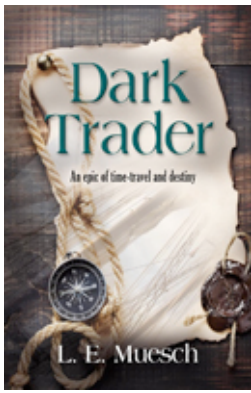


Dark Trader

An epic of time-travel and destiny

L. E. Muesch



Structured through past and future time travels, Dark Trader is an adventure-love story. Sean, an archeologist, is recruited to locate and excavate the yacht Dark Trader. The 150-year-old sailing vessel was discovered on three separate occasions with crew missing. After locating the remains, Sean and Carol experience several unexplained, hair-raising events. This is a timeless story of two people whose destiny is to fulfill the long promised legacy of a great people.

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Chapter One

Trapped between two worlds, I hovered high above the field of battle. The artillery smoke lifted. The bodies of butchered warriors, women, and children lay in pools of blood. Blackened corpses lay amid the charred ruins of village huts. Still alive, a native woman and white man were surrounded by French soldiers, using bayonets to prolong their agony. The woman hesitated long enough to look into the eyes of the soldier holding the bayonet against her belly. Swiftly she cut the wounded white man's throat, then her own. The taste of vomit rose from my belly. I turned away in revulsion.

Carol gave a stiff nudge. I gasped and leapt forward.

"Sean, stop dreaming and pay attention. You're missing everything."

"Sorry ... I must have fallen asleep." Was I asleep? God, I'd never experienced a dream so real. "What did I miss?"

"Dr. Fines was sharing the legend of the lost tribe."

I bent to whisper, "What about it?"

"He was describing how the natives of Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands still believe that their ancestors were sent from the past into the future so that their ancient ways of life would survive."

Huh. Living among us? Who would fall for this crap in today's world? With a smile, I turned my attention back to the speaker.

An asthmatic wheeze amplified by the microphone echoed off the dark chamber walls of the Oceanography Amphitheater. Dr. Fines was gaunt, grey haired, and wore thin wire-framed glasses. Every few minutes they slid down his long nose and

just as often he pushed them back. The rise and fall of his voice created a cadence that was monotonous and tiresome.

My thoughts were interrupted when a person in the audience stood to introduce himself. “My name is Lawrence Wells. I’m a reporter for the *Campus Star* ... Dr. Fines, I know you don’t care to discuss this subject but I have to ask. The story about *Dark Trader*, can you share with us why something so preposterous had your name associated with it?”

Dr. Fines hesitated, and then ran his fingers through his thinning, grey hair. He stood back from the microphone, straightened like a yardstick, and swept his hand across his brow. His voice grew louder. “Young man, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, Dr. Fines.” The reporter smirked, the corner of his lip rising, twisting unnaturally.

“If you were responsible for a major project and had to select an assistant from two candidates: one with an open mind and the other who came with preconceived conclusions, which would you pick?” He pushed his glasses back with one finger.

“Why the candidate with an open mind of course ... that’s if it makes sense to have an open mind.”

Sensing he’d taken control, Dr. Fines lowered his voice as he always did in moments of tension. Make him sweat. Make him worry. At least that was what Carol said, Fines would think. “As scientists, we must be open to every possibility and not restrict our thinking with artificial boundaries created by yesterday’s knowledge. Scientists are in a position to create new understanding of the future through understanding the past, but it will depend upon their willingness to be open to all possibilities regardless of how preposterous they may seem.”

The student reporter stood, scratched his chin nervously, and hesitated. Finally he said, “Thank you, Dr. Fines,” and sat down.

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A large overhead screen located behind Dr. Fines flashed a series of bright hypnotizing images too fast for anyone to make sense of. It captured the attention of the audience, and they began to whisper. The academics seated beneath the screen seemed unaware of the cause of the disturbance, but looked back and forth at one another. A hush came over the auditorium. Dr. Fines turned to look behind him and saw the picture on the screen, a black and white photograph of a yacht engulfed in flames.

“Who did this?” When no one took credit for the prank, he demanded, “Shut off the projector now ... Now!”

Carol cupped her face with both hands and gave an involuntary moan, almost inaudible. She was surely embarrassed for her uncle. No one was doing anything. I rushed to turn off the projector. Already off, it couldn't be the source of the projection. Seeing buttons marked Screen Up, Screen Down, I pressed the button marked Screen Up, and watched the picture disappear into the ceiling.

With a reddened face, Dr. Fines said, “I wish to thank the Scripps Institute of marine research for inviting me. I realize that some of you are here because you're interested in this topic and others are here to discharge a formal pre-requisite for required attendance.” He searched the faces of those students sitting closest to him. “Regardless, I wish to thank each of you for coming today and hope that you've benefited from my lecture.” Gathering his scattered notes from the podium, he took a seat.

An academic who was seated behind Dr. Fines walked to the podium. Bending to reach the microphone, tapping it several times, hearing it resonate through the room, he began, “Thank you, Dr. Fines, for sharing your experience as the Curator of the Newport Maritime Museum with us.” He turned and nodded at

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Dr. Fines. "Please accept our appreciation for your many years of service to the Scripps Institute."

The audience broke into applause that Dr. Fines appeared not to notice.

As everyone began to leave, Carol leaned over. "Sean, my uncle invited us for dinner at his hotel this evening. Don't feel trapped into coming if you'd prefer not to."

"Of course I'll come. I'd enjoy it. Where and at what time?" This would be a good opportunity to ingratiate myself to Dr. Fines.

"Seven-thirty in the Rose Garden Room at the Grand Hyatt. You know where it is?" she asked, preoccupied with keeping an eye on her uncle.

"We're staying in the same hotel. Can't we go together?"

"There's been a change in plan. I'll be returning to my uncle's hotel with him so we'll have to meet there," she said, rushing to pick up her purse and leave.

"No problem, I'll get directions from the concierge and meet you there. See you at 7:30."

Carol rushed off to join her uncle. Was her sudden change in plan because of what happened during the lecture?

* * *

On my way back to the hotel, I stopped at a Starbucks Coffee shop and treated myself to a pumpkin latte; the kind with a big lump of whipped cream floating on the top, ready to cascade over the side. I slid into a comfortable chair, and dipped my finger into the frothy cream, swirled it, and licked it from my finger. My mind drifted and I nodded off to sleep. Awakened by two men laughing I realized I'd been sitting there for the better part of an hour. I tossed my empty coffee cup into a rubbish bin, nearly missing it, and rushed back to the hotel.

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The phone message light was flashing in my room. On it, Carol's familiar voice said, "Sean, my uncle asked we move the time up to seven o'clock. Hope that's okay?" A click followed by dead silence. Christ! Just great. If I grabbed a cab, I'd just make it. I rushed to put on a clean shirt and fumbling to put on a tie ran out the door. An academic such as Dr. Fines could help get my career off to a good beginning. I wasn't going to be late.

In the hotel lobby I boarded an elevator saying, Rose Garden Room. After fifteen floors to the top, the elevator doors opened.

The Maitre'de asked, "Good evening. Do you have a reservation?"

"I'm with Dr. Fines," I said, pleased I'd thought to wear my best Andy Garcia tie.

"This way, sir, just follow me." We crossed the floor toward the rear corner of the room. Turning, he said, "Dr. Fines asked for a quiet setting this evening. He didn't want to be disturbed."

Dr. Fines and Carol sat in conversation. I'd never seen Carol dressed so elegantly. She wore a low-cut chiffon cocktail dress. The kind that exposed just enough of her breasts to prevent me from ignoring them. Distracted by Carol, I almost overlooked Dr. Fines.

"Ah. You must be Sean McDowell?" he said, pushing his chair back from the table, almost knocking over the glass of water in front of him.

I offered to shake his hand. "Please don't get up, Dr. Fines."

"I've heard so much about you, Sean," he said, repositioning his water glass.

"About me?" Why would he have heard anything about me?

Grinning, he looked at Carol, then me. "I should explain, my niece has told me all about you ... By any chance are you of Nordic decent?"

"How did you know that?"

"Your blond hair and light skin for one thing."

"My grandfather came from Denmark."

Turning to Carol, Dr. Fines winked. "Not a bad looking young man either."

Carol smirked.

"Can I bring anyone something to drink?" the waiter interrupted.

"I know Carol enjoys red wine, and you?" Dr. Fines asked.

"Red wine will be fine, sir," I said as the waiter rushed off.

"What was I saying before we were interrupted?" Dr. Fines asked, face reddening as he pushed up those glasses.

"You were explaining about --"

"Oh yes, you see, Sean, you're not here by coincidence. I asked my niece to do a little research for me. I asked her to recommend a fellow student, a PhD candidate like you with an open mind, and a willingness to undertake something very special to me." Another slight wheeze. "If you accept, you'll be working with my niece on a project that means a great deal to me. For the right person, it's an opportunity that will have extensive resources and funding." He stopped again, long enough to catch his breath. "Do you want to hear more?"

"I'm all ears, Dr. Fines."

He withdrew a cigar from his inside sport jacket pocket and lit it. Taking a deep draw, he tilted his head back and exhaled the smoke in one long continuous breath. Examining his cigar, he said, "First I must have your assurance that nothing we talk about here this evening will ever leave this table. Do I have your word on it?"

"Yes, of course," I said, now more curious than ever.

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“You heard that reporter ask about the yacht *Dark Trader*, and how my name could be associated with it?”

“I wondered what that was all about. I’ve read the book, *Land of Men*, but it was written as a novel.”

“Was it now?” Dr. Fines’ voice raised one octave and deep crevices formed across his brow.

“Dr. Fines, are you suggesting there’s truth to the story?” I looked at Carol. She gulped hard, and her eyes widened.

“That’s what you’re going to tell me. That’s if you accept the opportunity I’m about to offer you. Are you interested in hearing more?” His bushy eyebrows arched to connect above his nose.

“Interested? Of course I’m interested,” I said, still confused about where this was heading.

“Sean, you must have questions?”

“Gentlemen, your wine,” the waiter said as he poured just enough into Dr. Fine’s glass to sample, then stepped back to await the verdict.

He lifted his glass into the light, swirled its contents, and tasted. “Excellent!”

As the waiter filled each of our glasses, all attention turned back to me. “Sorry, Dr. Fines, what was it you asked?”

“Do you have any questions?” Covering his mouth with his hand, he coughed.

“Oh yes, sorry. I recall the book about a yacht called *Dark Trader* that made three voyages to the South Pacific, Nuku Hiva, I think.”

“Nuku Hiva’s real name is the *Land of Men*. Let’s just call it that from now on, shall we?” After clearing his throat he continued, “On two separate *Dark Trader* voyages, the yacht disappeared and was later found abandoned at sea with all her crew missing. On the third voyage, her skipper, after returning in time to the 1860s, set fire to her.”

When his voice began to slow and fade, I seized the opportunity. “If my memory serves me, I recall something to do with documentation purportedly in your possession at the time of the yacht’s disappearance. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe your refusal to respond to anything about *Dark Trader* stoked controversy.”

“Very good, Sean, your memory serves you well indeed. You left out one important detail: I refused to refute having the yacht log, journals, or for that matter any knowledge of the missing yacht, or her crew. That alone created something of a scandal.” Another short pause. “Only because I had lifetime friends who stood by me at the Maritime Museum was I able to weather that storm and continue as Curator.”

“Are you telling me you believe there was truth to that whole time-travel thing?” I asked. My god, he was talking about a subject he had refused to discuss with anyone for years.

Making eye contact, leaning forward, he spoke with a deepened voice. “I’m a scientist, Sean. If the story is true, we must find indisputable proof, scientific evidence that can stand up to the highest standards of academic scrutiny.”

“Dr. Fines, are you telling me you think the story about *Dark Trader* is true?” I asked a second time.

“Sean, it isn’t important what I think! One of two things will happen. You will either make one of the most important archeological finds of the twenty-first century, or you will disprove an old man’s silly theory.” He stopped to draw a deep breath, then raised his hand to his chest. “What I can promise you is when we’re finished, you will have earned your PhD ... and just maybe made a contribution to archeology and science in the process.”

Dr. Fines and Carol had clearly combined forces and were now looking for a third person to work with them. Carol was

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quiet. Content to let her uncle do the talking, her gaze moved back and forth between us as we spoke.

“Your first task is to read the personal journal of Captain Samuel who claimed to have taken *Dark Trader* back to the *Land of Men* in 1864. I’ll give you the notes I discovered myself written by Captain Samuel and Michael.”

“Michael?” I asked.

Dr. Fines wrinkled his brow, then said, “I guess I’m going too fast here. You’ll understand after you’ve had a chance to read my notes. Michael was Captain Samuel’s mate, who claimed to return to the *Land of Men* on two separate occasions.” His voice grew weak; his hand massaged his chest, making circular motions. “Most of what we know is based on his journal. Your first assignment is to study these in depth.”

“And then?”

“Then the real work starts. You and Carol will search for the remains of *Dark Trader*.”

“Yes, but she was supposed to have burned to the water line and sunk. There might be nothing left of her after all this time.”

“That’s the chance we’ll have to take. We can hope that because a fire was intentionally set below, it spread and burned through the hull, causing her to sink before there was too much damage.”

“The *Land of Men* isn’t a small island. Does anyone have any idea where to start looking?”

Pursing his thin lips, he said, “From Michael’s journal, we know to look for an estuary. In 1864, it was still a swampy area with large mangrove trees. His journal describes it being on the southern end of the Island. From old charts, several areas exist where *Dark Trader*’s remains might be. Of course these are large areas to search. We’ll discuss your needs later.” Dr. Fines exhaled as though it could be his last breath. “As you can see,

I'm no longer a young man and my days of working in the field are over. That's why we need your help, Sean."

"Carol and I can't handle this alone, we're only two people."

"I'll recruit several undergraduate students to help you and my niece. I don't need to remind you that they will have to be divided into teams."

"I'm guessing you're referring to excavation and survey?" I said in an effort to display that I knew something about the basics of archeological management.

Raising her penciled eyebrows, Carol said, "One part of it, anyhow."

"What does that mean, one part of it?"

"My uncle, I mean Dr. Fines, expects one more thing from us."

"And that is?" I asked, frowning.

Carol winced, then said, "There is something you should know. Messengers were sent--"

"Carol, please!" Dr. Fines interrupted, then cleared his throat. "After you've found *Dark Trader*, I want you and Carol to use your knowledge to supervise the building of an exact replica of *Dark Trader*. Whatever can be salvaged and preserved I want included in the reconstruction. And I mean every porthole and even fasteners once they're recovered."

That was peculiar. Why on god's earth did he interrupt Carol? I'll ask her later. Color rose in Carol's cheeks and her mouth became a thin line.

"Dr. Fines, with all due respect. We're archeologists not ship builders. How on earth do you expect us --"

"Sean!" Dr. Fines stopped long enough to jab his cigar up and down in the ashtray. "I don't expect you and Carol to build a yacht that's similar to *Dark Trader*. I expect you to build a yacht that even her past crews couldn't distinguish from the

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original. As archeologists, I expect you and Carol to supervise the construction to see to it that every last detail of the original *Dark Trader* is duplicated.” Covering his chest to compensate for shortness of breath, he continued, “I’m attempting to locate the old records documenting her construction. If they still exist, I’ll find them. The new *Dark Trader* will be constructed at a wooden boat-building yard using volunteers and students!”

“Dr. Fines, why are you doing this? I can understand wanting to discover the underwater archeological site of *Dark Trader* but why build another yacht? What do you hope to prove?”

“All in good time, Sean. All in good time.”

“Just one more thing.”

“Of course,” Dr. Fines said.

“If *Dark Trader* did successfully go back in time, then we can expect to find a yacht that has been buried on the bottom for almost 150 years. The yacht would have to be equipped with the modern instruments she left with in 2007. Let’s say for the sake of argument, if we find *Dark Trader* with no sign of modern instruments, then that’s proof enough this story was fabricated. Is it not?” If a hidden agenda existed, I wanted to know it right now.

“I see now why my niece selected you, Sean.” Turning to Carol, he raised his glass of wine. “To science and *Dark Trader*.”

Raising our glasses, we all said, “To science and *Dark Trader*.”

Chapter Two

After dinner, Carol and I said goodnight to her uncle. In the lobby, I asked, “Carol, what was that all about this afternoon?”

“I don’t follow.” She shrugged.

“That slide on the screen during your uncle’s lecture this afternoon.”

Fumbling through her purse in search of her room keycard, she said, “Oh that. What about it?”

“Who could have committed such a hoax?”

As she removed the keycard from her purse, she exclaimed, “Oh, thank god. I was afraid I’d lost it.” Her cheeks puffed, and she exhaled deeply. “Who knows who did it, it could have been anyone. A student maybe.”

“Is it possible your uncle has enemies that would discredit him?”

“We’ll never really know will we.” She turned away

“One more question, Carol. That picture of *Dark Trader* burning sure looked real. Is it possible?”

“Think about it, Sean. To be real, it would have had to be taken in 1864. And in case you hadn’t noticed, the picture had no signs of age, a pure giveaway it was a fake.”

“One more thing you should know.”

She gave him her full attention. “What’s that?”

“The projector wasn’t connected.”

“Are you sure?” A deep furrowed frown replaced her complacent smile.

”I’m sure of it. I raised the screen because I had no other way of shutting off the picture. I’m telling you the projector was already off.”

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“She bit her ruby-red bottom lip and said, “Then it was a clever hoax, that’s all.”

“Maybe, but don’t you think we should be concerned about the person who did this? This may not be the end of it.”

“Sean, we’ll have a lot better things to do with our time than worry about people playing pranks.”

“I suppose.”

“By the way, I won’t be returning with you in the morning. I’ve decided to remain one more day. Is it okay if we meet back in Virginia on Thursday?”

I bit the inside of my cheek to hide my annoyance. “Sure, see you on Thursday.”

I watched Carol walk toward the ladies’ room, her taut dress accentuated every curve, pulling tighter with each step. I decided to use the hotel men’s room before going in search of a cab. I was about to exit the men’s toilet when I heard Carol talking on her cell phone just outside. She mentioned my name, and I paused behind the door to listen.

“I’m telling you for the last time, Uncle, that picture of *Dark Trader* on the screen this afternoon was taken with my camera.” Carol stopped talking and listened. “How do I know for sure? I know because my camera lens has a scratch and it showed up in that picture. I’d know it anywhere.”

She listened again.

“Uncle, here’s the best part. That picture had no signs of being an old photo, at least not a 150-year-old one when *Dark Trader* burned and sunk. It had all the markings of a picture taken recently.”

She paused again to listen. “I understand ... I know it’s impossible. You should know that Sean told me he had to roll the screen into the ceiling because the projector was already off.”

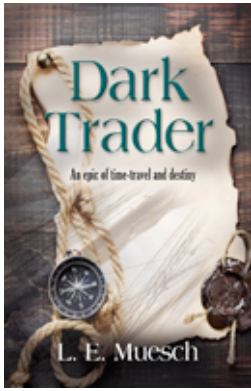
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Carol turned back toward the men's room door. This time I heard Dr. Fines cough into his own phone.

"Of course I won't talk to anyone about this until you've had a chance to check into it. We'll talk later." Listening. "Love you, Uncle," she said, flipping her cell phone closed and returning it to her purse.

Carol's footsteps faded. Exiting the men's room, I saw her getting into the elevator.

Time Travel, huh. Just how crazy were these people? The truth was, I knew nothing about them. Was it worth risking my future to become a part of something I knew nothing about? But only this morning, I was an unemployed student with no real future to speak of. At least now I had an opportunity to get some experience and be paid for it. And my thesis, I'd almost forgotten, this gives me an opportunity to earn my PhD. Still, who were these people? Wait a minute, no one was breaking my door down with better offers. No second thoughts. If Dr. Fines proved to be off the wall, I'd face that when it happened. The risk was worth taking. I was in.



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