

If you open this book you must open yourself to a world of intrigue, romance, and magic. How it begins and how it will end is a mystery hidden within the pages of this story. It's up to you to discover the truth behind the Fleur-de-lys.

Fleur-de-lys

By Keith Walsh

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THE LEGACY OF
FLEUR-DE-LYS



KEITH WALSH

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Fleur-de-lys

Chapter 2: The Battle of Dien Bien Phu

“Bout fifteen minutes!” The pilot could barely be heard above the relentless pounding of rotor blades beating against the humid air over the dense jungles of Vietnam. “We might run into some anti-aircraft fire. If that happens, be ready for a wild ride!”

What am I doing here? the young private thought to himself. He reflected upon the events that had brought him to this desolate and remote part of the world under such perilous circumstances. His name was Charles. He was only nineteen years old, and he wondered how he could have possibly ended up in such a precarious situation. He remembered being called into his CO's headquarters a month earlier to receive his orders. Someone from the CIA and a couple of strategic analysts from the Army were standing around a map that was spread out across the captain's desk. After exchanging the required military formalities, Charles was asked to sit down while they began to explain the details of his new assignment.

It was February of 1954, and the French had been fighting the Viet Minh in Southeast Asia since the end of World War II. The Cold War was on everybody's mind, and the threat of Communist expansion had become a major concern of the Eisenhower administration. It had been decided that military aid in the form of weapons, supplies, and advisers would be covertly provided to the French as a means of deterring the spread of Communism. Tanks would be an essential part of this effort to reinforce the firepower of the French “liberators.”

Charles had been trained as a mechanic, specializing in the maintenance of Chaffee M-24 light tanks which had been successfully used during the Korean War and by the French in the War in Algeria.

Since he had extensive experience working on M-24s, he was considered to be the best man for the job.

It was decided that Charles would fly into Hanoi, where he would be airlifted to a secret military base located somewhere deep within the damp, muggy rain forests of northern Vietnam.

“Not exactly the vacation getaway I was hoping for,” he said sarcastically to the pilot. He knew his sense of humor would be essential in order for him to keep his sanity in this hell on earth called, “Indochina.”

“Here they come!” the pilot shouted. Charles could see the 57 mm shells, fired from the Soviet made S-60 anti-aircraft guns, whizzing past the canopy of their Bell H-13 Sioux Helicopter as they dodged their way past the incoming artillery fire and crossed their fingers, hoping for deliverance.

“I'm gonna bring her up to five thousand feet. That should take us out of range till the heat dies down.” The pilot seemed to know what he was doing, and it was obvious that this wasn't his first rodeo. As soon as they reached altitude, the guns stopped, and they were still in one piece.

“Holy shit, that was close!” Charles said to himself. It was his first experience with enemy fire.

There was a pause before the pilot responded. “You'll get used to it ...,” he said nonchalantly, chewing a piece of gum. “It's just another day in paradise,” he added with a wry grin.

Soon they came upon a huge clearing in the midst of the crush of trees and foliage which blanketed the countryside. It was in a large valley surrounded by hills and ridges in an otherwise impenetrable sea of high brush and indigenous vegetation. As they descended, Charles could make out what looked like a secluded airfield encompassed by several satellite positions at various locations, strategically situated around a central command post and a landing strip. Soon, he recognized what looked like military barracks, artillery batteries, and other fortifications encircling the garrison.

“Good luck!” the pilot shouted as Charles grabbed his gear. He jumped out of the cabin as the helicopter pushed off the ground,

forcing up a huge cloud of dust as it disappeared into the gray skies of the tropical winter.

There goes my last connection to reality, he thought dismally.

Three soldiers marched across the open field toward where he was standing with his overstuffed cargo bag. They were with the French Union's Far East Expeditionary Corps.

“*Bienvenue, Monsieur!*” Only one of them spoke English, which fortunately was not a problem for Charles who had grown up in the French Quarter of New Orleans. The eldest among them was a *caporal* named Marcel Beauchamp. He and his two subordinates were apparently Charles' reception party.

“*Parlez-vous l'anglais?*”

“A little,” he said. Marcel had been studying English in his spare time and was assigned to Charles as his “liaison.” He would be responsible for his acclimation as a military adviser to the French.

“You have had a long journey. I will take you to your quarters. After you rest, I will show you where everything is, no?”

He had evidently been practicing his introduction. Charles appreciated his efforts to be hospitable. He knew how much the French disdained Americans for their indifference toward learning other languages, especially French. He thanked him for his kindness and told him that he would look forward to learning about his new role as a tank mechanic. When Charles finally climbed into his bunk, he was so exhausted he thought he would never wake up. And then ...

Sirens began screaming. Everyone scrambled to find their positions, and panic seemed to rule the entire camp. Some men were jumping into their pants and running at the same time, while others didn't even bother to change, dashing past the barracks in their underwear as they ran to their posts.

Then came the successive hammering of incoming artillery fire. Mortars hit the ground indiscriminately, heaving heavy clouds of dirt and sand into the air. Confusion reigned, and the wrath of Satan seemed to be upon them. Machine gun fire punctuated the madness with an endless rattle of bullets perforating everything and everyone in its way. It was hard to discern friendly fire from the enemy's

relentless onslaught of bullets and shells. And then, suddenly, it was over.

Charles was standing outside his barracks, dumbfounded and in utter amazement, while people slowly began to resume their daily activities as if nothing had happened. A few medics could be seen attending to the injured, as men with stretchers carried the severely wounded to whatever was used as an emergency aid station. He turned around and saw Marcel, dusting himself off as he came over to see how his new recruit was doing.

“You are okay, no?” he asked.

“No, I’m not okay! What the fuck just happened?” Charles was clearly pissed.

“It is nothing.” He paused to light a cigarette, exhaling a long stream of smoke into the air while he continued his explanation. “The Viet Minh bring artillery guns close to our fortification. There are not many. They try to fool us by making, how do you say, fake guns out of wood. They try to scare us. They try to make us believe that they have more guns, and more soldiers.”

“So, they’re just bullshitting us? Like, they’re harassing us?” Charles replied, almost as if he were comforting himself.

“Oui, Monsieur. Now, you should join me for a drink of *absinthe* which I have been hiding in my locker.” Marcel was trying to take the edge off his comrade’s nerves.

“Sure. What the hell!” Charles resigned himself to the fact that this was the “new normal.” It would take a bit of getting used to.

Later that evening, Marcel and Charles were in the barracks getting drunk. They’d finished most of the *absinthe*, and they found themselves deeply entangled in a political discussion involving the ethics behind the war in Vietnam.

“We have to win this war, Charles. Do you not see? Without the structure of our government and the protection of our armed forces, these people would become savages again, no? The Russians and the Chinese will steal all their resources and use them against us, it is for sure.” It was clear that Marcel was a patriot.

“But, what about how the Vietnamese feel? What do they want? Don't they have a right to decide their own destiny?” Charles was enjoying playing the devil's advocate.

“Bah! They do not know what they want. They are uncivilized. They live like pigs and eat bugs! Their cities are filled with drugs and prostitutes, and there is poverty everywhere. There is no sense of law and order. They need the stability of the French to bring them into the twentieth century.”

“Maybe they were just fine before the twentieth century,” Charles countered. “Maybe the simple bliss of their unencumbered existence was destroyed by our technology. Perhaps they've been corrupted by the outside world and now they're addicted to its mechanisms, its politics, and its bureaucracy.”

“If that is true,” Marcel responded, “it is too late to undo what is done. We must move forward and complete our destiny!” he insisted.

“Well, I hope you're right,” Charles replied, attempting to segue into a less ideological conversation. “So how do you know so much about the cities here?”

“I have been to Tourane (Da Nang). I was on leave. I spent a week there.” He poured another shot into a small, plain glass and handed it to Charles after adding a little water from the pitcher on the floor.

“So, did you see the sights? Go to any bars? Maybe taste some of the indigenous delicacies?” he asked, with a leering grin on his face. It was obvious that Charles was alluding to whether Marcel had been philandering with any of the local girls.

“Of course not! It has been a long time since I have been with a woman, but I would never sleep with a Vietnamese whore. They are dirty, like dogs. I do not sleep with dogs!” His prejudice was apparent, and the *absinthe* had made him irascible.

“Okay, okay, I get it!” Charles said, trying to calm him down. “I was just wondering, that's all.” He paused for a moment. “So, you got a girl back home?”

Marcel's expression softened. He was thoughtful for a moment, and then he spoke. “Her name is Marie. She is going to the university to become a teacher.” His pride was obvious by the smile on his face.

“I met her while I was in Paris,” he said while he searched through his wallet. He found her picture and handed it to Charles. “She is beautiful, no?”

Charles looked at the photograph and smiled. “Yes, she is,” he said, “a real keeper.”

It was clear that Marcel missed her. His face revealed a look of wistful longing as he took the picture back. “Do you have a girl in America?” he asked.

“No,” Charles said woefully. “I just never met one I could get along with, I guess. Maybe I’ll meet someone when I get back home.”

He was in the middle of his sentence when they heard voices shouting in the distance. They both ran outside to see what all the commotion was about.

One of the searchlights was directing its beam on three or four people about two hundred meters away in an open area next to a barbed wire fence. It appeared as if they were trying to restrain someone. Though it was hard to see in the darkness, it looked like a boy, not more than 12 or 13 years of age. The soldiers were struggling with him when suddenly there was a flash, and then a loud “Bang!” a fraction of a second later.

Charles and his new friend immediately ran to investigate what had happened. They came upon a bloody scenario. It was later determined that a young Vietnamese boy had been sent to spy on the French to gain intelligence about the location of artillery positions around the base. When he was discovered, the soldiers on duty tried to arrest him. During the scuffle, the boy was able to detonate some kind of explosive device, which resulted in everyone being blown to pieces.

Charles was speechless. He had never seen anything like this before. He’d heard stories about these kinds of things, and there were rumors about suicide bombers, but he could never have imagined witnessing it firsthand. Consumed by these horrific thoughts and images, Charles was unable to sleep that night.

The next day was March 10. What the French did not know was, for the past three months, the Viet Minh had been stockpiling weapons and supplies. They had been secretly hauling heavy artillery and anti-

aircraft guns through the treacherous marshlands and rugged terrain, up the steep rear slopes of the hills to the tops of the ridges and peaks overlooking the surrounding area. They dug tunnels through the mountains, which they used to bring in more guns and ammunition. The Viet Minh had now encircled the entire installation.

They had over 50,000 men ready to attack, compared to the 16,000 soldiers defending the air base, and their artillery outnumbered the French four to one. A siege was imminent.

The next few days passed without incident, and things remained quiet around the airbase. Charles spent his time working on the ten M-24 light tanks that had been assigned to Dien Bien Phu. Marcel came over to see if he could help Charles with a torsion bar he was repairing.

“Hold this wrench steady while I break the seal on this,” Charles grunted. Marcel was still feeling sick from the other night.

Reluctantly, he grabbed the tool while his companion concentrated his full strength on a rusty bolt.

“Shit! You little bitch!” Charles was accustomed to shouting at inanimate objects in order to let his frustrations out.

“Damn it!” he continued his rant. “I stripped it!”

“Here, *mon ami*,” Marcel handed Charles his canteen. “Why don't you stop for a moment? You look like you need to take a rest.”

They sat on the ground next to the caterpillar track as Charles took a long swig of water and then handed it back Marcel.

After a brief silence, Marcel decided to break the ice. “So, you are from New Orleans, no?” He knew that his companion was still shaken by some of the events that had been happening lately.

“Yeah, French Quarter. That's where I grew up,” he said nostalgically.

“You have a mother and father?” Marcel knew this might be a touchy subject, but he thought his friend might want to talk about it.

“My dad—he owns a real estate company back home. He manages properties ...” He stopped for a moment, and then went on. “My mom, she stays at home mostly. She reads a lot, and she likes making candles out of bees' wax.”

Charles began to open up after Marcel asked him a few more questions about what it was like to live in Louisiana. He'd had a rough

time in school. It was difficult for him to learn how to read, and he was always getting into fistfights with the other kids. But the local culture provided him with a rich childhood which he reflected upon in great detail.

He talked about taking long walks along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, and the amusement park at the beach. Marcel listened intently as Charles described his experiences riding on the Zephyr Roller Coaster and strolling along the massive boardwalk past the penny arcade where the bands played all kinds of music, and people danced everywhere—on the lawns and in the streets. It was a constant party wherever you went.

Unfortunately, he explained, his inability to concentrate in the classroom led to more disciplinary problems at home. He fell in with a bad crowd and resorted to using alcohol as a means of escape. As he got older, his appetite for trouble grew.

One swelteringly hot night in June, he and one of his buddies sneaked out of the house to retrieve a bottle of liquor they had stashed earlier that day behind some trash cans in the alley. The boys noticed an abandoned truck. The keys were still in the ignition. It was a brand new 1949 black Ford pickup, and the temptation was too much for them to resist. Without considering the consequences of what they were doing, they found themselves cruising down Canal Street.

They had parked the truck and had only walked a few blocks down Bourbon Street when they were spotted peeking through the doorway of a neighborhood bar by a couple of detectives working the night beat. The next thing they knew, they were cornered.

The police began to question them. “How old are you? What are you doing down here so late after dark?”

Eventually, the cops discovered the keys he had in his pocket, and everything went downhill from there. Their parents were called down to the police station where their prodigal sons had been waiting. They had both been booked for car theft as juveniles. It was the last time he ever saw his friend again.

But even though he had been grounded for the rest of the summer, it hadn't been enough to curb his criminal predilections. He continued to get arrested for shoplifting and various other petty offenses until

finally, he got caught stealing a bottle of cognac from a liquor store on Decatur Street.

He explained to Marcel how his father had some influence with the courts in New Orleans. He said his dad knew Mayor “Chep” Morrison on a first name basis, and he golfed with a few of the magistrates and prosecutors from the local parishes. Although his pop had persuaded some of the judges to go easy on him in the past, the old man had called in all his markers, and the time had come for a day of reckoning.

Charles and his father met their attorney outside the courtroom, where they were informed that “The Honorable J. Skelly Wright” had summoned them to his chambers. They entered the hallowed inner sanctum of “His Honor” where they found him reviewing the file for Charles' case. He instructed them to close the door and take a seat.

“Normally, I don't waste my time with trivial matters like this. If I didn't know and respect your daddy as much as I do, you'd be breakin' rocks in the Louisiana State Penitentiary. You hear me, boy?” The judge directed his assault squarely at the young man while his father remained mute.

“I've been lookin' at your file, and your conduct is reprehensible. You're a menace to society and a disgrace to your family. You got anything to say about that, boy?”

“No, sir,” Charles mumbled.

“I didn't think so. But today is your lucky day, boy. You better thank God you have a father like Charles here. Otherwise, I wouldn't be so inclined to give you this opportunity. Y'see, I believe you need to get rehabilitated. So, here's what we're gonna to do. I'm going to make a call to Fort Bliss in El Paso. I got a good friend in the recruitment office there who'd just *love* to bust your balls. Now, if that doesn't suit you, you got another choice. You can walk into that courtroom out there, and I can throw the book at you. I figure by the time they get through with you in Angola, you'll be wearin' a dress and they'll be tradin' you around like a pack o' Marlboro's. So, whad'ya say, boy?”

“So, what *did* you say?” Marcel asked. His curiosity was piqued.

“Well, what do you think I said?” Charles replied caustically. “I joined the Army, of course. That's what I'm doing here!”

He went on to explain that the following week he took a bus to Texas, where he enlisted in the army for a four-year enlistment. It was a condition of his probation, but he found that he liked the discipline and consistency that life in the service had to offer, in addition to the sense of pride and honor that came with the uniform. There were other advantages as well.

Charles enrolled in an educational program designed to help enlisted men who wanted to learn a trade which they could also use in civilian life. The Army needed mechanics, and Charles had an aptitude for fixing things. It wasn't long before Charles became a certified Army mechanic and got a promotion to Private 1st class.

This was a good plan. He would get an honorable discharge and receive all the benefits that came with it. He also would have a skill that he could use for the rest of his life. The country was at peace despite the Cold War, and it looked as if he would be able to put his past behind him. Then came the day he was called into his CO's office to receive his new orders.

Before he left for Southeast Asia, Charles' father came to bid him farewell. He knew the potential danger his son faced being given an assignment in that part of the world, and he was legitimately concerned.

“I know you've had some tough breaks, Charles.” He was struggling to put his thoughts into words. “But I want you to know how proud I am that you are my son.” He reached into his coat and pulled out a gold chain. Dangling from the end of it was a medal bearing the image of the fleur-de-lys.

“When I left the orphanage, they gave this to me,” he said, handing it to his son. “It belonged to your grandfather. He was wearing it on the day of the accident.” (Charles' grandparents died in a terrible car crash when his father was just an infant, leaving him all alone in the world.)

“It has always brought me luck in the past, especially when I needed it most. I hope whatever magic it possesses will keep you out of harm's way.” He hugged his son for the first time since he was a small boy.

“Take care of yourself,” Charles's father said sadly, as if this were the last time he would ever see him.

“I will,” his son smiled back at him. “Don't worry. I'll be back before you know it, and then you'll be sorry I ever came back!” They both hoped he was right.

Marcel was quite intrigued by Charles' story. He'd often wondered about life in America and how it compared with his home in France. He told his friend that his experiences growing up in the rural countryside outside of Lyon were very different compared to the fast-paced tempo of New Orleans.

When Marcel was a young man, he spent most of his time working in his father's workshop in the city of Collonges-au-Mont-d'Or—a small town located just west of the Saone River in the Rhone region of France. It was a small pastoral community which owed its distinctive charm to the ancient Castle of Tourveon which could be seen in the distance on a hillside slope.

He recalled one of his favorite childhood memories. During the Christmas holidays, his family would travel to Lyon to celebrate the “Fete des Lumieres.” The whole city would be shimmering with the radiance of thousands of lights, and the streets would be filled with people, all singing, and dancing, and laughing under the stars.

His father was a carpenter who specialized in wood-working and cabinetry. Most of his work was commissioned by local developers, who contracted him to build furniture for housing projects in nearby Lyon. Marcel's schoolmates used to tease him about his flat-shaped head, which they found ridiculously appropriate considering his father's profession. They used to call him, *la Table* or *Table Tete*. This, he confided, would infuriate him, and it ultimately culminated in his obsession with wearing hats.

Then the war came, and with it came an end to education as he knew it. His father was killed in Belgium, and it was up to him to continue the family business. Marcel's younger brother, Aubert, was only twelve.

Nazi soldiers had seized control of most of the territory in and around Lyon. His family was always on alert for the merciless Gestapo raids which terrorized their little village. Their lives were ruled by fear and suspicion. The Resistance had built secret tunnels that ran between the houses and underneath the streets, but no one was safe or secure from the relentless scrutiny of the German Army.

Finally, on September 3, 1944, the city was liberated, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. But Marcel would never forget what it was like to have his own country occupied by a foreign invader, or the feeling of helplessness that ruled their lives and almost crushed their spirit.

It was Ironic, Charles thought to himself, that his new companion felt so strongly about France's right to assert its authority in Vietnam, when they had almost become a conquered territory themselves.

When Marcel's younger sibling was old enough to take over the furniture shop, he decided to join the French Armed Forces. He wanted to learn how to fight for his country and see the world. He enlisted with the infantry when he was twenty years old and never looked back. Now he was twenty-eight, and a damn good *caporal* in one of the most elite military units in the world.

“Good job,” he heard Charles say whimsically. “At least they didn't have to drag you by your feet with a gun to your head like they had to do with me.”

Later that evening, Charles wrote a letter to his parents:

Dear Mom and Dad,

This is a different world over here and I feel very far away.

I'm one of the only Americans. Everybody else is French, Algerian, Moroccan or Vietnamese. Most of them are pretty friendly, except for some of the French, who think they're so much better than everyone else. They come from the big cities like Paris.

The ones that come from the country are a lot more welcoming.

One of them is the liaison who was assigned to me when I first got here.

His name is Marcel, and he seems like a nice fellow. We get along well, and he has been extremely helpful.

Please don't worry about me. Especially you, Mom. I'm fine, and I keep myself busy, so time goes by fast. You'd be proud of me, Dad. I haven't robbed any liquor stores since I got here (just kidding).

I hope this letter finds you both well. I love you very much.

*Your son,
Charles*

He hoped his sentiments would find their way back to his home in the States. It was hard enough to get the mail out of Vietnam, let alone from France to Louisiana.

Charles woke up the next morning feeling rested and restored. He was glad the atmosphere around the base had become noticeably more relaxed. Getting used to the politics of war and its hierarchy was challenging, to say the least. He'd done his homework though, and it would be fair to say that he had a pretty accurate grasp of what the political situation was in Vietnam, and who all the big players were.

Henri Navarre had been put in charge of the French Union Forces in Indochina by Premier Rene Mayer the year before. He had an idea that by setting up an airhead in the middle of the jungle, they could fly in troops and provisions while at the same time cutting off the supply route to Laos, thus effectively forcing the Viet Minh to engage in a set piece battle which they would use to demoralize and destroy the resolve of the northern Vietnamese army. They called it, "The Hedgehog Concept." The plan was theoretically sound, but it didn't take into consideration that they were at the bottom of a valley, the Viet Minh had control of the high ground, and their ability to move weapons and soldiers was far superior to what the French had originally anticipated.

Major General Rene Cogne was in charge of operations in the Tonkin Delta. He had originally suggested that Dien Bien Phu could be used as a mooring point from which they could launch raids and

small assaults. When he heard that it was to become a strategic airbase, he was strongly opposed, saying that it was too vulnerable to the enemy. But he was overruled.

The Viet Minh were under the leadership of General Vo Nguyen Giap. He had learned his lesson at the Battle of Na San a year earlier. They would take their time and build up their forces until they were sure it was the right moment to attack.

“Dien Bien Phu was like a rice bowl,” General Giap later recalled. “Our soldiers surrounded the perimeter, and the French were all at the bottom.”

Navarre made the situation worse at Dien Bien Phu by placing it under the command of Colonel Christian de Castries, whose methods were more reminiscent of an eighteenth-century cavalryman than a twentieth century pragmatist. Some say the Colonel had a bit of an ego. He went so far as to name the eight defensive positions around the installation after his former mistresses:

They were *Huguette* to the west, with *Dominique* and *Beatrice* in the northeast. *Claudine* and *Elaine* were both toward the south, while even farther south, almost by itself, *Isabelle* guarded the reserve airstrip. The other fortifications included *Anne-Marie* to the northwest, and *Gabrielle* to the north.

It was around noon on March 13. The air that hung over *Beatrice* was moist and still. Charles and Marcel were headed to the mess hall for a bite to eat. Off in the distance, a lone cargo plane gradually came into view, descending slowly over the treetops as it made its deliberate yet somewhat cumbersome approach.

“Finally!” Charles exclaimed. “We’ve been waitin’ on that damn plane for days now.”

Marcel knew what he meant. They were running low on ammunition, particularly mortar shells and bullets for machine guns, and Charles was waiting for some tank parts that he needed.

They could see the landing gear extending as the plane prepared to land. And then, suddenly ...

Ratatatatat! Out of nowhere, a volley of anti-aircraft fire could be heard just beyond the ridge overlooking the airfield.

Charles and Marcel froze with their mouths agape, watching the tail section catch fire—a trail of black smoke marking its downward trajectory. Then the belly of the fuselage hit the ground, and the wings flew off. The deafening explosion from the crash's impact could be heard for miles. A wall of flames ignited, leaving a fiery path as the burning remnants of what was left of the plane skidded down the runway. Then all hell broke loose.

The doors of every building on the base ripped open as hundreds of men ran to their stations. The airfield was full of soldiers trying to extinguish the fires, but they had no idea what to do. The aircraft had become a raging inferno, and it would take more than a miracle to bring it under control.

The munitions and explosives inside the burning wreckage started to detonate, sending a barrage of explosions and thunderous gunfire careening in all directions, like deadly fireworks on Bastille Day. Young men could be seen running from the desolation, covered with airplane fuel, and screaming as they burned alive, falling to the ground and begging for the mercy of death.

It was no coincidence that the Viet Minh chose this moment to make their move. Machine gun fire and artillery pummeled them from every direction. Hundreds of men began to drop where they were standing, riddled with bullets. The ground started heaving up mountains of dirt, displaced by the impact of huge incoming shells pounding the earth and throwing up pieces of bodies in every direction.

Pandemonium reigned as the French scrambled in utter confusion, trying to seek cover. They were falling and dying everywhere. It seemed as though God Himself had forsaken them.

“Jesus Christ!” Charles shouted. “We’re under attack!”

He and Marcel made a beeline toward the nearest bunker. These had been built despite Colonel de Castries lackadaisical attitude concerning constructing any protective or defensive shelters around the encampment.

This was not another skirmish with the enemy, nor was it a random assault to keep the French on their toes. This was an all-out, totally

committed siege by the Viet Minh on Dien Bien Phu, and it would not let up any time soon. It would be a fight to the death.

At 6:15, the command post was blown up, killing Legionnaire Commander Major Paul Pegot with his entire staff, and leaving the remaining leadership in a state of disarray. Moments later, Colonel Jules Gaucher, who oversaw the entire northern sector, was hit by a random artillery shell and added to the growing list of casualties. Enemy *sappers* cut down barbed-wire fences, dug trenches, and blew up French artillery batteries before they had a chance to respond. The 312th Viet Minh Infantry had swarmed around the encampment and effectively cut off any means of escape.

Marcel and Charles were pinned down until nightfall. They could hear the enemy all around them in the bushes and trees surrounding the perimeter, but they could not see the snipers anywhere. For the rest of the day and into the night, the relentless thundering of artillery shells and the rattling of machine gun fire could be heard throughout the valley. By the light of a burning flare slowly drifting toward the ground, they could see an abandoned jeep. Deciding to make a break for it, they managed to reach their means of escape.

Charles grasped the pendant around his neck. "If there's any truth to what my dad said about you, I need your protection now!" He said it like an incantation, as if he could actually communicate with a metal object.

They wove their way between the tracer bullets until they found refuge in an abandoned barracks within the protective confines of *Gabrielle*. A few hours later, at around midnight, *Beatrice* fell.

By the time the sun rose, five hundred French Legionnaires lay dead on the ground. The Viet Minh suffered an estimated six hundred deaths with 1200 wounded, but their morale had been significantly bolstered by their decisive victory.

There was a strange pause in the fighting accompanied by an eerie calm, which fell over the valley like a malicious shadow. The occasional cries for help among the dying or the sound of someone coughing up blood punctuated the morning haze, but the ceaseless bombardment had abated, at least for the time being.

Colonel de Castries went to meet with the French artillery commander Charles Piroth in his bunker to review their dire situation. Colonel Piroth was stymied. He had been completely unprepared for the attack on their position.

“I have never seen this type of thing before! They just shoot their big guns at us! There is no organized system of forward artillery spotting. There are no technically trained soldiers relaying coordinates or giving detailed instructions about the positions of their targets. They just point their weapons and shoot!”

Colonel de Castries suppressed a wry smile. He recalled how the French had used the same tactics with *their* mobile artillery against the Vendean Royalists during the French Revolution over a century and a half before. He knew the irony would be lost on his fellow officer. He looked dolefully across the room and concurred reluctantly.

“The way the Viet Minh have adapted to their lack of any formal expertise or traditional knowledge of artillery tactics has us clearly at a disadvantage. They have mounted single cannons inside shellproof dugouts at several spots around our encampment. They have done the same thing with their anti-aircraft guns. I am sure the Chinese put them up to this. Those bastards have been sending military advisers and weaponry to the Viet Minh to help advance their campaign of guerrilla warfare against us since we began this operation.” He seemed to be talking to himself as much as he was to Colonel Piroth.

“I cannot get a bearing on their positions. All their batteries are hidden in the bushes and trees on the hilltops surrounding us. We have no way to wage a counterattack!” Colonel Piroth was in a quandary.

The intervals which marked the pauses in their conversation were filled with the sound of bombs and enemy gunfire. It had been four hours since they'd heard any activity, but now it seemed to have resumed with renewed vigor.

“I have information which indicates that the Viet Minh have built an extensive network of tunnels and caves around the entire area encircling our position. That is probably how they are able to move their equipment around so quickly, and that is why we cannot get a fix on their guns.”

“What are we going to do? Where do we go from here?” Piroth was exasperated. He had the look of a desperate man.

“We are going to re-take *Beatrice*!” de Castries snapped back, like a man who had just lost his favorite concubine. “We are not going to let these ignorant barbarians take one more inch of ground away from us!” He was furious that the Viet Minh had so cleverly outmaneuvered them. Just then, a mortar hit the ground right next to their bunker with a loud “THUD!”

“Those disgusting little vermin!” de Castries exclaimed. “We are going to show them how the French fight when we get angry!” He left in a tantrum without even dismissing himself, slamming the hatch door as he exited the dugout.

Cursing and swearing, he scowled and grit his teeth as he made his way toward the new command post a few meters away. A muffled explosion shook the ground not more than a hundred steps behind him. Spinning around he saw smoke billowing out of Colonel Piroth's bunker—not from an incoming mortar, but from a grenade which had been detonated from inside. Although the French command would officially deny it, Charles Piroth had just committed suicide.

As Colonel de Castries had promised, he did try to launch a pitiful counterattack which only ended in the extermination of what was left of his remaining Legionnaires. He barely escaped with his life. His honor, however, was far from intact. He reached *Gabrielle* with no more than a cut on his elbow and a bruised ego.

Between the impact of the heavily loaded cargo plane and the resulting destruction caused by its volatile contents, the runway was irreparably damaged. This was compounded by the numerous ditches left behind due to the enemy's tenacious bombardment of the airstrip. There would be no chance of any type of aircraft, with the possible exception of a helicopter, navigating a landing there. And even that would be suicide. From now on, food, water, ammunition, medical supplies, and anything else considered essential to the survival of Dien Bien Phu would have to be dropped by parachute.

Meanwhile, Marcel and Charles were struggling to cope with the gravity of their situation. They knew *Beatrice* was now in the hands of the Viet Minh, but what would be the end game? *Gabrielle* was located to the north of *Huguette* and the battered airfield. It was difficult to say where their elusive adversaries would strike next. They were still taking shelter inside the deserted barracks where they had sought refuge the night before. Marcel was able to put together some food rations which would last them for a few days, while Charles assembled a small arsenal of guns and ammo.

“We will not go gentle into this good night,” he said to himself. Marcel looked at him curiously, puzzled by his remark. Charles noticed his expression and went on to explain.

“It’s from a poem by an Irish author named Dylan Thomas. My dad used to say it when I was a kid. It means we refuse to give up without a fight.”

Gabrielle was held by an elite Algerian battalion which had a reputation for being highly trained and ruthless in battle. But despite their military prowess, they were about to meet their match.

Around 5:00 PM, the first artillery shells made their debut. Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! They were drawing successively closer with each impact. The Viet Minh targeted the watchtowers, artillery batteries, and munitions depots. After accomplishing these objectives, it would be easy for the 308th Division to come in and mop up what was left.

By now Charles and Marcel had found a CO to whom they could report and get their orders. His name was Lieutenant Albert Lafon; he answered directly to Colonel Pierre Langlais.

Charles and Marcel would be responsible for retrieving deliveries which were airdropped from cargo planes flying above the range of anti-aircraft fire. Because of the high altitudes and shifting winds, it was almost impossible to land the packages anywhere near the target zone. The French were running out of water, and food rations were getting low. Many times, the badly needed supplies floated right into the hands of their adversaries. Of course, retrieving the supplies that actually made it inside the compound was also dangerous. Whenever Charles ran out to grab some provisions, bullets perforated the ground

from every direction. One finally winged his left shoulder, leaving him with a nasty gash that hurt like hell.

“Damn, Marcel! I said cover me!”

“From what? From whom? I can see nothing! They are everywhere, no?”

At 8:00 PM, two regiments of Viet Minh fighters began their siege on *Gabrielle*. The battle proceeded with unmitigated fury throughout the night, until an artillery shell slammed into the battalion headquarters, severely injuring the commander, and disabling most of his staff. De Castries put Colonel Langlais in charge of mounting a counter assault to push back the invaders. Langlais decided to rely upon the arrival of the 5th Vietnamese Parachute Battalion, which had landed in the jungle the previous day to reinforce their campaign. But they were already tired and battle-weary, and few of them ever reached *Gabrielle*, having been picked off by the Viet Minh until their numbers had been significantly reduced.

The next morning, the Algerian forces collapsed, and *Gabrielle* was overrun by enemy soldiers. The French and Viet Minh both suffered heavy losses, numbering at least a thousand on each side. Now, with *Beatrice* and *Gabrielle* both under control of the Communist army, it would be easy for them to train their weapons on what was left of the French defenses and cut off their air supply. The future looked decidedly grim.

Once again, Charles and Marcel managed to elude their “would be” assailants by slipping through hostile territory under the cover of darkness, until they reached the safety of *Elaine*. This placed them close enough to Headquarters so that Lieutenant Lafon, who had also escaped from *Gabrielle*, could have direct access to French command. The garrisons were sub-divided into fortified outposts with numbered designations. *Huguette* was split into seven positions, the same as *Elaine*. *Dominique* had six and *Claudine*, only five. By using this system of organization, the officers could dictate their orders with precision and detail.

Anne-Marie was defended by a battalion of ethnic Vietnamese, called the *Tai*, who were French sympathizers. The Communist Viet Minh had been distributing subversive leaflets containing propaganda emphasizing that “this was not their fight,” and that remaining loyal to the French was treasonous and futile. After the fall of *Beatrice* and *Gabrielle*, the *Tai* were beginning to think the Communists were right. One night the winds of loyalty shifted.

The next morning, a ghostly fog engulfed the encampment, so thick that no one could see the hundreds of *Tai* disappearing into the dark thick jungles of North Vietnam. The few who remained withdrew to *Claudine* or *Huguette*. When the cloud lifted later that day, Viet Minh scouts found an abandoned outpost, vacant and devoid of any signs of life.

The enemy had now taken complete control of the northern end of Dien Bien Phu and was advancing steadily southward, tightening their noose around the French Central Command. This left *Isabelle* completely cut off in the south. Without supplies or reinforcements, they were left to fend for themselves with just under two thousand men. But the hostilities had subsided, and the atmosphere seemed relatively calm compared to the last few days. This would continue for some time, while the French licked their wounds, and the enemy redoubled their strength.

On the morning of March 17, Charles and Marcel emerged from their shelter to take stock of their surroundings. There were dead bodies everywhere which had started to succumb to the rancid tropical humidity. They were covered with birds and insects, and the air was rank with the stench of rotting flesh, gunpowder, and burnt sulfur. It was so bad that Charles had to cover his face with a rag.

“It smells very bad, no?” Marcel said, stating the obvious.

“It smells very bad, yes!” Charles retorted. “Why do you have to say 'no' all the time, you stupid fuckin' Frog!” He cuffed the top of Marcel's head with the front of his palm, which initiated a moment of playful roughhousing that they both badly needed. They were laughing and pushing each other back and forth when Lieutenant Lafon caught them in the middle of their shenanigans.

“What are you doing?” he barked, as they both snapped to attention. “You were supposed to report to me an hour ago! I have already briefed the rest of the men.”

Charles and Marcel stood mute. They realized they were in for a serious ass-reaming.

“You! Hollywood boy! You need to fix some tanks, now! That is what you are here for, no? You! *Caporal!* You are supposed to be his superior. I suggest you start to act like it. You will assist him. I need those tanks ready immediately. Now get moving!”

Of the ten Chaffee M-24 light tanks that had been allocated to Dien Bien Phu, only six were running and only five had working turrets. They would need all of them if they were going to attempt any kind of meaningful attack against the Viet Minh.

The Communist *sappers* were using their “down time” to dig in around what was now the perimeter encircling *Huguette, Claudine, Dominique, and Elaine*. Their rows of trenches now extended around the entire garrison. General Giap would employ the use of ground artillery and machine guns to muscle his way into the encampment, and his anti-aircraft would eliminate the possibility of his enemy getting reinforcements or supplies. If the French had any chance of redemption, they would have to act quickly.

Unfortunately, weaknesses in the current French leadership had ultimately reached the point of failure. Colonel de Castries' incompetence had become what might only be described as a catatonic breakdown in his capacity to lead. He isolated himself in his bunker and refused to speak to anyone. Colonel Langlais did his best to take over the day-to-day responsibilities of being a garrison commander, but de Castries' descent into denial and subsequent loss of any decision-making ability or judgmental competence left a serious vacuum within the command structure which threatened to undermine the morale of the entire operation.

Upon hearing this, Major General Cogne, who was in Hanoi, decided to take matters into his own hands and fly into the battle zone himself, in order to seize control of Dien Bien Phu. But his plane would have to fly within range of anti-aircraft fire, so he could not get anywhere near the drop zone. His staff eventually talked him out of

trying to reach the command post by parachute. A week later, Langlais and some of the other paratroop commanders confronted Colonel de Castries in his quarters. Langlais addressed his superior.

“Christian, I am appealing to you as a comrade and as a fellow officer. This situation calls for drastic measures. Your refusal to act is leaving us with very little choice.”

“So, what is this, a mutiny?” Colonel de Castries seemed almost detached, as if he were a member of the audience, watching this whole scene play out on a stage.

“No, Monsieur, it is an intervention. You pretend like there is no war here. If we do not come up with a plan and execute it now, we will all be dead. It is just a matter of time.”

“So, what is this plan of yours?” he inquired, fatalistically.

“I will assume control of this installation as of today, and dictate policy from now on, or until such time as you are deemed capable of resuming your responsibilities as Garrison Commander. You will retain the appearance of being in command to ensure the stability of our leadership and to preserve the morale of our men. In the meantime, you will be in charge of all communications to and from Hanoi as our liaison. Are these conditions acceptable to you, Christian?”

“I do not see that I have an option,” he replied stoically.

“Colonel, please believe me. This is best for all of us. You will be included in all the decisions regarding the welfare of the men and the defense of Dien Bien Phu. Your advice and experience are still of great value to us.”

De Castries remained speechless. Like Christ standing before Pontius Pilate, he accepted his fate like a condemned man.

“I am sorry, Christian. You will see that it is better this way.” Colonel Langlais turned and left with the other officers following close behind him.

One thing de Castries did accomplish before he relinquished his command to Colonel Langlais, was to order an attack on the enemy's machine gun batteries in the west. This brash offensive was surprisingly successful and resulted in the elimination of seventeen heavily guarded machine gun nests and the extermination of over 350 Viet Minh.

For a brief time, the French were able to acquire some badly needed supplies and ammunition without too much harassment from enemy ground fire. But they would not be able to exploit this weakness for very long. There were always more weapons and Viet Minh soldiers on the way to reinforce any faults or deficiencies along their flanks, and they would soon make it impossible for the French to get any outside help.

Charles and Marcel were oblivious to the clandestine maneuverings and political power struggles going on behind the scenes over the past few days. They only knew that those M-24 light tanks had better be up and running real soon. To say that Lieutenant Lafon would be severely disappointed would be a drastically miscalculated understatement.

Charles took a few shortcuts to help expedite the process. He called it “creative improvisation,” but it was more like “cross your fingers and hope it works.” The way he saw it, these tanks only needed to stay functioning for a week or two. By then it wouldn't make a difference whether they worked or not. They would either drive out the Viet Minh and regain control of the base, or they would all be dead. Over the last few days, he and Marcel had managed to get eight tanks operational, with only minor repairs left to do on the other two. It looked like they might just make their deadline.

But the next day, on March 30, the fighting resumed in earnest, with the enemy using the same tactics that had proved so effective on *Gabrielle* and *Beatrice* to surround and isolate *Elaine* and *Dominique*, to the east of the Nam Yum River. The five battalions protecting those locations were severely under-supplied and undermanned. Charles and Marcel were called away from their duties to defend the perimeter at *Dominique 3*. *Dominique 1 & 2* fell as Communist forces of the 312th Division advanced. Holding the invaders at bay had become a desperate priority.

As luck would have it, the French 4th Colonial Artillery Regiment arrived with sufficient firepower to push back the Viet Minh, combined with the help of some anti-aircraft guns. The French had effectively used these to blast holes in the enemy's troop formations.

Colonel Langlais had realized that the only way they could hope to gain an advantage was to adopt the same methods as their adversaries. They used *sappers* to dig interconnecting trenches and set up mine fields at night. They set their 105 mm Howitzers to zero elevation, training their artillery squarely on their attackers, while using other types of unconventional strategies to repulse the enemy. These tactics proved to be adequate for a while, but as the battle progressed, the Viet Minh adapted and adjusted their offensive maneuvers again and again to overcome even the most aggressive guerrilla warfare.

As the smoke dissipated over *Dominique 3*, it seemed to Marcel and Charles that the line had been held, but the sounds of battle could still be heard from *Elaine 1 & 2* as well as from across the river at *Huguette 7*. By the next day, *Elaine* was in trouble. General Giap's 316th Division was turning up the heat. The Moroccans who were defending the outposts were unable to withstand the intensity of the enemy's ruthless assault, and they were eventually overrun.

"Damn! My shoulder is killing me!" Charles moaned. "I think it's infected." The gunshot wound was getting worse; in time it would become gangrenous.

"Maybe I could get some morphine from the medic," Marcel offered.

"Yeah, that would be great. If we could only find him. Chances are, he's probably dead." Charles' pain was only surpassed by his pessimism.

"Perhaps we could look in the first aid boxes mounted on the back of the tanks. We might be able to find some antiseptic or alcohol." Marcel remained optimistic.

"The only alcohol I need is a bottle of gin and some quinine for the malaria." He thought his play on words was almost clever.

In reality, the sanitary conditions around the garrison had become so bad that the food was spoiled, and the water was no longer fit to drink. Dysentery was so common, the men had to watch their step, to avoid ending up with shit on their boots, and the jungles were teeming with parasites and fungal infections just waiting for their next victim.

But the dangers of sickness and disease weren't the only problems affecting the morale of the French troops. The constant shelling and barrage of machine gun fire had caused nerves to fray and tempers to flair. It had become increasingly difficult for the men to maintain their sanity after so many days of constant fighting. Some of the soldiers would drop to the ground every time they heard a door slam or a jeep backfire, and it wasn't unusual to see someone's hands shaking even when they were at rest.

The hideous sight of someone with their legs blown off or their intestines hanging out was more than some of the young recruits could handle. The stronger, braver men could deal with it, but others had a harder time coping. In the end, they all suffered in their own little private hells, and they all knew that they either had to suck it up or perish.

Lieutenant Lafon was the kind of man who never showed any emotion. No matter how intense the fighting—even in the face of certain doom—he always kept a cool head and a steady hand. For this, he was highly respected by his subordinates and superiors alike. His unwavering resolve and mental toughness served as a shining example of what it meant to be a true soldier and a leader of men.

To Charles and Marcel, he was like a father figure. He kept them focused and productive. His advice was invaluable, and sometimes made the difference between life and death. Without his guidance, they would be empty of any meaningful purpose or reason to persevere.

Lieutenant Lafon's appearance was stereotypical of a Legionnaire. Standing about five feet, eleven inches, with long arms and a pair of big hands, he maintained a dark, finely trimmed mustache with matching eyebrows. His eyes were black as coal. They seemed as though they could look into a man's soul and know what he was thinking.

On March 31, Colonel Langlais ordered a full-on counterattack against the Viet Minh in an effort to take back the lost fortifications of *Elaine 1 & 2*, in addition to reclaiming *Dominique 2*. Charles and Marcel had taken positions in the trenches defending the perimeter outside *Elaine 1*. They had heard that the French had already taken

back most of *Elaine 2* and fought back the assault on *Huguette 7* the night before. The news was very encouraging.

Lieutenant Lafon showed up with his leather jacket under his arm. It had been cold that morning, and the sun was just beginning to come up over the tops of the trees. He threw it on the ground and crouched down next to Marcel.

“See those *sappers* over there, just past the barbed wire?” the Lieutenant asked. “They are trying to dig in closer so they can set up their machine gun nests within range. I need you to take them out, or at least keep them from getting any closer. Of course, I would prefer it if you killed them all, but do the best you can without getting shot.”

The Lieutenant put on his jacket as he was getting up to leave. Marcel passed him a cigarette.

“Just kill the bastards ...”

In the middle of his sentence his eyes went wide. “What the—?”

All of a sudden, a snake slithered out from the armpit of his jacket. It had apparently sought to warm itself inside the sleeve while it lay in the dirt. Before the Lieutenant could react, the snake bit him on the neck. Then it fell into the mud and disappeared. Charles pulled out his service revolver and fired at it, but the slimy little assassin had already made its escape.

They all looked at one another, knowing what each was thinking. “*Krait.*”

The Bungarus, or blue krait, is one of the deadliest snakes in the world. A decade later, American GI's fighting in Vietnam would call them “two steps,” because of the urban legend which claimed that, after being bitten, you could only walk two steps before you were dead. Although this was an exaggeration, the bite from a krait was always fatal without the antivenin, and even with medical attention, the chances of surviving were fifty-fifty.

There was no medic, no antivenin, and no way to save Lieutenant Lafon, and they all knew it. He had been bitten three times in the carotid artery, which meant the poison would reach his brain almost immediately. Death would be swift.

“Are you sure it was a krait?” Charles asked, attempting to sound hopeful.

“I do not know. It does not hurt, really—the bites I mean. It is not like what you would expect.” He sounded remote and disoriented.

“The marks are small. You wouldn't even notice them if you didn't know what just happened,” Charles offered.

“Maybe you had better sit down, Monsieur.” Marcel was cautious. “At least until we know you are going to be all right.”

“Very well, I will stay a little longer,” he acquiesced. “But remember what I said about getting those *sappers*. That is the most important thing right now.”

The Lieutenant settled into a spot near Marcel, who was busy firing his machine gun. The next half hour passed with bullets flying over their heads and mortars exploding in the distance.

“I got one!” Charles shouted. As he turned to share his success with his fellow comrades, he noticed the Lieutenant had a strange look on his face. He was grimacing. He seemed to be in a lot of pain, and Charles was worried.

“Marcel! I think there's something wrong with Lafon. I'm going to look after him. You just keep shooting.”

“Oui, Monsieur! Let me know how he is doing.”

The Lieutenant clutched his abdomen in agony. It was obvious that he was suffering from severe stomach cramps.

“I cannot see!” he choked. “I am blind!” He was also having trouble speaking, and his breathing was labored. As the minutes turned to hours, it was evident that Lieutenant Lafon would eventually succumb to the poison. Paralysis set in as the neurotoxins invaded his brain and began their final assault on his lungs.

“Not this way!” It was all that he could do just to get the words out.

“Please, do not let me die this way!”

Then his face froze as if it had turned to stone, with his eyes wide open. Charles and Marcel had just lost their “Jesus.”

The battle was escalating, and the enemy was getting ready to charge. For the first time they could actually see the Viet Minh soldiers coming at them in waves, their sun-pan helmets coming well within the range of their MAT-49 sub-machine guns.

Charles and Marcel, both distressed and furious over the death of their brother-in-arms, saw revenge as the only release for their rage. They put themselves directly into the line of fire, as they strafed the advancing Viet Minh with a spray of machine gun fire, slaughtering dozens of them as they continued their ceaseless march toward damnation.

Their wrath must have been contagious, as all the other soldiers around them took up the fight with renewed energy and spirit, rushing straight toward the enemy forces with unbridled contempt and hatred. Major Marcel Bigeard was in charge of the counterattack, and he was vehemently determined to conquer his foe, no matter what the cost.

“I heard they are sending reinforcements from *Isabelle!*” Marcel shouted. “We will win this fight!”

It was true that help was coming, but the Communist forces defending the northern route along the way to Central Command made certain those soldiers never arrived. The few who survived were beaten all the way back to *Isabelle*, where they remained prisoners in their own fortress. The fighting was heroic—if not tragic—that day, with French troops advancing and then falling back as the hours passed.

At one point, when things looked desperate and it seemed all was lost, Colonel Langlais called upon Major Bigeard to fall back across the river.

Like a man obsessed with a divine purpose, Bigeard refused. “As long as I have one man alive, I will not let go of *Elaine!* Otherwise, Dien Bien Phu is done for!”

As night approached, the aggressors mounted a sustained attack against the remaining elements of the French army, pounding them with everything they had. Charles knew the battle could still go either way. It was moments like this that brought out the real heroes of war, and a “Charlemagne” was about to rise to that challenge no matter what the consequence.

Charles knew there was a tank that he had just finished working on across the compound. It was about one hundred meters away, behind an empty supply depot. If he could reach it, he might be able

to use it against the encroaching enemy troops and take out some of the machine gun nests that had them all pinned down at *Elaine 1*.

“Marcel, I’m going to make a run for it!” he said.

“What are you talking about? That is madness!”

“Just cover me the best you can. I’m going to try and get to that tank over there and do some real damage!”

“You will never make it! There are too many of them! You will be destroyed!” Marcel pleaded with his friend to change his mind.

“Don’t worry! I’ve got an angel on my shoulder!”

He climbed out of the trench and began his slow, precarious advance, crawling around the dead bodies and under the barbed wire, as he snaked his way toward the Chaffee M-24 waiting behind the shed in the hazy distance. It seemed like an eternity, sneaking inch by inch across the battlefield as the bullets impacted the sand and flew over his head. All the while, he prayed that he would reach his objective before the enemy could stop him.

It was then he became aware of the medallion hanging around his neck. It seemed to be sending him a message, as if God were trying to speak to him. “Be at peace and do not be afraid. For you are a warrior, bound to your future and your past.”

At that moment, he realized he was lying right next to his tank. Scrambling up the protected side of the vehicle, Charles climbed through the open hatch as the shells ricocheted off the heavy armor. Once inside, Charles found his way down to the driver’s seat in the front compartment and crossed his fingers.

“Yes!” he said, as he heard the two 110 horse Cadillac engines roaring to life, releasing a large cloud of exhaust fumes and smoke. Normally, it would take a crew of four men to properly operate a scout tank like the M-24, but Charles would have to improvise.

He jumped over to the assistant driver’s seat where he could still maneuver his vehicle and have access to the 30-caliber machine gun which came standard with all the M-24’s. If he needed to fire the main gun, he would have to stop the tank and climb up into the gunner’s seat to operate the turret and fire the cannon.

Charles had already attracted some attention, judging by the distinct rattle of bullets bouncing off the inch-thick steel plating. He

put his mobile fortress into gear. It jerked forward and then commenced its steady, lumbering pilgrimage toward its designated objective. He used his binoculars to get a better look at his prey. There they were, situated beneath a ridge on the high ground looking down on the trenches where Marcel and his fellow compatriots were trapped by a hail of machine gun fire that rained down upon them.

“Sons of bitches,” he cursed. “I’m gonna teach you some manners.”

He sized up their strengths and weaknesses. The shelter was embedded into the side of the cliff, shielded with sandbags and armor, protecting all but the narrow, visor-like opening which they used to fire upon their selected targets. He estimated there were roughly two heavy machine guns, three or four regular machine guns, a few 60mm mortars, and a grenade launcher. They probably had enough ammo to last them a year.

M-24's were tactically designed to shoot their cannons from behind a position of cover, preferably patches of trees and shrubs, hidden from enemy spotters. Charles mapped out a zigzag advance strategy that would get him within range of his target without leaving him too far out in the open.

He maneuvered his tank around to face a row of tall bushes covering the top of a large mound of earth and began his first approach. The Viet Minh responded with a few closely placed grenades, which blew up on the left side of his caterpillar tracks, rocking him back and forth with each impact.

“Damn! I hope that didn't derail my *bogies!*” he worried aloud, but the tank kept creeping forward.

From the opposite side of the hill, he could see a small platoon of Viet Minh ground soldiers charging in his direction, armed with sub machine guns. They were obviously planning to overwhelm him and possibly drop a hand grenade through the escape hatch. He had no time to scramble up into the gunner's seat, so he pivoted his tank around in a half-circle and emptied a thousand rounds of 30 caliber shells into the first wave of enemy fighters to come within range of his ball-mounted automatic weapon. About fifteen of them fell to the ground while the others turned and ran.

The sun was going down, and what little visibility remained was waning in the last few minutes of dusk. If Charles was going to be successful, he would have to move fast.

He pivoted again and lunged into a slow roll toward a grove of trees. If he could get that far, he might be able to position himself for a direct hit on the machine gun nest. He reached the dense thicket and took refuge behind its branches.

Pulling himself up into the turret, he found his place in the gunner's seat and peered through the telescopic sights to get a fix on his quarry. As luck would have it, the cannon had already been previously loaded. At the same time, he began to turn the hand wheels and engage the hydraulic traverse control with his foot, as the monstrous 75 mm barrel commenced to rotate in a lethargic, deliberate motion, until it finally came to a stop, having found its mark. He focused his optics on the small slit on the side of the cliff overlooking the garrison.

There they were the little bastards. He raised and lowered the massive gun barrel until it was aimed precisely at his target.

“Here we go!” he shouted, as he pressed down on the firing pedal. The entire vehicle convulsed with a resounding jolt, the result of the tremendous recoil of the cannon. He followed the trajectory of the shell with his eyes, as it arched toward the side of the mountain and connected with its destination. He saw the earth, and dust burst forth from the face of the escarpment, sending back a thundering report across the valley. In the aftermath, he saw what appeared to be the remnants of weaponry, rocks, and bodies cascading down the slope amidst an avalanche of dirt.

Charles didn't have time to evaluate his success. He could hear the whistle of incoming artillery shells, and he knew their intended target. Leaping back down into the driver's seat, he swung his tank around and lurched forward toward the nearest cover—a small ravine with an abandoned storage unit in front of it.

In the distance, he could see that a few more M-24's had joined the fight. They were coming up from the rear of the battlefield and charging the enemy lines. Help had arrived!

Without warning, a terrific explosion sent a shock wave that almost knocked his entire vehicle off its tracks. The artillery fire was getting closer, and it wouldn't be long before they would make the necessary adjustments. Two of the torsion bars were broken, but Charles kept going.

As the shadow of night crept over the macabre display of tracer bullets, flares, and explosions, the French emerged from their trenches and rushed their attackers with a vengeance, no longer intimidated by the constant harassment they had endured from the ominous machine gun nest on the mountain.

Now he was drawing more fire. He could hear it punishing the exterior of his slowly dying tank.

With the force of a locomotive train driving its weight, a 94-pound shell careened into the side of the engine compartment, literally lifting it off the ground, and tearing through the heavy gauge metal like a can opener. Charles barely knew what hit him. His ears were bleeding from the concussion, and the driver's compartment was filling up with smoke.

He knew he had to get out of there before the engine caught fire and the gas tank exploded. Now deaf, and in total darkness, he was still able to grope his way up to the commander's cupola and throw open the hatch. He hoped the billowing clouds of flames and smoke emanating from the back of his vehicle would provide some measure of cover for his escape.

Charles' head was pounding, and he was completely disoriented. The noxious fumes had made him sick, and he wanted to vomit. As he began to exit the wreckage, he felt a sudden thump in his back that hit him so hard, it knocked him out of his turret and into the mud. He never heard the echo from the sniper's rifle a thousand meters away.

Marcel witnessed this tragic scenario from the safety of his foxhole until he could bear it no more. He crawled out of his ditch and ran across the battlefield, staying low to the ground as he dodged the maze of bullets.

Charles tried to get up, but his legs wouldn't move, and he had no feeling from the waist down. With some primal instinct to survive, he

began to pull himself across the ground on his elbows, completely unaware of the gaping hole in his abdomen.

Marcel heroically dragged his fallen companion almost a hundred meters under enemy fire until he found shelter inside an empty bunker. Charles lay on the floor with Marcel's coat tucked under his head. The color in his face had faded to the gaunt pallor of death. He was cold, and his lips were blue.

“Marcel, *mon ami*, I think I'm dying,” he gasped.

“You are just tired, Monsieur. A little rest and you will be, how do you say, as good as new.” Marcel was trying to understate the dire reality of Charles' condition. He didn't want to admit it to himself, let alone tell his friend that he was not long for this world.

Charles ignored Marcel's attempts to comfort him. He grasped at his sleeve as he struggled to speak.

“Please, take the chain from around my neck. It's my father's. If you make it out of here alive, please return it to him.”

Marcel did as he was asked. He took the medallion and placed it in his shirt pocket.

“I will do this for you, Monsieur. May the angel on your shoulder take you to heaven.”

Charles' last moments were haunted with images of all the Vietnamese he had killed up on the hill as a result of his deadly rampage. His lifeless hand released its grip from Marcel's arm. “Forgive me, Lord!” was his last human thought as he vanished into the black silence of eternity.

Marcel didn't have time to grieve for his friend. He quickly removed Charles' dog tags and placed them in his pocket along with the medallion. The fighting around him had escalated to the point where he would have to engage the Viet Minh at close range or die trying. He passed his hand down over Charles' face and closed his eyes.

“*Au revoir, mon ami.*”

By the morning of April 1, the French had succeeded in retaking *Elaine 1 and 2* as well as *Huguette 7*. They were hard battles to win, and it cost them a lot of men and ammunition. Unfortunately, they

would be among the last significant victories they would achieve in the days and nights to come.

On the 5th of April, French fighter-bombers inflicted heavy casualties upon a regiment of enemy soldiers who were caught on open ground. It was an impressive but limited triumph, because in the end, General Giap's use of *sappers* and superior trench warfare proved to be too much for the French to withstand without supplies or reinforcements.

For the rest of the month the fighting dragged on with *Huguette* being captured, followed by *Claudine* and then *Dominique*. *Isabelle*, which had been cut off to the south, ultimately yielded to the stranglehold that Communist forces had used to deprive them of food and water.

Finally, on May 6, after *Elaine 1* had fallen, a bloody assault on *Elaine 2* commenced, which included the use of Russian-made Katyusha rockets. The remaining French army was unable to defend itself against this level of bombardment. That night, Viet Minh *sappers* blew up a mineshaft which effectively disintegrated *Elaine 2*.

The next day, General Giap ordered a full-scale siege on what was left of the French defenses. Marcel had managed to stay alive, but he knew his days were numbered. With over 25,000 soldiers, the enemy clearly had an advantage over the 3,000 starving, under-supplied French troops who were still clinging to the small patch of land they called Dien Bien Phu.

At seventeen hundred hours, Colonel de Castries contacted Major General Cogy in Hanoi.

“The Viets are everywhere! The situation is very grave! The combat is confused and goes on all about. I feel the end is approaching, but we will fight to the finish!”

In response, Cogy replied, “Well understood. You will fight to the end. It is out of the question to run up the white flag after your heroic resistance.”

As the battle wore on, the situation deteriorated further. De Castries radioed Cogy one last time.

“I am blowing up the installations. The ammunition dumps are already exploding. *Au revoir!*”

Cogny knew it was probably the last time he would ever hear de Castries' voice. "Well, then, *au revoir, mon vieux.*"

In the twilight hours of May 7, 1954, Dien Bien Phu fell. Through a broken window inside French headquarters, Marcel was still firing his AK47 at the enemy troops who had encircled the bunker. All the other positions had been captured. In the background, he could hear the radio operator sending out his last transmission.

"The enemy has overrun us. We are destroying everything. *Vive la France!*"

Marcel was aware that his time, too, had come to an end. He thought about his family and his home in Collonges-au-Mont-d'Or, nestled in the sleepy countryside of the Rhone Valley. A slow tear came to his eye.

"*Au revoir, ma famille.*" He reached into his pocket and grasped the gold necklace. "I am sorry, Charles, but I cannot fulfill my promise to you. Please, forgive me."

At that moment, the Viet Minh soldiers came blasting through the door with their machine guns blazing. Marcel removed a grenade from his belt, pulled the pin, and his world ended.

The following morning, a foul wind blew the smoke and stench across the desecrated graveyard of the unburied. The Viet Minh were organizing their prisoners in preparation for a long march through the jungle. Few would survive.

A lone Vietnamese Lieutenant surveyed the carnage with a critical eye. He gazed upon the ruins of what was once a vital military airbase and noticed something which stood out amidst the remnants of the obliterated commander's outpost—a shiny object, reflecting the daylight in such a way that it reminded him of Morse code. Upon closer inspection, it revealed itself to be a broken neck-chain with some sort of antique gold medallion, intertwined with a set of dog tags. He found them rapped around the hand of a dead soldier. The corpse's head had been blown clean off, but the uniform he was wearing indicated that he was a French enlisted man.

So sad, he thought to himself.

The Lieutenant pondered this discovery. Was it a family heirloom, passed on from generation to generation? Was it a symbol, or an omen, or maybe some kind of message from the afterlife? He wasn't superstitious. Rather, he was a deeply philosophical man who believed that there was more to life than just the physical world, and that there was such a thing as karma.

As a rule, the North Vietnamese hated the French. Their occupation of Indochina had been marked by numerous political uprisings and civil unrest. They were seen as invaders who served their own interests at the expense of the Vietnamese people.

Yet something nagged his conscience. As if a greater power were guiding his thoughts.

“This man must have had a family ... a mother and a father ...”

It was a shame that this was to become his legacy. He took the dog tags and the severed gold chain into his possession and walked away.

Some men would have kept these items as morbid souvenirs—proof of their so-called bravery or traded them for a cheap bottle of liquor. But his conscience transcended the differences between French and Vietnamese, beyond consideration of who was “good” and who was “evil.”

The Lieutenant sent these items to the French government, hoping that they would find their way into the hands of a living relative, perhaps as a gesture of decency or an act of kindness in a world so full of cruelty and hatred.

In the wake of the disaster at Dien Bien Phu, the French government entered into peace negotiations with Ho Chi Minh at the Geneva Conference. The result of these talks culminated in the division of the country into two zones, separated at the 17th parallel. The North was controlled by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and the South was administered by the French-supported State of Vietnam. The French soon initiated a steady withdrawal of their troops, and by 1956, they had exited the country, humiliated by the shame of defeat. They had lost one-tenth of their armed forces at the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

The war in Indochina became a central issue in the Cold War between NATO countries and the Soviet Union as well as China. Elections over which zone would ultimately prevail as the new government of Vietnam were never held. The United States could not resist the opportunity to establish a strategic stronghold in Southeast Asia, ostensibly governed by a dictator who would be sympathetic to the U.S. Government.

The French had fallen victim to their own arrogance. This was due to the incompetence of their military leadership, even though their soldiers had fought valiantly. They had, in a manner of speaking, written a blueprint of “what not to do” in a pitched battle against the North Vietnamese. However, the Americans blatantly ignored this critical and costly lesson, and proceeded to make all the same bureaucratic mistakes their predecessors had made. They would find themselves quagmired in one of the most tragic civil wars of the 20th century, proving that history does repeat itself beyond the point of irony.

The French Ministry of Defense had undertaken a massive reorganization of their filing system which had fallen into total chaos since World War I, World War II, and the War in Indochina. The military records of prisoners of war, deceased soldiers, and soldiers missing in action were kept in boxes which had been left in abandoned warehouses, where they would ultimately be neglected and forgotten.

Marcel's family in Collonges-au-Mont-d'Or were never informed about what had happened to their brave and courageous son. He was simply listed as “missing in action.” The French Government had received his personal effects, which had been recovered by the Viet Minh Lieutenant on the day after the massacre. But they were erroneously delivered to a man in Vosne-Romanee named Charles Charlemagne, whom they had determined to be the father of someone of the same name, who had died in a previous war.

The letter which accompanied this mysterious parcel was from the French Ministere de la Defense Nationale. It stated that the items contained within the package were, in conjunction with the identification found with it, the property of Charles Charlemagne, who

was listed, according to their records, as a casualty of war. By association and process of elimination, he, Charles Charlemagne, had been determined to be his father, and therefore, his closest living relative. The contents described in the letter included a medallion attached to a broken gold chain and a set of dog tags.

The medallion had once again found an owner.

Fleur-de-lys

Chapter 3: Sons of New Orleans

The sun shone brightly on the busy intersection of Canal Street and Rampart. It was a perfect April day in the spring of 1964. The familiar perfume of fresh white blossoms covering the ubiquitous magnolia trees in the “Crescent City” filled the air. Their sweet fragrance drifted gently down the thoroughfare, intermingling with the exotic aromas of fine Cajun cuisine which emanated from the local markets and food emporiums populating New Orleans' prosperous business district near the French Quarter. The rhythmical stylings of a blues trio playing around the corner at a neighborhood bistro could be heard amidst the medley of cars honking and people talking. It was a glorious day in “The Birthplace of Jazz.”

Charles Charlemagne was enjoying a leisurely stroll on his way home from his office on Common Street. He had been trying to escape the confines of his second story flat all day, but the responsibilities of owning a large property management company had kept him tied to his desk since six that morning. He usually took a cab to his Creole townhouse in Vieux Carre, the old residential section in Louisiana's most famous metropolis, but today he decided to walk, taking his time to appreciate the familiar shops and cafes that lined the friendly thoroughfare known as Rampart Street. From there, he would turn right on St. Peter until he reached his residence on Dauphine, a short distance from the Baptist Church.

New Orleans was a wild temptress of a city, and its reputation for licentiousness and debauchery was legendary. Parties, parades, and celebrations were a nightly occurrence, and outrageous costumes—or outright nudity—were not an uncommon phenomenon along the storefronts, bars and restaurants which crowded the narrow corridor of Bourbon Street, even in the middle of the afternoon. This, combined

with the psychedelic mayhem of the 1960's and the political climate surrounding the War in Vietnam, was an inevitable recipe for anarchy.

Music was changing as well. The recording industry had found a new cash cow, and now the record companies were desperately competing against each other for dominance over the airwaves. This controversial medium was called, "Rock-n-Roll," and the entertainment business could barely accommodate the voracious musical appetite of America's rebellious youth. The pelvic gyrations of Elvis Presley, and the energized, electric twang of the Beatles were hard—if not impossible—for so-called "square people" to define. All of this created a surreal milieu of artistic madness in one of the most socially turbulent decades of the century.

Although these new sounds captured the imagination of the younger generation, jazz remained the mainstay of the local culture. Its roots could be traced back before the twentieth century, when ragtime merged with gospel and "the blues" to create a sound that was uniquely American. Jazz was a reflection of the people and their traditions, which resulted in translating their combined history into a musical legacy.

It might be said that, if music were the soul of this old city, then the Mississippi River was, without a doubt, its beating heart. She was—and still is—to New Orleans what a mother is to a child, punishing her inhabitants when they fail to succeed, and lifting them up when they are deserving of praise. Like a patron saint, she has fed and nurtured her people with the bounty of her generous delta and blessed them with the warm breezes of her tropical embrace.

This area had one of the most diverse, and certainly, one of the most colorful demographics of any urban population in the United States. As Charles passed Beauregard Square, he was greeted by a menagerie of individual spectacles including a transvestite walking his poodle (actually a man *dressed* as a poodle wearing a spiked dog collar), a witch doctor with a painted face, dancing around in circles and chanting in his native tongue, a woman in a black swimsuit wearing a boa constrictor, and, towering above the rest of the crowd, a

clown on a pair of six-foot stilts. This, along with the usual amalgamation of Creoles, Cajuns, African Americans, college students, beatniks, Bohemians, and “wannabe” misfits, rounded out the social equation of New Orleans.

He recognized each familiar point of interest along the way, as he passed the timeworn buildings and weathered storefronts that captured his attention. They were old friends from his past, conjuring up memories of days gone by.

* * *

Charles was the epitome of a self-made man. His grandfather was a vineyard-hand, who worked for a private winemaker in the small village of Vosne-Romanee in Burgundy. His grandfather moved to the United States with his wife and two daughters in 1885 before the *phylloxera* blight all but destroyed the wine industry in France.

Four years later, Charles' father was born, making him the first “American” Charlemagne. He was the only boy among his siblings. His father's sisters, Angelique who was eight years old, and Monique who was barely six, died tragically with their mother the following winter, during the influenza epidemic of 1889 - 1890.

Charles' grandfather was a man of indestructible character who overcame tremendous hardship to make sure his son would have a fighting chance in the years to come. He secured a job working on a shrimp boat. It was extremely laborious work, and nothing like managing grapevines back in his native home of France, but it was enough to raise and educate his son. Unfortunately, he was killed one day when his foot became entangled in a net that dragged him overboard and out to sea.

Charles' orphaned father did indeed prosper in the burgeoning culture of Louisiana during the early years of the twentieth century. He became a well-respected and highly influential lawyer, mingling among the exclusive members of New Orleans' upper class, and taking a wife at the age of 24. A year later, in the summer of 1914, Baby Charles made his debut as the son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Charlemagne. It was expected that his future would be secure, being

blessed with such pedigree, but his charmed life was turned upside-down when disaster struck just after his fourth birthday.

His parents were returning home from a fund-raising event in Baton Rouge. They had gone to support a friend who was seeking reelection for a second term as State Supreme Court Justice. Young Charles had been left at home in the care of his nanny. It was late at night, and they were driving through a remote section of the Louisiana swamp country called, “Bayou Lafourche.” In their new Ford Model T Speedster, they drove down a treacherous stretch of dirt road, which snaked and twisted around the bogs and marshes indigenous to the area, and known to be dangerous and, at times, unnavigable. They swerved to avoid a stray dog that darted out in front of them as they raced down the winding trail. The wheels turned too quickly, causing the entire vehicle to flip over after hitting a stump on the side of the road.

Charles' mother and father were discovered the next morning by a man on horseback. As he was passing by, he noticed the overturned automobile lying on its side in the ditch. His mother had been thrown from the car and had broken her neck, and his father was found trapped behind the steering column, barely alive. He was taken to a hospital called the Hotel Dieu on Perdido Street in New Orleans, where he later died from his internal injuries.

The attending nurse belonged to the “Sisters of Notre Dame.” She donated her time at the hospital in the afternoons, after working all night at the orphanage. Just before he passed away, Charles' father told the nurse that he had something of vital importance to request of her. He reached around his neck and removed a gold chain with a medallion attached to its links. In its center was the image of the fleur-de-lys.

“This is a family heirloom. It has been passed from father to son for many generations. Please see to it that my son receives it on his ninth birthday. God bless you for assisting me in this important task.” After uttering those last words, his soul departed from its tortured prison.

Charles spent his childhood growing up at the St. Joseph Orphan Asylum in New Orleans. At age nine, the nun who had accepted the task of raising him presented him with the fleur-de-lys. She told him

the story about how his Papa had entrusted her to give him the precious amulet, and she made sure that he understood its meaning and significance.

At age sixteen, he received a large trust, which included a portfolio of investments and a considerable sum of money. He had been named in his father's will as the sole beneficiary, and it was to have been kept in his name until it was time for him to leave the orphanage.

* * *

Charles stopped at the corner of Rampart and Saint Peter Street and paused for a moment of quiet reverie. He remembered giving it to his own son just before he left for Indochina ten years earlier. It was the last time he saw either one.

* * *

Charles had lost his wife soon after losing his son. She had hung herself in their Creole townhouse in the Vieux Carre, a victim of her own afflictions, having suffered from chronic depression. When she received the news of her son's death, it was too much for her to bear. She was buried in the old St. Louis Cemetery on Basin Street, alongside his parents and grandparents.

His recollection was as painful as it was clear. Coming home late from work one evening, he had stopped to pick up the rent from one of his properties on Lasalle. He was completely exhausted, but nothing could have prepared him for what was waiting beyond his front door that fateful night.

After turning the glass nob and entering the foyer, Charles saw the shadow of his wife's lifeless body dangling from a tapestry cord, which had been secured to the railing of the upstairs balcony overlooking the parlor. Her silhouette was starkly contrasted against the eerie glow of the gaslight which filtered through the French doors that guarded the entrance to the courtyard.

He had stood on the chair which she had used for her own demise and cut her down with the switchblade that he carried for his own protection. She was still warm to the touch—he knew that she had taken her life only moments before his arrival.

“If only I'd come home sooner,” he lamented. The guilt he felt, combined with the excruciating pain of his sorrow, began to crush his once vibrant spirit.

His grief took him to a place far beyond tears. Isolated from friends and acquaintances, he excluded himself from the same social hierarchy that had once been such an integral part of his existence.

Through this veil of sadness his thoughts turned to happier days. He remembered meeting his wife, Cheri, during the summer of 1933, while he was studying at Louisiana State University. She was a freshman who was working on her bachelor's degree in the liberal arts. He was immediately intrigued by her, and she was equally captivated by his charismatic charm, and the way he smiled at her when he thought she wasn't looking. Their romance bloomed like a fairy tale, and before long, they were engaged. Six months later, in August of 1934, they were married at New Orleans' St. Louis Cathedral. The following year he graduated with a master's in business, and Cheri was pregnant with their first and only child.

Charles Jr. was born on the 4th of July in 1935. He was spoiled and pampered by his adoring parents and Charles Sr. couldn't wait to come home after work to spend time with his precious son. He remembered how he had cherished every moment they shared together, and how he wished he had never left home.

But, on September 3, 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany, and two years later the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The world was at war, and Charles Sr. enlisted in the military to fight for his country.

He was a Captain in the army when his regiment landed in Normandy just a day after the invasion. They were sent to “mop up” after the first waves of unfortunate soldiers who bore the brunt of the German defenses and sacrificed so much in the name of freedom. From there they made their way east through the French countryside, liberating small towns and villages along the way. Eventually, they arrived in Paris in August 1944. The Parisians were grateful, of course, for their emancipation. There were endless parades and speeches given in honor of the Americans who forced the Nazis out of their city.

When Charles came home after being gone for four years, things were not the same. His wife was cold and distant, and the bond he had shared with his son had dissolved with the passage of time. He felt like a stranger in his own home. His son acted as if he had been abandoned by him and harbored a deep resentment toward his authority. They spoke very little, and when they did, it was not kind. Cheri had become detached from their relationship and spent most of her time alone in her room. He gave up trying to figure out what was wrong with her, and immersed himself instead, in his real estate business.

Like his father before him, Charles did very well for himself. He had garnered the respect of the community after returning home from the war with the title of “Major,” and connected with the same political and judicial circles that had served his father so well in the past. Charles became an influential member of the French Quarter's elite society and was well-recognized and regarded by his peers.

He started buying houses in a recently gentrified section of Metairie, in Jefferson Parish, and before long, he began to invest in some business properties as well. In 1947, he established the “Charlemagne Property Management Company” after securing an upper flat in the heart of New Orleans' business district on Common Street, and his reputation grew.

While Charles remained preoccupied with his commercial and residential acquisitions, his son began to engage in a pattern of antisocial and eventually criminal behavior. This rebelliousness was obviously a misguided attempt to get his father's attention, since his mother found it hard to be compassionate due to her deteriorating mental condition. This behavior started in school, with the usual detentions and suspensions, which naturally result from insubordination and other violations of the academic code, compounded by his inability to focus and lack of concentration in the classroom.

As he got older, his capriciousness turned to malice. This manifested itself in a variety of anti-social behaviors including shoplifting, drinking, and other delinquencies. Of course, these transgressions exasperated the already tenuous relationship between young Charles and his father, and their heated arguments and cruel

verbal exchanges escalated to the point of intolerance. The last straw came when his son was arrested for stealing a bottle of Cognac from a liquor store. In response to this willful disregard for the law, an agreement was made between the judge and his father. Charles Jr. would stay out of jail, provided he agreed to enlist in the military for no less than four years.

He thought about his son, and how he regretted being angry with him. If only he had paid more attention to him as he was growing up, or taken more interest in his schoolwork, maybe things would have been different, and he'd be at LSU majoring in business law or economics, instead of joining the army and dying in Vietnam. His memory was a bitter reminder of how pride can change to regret as quickly as a bullet can stop a heart. He had spent years tormenting himself with self-recriminations and endless guilt. Now it was time to put the past into perspective and move on with his life ... or so he told himself.

* * *

Charles turned the corner onto St. Peter Street and stopped to pet a shaggy dog who seemed to be begging for his attention. He smiled and extended his salutations to the elegantly dressed debutante who claimed to be its owner. After some superfluous banter, he resumed his steady pace toward Dauphine.

For someone who had just celebrated his fiftieth birthday, Charles was a handsome man, and he was considered by some to be one of the city's most eligible bachelors. He had a trim physique, which made him look quite dapper in the latest men's fashions, and he was always clean-shaven and fastidiously neat. His youthful appearance and impeccable grooming made him look at least ten years younger than his true age.

Charles walked toward the decorative arched oak front doors that marked the entrance to the bleached-white stucco facade of his three-story townhouse. Two French windows were set on either side of the doorway, decorated with a pair of ornate wrought iron shutters with two beautiful flower boxes at the bottom of each sill. Overlooking the banquette, was a black iron balcony held up by four pillars connecting

three French doors on the second floor. These were flanked on both sides by louvered shutters that opened to the street below. The third level had three smaller French doors on a higher balcony and two dormers on top of a pitched roof.

Inside, the interior was an ode to Victorian splendor, replete with upholstered chairs, settees, and armoires crafted from cherry burl. Lavish satin draperies with gossamer sheers swept across the frosted glass panes, which diffused the sunlight throughout the entire house. Polished, hardwood floors were caressed by fine Persian rugs with intricately woven paisley patterns intended to mesmerize the eyes and glorify the domicile. Everything was carefully chosen and matched to create a flawlessly perfect motif.

This was certainly a large residence for just one man, but this was where he spent his adult life, and this was where he intended to die.

As he pushed open the front door, Charles noticed a pile of letters, which had accumulated on the floor beneath the mail slot. One in particular seemed to stand out from the rest. Its return address was a Post Office Box listing from a place called Vosne-Romanee, in the departement of Cote d'Or, France.

How odd, he thought to himself. I don't know anyone in Burgundy. My ancestors came from the Cote-de-Nuits, but that was a long time ago. I don't think I have any living relatives over there now.

Reaching for the letter opener on top of the bureau, he opened the mysterious envelope. It had been written in old Burgundian patois using a feather quill. Fortunately, Charles had studied French in school and strangely enough, remembered how to read it almost perfectly.

Dear Monsieur Charlemagne,

My name is Charles Charlemagne. I am writing you this letter because I have something that I believe may belong to you. It is a gold medallion imprinted with the image of the fleur-de-lys. It is attached to a broken gold-link chain. I received this in a package from the Office of the Ministere de la Defense Nationale, along with a set of dog tags and a letter of explanation.

The tags were stamped with an American ID (social security) number which is different than in France.

I contacted the United States Social Security Administration and the Department of Defense. They seemed to think that a mistake might have been made regarding the provenance of these items and to whom they actually belong, probably because we both have the same first and last names.

I am a man of limited means. I have no telephone at my home. I do not drive a car, and I live in a rural area, on the edge of a small village.

If you would like to identify, and by way of confirmation claim these possessions, I am afraid I can only offer you my location and my humble but sincere hospitality.

I am sorry if this letter finds you at a bad time, or if it upsets you in any way. My intention is only to bring you some closure and to offer a resolution to what may be an unfortunate misunderstanding.

I hope we will have the opportunity to meet in person. May good fortune guide your destiny.

*Sincerest regards,
Charles Charlemagne*

Charles dropped the letter to the floor as his face went blank. He was struggling with his emotions, trying to comprehend what this could mean, or how to interpret it. The wall he had built around his subconscious started to crack, and suppressed memories and anguished feelings of guilt and remorse began to seep through the fissures of his mind until he could think of little else. Forced to face his own denials, he grabbed a bottle of Cognac from the liquor cabinet and poured himself a generous snifter. He was not given to heavy bouts of drinking, but the news of this discovery had caught him entirely off guard, and he felt completely unable to make any sense of it.

Charles walked through the front door and twenty minutes later, he was sitting at a table by himself at Pat O'Brien's on St. Peter Street.

He nursed another glass of brandy, wrestling with his thoughts amidst the clattering of plates and glassware, annoyed with the incessant chatter of noisy patrons. His head was swirling with questions and contradictions. *Who was this man? Was he to be believed? How was he able to figure this out—about him, and his son, and the fleur-de-lys?* Of course, he knew the only way he would ever get any answers would be to go to France and find out for himself.

He paid his tab and made his way over to Napoleon's on Chartres Street. He ordered a bowl of gumbo and a glass of Martell Cordon Bleu. Although he left his food untouched, he reordered several more Cognacs before moving on to the next watering hole. His nocturnal wanderings eventually led him to a seedy, rundown, wreck of a nightclub in the Bywater District. It was near the Desire Projects across from Florida Boulevard in one of the city's most destitute neighborhoods. Charles was out of his element and a long way from home. His obvious state of inebriation made him a conspicuous target for anyone looking for an easy mark.

He staggered out of the bar and down the empty street into the lonely blackness of the humid Louisiana night, until he came upon a small curio shoppe in an abandoned storefront. He stood there on the dark, desolate sidewalk trying to focus on the words which were etched on the dusty bay window next to the entrance of the quiet little store.

“Madame Elaine's Curio,” he whispered. “Fortunes lost; Fortune's told.' That's odd ...,” he mused, unaware that he could be heard talking to himself.

There was a faint glow radiating from somewhere inside, perhaps from an oil lamp in a back room, which illuminated the myriad of strange and exotic items that cluttered the shelves and display cases within the confines of this strange little boutique. Suddenly, a flash of lightning ripped across the midnight sky, followed by a deafening clap of thunder. In an instant, he found himself in the middle of a torrential deluge.

Charles stepped inside the doorway in a belated effort to remain dry. A shadowy female figure emerged from behind the counter, navigating her way through the maze of eclectic obstacles and passing

through a beaded curtain that acted as a veil between the parlor and the front door. The outline of her silhouette was undeniably feminine, and she moved with the intuitive stealth of a hungry cat.

The angry clouds rumbled and roared while the driving rain continued to pound the steam out of the pavement. He could hear the sound of latches and chains as the door opened and a woman's voice beckoned him to enter.

“Come in! Come inside!” she insisted in a heavy Cajun accent. She could see that he was not only soaked, but very drunk as well. Offering him a chair and a cup of tea, she helped him remove his jacket and locked the door behind him.

“Please, take off your shoes,” she said as she began to light some candles, their shadows moving across the walls in the flickering light. As she drew closer, he could see that she was a dangerously beautiful woman in her early thirties, with thick blond hair and dark blue eyes which were augmented with a liberal amount of black mascara. His pupils fixed upon the supple movement of her ruby red lips as she cryptically introduced herself.

“I am, as you may have guessed, Madame Elaine.” She paused to light some incense. “I have been expecting you.”

“How ... I mean ... what do you mean?”

Charles was distracted by the multitude of bizarre and hideous objects which crowded the wooden ledges above their heads like gargoyles on the roof of a Gothic church. Among the usual knickknacks, one would expect to find in a novelty emporium, was an unusual array of animal skulls, religious artifacts, wooden effigies, and symbols of the occult, along with a random collection of herbs, oils, and elixirs. Everything was covered with a fine layer of dust and strewn with cobwebs.

“Didn't you read the sign outside?” she asked with a sly smile. “It *is* what I do.” She wandered around the room softly waving a smoking bundle of sage through the air.

A nagging question began to haunt his subconscious. *Why does she seem so familiar?* It was like trying to remember the name of an old girlfriend. She was wearing a long charcoal gray silk gown with a plunging neckline and her shoulders were cloaked with a red lace

shawl, which was delicately draped around her neck. Her wavy, soft hair was held back by a red head band and her slender fingers were covered with rings.

“You're quite far away from the Vieux Carre,” she observed. “You had best stay here for a while and dry out.”

He guessed that she meant that figuratively as well as literally. She walked over to the phonograph and pulled a vinyl disc from its sleeve, setting it on the turntable. Charles recognized the instrumental stylings of Louie Armstrong despite the scratches, skips, and pops emanating from the old Victrola.

Finally, it occurred to him. *How does she know where I live?* Instinctively, he reached for his left breast pocket, but his wallet was still there.

“Don't worry,” she reassured him. “I am not going to rob you. Besides, I am here all alone. I am the one who should be cautious.” Her words seemed laced with sarcasm as she began to circle him like a panther studying its prey.

The room was filled with the heady aromas of spice, perfume, and incense, which intermingled with the primordial odors of tobacco, raw blood, and burnt flesh. These smells inundated the atmosphere and aroused his primal instincts.

“I suppose I could stay for a while,” Charles agreed nervously. For some reason, he felt she had him at an embarrassing disadvantage.

“Good,” she smiled. “I thought that you might need someone to talk to.” Her face softened, and for a moment, she seemed less threatening and more genuinely approachable. She slipped off her rings and stepped behind him. Sliding her hands over his collar, she began to massage his neck.

“You are carrying quite a heavy burden on these broad shoulders.” She pressed on his spine and moved down his back until he began to fall into a deeply relaxed state.

“You are feeling better now? I added something special to your tea. It will heal your soul, and sooth your mind.”

“I am feeling *much* better,” he marveled, “amazingly better, in fact.”

Charles then noticed his clothes were perfectly dry, and he was utterly sober, as if he'd never taken a drink.

"How long have I been here?" he asked, searching the room for a clock. He guessed that perhaps ten minutes had gone by.

"Three hours," she answered casually. "You were telling me about your wife and son. No wonder you look so sad. It was tragic, what happened to them."

She was wearing a different outfit now. It was a white chiffon dress with a sash, and there was some zydeco music playing on the record player.

"That long? I mean, I was?" He was absolutely disoriented. She knew everything—his son's sacrifice in Vietnam, his wife's suicide, and even what happened to his mother and father. She knew everything about his entire life, yet he could not remember saying a word to her. He started to get up, but she stopped him. Imperiously, she motioned for him to sit back down.

"If you leave now, you leave with nothing. I can show you the future, but you must remain with me, or you will never know the truth."

Charles paused for a moment before he acquiesced and returned to his seat.

"How did you know I would come here ... and why?" he asked her, focusing upon what seemed to be an altar with three thrones draped with blue, white, and red satin.

"I am a *Santera*, and this is my *casa de santos*." She raised her arms to indicate the room which surrounded them. "What you see over there is an *igbodu*. It is used to seek guidance from the *orichas*."

He was understandably perplexed, but he held his tongue.

"The past is not a remarkable thing to know. We learn from it, but it does not change. It is subject to the rules and laws of a specific dimension, just like an inanimate object.

"But the future is different. Many things are destined and cannot be changed, but some aspects of fate are subject to the decisions we make while we are still mortal. This creates a variety of 'possible futures,' any of which can become the present, once a path is chosen. When that happens, the future becomes the past, and *that* is unchangeable."

She pretended not to notice the bewilderment on his face.

“Because of this, you must first be cleansed with herbs and water. After completing the holy rituals, I will give you the *elekes*, a beaded necklace representing the five most powerful *orichas*. Then we will speak about what lies ahead for you.”

Charles began to open his mouth, but before he could say a word, she interrupted him again.

“You are here because of the letter. It is the fleur-de-lys that you seek. Is there anything I left out?”

“Uh ... no ...,” was his feeble response.

“Then please do as I say,” she said, in a way that was both commanding, yet delicately polite.

He followed her into a room at the end of a hallway toward the back of the store. There was a king-size mattress on a wooden frame, draped with blue satin sheets and three large round throw pillows. Next to the bed were a water pipe and a brass incense burner alongside an ornate porcelain washbasin and a water pitcher. Across from the bed and next to the closet, was a low-standing table with a small makeshift altar sitting on top.

Madame Elaine handed him a white cloth robe and asked him to get undressed and put it on. He did as she instructed as she prepared for the initiation ceremony and assembled the necessary paraphernalia needed to perform the sacred ritual.

“Drink this,” she instructed, handing him a heavy metal chalice filled with a strange, foul-smelling liquid, which she had carefully ladled from the bottom a steaming copper pot. “It will help your mind to 'see' better.”

She directed him to sit on the bed. After pouring some water into the basin, she sat down on a carved mahogany chair in front of him and gently washed his head. Then she began speaking in *lucumi*, a dialect of the Yoruba people from West Africa. Meanwhile, the sounds emanating from the Victrola seemed to be changing, as if it were one long endless song. At times it seemed very faint and distant, then it would be playing loudly inside his head, changing erratically from The Rolling Stones to Pete Fountaine, and then to something else

completely different. Eventually, the music morphed into a Latin-Cuban theme that slowly faded into the rhythm of native drums.

In his mind, he imagined the shadowy figures of savages leaping and screaming, their faces painted with blood, dancing around a hungry fire in the wilderness. They were sacrificing an animal, though he couldn't see what it was, and they were repeating the same monosyllabic incantation over and over again.

He realized that it was Elaine who was chanting and conjuring these strange invocations, which he had heard in his imagination, and that she was his spirit guide. He looked into her eyes and was at once hypnotized by her psychic powers.

“Good,” she whispered. “You’re getting in touch with your 'Ache,' the primal life force which leads to divinity and completeness.”

Elaine took him deeper into the trance. He found himself on the battlefield of Dien Bien Phu in the middle of a firefight, and he could see his son by the light of a burning tank. Flares and tracers illuminated the night sky.

“Charles!” he cried. “Charles, my son, please come home!”

“He can't hear you,” she said. “You are in another dimension.”

Immediately, the scene changed. It was eighteenth-century France, during the French Revolution. He stood upon a narrow stretch of land in front of a beachhead on the coast of Brittany. A moment later, he was surrounded by Republican Soldiers fighting against an army of peasants and mercenaries as they battled for control over a strategic outpost at the end of the peninsula.

A young man was fighting for his life in the midst of all the carnage and slaughter. He bore a striking resemblance to his son, with the exception that he was wearing a blue *habit-veste* with white infantry breeches, and his hair was longer. Charles could see that he'd been mortally wounded, and that he would soon be dead. A terrible sadness swept over him, as if he was losing his son all over again.

“Who is this?” he asked woefully. “And what does this mean?”

Then the imagery shifted. Now the fighting was over, and a lone scavenger could be seen removing something from the body of a dead infantryman.

“That's the fleur-de-lys!” Charles protested angrily, although he knew no one could hear him. “He's stealing it!”

Another vision transported him even further back in time, to a place now known as Germany, in the region called Saxony. A great army of Frankish warriors had amassed, commanded by a tall, bearded man with curly white hair and a long gold sword, which hung from his waist. He sat victoriously astride a great white stallion, towering over the ruler of the Saxons. King Widukind had just submitted himself to the will of the Emperor.

“Who is that man?” Charles wondered aloud.

“Charlemagne,” Elaine answered. “Charles the Great, King of the Franks.”

Charles fell deeper into his dreams. He saw Charlemagne's son, “Louis the Pious,” kneeling at his father's deathbed. He was asking his father (the Emperor) if he had any last requests. His father told him to remove the gold necklace from around his neck. He recognized the fleur-de-lys dangling from the end of the chain as it glimmered in the candlelight.

“Take this, my son,” The dying monarch beckoned him. “Bestow it upon your descendants, so it may be passed down through the ages, until the end of man's domain. It is very powerful, and it will bring you good fortune, courage, and wisdom.”

The dream began to fade, and Charles found himself back in Dien Bien Phu on the day after the final siege. A smoky haze drifted over the remnants of what used to be a military outpost in the middle of the jungle. The air stank of sulfur and death, and corpses were haphazardly scattered across the smoldering killing fields.

He could barely make out the solemn figure of a lonely Vietnamese Lieutenant bending over the decapitated body of a deceased French soldier. He was retrieving something from the soldier's front pocket. It was a pendant with a broken, gold chain. Of course, Charles knew what it was, but his reaction was tempered. Something seemed to be affecting this man in a way that eluded explanation—as if he were listening to the voice of a spirit. There was a sadness which fell over him which was empathetically tangible—not

for the death of just one soldier, but for all who perish at the expense of tyranny.

Charles was gradually becoming aware of where he was in the present tense, when a malevolent shadow passed over him like a deadly ghost. He was surrounded by a great darkness, and from its depths he heard a horrible sound—a low, guttural voice speaking in an ancient tongue.

“Charles, this is not a dream. You are not sleeping. You are no longer among the living. You are dead, and you belong to the damned.”

Then he heard Elaine's voice from somewhere beyond the gates of the underworld. “Go away! You are expelled! Go back to Hell and never return!”

Charles found himself still sitting on the mattress in the room down the hall at the back of the store. Elaine sat on the bed next to him. She was smiling as she stroked the back of his head.

After he'd had a chance to think for a moment, he looked at her and said, “What in God's name just happened?”

“While you were transitioning, one of the 'dark ones' tried to steal your spirit. That is when you are most vulnerable,” she explained. “You have a very old soul, and it would be a coveted acquisition for the Devil. I expelled him before he had a chance to take possession.”

Charles was understandably shaken.

“You've been on quite a journey,” Elaine told him. “But it is a foreshadowing of a journey yet to come.”

“What do you mean?” he asked. “How does this all fit together?”

“These answers will be revealed in time,” she continued. “I have consulted the *orichas*. Your future takes you on a pilgrimage across the water to the land of your ancestors. You will meet a man who will guide you along the path to your destiny. Do not underestimate him—he is older than he appears.”

“The fleur-de-lys is more than just a family heirloom,” she went on. “It is an amulet from the distant past—very old and very powerful. It connects a patriarchal trinity that moves through time in a multitude of reincarnations, creating and recreating an endless chain of generations that continues throughout the centuries. When your son

died, that chain was broken, figuratively and literally. It falls upon you to make it whole again.”

“But, how? I don't know anything about this stuff. What makes you think I'm capable of embarking upon a 'sacred quest' to fix this 'holy necklace?’” Charles was trying to reason with *himself* more than with Elaine. It was difficult for him to imagine, that a simple gold chain and pendant, which was inherited from his father, could be this magical sovereign relic, which had been passed down through the ages.

“I just tell you what I see. It is up to you to decide what you do with the truth. Remember what I told you—some aspects of fate are subject to the decisions we make while we are still mortal.” Then she paused. “There are some things you should know about the fleur-de-lys. It will always seek its owner. No matter what happens to it, or where it goes, it will find its rightful heir.”

He recalled losing the medallion while he was a student at LSU. He had been swimming in the river when it slipped off his neck and was carried away by the current. Miraculously, he found it the next day downstream on the shoreline, about a mile from where he had lost it. He just happened to pick that spot to go fishing.

Another time, he was mugged while walking through the Lower Ninth Ward, on his way back from inspecting one of his properties down by the Industrial Canal. He was forced at gunpoint to turn over all his money and his jewelry—including, of course, the fleur-de-lys. The thief was found shot through the head the following morning by police, with the amulet still in his hand.

Now it seemed that it was trying to be found again, only this time, Charles would have to travel across the ocean to get it.

“The medallion will give you strength when you are weak, and wisdom when you seek guidance. It can influence people, but it must not be used for evil or personal gain, and it will not make you invincible.”

She looked him squarely in the eyes until he could see nothing else. “The fleur-de-lys becomes more powerful as you become more bold. Courage is the most noble attribute in any man, and you could be a lion if you were put to the test.”

As she spoke those words, Charles became aware that she was totally naked. He blushed with embarrassment, surprised that he hadn't even seen her disrobe. She acted as if there were nothing strange about her nudity, as if it were as natural as removing her slippers.

Elaine prepared a mixture of opium and hashish, which she used to fill the hookah. She ignited the contents of the pipe and began to inhale its intoxicating vapors as she motioned for him to join her.

He thought to himself, *well, I've swallowed or ingested just about everything else she's given me, so I don't see why this makes any difference.* He placed one of the leads in his mouth and drew in a large amount of smoke. His mind became enveloped in a soft, warm, fuzzy haze.

“You must lose your inhibitions now and relax,” he heard her say. She sounded incredibly seductive, whispering enticingly into his ear. She looked so beautiful that he found himself staring at her as if he'd never seen a naked woman before. He noticed a birthmark in the shape of a tear, near her collarbone, just above her right breast. Somehow, it seemed familiar.

“Have some more.” She passed him the lead. “Your mind wants what I want. Your heart longs for my heart. Your body craves what mine desires.” She lay back across the bed and smiled at him alluringly. “Come to me, Charles, and trust your feelings.”

The rest of the night turned into a wickedly erotic dream, where fantasy and reality were combined together in an orgy of sensual, sexual, and psychedelic euphoria, and time was only an abstract concept. He drifted beyond the ecstasy of the moment and into a Utopian bliss. The imagery in his mind shifted to a grassy meadow, blanketed with bright yellow mustard flowers, on a gorgeous sunny day. He saw a beautiful young woman nursing a baby beneath the bough of a large oak tree. She looked so completely peaceful and content as she held the infant to her breast. She bore a remarkable similarity to Elaine, but her clothes were from a different time. She was wearing a simple white blouse with short puffy sleeves and a bodice. And around her waist she wore an apron over a high-waisted, full-length skirt. She looked up at him from underneath her bonnet, with a warm, welcoming smile.

“Charles, you have come back!” And then the dream faded. The last thing he remembered was staring up at the ceiling fan that rotated, ever so slowly, just above his head.

* * *

The dawn was heralded by the sun's rude intrusion through the familiar windows of Charles' bedroom. He opened his eyes and focused his gaze on the portable fan, which was wedged in the space between the frame and the sill, its blades gently turning in the stagnant morning air.

“This is my room,” was his first lucid perception. He had no idea how he'd gotten there or why he was in his own bed.

“This is my room and I'm alone,” he said to himself dolefully. He realized it had all been just a dream. Someone must have found him in a gutter somewhere and called him a cab. Elaine was just a figment of his imagination.

He tried to piece together the fragments of his memory. “I went to Pat O'Brien's, then I went to Napoleon's, then ...” He couldn't remember much beyond that.

But what had happened to Elaine? He was still consumed with the burning passion and desire that he felt for his “imaginary lover.”

Charles got dressed and went to work, but as the day wore on, he found himself unable to concentrate on his job. All he could think about was the “femme fatale” who preoccupied his thoughts and captured his imagination. He couldn't get her out of his head; everything seemed so real. No matter how he tried to dismiss it, or explain it, he could not convince himself that she was just a product of his subconscious mind.

He looked through the phone book, but he couldn't find anything listed under “Madame Elaine's” in the Ninth Ward, nor was there anything that looked familiar on Florida Boulevard.

After he'd finished at the office, he took a cab to the exact spot where he thought he'd been the night before. He saw the rundown nightclub and the dilapidated storefront on the street where he'd been standing when he had first noticed the curio shoppe. Everything looked

the same, *except* there was no “Madame Elaine's” or anything that vaguely resembled it.

Charles was stymied. “I know it was right here! I know it!” he insisted to himself.

He commenced his persistent wandering up and down the road, into the alley and back again, but he always ended up in the same place. Then, just as he'd resigned himself to the probability that it had had never happened, he recognized the distinct scent of incense, opium, and potpourri. It was there for just a moment, and then it was gone. He reached into the pocket of his pants, which he had been wearing the night before and found the beaded necklace that she had called the *elekes*.

A dark-skinned Creole gentleman wearing a shabby suit called to him from across the street. “Hey, man! You lookin' for someone?”

Charles began to say something, but he then just smiled and said, “No. I think I found what I was looking for.”

Elaine, he thought. *You sly little witch*.

He shook his head and walked away.

In the days that followed, Charles felt quite good about himself. Whatever had occurred on that fateful night had had a cathartic effect on his emotional well-being. He finally had come to terms with his past, and as a result, it seemed the weight of his remorse had vanished along with his guilt.

One day, while he was working in his office, Charles began to think aloud.

“Elaine, wherever you are, thank you. I'm ready to take that path, now. Wherever it leads, I hope I will see you again.”

Charles was composing a legal document. It was a power of attorney for his lawyer to act in his best interests in the event that he was detained or otherwise unavailable during an extended period of absence. He had just been on the phone with Laurence, his legal adviser.

Lawrence and his father had gone to school together, back when they were undergraduates studying law. Now he acted as Charles' executor and legal counsel. He told “Larry” that he needed to set up a

meeting with him on Friday afternoon, to discuss the details of how to manage his affairs while he was “away on personal business.” They agreed to meet at 2:00 PM the next day.

The following afternoon, Charles was seated at his desk when the receptionist peaked through the open door to let him know Mr. Dagueneau was there to see him. A tall, older man, in his early seventies, walked into the room and closed the door behind him. He was wearing a somewhat outdated, gray, double-breasted suit, and a cheap, wrinkled, white shirt, which was unbuttoned at the collar.

“Larry! Good to see you!” Charles greeted him with his usual punctuated enthusiasm.

“What's this about Charles? I hear you're leaving town.” Laurence always got straight to the point. Unlike other attorneys who prided themselves as being masters of subterfuge, he never wasted time on useless conversation.

“I am,” Charles responded. “I just purchased my ticket, and I'll be flying out of MSY a week from today. I need to go over the “lay of the land” with you so you can take care of business while I'm gone.”

“Charles, this is preposterous! You don't even know anyone in Europe. What could possibly be so important that you would have to leave New Orleans and fly across the Atlantic, for God's sake?”

“Well, apparently I do know someone over there,” Charles contradicted him. “—something about a dispute over property rights. Since I can read French, I offered my assistance as a real estate consultant.”

“Charles, you don't know anything about the real estate laws in France! What is this really about?”

“I'm afraid that's all I can't tell you for now, my old friend.” Transparency was never one of Charles' greatest attributes.

“This is going to take up most of my time,” Laurence retorted. “I'll have to put my other clients on hold and postpone all my court appearances. My services aren't going to come cheap, Charles, even if you are your father's son.”

Charles slid an envelope across the desk. Laurence opened it and read the amount indicated on the check inside.

“An advance,” he said, nonchalantly. “Something to tide you over while I’m gone.”

Laurence raised his eyebrows. “You can’t afford this!” he scoffed. “I know how much was in that inheritance, Charles. It wasn’t *that* much.”

“Let’s just say I made some good investments,” he smiled as he handed him a business card.

“That’s my accountant,” he continued. “You’ll need to get in touch with him regarding money transfers and other financial matters.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent going over collections, maintenance issues, and other minutia, which were essential to expedite the daily duties of running a property management company.

“I’ll need you to be in your office every Thursday at 10:00 AM. That’s 5:00 PM in Burgundy, France. I’ll be calling you to discuss any problems or decisions that need to be made involving the business. I may also need you to send me some money, depending on how long I’m going to be over there.”

Laurence gave him a skeptical glance. “I don’t know what you’re up to, Charles, but I certainly hope it doesn’t get you into trouble!” He may have been a little over-concerned, but Laurence felt like a father figure to Charles, especially after what had happened to his parents.

“Don’t be so suspicious, Larry!” he said, reassuringly. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

The following Friday, Charles boarded his first intercontinental flight. Even though he was what some would call “a man of means,” Charles hadn’t really done much traveling beyond the friendly borders of his native state of Louisiana, so this was a bit of a stretch for him.

He was sitting in first class, but he was still amazed at all the amenities that were available and the level of courtesy which was provided. A neatly dressed stewardess came over to his seat and asked him if he would like a cigarette or a beverage. He asked her what there was to drink. She responded in a heavy French accent, repeating a long litany of cocktails, beer, wine, coffee, and other nonalcoholic beverages. This was followed by a delicious in-flight meal and breakfast before his arrival in Paris. Although this may have been

status quo for the average seasoned traveler, Charles was indeed impressed by the quality of service he experienced.

He was trying to occupy himself with a magazine when, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the passenger sitting next to him. She was an attractive woman in her early forties, with auburn hair, and long shapely legs. The ostentatious rock on her left hand and the stylish clothes she wore were an indication that she was probably well-heeled and well-married.

Suddenly, the plane dropped abruptly. Then, after a bit of turbulence, it proceeded on its course as if nothing had ever happened. Unfortunately, during the disruption, Charles had spilled Cognac all over his lap. The woman next to him was staring at his crotch, when she realized he was acutely aware of her voyeuristic regard for his awkward predicament. She turned a bright shade of crimson and blushed with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry!" she said, looking in the opposite direction.

"Miss! Miss!" She tried to get the attendant's attention in an attempt to create a diversion. A young lady named Colette came to the rescue.

"Oui, Madame. Comment puis-je vous aider?"

"This poor gentleman has had an accident. Could you fetch him a cloth towel and some soda water?"

"Oui, Madame. Je serai de retour dans un instant." The stewardess had had enough experience on board these flights to know that this was a compromising position for someone to be in, and that her discretion would be appreciated. She disappeared into the back of the cabin to see if she could remedy the situation. After a brief, awkward silence, Charles broke the ice.

"What was that?"

Assuming that he was asking about what had happened to the plane, she replied, "It was an air pocket. It occurs when an aircraft encounters an updraft or a downdraft."

"Oh ..." He tried to sound like he understood her completely.

"You'll have to excuse me," he continued. "My flying experience is limited. I've never done a trans-Atlantic flight."

Colette returned with a wet towel dipped in soda.

“*I hope zis weel take care of zee problem,*” she said in her best English, trying to be polite.

“My name is Betty,” his flying companion said, “Betty McConnell. I couldn't help but feel obligated to introduce myself.”

She was still flushed. “And you are?”

“I'm Charles,” he said, trying to rub the stain out of his pants. At this point, he didn't care if she was looking or not. He explained that he was on his way to Burgundy to take care of some personal business, and this would be his first time there.

“Oh, I know that area very well,” she said. She was clearly in the mood to start a conversation, and Charles was happy to oblige her. She went on to explain that her husband was an importer of fine wines and spirits, and that he represented some of the biggest *negociants* and producers in Europe. His clients included a laundry list of wealthy and influential collectors and investors from all over the world.

“I remember one night we were having dinner with Henri Leroy at Maison Lameloise in Chagny. He brought a bottle of wine with him, which for some reason, we'd never heard of before. As soon as the wine was decanted, a tantalizingly seductive aroma overwhelmed the air in the room. After the first sip, it seemed like every blissful memory I'd ever had was condensed into this unforgettable flavor that could only be described as euphoric. It may be hard to believe, but it actually made the food seem comparatively bland. By the end of the bottle, I felt like I was walking on stardust. The next day, much to my surprise, I awoke to find myself feeling totally rejuvenated and well-rested.”

“That must have been some mighty fine grape juice!” Charles said jokingly. After all, he'd just met this woman, and he suspected that she might be prone to exaggerate. “What did it say on the bottle?”

“All I remember for sure, was that the words, 'le Clos de Suzette' were written in black ink across the front of the label, and the only other information I recall seeing was the vintage, 1935, and the town of Vosne-Romanee.”

“That's where I'm going!” Charles said with surprise. He was thinking about how odd it was that he was having this discussion with a total stranger. *Small world*, he thought to himself.

“It's true!” she said, as if she were trying to validate her story. “We had the same experience while we were visiting Baron Philippe de Rothschild at his Chateau in Pauillac the following year. He presented us with the very same wine, saying that he had received it from an 'anonymous friend,' and that technically, it wasn't even supposed to exist.”

“Really?” Now Charles' interest was definitely piqued. “What was the vintage?”

“1889,” she answered, “but it was just as vibrant and sumptuous as the '35 we had the first time. I was in rapture by the time we finished the last glass.”

Betty kept talking all the way to Paris. Charles pretended to hear what she was saying, and every now and then, he would nod or gesture as if to suggest that he was actually listening to whatever it was she was chattering about. But all the while, he kept thinking about the old man, the letter, and the fleur-de-lys.

Her incessant rambling had a narcotic effect on Charles, and soon he was fast asleep. He was awakened by the sound of the captain's voice informing the passengers that they were now making their descent into Aeroport de Paris-Orly.

“I must have dozed off,” he said to himself.

Betty was preoccupied with her purse, which contained all the essential components that she needed to complete her face.

“You've been sleeping for over an hour,” she said. “I hope I didn't keep you awake.” She was irritated by the possibility that he might have been bored by her inexhaustible babbling.

“Uh, no, um ... I'm just overtired, I guess.” He was relieved they were almost there.

When Charles got off the plane, he wasted no time finding a taxi to take him to the train station. Most American tourists would spend at least a few days taking in the sights, as well as enjoying a taste of the glamorous Parisian nightlife, but Charles was not there to indulge in any sightseeing curiosities. He was instead more concerned with learning the truth about his son, the amulet, and the circumstances behind its mysterious discovery.

Charles boarded the SNCF railway and traveled south to Dijon, where he enlisted the services of a cab driver to take him to the provincial village of Morey-Saint-Denis.

Two days had passed since he'd left his native state of Louisiana, but he might as well have been on another planet. Even though he realized that everyone would be speaking French, it was still hard for him to adjust. The way they spoke was much different than the patois commonly used in Cajun country, and no one knew any English. The air was much cooler here, and even the sky looked quite different—mostly flat and gray. But the one thing that was undeniably conspicuous about this mundane little countryside was the *vineyards*.

The trellises were everywhere, as far as the eye could see, and they were all facing the morning sun. The massive hills that rose and fell across the landscape seemed to roll and pitch like giant swells on the ocean, their tiny communes and hamlets appearing briefly like miniature islands among the vast sea of vines.

Morey-Saint-Denis was a testimonial to its ancient Gallo-Roman past, and the architecture reflected the combined influences of Gothic and Romanesque design and engineering. Most of the older buildings were constructed with “Comblanchien” limestone, a local marble, which was mined from the quarries in the surrounding area and known for its fine grain and polish. From a distance, the tile rooftops resembled a mosaic of pink, beige, and rust colored pastels complimenting the quilted milieu of pastoral beauty.

Charles walked along the narrow brick roads that connected the shops and small businesses clustered around the little plaza in the center of town. The whole village was imbued with the feeling of antiquity, evoking the memories of Saint Denis, a famous bishop who allegedly carried his own decapitated head to the place where he wanted to be buried. Charles gazed up at the church in the village square.

“This place is older than New Orleans,” he said to himself, measuring his steps as though he were walking on the moon. *Where do I go from here?*

He asked for directions from one of the regular patrons sitting at an outdoor cafe in the “Place de Monument,” but he barely received an answer that he could understand.

With nothing except a backpack, a suitcase and walking stick, Charles began his journey on foot down “N74” toward his final destination. It was almost nightfall by the time he reached the placid, little commune of Vosne-Romanee.

He wandered into a bistro where he was met by a tribunal of curious stares and suspicious glances. They were all smoking cigarettes and sizing him up.

Pretending not to notice, Charles ordered a *saison* and seated himself at one of the empty wooden tables near the end of the bar. After a few minutes, the attention began to wane, and everyone returned to their previous conversations.

The proprietress was an elderly woman in her late sixties, whose ambivalence was presently directed at Charles. He tried to hail her as she shuffled past him.

“*Pardon, Madame. Est-ce que vous pouvez m'aider?*”

After a moment of hesitation, she turned in his direction and bluntly asked, “*Que veux-tu?*”

He asked her if she knew of a man named Charles Charlemagne. She stared at him with a skeptical eye.

“Who's asking?” she inquired in perfect American English.

“You speak English!” He reacted, with surprise.

“Of course, I do. What do I look like, a deaf-mute?”

Her name was Danielle, and it so happened that she was schooled at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while she was in her early twenties. She had been studying theology when she fell in love with one of her professors. After they married, her husband was offered a position at the *Universite de Bourgogne* in Dijon, and they moved back to France.

“I'm sorry,” he apologized. “You look so ... well, so indigenous.”

“Well, I'm sorry I spoiled your expectation.” She paused again, carefully looking him over.

“I received a letter from a man named Charles Charlemagne inviting me to come visit,” he said, pushing forward with his inquiry. “Here is the address.”

He handed her a torn envelope which contained the name and rural route of a residence located somewhere within the confines of Vosne-Romanee.

Danielle squinted through the smoky haze underneath the spectral glow of the flickering gas lamps that adorned the walls of her tavern. Carefully, she scrutinized the folded paper she held in her hand. She scowled and bent over close to his ear, looking both ways to make sure no one was listening.

“Follow the Rue des Grands Crus until you reach a narrow trail between the vineyards of Romanee-Conti, la Romanee, and la Grand Rue. Keep following it until it ends, passed Aux-Reignots. That's all I can tell you.”

Charles thanked her profusely and paid his tab, leaving a ridiculously generous tip. He had made reservations at Chateau de Gilly where he planned to stay the night. It was a fourteenth century estate which had been converted into a plush hotel with all the lavish amenities associated with a luxury resort, and it was conveniently located between Vougeot and Vosne-Romanee. As he got up to leave, he could feel the eyes upon him as he made his way toward the door. The locals were obviously distrustful of outsiders—especially Americans.

The next day, he awoke feeling well-rested and ready to begin his search. He checked his luggage at the hotel and reembarked on his quest. Mr. Charlemagne was apparently a difficult man to find.

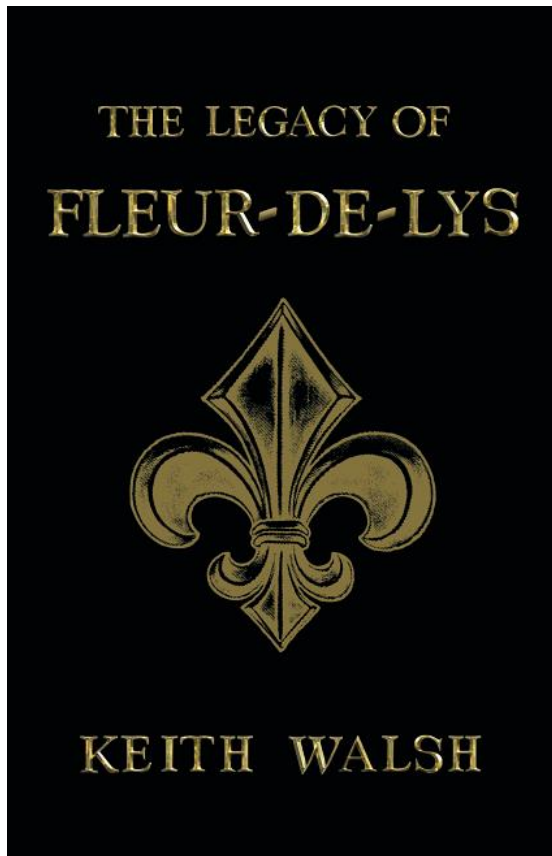
Charles reached the isolated path off the Rue des Grands Crus which led him directly into the vineyards. It was right where the matron from the bistro had said it would be. As he walked along the winding lane, he couldn't help but think of how familiar this place felt to him. The vines, the road, the *lavende* and mustard flowers, even the smell in the air seemed to welcome him. He thought about his home in New Orleans, and how small and ordinary his life was in

comparison to the rest of the world. Then the trail disintegrated into a tangle of trees and brush.

This must be the end of the road, Charles surmised, as he sat down in a patch of weeds and pulled a flask of brandy out of his pocket. He sat there for what seemed like hours, listening to the breeze whistling through the bushes and watching the clouds changing shapes as they moved like phantoms across the sky. Occasionally, the gentle silence would be broken by the sound of a *kestrel* or a *little ringed plover* singing to its mate. Taking another swig, he marveled at how peaceful and humble this place was, situated in the middle of nowhere like a secluded niche in the Garden of Eden.

Something caught his attention. There was rustling in the branches, like a gust of wind blowing through the thicket. Someone was watching him, like a ghost in the woods. Suddenly, he heard a gruff voice directly behind him.

“Bonjour, Monsieur. Je suis Charles Charlemagne.”



If you open this book you must open yourself to a world of intrigue, romance, and magic. How it begins and how it will end is a mystery hidden within the pages of this story. It's up to you to discover the truth behind the Fleur-de-lys.

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