslie working away. As she entered the office, Leslie said, “We are clearing all our existing cases to focus on yours. We put *out of office* notices on our website and set up the bookkeeping for the expenses we are surely going to encounter.”

Wanda caught her morning flight home and left text messages every step of her travels. After talking about old business, they worked on how they were going to move ahead. Leslie wanted to start interviews with Dela the next morning, Friday, leaving Dela with nothing to do for the rest of the day. Leslie was going to spend the time doing research and putting together all the transcriptions. It was important to get organized at the beginning of a case because putting it off often resulted in lost information and hard to follow timelines. Dela’s boyfriend, Jindrich, was flying in on Saturday for a week of romance and

relaxation. Since she had some time on her hands, she walked down to the stores and bought a few items of clothes for Jindrich's visit. She relaxed and exercised the rest of the day and then turned in early that night looking forward to starting to work with her friends the next morning.

Dela came downstairs to a reconfigured office. A dedicated interview area had been created with recording equipment and electrodes for the person being interviewed to wear. Leslie, Wanda and Basil were not taking anything for granted while focusing on Dela. Wanda was online waiting to get started. Everyone greeted Dela and prepared to begin working.

Maps of Europe had been pinned around the room labeled by century starting with the 1500s and stopping at 1900. Two new large monitors, a few pin corkboards and a large whiteboard had shown up as well. Dela took a seat; Basil hooked her up and adjusted all the cameras and other equipment. It took a good ten minutes to test each lead after connecting them.

Basil started the session by recording Dela phasing in and out to the *other world*, as they were now calling it. He used the readings he acquired to adjust the equipment and the software he was using. It was a long process of tuning one sensor at a time by testing, making adjustments, testing again and making more adjustments until Basil was satisfied. After almost an hour, he was finished and turned the next phase of the process over to Leslie. She started with having Dela repeat the basic information she had shared at dinner the night before last. Leslie and Wanda had written up notes from the narrative by memory, but Dela had to review and make corrections where necessary. Finally, the new questioning began.

Leslie started, "What was your first memory after your assassination?"

Dela took a deep breath and began what she knew was going to be a long narrative, "I was walking alone down a hall in Poenari Castle in the middle of the night. I was very familiar with the castle. It was one of my grandfather's citadels and we lived there when I was very young. However, I did notice that some things -- furniture, tapestries and pictures -- looked different than I expected. I walked to the great room and still saw no one. I heard noise coming from the kitchen and walked in to find servants working at the early hour. Both of the women looked up at me and one asked if I wanted anything? I was freaked out by this and just shook my head. I backed out of the room and went back to the great room. I found a big chair in a corner and curled up to calm down and try to understand what the hell was going on."

Wanda piped in and asked, "Did the place look the same as you remembered it?"

"Pretty much. There are not a lot of options for decorating a castle. Anyway, I sat there afraid for a few minutes until another servant walked by and nodded hello at me. It took me a few hours of wandering around until someone finally asked who I was. I told him I delivered some things and was on my way out.

I walked out of the castle and into the cool morning air. There was a stream of people coming and going on the steep road up to the citadel. I went into the village and got the same unfamiliar stares as in the castle. Then I noticed date stamps on the bagged grain read 1581. That took me a few more freaked out minutes to realize that was the date. It was not 1537, the year I died, but now 1581. Forty-four years had passed while I was dead. I guess I was dead.”

Basil wanted to readjust some leads attached to Dela and they paused for a moment. He had to repeat the testing process for each adjusted lead and it took longer than anyone liked. Then Dela continued. “So, I was sitting in the center of the village wearing a fancy dress that I am sure was half a century out of fashion. Not that these village folks would tell the difference. I started to talk to children that were running around and found out that things had indeed changed. New rulers, new alliances and new people everywhere. I am not sure which I realized first -- that I was hungry or that I was a spirit. But, how could all these people see me if I was a ghost? Then I drifted into the other world. It was scary at first, but when I realized that I was invisible and could walk through doors and walls, I calmed down and started to test the new situation. I walked into a market, picked up a loaf of bread and walked away with it without anyone noticing. I went around a corner, shifted back to this world and ate the bread as quickly as I could. I went back to the square several times getting different fruit and vegetables each time until I was full. Then I realized this would be much easier if I had a little money. It only took a moment for me to realize I knew just the place to get all I wanted.”

They took a five-minute coffee break and then continued. “I switched worlds and hiked back to the citadel above the village. No one paid attention to me and I even walked through a couple of men pulling a wagon. I entered the castle, went up the main staircase to the administration areas and found the treasury vault right where it always had been. Shelves were all along the walls with bags and boxes of gold coins sitting out for the taking. I filled a bag and tucked it under my clothes where it became invisible, just like me. Remember, I was still figuring out how to work my way around.

I made my way back down the hill where I rented a wagon and driver to take me to the nearest large city, Sibiu in Transylvania. For the next forty-seven years, I lived in Hungary-Bohemia making my way by stealing money and pretending to be a wealthy wife of a nobleman who was always away on business.

I learned quickly that I still had the same desires and needs of the living. I still liked men and food and drink. I took lovers through the years always leaving them before they realized I was not growing old. From 1628 to 1734, I lived in the vast territory of Russia, mostly in Moscow and St. Petersburg. For a while, I was the personal spiritualist to Peter the Great and his family. But, that is a whole other story. From 1734-1746, I roamed around Africa and lived mostly in Cairo. Then I moved to Greece from 1746-1779. Rome and all of Italy became my playground from 1779-1793 and then to Hapsburg from 1793-

1810. After that settled time, I started traveling for the next twenty years and ended in London. I stayed there for five years then traveled to America, and I have lived here since 1835.”

It was lunchtime and they decided to have Chinese food delivered from around the corner in China Town. The recording of the interview had to be transcribed and Dela had an idea on what to do next. Wanda signed off and they ate lunch. After that, Dela had decided on a road trip. They gathered their things, went to the garage and she drove all of them to her storage facility on Pine Street just a few blocks from her house.

After entering the gate code and then a building code, they walked down the long hallway to Dela’s unit. Basil noticed the security cameras and the coded ten-digit alarm as they arrived at the room. The room was twenty by twenty with a large roll-up door. Dela turned off the security system and unlocked the door. Lights automatically came on. The room had the feel of a museum with antique cabinets, lockers, wire shelves and a couple large safes along the three walls almost stacked to the eight-foot ceiling. The center open floor held a motorcycle with a sidecar covered with a white sheet.

She knew they would want to see what was under the sheet so, once they had gotten a good look around, Dela pulled the cover off the bike to reveal the motorcycle.

Dela told them, “You will need to go through all of this. There are journals and letters in these cabinets here.” She pointed to a set along the back wall. “And there are things in this cabinet,” again she pointed. “That may hold a clue. They are all significant to me personally.”

Leslie said, “What’s the story behind the motorcycle?”

“I just liked it. I bought it new and drove it all the time. But, as time went by, it stood out more and more. I’m thinking of getting one of those bikes that you can drive on the water like a jet ski.”

Basil said, “Yeah. Those things are really cool. Let’s get two.”

They all laughed and Leslie said, “Basil and I get to do all this research for the next week while you get to play vacation with your boyfriend.”

Dela said, “Yep. That’s about the size of it.”

Railroads

Jindrich was flying into San Francisco International Airport at 8 a.m., having taken a redeye from New York after flying on from Prague via London. It was a long tiresome trip with several plane changes. Fortunately, Dela kicked in for the ticket and Jindrich relaxed in first class the whole way. Dela drove to the airport, parked in the short-term lot and went into the baggage area to wait for Jindrich's plane to arrive. It came in on time and Jindrich took only twenty minutes to get to the baggage claim carousel where his few bags would show up.

Dela saw him coming down the escalator from the floor above and ran over to him. They hugged and kissed just like many people were doing around them. Dela greeted him in Czech, and they chatted on about his flights until the baggage showed up a few minutes later. After collecting the bags, they walked across the skyway to her car. When they settled into the car, Jindrich wanted to kiss hello some more.

After the passion subsided, they drove the twenty minutes to Dela's home. After Jindrich received an expected tour of the house and then unpacked his luggage, they took a half hour to become romantically reacquainted. Even with the time change, Jindrich was up for anything thanks to the sleep he got on the plane. Dela took him to Golden Gate Park where they visited the Japanese Tea Gardens, the de Young Art Museum and the California Academy of Sciences Museum. It was close to 5 p.m. when they were finished and they had tickets for a 9 p.m. Diana Krall concert at the Davies Symphony Hall. That gave them plenty of time for dinner near Dela's house, so they went home to change clothes.

The weather was cool and clear so they decided to walk down the street to China Town for dinner. They ate at Hunan Home's Restaurant on Jackson Street and got back to the house with plenty of time to spare before the concert. Jindrich stretched out on a couch and was out until Dela woke him an hour later. They drove across town to the concert and enjoyed a great show with Jindrich only nodding off a few times at the end. Dela took him home and put him to bed, jet lag finally catching up with him.

Sunday was an off day with no planned activities, so they spent the day walking around and then driving a bit to show Jindrich the local sites. They ate lunch at Fisherman's Wharf and then dinner at the Top of the Mark in the Mark Hopkins Hotel. They caught up on activities with Dela lying half the time and hating it as she did.

On Monday, they were taking the 11 a.m. Napa Valley Wine Train to the city of Napa about fifty miles north of the city. It was a three-hour trip with a variety of options for food and entertainment. Dela had selected the Gourmet Lunch package and they had to be at the station at 10:30.

They left the city for the relatively short drive at nine a.m. and arrived early enough for Jindrich to

stop in the gift shop. Lunch was served in a 1915-1917 beautifully restored Pullman car and Dela had wisely purchased the upgrade for a two-person table rather than share with another couple. Lunch was grand with a wine tasting thrown in. The weather was perfect and the train trip went off without a hitch. After they returned, Dela and Jindrich revisited the route the train took by car and stopped at several wineries where they purchased two cases of wine of different ages and varieties. Without really planning it, the last winery had a restaurant and the menu looked good, so they just ate there.

They got back to San Francisco and went back to Dela's home. It was relatively early, so they walked toward Union Square in search of live music. They found a good band on the third stop and stayed until midnight enjoying the tunes and each other.

For Tuesday, Dela had scheduled a train ride on the Roaring Camp Railroad out of Santa Cruz. It was only a short seventy-five minute ride, but there was plenty to do in the Santa Cruz area. The drive from the city was longer than the trip to the wine country, and they left around nine in the morning in order to make the eleven a.m. train ride.

The conversation between Dela and Jindrich finally ran out of general catch-up items and turned to Dela's work. She told him about the successful convention and then moved to case studies. She gave him details on the Claremont Hotel and Hearst Castle and even pulled up the live feeds from the sites on a tablet while they drove. They were about fifteen minutes from arriving at the train station when Dela told Jindrich that the train they were about to take was haunted. She recounted the various sighting stories and finished just as they arrived. There was not much of a crowd and the wait to board the train was short and easy. This train had only open-air cars attached for this trip. For a few minutes, Dela and Jindrich enjoyed a car to themselves but, as it came close to starting the trip, a few more people joined them. The train was only twenty percent full because this was the first run of the day, a weekday and in the off-season.

While they were waiting for the train to get started, Dela told Jindrich another story about the train they were now riding on. A ghostly apparition of a grizzly old miner was repeatedly seen who walked the aisles from car to car scaring the passengers half to death. The last time a sighting occurred on the train was back in 1999 but the story was the same as it had been since 1901 when the first eyewitness account was documented.

The conductor recited his obligatory safety speech over the loud speaker and then told the passengers what they would see along the way. When he was finished, the train bucked and ground its way to a start.

They rolled out of the station and immediately entered a thick forest of tall trees. Jindrich took pictures of everything. What would you expect of a photojournalist? The train wound its way through the forest before coming to the first attraction, Hallelujah Junction. It slowed a bit as they passed through the scenic wildlife area and then kept going to Wayside Junction where they were close to the turnaround at

the top of a mountain.

Just after they started into the circular track that looped back down the hill, Dela saw something two cars up. A figure of a man dressed exactly as you would picture an old prospector came out of the passenger car at the front of the train right behind the engine and coal tender. At first Dela assumed he was another one of the colorful staff, whose job it was to entertain the crowds and have their pictures taken with anyone so inclined as souvenirs, but then she *felt* something different about this person. He did not interact with the people even though they tried to talk to him. He appeared to be ignoring them, and then Dela saw it. Every once in a while as he moved forward, his motion seemed to flutter out of focus.

He was now frightening some people and making some angry at his inconsiderate behavior. Most just ignored him and watched the beautiful forest scenery pass by. As he entered Dela's car, she whispered to Jindrich to take his picture. He pulled up his camera and started shooting. Still the old man kept walking paying no attention to anyone at all. Dela was sitting on the aisle of the bench seat with Jindrich on the outside window seat, if the cars had windows. She stood and stepped across the aisle to the empty bench seat and waited.

The miner stopped when he reached the seat in front of Dela and said, "Hello, Ruxandra."

She was flabbergasted that he used her given name and sat down to catch herself. Jindrich continued to take pictures, not realizing that he was not taking pictures of a live person. Dela composed herself, stood up and said, "How do you know me?"

The man laughed and said, "I'm not sure." He started to walk away but turned around as he passed Dela. He smiled, looked her over again, made a quizzical face and asked, "Where's your locket?"

She replied, "What locket?"

And he vanished.

California ~ 1849

Elizabeth McKinsey was the name Dela had used for the past ten years of her long life. She had traveled west from New York where she had lived for a short five years. Promises of another new start had often driven her to the frontiers. Now she lived the quiet life of a married woman raising a few cattle and growing grain on her small ranch in the San Fernando Valley. She introduced her husband to the local bankers, and then he disappeared on a long business trip back East. He was actually a ranch hand in St. Louis that she hired to play a month-long role as her husband. Once he returned home with his pay, Mrs. McKinsey assumed all responsibilities with the ranch and made a nice life for herself, for a few years anyway. The Mexicans that lived there were very friendly to Mrs. McKinsey especially since she paid

them very well. Two families lived on the ranch with their own small houses and everyone helped around the place including the children. She enjoyed these new people as they eventually embraced her as one of their family. She moved about in the social circles of the city meeting the ruling Spanish and the ever-growing Easterners, at least the ones with money.

In the fall of 1848, Mrs. McKinsey got news of the gold strike four hundred miles to the north outside Sacramento. She had lived through many of these mineral strikes in Asia, Europe, South and North America and Africa. She knew who made the real fortunes off these events, the merchants that provided equipment and supplies. She gathered her ranch hands and their families and told them of her plan.

She got her wagons together and sent her men into the city for mining equipment and everything they could buy, everything. Then she contracted with a ship building carpenters' shop to build sluice boxes. She paid upfront for one hundred boxes and bought several hundred more by the time she was done. She purchased more wagons and horses, hired more men and started to fill the wagon train with the equipment she was gathering. Her first load was ready to go by the end of November and the string of twelve wagons with thirty men, four women and a couple of boys left on the month-long round-trip.

They got to the gold fields and sold out after only two days. Mrs. McKinsey made a quick small fortune and sent word back to Los Angeles to build another one hundred sluice boxes. Once the wagons were empty, she sent two ahead to stockpile picks and shovels in one of the major outposts they passed on the way up the Central Valley. She had already paid for them with agreements for the provisioners to expect pickup in a few days.

Making the trip north and south again and again was hard on everybody, but Mrs. McKinsey knew that she had to strike while the iron was hot so she drove everyone on and on. She ended up making three trips before the demand dwindled. However, it was time for her to move on again. She sold the ranch to one of the families that had lived there with her, paid for with the cut they made on the mining equipment sales, and left for a life in the growing city of San Francisco, where she would again create a new identity.

California ~ Present Day

Dela looked around the train. Several people near them had seen the man disappear including Jindrich who had photographed the whole encounter in still shots. Jindrich jumped out of his seat and stood next to Dela with his arm around her. It was more to comfort himself than Dela,

A man moved up to Dela and Jindrich and said, "Where did he go? He was there and then he wasn't. Where did he go?"

In halting English, Jindrich said, "We do not know."

A couple of others had gathered around and the first man said as he looked at Dela, “You talked to him. What did he say?”

Dela finally realized she had to diffuse the situation and said in the same stuttering voice that Jindrich had naturally used, “I did not comprehend him.”

The man threw up his hands in disgust at the stupid foreigners and returned to his seat, as did the others around them. Dela and Jindrich sat down in the nearest seat and snuggled up to try to support each other. Finally, Jindrich asked Dela, “Was that the ghost you told me about?”

“Apparently.”

“What did he say to you? He called you Ruxandra. Why would he do that?”

Dela lied and said, “I have no idea.”

“What exactly did he say?”

“He said “Hello, Ruxandra” and I asked him why he called me that. He said he didn’t know why. And then he asked me where my locket was.”

“Locket? What locket?”

“I have no idea what he was talking about, but I am going to get my team down here as fast as possible to try to learn more about what just happened.”

They were pulling into the Felton station for the end of the ride and the nosy man was already talking to the conductor about the encounter with his family standing behind him. Dela hurried Jindrich to their car and they drove south toward Santa Cruz after winding through the mountains for a few miles away from Felton. They talked little as they drove on until Jindrich suddenly pulled off the road into a gas station and parked. He reached behind his seat and grabbed his bag. He pulled out his camera, held it so Dela could also see the playback monitor and paged through the pictures. It showed nothing more than what appeared to be a staff entertainer on the train with them. It showed no sign of him going out of focus as he moved. The pictures contained no evidence of anything unusual except for the man himself.

Dela called her friends at home who were hard at work and reported the events of the train ride to them. Leslie took particular note of the locket question and told Dela they were just finishing cataloging the paper files, notes and letters. With this locket question hanging over their heads, Leslie would work on the personal items in the storage garage next. Maybe they would find a clue.

Dela and Jindrich continued south and ate a late lunch in Carmel. They talked more about the train until there was nothing left to say and then dropped the subject. They enjoyed lunch and took their time driving back to the city. They stayed in that night with Dela preparing a nice dinner of baked chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy. They watched a little television and went to bed early.

The Fort Bragg Skunk Train was on the agenda for Wednesday and they needed to be there at nine

for the four-hour train ride. With the three and a half hour drive, they would leave at five a.m. to be sure they were there on time. They would save the coast highway scenery for the ride home. However, Jindrich refused to go until Dela assured him there was no ghost story history on this train.

The weather was foggy until they reached Santa Rosa where it lifted to reveal a beautiful clear day. They left the interior freeway at Willits and finished the first part of their trip with the sixty-five mile run to the ocean. The train station was easy to find and they arrived with time to cruise the gift shop and let Jindrich take pictures of the train while it was sitting still in the station.

The Northspur Flyer, one of the Skunk Trains, left the station on time at 9:45 and was only half-full of tourist taking the beautiful tour of the redwoods and the Noyo River Canyon. One point during the trip includes an 8.5 mile length of track in a serpentine of switchbacks that covers a straight-line distance of less than one mile. Jindrich snapped pictures of everything they passed and even of the interior of the train itself.

The trip ended and they found their car where they left it across the street in the station lot. They headed south on the coast road and stopped for lunch at a roadside diner in a small seaside hamlet. An hour was spent taking pictures and walking around the Point Arena lighthouse. Then, they stopped at Bowling Ball Beach, named for the round rocks that are all over the place in nice tide-driven rows. At some point, the ocean cliffs had washed away to release the rocks and let them tumble to the beach below where they lined up like cannon balls ready to be shot. They stopped several more times where Jindrich had to take pictures of the magnificent rocks jutting out of the ocean. They got back to San Francisco after stopping in Sausalito for a nice wharf-side dinner and again went to bed early. The next day was free until they had to leave for Woodland to catch the next train ride.

They laid around most of the day with a couple of short walks close by for coffee, lunch and then more coffee. They left around 4:30 to get to the train for the 6 p.m. departure. This adventure included dinner and a show, a murder mystery where the guests would interact. The drive was pleasant and they arrived early enough for Jindrich to get stills of the train sitting in the station. The ride was a lot of fun and timed early enough in the day to see the sites along the Sacramento River as they passed by. Jindrich was selected to participate in the murder mystery show and he dived into his minor role with gusto. The food was only passible, but the excellent beer made up for it. Jindrich had been acting a little funny since the Santa Cruz ghost-sighting and it was clear their relationship was not going to last much longer. They drove the ninety-minute ride home and again had the next day off with tickets to attend the symphony that night.

They lounged around all day, ordered food delivered and got ready for the symphony after a dinner of the best North Beach pizza Dela could order. The San Francisco Symphony was playing Stravinsky's Rite

of Spring and did an incredible job of performing the difficult piece.

Dela had saved the best event for last and they got up early on Saturday and left for Yosemite. The train ride was only an hour long. Dela managed to get them to the station in Fish Camp at the south entrance of the park just in time. The ride was incredible and the narration was excellent as well. After the trip, they entered the park and Jindrich was amazed at the beauty and majesty of the Yosemite Valley. They stopped at every opportunity for pictures and broke for lunch at the visitor center cafeteria. After lunch, they walked a few trails and continued to see and stop for every possible photo opportunity. It was almost dark when they left the park and started the long drive home.

They stopped for dinner in Oakland and got home with only enough time to get ready for the 4:30 a.m. drive to the airport for Jindrich's flight back to Europe. Somehow, they managed to get up on time and make it to the airport without much trouble. Dela dropped Jindrich off with lots of hugs and kisses. Both made promises to get together again soon, though they both realized this was probably the end of a wonderful short-term romance. They left each other with that knowing look in their eyes.

Retracing Ancient Steps

Wanda had flown back from the East Coast to join the investigation live and in person. Today, they were planning to go through the contents of the storage unit, item by item. They met at the office early in the morning to start with the documents, letters and photos.

Leslie took the lead by describing the cataloging system she had set up in a database. All the items were scanned, analyzed, referenced and cross-referenced. They started with the photos since that was the smallest group.

“Let’s start by getting a verbal description of each of the one hundred twenty-two pictures. Some have dates and handwritten notes, but most are unknown to us. I have ordered them by age as best as we could determine, so let’s start with the oldest first.”

And off they went gathering descriptions about content, dates, circumstances and anything else Dela could remember, which was a lot. She recognized each photo and remembered every detail about all of them. They gathered a wealth of information and cataloged as they went. The oldest was from 1893 where Dela lived in San Francisco.

After they were finished with this first tedious step, they broke for lunch and then picked it up again by starting on the more official documents. There were contracts, land ownership deeds, and bills of sale that went back at least three hundred years. Many were in foreign languages and Dela spent time glancing at the document and then giving a short narrative of the article including dates and relative circumstances. They had a speech-to-text application running that provided them with a complete documented report attached to each article. Basil collected all the necessary cross-referencing data and applied it to fields in the database he had created.

They plowed through this process for almost three days and then tackled all the personal letters. They got quicker as they went with Basil, Leslie and Wanda spelling each other and Dela the only one going one hundred percent all the time. They started early and ended late to finish the correspondence after two and a half days of intense work. They had already cataloged the money, gold and other liquid commodities before they started the interviews with Dela. They did the same with all the other items in the storage room as well, but those needed to write-ups similar to the paper files. That took almost one full day and they pronounced themselves done.

Now they were ready for the good part, the conclusions from what they had done.

Basil started with the statistical basics. “We now have a database with 3,455 records classified as

documents, pictures or artifacts. There are several subcategories for these categories, such as letters, deeds, financial and other documents.” He had pulled up a database picture that looked like a family tree that showed what he meant. “The easiest to handle are the deeds. It seems that Dela now owns over thirty properties around the world. And it appears that you have forgotten or ignored around twenty of these for a very long time. If these are indeed still in your name somehow, you have a portfolio that totals around fifty million dollars.”

They talked about it for a few minutes and decided to hire an international real estate company to find the statuses on the properties. They assumed that many had lapsed back to the governments over the years and were gone. However, they also thought that some were still legally Dela’s.

The property records did clearly show where and when Dela was at a specific point in her life. Basil displayed a globe with each property marked. They worked through them from the oldest to the newest and traced Dela’s travel and residences from around 1720 until today.

Then Basil pulled up the correspondences indicating *To* and *From* locations. With that, he was further able to detail Dela’s history. With each record’s addition, the picture of Dela’s life became clearer and clearer.

Going through the physical articles took one day, with a central question asked more and more, “Does this item have spiritual relevance?” They kept looking for a clue that would lead them to the item indicated by one of the spirits to be of some significance -- the locket. There were no references to it in any documents or letters. The locket did not appear in any of the photos and certainly did not turn up with the jewelry Dela had put away. At this point, the locket was the only clue they had.

They searched online the next day and added information to the records already on file. The most significant thing they found was a portrait of an unknown family that dated from the time Ruxandra was a little girl. The family was clearly royalty of some kind and from the same location where she was born. They identified a few other items, but they added more questions than answers.

After almost ten days of long hard work, they caught up with everything and were ready for the next move, whatever that was.

The group lounged around for a day and just talked. Everyone threw out ideas for possible next steps and they considered all the options available to them. The only one that made sense was to travel. They had to backtrack through Dela’s life and see what they could uncover. There simply was nothing left to do with the limited although extensive data they had. But, where to begin? They all agreed needed somewhere to start, so Dela made the call. They would begin in Lisbon.

Lisbon ~ 1812

The Portuguese were at war in 1812 with the French and at times the Spanish. Portugal was a colony of Brazil from 1808 to 1821 and a protectorate of the British, who were managing wars on several fronts in Europe and the new country, the United States. Lisbon was and remains to be today the main port city for the country receiving ships from almost every country in the known world. Goods flowed from and to the port through Madrid and then Paris during this tumultuous period.

The military ruled the city and shopkeepers and merchants were left alone to carry on necessary trade. This is where Dela found herself during her wanderings through Western Europe.

She stayed in Lisbon almost the entire calendar year living as the rich widow Lady Sofia Mascarenhas. No one questioned her pedigree since she spent lavishly on the finest dresses and jewels. The Patriarchal Cathedral of St. Mary Major, or Lisbon Cathedral, is the oldest Catholic Church in Lisbon, and Lady Mascarenhas would regularly attend Mass and stop to pray there often.

One August night, she attended a dinner thrown at the residence of a local dignitary. She had no date that night and the affair ended close to midnight. Her carriage was brought around to the front of the home and she and her servants started the half-mile trip to her hotel. Her path went past the Cathedral and she stopped for a quiet moment of prayer. The church was empty at this time of night and she quietly took a seat in the front row.

While deep in prayer, she was startled by the sound of scraping on the floor behind her. She turned to see the translucent figure of a Portuguese naval officer from perhaps two hundred years earlier. He was a dashing figure in his dress uniform and walked straight and tall toward the altar. He ignored Sofia until she blinked into his world. Then, she startled him. In perfect Portuguese, he said, "I am sorry, Madam, you surprised me. I did not see you sitting there." He removed his hat and formally bowed.

Sofia was standing in the aisle with him now only a few feet away and she replied, "No, kind sir, it is I that should apologize." They both laughed. "I am Lady Sofia Mascarenhas." She put out her hand; he took it and gently kissed it.

"And I am Captain Adriano Sarmiento de le Costa." He stood tall and tipped his hat again. They started walking toward the front door. "Lady Mascarenhas, I have never seen you here before. Are you a visitor to Lisbon?"

She told him that she was new to the city and they chatted for a few more minutes. The conversation ended and they said their goodbyes. He walked back into the church and she left through the front door, without opening it, and blinked herself back to the living reality. She got into her carriage and went home.

After several more visits and some long conversations, Sofia learned that he had most likely died at

sea in a battle with the French. She had asked around about the history of the time and figured it all out. However, Sofia did not have the heart to tell the deceased captain until their last conversation. Sofia had never encountered a spirit that was so real to her that she could carry on lengthy conversations. The young captain was on his first command voyage when they encountered a French frigate. By all reports, the appearance of the frigate surprised the captain, and he failed to get off any cannon volleys before the ship sank and all hands were lost.

He had been an only child. Sofia checked and both parents were now dead. Adriano spoke lovingly of both his parents and said that he was going to visit them after his prayers. Of course, he never made it. Sofia was visiting with Adriano when she steered the conversation to his current situation. She asked, "What happens after you finish your prayer time when I leave?"

"I don't know what you mean?"

"When I leave, you walk to the altar to pray. What do you do after that?"

The question confused him because he had no answer. He finally said, "I don't know. I remember all our visits. They seem to be the only light in my life these days." He sighed as he finished the sentence.

Sofia took his hands and said, "There is nothing for you here. I am like you in some ways, so I know this -- There is nothing here, right now, that holds you to this place and time. Kind Adriano, you are free." He understood, they said good night and he never appeared again during any visit she made to the church.

Lisbon ~ Present Day

The four friends landed in Lisbon after a flight across the United States, a plane change and a flight across the Atlantic. After traveling fourteen hours, they were ready to get off the plane even though first class had been very, very nice. They took a limousine service from the airport to their hotel, the Olissippo Lapa Palace Hotel. Leslie made all the trip arrangements, with a little advice from Dela, and would continue as their trip coordinator. They had two double-room suites with Dela and Wanda sharing one and Basil and Leslie sharing the other. Basil and Leslie's suite would serve as the technical center. When they were finally in their rooms, Basil went to work setting up. Leslie and Dela spoke with the concierge to get tickets to museums and other historical sites they were going to visit. They all agreed that their basic plan for starters was to visit the museums and search for anything that might stir a memory in Dela's mind.

Of course, the first place to visit was the Lisbon Cathedral where Dela used to visit with her *spirited* captain. Leslie found out there was an evening Mass at the cathedral at eight p.m. that night. It was just three o'clock now and everyone was hungry, being off schedule with jet lag. They rested for a couple hours and met for dinner. One of the best restaurants in the city was inside the hotel itself, so they ate

there. The food was great and they discussed the itinerary while they ate dinner.

After the wonderful meal, they gathered their equipment and caught a cab for the short trip to the church. Dela had gotten permission to set up some of the equipment in the entranceway to the inner sanctuary while the service was proceeding. They arrived early enough to set up and grab seats for the mass. Mass lasted a full hour and was filled with catholic ceremony, as expected for the oldest Catholic Church in the beautiful city.

When the service ended, the people slipped away with just a few remaining to pray for another few moments. The four visitors moved to the rear of the church and waited until they were completely alone.

They planned the next move so were not surprised when Dela smiled at them and blinked into the other world to look around. She walked to the altar and looked around with two complete turns. She saw and felt nothing, no other presence. She walked up the circular staircase to the balcony that was the choir loft. Again, she took stock of her surroundings. She came back down and continued to the basement. She walked the full length looking in every room for anything unusual. Dela visited every room of the large beautiful building and then returned to her friends. She changed worlds again and walked around a corner to avoid scaring them. Upon her signal, they gathered the equipment and went back to the hotel.

It was getting late and everyone was tired, but Basil could not resist reviewing the data before he turned in. He quickly checked the recordings and found nothing out of the ordinary, although the word *ordinary* was quickly leaving their collective vocabularies.

They wanted to tour five museums and started the next day with the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum of Art. The museum is a private collection left to the public trust by a rich patron in 1969. They walked to the museum and enjoyed the beautiful warm day with a nice breeze blowing off the bay. They were there when it opened and finished just in time for lunch. They focused on the rooms that displayed the Mesopotamia, Islamic Orient and Armenia works, which might possibly contain something that was relevant to Dela's life since they were the general regions that the Ottoman Empire spanned. They all enjoyed the masterpieces, but nothing caught Dela's eye. They ate at a nice outdoor café and had local fare that Dela selected, being the only one who spoke Portuguese.

With the afternoon unplanned, they decided to simply walk around the old parts of the city and see if Dela discovered anything interesting. They managed to stop at every ice cream and coffee shop while they shopped for clothes and other small items. They found several outdoor markets and walked down the side streets enjoying playing the tourist.

They managed to stretch dinner out over three different restaurants. It was all fun for the most part and Dela's mind spun a hundred miles an hour with every remembered street they walked. They still had

remnants of jet lag and all said goodnight around eleven o'clock.

After a lazy breakfast, they met up for a taxi ride to the Medeiros E. Almeida Museum. This converted museum was a beautiful old mansion now filled with items António de Medeiros e Almeida collected over his life that include household items, furniture, china and silverware. Of course, the house is decorated with paintings, all European, sculptures, statues and many porcelain items, Chinese terracotta and Egyptian earthenware. Nothing jumped out at Dela as they wandered through the beautiful mansion.

They grabbed lunch when they were finished and headed to the National Museum of Archeology for the afternoon. Basil took off on a separate mission of his own. He went to the National Archives to look up two deeds that Dela had for property in Lisbon. The first thing he did was take a taxi past each of the buildings. One was gone, but the other was an empty villa on the outskirts of the city.

It turned out that Dela's deed for the empty villa was still good. The place had sat empty for the entire period and was considered by the locals to be an ancient abandoned homestead. The roof had collapsed a long time ago leaving the walls and chimneys to fend for themselves in the weather. Still, the footprint of the villa was large and grand. It stood on a hillside overlooking a valley filled with orchards and wheat fields. Dela had deposited a lot of money in the Bank of Brazil, which happened to still be actively working. Her account was still earning money and still paying the taxes and other fees assessed against the property all these years.

The National Museum of Archeology has the skeleton of an ancient cathedral on the property turning the ruins into a wonderful historical site. They have mummies and other artifacts of antiquity that make the museum a wonderful place of historical significance. However, Dela found nothing there that helped in the investigation.

It was four in the afternoon when they all met again. Basil told them of the information he had uncovered. Now the problem was how to link Dela Samuels to Lady Sofia Mascarenhas. At this point, all they had was a parchment deed. Lady Sofia Mascarenhas had purchased the property, planning to move in, but circumstances had her move on without carrying her plans to fruition. She gave directions to the bankers and left for Madrid.

Basil wanted to show everyone the ruins so they caught a taxi and were there in twenty minutes. They walked the property and enjoyed the view. All agreed that it would be a nice quiet place to live, if you want to retire to that life style. They decided to let the business problem lie in peace for now.

The foursome decided to make the night a party since they were finally comfortable in this time zone. They went to a nice restaurant and then looked for music and drink. Páginas Tantas, a good jazz club, was recommended to them and they found it around the corner without trouble. The music was good as were the adult beverages and they stayed until the band stopped playing at midnight. They turned in after that

and decided to sleep a little later than they had been.

The Ajuda National Palace was the morning sightseeing tour. The palace was delightful with a wide variety of collections from paintings to photos and ceramics to jewelry. The *jewel* of the displays is the country's Crown Jewels, which are magnificent. They were created over a two hundred year period and were quite contemporary as far as crown jewels go.

After touring the palace and finding no clues, they grabbed lunch. Leslie begged off to attend to business back at the hotel and set up travel reservations. They were leaving the next day for their next stop, Cairo.

Leslie rejoined the group at the National Museum of Ancient Art around two o'clock. The foursome wandered through an unguided tour of the huge building. The European paintings were toward the back of the building and were almost the last thing for the three investigators to see. The paintings were interesting and beautiful, but none of them highlighted anything related to their quest -- until they were walking out of the section.

On a small wall in an almost hidden alcove was a large painting of a family. The placard beside the piece read "Family portrait of an Ottoman prince – 1500 ~ 1550 – Artist unknown". Wanda was the first to notice it and called the others back since they had already passed it. Dela walked up to the painting and her jaw dropped open in amazement. She almost shouted, "That's my family!"

Both Leslie and Wanda moved in closer to get a good look at the face of the little five or six year old Dela. They both studied the little girl and then looked at Dela very carefully at the same time.

Wanda smiled at Dela and said, "You were a beautiful little girl."

Basil told them he would talk to the museum people and get the history behind their acquisition of the painting. He took a good number of photos before he took off. The women started taking pictures with their cell phones and finally Leslie noticed the obvious. She pointed to the little Ruxandra and said, "There is your locket."

Unholy Death

Basil got the history on the painting with nothing gained. The painting was purchased in a lot with five others. All had historical significance in and of themselves, but they too were missing date, painter and location data. The only note of interest on the painting was that the subjects were thought to be the family of an Ottoman prince -- but there were many historical figures from that time who called themselves princes. Between the various subkingdoms under the Empire and with families going back several generations, there were around one hundred men that bore the title of prince.

That included Ruxandra's father, of course. He was Mihnea "The Bad" and stood tall and proud in the portrait. His wife, Ruxandra's mother, was Voica, Mihnea's second wife. The first wife was put away for not bearing any children to Mihnea. Mercia, Ruxandra's older brother, stood beside his mother who was sitting in a chair. Ruxandra stood next to Mercia with her little brother, Milos, sitting on his mother's lap. It was all very formal and well-staged.

And there was the locket resting beautifully around the young Dela's neck. It was around an inch and a half tall and shaped in an ornate oval. There were several precious stones around the obviously gold case. Basil got some very clear pictures of the locket and distributed them to everyone's phone.

It was still too early for dinner so they decided to go back to the hotel for drinks while Basil did his work. Now that they had a picture of the locket, he was able to search more accurately for it online. He had fifty possibilities and sifted through them one by one. He struck gold on number forty-five and actually said "Bingo" when he realized he had most likely found it. He called the others to his computer and they all agreed it was probably Dela's locket.

Leslie went to work changing the travel arrangements. Cairo was going to have to wait. They were headed to Chisinau, the capital city of Moldova.

They checked out of the hotel early enough to get to the airport and through security to be on time for their five-hour flight. The location of the locket was not really a surprise. Moldova was under the control of the Ottoman Turks for over three hundred years. They certainly did not know what the locket would mean to their puzzle, but they simply had nothing else promising to follow at this point.

They arrived at the airport at six p.m. and rented an Opel Vivaro. The car was something of a van and easily accommodated all four and their luggage. Leslie had planned to have them drive the three hundred and ten miles from Chisinau to Rasnov in Romania. Everyone agreed it was time to go to Ruxandra's birthplace especially since it was so close and Wanda felt that they were being led in that direction by

something.

Chisinau is one of the least visited capitals of any European country. It had an unhappy past under the USSR for so many years. The country is trying to rebuild itself by creating new industries. Winemaking has been one of the more successful industries. In Chisinau, the National History Museum of Moldova resides like a jewel in a tarnished crown. The building is old and cold looking, but the inside is reminiscent of a palace.

They checked into the Hotel Diplomat Club and each got separate rooms this time. They only planned to be there one night, but the two-hour time zone difference made them all want to go to sleep early. They ate dinner in the hotel restaurant, which was very good, and said goodnight with a promise to meet at 9 a.m. in the lobby ready to check out.

It was a weekday and the hotel and the rest of the city became quiet early. Around midnight, Dela went for a walk. She did not want to be seen leaving the hotel, so she blinked into the other world and walked out of the lobby without being noticed. The museum was about a mile and a half away, so Dela kept up a brisk pace as she wound through the empty streets. She reached the museum and simply walked up to the front doors and passed through several locked gates. Dela slipped through the massive front doors and found no one on station or walking around. She knew exactly where the locket was located in the building and would visit it last.

She took her time and walked the floors not wanting to miss any chance at finding another item of interest. It took her almost two hours to get to the locket room. The only things that caught her attention during the tour was a chair. It was very, very ornate and she thought it might have been from her third husband's palace bedroom. Anyway, if it were indeed that very piece, it meant nothing to her then or now.

She saw the locket as soon as she entered the room. It was in a case with several other items centered in the back of the room. It was the first thing she saw when she entered the room although it was twenty feet away. Dela did not run over to it, but continued to look at everything else in the room first. Finally, she fixed her attention on the locket and teared up as she beheld it for the first time in 480 years. The card beneath it read, "Locket ~ Ottoman Empire ~ circa 1500 A.D.". Dela just smiled as she read the card. Then she reached through the glass case and picked up the locket.

The instant she touched it, she was pushed back to the living world with the locket in her hand as the glass case shattered all around her. Alarms started to sound and she looked around to find herself visible. She blinked herself back to the other place and vanished just as a security guard came running into the room. He looked right at her as she disappeared along with the locket. He just stood watching with his mouth open and was unable to move for fright.

Dela was up and gone before the guard moved. She passed through the front doors and zipped by two

police cars pulling up to the museum in response to the alarm. She resumed the same brisk pace she used on the way to the museum, but was quickly tired and could only keep up the pace a short way. She slowed, caught her breath and continued with the wail of the sirens in the background as more cars arrived at the museum.

It did not take Dela long to reach the hotel and she slipped in as quietly and unnoticed as when she left. She climbed the one flight of stairs to the floor her room was on and passed through her door without opening it. Once inside the room, she blinked herself back to the living world and took off her coat. She set it on the bed and glanced in a mirror as she turned to take off her jewelry. She gasped at what she saw and eased closer to the mirror to get a better look. She had aged at least ten years. There were more wrinkles on her face and a touch of gray in her long curly black hair.

Dela called and had her friends join her in her room before they checked out. She warned them about her appearance and they were genuinely concerned for her when they understood what had happened. She told them the whole story while Basil examined the locket carefully. The family crest that covered the front in porcelain was surrounded by gold ornate decoration. Basil could find no way to open the piece until Dela showed him how. There was a small hidden button latch inside of the top decoration. He examined the inside with a lighted magnifying eyepiece.

While Dela was recounting the theft from the night before with her friends, Basil said, "Hey. What have we here?" He grabbed a knife from his tool kit and gently lifted a thin cover plate. It was a perfect mold to the bottom and Dela never knew it was there. A minute phrase was inscribed on the inside backing. Basil got out his camera and laptop, photographed the text and expanded it on the computer screen. It read:

*Un jurământ sfânt
pentru cei morți fără moarte
Să-i elibereze puterile
Cel binecuvântat sugerează
Prin onorurile monarhului
care le leagă*

It was in old Romanian script and difficult for Dela to translate. The best she could come up with was:

The Curse of Dracul

A holy oath for the dead without death (unholy dead)

Let him (her) release (them with) his (her) powers

The blessed one suggests (welds)

Through the honors of the monarch who (that) binds them

At that point, they had to break off the discussion and get on the road. Everyone was hungry, so they packed, checked out of the hotel and grabbed breakfast sandwiches and coffee at the hotel restaurant. They quickly settled in for the eight-hour drive.

The hot topic of discussion was the script in the locket, of course. They figured out that the ‘unholy dead’ were other words for ‘ghosts’ and that the holy oath must be something that is holding them to the other world. Wanda suggested that the ‘blessed one’ could free the ghosts to move on. ‘Monarch’ was clearly a ruler of some country or province. It was all just conjecture at this point, so the discussion ended quietly. Everyone was clearly upset by the sudden aging of Dela. As soon as Basil was done with the locket, Dela put it around her neck and only took it off for bathing from then on. She was happy to have it again as it brought back memories of her family and her younger years.

The long drive took them through farmlands, mountains and forests. It was quite beautiful, but the seriousness of their work put a damper on enjoying the sights. They stopped several times to spell the driver, Basil, though he was comfortable driving the new vehicle for long stretches. Lunch was eaten quickly in a family café in one of the little towns that dotted the road. They splurged on a bottle of local wine and the three women enjoyed a glass at one of the stops.

The Chisinau police quickly reviewed the recordings from the museum robbery and saw exactly what the guard described, a woman lying on the floor near the broken display case for a second and then vanishing. They got a good facial picture of Dela and started the search at first light the next morning. They got to Dela’s hotel fifteen minutes after the foursome left and spent the next few hours figuring out a name to go with the reservation and the car rental. When they were done, they had a good timeline of Dela and her friends’ movements, until they drove away at least. They checked the possible exit routes and incorrectly guessed which ones to search. They notified Interpol of the theft and the identity of the probable culprit, but all that paperwork sat in inbox after inbox before it was shuffled to the bottom of the caseload since it was a minor theft of an artifact worth no more than a few hundred dollars. Fortunately, Leslie was using new credit cards set up without Dela’s name and that confused the search even more.

The group got to Rasnov in Romania and checked into their hotel just as the sun was setting. It was the

niciest hotel in the city though run down just as most of the city was. Basil and Dela took a short walk around the corner and found a nice little restaurant. They ordered a ton of food and drink and took it all back to the hotel to eat together in Wanda and Dela's room. They planned the next day and decided they would start the three-hour drive at 9 a.m. for to Poenari Castle, Dracula's citadel. Wanda insisted that Dela stay with her that night for safety and company.

They were told by the hotel staff to pack a lunch since there were no places to get anything to eat at the citadel. Wanda picked up sandwiches and other supplies at the same restaurant where they had gotten take out the night before and off they went. They checked out of the hotel and planned to head to Bucharest in the afternoon, which was only a two and a half hour drive from the citadel.

The road took them through the beautiful hidden valleys that sat between the tall mountains dominating the region. The twisting and turning road wound next to a river that flowed from Lake Vidraru a few miles to the north. Although in ruins now, it was easy to see why this area was used as a defensive fortification. It sat high on Mount Cetatea with 1480 steps up to the massive structure.

Dela and her friends arrived around noon, parked and immediately began the long climb to the top. They stopped several times on the way to catch their breaths sitting on the rock side of the hill beside the steps. They saw several groups of out-of-shape tourists taking the same break. Toward the top of the climb, several dummies had been skewered by large poles and positioned to resemble the real corpses that were plentiful in Vlad the Impaler's time.

At the top, they walked the ruins and took in the spectacular 360-degree view. Wanda had instinctively taken Dela's arm and walked with her. Dela admitted to her friends that she was more tired from the long climb than she usually would have been. Her mysterious aging was taking its toll.

Much of the castle wall construction was mortared brick and stone with rubble used to fill the thick walls. Little remained of the original structures except for the foundation walls. No one said anything as they slowly took in the fortress ruins. Dela and Wanda talked quietly about what they each *felt* about the place. Wanda could sense great pain and suffering everywhere, while Dela remembered it as a place from her childhood. Her family only visited occasionally. But, still, she had strong memories of it.

Wanda and Dela were sitting quietly on one of the walls when Wanda asked, "What would happen if I held onto you when you shifted away?"

Dela casually said, "I have no idea. I just assume that you would stay here while I was there."

"Let's try it."

They waited until the handful of tourists were out of sight and Wanda held Dela's arm tightly. Dela blinked away, but she could still feel Wanda's grip on her arm. It felt very weird for her to have a connection back to the living world while she was on the other side. Dela blinked back and looked at

Wanda who was smiling. Wanda said, "I saw what you saw. A dark world of mostly shadows in cloudy black and white. It has the same feeling I get when I connect with the spirits of people there. Now, I can feel it from their perspective. Very cool. Thank you." They hugged and Dela got up to walk some more.

She looked at Wanda and said, "I'm going to walk this place on the other side. Wait here. I could be a while if I find anything." She looked around for anybody watching and, seeing no one close by, she disappeared.

Dela walked the outer walkway around the entire structure and then the aisles between the walls. She came to the only enclosed area, a square room about twelve feet across. She carefully searched around the walls for anything unusual. Then she saw an odd thing on the stone and dirt floor. There was a staircase buried around five feet below the surface. She had always been able to see through solid materials, but never through so much hard material. Dela walked to the edge and stepped into the dirt and stone until she was over the hard stairs. It was weird willing herself to enter the ground directly beneath her. She floated down the stairs and was enclosed in solid ground. She felt trapped but kept going, fighting her fear the whole way.

The stairs wound around the edge of constructed rock walls that seemed to have been connected at one time to the surface walls. The stairs stopped at a stone floor leading through a doorway into a long corridor. She eased her way down the long tight opening and into a massive natural chamber. What Dela saw inside the chamber actually frightened her. Lining the walls and sitting everywhere were the spirits of men looking at her. They were mostly soldiers, but a few were dressed like peasants of the Middle Ages. She eased past the first of the thousands of them and listened to them whisper about her as she walked by. She caught some of what they were saying -- "It's Ruxandra", "... the locket", "She can do it," and "Thank God".

The cavern had a glow to it that allowed Dela to see what was around her. The opening was massive with classic formations of stalactites and stalagmites glistening in the eerie glow. The multitude of spirit beings watching her never moved, but shifted as they shimmered. She walked the thin path on and on hearing the same reactions as she walked. The cavern opened up more as she went until she could finally see the end, and there was a dim light coming from a passageway on the backside that looked like it might lead to the outside. The area was shaped like an amphitheater leading down to a central stage-like platform that held a large throne. Sitting attentively on the throne was a large burly man covered in furs and leather. He had a simple steel crown on his head and eyed Dela as she approached.

His voice was quiet, solemn and deep, "You wear the locket of the Princess of Walachia, girl. Are you her?"

Dela bowed and answered with respect, "I am Princess Ruxandra Dracul, my lord."

He shouted, "Wearing the locket of Dracul is not proof enough of your claim, girl."

Maintaining her composure, she quietly said, "And what more proof would you need than my locket and my word, my lord?"

He obviously appreciated the respect and returned to his former quiet tone, "The word of a woman means little here to us. We have waited ten lifetimes for you to come, if you are indeed the one sent to free us from this eternal waiting."

"I do not know if I am the one." Then she remembered something and continued, "My locket bears a riddle that I do not know the answer to." She took it off, opened it to the inscription and handed it to the man.

He read the text and thoughtfully said, "We are the Unholy Dead, trapped between life and death by the curse placed on us by Vlad Dracul. He foretold that a woman would someday come to this place and she alone could put an end to our suffering. If you are the lady we wait for, you should have more than the locket as proof."

"What more proof could you need, my lord? I am who I say I am."

He stood tall and dark, growing angry again, "Show me your crown and ring as well as your locket and we shall then tell you how to break the curse. Until then, you and all of us are damned to an eternity between heaven and hell." And they all vanished into the shadows.

Dela retraced her steps climbing out of the cavern, up the buried staircase and back into the afternoon sun. Once inside the small enclosure, she could see no one and once again blinked herself into the world of the living. She stepped through the tight doorway and scared the hell out of a young couple who had apparently just come out of the room. They looked at her like she was a magician who was hiding behind a mirror as she quickly walked by them ignoring their gasps and comments.

Dela saw Basil and Leslie first and they immediately knew that something important had occurred. They took Dela's arms and walked her around the corner to where Wanda had been waiting patiently for the last two hours. Without realizing it, the time had past much quicker than Dela had realized. Wanda too knew something was up as they all began the long descent down the mountain. No one spoke until they were in the car and driving. Dela revealed what had occurred and, of course, her three friends believed every word.

Chased

They reached Bucharest and checked into their hotel. Leslie had gotten a suite for Wanda and Dela to share while Basil and Leslie each had separate rooms. They grabbed a quick dinner in the hotel restaurant and gathered in the suite to make plans.

Basil stated the obvious, “A ring and a crown.”

Wanda asked, “Do you remember those things? Do you have any idea where we might find them?”

Dela answered, “I had a tiara once. But, I hardly remember ever actually wearing it.”

Always the technical and practical one, Basil asked, “Can you describe it? If I get a good enough description and it still exists, I can search the web.”

Dela described it as best as she could with Basil taking notes. It was a simple design as far as tiaras go. It had a large blue sapphire oval stone surrounded by small diamonds all set in gold. The general shape was more of a headband than a crown but, with the blue accent stone, it sounded beautiful. With this description, Basil started his search.

Everyone wanted to try to figure out what the deal was with the three identification pieces -- the tiara, a ring and the locket. They decided they were dealing with five hundred year old spirits, and who knew what would make sense to them. For Wanda, the bigger question was who are these guys? Leslie assumed they were all on the same page about their history and was surprised when Wanda asked the question. In Leslie’s mind, obviously they were the slain enemies of Vlad Dracul. Once Leslie offered this suggestion, Basil and Wanda agreed.

Basil was still searching but asked Dela for the description of the ring also. The ring matched the tiara with the same type of sapphire stone and diamonds set in gold. After Basil had enough to go on, he started a second search for the ring.

About forty possible hits came back from the search for the tiara and Leslie and Basil started to go through them one by one. They easily narrowed it down to five and then asked Dela to look at those. After just a few seconds, Dela recognized her tiara. Basil did some more magic and found a history of the tiara. It started in the Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum showing up in the collection in 1835. It was on display from that time until 1910 when sold with many other pieces to the British Museum. It was never displayed, but was stored until 1952 when it was sold to a private collector. The trail ended there with the new owner never named except the word *foreign* was used to describe him in the press release.

It was starting to get late and the foursome were ready to call it quits for the night having reached this seemingly dead end with the tiara and the search ending on the ring with over a thousand possible results.

Again, Basil started going through them one at a time. He was just getting started when there was a knock on the door. Leslie got up, walked to the door, looked through the peephole and said, "It's a policeman," as she opened the door. No one inside had time to react when four Moldovian uniformed officers burst into the room followed by a plain-clothes detective from Interpol. They did not handcuff anyone, but escorted the four out of the hotel and down to three waiting police cars. In ten minutes, they were at the main station. All that Dela could get out of the police was that they were wanted for questioning.

Since Dela was the only one who could speak Romanian, the main language of Moldova, and she was the prime suspect, she was put into an interrogation room while the others were dumped into a cell down the hall. They took Dela's locket, tagged it and put it into a plastic bag while she sat there. The Interpol officer, a Detective Constable Petrescu, did the talking while a regular Romanian uniformed police officer stood quietly to the side.

Once he was ready, he started the visit. "Ms. Samuels, this necklace was stolen the other day from a museum in Chisinau." He opened the folder in front of him and took out still pictures taken by the security camera at the museum. He spread the pictures out for Dela to look at and continued, "As you can see, you were caught by the cameras as you stole the necklace." He laid out a final picture that showed the now empty place where Dela was. "What I cannot understand is how you managed to make it look like you vanished into thin air and leave the building without being seen." Dela remained silent through all of this. "Would you please explain this mystery to me?"

"I think I will wait for an attorney."

He stared at Dela for a long time. Neither blinked until he finally gathered up the pictures, put them neatly back into the folder and said, "I think this matter can wait until the morning. I hope you enjoy your stay with us. I assure you, it will be a long time." With that, they took Dela and put her into the same small cell with her friends.

Leslie was crying. Dela sat down and said, "Not to worry. This is nothing I can't handle." Just then, a police officer came and took everyone out of the cell except Dela. As they were walking out, Dela translated what the woman was saying, "You are free to go." They all stopped outside the cell and Dela continued, "Go back to the hotel and pack up for a quick exit. I will take care of this mess here. Just wait for me and be ready to go. We are leaving our rental car here. I shouldn't be very long" And they were gone out of the door just like that.

Dela waited an hour for the place to settle for the night. When all was quiet around two o'clock, she hid herself under the blankets and pillows on her cot and shifted to make herself invisible. Then, Dela walked down the hall to the building security room and went in to find only one man asleep in a chair in

front of six monitors. She blinked back to the living world and switched off the cameras one by one without waking the sleeping police officer. She shifted back to being invisible and moved out into the bullpen area where there was only a female officer on duty. Dela quickly found the envelope and folder that held her locket and placed the charm around her neck. With that accomplished, she walked out the front door, down the steps and around to the back of the building to the vehicle impound yard. Walking through the chain-link gate, she went into the guard shack and pressed the button that opened the gate. She looked through the vehicle keys hanging on a rack and selected a car, a Mercedes sedan. Dela found the car parked toward the back of the full lot and drove it out the gate. She stopped and went back inside the shack and closed the gate behind her. Without anyone noticing, as far as she could tell, she drove across town to the hotel and parked in an ally off to the side.

Dela slipped through the lobby and up the stairs to her suite. She found her friends and they all slipped out of the hotel, this time by a side exit right beside the waiting car. They quickly and quietly loaded up the Mercedes and Dela and her friends drove away. She told them the entire story and her plans as she drove out of the city. She stayed on side streets hoping to avoid the cameras that were everywhere on the main thoroughfares. She headed south through Bulgaria with their destination being Athens.

The drive was about twelve hours and she drove on through the night letting her friends catch up on some sleep. When they reached Sofia in Bulgaria, Dela stole another car, dumped the Mercedes in an off-road forest where she thought it would not be found for several weeks and they continued their drive.

The friends reached Athens without incident around five in the morning and hung out in a 24-hour coffee shop until morning light. While they were waiting, Dela went for a walk and returned a half-hour later with bag full of cash. No one asked her where she had gotten it. Again, they dumped the stolen car, this time in a rundown neighborhood where they thought it would be taken away by the locals and never reported. They caught a cab to a local upscale marina and found a yacht broker office. After flashing the cash, which totaled over four hundred thousand euros, they bought a used 65-foot sailboat. The agent helped them outfit it with supplies and equipment and, exactly at noon, they motored out of the harbor until they could raise sails.

Without knowing it, they had managed to evade a dragnet thrown up by Interpol and the local surrounding countries. Dela's escape was discovered around six a.m. the previous day, but they did not realize that the Mercedes had been stolen until later that day after Dela had disposed of it. No one ever connected the theft of the second car or cash to Dela.

Leslie, Basil and Wanda knew nothing about sailing so Dela spent a few hours giving them a crash course as they motored away from Athens into the Saronic Gulf's bustling sailing playground. Basil was the fastest learner and could soon spell Dela at the helm. Leslie was the most lost and relegated herself as

cook and housekeeper. Wanda too was a quick learner; it was clear Dela was an extremely experienced sailor and a good instructor to boot.

They sailed south and turned west before they reached the island of Crete. The land disappeared as they crossed the expanse of the Ionian Sea finally turning north and passing through the thin channel between Italy and Sicily near Messina. From there, they hugged the coast of Italy past Naples until they reached Rome, their destination.

They docked the boat in a marina near Rome and sold it to a broker for two-thirds what they paid. The plan from here on was to take trains the rest of the way to London where they would look for a lead on the current owner of the tiara. There was only one problem, Dela needed a new set of papers -- in fact, they all did.

Through the years, Dela had changed her identity many times. The first thing they needed was a simple passport photo. They stopped into a shop and walked out twenty minutes later with a picture for each. Dela knew all the ins and outs of the game and used her experience to find a top-notch forger in Rome. Her companions wandered the streets of Rome taking in the sights after purchasing burner phones and other necessities they had to abandon along the way, easily picked up at a local subway station kiosk.

Dela went through three cold contacts to find the forger and paid him very well for the fake passports that would get them to London. She rejoined her friends for dinner at a nice outdoor restaurant in the Piazza Navona where the Fountain of Four Rivers sits alongside other beautiful fountains. With the new identification papers, Dela checked them into a small, but decent hotel for the night. From now on, at least until the end of this investigation, she was Elizabeth Reardon.

Basil finally connected to the Internet and narrowed his search for the ring to around one hundred possibilities. Dela reviewed them and picked out four that might be the one. Two were in France -- in Paris and Lyon -- and one each in Minsk, Belarus and Ankara, Turkey. With this new information, they decided to stop to look in Paris and Lyon on their way to London.

Rome to Lyon by train was a ten-hour trip and they purchased tickets online that night to leave early the next morning. Everyone crashed hard that night after all the excitement and knowing they had an early schedule.

Detective Constable Petrescu was genuinely angry at himself about Dela's escape. He immediately got the entire force on alert trying to avoid the embarrassment they would endure from the seemingly magical escape. Once they discovered that the Mercedes was missing, they started the search in earnest. Before that, all they had to go on was the identifications of Dela and her three not-guilty friends. Now they

sought all four. They tracked the Mercedes with traffic cameras headed southwest on the main highway to Sofia and then lost all trace of it. Notices and pictures were sent to every law enforcement agency along the route they had gone, but Petrescu received nothing for their efforts as of yet. But, Petrescu was a vigilant and patient man believing the group would eventually make a mistake. He upped the ante by charging Basil, Leslie and Wanda with helping in the mysterious escape.

The four *criminals* had purchased a cabin berth on the train to Lyon and hid the whole trip, ordering food in. The phony passports worked without any trouble and they paid for everything in cash trying to leave no trail behind. Train travel was less restrictive than taking an airplane where the security would be harder since their fake passports would not hold up to any computer search. Keeping a low profile and trying to stay under the radar was going to have to be enough for now.

They arrived in Lyon at five p.m. and took a taxi to a downtown hotel. They picked one at random and checked in with no trouble. Dela went out for a shopping trip alone and came back with a blond wig and some new sunglasses in case she was caught on a video camera again. They had a pleasant evening waiting for the target museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, to open at ten a.m. the next day. They figured the museum visit would only take a few hours at most and bought train tickets to Paris for one forty in the afternoon. The trip would only be a couple of hours and Leslie figured they could do the same last-minute hotel check-in again.

The next morning, they had a taxi take them all to the museum, but Dela left them in a coffee shop while she checked the museum out. She had her new blonde wig on and was confident she would be leaving nothing for anyone to identify her. Just as the museum opened, she went inside and headed straight for the ring. She found it quickly in a display with many other rings and zeroed in on it immediately. It was a pity she was so focused on her ring because it caused her to miss a treasure sitting four items to the right.

Dela looked at the ring hoping to recognize it, but it did not stir any memories in her at all. The museum was busy considering it was a weekday – after all, it is one of the biggest in all of Europe and quite well visited. Dela used this to her advantage. She walked to a place behind a pillar clear of any video camera, waited until no one was watching and shifted into the other world. She walked back to the ring, planned what she was going to do and waited until the right moment when a family was looking at the display. She went behind it and with the family pretty much hiding her; she reached into the case and touched the ring. But, nothing happened.

Dela went behind the same pillar she had hidden behind to disappear and reappeared into the world of the

living. She left the museum and went to find her friends at the coffee shop. Dela joined them and filled them in on her visit. She had a pastry and coffee as they talked and, when she was finished, they took a cab to the train station. They boarded quickly without incident and settled in for the two-hour ride to Paris.

They talked and visited on the train with Dela telling stories of her life.

Paris ~ 1810

Lela Vertefeuille moved to Paris in 1810 from “a small town down on the coast”, rented a nice home in the neighborhood around Place Vendome, hired servants and started a new high society life as a rich young widow. During this Napoleonic era, life for the wealthy and even for the well-off was picturesque, with Paris being the epicenter of the arts and political rule for a large portion of Europe. There were parties, festivals and concerts in abundance to attend, if one knew the right people of course, and Lela quickly made the acquaintance of all of these right people.

A few weeks after she settled in, major celebration took place on April 2 to mark the marriage of Napoleon to his new Empress, Marie-Louise of Austria. There was a lavish wedding procession on the Champs-Élysées. Lela attended everything -- the parades, the balls and every outdoor event arm in arm with a different man for each event.

Lela joined with the other Parisians taking their promenades on the grand boulevards, in the public and private parks and gardens, and above all on the Palais-Royal, a street with every imaginable thing for sale, many fine restaurants and salons for dancing, playing billiards and gambling.

One night after a long visit to Palais-Royal, Lela and her date went for a casual walk along the Seine. It was around midnight and the city was still going strong during the wedding celebrations. Suddenly the sounds of horses pulling a carriage neared. Lela turned around and saw the large gilded open carriage with a male and female passenger. They were obviously some kind of royalty. As it approached, Lela and her date moved out of the way. When it passed, Lela could tell the carriage and passengers were not of the living world. The fuzziness of the movements gave it away for her, while her date seemed not to notice anything except seeing the glamor of royalty. As it passed, Lela recognized the couple to be Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette. Both had been executed by guillotine years before and Lela was sure that her date and probably most of the people on the street would not recognize them. The coach passed with strollers quickly getting out of the way before the large beautiful black horses ran them over. And off they rode with no one but Lela knowing the truth of the *spirited* event.

Paris ~ Present Day

Detective Constable Petrescu sent out a new description of his target, changing it to be on the lookout for four people traveling together with Dela as the main suspect. It included pictures of all four with different hair color and with facial hair for Basil, but the most important detail was that they were indeed running together.

Dela had thought about what the police were doing to track them and already realized the heightened danger of them remaining a foursome. She thought they were okay getting to Paris but, after that, she guessed correctly that they were being advertised to the local authorities as a group and not just her. Dela casually scanned the newspapers on the train and found no story about the robbery of the necklace, her magical escape from jail or their identities. She figured that did not mean anything considering the time lag and the great distances she had put between the museum in Chisinau, Moldova and Paris, France. But, she knew she had humiliated the Interpol detective and he would never let go.

Therefore, they split up. Dela and Basil paired up as a couple on holiday while Leslie and Wanda became two old friends seeing the sights. Although they were primarily hunting Dela's ring, they decided to stay three days to wander through the other museums and sites. No one but Dela had been in Paris and she felt confident that, as couples, they would avoid being identified.

They checked into two cheap hotels close together near Serris, thirty-five minutes from the center of Paris proper. They met up, went to eat at a nice family restaurant near their hotels and then went shopping for clothes. Everyone picked up lots of new stuff using cash so as not to leave a trail. Some of their old things were discarded and new travel suitcases were purchased.

The next day, Dela went to the museum that might have her ring and walked it until she arrived at the display case. Upon seeing it live and in person, she knew that this ring was not hers. She did the hide and shift thing, touched the ring and verified her belief. She rejoined Basil, and they enjoyed touring every historical site and museum possible in one day. Basil asked questions and got to hear a lot of interesting history that Dela was happy to share with someone for the first time in her life. It felt good.

They joined Leslie and Wanda for dinner and then went in search of music. It did not take long for them to find a fun place to pass time and soak up the culture. Basil shared how great it was to listen to Dela tell her stories and offered to trade her off the next day. Wanda took him up on that swap, but Leslie made them promise that she could go out with Dela on the third and last day in Paris.

Uniformed Paris police officers walked the city in the busier nightlife districts everywhere these days and

every one of them had received hand flyers on the four fugitives. They reviewed hundreds of these every day before hitting their beats and, by chance, one rookie had taken that particular flyer with him for the night's work. He often walked into the nightclubs to let it be known that Paris's finest were present to protect the citizens and tourists alike. The search for the four friends was a good reason to do so again tonight. He wandered into each club as he and his partner strolled their patrol area. He showed the picture to the bartenders and waiters and got nothing for the effort.

Wanda selected the final club after they checked out two and they settled in for a few hours of Paris's version of new-day rock and roll. They enjoyed themselves and left before the late night set arrived. They hailed a cab and went back to their respective hotels.

The police officer entered one of the first two clubs the friends had visited where a bartender remembered seeing them walk in but leave without ordering drinks. Finally, he got to the club they had settled on and all the staff recognized them immediately. He collected as much of the cash they had spent from the waiters and started checking cabs to find the one that probably took them to their hotel. Having no further luck by the end of their shift, they went back to their station, wrote up their reports and tagged the cash as evidence.

The last thing the rookie did was to send a note to the issuing officer, Moldova Interpol Detective Constable Petrescu.

Petrescu got the message first thing in the morning and caught the first flight from Chisinau to Paris. On the way, his colleagues confirmed that the cash was from a bank theft in Athens. Petrescu read over the report of the theft several times before he believed it. The cash was missing from a sealed bank vault. There was no sign of entry and the cameras showed no coming or going. The theft occurred sometime before the bank opened and not noticed until a counting in the early afternoon. Tying the bank robbery to the same suspect in the Chisinau robbery got the attention of the higher-ups at the agency. They authorized Petrescu to use more resources and make the search a priority. Just to make the case a bit more curious, one of the club servers clearly remembered that Dela spoke perfect French with no hint of a Romanian or American accent.

The foursome checked out of their hotels, walked about a mile to find two more hotels near each other and checked in. With that accomplished, Dela and Wanda toured the same places Leslie and Basil were touring, but in a different order. Leslie and Basil wanted to do the town again that night, but Dela and Wanda ate room service in their room. All the walking was getting to the two older people while the

youngsters just wanted to keep going.

Late that night, the police found the cab driver that had taken the group back to their hotel. He remembered them clearly and that they were good tippers as well. Detective Constable Petrescu and the rookie Paris cop, immediately went to the hotel only to find the suspects gone with no trace since they had walked away without taking a cab. The trail turned cold for the rest of the night and on through the next day.

On the last day before moving on to London, the foursome switched hotels again before going out one last day. Leslie and Dela spent a few hours to find the right airport and hire a private jet for the rest of the trip. They all met for one last dinner together. Fortunately, luck was on their side and they selected a restaurant that was not on the radar of the people searching for them. They had a pleasant meal and everyone called it an early night.

One Step Ahead

Interpol's Detective Constable Petrescu went back to Moldova three days later after checking every lead. He was sure his quarry would make a mistake -- the only question was when.

Dela and her friends checked out of their hotels and caught two taxis to the airport. The rented plane waited with two pilots ready to go. They left immediately after boarding and flew the short one-hour flight to London. The customs agent greeting them quickly passed them through without checking their new fake IDs through a computer.

They caught a cab and went straight to the British Museum near the center of London. Basil provided a detailed map of the museum since Dela would be looking into the records office, which was off limits to the public. The museum was fully staffed during the working hours, which meant Dela would have to return later that night alone. They walked the museum so Dela could formulate a plan of attack for the late night visit. Leslie stayed in touch with the plane's pilots and told them to be ready to leave around two in the morning. They asked no questions being quite used to dealing with eccentric rich customers.

Once finished, they ate fish and chips at a restaurant across the street and then went to the Tower of London to view the Crown Jewels. They managed to do a little shopping while they killed time and buzzed over to SoHo for an evening of jazz and dinner. Dela left around midnight to make the visit back to the British Museum while her friends stayed for the last set.

She got out of the cab across the street and slipped into the shadows of an ally to make the transition to the other world. She bounded unnoticed up the steps of the building and passed through the front doors without a hitch. There was a cleaning crew working in the lobby and she easily avoided them as she made her way to the administrative wing. This section was not occupied for the night and she took only a few minutes to find the records room that was filled with filing cabinets. They were conveniently set up by year and she found 1952 with no trouble. To make things even better, the files were labeled by purchases and sales making it easy to find the sale in question.

She had to sort through a couple until she found the right one. There were pictures and description of the sale including the tiara. Rather than linger around, she stuffed the file into her coat, closed up the cabinet and left everything as she found it. There were no cameras in the room, so she felt confident the file would not be missed for a long time.

It took her a half hour to get back to her friends and another half hour to get back to the plane. On the ride back to the airport, Leslie read the file. When she found what she was looking for, she said, "Call the

pilots. We're off to Saudi Arabia." Basil made the call and Leslie continued, "It seems one of the Saudi royal family bought the lot. King Faisal, before he was king, purchased it to start his personal collection in earnest. That is all the sale notes say about it. Basil, what do you have?"

Basil continued with the information he found online, "Before that, he was considered a rich amateur collector. His collection passed to his eldest son, Prince Abdullah, and then, upon his death, to his younger brother, Prince Khalid al-Faisal bin Abdulaziz who is the current governor of Makkah Province. That is an important position since the province is the most populace place in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Mecca is there as well. Faisal lives in Mecca, but has a beach home in Jeddah. Mecca has no public airport, so I'd say start in Jeddah." And off they went.

The eight-hour flight would put them into Jeddah around ten in the morning. They were all bushed after the late night and one by one fell asleep in the reclining seats. The pilots were notified to be available for another fast departure, probably later that night. Then the foursome took a taxi into the city from the airport.

Interpol has an office in Riyadh and works closely with the Ministry of Interior, the main law enforcement agency in Saudi Arabia. The same fugitive report hit that office as it did every office of Interpol including a small one in Jeddah. The data now included updates on the crimes and sightings, the museum theft in Chisinau, the jail escape, the bank robbery in Athens and finally the search in Paris. This was flagged as a high priority, so it made every morning briefing in most of the major cities across the world, but primarily in Europe. Detective Constable Petrescu was watching and monitoring everywhere waiting for the mistake that would trip up the elusive band of thieves. He reviewed every report and every detail available to him. The thing that drove him the hardest was the questions he had about Dela Samuels's seemingly magical powers.

In cooperation with the federal, state and local authorities in the United States, Dela's house was searched. They found nothing of interest to the case since all their data on Dela was kept on Basil's computer. But Petrescu was fascinated by Dela's paranormal investigation activities and reviewed her website over and over again. This only served to make him more curious and more determined about this case.

The foursome found a café on the beach and worked to develop a plan. Dela made sure they sat where she could watch the street for signs of any police that might be looking for them. Basil located the Governor's beach home, which was really a palatial estate surely heavily guarded and secured. After a short discussion, they decided that the prince probably kept his collection in Jeddah and not Mecca. This was

good for the team since Mecca was off limits to non-Muslims. With a bit more discussion, the agreed upon plan was simple. Dela would again go solo. With her abilities, it was the only sensible thing to do.

Dela saw no difference between going to the estate right now and waiting until the middle of the night, so she left in a taxi. Leslie and Wanda walked around the nearby shops while Basil kept the table at the café by drinking an endless stream of coffee and tipping really well. Dela had the cab driver drop her off a block away from the home and looked for a place to make herself invisible. She found a tall row of hedges on her path and stepped close to it as she shifted. She continued down the wide street and reached the main driveway gate. A guard was posted directly inside with a uniformed police officer inside reading. Dela passed through the gate and walked up the driveway to the main house. Armed men patrolled the grounds, but they paid no notice to Dela. She reached the front door and looked for cameras. They were everywhere, at least on the outside. The inside was probably the same and maybe worse.

She slipped through the two massive front doors into an entryway that was classically grand in design. Two matching curved staircases led to a beautiful balcony. Everything was lavish, even gaudy with marble everywhere. There were alcoves to display rare urns and ancient statues scattered around the large room. There were no people here. She started to her left to be efficient and entered a large formal sitting room. It too was decorated with all the finest things in the world -- Persian rugs and antique furniture perfectly looking brand new and fit for a billionaire prince of Saudi Arabia. There were several doors off the room and she started to the left again. The first room was a bathroom, but of course no ordinary bathroom. The fixtures looked to be solid gold with more marble lining the entire room. In the next room, she found what she was looking for -- the private art collection of one of the richest men in the world.

Paintings were hung on the walls and display tables arranged just so. They contained any number of things from ancient Egyptian pieces to beautiful precious stone necklaces. Dela found the tiara far in the back of the room with similar items laid out on velvet. She stared at the tiara for a few moments remembering it clearly. She knew this was her tiara and now came the challenge of touching it and all that might mean. She checked the security cameras and saw none, though they were probably concealed in the wall. Remembering what happened when she touched the locket, Dela crouched down behind the table that held her tiara. She reached up and hesitated, while she made sure she was as hidden as she could be. Then she snatched the tiara.

As with the locket, the same quick-shifting energy hit her and she found herself in the world of the living and quite visible to anyone or anything watching. She quickly blinked invisible again and got to her feet. No alarms went off and no one entered the room. She quickly walked to the door and managed to step aside just as it opened. Dela was prepared for the worst, but it was just a house cleaner coming in to

clean. Dela slipped by her, crossed the large entryway and walked through the front doors.

She walked a mile down the street until she found a good spot to shift worlds. Dela had to walk another mile before she hit enough businesses to warrant taxicabs. She caught one back to the café where she had left her friends.

The house cleaner cleaned the floors first and then began dusting everything. When she got to the empty place where the tiara had been, she thought about it for a quick second and immediately left to get her supervisor. He returned with her to see the display for himself. Once he had, he called the head of security with a walkie-talkie. The security man joined him with a few others and the search began in earnest. Every staff member was asked about the missing item with every one of them knowing nothing, of course.

Basil and Leslie were out visiting the shops when Dela found Wanda holding down their places at the café. When Wanda saw Dela, she actually gasped. Dela knew instantly that finding the tiara had made her age again. “How bad do I look?”

“Take a look for yourself.” Wanda handed Dela a compact mirror and it was Dela’s turn to gasp.

“Another ten years, I would guess,” said Dela

Wanda reached over and stroked Dela on the side of the face in a loving caress and said, “You poor thing. Are you feeling okay?”

“Older, now that you mention it.” Dela looked at herself in the mirror again and said, “Crap.”

Wanda called Leslie and told her what was going on and to return immediately.

With all options exhausted, the house security chief made a call to his brother, a captain on the Jeddah local police force. He had two of his officers head straight over to get details on the possible robbery. In the meantime, the house security staff reviewed the video of the room and discovered that no cameras had been aimed at the spot the tiara held. They saw nothing, but were able to pin down the time of the disappearance between 4:58 a.m. when a guard walked through and checked everything and 11:34 a.m. when the house cleaner noticed its absence.

When Leslie and Basil returned, they went through the shocked phase of seeing Dela again and then into the serious “What do we do now?” phase. Dela answered the question, “I think we should get out of this place as soon as possible and head for Ankara.” No one disagreed and no one hesitated as the four packed up and got a cab back to the airport where their private jet was notified to go.

The officers reviewed the video recording and they were also at a loss as to how the tiara had gone missing, since no one had entered the room. They radioed their report to the captain, who remembered the Interpol notice about a seemingly impossible theft earlier that morning. He got up from his office desk and walked down the hall to the office of the loan Interpol agent assigned to Jeddah. That agent contacted Detective Constable Petrescu in Chisinau and all hell broke loose.

The ride to the airport was slow with the afternoon traffic being detoured in several places for construction, but eventually they arrived. The plane was ready and they boarded quickly since all they had were the few packages of things purchased while waiting for Dela. Unfortunately, they got no special treatment on departure lineup and they waited for eight commercial aircraft to take off before they could. Once in the air, Dela relaxed. She knew the police would put two and two together eventually and the search for them would get hotter. She just hoped it would be later rather than sooner.

Petrescu requested and got an immediate manhunt of the city with every cop given a fresh description of the sought after fugitives. They missed the four friends by an hour at the café and did not think to check for a private aircraft at the airport. Petrescu hopped on a plane as fast as possible, but he would not arrive until the next day. He received the video files of the theft, which showed nothing except the guard's entry and then the house cleaner's. He was sure that Dela had performed another magic trick. What was stumping him now was why just the locket in Chisinau and why just the tiara in Jeddah. What did these items have in common? Both items had a simple description from the museum and the Jeddah home, but they clearly dated around 1500. He began to research their histories with every resource he had available including two university professors of 16th Century archeology and history.

The Anatolian Civilizations Museum in Ankara, Turkey dates back to the 1500s and is a treasure trove of historical items. Dela's ring was stored in the basement warehouse that holds many of the museum's items too numerous to display. The plane landed, and they again told the pilots this would be a short stop and let them know the next destination was most likely Minsk, Belarus.

It was now five o'clock and they took a taxi to the museum. The group again sat in a café nearby and again decided that Dela would visit the museum by herself while the rest sampled the local food and most of all the coffee and tea. Dela quickly got ready for her mission and left. She walked the block to the museum, found a place in the shadows of an older building and blinked herself into the other world. The museum had just closed for the day. Dela passed through the locked front doors and encountered no one

as she made her way to the basement storage areas.

It took her a full half hour to find the right storage locker and open it. She searched the trays of jewelry and found the ring in the bottom tray. When she saw it, she knew this was not her ring. She touched it to make sure and nothing happened. She closed up everything trying to leave it as she had found it. Dela quickly retraced her steps to the same dark shadowy place she had shifted from earlier. She shifted back into the living world and walked the few blocks to the café. Wanda, Basil and Leslie had gotten a good stash of food to go while they waited. Seeing Dela return, they were relieved and disappointed at the same time -- relieved she had not aged more, but disappointed at not finding the ring. Another cab ride to the airport and they were back on board in a matter of minutes. The pilots had already filed a flight plan and started to taxi quickly. Once in the air, Dela and everyone felt a little safer since they were putting distance between them and Jeddah.

Petrescu arrived in Jeddah just in time to receive a report from an enterprising detective regarding the whereabouts of Dela and company. Finally, someone took the initiative to check on private aircraft. The detective quickly identified the plane, the passengers, their time of departure and their destination. He called ahead to Ankara only to find that they had slipped away again. However, he did find out that they were headed to Minsk. In fact, they had just landed and the local police were currently in route to the airport to intercept the plane and passengers.

Dela's jet landed in Minsk around midnight and they all headed for a cheap hotel around the corner from the target museum, the National Historical Museum of the Republic of Belarus. With its forty-eight collections, it is the preeminent museum in the large, but sparsely populated country. The ring in question was currently on display in the Archeology of the Middle Ages collection. Once at the hotel, they settled in while Dela took off for the museum. She again shifted in a dark corner of a building and then walked directly through the front doors of the large grand building. She found the collection quickly and zeroed in on the display case that might hold the last key to identify herself to the souls at her grandfather's castle.

She truly expected to find her ring here since this was the last of the four places on Basil's list. When she finally got a good look at the ring, it too was not hers. She reached through the glass and touched it to be sure and, as expected, nothing happened. She returned to the hotel, visited with her friends for a few moments before crawling into the nearest bed for the night.

Shortly after they landed, the local police arrived at the waiting jet and interrogated the crew. They searched the plane and found the tiara in a suitcase. They filed a verbal report with the Interpol man in

Jeddah and were told to wait for the four fugitives to return and arrest them.

Basil was the first one up and went out for breakfast food and coffees for everyone. When he returned, they ate and talked about what to do next. After a short discussion, Dela said, "We should go to the last place I remember having my ring, the Tismana Monastery." They all knew where that was having studied Dela's history.

Wanda said, "But, you died there. Are you ready to go back?"

"Certainly. I know we are on the right trail and I am so tired of this game. I am tired. Tired to death." No one replied to that statement. The four travelers picked up the few things they had with them and left for the plane. When they arrived at the airport, they were dropped off outside the private plane terminal. As they rounded a corner, Basil spotted the police officers waiting and pulled the group back behind the corner out of sight. They talked it over and realized that the only thing on the plane worth having was the tiara. They had all the IDs and money with them. So, Dela blinked and vanished as she walked around the corner to the plane.

Fortunately, the stairs were down so she walked up the stairs onto the jet, right past the police officers waiting in their cars. There was no one on board, so she took the time to change clothes before she grabbed the tiara that was sitting on a table in a plastic evidence bag. She removed the tiara from the bag, and then left the bag right where she had found it. She exited the plane walking past the police officers again. She found her friends who were now waiting in another taxi. She climbed in and they left for the city.

The taxi driver took them to a bank that would change euros for Russian rubles. They paid him off and then found a restaurant to hide in and get some food as well. Dela purchased a local newspaper and sat down to look for a vehicle or two. She had an idea. They would buy a cheap car from a personal ad and then do the same for an RV. RVs turned out to be scarce but, after a few calls, she found what she hoped would be a decent one. She also found a reasonably priced Audi for sale by owner and made that her first stop.

After a short taxi ride, she found the home and let the taxi take off. A nice older couple sold her the car and were happy to take the cash. They would take care of the transfer of title by mail in a few days. Dela hoped they would forget entirely. She drove back to the restaurant to get her companions and they all went to look at the RV.

The drive again was short and was actually close to where Dela had purchased the Audi an hour earlier. The RV was perfect and would sleep four quite comfortably. Basil took it for a drive and came back with a positive review. Dela made the same cash purchase with the same promise to mail in the

The Curse of Dracul

paperwork as with the Audi. They filled up both vehicles with gas and found a grocery store to buy snacks and drinks for the drive. The drive would take twenty-hours, which they planned to make in two days if everything went well.

The grocery store had a section for clothes and they all purchased a few items. Once they felt they had everything, they got on the highway toward the next stage of this strange scavenger hunt.

Out of the Shadows

Interpol's Detective Constable Petrescu stayed in Jeddah and continued to receive updates from the field. He finally called off the stakeout at the Minsk airport. No sooner had he done that, than they called back and told him about the missing tiara. They swore up and down that they had not left their post and no one had entered the plane. Petrescu was actually not surprised. He counted this as another of the strange occurrences piling up in this case.

Another set of facts was now confusing him in the picture developing on the group's choice of cities they visited. They left San Francisco together and made their first stop in Lisbon, Portugal. From there, they went to Chisinau where Dela stole the locket. Next stop was for cash, over four hundred thousand euros in Athens. After that, they had been spotted in Paris (he did not know about them stopping in Rome or Lyon) and then London with the pilots confirming the rest of the stops -- Jeddah, where Dela stole the tiara, Ankara and now Minsk. He concluded that they were looking for specific things like the locket and tiara. He had the museums in Lisbon, Paris, London, Ankara and Minsk checked for other missing items. They turned up nothing even after reviewing their security video footage. He had successfully deduced the right questions to ask, but had no answers. Who the hell was Dela Samuels and her friends and what were they looking for?

Dela drove the motorhome with Wanda as copilot, and Basil and Leslie were in the Audi. They drove for six hours before parking for the night on a wooded side road. They slept until dawn and took off again. Their fake IDs were getting them through the checkpoints at each of the countries they entered. Some had no border checkpoints, but a couple of the old holdouts did. They reached Budapest at noon and stopped to stock up on more clothes, another set of luggage, personal supplies and food. A few hours later, they got back onto the main highway headed toward their destination, only six hours away.

Petrescu had people watching every public transportation outlet out of Minsk -- the airports, the bus lines and the trains. They got no whiff of the group, but no sightings told him something -- either they were holed up somewhere in the city or they were traveling by car. He bet correctly that they would not sit around and were driving. He made guesses with the timing and started checking traffic cameras on the highways. He made a critical error in figuring that the four were still traveling together and missed the car and RV as they were caught on the cameras. After one more day with no leads turning up, he again went back to Chisinau.

Petrescu had gotten a report from the history professors and he read it in detail. They determined that the locket and tiara were most likely from the royal house of Wallachia around 1500, as the museum data had revealed. Petrescu thought that was no big deal until he read the bios on the ruling family, the Draculs. He knew from his schoolchild studies about the family, but it was so ancient that the teachers never really focused on that period in Moldovan dark history. The report was very complete and included timelines, family trees and maps. He studied everything and kept going back to the maps. They showed the significant sites of the royal family's domiciles. There were three, a palace in Targoviste (Princely Court) known as Vlad's real palace, another palace, *Curtea Veche* (the Old Princely Court) in Bucharest and the Poenari Castle, also known as Vlad Dracul, the Impaler's Citadel.

Dela wanted to visit the monastery during daylight hours first. When they got close, they found another small road into the forest and hid for the night. The monastery is a working facility with nuns assigned there and Dela wanted to watch them during the daytime to see if there were any clues to where her ring might be or had been. Hiding in their RV, the friends ate dinner cooked in the microwave and finished two bottles of a very nice local wine. Leslie asked Dela if she was able to tell the story of her last fatal visit to the monastery. To the others' surprise, Dela was delighted to fill them in.

The Tismana Monastery ~ 1537

Ruxandra Dracul had endured two politically arranged marriages. She began her third to Radu Paisie in 1530. She became a loving wife to the elder man and encouraged him to take on restoration projects around his country, one of which was the Tismana Monastery on Starmina Mountain in the Transylvania Alps of what it now Romania.

Ruxandra's husband was traveling south toward Egypt and she decided to take some time and visit the monastery on Starmina Mountain to relax and get away from the royal courts in Bucharest. She took a small number of servants, just two handmaids and two carriage footmen. The trip took four days to make in the slow carriage even with four huge black horses to pull it. She arrived late on what would be the day before her murder.

The senior monk in charge greeted her as the old friend that she was. She had visited many times through the years during the restoration and then just to rest. She liked the peace and quiet this hidden place provided. She and the senior monk dined together with a few other special guests and then she joined him in prayer in the center chapel. They retired for the night, but Ruxandra could not resist a late night walk around the grounds to enjoy the stars and the view of the valleys below in the moonlight.

She spent the next day in prayer and walking with her friend around the large grounds and gardens. They ate quiet meals together and discussed the current situations in the outside world. After dinner, Ruxandra went for her quiet walk around the grounds and decided to stop by the chapel to pray before going to bed. She did not notice a man slip into the back as she prayed in the front pew. When she was finished, she went forward to the altar to kneel and say one more quick thanks to God. That is when she felt the knife enter her back and heard the man say, "For the sins of your grandfather." She felt her heart stop as she rolled over to the ground while the man ran out the front doors.

The Tismana Monastery ~ Present Day

Dela and her companions all awoke around the same time when the sun came out from behind the clouds in the early morning. Wanda cooked breakfast for everyone as the group had their coffees together. They ate quietly, cleaned up the dishes and got dressed for the day. They all took quick showers and were much appreciative of the modern RV they had purchased. It was about nine when they made the short remaining drive to the monastery.

The group began to explore the grounds. They enjoyed the gardens and then the inside art displays. There was no sign of Dela's ring in any of the displays. A small gift shop was attended by a young nun dressed in her working nun clothes. Dela told the others that she wanted to take a walk by herself and went outside. She found a secluded space and shifted away.

She immediately entered the chapel, which was locked for the morning for the nun's private prayers. Several nuns were sitting in the pews and praying silently. Dela eased past them and approached the altar. She looked at it hard seeing the very place she had died almost six hundred years ago. She hesitated only a moment before she started looking around. She searched the altar and the surrounding stone floor and found nothing, not that she expected to, knowing it was a very long shot.

Dela was finished in the chapel and turned to walk back down the aisle, when a group of nuns led by the head of the monastery, an older woman. Dela stepped aside to let them visit the altar before they took their seats. The head of the order approached first and Dela stood respectfully off to the side, still invisible. The nun knelt and, as she did, Dela got a good look at her clasped hands. On her right hand, the third finger held Dela's ring.

Dela looked at it in amazement while the others followed the older nun to the altar and then to the pews. Dela followed the last one down the aisle and then exited the small building. She found a place to shift and then hunted her friends who were sitting in a garden enjoying the beautiful weather. She told them she had found the ring and they were all very excited as Dela told the short story. Dela told them of

her plan to get the ring and they all approved with amusement. Dela would wait until after dinner when the nuns retired to their private rooms for the night before taking action. No one said anything about it, but they all knew their next stop was back to Dracul's Citadel, Poenari Castle.

The friends left the monastery and made their way to the town of Tismana proper. They found a place to park their two vehicles. Then they grabbed a nap in the RV before going to dinner at a small restaurant close to where they had parked. Dinner was pleasant until Dela brought up a subject no one knew how to talk about, her sudden aging every time she found one of her special identification items. If she reacted to the ring the same way as the locket and tiara, she would look sixty years old. Everyone, including Basil, teared up a bit for their friend while Wanda sobbed quite loudly attracting the attention of nearby diners. Dela finished the conversation saying that she was not concerned and this is just another step in the long journey that had been her life.

They went back to the RV and waited an hour before it was time for Dela to return to the monastery. They tried to keep the conversation light, but there was a cloud of concern for Dela hanging over the heads of her three friends. Finally, it was time to go; Dela took the Audi and left for the three-mile drive. She found the dark parking lot and hid the car off to one side near some trees. Dela got out of the car, walked to the trees, and shifted. Then, she walked up the hill to the facility and quickly found the residences. She walked down a long hallway and found the apartment she was looking for.

Dela entered the space and found the bedroom with the elderly nun fast asleep in a single bed. She had done this trick only a few times before and remembered the fun she had scaring away some young toughs in New York City in 1839. She kind of half-shifted turning translucent, visible to the living in an eerie shade of blue. Then she spoke in a sweet quiet tone, "Servant of the Lord, awaken." She repeated the phrase again until the sleeping woman woke up, turned over and saw Dela.

The woman gasped at first and then settled down to accept the vision as real. Dela could see that she was still wearing the ring and said, "Take your ring to the chapel altar as a sacrifice to the Lord." The woman nodded her head in obedience and Dela shifted completely into the other world invisible to the nun. The nun got out of bed, put on a heavy robe and walked out of the apartment into the hall. She knocked on the door across from her, waited and another nun finally opened the door. The older woman told her of her heavenly visit and took her companion along to the chapel. Dela followed as they entered the sanctuary and went to the altar. The nun removed the ring and placed it directly on the altar next to some flowers. They turned and walked away with both of them agreeing to make sure the ring would remain there forever.

Dela approached the ring and shifted back to the living world. She prepared for the same shock as before and touched the ring. There was no shock. Then she realized that the other times the touch pushed

her into this world, but this time she was already there. She felt relieved and put the ring on her finger. She shifted back to avoid being spotted by anyone, walked out of the building and went straight to the waiting car. She got behind the wheel and purposefully glanced in the rear view mirror at her reflection. As expected, she looked older. She smiled a bittersweet smile and drove back to her friends waiting in their motor home.

On the way back, she got a call from Leslie. Leslie had moved the RV to the side of a local hotel in their parking lot after paying a small fee to the night clerk, who surely pocketed the cash. Dela took the opportunity to let Leslie and the others know that she had indeed aged upon touching the ring. So, when Dela walked into the motor home, they hid their shock and displayed a quiet sympathetic reaction. But, they felt a peacefulness that the quest was almost over now that they had all the items the spirit under the citadel needed. They talked for an hour enjoying another bottle of the local wine and finally crashed when Dela let them know that she was tired.

Early the next morning, they all got up, showered and ate a quick microwaved breakfast. Once ready to travel, they headed down the mountain and settled in for the four-hour drive.

The drive was beautiful through the winding mountain passes of the Transylvanian Alps that the road followed. They stopped a few times for short breaks and changing drivers in the larger cities along the way. They ate lunch in the last big town before the citadel, Râmnicu Vâlcea. It was pleasant, but everyone was anxious to reach the expected end of the quest.

While making the short drive up to the ruins of the citadel, Dela described to her three friends the possible lower passage into the cavern. They all wanted to go with her if they could find the entrance. They pulled into the almost vacant parking lot and started the search. After a good half hour of looking for the entrance and beginning to think it was hopeless, Basil found it. It was behind a large bush and, with a little manual labor moving rocks, they made the entrance big enough for them to crawl inside.

Now that the plan was coming together, Dela brought everyone back to the RV for a meeting and a change of clothes. She removed her casual traveling attire and put on an old-style fancy dress made out of velvet and silk. Dela wanted to look royal as she addressed the spirits waiting for her. She carefully put on her tiara, locket and ring while she talked to her friends.

“I’m not sure what is going to happen in there, but I may not come out. If I can free these poor souls, it may mean that I will go with them. Their curse may be holding me between the worlds of the living and the dead just as it holds them.” This statement brought tears from Wanda and Leslie while Basil pretended to be concentrating on his laptop -- but his eyes were moist also.

When Dela was ready, she pulled an envelope from her bag and handed it to Wanda saying, “This is my will and power of attorney. I left everything I have to you. Do what you want with all of it, but please

take care of these two wonderful friends.” She waved an arm at Basil and Leslie. The four of them hugged, then exited the RV and headed to the cavern.

They crawled into the opening and progressed twenty feet until they could stand. Dela said, “This is where I must shift away from you, but I will shift just enough for you to see me as an apparition of sorts so you can follow me. I will try to signal you somehow if I need to.” Dela halfway shifted. The four continued until the tunnel opened into the expansive cavern. Dela stepped inside alone and quickly came back for the others. She brought them just past the tunnel entrance and signaled for them to wait there. Wanda moved to the front and lifted her hands as if to feel the air around her. She closed her eyes and tried to *see* what was going on.

The outside tunnel connected to the lowest point in the expanse beside the stage where the man sat on his throne. When the men around her noticed Dela, they started saying the same things as before, “It’s the princess.” “She can set us free.” “Ruxandra, save us, save us.” She went before the throne and bowed as the man spoke. “You return. Are you here to prove your birthright or stay with us forever?”

“I am here my lord with proof that I am the one who can break the curse of my grandfather and set us all free.”

“Show this proof to me, woman.”

Dela stood tall and moved closer to the man holding out her hand to show the ring. He studied the tiara, locket and ring and motioned for her to lay them before him. She took off the tiara and put it at his feet, then the locket and finally the ring. He picked them up and said in a loud voice for all to hear, “The offspring of Dracul, the blessed one that can save us, stands before us!” The thousand voices of the unholy dead cheered as best they could. They quieted and the man continued talking to Dela, “You may now bring forth the king’s sword, scepter and ring, speak the words that will break the curse and make us free.”

“My lord, I did not know I needed anything else except what I have laid before you.” She bowed her head in respect.

With a quiet and sad voice, he said, “Then we are destined to stay in this empty place forever.”

Quickly Dela said, “No. I shall find these things just as I found these.” She pointed to the floor and then picked up her tiara, ring and locket. She slipped them back on and stood tall before the man and the other trapped souls. They looked at her with the same sadness she felt the last time she was here. She bowed her head, lifted it up and said, “I shall return.” She shifted back to the living world and walked to her friends and said, “Let’s get out of here. We are only halfway done.”

Dela led them quickly into the tunnel at a steady pace until they had to crawl the last part. They broke

into the daylight and helped each other get up and brush off the dust that covered them from the crawl. Wanda started talking first to reveal, “I heard and saw it all!”

Dela could not believe it at first and then they compared stories to verify Wanda’s vision. Basil summed it up for them, “So we are only halfway done. Now we have to find Vlad Dracul’s sword, scepter and ring. Right?”

Dela and Wanda nodded as they opened the door to the RV and climbed up the stairs to the living area where they were greeted by Detective Constable Petrescu. He approached Dela, taking in her newly aged face, and said in accented English, “We need to talk.”

The Ally

Petrescu sat down around the lone dining table and waved for the others to join him, which they did. Once everyone sat, he started, “Dela Samuels, you are a very interesting person with seemingly magical powers.” No one responded. “When we first met and you disappeared from my jail, I thought you were simply a very, very talented thief magician. Then the bank in Athens. Another of your tricks? Okay, but taking the tiara from the Saudi prince’s home in Jeddah ... and then taking it back in Minsk. Too many unexplainable occurrences to be a thief’s trick.” Still no one said anything. “Somewhere in there, I figured out that you were after those three specific items and the cash was just to keep you going. Am I right?”

Dela looked at Wanda, and she nodded at Dela’s silent request for approval to reveal information. Then at Leslie and she nodded. Lastly at Basil and he nodded. Dela said, “Yes, you are right, Detective Constable Petrescu.”

He pleasantly said, “Please call me, David. May I call you by your first names?” They all nodded in agreement. “Now I find you wearing all the stolen items and coming out of Dracul’s citadel like you performed some kind of ritual.” He paused and took a sip from the soda he had taken from their refrigerator. He raised the can to them, “I hope you don’t mind? I’ve been driving a long time.” He shifted in his seat and went on, “I did some research on these things and they were identified as royal items belonging to the house of Dracul from around 1500 when Vlad III ruled Walachia.” Since he got no signal from any of them, he said, “Right again?”

Dela looked at him and nodded. He continued, “Thank you for not insulting my intelligence. I had your home in San Francisco searched and we found your website -- paranormal investigators. And, you, Wanda, a psychic medium from New York. All in all, a very interesting group. Oh, and let us not ignore your sudden transformation. The last time I saw you, you could pass for thirty and now...” He paused again and then asked, “Now, what am I to do with you? If I take you in, you three will get off,” he indicated Wanda, Leslie and Basil, “and will go home. Dela Samuels, on the other hand, will be locked away until she simply decides not to be and then vanishes into thin air. Again.”

Wanda finally said, “David, we don’t mean to hurt anyone. In fact, we’re trying to help some people.” The word *people* stuck in her mouth as she said it.

David looked at her, truly trying to understand. “And who would those people be?” The friends looked back and forth at each other and did not answer.

Dela finally spoke, “Detective, I appreciate your position. However, we are dealing with things you may not be able to understand.”

“Please give me a little bit more credit. The only logical explanation for what you have done lies beyond the bounds of common sense. So, try me.”

Dela smiled across the table at the detective and blinked herself halfway between the two worlds making herself transparent and shimmery. She watched his face as the shock set in, smiled some more and shifted totally to the other world making herself completely invisible. David jumped out of his seat and said a few swear words in his native language. Dela remained invisible while her friends just smiled.

Wanda summed it up for David by saying, “Dela is a ghost.”

He reached over across the table where Dela had been and waved his hand through the space to ensure she was really gone. Then he said, “Where did she go?”

Leslie answered this time, “Into the *other* world, as we call it. But, some might call it the *realm of the unholy dead*.”

David asked, “Is she still around here watching and listening to us?”

Basil could not resist getting in on the fun and said, “Probably, but she could be anywhere by now.”

Dela had moved to the back of the room and was watching the detective. Then she remembered that Wanda could probably hear her and said, “Wanda, tell him that we have three more items to find and then we will return it all, including the cash from the Athens bank. But he must let us finish.”

Wanda then said, “We have three more things to find and then we will give them all back including the cash.”

“I’m afraid it’s not as simple as that. My superiors are following this case closely and have made it a high priority. I mean, you stole from the Saudi Arabia royal family. Even if I want to help, they will keep going until they finish the case.”

Leslie said, “What would happen if the stolen items, including the cash, reappeared?”

“I’m not exactly sure. It certainly would lower the case’s priority in the great scheme of things. But, if other things disappear, then I guess the whole thing would start over.”

Dela was standing behind her friends, shifted and reappeared instantly with David watching. He jumped and said, “La dracu!”

Dela smiled and said, “Sorry about that.” She paused for him to collect his wits and then said, “Well, it seems you have a real problem. You know that arresting us would do nothing, since you cannot hold us. Except for the money, we are not really thieves. I mean, these things actually belong to me.”

David said, “Belong to you? Exactly who are you?”

“I am Ruxandra Dracul, the daughter of Mihnea Dracul, the son of Vlad III Dracul, the Impaler.”

The detective shouted, “Sfinte rahat!”

Wanda got up from the table and said, “We are going to need some wine, lots of wine.”

Dela smiled and said, "David, come for a walk with me and we'll tell you everything."

Dela took David's hand and walked him out of the RV into the afternoon sun. "I grew up living here and a few other places. I had two brothers, one who became the king after my father. I was married off to three different men and never had children. I was born in 1498 and assassinated when I was 39 at the Tismana Monastery. I regained consciousness forty-four years later as you see me now. I am not alive nor dead, but trapped between two worlds." They had been walking and were now standing in front of the tunnel entrance. Dela waved at it and said, "This tunnel leads to a huge cavern in the mountain. The spirits of the people slain by my grandfather are trapped here as the Unholy Dead -- held between this world and the final world by a curse placed by my grandfather. I too am held by that curse."

Dela showed him the inscription hidden in the locket and transliterated it for him, explaining that she was the Blessed One that could free them all to move on -- whatever that entailed. It was time to enter the tunnel and she told him what he would see. Once they crawled and then walked through the tunnel, they entered the empty cavern. Dela had a flashlight and gave it to David. Dela remained in the world of the living not wishing to disturb the multitude of spirits around them. "David, what you can't see is the thousands and thousands of people who once lived, loved and died here by my grandfather's hand. Most were honorable soldiers fighting for their kings. They need my help. By helping them, I am helping myself as well. Finding my locket, tiara and ring has taken its toll on me, as you can see. I am so very tired of this existence, as you might expect after six hundred years. The curse is the reason I am held here. It is my destiny to end it."

David looked around, "All those poor souls are here, right now?"

"Yes."

David looked at her for a second and then walked past her back to the tunnel. He had obviously seen enough here.

When they got back to the RV, David and Dela entered. Wanda, Leslie and Basil stood up. David addressed them all and said, "We are going to Targoviste. Dela, you ride with me and you three follow along." And that was that.

Targoviste is a large city that housed one of the palaces Vlad used -- the Princely Court -- and was two hours away. It took a few minutes to get ready to go, but once they settled in for the ride, David and Dela continued their talk.

The detective asked Dela, "So, have you always financed your life by robbing banks?"

"No, not a habit. I usually steal from pimps or other lowlife who cannot go to the police when some

of their cash disappears. And I am a pretty good card player.”

“A gambler? I wouldn’t have figured that.”

“You can get good at anything when you have been alive as long as I have. Card counting in Black Jack is the easiest, but the casinos watch for that now. But, I never lose at poker. In that game, you play your opponent, not the cards. Sure, knowing the cards is important, but nowhere near as important as understanding your adversary. However, that also is not how I made money through the years -- it was with real estate investment. Think about it -- almost any property goes up in value if you wait long enough. I bought property in San Francisco and Los Angeles in the 1930s and sold it in the 70s. And then again in fifty-year cycles. Gambling is chump change compared to that. Now, tell me about yourself.”

Petrescu was fifty years old with no family. His only marriage ended twenty years ago and he had never remarried. He said that he was married to his job and that was that. He made a comfortable salary, which allowed him to have a decent apartment in the city close to his office. He bought a new car every few years and had no hobbies to speak of, no girlfriend at the time and no prospects. It sounded sad, but he was really quite happy catching bad people. He dreamed of the day he could retire and buy a sailing boat to live on while he cruised the Black and Mediterranean Seas.

When that short discussion was over, he asked Dela to give him the history of her life -- a short question with a long answer. She spent the rest of the trip painting him a verbal picture of her long life and he took in every word.

They arrived in Targoviste and immediately drove to the Princely Court, which is mostly in ruins now. David explained that he wanted Dela to walk the grounds and see if she *felt* anything. He just thought that if Dela was going to free the souls at Poenari, something similar might be going on here and *Curtea Veche* in Bucharest. They had to go to Bucharest anyway to get to a major airport.

The caravan pulled into the parking lot and everybody joined up for the tour. The site is small and it took them just a few minutes to see the ruins and then just a few more to visit the watchtower and church. The church is filled with impressive wood-carved furniture and paintings and sculptures adorned the walls. When they were finished, Dela asked for time alone to look around from the *other* side. The remaining four either found the gift shop or went to wait in the RV.

Targoviste, the Princely Court ~ 1502

Ruxandra and her big brother, Mercia, were shuffled along by their governess into the great hall to greet their grandfather returning from battle. Grandfather had been gone for months now and the children were anxious to see him. He treated them well. Ruxandra, only five years old, loved her grandfather, but

recognized even at her young age that he was a very different man to the rest of the world.

Ruxandra watched with the other family members as Vlad Tepes led his guards and army captains into the palace courtyard to a cheering crowd. They had won the battle and were returning home to winter at the palace, where they would prepare to return to fight in the spring. Grandfather Vlad dismounted his beautiful stallion and walked up the steps to greet his family. He started with his wife and children, but could not wait to pick up Ruxandra and Mercia. The crowd followed him into the palace as he carried the two kids, one in each arm. Once inside the main hall, Vlad set the children down, took off his cross-body sword belt and handed it to an aide standing by.

Ruxandra was standing right there as the sword passed and got a good, long look at it while the aide stood holding it.

A captain of the guard came in carrying the king's scepter and eased through the crowd to present it to Vlad. He thanked the man and handed the scepter to the same aide that held Vlad's sword. Ruxandra always thought the scepter was a golden magic wand encrusted with all the jewels. Again, she got a good look at it.

Later, that night, the family dined together and celebrated the return of the family patriarch. Afterwards, they all sat around the huge fireplace in the family living quarters and relaxed. Ruxandra played quietly by herself always watching her grandfather and waiting for her turn to have his attention. Finally, he looked at her and saw her yawning. He walked over and reached down to pick her up. He took her back to his chair by the roaring fire and let her sit on his lap. She fidgeted a bit and played with the buttons on his clothes and the rings on his hands as she fell asleep cuddling up to him. The last thing she saw was his signet ring, made of only gold, large and heavy. She remembered thinking that the leaves around the outside pictures were pretty.

Targoviste, the Princely Court ~ Present Day

Dela found a dark hidden corner to shift herself. Once in the other world, she walked the grounds again feeling nothing unusual. She found no hidden rooms or buried staircases, nothing odd at all -- just palace ruins now surrounded by a modern-day industrial park. She returned to her hiding place and shifted back to the living world with no one noticing. She returned to the RV to find her friends, including her new one, waiting patiently. She immediately answered their unasked question, "Nothing. I found nothing at all. No spirits, nothing."

It was now three o'clock in the afternoon and David wanted them to get to Bucharest before the last palace, *Curtea Veche*, closed. So, off they went for the ninety minute drive.

Dela needed rest, so she napped in the RV while Basil drove. Leslie took the Audi and Wanda rode with David in his car. They mostly talked about themselves except when David asked Wanda questions about Dela's past. By the end of the short drive, Wanda decided that she liked this man very much. He was kind with his rough police officer exterior hiding a gentle and loving heart.

When they got into Bucharest proper, they took the shortest route to *Curtea Veche* in the center of the city. The buildings are now almost completely ruins, but a bust of Vlad III watches over the few tourists that stop by. They parked and walked the small grounds for a few minutes. Then, as before, Dela went back to check out the place from the other side of the living world. She walked the grounds and realized she had no memories of this place. She neither saw nor felt anything here and went back to her waiting friends in the RV.

Leslie had been talking to David about hotel accommodations and, since they were willing to treat, they all went to the Casino Bucharest and checked into the hotel. Basil and David shared a suite while the women did the same. They unwound from the drive, cleaned up and met downstairs to have dinner together. They found a wonderful restaurant around the corner and stayed a full three hours enjoying course after course accompanied by samplings of local wine. During dinner, they discussed the next moves. They decided to clean up the easiest things first. The ring would be returned to the Tismana Monastery by Basil and Leslie the next day. It would be a long drive in the Audi, but that was okay with both of them -- they seemed to be moving past just being coworkers and friends to perhaps more. Dela would take the tiara back to Chisinau by private plane and return the same day. Wanda and David would hold down the fort in Bucharest with David having reports to file.

They returned to the hotel-casino and everyone but David wanted to try their hand at the casino for a while. He went right to bed while the others changed clothes and went downstairs. Once on the main floor, Dela went her separate way and left the others to fend for themselves.

Dela found what she was looking for quickly after exchanging some cash for chips. She had her choice of stud or Texas pokers and watched the play at the tables for a few minutes before selecting a Texas poker table. She played slow and stingy for a bit to get a feel for the other players and soon was ready to start serious play. She had dressed quite conservatively and played the part of an American homemaker on vacation as long as anyone cared. Soon, her betting tipped off almost everyone at the table that she was no amateur. A few left the table quickly with their seats filled by people wanting a piece of Dela's action.

Dela cleaned out player after player until the table held only two others besides her. She had been playing for two hours and was getting tired. She played one more hand and walked away with one hundred thousand Romanian leus, which equals about twenty-five thousand U.S. dollars. As she was

walking out of the poker room, David caught her eye sitting at a bar. He had been watching her for hours chuckling to himself all the time. She waved him over and he escorted her to their rooms upstairs.

Early the next morning, Dela took off for the nearest small airport where she was sure she would find a private pilot with a plane for hire. Basil and Leslie met in the lobby and left for their marathon drive to return the ring to the nuns at the Tismana Monastery. Dela successfully found a pilot who cancelled all his lessons for the day preferring the large payment for his services. She was in the air less than an hour after leaving the hotel and on her way to Chisinau. What would have been a six-hour drive was about ninety minutes by small plane.

Wanda and David met for breakfast. He told her that he had finished filing reports and had successfully removed the notices to the other Interpol field offices. That still left flags on their passports, but he could do nothing about that without drawing attention from his superiors. However, he had reviewed their fake passports and thought they would hold up to any visual inspection, although certainly not to a computer database check. Now he was focusing on the fact that he was technically an accomplice and a double agent.

Basil and Leslie had a nice drive back the way they had come the day before through the beautiful Transylvanian Alps. They arrived at the monastery around eleven a.m. just as planned. Together, they decided that Leslie would try to put the ring back on the chapel altar when the nuns finished their Morning Prayer time, which was just now ending. She got out of the car and walked into the center of the monastery toward the chapel. She pulled on the front doors and they opened. She walked in and was thankful that no one was present. She slowly walked to the front altar and placed the ring on it, turned and walked out without anyone noticing. Simple as that.

Afterwards, driving away, Basil and Leslie wondered what the nuns would do with the ring. Put on the altar by the elder nun, disappearing for a day, and now it was back. They were sure it would be a story told repeatedly throughout history by the nuns down the generations. The ring would now be a holy relic of the church.

Dela arrived at a small airport outside Chisinau, Moldova, and caught a taxi to the museum where the tiara used to live. She had the cab driver drop her off around the corner and she stepped into a café's bathroom to shift. She hurried up the museum steps, through the front doors and found her way to the room where the tiara had been. When she got there, she found that the space that once held the locket now held a similar one. She reached through the display glass with her locket in hand and set it beside the new one and left the building as fast as she could. No alarms sounded and no one took notice until she was long gone and in the air.

The Curse of Dracul

Sometime in the midafternoon, Basil got up the nerve and asked Leslie to dinner that night. She mistakenly thought he meant with the others until he corrected her and flat out told her that he meant it as a date. Embarrassed, she happily and quickly said that she would love to have dinner alone with him. They arrived back in Bucharest just as Dela did. All of them had been in touch by cell phone the whole day and agreed to meet for drinks in one of the casino bars. David had received notification that the locket was returned and took the opportunity to ask for a couple of weeks off, which he got. A new detective was assigned to the case and David passed off all the data to him that he might need. However, he neglected to give him his personal notes from the university professors and about the history of the Dracul family.

They all wanted to take some time to enjoy the night and Basil and Leslie let the others know that the two of them were going out on an official date. Then David let them know that he and Wanda were also going out alone together. That left Dela to herself and she spent the night at another casino winning another twenty thousand dollars.

Later, when they were alone, Wanda told Dela she thought David looked like one of those intriguing foreign detectives you see in the movies. Dela knew Wanda's attraction to David was genuine because Dela saw him as a slightly overweight police officer who wore cheap suits.

Making Things Right

Junior Detective Pinzari took over the case and started by reading the case file. The case priority was not high, so he did not give it much consideration. Now, one of the stolen items was returned as magically as it had been taken. He called Petrescu and got little more than a rehash of the facts without any conclusions or insight. Detective Constable Petrescu, his onetime superior, seemed to be ready to forget the case and wished the new man good luck.

Late the next morning, they all met in the women's shared suite and discussed a plan of attack. Many ideas were tossed out for contemplation, but they decided to take it slow and straightforward. Dela and David would return the bank cash to Athens and then the tiara to the Saudi Prince in Jeddah. Basil, Leslie and Wanda would try to locate the scepter, ring and sword on the internet. They were also going to contact David's professor friends and see if they could help.

David and Dela packed and left for the train station after David hooked up Basil with his scholarly friends via email. They arrived to board the train almost immediately and settled into their cabin for the twenty-four hour ride. They spent the first hour banding all the cash Dela had gotten for the sailboat and gambling to look like the perfect bands the Athens cash came in. The idea was for Dela to put the bundles of money back in the vault to be discovered in some count long after it had been returned. They wished to be as far away as possible when it was found. After counting out the cash, they were left with fifty-two thousand euros to get them back to Bucharest.

Dela casually grilled David on his feelings for Wanda and he gave the noncommittal flat answer most men would to sticky questions. However, Dela saw his face light up and a sly smile appear when he thought of Wanda and she felt happy for them. She loved Wanda as a dear friend and David was proving himself as a truly good man.

Basil had searched everywhere for the items and only found four rings that looked promising. He had nothing on the sword or scepter. The rings were in St. Petersburg, Russia, Lyon, France, Warsaw, Poland and Tokyo, Japan in a touring show of special exhibitions in museums around the world. The tour had just left the United States and would be in Japan for six weeks.

Basil was doing all the search work, so Leslie and Wanda brought him breakfast and coffee as he worked. In between that pleasant chore, they walked around the city and shopped to replace the wardrobe items they lost with the private place. On one trip out, they picked up luggage again and so the day went.

Pinzari was not sitting idle on the case. There were so many holes, he did not know where to start. Therefore, he started with the standard tact of tracing the steps of Dela Samuels and her three accomplices. He came up with the same answers as Petrescu, but now Pinzari had another data point -- the return visit to the museum in Chisinau. Pinzari asked the same question his predecessor had -- what was so special about the locket and the tiara? However, he had another clue. The locket was thoroughly examined and an inscription was discovered. He ran it by his own personal sources but learned nothing. Then, he too zeroed in on dates when he realized that the items were from the same period, around 1500.

In the middle of the afternoon, Basil got a message from one of the scholars regarding the new items they were looking for. They had found the scepter at the Vatican. As far as they could tell, it was locked away in the storage units of the Vatican Museum. The museum owns some seventy thousand items and displays only twenty thousand at any given time. The scepter had been a gift in 1720 from the Republic of Genoa (Venice) to Pope Clement XI. They had narrowed down a possible sword match at the *Neues Museum* in Berlin. He shared this information via email with David and with the others in person as they stopped back at the hotel to check on him.

The afternoon came and went with several of the friends catching naps before dinner including Dela on the train. Dela and David ate dinner in the plush dining car with other passengers. They shared a bottle of wine along with more stories from their pasts. The more Dela got to know David, the more she liked him. Leslie, Basil and Wanda went out to a restaurant Leslie had spotted on one of her excursions that day and it was delightful. When they finished and were back at the hotel, Wanda begged off for the night and let Basil and Leslie go out for private time together. Dela and David sat and talked for a long while after dinner and then finally climbed into their bunks to get some sleep. They would arrive in Athens early in the morning.

The train pulled into the station right on time at seven twenty a.m. Dela and David quickly disembarked and caught a cab to the banking district. Once there, David found a place to sit and sip a coffee while Dela visited the bank. She took the cash, walked into the restroom and shifted to the other side. She walked out past David and almost couldn't resist scaring him, but continued to the coffee shop exit. The bank was around the corner and she walked right through the front doors as before. The bank would not be opening for hours and no one was anywhere to be seen. She walked to the vault in the back, passing through several locked metal doors, and then into the vault. There was plenty of cash to hide the money beside and she placed the separate packets around the ones already neatly stacked in the vault. She was done and out

the front doors in a flash.

She walked back to the café where David was waiting and went into the restroom to shift back. She took the time to wash up and came out to find David surprised to see her so soon. They paid the bill and left immediately. Now they had to get to Jeddah.

David had been thinking about their situation and made some decisions. First, Dela would acquire another set of fake passports for them while they were in Greece. She was confident that she could get them with no problem. Then, they would hire another jet and head for Jeddah. When done there, they would fly back to Bucharest. That was as far as he had gotten.

Basil had come up with another idea. Since they did not want to attract any more attention from the police, they would take time to have copies made of the signet ring, scepter and sword to substitute for the real ones. That would buy enough time to finish the quest before the absence of the real items was noticed. It all came down to timing with this plan, but David liked the concept and mulled it over.

Sometime in the afternoon, Junior Detective Pinzari noticed that the last thing Petrescu did on the case was to cancel the bulletins to the other Interpol offices about the fugitive search. He could not figure out that move and was going to make it a point to talk to someone. Other than that, he went to the museum and looked at the display case where the locket reappeared. During that visit, someone used the word *magical* to describe the return and that stuck with Pinzari.

Dela and David got fresh passport photos taken and off Dela went into the shady world of fake passport appropriation while David busied himself visiting the ruins on top of the Acropolis. He had passed through Athens many times, but never had the time to visit the famous site. Dela went through four men to get to a forger and paid a premium to have the passports done while she waited.

David and Basil were in constant touch by email and Basil wanted to know what the plan was when the newly rented plane got to Bucharest. They had looked at logistics for possible locations of the items and were leaning toward making the next stop Berlin. After that, the next logical visit would be to St. Petersburg, Russia and then Warsaw, Poland. If they found nothing in these places, then the choice of locations became less probable.

Dela met David in the famous ruins of the Acropolis and they caught a taxi to the airport to meet the jet David arranged while waiting for Dela. David took a close look at the new identification papers and pronounced them amazingly good for such quick work. They arrived at the airport an hour later. The two pilots were present, took the cash, signed the rental papers and off they left for Jeddah.

Basil was looking online for a top-of-the-line 3D printer to copy the scepter, sword and ring. He

decided on the MakerBot Replicator Z18 and found a shop in Bucharest where he could order one and pay cash when it came in a few days later.

Around that time, the Athens bank discovered the money. They called everybody including Interpol and finally got the new case officer, Detective Pinzari. When he heard the news, Pinzari called David and left a voicemail message. Pinzari ran everything by his boss and was told to get to the bottom of the reappearing money as fast as possible. Pinzari jumped on the next plane to Athens to arrive late the next morning. David picked up Pinzari's message immediately, but did not return a call. He was going to try to stay away from the investigation, though that might not be possible.

Dela and David's jet touched down in Jeddah at peak busy arrival times and it took a bit to get them into their private hangar. They rented a car and drove straight to the prince's home, which was pretty close to the airport. They cruised past the home and discovered that there was some kind of function going on with cars coming and going. Putting the tiara back would have to wait until the end of the party.

David called the pilots and told them the schedule -- be ready to return to Bucharest around two in the morning. Dela and David went into the city and found a nice restaurant to eat dinner. When it closed, they moved to a late-night coffee shop and waited. When the time was right, they hired a cab to take them near the party. When they got close, Dela got out and David and the cabbie waited. She walked about half a mile and shifted easily on the tree-lined street. She got to the estate and it was buttoned up for the night with all guests either gone or fast asleep in guest rooms. She walked through the front gate and past a couple of roving armed guards. Once at the front doors, she took a good look around and entered the house. She went straight to the collection room and found the display table surrounded by crime scene tape. She thought that was odd since the theft was more than a week before. She studied the cameras in the room and was sure that the empty tiara spot was not in a camera's direct sight. She placed the tiara in its empty spot and it reappeared when Dela removed her hand. She did not hesitate and left immediately retracing her steps. No alarms sounded and no one appeared to notice her visit. She walked back to the same street, shifted at the same place and found the cab in the same spot. They quickly took off for the airport and were in the air within thirty minutes.

The jet touched down around five a.m. and Leslie, Basil and Wanda were waiting. They had put the Audi and RV into a car-park storage place near the hotel and checked out. They only stayed on the ground long enough to refuel and were quickly back in the air headed to Berlin. The five friends landed in Berlin at eleven o'clock. The pilots were required to take twenty-four hours off before they could fly again, so they all went into the city center and checked into the Hotel Adlon. The pilots were extremely thankful for

the five-star accommodations.

The five friends did not linger at the hotel and took the hotel shuttle bus to the *Neues Museum* a little over a mile away. They split up with Dela going in alone first, then Wanda and David and lastly Basil and Leslie. Dela found the sword first and recognized it immediately. Of course, it was behind glass and Dela did not want to touch it until she had to. She sat against a wall on a bench while the others passed through the exhibit. As the two couples came in, they saw Dela and watched her nod her head to acknowledge that this was indeed her grandfather's sword. They all casually took pictures. One security person took notice of Basil shooting the sword from many angles with different lenses, and he started to wander over. Basil quickly ended his shoot and ventured away. When Basil left, David and Wanda came in taking pictures of everything including twenty of just the sword. Dela performed the last task, using a laser-measuring device to get precise dimensions of the sword.

They went back to the hotel and crashed for the rest of the afternoon to prepare for an early start. They met for dinner downstairs later and ate in one of the many restaurants the hotel had on premises. They celebrated that they now had pictures of one of the artifacts and knew the definite location of another one. No one mentioned that the last one, the ring, might or might not be in one of four possible places. The only business they talked about was their money. With the deposit on the jet, they were down to around ten thousand euros. Dela said that she would take care of their money issues and they went their separate ways. Leslie and Basil went to find a quiet bar while David and Wanda went back to Wanda's room presumably to watch TV.

Dela walked the mile to the casino enjoying the Berlin night air. Once there, she went to work. She scoped out the poker tables and made her selection after just a few minutes. She followed her usual strategy and bet quietly while she watched the other players for thirty minutes. For a while, she played the act of a surprised winning amateur. Finally, she shut up and got down to some real play with three high rollers at the table. One by one, she cleaned them out and walked away from the game with eighty thousand euros. She took the casino up on an offer of a limousine back to her hotel, arrived there around one a.m. and quietly went to bed.

Detective Pinzari arrived in Athens the next morning and went straight to the bank. Just as he was entering the building, he got a call from his boss telling him about the tiara reappearing in Jeddah. They were both extremely confused by this and neither could find any explanation for the locket, the cash and now the tiara being returned. They did not know whether to downgrade the case or to escalate its priority. There were good arguments for doing either. They decided the detective would continue his trip and travel to Jeddah when he finished in Athens. They both tried to reach Petrescu, but he was not answering

his phone.

Pinzari visited the bank and found nothing new for his trouble. The cash just reappeared in the vault with no clue how that was accomplished. No bank employee noticed anything as they went in and out of the vault all day until a count was made late in the day. Then it was counted and recounted. The amount returned equaled exactly the amount taken.

The detective was still scratching his head until he came up with a good idea. He walked the neighborhood around the bank, stopped into every shop and asked to see their security footage for the entire day when the money was returned. Although many of the stores had no security cameras, Petrescu spent all afternoon looking at video from the shops that did. He was reviewing the footage from a café and spotted Petrescu, plain as day, drinking coffee for nine minutes and thirty-two seconds early in the day before the bank opened.

Everyone got a late start at the hotel and sent messages back and forth about the plan for the day. Basil and David were the only ones who had work to do, so the women toured the city and shopped. Wanda bought David a new wardrobe without a suit in the pile. Basil spent the day working with David to compile the package of sword picture files they would need for the 3D printer. The three items to be made with the printer would also need painting since the printer used plastic to make the thing it was copying. David suggested a custom automobile painter since they were very good with the fine paint sprayer. They found several and were sure that, with David's badge, they could get the painting done quickly.

Another task was trying to figure out where the scepter was in the Vatican Museum storage vaults. The museum website did not show the scepter, so it must be with the fifty thousand works not on display and stored in basements of several buildings. David called his friend, the museum assistant curator in Chisinau, and asked him about the Vatican hidden treasure vaults. The curator knew quite a bit and described the layout to David. Now, at last, they had a plan on how to search for the scepter. There was a records system in a library card catalog room at the entryway into the main storage area, which was the size of a small warehouse.

They stayed in that night except for Dela who took advantage of the casinos in the city and walked away with another forty thousand euros won at six different casinos playing blackjack.

At eight a.m. the next day, they all checked out including the pilots and returned to the plane for the flight to St. Petersburg, Russia.

Sword Ring Scepter

After seeing Petrescu on the café video, Pinzari and his bosses decided to add him to the wanted list after trying to contact him several different ways and getting no answers. Of course, that meant little now that Petrescu was using a fake passport and a private plane. The young junior detective had packed up and was heading for Jeddah to get a firsthand look at the crime scene. When he landed in Jeddah, he went to the police station and met with all the people involved in the strange case. He reviewed the video footage that showed nothing and read the statements from the people that had been in the room before and after the theft and then before and after the return.

There was no logical explanation. Then Pinzari went down a wrong path. He thought he had a brilliant idea; he would get in contact with real magicians and see if they could figure out how the robberies and returns were accomplished. He ran the idea past his boss and he authorized it out of sheer frustration on what to do next. Doing anything was better than doing nothing.

Dela sat quiet and alone on the plane ride to Russia. However, she constantly smiled at the good fortunes of her friends. Wanda and David were moving along with their blossoming romance as was Leslie and Basil with theirs. It made Dela's heart warm seeing her friends find something so important as the loves of their lives.

The ring that might be Dela's grandfather's in St. Petersburg was displayed at the State Hermitage Museum, which was the official residences of the Russian monarchs from 1732 to 1917. Dela was very familiar with this place having lived there from 1722 to 1725 during the reign of Peter the Great.

The Winter Palace of Peter the Great ~ 1722

Dinara Lukin, a rich society widow from Moscow, resided in St. Petersburg, Russia from 1721 to 1726. She circulated in the highest of high society in St. Petersburg and had a reputation as a woman who could talk to the dead. She fueled her friends' appetites for things spiritual by throwing parties and having séances, a ritual where a host attempts to allow the dearly departed to speak through her to their loved ones still living. Guests attended all in good fun, until Dinara actually spoke some tiny fact that allowed a guest to recognize his or her departed spouse or child.

Dinara's gift caught the attention of the royal family, namely the Emperor Peter Alexeyevich's wife, Catherine. She was a regular at Dinara's parties and started to invite Dinara to the royal balls at the Winter Palace. Dinara was popular with the single men around the city but showed no favoritism toward any

would-be suitor. Things were fine with everyone enjoying the lighthearted fun the spiritualism, until the Emperor himself wanted a demonstration of this entertainment. He commanded a private session with the Widow Lukin and she could not refuse, even with the help of Catherine.

Earlier that year, Peter had begun a war of conquest over the Persians, later called the Persian Expedition of Peter the Great. Because of this, the Winter Palace was always filled with Peter's military men leading the war of conquest to the south. During a ball earlier that week, Dinara had noticed two generals whispering in an alcove off the main ballroom. She did not overhear their conversation, but remembered that they seemed to have been almost quarrelling. When Dinara was told of the private audience the following evening with the tsar, she thought of running, but quickly came up with a better plan. If Peter wanted to see her abilities, she would give him a very convincing show, indeed.

Late that night, Dinara shifted into the other world and went for a stroll around the palace. She started with the two generals that were talking a few days earlier and found them with another couple of senior officers playing cards and drinking in one of the many guest bedrooms. She listened for a while and then went to Peter and Catherine's private bedchamber. Peter was reading and Catherine was working on a needlepoint project sitting by a large fire. They were chatting comfortably and Dinara only needed to listen for a few minutes before she had what she needed.

Finally, it was time for Peter and Dinara to meet in private. Dinara was greeted warmly and escorted to Peter's private office, where he was waiting. They sat across from each other on couches with a short coffee table between them. They visited for a moment and then Peter wanted to get down to business.

"My curiosity has gotten the better of me and I must determine if your talents are more than just fun at a party."

"My Emperor, I am but a humble servant with a special gift. It is very real I assure you, but often I, myself, do not know what will occur."

"Well then, a demonstration please." He leaned forward in his seat.

Dinara closed her eyes to put on the show and sat there quietly for a full minute before saying, "There is a spirit that wishes to say something to you personally." She waited again and then continued, "They want to warn you about your generals. There are two, Komotov and Vasiliev, who believe your plans for taking the south are folly. They are trying to convince the rest of your staff to talk you out of your plans." She stopped as if tired and opened her eyes, "My lord, could this be true? I do not know these men."

He was stunned, "Yes, it could be. What else do you know?"

She closed her eyes again as if to drift into a trance and then said, "Catherine is unhappy with this war. She wants you home more and fears that you will not be." Catherine had told Peter these exact words

last night when they were alone.

Again, he was stunned as he said, “Your gift is truly remarkable. You shall move into the palace and be my advisor. I would be a fool to not take advantage of your counsel.” They talked a bit more and she offered more secrets to the emperor that only he would know, further convincing him. When they finished, he called in Catherine and a minister. He had the minister draw up an order granting Dinara privileges in the household and the monarchy.

Dinara and Catherine became inseparable. Dinara kept a close watch spying on the court and every once in a while personally on Peter when he was alone. She would mention things to him and Catherine that they thought only they would know, keeping them convinced of her special insight and loyalty.

Dinara Lukin lived in the palace until 1726, a full year after Peter died. Finally, she thought it time to move on before anyone began to notice her not growing older. She slipped out of the palace one day and was gone before anyone missed her.

The Winter Palace of Peter the Great ~ Present Day

Dela and her friends stood outside the State Hermitage Museum, the winter palace of Peter the Great and other Russian tsars, and took in the grandeur of the building from across the square. Dela had never given the group details of her time here, but Leslie pressed Dela for the story. Dela walked them around the square and told them tale after tale of palace intrigue and about the clothes, literature, music and other things in the early seventeen hundreds.

They entered the museum and walked it as planned, paired up as before with Dela again remaining alone. Since there was no other treasure they needed in the building, they zeroed in on rings, of which there were hundreds displayed. Dela found the one they thought might be the right one. When she saw it up close, it was not Dracul’s. She phoned the others on their burner phones and they left the museum immediately and headed back to the waiting jet. They were sticking to their plan making Warsaw, Poland their next stop. The flight was just two hours and they would search the Royal Castle museum.

Detective Pinzari was still in Jeddah and waiting for the magicians whom he had called to arrive. He found two that were interested in helping with the case and willing to cancel scheduled shows. They were German magician Jan Rouven and a British magician Derren Brown. Pinzari personally talked to each, described the thefts and returns and thoroughly intrigued both. The magicians arrived around two in the afternoon and were taken to police headquarters. They were shown the reports and videos of the tiara theft and return, the Athens bank robbery and the return, and the locket theft and the return. Reports on the

police station escape and the second theft of the tiara from the jet were included as well. Jan and Derren asked tons of questions and discussed the possibilities with each other in private.

Then, they wanted to see the prince's home and the tiara, so they all took a ride to the house. The two magicians asked more questions, conferred again and then drew some conclusions. Derren said, "There are several ways to accomplish this theft. However, when you look at all of them, there is only one conclusion -- the perpetrator, has a chameleon suit."

Detective Pinzari said, "A chameleon suit?"

Rouven, said, "Yeah, like with the James Bond car and the G.I. Joe movies."

Pinzari looked hopeful and asked, "That really exists?"

"Sure. The military has been working on a super camouflage tank for decades. Surely, they have something for the human soldier by now."

"It could make the thief invisible?"

"Pretty much."

"But, what about passing through doors and getting out of jail?"

"They may not have left and just stood in a corner until the doors were opened by someone."

They talked a little bit more about the technology and how someone might acquire it. Pinzari felt he had gotten all he could from them and sent them on their way telling them to send his bosses the bills. He updated his boss and was ordered to send out bulletins to the private jet rental companies in greater Europe. Pinzari's superior had the idea that the fugitives may have gone back to renting jets to get around especially if they had acquired false identification papers. Pinzari took care of that chore and went to the airport to catch the next plane to Bucharest per his boss's orders.

The jet took off quickly and Dela and her friends were in Warsaw two hours later. From the airport, they all left for the Royal Castle, the museum that might hold the ring they sought. They walked up the front steps and entered the building at two fifteen p.m. giving them plenty of time to look around before it closed for the day. The Royal Castle has transformed over the years to become one of the finest facilities in all of Europe with a wonderful display of art and antiquities. It also has a great modern collection to round out the museum's display of Polish history.

The group split up before they entered and this time Dela and Basil strolled directly to a display that might hold Dracul's signet ring of gold. They approached the display but were disappointed that the ring was not Dracul's. They split up to continue the search. Dela had been the only one in the museum before, so she continued to look for the ring while the others toured the place and waited for Dela's signal. She found a ring display and waited a bit for a few tourists to move away before she approached the case.

Once she was in front of the display, she recognized the ring as her grandfather's. She stepped back and called the others. Then, she completed her assignment by taking measurements with her laser device. She finished just as David and Basil came into the room from one side while Wanda and Leslie walked in from the other.

Basil went to work with his high-definition camera and shot twenty pictures in just a few seconds. David followed with another camera. He finished and Leslie and Wanda went to take their assigned shots. They all wandered out of the hotel and met at the bottom of the steps. Everyone was overjoyed that the treasure was found and wanted to get lunch. They decided on take out, nice takeout, and went back to the waiting jet to share the food with the pilots. It was just a short hop to Rome and they expected to be there before the Vatican Museum closed. They were going to stay the night, so Leslie booked them all into the *Splendide Royal Hotel* near the Colosseum.

They touched down and suffered through the long, congested drive from the airport to the hotel. They checked in and immediately left for the Vatican, only a short ride away. They got into the next tour by luck and walked with a guide on the incredible walk through the Sistine Chapel and the museum proper. They finished and walked over to the *Trevi Fountain* and then ate at one of the fine restaurants nearby. They hung around until nine and then caught a cab back to their five-star hotel.

Basil met Dela downstairs for the ride back to the Vatican. The cab driver dropped them off at a late-night café down the street. Dela was loaded down with camera and measuring equipment as she took off for the Holy City. She shifted in a shadow and, although there were a few late-night party-goers around, no one noticed. She made her way across St. Peter's Square, up the front steps of the Basilica and through the massive front doors. Dela had reviewed the path she was to take several times and easily found her way between buildings and to the top of the stairs leading down to the cataloging room. She felt good about how she was doing so far, since there was no one chasing her and no alarms ringing. Dela climbed down the one long flight of stairs and entered the target room. She studied the cabinet labels for a moment and found what she was looking for. She opened the drawer, thumbed through the cards and found the scepter file, complete with a picture. The card told her the exact location of the scepter complete with a reference map as well. It was down the hall in a room off to the right side. She closed up the cabinet having replaced the card in the drawer. Dela made her way to the room and entered with no problems. She identified the metal cabinet the scepter was in and opened it. The scepter was in an ornate wooden box on a lower shelf. Dela picked up the box and placed it on a table in the center of the room. She opened the box and there it was. Luck was on her side with the way the box was made. The box opened at the halfway point, offering a perfect view of one complete side. Then, when the box was turned over and

opened, the other side was also displayed with a perfect view. Dela did not have to handle the scepter now. She knew the time would come when she would have to touch the article and that it probably would have the same aging effect on her.

She spent the next ten minutes taking pictures and measurements of the scepter from both sides. When she was finished, she replaced the box back in the cabinet, shut it and left the room. Dela followed the path back out of the building and into the square. As she neared the center obelisk, she noticed two shadowy figures walking toward her. They were dressed in nuns' habits and nodded their heads acknowledging Dela as they passed. Dela was more than a little taken aback when she realized that these poor women of the cloth were trapped in the world between life and death. She wondered about the story they had to tell as she walked back to the café. Dela shifted herself in the shadows again and found Basil waiting. He reviewed everything and was delighted. They caught a cab back to the hotel and said goodnight.

Busted

The group had planned to leave Rome first thing in the morning, but Basil and Leslie talked them into later in the day. They had never been to Rome before and wanted to see more of the ruins. Therefore, they spent the morning touring the Coliseum and Palatine Hill. They had a nice lunch with the pilots and then everyone left for the airport. After the one-hour drive, they boarded the jet, waited in line and then took off for a five-hour flight to Bucharest.

They talked about the plans to replicate the ring, the scepter and the sword with the 3D printer and getting them painted to match the originals well enough to fool anyone looking at them through a display case window. After the restful flight, they landed at the now familiar airport in Bucharest. They offloaded luggage and equipment and took two cabs to the same hotel they had stayed in just days before, the Casino Bucharest.

Detective Pinzari watched with his field glasses as the private jet taxied into the hangar. He saw all the people he expected and continued to watch as the travelers, luggage and equipment were loaded into a pair of taxicabs. As the cabs pulled away, Pinzari followed at what he thought was a safe distance.

David spotted the tail before they left the airport. He got on the phone to Basil in the other cab and told him the plan. David did not know that he was also on their list with Dela, Wanda, Basil and Leslie when he made the plan. They were going to the casino with everyone but David passing right through to the rear exit and walking the two blocks to where the RV was being stored. David would stall the people following Dela's group while the others got away. The original foursome would stay and work out of the motor home for the next few days while the duplicate treasures were made.

The two cabs pulled up to the entrance to the casino hotel and everyone but David grabbed their suitcases and dashed into the lobby. David followed just as Pinzari and another man stopped their car at the curb. Dela and her friends did exactly as planned and flew across the casino floor, passed the hotel check-in counter, crossed another casino gaming floor and exited out the back doors.

Pinzari and an agent from the Bucharest Interpol office had staked out the plane hangar at the airport for a few hours until the jet finally arrived after changing its flight plan at the last minute this morning. Pinzari had gotten a reply to the bulletin he sent to private jet rental companies. He did not know at the time that the vacationing Detective Constable Petrescu would be onboard although he figured that he was

complacent somehow. They were close enough to the casino doors to see from their car the group enter the casino quickly. They pulled up, ran inside and stopped at the entrance lobby because they did not know which way to go. Then Pinzari saw Petrescu sitting at a slot machine shoving in coins and pretending not to look around. The two agents walked up to David, cuffed him and took him away. David said nothing.

Dela and her friends made it to the RV and hid out as ordered to by David. They cleaned up and unpacked while they waited for David to show up. But, he never did. Finally, Dela called him on one of the burner phones and it rang inside the RV. He had placed it in his luggage knowing that it would lead the police right to Dela if they found it.

It was getting dark and Dela decided to make a move. She shifted and walked the three miles to the police headquarters building. She was betting that, if the police arrested David, headquarters is where they would take him. During the walk, she was trying to figure out how to get her friends and David off the hook and leave the authorities to think she was the lone thief. She decided to find David and get his ideas.

She arrived at the busy station and went inside without notice. A directory hanging in the entryway pointed her to the Interpol offices on the third floor. She entered the small office suite and immediately saw David sitting by himself in a cell across the room. There were a few agents and other workers here and there, but it looked like most had gone home for the night. Dela stepped back out of the room and blinked herself back to the living world. Then she opened the door and stepped back through the room.

A young woman saw her and in Romanian said, "May I help you?"

Dela answered her in the same language, "I'm looking for the agent in charge of recent thefts and returns of certain items." She said this loud enough for Pinzari to hear her across the room.

He walked towards Dela, was about to say something and then recognized her. He called to another agent over his shoulder and moved forward to take Dela into custody. She did not fight, but let them take and search her shoulder bag. They walked her to a debriefing room across from David's cell, and Dela and David winked at each other as she passed. Dela even smiled.

They handcuffed Dela to a bolt in the middle of the table. Pinzari got his files and gathered a few more officers in the interview room and viewing room to watch and record the interview.

Pinzari finally started, "Dela Samuels of San Francisco, a paranormal investigator who stole museum artifacts from the 1500s and a large amount of cash -- and then returned everything down to the penny. Oh, and let us not forget vanished from a jail cell in Chisinau. Am I getting all this correctly?"

Dela answered, "Yes, I think so."

"You think so? What is that supposed to mean?"

Dela became meek and scared a bit, "I'm not sure. *I* really did not do anything. I was forced to."

"Forced to? And how were you *forced*?"

"I was taken over by a spirit." Dela was beginning to sound hysterical.

"A spirit? Do you really expect us to believe that?" And your friends..." He paused and read from a sheet. "Wanda Ford, Leslie Bartok and Basil Demeter did not help you somehow?"

"They know nothing about me taking those things. They are on vacation."

"Yes. And Detective Petrescu? I suppose he has not been a part of this either, especially when he was waiting for you in the Athens café after you returned the money. However, let us get to the good parts.

How have you managed all of this magic?"

"The spirit. It controls me and I am not sure what I do when it takes over me."

"The spirit can make you invisible and has you walk right through walls and into bank vaults?"

"Please let me go. The spirit is finished with me. I did what it said to do and finished what it wanted. You must help me and let me go. It is going to kill me..." Her voice trailed off as she said this warning.

"You are perfectly safe here. No one is going to kill you while you are with us."

Dela started to act even crazier as though she was seeing things in the room, "It's here. It's come for me." Then she started to shimmer and then scream as though she was being tortured. She shimmered more and faded, becoming more and more invisible and letting the show take a full thirty seconds. A couple of the men moved back against the wall fearfully. The shimmer grew brighter while Dela faded and screamed louder and louder. She struggled and wiggled scaring all of them half to death. Then, at the peak of her violent transformation, she faded completely away. The room became silent except for the handcuffs falling empty to the table.

The men slowly got up from their crouched positions and looked at each other. Pinzari dashed from the room opening the door wide. David had heard the screams and said, "What have you done to her? My God, what have you done?"

Pinzari barged into the viewing room where everything was being recorded and screamed, "Did you get all that? Did you see it? Did you record it?" All of the officers and technicians in the room nodded yes. "Play it back. Play it back." One of the techs did as everyone crowded around a monitor to watch. Four cameras caught the action and replayed the scene on the monitor in four synced quadrants showing everything.

Dela waited until she was several blocks away from the station before finding a shadow to shift back to the living world. She walked the three miles back to the vehicle storage garage and chuckled several times about the act she had just put on. She walked into the garage and then into the RV. Wanda was the first to

greet her with the others right behind her. Dela told them what she had done and they all got a laugh out of it even though it was deadly serious.

Pinzari let David out of his cell and showed him the recordings. David went along with the charade saying repeatedly that he had no idea what was going on. Pinzari got everyone from his Chisinau, Jeddah and Athens offices online and showed the recordings. He even found the two magicians and had them review it. No one knew what to do. With lack of evidence against David, it was decided to let him go. He made a big show of being offended that they could think that he was involved and finished by quitting Interpol. His boss from Chisinau tried hard to talk his old friend out of quitting but, in the end, Interpol Detective Constable David Petrescu from Moldova retired. When David left the station, he assumed the case was closed. He was wrong.

David showed up at the RV a few hours after Dela and was greeted warmly with a full-blown party. They had gotten food from a nice restaurant a block over and picked up a mixed case of wine from a liquor store. David updated them on the happenings at the station after Dela left. They absorbed every detail and had a toast to David's sudden retirement. Wanda seemed especially glad at that circumstance and held David close as the party continued.

Around midnight, the couples went to their beds, leaving Dela alone again. She decided to entertain herself with a game of cards. She changed clothes and walked the few blocks to the casino. She wore her blonde wig and changed her makeup to avoid notice from any police officers from the station who thought she was dead. One of them might just like to gamble at the casino, so Dela was playing it safe while she had some fun.

Dela followed her process and was soon in a high-stakes game. She had sat at this very table with the same dealer a week before and he did not seem to remember her. However, he might remember the way she played, so this table would be short-lived. She began her conservative exploratory play but the dealer's shift ended just as Dela was getting going. She got down to business and was up fifty thousand dollars' worth of leus in just an hour. A couple of high rollers moved into empty chairs at the table where the losers had been sitting. They had watched Dela win big and wanted a piece of her winnings. She ended up walking out with over one hundred thirty thousand dollars in cash. She took a complementary security casino ride to the RV, laid the cash out on the table for everyone to enjoy when they got up and went to bed.

Basil was the first to rise and had David accompany him to pick up the 3D printer. While they were gone, the women cleaned up the place and cooked food to reheat for a few days. Wanda and a disguised

Dela went out to grocery shop to buy the staples -- bread, drinks and snacks for the RV. Leslie cleaned up the place a bit and did laundry while she was alone. They all arrived back at the same time and everyone went to work cooking, eating or setting up the computers and new printer.

The physical printer setup was simple, but working it was not. There were literally hundreds of settings to set before making a sample shape. Just after lunch, Basil was ready to run his first print test. It took thirty minutes to make each time, and Basil made four of the pretty shapes before he was satisfied. He selected the ring as the first item, because it was small and they could print multiple rings during one run. It took him an hour to load the files into the machine and, after three attempts with everyone critiquing and encouraging him, he liked the fourth result.

With the afternoon almost gone, Basil and David made one last trip for tools to trim and sand the plastic pieces. That night, the elders of the group encouraged the youngsters, Leslie and Basil, to go out on the town for supper and music by themselves. David, Wanda and Dela sat around the motor home and visited with Dela telling more stories of her life.

Europe ~ 1940

The *Blitzkrieg* had been going for a few months now in London doing significant damage to the city and causing children to be sent to the country for safekeeping. The beginning of the worst was happening, but no one knew just how horrible it was going to get. Nancy Woodsmith arrived in London from New York and went to the war office to offer her services -- her services as a spy.

When she made her proposal to a low-level military man, he laughed aloud. Then she told him of her background -- which she made up -- and language abilities. She fluently spoke Polish, French and most importantly German. He called his boss and then he called his boss and together they hatched a plan. Nancy Woodsmith would be given false German identification papers and travel into Berlin. She would make contacts cold and use them to gain valuable war plans. The Brits were willing to gamble anything and anyone to gain the upper hand. This would begin a four-year assignment for Nancy Woodsmith to become Gilda Burkhalter and work as a spy for the Allies.

Gilda arrived in Berlin to begin her work. She quickly established a communication system and dead drops to get copies of documents she would take from the German military high command and push to London. She had a luxury apartment on the west side of the city and moved in the highest echelons of the Nazi regime. Establishing this identity and gaining the trust of a few well-placed men took her six months. Finally, she felt everything was ready and she made plans for her first incursion into the command's secret war planning rooms.

Gilda moved down the dark streets of nighttime Berlin until she was a block away from her target. She shifted into the other world in the shadow of a great two hundred year old oak tree. She walked up the steps and through the front doors of the cold stone building that held two red cloth banners emblazoned with the swastika. She had never been in the structure before so this visit was as much getting familiar with the building for future visits as gathering any valuable information. Gilda had to find and pass information in such a way as to not let the Germans know they had a serious leak. Actions taken by the Allies after they received the data needed to look like they had gotten it from another source. If the Germans suspected anything else, her cover would be blown and she would have to end her work.

Gilda routinely slipped into the building and took a good look around. She easily became familiar with the organization of it and the people who worked there. She paid attention to the higher-ranking officials although she learned a lot by watching the wireless code senders too. She read the messages before they were encoded and chose the important ones to send back to London.

The first message she sent back was the layout of the building, where the important rooms were and the names of the people who used them. She wanted to paint a picture of the organization by using the building as the start of an organization chart of sorts. London quickly compiled a comprehensive list of everyone in the high command. Gilda was even able to figure out the current state of the German army by reading memos and looking at a large map of Europe marked with little models for different groups, infantry, tanks, and so on. Then she moved on to plans.

So it went until her cover was finally blown and she had to flee back to London. She then vanished to New York City after the war ended.

Romania ~ Present Day

On the second day of hiding out in the RV, Basil went to work trimming the ring moldings to be ready for the painter. Then he set about making the sword. The sword had to be made in three pieces because of its large size. Once complete, each piece would fit snugly together because the system could automatically create slots and fittings that snap together. Basil began printing the sword tip, which would take three hours to run.

David took the rings to the paint shop and got the job prioritized by laying down cold hard cash in sufficient quantity. The ring would be a simple job, since it was all gold, but there were some minor scratches and tarnish to recreate. The painter would have the job done in one day most of which was drying time.

The day grew boring and Dela suggested that David and Wanda take a side-trip somewhere. Wanda

was afraid she was going to lose her best friend at the end of all this and was reluctant to go anywhere. However, Dela insisted. Mangalia, Romania on the Black Sea is a bustling shipping port and resort destination. It is only a three-hour drive from Bucharest, so Wanda and David left the next morning in the Audi. Leslie booked them into the finest room of the finest resort for two nights. The couple did not know it, but Dela had a surprise for them if Leslie to pull it off. And Leslie did pull it off. She moved three hundred thousand dollars to a bank in Mangalia where Wanda had authority to spend it. Dela wanted David and Wanda to buy a boat.

Basil kept cranking on the sword and had three copies that he liked after making fifteen runs. He trimmed off the excess moldings. He took them to the paint shop and picked up the rings at the same time. The shop would have the swords painted in two days. When he got back to the RV, Dela and Leslie agreed that the rings were perfect.

Dela called Wanda and told her about the money for the boat, and Wanda and David both cried with happiness. Once that was out of the way, Dela wanted to know what kind of boat David wanted. He described it to her in dreamy Romanian detail. He wanted a sailboat, something about fifty feet that would sleep at least six. It could be a used boat, but had to be fairly new. They all looked online together and then Dela had them choose for themselves. They narrowed it down to two the next day. Then Dela transferred another two hundred thousand dollars to their account so they could look at bigger boats. David and Wanda bought one and spent the rest of their short visit taking the boat out for a day trip.

Basil started on the scepter, the hardest piece to make because it was the most intricate. This would be made in two pieces so the work went faster than the sword. The scepter was done and ready for paint just as David and Wanda returned. Off the three scepters went to the paint shop and Basil was able to pick up the finished swords. They were amazingly perfect and the scepter would be ready tomorrow afternoon.

The friends had a strategy session on the order to switch the items and who would be with Dela. They picked up the scepters the next day and, once satisfied, they took all three replicas and got ready to take the next step on their journey.

Tales, Tails and Trails

Interpol's Junior Detective Pinzari was back home in Chisinau now tying up loose ends of the case. None of the institutions or people that were robbed wanted to pursue their cases further nor did their insurance companies. That still left the escape from jail. Representatives of the church had viewed the video recordings from the interview room in Bucharest where Dela had vanished in anguish and decided to make no official comment. As far as Pinzari's bosses were concerned, the case could be closed and always reopened if anything else happened.

Pinzari could handle closing the case except for one big loose end -- Petrescu, his old partner's involvement. Therefore, Pinzari dawdled finishing the paper work and watched Petrescu's movements with the help of a GPS tracker planted on the retired detective while he was in custody. Pinzari watched him go out on the Black Sea out of Mangalia for a day. Petrescu then returned to Bucharest to where the group had stashed their two vehicles. Pinzari had a local officer scope out the garage and Petrescu and a few other people were apparently staying in an RV. The case did not warrant a fulltime stakeout, but the GPS location on David told him a lot.

The group considered making a loop to Berlin for the sword, Lyon for the ring, then the Vatican in Rome and finally back to Bucharest for the run to Poenari Castle, Dracul's Citadel. No one bothered to plan past that, quickly deciding that driving was crazy. They would ship the sword to Berlin and the scepter to Rome. The ring could transport in anyone's pocket or be worn without trouble.

David made the final decision. They started by hiding the RV and Audi in a private garage recommended by the paint shop owner. Then, with Dela invisible in the other world, they went to the train station and took the 24-hour train ride to Berlin. They booked two private cabins and ate inside their rooms most of the time. They relaxed and visited knowing they were on the last part of this strange scavenger hunt. They all agreed that the couples could enjoy romantic meals together in the dining car. On one of the breaks with everyone gathered in a cabin, David announced that he and Wanda were engaged. They toasted the happy news and celebrated for quite a while.

Later, when pressed for another story, Dela told them of one time when she was on this very train route in 1794.

Vienna, Hapsburg ~ 1794

Marie Lehmann of Bavaria was working for the French as an agent traveling from Vienna to Berlin by

train. She was following a coalition colonel who was carrying war plans against the French in the Flanders Campaign during the French Revolutionary Wars. The French were battling a coalition of the British, Hanover, Dutch Republic and Hapsburg Monarchy. Marie had embraced the French Revolution as a way for Europe to have a fresh start against the cruel rule of Eastern European monarchies of that time. It was February and looked like a major confrontation was almost at hand. Both sides were waiting for winter to ease its grip on the region before moving troops and preparing for a major battle, later named the Battle of Fleurus.

Marie had just introduced herself to the colonel, and he was smitten by her charms instantaneously. He invited her to dine with him and she accepted. They had a delightful dinner together and, as Marie planned, she accompanied him back to his stateroom. He offered champagne and she took it. While he was not looking, she slipped a powder into the colonel's glass. They toasted and he started to kiss her. However, the kiss was interrupted with him passing out on the bench seat in the cabin. Marie laid him down and immediately went to work. She found his official attaché case and picked the lock expertly. She opened it and dug through all the papers until she found what she wanted -- the battle plans to fight the French in their next engagement. There were troop numbers, cannon numbers, and locations -- now and future-planned -- for everything. She took notes on paper she had in her purse and worked for almost an hour.

She put everything back in place and slipped out of the cabin with no one seeing her leave. She got off at the next stop and made her way to her contacts in Geneva. She passed along the information, which turned the tide of the battle and the entire war, resulting in the Austrian Netherlands and the destruction of the Dutch Republic.

Vienna, Austria ~ Present Day

Leslie and Basil slipped away, and Dela found an empty compartment to leave David and Wanda alone for the night.

The group of five arrived in Berlin in late afternoon and got off the train to rain coming down in buckets. Dela found a quiet place to shift back into the living world and met her four friends at the cabstands. They took two cabs back to the same hotel they used during their last stopover here, the Hotel Adlon. Basil went to the post office and retrieved the plastic replica swords they had shipped to Berlin. They checked in and prepared for the switch of the swords. The museum was only a block away, but it was raining and Dela did not want to go out in the rain for more than a few seconds. She discussed with David the process she was going to use to make the swap, and he helped her think it through step by step.

When Dela was ready, David and an invisible Dela hailed a cab outside the hotel.

David directed the cab to a large bookstore on the same block as the museum, which was just now closing. David paid the driver and went into the bookstore to wait while Dela made a beeline for the museum. She quickly walked up the steps and through the front doors and went straight to the sword display case. When she looked inside, the sword was gone. A posted sign read *Out for cleaning*.

Dela began her search by looking at a map on display in the room and found a downstairs area secured for personnel only. She had to walk to the other end of the museum to find the right door and climbed a flight of stairs to the storage and work area floor. Then she went through the storage rooms and found the restoration and upkeep workshop. Her grandfather's sword was laid out on a table ready to be worked on. Since the sword would be handled, she could not replace it with the plastic one. However, there was one piece of business she could take care of there and then. She scanned for cameras and, not finding any, she shifted back to the living world. She reached down and touched the sword. It had the same effect as finding the other items did. She felt a jolt and a picture of her grandfather flashed through her mind.

She shifted back to the unseen world and walked back to the staircase. She climbed it, feeling extra tired knowing then that she had aged again. Dela walked out the front door and back to the bookstore. She shifted in a quiet aisle and found David. He took a good look at her and she simply said, "How many years?"

He looked at her again and said, "Maybe seven." He paused and then asked, "So, did everything go okay?"

"No. The sword was out of the display case for cleaning. I found it, touched it just to get the affect over with, and left. Maybe it will be back on display tomorrow night. It looks like they were just going to work on it."

David gathered up his things and waved for Dela to shift away. Once she was gone, they walked outside and down a block to a cab waiting in front of a nightclub. The ride to the hotel was short. They went to their rooms and Dela shifted back into the world of the light.

Pinzari was convinced that more was about to happen with the case. Petrescu's movements had not made sense ever since he quit the case. He was in Athens at the exact time the stolen bank cash was returned. He got off the jet when it returned to Bucharest with the Dela Samuels group. Right after Dela's disappearance at the station, David was released; then after two days, he goes to Mangalia, sails for a day and then returns to Bucharest. Now he was on a train heading to Berlin. In addition, the RV and Audi had disappeared from the parking garage. It did not take much of a detective to know something was amiss.

However, all he could do at this point was watch.

Pinzari did however think of doing one thing -- he got copies of Petrescu's email and phone records exchanged while he was on the case. He had only begun to go through the folder of printouts.

Dela described the cleaning sign and touching the sword. Once she saw herself in a mirror, she thought she now looked about sixty. The funny thing was that she did not care. She felt like it was just part of life, her life. The only thing to do now was to wait until tomorrow night; hopefully, the sword would be back by then.

Pinzari was almost finished with his reading, when he found the correspondence between the history scholars and David. The stolen and returned artifacts belonged to the Dracul family. That fact put a new perspective on the case for Pinzari. Was Dela controlled by Vlad Dracul? Impossible! Then again, he had seen what he had seen and Dela vanishing still scared him to death. Maybe the whole thing was not over. Was David finishing something? If that was the situation, then what was in Berlin?

Daylight came and the five friends gathered in Dela's room for breakfast delivered by room service. After breakfast, everyone left so Dela could get some more sleep -- she was still tired. The two couples spent the day enjoying the sights of Berlin and eating too much. The day passed uneventfully until it was finally closing time at the museum. The rain stopped during the night, which allowed Dela to remain in the living world as she and David traveled to the same bookstore as the night before.

Dela shifted in a quiet corner in the store and left for the museum. She quickly made her way into the building and headed straight for the sword display case. As soon as she saw the case, she saw that the sword had been returned to the case. She breathed a sigh of relief and prepared to swap the two swords. Dela reached through the glass and touched the sword. Nothing happened. Good. Then she pulled the sword out and placed the replica into the glass enclosure. She gathered the real sword and left the museum as fast as she had entered.

She found David quickly and told him the short story of her visit complete with showing him the sword. They packed up and left for the hotel. Everyone was waiting again when Dela and David returned. Dela repeated the story and the displayed the sword. The five talked for a while and then went their separate ways until morning when they would catch a train to Lyon. They were boarding at six a.m. for the twelve-hour ride.

After receiving wakeup calls from the hotel, everyone met in the lobby at the unreasonable time of five in the morning. They took two cabs to the train station and Dela slipped into the other world just

before they boarded. They brought breakfast back from the dining car to eat with Dela. They chatted and napped the entire trip with Basil out and about taking pictures of the beautiful countryside. David was also something of a photographer and worked with Basil who had all the best equipment money could buy. They bought fresh burner phones for everyone onboard from the gift shop because time had run out on their previous phones.

An hour before passing Frankfurt, David had a chat with Basil and gave him a secret mission. When they reached Frankfurt, Basil got off the train and caught another one for Prague. David let the others vaguely know what was happening. The rest of the group were all set when they pulled into the Lyon station at the busiest time of the day.

There was an overnight express train from Lyon to Rome leaving in four hours that they hoped to catch. David assumed the role of protector and personal assistant to Dela, who appreciated all that David did and the kindness he consistently showed to everyone. They left Wanda and Leslie near the station and took a cab to the Museum of Fine Arts in the heart of the beautiful city. The museum had closed just as they arrived. The cabbie directed them to a small restaurant near the building where David could wait in quiet.

Dela entered the museum and made her way to the very back where the rings were displayed. She found the setup the same as a few days ago. Now she had to deal with the logistics of getting the ring out without hurting the case and then putting the fake one in. David and she had talked about this and Dela got herself ready.

She slipped her hand through the glass and took the ring next to her grandfather's ring. Then, she used it to push her grandfather's ring off the shelf and let it fall to the bottom of the case. She put the one in her hand back in its place, then put the fake ring where the real one had been. Dela crouched low behind the case to hide herself from cameras that might be watching. She reached through the wooden bottom of the case and grabbed the ring. The contact made her flash into the living world and she immediately shifted herself back to the other world. She was probably visible for a half second. The case was unharmed and she had the ring.

She rolled onto her hands and knees and slowly got to her feet. She felt the same aging occur as when she touched all the other magical items. She felt older, really older. She walked out of the museum, down the stairs and back to the restaurant where David was waiting for her. She slipped in and went to the bathroom where she shifted. She got David's attention as she entered the room and he got up to leave with her. He looked at her, but made no mention of her growing older. The restaurant called him a cab and they went back to the train station.

Wanda and Leslie tried not to look concerned when they saw Dela, but Dela could tell it was bad by

the sad looks on their faces. The train was just boarding and Dela went to a bathroom and shifted invisible for the start of the train trip to Rome. She looked in the mirror before she changed and guessed she was now around seventy-five.

Basil arrived in Prague and got off the train. He went directly to the main police station and found a bathroom right inside the front doors behind the lobby. There was no one in the room at that moment and Basil hid in a stall to complete his work. He opened David's cell phone and called Pinzari. He and David had prerecorded a call and, when Pinzari answered, Basil started the recording, "Hi, this is David." Pause. "I know how they did it. I know how they stole the things and put them back. I am chasing them right now. The..." Crackle, crackle, and then the call ended. David's phone rang almost immediately but Basil turned the phone off.

Basil left the station and checked into a nearby hotel for the night. Before he went to bed, he ran an application on his phone that only clicked the call through when the receiving phone was busy. The app would call Pinzari's phone and, if the line was free, hang up before Pinzari could answer to connect the call. If Pinzari's line was busy, the call would go through to register a call was attempted. Basil found the app on a secret developer's website. It would look like David was trying to call him and, of course, Basil would never answer when Pinzari called David's phone. Basil ran the application for a half hour. He would do it again in the morning before he caught another train, this time to Krakow, Poland.

Pinzari caught the first plane out of Chisinau for Prague the next morning. He did not know that David had found the GPS tracker in his shoe right after he left the police station. Now, Basil used the shoe and fake recordings to lure Pinzari to chase the proverbial wild goose.

Rome was a sixteen-hour train ride and they occupied two cabins again. Once onboard, Dela reappeared and joined them. They had a quiet night relaxing and catching up on much needed sleep. Everyone was slightly on edge and thinking about the end of the quest nearing.

Pinzari arrived in Prague at the same time Dela, David, Wanda and Leslie got to Rome and the same time Basil got to Krakow. Pinzari went to the police station first and asked if anyone had talked to now retired Detective Constable Petrescu. No one knew anything about Petrescu being in Prague. Then Pinzari went to the hotel where the GPS tracker recorded David spending the night. Again, Pinzari found nothing.

Pinzari did not know what to do. Then his phone showed a call coming in from David while he was reporting in to his bosses. Pinzari called back and got no answer for the millionth time. He checked

David's location on his phone and saw that he was now in Krakow. What was going on?

Basil was to stay in Krakow for four hours then catch a train to Bratislava in Slovakia. He did so and ran the phone application for three hours. When a call finally went through while Pinzari was on another call, Pinzari did not immediately call back. It was getting late after all.

The four friends got to Rome midmorning and would have to wait until well after dark to switch the scepters. They checked into an inexpensive hotel and waited. Wanda and David went out, but Leslie would not leave Dela's side. Wanda came back a few hours later sporting a beautiful engagement ring. Leslie and Dela fawned over it and the friends had an impromptu party that afternoon at a sidewalk restaurant a few doors down from the hotel.

Pinzari began to think he was being played and decided to make a bold move. He was going to try to get ahead of David and intercept him at a next probable destination. The GPS tracker showed that Petrescu was now on a train going from Krakow to Bratislava. It would arrive in five hours. Pinzari called the local police in Bratislava and asked a favor. Could they please send two plain-clothes officers to the train station to intercept and detain Petrescu when he arrived in a few hours. Pinzari was pissed thinking Petrescu was giving him the run-around. He would get to the bottom of this and be done with it.

The Vatican closed for the night and Dela waited a few hours for the staff to go home. David insisted on going along and together they took a cab to a café near the huge church and complex that makes up a sovereign country in the middle Rome. Dela dropped David at the bar and went to the bathroom. She shifted and left the café walking straight to the main square. As she was crossing the wide expanse, she saw the same two spirit nuns walking together that she saw the last time she was in the square.

Dela walked through one building and into the one that had the main storage area beneath it. She walked down the stairs and passed the library card catalog room. She walked all the way down the same hallway she had before and found the same room. She opened the cabinet that held the scepter and reached down to retrieve its case. She set the case on a table and opened it. There it was, the last piece to the puzzle. She shifted and touched the beautiful antique. She saw her hands age as she picked it out of the case. She put the fake scepter in, closed the case and put it away. Dela closed the doors to the cabinet and retraced her steps to where David was having a glass of wine at the bar. She went to the bathroom again and shifted back to the world of the living. David saw her as she came out and immediately ran over to offer her his arm. She was hobbling along as a ninety-year-old woman might.

He hailed a cab and they returned to the hotel quietly and quickly.

Moving On

Wanda and Leslie tried to hide their concern for Dela, but failed miserably. Wanda started to cry first and then Leslie could not help herself and joined in. David tried to comfort them all, but quickly realized it was a special thing between old friends who love each other. Dela was exhausted from her ordeal and wanted to rest.

Pinzari's local police friends in Bratislava were at the train station when the train pulled in. The train was short and the police officers could easily see everyone getting on and off the train. The train pulled away and they did not know what to do. No one told them to board the train and search, just watch as Petrescu got off. After it was too late, they checked the GPS locator's position. The GPS was still on the train. They called ahead to the next station two hours away and arranged for the train to be searched for Petrescu and the shoe hiding the GPS unit.

Basil got off the train in Bratislava and walked past the two plain-clothes officers looking for David. Basil headed to Bucharest to retrieve the RV and wait to take everyone to the Citadel when they arrived the next afternoon. Before he got off the train, Basil had paid a lot of money to a porter to take the shoe and get rid of it somewhere a long way down the tracks before the train reached the next station. David explained the story as best as he could using an interpreter application on his phone to communicate with the young man. The porter understood perfectly what he was to do and had a thought after David was long gone. It would be fun! The train was headed for Budapest and at Sala, a smaller town about halfway there, it crossed the Vah River. The porter got a plastic tub from the kitchen and put the shoe inside. Then he wrapped it up with tape, took it to the caboose and waited. When the train crossed the slow-moving but steady-flowing river, he tossed the package into the water and watched it drift south floating happily along in the sealed box. He laughed the whole time knowing that the person who paid him would love the trick.

Dela and her friends collected their things, checked out of the hotel in Rome and caught a taxi to a remote airstrip outside the city. They were meeting a private pilot with a Cessna 402 that would take them to Bucharest, Romania.

They got to the airport, finalized the contract in cash and boarded the plane for the five-hour flight across the Adriatic Sea and southern Slavic countries to Bucharest.

Pinzari was following the GPS signal from an unused office at the Prague police headquarters. Petrescu had remained on the train at Bratislava and kept going on to Budapest, Hungary. The officers in Bratislava had called some friends at the next stop, Esztergom, Hungary, and asked them to search the train for Petrescu and the tracking device. Ninety minutes later, the GPS signal exited the train and was most likely now on a small boat going south on the Vah River. Pinzari called off the men at the Esztergom station. He had to wait and see where the signal ended up before he could justify another wrong move.

While he was waiting, he got a call from the New Museum in Berlin. A sword replaced with a realistic plastic replica. The only reason the switch was discovered was that the curator removed the sword from its display to review the recent cleaning done by his staff. The curator instantly realized that they had been robbed. He called the local police and they called Interpol because of the recent bulletins about things gone missing from museums.

The last part of the conversation clinched the connection for him. The curator said that there was no broken glass, no disturbance to the case and nothing on the security camera footage. He concluded, "It's like magic."

When Pinzari received a written follow-up report via email, his jaw actually dropped when he read the description of the sword -- labeled "Sword of Vlad III Dracul, the Impaler".

Pinzari got on the web and found the same three homes Petrescu had -- the Princely Court palace in Targoviste, *Curtea Veche* in Bucharest, and the Poenari Castle.

Pinzari had actually been to the castle in Bucharest and now he read up on the one in Targoviste. Both of these attracted only a few visitors, but the Poenari Castle was famous as the place where Vlad planted his spikes to impale his defeated enemies. It was only a two and a half hour drive out of Bucharest and Pinzari felt this one was the most interesting to him.

He made a few calls and ended up hitching a ride on a diplomatic plane headed to Bucharest. It was a quick-moving jet owned by the government and was definitely his fastest option. Pinzari was still tracking what he was now sure was just Petrescu's GPS unit probably still inside his shoe. It had come to a halt on the bank of a river.

Basil arrived in Bucharest and immediately went to the secret storage garage to pick up the motorhome. He stopped and stocked the RV with groceries from a small market. He watched the clock so he could time his arrival back at the small airport that he had flown into as the others were landing.

Dela, David, Wanda and Leslie landed at the airport and received a warm greeting from Basil who was unable to hide his concern over Dela. She comforted him and told stated this was just the natural order of things finally taking its due. They were at the airport only long enough to load luggage in the RV and then drove away.

David drove while Basil made steak and eggs for everyone. He had good beer and wine and they all relaxed as the quest was about to end. They were both happy and sad as they drove with everyone working hard to make Dela comfortable. She ached all over with arthritis and was worn out from her long, long life.

Poenari Castle ~ 1492

Vlad Dracul was tired after his many battles during the spring campaign against his many enemies trying to bring him down, but he was victorious in every skirmish. Many of the battles were fought in the valley below. Now his men were following his orders and impaling the dead and wounded of the defeated. They stood the long stakes in holes lining the lower hills of the citadel. It was a gruesome sight meant to frighten Vlad's enemies. It left horrible memories in the minds of all who saw it and, for that reason, Vlad's wife and children were sent away to one of his other palaces, Targoviste.

Vlad walked the citadel towers and watched as the cleanup below took place. His men, servants and commanders came up to him periodically to see if there was anything to be done, but most stayed away during this ritual of impalement of the vanquished. He looked down on the bodies and considered this much more personal than the usual business of war. He was fighting for survival and believed that each and every person was out to kill him and his family. He hated all of them with a hate that is usually reserved for only the worst kind of person, not common soldiers who often did not know why they were fighting.

Then Vlad uttered this curse:

I condemn you to an unholy death

By the sword I used to kill you

By the royal signet ring I used to declare war on you

And by my scepter that welds the power to rule over you in this life and the next

Poenari Castle ~ Present Day

The RV pulled into the tourist site parking lot off. David positioned the vehicle off to the side and close to the hidden entrance cave to the caverns. No sooner had they stopped when there was a knock on the side door. David opened the door.

“David, may I come in?” Junior Detective Pinzari casually asked his old boss, mentor and friend.

Everyone except Dela was standing around gathering up the treasured items for Dela to take into the cavern. Dela was sitting at the table resting as Pinzari entered. He looked at everyone one at a time and recognized all except Dela. He went around the room and shook everybody’s hands saying their names as he went until he got to Dela. He introduced himself, but she did not give her name as she shook his hand.

Then he turned to David and said, “Nice trick having me run around Europe tracking your shoe. Your fake sword was discovered in Berlin and that got me thinking about the ties you all seem to have with the former ruler of this country, Vlad III Dracul.” He waited but no one spoke. Pinzari continued, “May I assume that this lady,” he pointed at Dela, “is Ruxandra Dracul?” He watched all their faces as they tipped their hand with looks of shock at this statement. “David, you are not the only one to have friends at museums and universities.”

Pinzari sat down at the table and spoke to Dela, “I know that you are not bad people, not ordinary thieves or criminals. No bank robber ever returns the money.” They offered feeble smiles at that observation. “So, does someone want to bring me up to speed on all this? Or, do I arrest everyone and again try to keep you behind bars?”

They all looked at each other and finally Dela said, “Detective, you deserve to know what we are doing. If you will come with us, we will reveal everything. But, I warn you, it may be more than you ever bargained for.” Knowing that he would follow, Dela got up from the table and went to change clothes. Wanda had laid out what Dela wanted to wear in the RV back room.

Once she was gone, David said, “Old friend, how about a drink? You might need it.” He pulled out a bottle of vodka and a couple of small tumblers that he filled with ice. Pinzari sat down at the table. They drank and refilled the glasses. David said, “So, how long did it take for you to figure out that I found the tracker in my shoe?” They laughed and downed their second shots.

They chatted a moment until Dela came out. She was dressed in the same peasant outfit she had on the last time they were there. She opened a cabinet, took out the sword, scepter and ring and set them in front of Pinzari on the table. “These things belonged to my grandfather.” She asked Basil to carry the sword and scepter while she put the ring on her finger.

She pronounced herself ready and they all stepped into the sun. When they were all outside, clouds

rolled in and it started to rain, complete with thunder and lightning. They dashed eighty feet to the cave entrance and David went in first. Dela went next, then Basil, Leslie and Wanda followed by Pinzari.

They crawled along until they could stand with David assisting Dela. Once they were all together, Dela took the lead and said, "Hold hands." They linked to the persons' hands in front and back as they walked into the cavern. Dela shifted into the other world and walked her friends in front of the now visible king of the hall. Holding hands with Dela allowed them to see the vast number of spirits inhabiting the cavern. David and Wanda were the calmest at seeing the spectacle. Basil and Leslie did okay but trembled a bit. Pinzari stumbled at the sight, but was now up and watching everything with his mouth open.

The king spoke, "Princess Ruxandra, our world of half-death looks like it is catching up on you."

"I am weary of this existence, just as you are, my lord." She bowed and then said, "And I bring the things that will give all of us peace at last." Every living and otherwise soul in the cavern watched as she took the ring off her finger and set it before the stone throne of the king spirit. "My grandfather's signet ring. He declared war on you by the authority of this ring. I use it to declare peace on our souls." Then she produced the sword and laid it next to the ring. "My grandfather used this sword to bring death to you. I use it to cut you free from your unholy death." Finally, she laid the scepter with the other two items. "My grandfather used the scepter to rule over you in life and this world of half-life. I use it to grant us our freedom."

The king stood up and said, "By your right as the heir of the one who cursed us, we recognize your right to free us from that curse. Thank you, Granddaughter of Dracul. Thank you." He slowly faded into the final world followed by the other tormented spirits. Hundreds of them walked past Dela and said, "God bless you, Ruxandra" and "Thanks be to you, princess." Then they too slipped into the last oblivion.

Dela turned to her friends still holding their hands and said with tears in her eyes, "I must go now." They all pulled closer still holding hands and Dela finished, "Thank you. I don't know what else to say."

Wanda simply said, "Dela, thank you for your kind friendship. We love you and always will. Always." At those words, Dela started crying more. They group-hugged with Dela being smothered with their love. When they broke away, she was gone.

Epilog

Pinzari took care of returning museum pieces and went back to work with a new outlook on life. The first thing he did when he returned to the office in Chisinau was to close and seal the case.

Wanda and David got married a few weeks later on their boat in Mangalia with Basil acting as the best man and Leslie as the maid of honor. Wanda wanted a garden, so David bought her a cottage near the docks where they kept their boat.

Leslie and Basil moved into Dela's home on Nob Hill and spent the next year tracking down and liquidating all of Dela's holdings. With Wanda's blessing, they established a foundation that would support the Paranormal Investigator's Annual Convention forever. They were married the following year on Wanda and David's sailboat in Romania. Their first child was a girl and they named her Ruxandra.

The End