

INTERVIEW
WITH THE
ANTICHRIST

INTERVIEW
WITH THE
ANTICHRIST

HIS
HOUR
HAS
COME

JEFF KINLEY



EMANATE
BOOKS

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*To the one true Christ, whose return is
soon and whose reign is sure.*

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	IX
Letter from Julien	1
Chapter 1 “Something Has Happened!”	3
Chapter 2 The Villa	17
Chapter 3 The Mystery Man Revealed	33
Chapter 4 The Jews	47
Chapter 5 Of Mandates and Messiahs	63
Chapter 6 “I AM That Man”	81
Chapter 7 The Sword	93
Chapter 8 Revelation in the Library	111
Chapter 9 Jerusalem	127
Chapter 10 A World on Fire	141
Chapter 11 The Last Interview	155
Meet the Antichrist: Thirty Intriguing Biblical Revelations	
About the Coming Man of Sin	171
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	205
<i>Notes</i>	207
<i>About the Author</i>	209

PREFACE

Antichrist. What do you really know about him? What would you like to know? Curious? If so, then you're in a good place. The Bible prophesies that a lone individual will arise in the last days and be the catalyst for global change. Scripture describes him as being both delightful and deceptive. Diplomatic, yet diabolical. He will be charismatic and charming, but corrupt to the core. Like a subterranean monster volcano, this man will be beautiful and calm on the surface, but hiding underneath will be a heart from hell. Without warning, he will emerge onto the world stage, rising from the waters of mankind. His persona will marry the charisma of John Kennedy, the mystique of Barack Obama, and the arrogance of Alexander the Great.

And though many kings, conquerors, presidents, and premiers have preceded him, none will rival his raw ambition or success at world domination. They are all amateurs in his shadow. And the whole earth will swoon over him.

If Bible prophecy experts are correct, his arrival could be soon.

PREFACE

He will be an international celebrity—bigger than a rock star, more powerful than a president, and more influential than a Kardashian tweet. And according to the book of Revelation, he will dramatically impact the planet and every person living on it.

But for now, his identity remains obscured. Veiled behind God's prophetic curtain, this principal player in history's end-times narrative waits in the wings for his dramatic entrance.

Intelligent, cunning, and deceptively delusional, this unparalleled opportunist will position himself to be in the right place at the right time. But his true character will eventually be revealed. Exuding egotistical self-adoration and armed with a satanic agenda, he will propagate pure evil like no human before him. And he will crown himself "King of kings and Lord of lords."

But what do we really know about this man? What *can* be known about him? What does the Bible actually say about this nefarious individual? How close might we be to his unveiling? And what difference does it really make in your life today?

This fictional narrative will catapult your mind into a world that hasn't happened . . . *yet*. Upon your arrival, you'll see and hear things you never thought possible. That's because the Bible holds nothing back, but instead reveals "history in advance" through an unfiltered lens. It's raw, rugged, and often shocking, but that's the nature of Revelation.

The story you are about to read is told from the perspective of a young journalist close to the one whom the Bible calls the "beast." He will give you a window into the character of Antichrist and how Scripture's last-days plot *could* unfold. You'll witness Antichrist's transformation into the most evil human in history. This imagined prophetic narrative will also reveal how this coming prince may alter reality and impact mankind.

More than merely entertain you with a suspenseful mystery, however, this speculative account will arouse your prophetic

PREFACE

curiosity, whetting your appetite for more solid biblical food on the subject. And you'll find that in the last section of the book.

Antichrist is real, my friend. And he is coming.

But so is Someone else.

Maranatha!

JEFF KINLEY

Dear Marc,

As my closest friend, I am entrusting the attached file to you for safekeeping. These are my thoughts and personal reflections, compiled over the past seven years, and since I can think of no one more trustworthy, I am thus committing them to your care. The file is password protected, but I don't imagine you'll have any trouble getting into it. (Hint: you still remember the name of that girl from communications class, don't you?)

By the time you receive this, I will be on my way to join the president at an undisclosed location. I am filled with anticipation, and persuaded that tomorrow will truly be a day for the ages. Who would have imagined that I, of all people, would secure a front-row seat to history in the making. And I take great comfort in the hope that, in spite of what we've all been through in recent years, this one day could prove to be mankind's most glorious moment. I'm sure, by now, you already know what I'm referring to.

Be safe, my friend.

Julien

“SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED!”

The 7:24 from Bruxelles Central to Paris was delayed that Saturday morning, and I, for one, was glad. Upon arriving at the train station, my immediate observation was that I had never seen it so full of aspiring travelers, and my presence only added to their ranks. To say I was in a rush to leave Brussels would be a gross understatement, as my itinerary was quite urgent. The early morning text alert disturbing my dormant state contained just a single word:

Come.

Though it had originated from an unknown person, I recognized the country and region code. I knew where I was going, but the only question now was whether I would ever be able to leave Brussels, as multiple routes were experiencing uncommon delays. But my best option remained the Thays, a high-speed train conceived and built in cooperation with Belgium and France, making travel between our two countries much more convenient and comfortable. At 300 kilometers per hour, station-to-station time

between the capital cities was cut to an hour and a half, about the time it takes to check the news over a few coffees and a Danish. However, my journey would not end in Paris, as my final destination was much farther away, in the Middle East.

With no time to properly pack, I had frantically dashed out of my apartment door that morning with not much more than the clothes on my back and my ever-present shoulder bag. Now that I think about it, I can't remember whether I even locked the door. But I suppose that's the kind of behavior you might expect in the midst of crises such as this. And though my twenty-eight-year-old mind had no idea what awaited me upon my arrival, I was quite certain it would be life changing. This was a moment in history, and I was determined to be there . . . and to faithfully record it for future generations.

But before proceeding, perhaps a bit of explanation would be in order here. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Julien De Clercq, a freelance writer, or, more properly, a professional journalist. Following my formal university education in my native Belgium, I officially began pursuing my writing career, completing yearlong internships with two of our most respected news services.

These past three years, however, have seen me engaged in a different sort of writing, the kind that transcends the mere reporting of mainstream news. Put succinctly, I have been tasked with the privilege and responsibility of chronicling the life and career of one individual, a man who has come to be esteemed by all. Of course, it's no secret to whom I am referring. Upon his emergence on the world stage, the now president of the European Alliance of Nations was immediately inundated with requests for television interviews and press conferences. He chose instead a single press event to satiate the media's appetite for information regarding the one who would lead this global coalition.

On the same day of his inauguration, and due to the expediency of the moment, a press conference was held. Hundreds of journalists

“SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED!”

and reporters from across the world, already in attendance for the inauguration, were invited to this massive news gathering to be held in an auditorium adjacent to the new president’s provisional office, located in the heart of Rome. At this time, preparations and construction had not yet been finalized for what later would become his permanent headquarters in Babylon.

At the time, I was in my sixth month of contractual employment at the Belgian Daily Wire (BDW), an independent service based out of Brussels. Our bureau chief had managed to secure me a spot among the sea of reporters who would assemble there in Rome, and I was most grateful for the opportunity. I distinctly remember the auditorium buzzing with chatter that spring afternoon. As the newly elected president ascended the platform, the world’s press corps erupted into an almost coordinated, thunderous applause. In my young life, I don’t recall ever witnessing such a unified spirit among those whose job it was, not to cheer and affirm politicians, but rather to question and doubt them! Even so, the hurrahs eventually subsided and the meeting began.

Dozens of questions were simultaneously hurled at the man onstage, amid the incessant clicking of camera shutters, whose echoes filled the Roman theater. The president’s answers were eloquent, elaborate, and, most of all, convincing. He even managed to inject some humor, prompting laughter throughout the large room. And more applause. I observed that all his responses were given without notes or the conventional aid of a teleprompter. I would later learn that these extemporaneous speaking skills came second nature for this charismatic individual. No matter the question, he fielded them all with the competence of a seasoned orator, as if he had been doing this all his life, which, of course, he had not. His command of multiple languages, his knowledge of geopolitics, and his ability to seamlessly transition from subject to subject were both remarkable and impressive, to say the least.

INTERVIEW WITH THE ANTICHRIST

As a junior journalist, I was assigned a seat approximately two-thirds back in the press corps, not a favorable location for someone aspiring to be recognized by the podium. In the hopes of being noticed in a sea of reporters, I had purposefully chosen to wear my black, yellow, and red-striped tie, representing the colors of the Belgian flag. Perhaps it worked, because to my utter surprise, approximately twenty minutes into the question-and-answer session, the recently sworn-in leader unexpectedly pointed in my direction.

It took a few seconds to determine exactly who he was recognizing, as we all had our hands in the air. But then, with the help of his assistants, I was shocked to discover that he was singling me out in the midst of hundreds! This somewhat confused me, for why should a man as powerful and prominent as him acknowledge someone as small and insignificant as me? Our online readership was modest, and even more so compared to the news giants represented there that day. But in any case, I was thrilled to be the needle he had plucked out of this journalistic haystack.

On the trip down to Rome, I had carefully prewritten five specific questions I deemed relevant and newsworthy for the occasion. Unfortunately, four of the five had already been asked by other reporters, leaving me with my fifth and final question, which had nothing really to do with policy, his cabinet, or the specific makeup of the newly formed alliance. Rather, it was a question much more personal in nature. And so, jumping to my feet and hoping I wouldn't stumble over my words, I cleared my throat.

Unexpectedly, at that very moment, the room's decibel level suddenly fell, as if someone had shut off a running faucet. The verbal traffic came to a complete standstill as the white noise of reporters jockeying for recognition abruptly subsided. I felt for certain the professional journalists gathered there were wondering why someone as obscure as me had been given the opportunity to pose

“SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED!”

a question to this powerful man at such a critical hour. My peripheral vision caught a jealous stare from Claude Von Spreckelson, the veteran German correspondent.

Why me? I thought. *Why not him?*

Nevertheless, he *had* called on me. And it was my time to speak. Standing almost at attention, I briefly glanced down, past my colorful tie, to my small, dog-eared notepad. Having previously crossed through the first four questions, I now stared at the last one, the least relevant of the five. This made me nervous.

“Yes, sir . . .”

“Speak up!” a voice from the other side of the room barked.

“We can’t hear!” another annoyed journalist yelled.

A few snickers rippled through the audience, presumably at me for my lack of readiness and unproven journalistic credentials. Undeterred, I continued, making a second—and louder—attempt this time.

“Yes, sir. I was wondering . . . er . . . what I mean is . . .”

The man behind the podium leaned forward, his brow furrowed slightly. “Well, go ahead. Get on with it. Spit it out, young man.”

And so, that’s exactly what I did.

“Why *you*, sir?” I inquired.

It felt good to say it. To get it out. To be *heard*. I enjoyed a certain degree of satisfaction to be able to ask my question at such a momentous meeting. But the asking was only half the moment’s drama. What I really wondered was, how would he respond to my peculiar inquiry?

The president’s head tilted slightly, and a faint puzzled expression emerged on his face. This unexpected response prompted me to elaborate.

“Precisely, Mr. President, what I mean to say is, why do you believe you are the most suited person for this position? Why are you the right man for this unprecedented moment in history?”

INTERVIEW WITH THE ANTICHRIST

A minor surge of self-confidence accompanied my words, having amplified and clarified my original question.

Upon hearing my explanation, his expression immediately transitioned, and a smile peeked from the corner of his mouth.

Looking back, I now credit that single question with officially launching my journalistic career in full force.

He responded, “Excellent question, young man.” He then answered with a swagger, his words rehearsing for all of us, and a watching world, six itemized reasons why *he*, and none other, could bring calm to our chaos and put the nations back on the road to peace and prosperity. The world’s press corps seemed stimulated by his words, and following several more rounds of questions, the conference was dismissed to deafening applause. By all accounts, most there that day seemed to believe there was actually hope for the future. And that this man would be able to deliver it. The president seemed pleased as well—smiling, waving, and shaking hands as he exited the theater.

While shuffling out of the room, I received several approving nods from older journalists, as if to say, “Nice going, kid.” I remember thinking that this would be the highlight of my career, something I would be able to build upon, as my face and voice had been broadcast all over the world. However, something quite unexpected happened to me as I was leaving the theater. A man approached me, identifying himself as a representative of the president’s security team. He informed me that I had been invited to personally meet with the president on the following day. As I was unprepared for the moment, I found myself hesitating, explaining how eager I was to get back to Brussels and that I was presently on my way to the airport for the return flight later that evening. He didn’t even acknowledge my comment, but rather informed me that my flight would be changed, a room would be booked for the night, and all my expenses were covered for the extra day’s stay.

“SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED!”

“Oh. Okay. Well, in that case, great!” was all I could muster, gladly accepting the invite.

The next morning, after only a few hours’ sleep, there was a knock at my hotel door. I scurried to grab my things, then accompanied an aide downstairs to an awaiting car, which then carried me to the new administration’s temporary offices downtown. I was led into a marble-lined room with a sitting area. It was decorated with two luxurious couches and equally fashionable chairs, with a table between them, upon which was a coffee carafe with two cups on a silver tray. I was asked to sit and told that the president would join me shortly.

As I waited, my eyes scanned the walls, where I observed several museum-worthy paintings, on which were depicted various religious and military scenes and personalities. One of them especially commanded my attention. I took a picture of it, later researching it online. Turns out it’s a work by Nicolas Poussin, painted in 1638, titled *The Conquest of Jerusalem by Emperor Titus*, the first-century Roman general. I stood up and strolled over to get a closer look, admiring the detail and depth of such a work of art. Just then, the door opened, and the president walked in, accompanied by a small entourage.

Observing my keen interest in the painting, he explained, “It’s an original, in case you were wondering. On loan to us from the Vienna Gallery, where it has hung since 1721.”

“It’s very impressive, sir.”

“Yes, it is,” he replied. “I like it because it depicts the glory that was once Rome.”

He motioned for me to sit on the sofa, which was adjacent to the oversized wingback chair he soon occupied. No formal introductions were necessary. He knew who I was and I certainly knew who he was. His suit, shirt, and tie were immaculate, and he was taller than I expected. On his lapel he wore a pin with ten white

stars against a sky blue background. A larger, gold star was prominently displayed in the center.

During what proved to be only a ten-minute meeting, I remained convinced he could detect how nervous I was.

He began. “Mr. De Clercq”—his tone was direct, and it was clear he would dispense with small talk—“your question at yesterday’s press gathering was . . . well, *unexpected*.”

I managed a nervous smile. “Yes, Mr. President. I suppose it was, sir. You see, my other questions had already been—”

“You went right for the heart of the matter, and that is something I can truly appreciate.” His sober interruption silenced me. I would later learn this to be his style. In any conversation, his would be the predominant voice. Settling more comfortably into the large chair, he continued.

“This is a dark hour in which we find ourselves, Mr. De Clercq. Trust in leadership right now, on a global scale, is at a historic low, and yet this trust is paramount to our cause. Without it, nothing can be accomplished. As I told you yesterday in my response to your question, I believe destiny chooses the man, not the other way around.” He paused. “I was born for this moment. I *know* it.”

The man sitting across from me exuded an inherent assuredness. It was his natural scent. He was resolute and determined. Charming, yes. Yet simultaneously intimidating. I could sense he wanted something from me. And I was right.

“But the question here, right now, is, ‘Were *you*?’”

I was caught off guard, not catching his meaning. My mind and attention were being pulled in several directions as I reminded myself I was in a room with arguably the most important and powerful man in the world. His presence was ambient, setting the tone and temperature of the meeting. And sitting within arm’s length of him, I could feel his persuasiveness encroaching on my will. It was as if I were all alone with him, though his secretary and

“SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED!”

advisors were also present, along with a personal bodyguard so huge I was convinced he ate people like me for breakfast.

I heard myself say, “Was I *what*, sir . . . Mr. President?”

He shot back without hesitation. “Why, *born* for this moment, of course! Are you the kind of man who believes in destiny, or just one of billions who ramble aimlessly from home to work each day? Born one day and die the next. What life is that? What I want to know is whether you are the kind of journalist and writer who is merely reporting the news as he sees it . . . or one who hungers for a *real* story to tell, one for the ages?”

He lifted one eyebrow, adding, “Put another way, De Clercq, when you leave here today and return to your little Belgian cubicle to trade a seven-hundred-word article for a few euros—will you be content with that? Or does something within you long for more?”

He edged forward in his chair, and closer toward me. His eyes fixated upon mine, and with all the sincerity of a marriage proposal, he asked, “Julien, would you like to step into history with me?”

Frankly, I had no clue what he was talking about.

“*Step into history*, sir? I’m afraid I’m a bit lost here.”

He leaned back and laughed. “You see,” he said, turning to his staff, “that’s what I like about this young man. He’s a journalist without a preconceived agenda. A rare find indeed.”

Then, turning his attention back toward me, he elaborated. “De Clercq, I detect a genuineness in you. You’re authentic, fresh, and untainted by the bitterness that has characterized so much of the press these past few decades.”

He glanced down at my shoulder bag on the floor beside my chair.

“I see you have one of my campaign buttons on your bag. It helps that you’re already a fan, or at least convinced enough to vote for me, I presume. In some ways, you actually remind me of *me*,” he said, laughing a second time. “You are enthusiastic, inquisitive,

and with, I suspect, a hidden ambition just waiting for the chance to be unleashed.”

I had forgotten about the button, and I felt a bit embarrassed that he had noticed it.

“Okay then, let me put it plainly to you . . . just as you were straightforward with me yesterday,” he added, stroking his chin. He took a slow breath, then exhaled and said, “De Clercq, I want you to consider becoming my official biographer.”

I felt the blood instantly rush from my face, and I feared I would either faint or vomit on the Persian rug beneath my feet. I’m certain my pallid condition was obvious to all present, evidenced by the smile that broke across the president’s face. I also heard a faint snicker from behind me.

This was an offer, no, *the* offer of a lifetime. Of *ten* lifetimes. Any writer wouldn’t hesitate to jump at the chance to etch himself or herself into history’s archives this way. They say your whole life flashes before your eyes just before dying, but in that few seconds’ pause, my mind instead raced *forward* in time. Such a rare open door would allow a young writer like me the privilege of being catapulted into literary recognition and prominence.

I envisioned transitioning from a struggling, small-time online reporter to achieving the prestige of chronicling the life and political career of one who could quite possibly prove to lift the world out of her current quagmire. From all indications, this man was going to be around for quite some time, leading a new empire and leaving a legacy unlike any who had come before him. So obviously, job security would be another huge plus, with multiple opportunities to follow. I would never want for a paycheck again. I could replace my old laptop. And I would certainly be able to move out of that one-bedroom dump I presently called home.

All these thoughts simultaneously swirled around in my brain as I contemplated this unique and unusual proposal. At the same

“SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED!”

time, I also found myself deeply humbled, and again wondered, *Why me?*

I stared into space for what couldn't have been more than a few seconds. Then, regaining my composure, I turned my attention back to the president and began slowly nodding. “Yes, sir! *Yes, sir!*” I said. “Of course. I would be honored. It would be a pleasure to serve you in this way. Whatever you need, I'll do it!”

His grin widened. “Excellent. Then we're all set. My team has already fully vetted you, and your background check has cleared security protocol. You also come from good stock, De Clercq. A good family. In fact, my team tells me your mother makes the best *pain à la Grecque* in all of Brussels.”

To this day, I don't know how he could have known that. But at the moment, it didn't matter much to me.

“It's settled, then,” he announced, standing to his feet. “We will set up an interview schedule and get you started right away.”

He extended his hand toward me, and I snapped to my feet, suddenly aware of how underdressed I was for a meeting with a world leader. I reached forward to give him a firm handshake. And while our hands remained clasped, his smile momentarily disappeared. “Julien,” he said, lowering his voice, “this is an assignment unlike anything you've ever done. As such, you need to know that confidentiality is of the utmost importance. Some of what I reveal and what you observe will, by necessity, be kept from the public eye until after it has been declassified. I don't have to tell you that any information leak or breach of trust will result in immediate termination, no questions asked. There can be no foul-ups or failures here. Are we clear?”

“Of course. I understand. You can count on me, Mr. President. I won't let you down.”

“Perfect,” he replied, giving my hand one final shake. “My staff will contact you with the necessary security clearance arrangements

INTERVIEW WITH THE ANTICHRIST

and confidentiality documents you'll need to sign." And with a confirming glance at his staff, he concluded, "So, until I see you again, Julien De Clercq, be at peace . . . and be safe!"

And with that, he was whisked out of the room by his secretary and security detail, staff in tow. I was left alone, save for the agent whose job it was to transport me to the airport for my flight home. He smiled at me, raising an eyebrow and slowly shaking his head.

"Do you have any idea what just happened here? What just happened to *you*?" he said. "You're one of the luckiest young men on the planet right now. And my advice to you is, enjoy it while you can. And don't screw up," he added. "The president is a good and fair man, but he doesn't suffer fools, and has little tolerance for incompetence. Do your job and do it well, and you *will* be rewarded."

I nodded. "Thank you. I will do my best."

Though that was more than three years ago, it still plays like a fresh imprint in my memory.

. . .

A loud tone sounded, and the female voice on the station's public address system finally announced the departure of my train. Traffic in Brussels was gridlocked, with several main arteries leading in and out of the city grinding to a halt on that Saturday morning. Even finding a seat on a bus proved difficult. Fortunately, I was able to secure transport by sharing a taxi with a neighborhood acquaintance, as he was also on his way downtown. It seemed as if everyone wanted to get out of the city. Some, no doubt, were commuting for business, while others were simply leaving to visit Paris, or perhaps meet up with friends or relatives there.

But this morning's summons to the city of Babylon was not a routine visit for another round of interviews or research. Though

“SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED!”

the actual reason for my trip was initially unknown, the one-word text I had received would soon be fully explained. In fact, it became abundantly clear the moment I climbed into that taxi.

“Something has happened!” my neighbor announced.

This made me regret taking a sleeping pill and retiring early the previous night. It seemed everyone knew but me. It was written on the cab driver’s face. And I suspected it had something to do with why the rail system was running behind schedule. For it was broadcast on every radio station and banner flashed across every screen in the Bruxelles Central Station. Words I never thought I would read.

THE PRESIDENT IS DEAD

THE VILLA

The station monitors indicated that the 7:24 train was finally ready for boarding. I jockeyed my way through a throng of travelers and up the stairs to platform 5. Climbing aboard the train, I found the first-class comfort section, having been forced there because there were no other seats left. I pulled out my phone and attempted a call to my contact in the president's office. No answer. Again, I lamented going to bed early the previous night, as I felt so in the dark regarding the news.

The train quickly filled with passengers, and within minutes we were Paris bound. The onboard Wi-Fi was unreliable and slow that particular day, making news reports erratic. Not that it would have mattered anyway, as what was reported didn't reveal much. But what virtually every traveler on that train did gather from their phones was that there had been an attempt on the president's life following a local dinner engagement just two miles from his Babylon headquarters.

The assailant had used some sort of knife or sword in the attack, fatally wounding the president in the head. The man was instantly

swarmed by security and was shot and killed in the ensuing scuffle. The president was rushed to an undisclosed medical facility, where doctors and surgeons made a valiant attempt to save his life. But the wound proved too severe. And this was the extent of the information playing on a loop on virtually every news source available.

I managed to get through to my old boss back at the Belgian Daily Wire to see if he had any further information on the story, but he informed me his sources could only confirm what the rest of the world was hearing. Babylon was being very tight-lipped about the whole affair. And rightly so, I suppose. In a crisis such as this, rumors, conspiracies, and misinformation are common after-shocks. And the last thing we needed was to report misinformation or to grossly exaggerate reliable facts, misinterpreting them.

I turned around and gazed down the rows of seats and into the train car behind me. Most people were fixated on their phones, making calls or searching for more information. Some simply stared out the window, while others wept silently. This disturbing news had sent the world into a collective state of shock, evidenced in microcosm by the somber spirits of those traveling on the 7:24 that morning. And not surprisingly so, for this president had single-handedly done so much to bring the world back from the brink of collapse.

Outside my window, the picturesque Belgian countryside seemed tranquil and unaffected by the day's news. I closed my eyes, listening to the hum of the train, and reminiscing about earlier, more hopeful times, specifically my first official interview with the president.

Having been vetted and granted official level B security credentials, I was invited to join the president at a private coastal villa located approximately thirty-five kilometers from central Rome.

Before moving into his permanent Babylonian residence, the president would spend many weekends at this villa, a welcomed relief from the ever-increasing pressures and demands of political life. It was here, just one week after my first meeting with him, that I conducted my inaugural interview.

Among its many amenities, the 1903 Italian mansion boasted seven bedrooms, a pool, an office, and a half-hectare (approximately one acre) rear garden area with a meticulously manicured lawn and sculptured shrubs. And all this overlooked the beautiful Tyrrhenian Sea. Upon my arrival, I was led through the manor and out into the back garden, where I immediately spotted the president seated at a glass-topped, rectangular table. A large, white canopied umbrella provided cover from the sun. The president's dress was considerably more casual than the last time we had met. His white open-collared shirt and Mediterranean-blue poplin trousers gave him more the look of a yacht owner than an international government head.

He recognized me, signaling me to come to him.

"Young Julien, how good it is to see you again. Come. Sit with me."

An aide pulled a chair for me opposite him. I slid my brown satchel off my shoulder and sat down.

"I trust your flight was uneventful and that the accommodations here will prove suitable."

"Oh, yes, Mr. President," I replied, looking around at the postcard scenery surrounding me. "No problem getting here. Your staff have been more than gracious. And I have no doubt that my stay will be delightful."

He gave me a reassuring nod, taking a sip from his glass.

"Brandy?" he offered.

"I'm fine, sir. Thank you just the same," I replied.

"Nonsense. You'll have a drink with me. I've recently been given a rare cask of Rémy Martin Louis XIII, and to my delight,

this particular cognac is among the finest I've had. There's a flavor of autumn in it, along with a hint of dried fruit and nuts. It's simply the taste of perfection."

He raised his glass again, sniffing it, while snapping his fingers with the other.

"Trevor, bring Mr. De Clercq a brandy," he ordered.

I gratefully acknowledged his provision.

"Should you ever want material pleasures and possessions, I highly recommend getting yourself elected president." He chuckled. "It seems as if everyone, from billionaires to kings, wants to lavish the Alliance leader with gifts. I suppose it's typical in the early days of my administration to receive goodwill from well-wishers, but if the gifts don't stop, we're going to have to build a storehouse for them! You don't, by any chance, have need of a vintage 1966 Harley-Davidson FLH Electra Glide motorcycle, do you, De Clercq?"

I chuckled. "No, sir. I don't believe I do."

"I wouldn't think you would," the president laughed. He savored another sip of his drink, then abruptly changed subjects.

"Okay, so where shall we begin, Julien? This moment marks the beginning of what I trust will be a memorable journey."

I had spent the previous week in feverish preparation, filling nearly half a notebook with questions and follow-ups. However, I thought it best to start by asking the president about what he thought had helped precipitate his meteoric rise to prominence.

"Sir, here we are in the spring, enjoying the beauty and tranquility of this magnificent place. But if you will, take me back to last fall, and the event that stirred you to step forward and take action."

"Yes, of course," he replied, nodding in agreement. He paused, as if holding his breath, then exhaled. His previous joviality disappeared.

I pressed the record button on my digital recorder and opened my leather-encased notepad.

“I still have difficulty comprehending such a mysterious incident. Nothing like it in history, De Clercq. Nothing. At. All. A completely unexpected and unprecedented anomaly. Millions worldwide just vanishing from existence . . . and they are still calculating the losses, and the sheer numbers involved in this tragedy that blindsided the world. It’s staggering, really.”

“And your *personal* theory or explanation as to what could have caused such a thing?” I interjected.

“We’ll get to that. But first, let us consider for a moment the *context* of the days, weeks, and months that followed and how it set in motion my emergence upon the global stage. It is imperative that we recall what it felt like during that awful time. There isn’t a person alive today who could not tell you where they were and what they were doing when they heard the awful news. Many even witnessed it firsthand. It goes without saying that this thing has become a defining moment of our generation—in my opinion much more so than past shocking historical events, which indelibly marked humanity—Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, the Kennedy assassination, 9/11, the 2023 Paris bombings, and so on.”

He nursed a sip of brandy, then went on. “You see, Julien, part of what makes happenings such as this so catastrophic and devastating is that, well, there are no warnings. No precursors or ominous clouds of doom riding ahead of them. And certainly no precedents . . . at least for something like this. So, tell me, how could the world have possibly prepared itself? One moment, more than 100 million people are here, and in the blink of an eye, they were not. It happened so suddenly. And that’s when panic and disaster struck us all like an unforeseen tsunami. Terror gripped our planet in most areas, especially in Western nations, like the United States. That former superpower was devastated in a single day, not so much from the sheer numbers among their missing, but more so due to the multiple facets of American society that were gutted at every level.

INTERVIEW WITH THE ANTICHRIST

“Around the world, family members were abandoned, and homes left empty. Possessions and money suddenly left unguarded. World commerce ground to a halt. Stock markets crashed. Mortgages went into default. The banking industry collapsed. Global communication networks were overrun and jammed. Children were left without parents and parents without children. Spouses and partners found themselves suddenly abandoned. Why, the immediate fallout on the family unit alone generated an international crisis. Even now, months later, millions worldwide remain orphaned and left without their loved ones.”

He shook his head while circling the top of his glass with his finger.

“You know, Julien, I remember as a young boy, when a school-mate of mine went missing. Our entire community was traumatized for weeks as the search went on and on. Hundreds banded together, vowing to find the little boy, combing the countryside, valleys, and streams. Fear gripped every home. No one knew if he had fallen down a well, drowned in a lake, or been kidnapped by a passing motorist. But you know what?” he said, elevating an eyebrow. “They never found him. To this day, no one knows what happened to him. Or if they do, they’re not saying. It was as if he simply *dematerialized*. He just ceased to *be*.”

“That’s a heartbreaking story, sir.”

“Yes, it is. In this case, however, we’re not talking about the single abduction of a little boy, are we? What we felt in my little town has been exponentially magnified. The combined world grief brought on by last fall’s phenomenon was unbearable . . . still is for some.”

My recorder sat on the table, right beside the tulip-shaped glass of brandy that had just been delivered. I left it alone, and the president went on.

“And that’s just the tip of the iceberg. There was, as you recall,

mass panic in the streets, seen predominantly in metropolitan areas. The suicide rate spiked for weeks, with thousands taking their own lives—shooting themselves, overdosing on narcotics, and jumping out of high-rise windows and off bridges. Local, state, and federal government agencies everywhere became a frenzy of confusion. In some countries, even the armed forces were deeply weakened as a result of losing soldiers and high-ranking officers and commanders. Military radar stations and outposts were left unguarded. There were massive, spur-of-the-moment reorganization and reassignments in the chain of command. The threat of war and invasion was heightened, and military conflict seemed imminent, sending even more shockwaves of dread and hysteria from country to country.

“Several nations lost top governmental leaders and key cabinet members. Patients died on operating tables due to surgeons and nurses disappearing. Many more patients suffered and died in hospitals from neglect. Emergency rooms swelled to overflow capacity, and those injured from automobile accidents related to the global event perished in hospital hallways and parking lots waiting for care. Pilotless commercial airliners plummeted to the ground, killing thousands more. Airport . . . um . . . what do you call those who direct the planes?”

“Air traffic controllers, sir?”

“Right. The air traffic controllers were not able to control or manage the sudden number of requests for emergency landings as passengers vanished from their seats in midflight. This created havoc on board flights, resulting in physical altercations with flight attendants, and some passengers even attempting to storm the cockpit area. And unless failsafe measures had been promptly enacted, nuclear power plants, like the one in Antwerp, just north of your home, could have suffered meltdowns. In my opinion, the failure to reach an agreement years ago to shut down those facilities was a

grave error. Even now, you Belgians are still dependent on nuclear power for the majority of your electricity.

“However, what we discovered as a result of that mysterious and fateful day was that we, as nations, as a race of humans, are much more fragile than we care to admit. We exist atop a precarious evolutionary perch, and are easily toppled by crisis. And *that*, my young friend, is precisely why the world desperately needs strong, resolute leadership . . . now, more than ever.”

Trevor appeared again, refilling the president’s glass. Seeing mine had yet to be touched, he raised an eyebrow, then retreated back into the confines of the villa. The immediate openness the president demonstrated toward me made me secretly wonder if brandy shouldn’t be a part of *all* our interviews together. I kept prompting him.

“You were saying, sir?”

“Of course, you already know all this, Julien. You lived through it as I did.”

“Yes, sir. However, part of what we’re doing here is putting these historical events in your own words, as *you* see them. This is your story, Mr. President. Not merely the reporting of commonly known news or past history.”

“Yes. Yes, I see. *My* story.”

“Exactly,” I replied.

“All right, then. The event and the ensuing chaos. And next, as you recall, was the crime epidemic that hit like an earthquake aftershock. Stores and businesses worldwide were left unattended, becoming open targets for looters. Law enforcement officers found it nearly impossible to address such widespread lawlessness. There was just too much of it in every place. This further led to an outbreak of arson, along with a shortage of food and gas in many areas, including first world nations. The freight industry was unable to meet the demand for food products and necessary resources. And

this sent millions into even greater panic, desperation, and insanity, expressing their agony and outrage through riots, shootings, and even bombings of some government buildings.”

He took another sip, then furrowed his brow in disapproval.

I privately wished he would begin transitioning from the *world's* story and get on with his own. But I understood his original point regarding the global context of his rise to power. And I didn't want to make a habit of interrupting him.

“Yes, it is all about context, Julien,” he repeated.

That's alarming, I thought. *Was this rare brandy enabling him to read my thoughts? Nonsense, Julien. He's still talking. Write!* I scolded myself.

“It's abundantly clear to me that this horrible, unfortunate incident was the worst thing that could have happened to human-kind. It awakened something within us that is sinister and dark. Something evil and destructive.

“Although,” he remarked with a shoulder shrug, “I suppose it *could* be argued that, in retrospect, things have turned out for the better, globally speaking. With the collapse and implosion of countries like the United States and others, this mass disappearance has actually served to help bring the nations together. And that's positive. Unlike before, today we actually need one another for survival. Nationalism effectively died last fall. It's a failed, fossilized philosophy that has no place in this new world. Globalism has been birthed in its place, and it's working.

“But this grand idea of uniting the world is not new, you know. It has been in formation for more than a century, dating back to the old League of Nations following World War I. Then came the United Nations, followed by the European Economic Community in 1957. But we can talk more about that in a future session. Suffice it to say that many have previously promoted and pushed for a more unified world government, but the times in which we now

live *demand* it. As a result, you could say this is actually an exciting era of history!”

His passion and voice rose as the blinding afternoon sun began to set, casting its rays directly toward my line of sight, forcing me to adjust my chair accordingly. I inadvertently placed the sun directly behind the president’s head, its orange glow producing a “halo effect” around him, temporarily veiling his face. It dawned on me that this man was occupying his current leadership position by no mere accident or stroke of blind luck. The sun’s brilliance behind him seemed emblematic of his personal radiance and political savvy. He was indeed a luminary for our time. A light shining in a dark world.

A tray of neatly arranged cheeses, meat, and fish appeared. “Enjoy” was Trevor’s only word before vanishing once again. Garden lights came on, brightening the path leading into the villa.

For the first time since my arrival, I felt comfortable enough to partake, which I did, choosing a selection of meat and cheese for my small plate. The president did the same.

“So,” I continued, looking at my notes. “I suppose the proverbial elephant in the room regarding this topic is what actually happened on that fall morning. What I mean to say, sir . . . back to my original question, is, what is your explanation for this sudden departure of so many?”

It was clear to me now how this event had formed the foundation of his sudden acceleration to international prominence.

He chuckled. “*Departure*, huh? You make it sound like they went somewhere, when in fact we simply don’t know, do we?”

“No, sir, we don’t, but—”

“I hear what you’re saying, De Clercq. So, you want to know what *I* think, right? *My* theory?”

“Yes, sir. Of course.”

“Well, opinions concerning the matter are as varied and as numerable as those who have them. Every person has his or her own

ideas, including a multitude of experts in fields ranging from science to astronomy, philosophy, and even theology. I suppose each of them must be entertained and given their proper due. There are, of course, those who subscribe to the theory that an alien abduction of some sort took place. Some argue that an advanced life form from another galaxy traveled to earth and snatched away millions, however, I find this ironic, given that previously these same people did not believe in life on other planets! How they would ascertain this information or prove their hypothesis is beyond me. Nevertheless, it is theorized that the aliens did this to ‘enlighten’ the abducted, whereupon one day they will eventually return to earth to convince the rest of us that aliens do indeed exist.

“This, of course, sounds futile and far-fetched to me. More science fiction than science. To my knowledge, there has been no factual or conclusive evidence to support such a preposterous assertion. I mean, in an age where every person carries a camera in their hand at all times, why didn’t one, even one person among eight billion, snap a photo of this event? Why no CCTV footage or pictures of extraterrestrial spacecrafts hovering all over the planet, waiting to beam up these poor souls? Don’t get me wrong. I believe there could be intelligent life out there. But advanced alien technology that makes millions simply disappear? I would have to drink a lot more before entertaining such an idea.”

We both laughed, and he took another piece of cheese from his plate and placed it in his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully, then swallowed before continuing.

“And why would aliens target only *those* people? Why wouldn’t larger concentrations of them be taken in other areas, countries, and cities? Why were there parts of the world where the loss was reported as very minimal? Why were countries like Albania and Afghanistan relatively unaffected? Why wasn’t I taken as well? Or you?”

Shaking his head in denial, the Alliance's leader argued, "No. I don't buy it. Doesn't sound plausible from an astrophysical perspective."

I momentarily put my pen down to reach for another slice of cheese, noting the declining battery life on my digital recorder. The president didn't notice.

"Now, we know there *are* atmospheric aberrations that can occur, especially in light of recent deteriorating patterns in climate change," he mused. "I am no authority in that field, but those who are have postulated that some irregularities in atmospheric changes *can* lead to deadly concentrations of random, harmful geo-spots, which have been known to prove fatal. Perhaps similar to spontaneous combustion and the like. I realize that explanation doesn't fully explain this phenomenon, but some variation of it could, I repeat, *could* account for what occurred.

"Of course, if you believe in some sort of universal consciousness out there, as many do, you might propose that those millions were removed because they no longer 'fit' with the rest of us—that they weren't earth-friendly, or willing to move toward a global collective consciousness and a unified planet. Again, unprovable.

"Another theory suggests there was a cosmic crack in our universe's space-time continuum, and that some kind of portal was opened to an alternate reality or distant dimension. These people, for reasons unknown, fell into that crack and were essentially swallowed up by the universe. But that plays better in a futuristic fantasy movie than it does in real life.

"Now, the Christian religion also contains a sect that believes in their own version of abduction, this one by God himself. This strikes me as bizarre, especially in light of the fact that many, if not most, others who claim to worship the same God don't hold to such a belief . . . and they're still here with us!

"Others in a more progressive contingency also attribute this

removal of millions to an act of God, only it being one of judgment, removing those who were intolerant, hateful, and bigoted. I am no theologian, but to me, *God*, if he does exist, would never do such a thing. Not a good God anyway. Sounds too dark and cruel.

“And again I ask, where is the evidence? We have evolved over millions of years into rational, intelligent beings who require evidentiary documentation for unparalleled occurrences like this. We need more than unfounded theories and religious fairy tales. We need *proof*. . . and though a conclusive explanation has yet to be verified, it is my opinion that an answer will come . . . eventually. And maybe sooner than later. Time will tell. Mankind eventually rises to understand these things. We always do. We were meant to. Look: we’ve split the atom, healed diseases, traveled to the moon, and sent probes into space, exposing ourselves to an infinite amount of data. We know why earthquakes occur and why weather patterns form. We’ve mapped the ocean floor and meticulously researched and analyzed virtually every part of the human body. Consider the invention of the MRI machine, DNA mapping, and genetic coding.

“So, yes, in time, it will all become clear,” he emphatically restated.

“Truth be known, when it’s all said and done, we may not even be surprised at how simple the explanation to this mysterious mass exodus is. The explanation may have been right under our noses all along. Or it could be staring us in the eyes, but we just don’t see it yet. But we’ll find the answer. History teaches us that there is almost nothing we cannot achieve if we are willing to work together toward a common goal . . . Do you believe that, Julien?”

“Oh, without a doubt, sir. No limits to what we can do if we are willing to be united.”

“I like that,” he remarked, approvingly. “Well said!”

Another ounce of brandy drained from his glass.

“And so, circling back to our original starting point, sir. Do you believe all this was the genesis of your rise to political prominence?” I asked.

“I suppose you could state it that way, even though I think I would have eventually found my way to this place in leadership regardless. But I’ll consent to that. I am much more, however, than the ‘opportunist’ rival leaders have accused me of being.”

He leaned forward in his chair, slowly pushing the meat-and-cheese tray aside.

“Julien, this is not just a job to me. I previously told you that I am *called* to this role and moment in time. It’s difficult to explain, but when I saw what was happening to my world, something awoke within me. Something that, as far as I know, may have been lying dormant deep inside all my life. It’s as if I was standing at a station platform, waiting for my train to arrive. I just didn’t know it would arrive in the form of such an international crisis and catastrophe. But I have successfully brought order out of chaos. Peace in the midst of panic. And I will continue to do so. The European Alliance of Nations will lead the world and effectively transition the human race into a new age.

“Coming together for a common purpose and mutual good is no longer some futuristic, noble ideal. It has now become critical and essential to moving forward as a planet. It’s what we *must* do. And it’s what we *will* do under my leadership. That’s my mission as president, to lead the nations forward toward a bright horizon. Others before me in history have failed in this endeavor,” he firmly declared. “I will not.”

It was evident he believed every word he was speaking. This was no campaign speech or political rhetoric. These were words from the heart. From the *soul*.

And with that, my digital recorder’s low-battery light illuminated.

The president's eyes diverted to his left, as an aide appeared under the archway leading into the villa.

"Well," he concluded. "I suppose that will be enough for now." He stood to shake my hand. "You know, Shakespeare was right, 'the past *is* prologue.' What has already occurred is merely the introduction for what is to come. And great things *are* coming. And on that note, matters of state are calling, and I must go. You'll be contacted regarding our next meeting, which I hope will be soon. Until then, peace and safety to you, young De Clercq."

"Peace and safety to you as well, Mr. President," I responded.

He walked briskly toward his aide, and they both disappeared through the darkened doorway. The sun was almost gone, and the shadows were long on the manicured lawn. I wasn't sure if the growling in my stomach was hunger or anxiety as I contemplated the weight of the task I had been given. For a moment, I felt overwhelmed. The last rays of the setting sun shone through the glass that sat untouched before me during the length of my interview. I reached out and grabbed it, emptying its contents down my throat with a generous swig.

THE MYSTERY MAN REVEALED

There was a small snack service on my train, and I made my way forward to secure a cup of coffee. Returning to my seat, I stared at the blurring landscape racing by. In just under ninety minutes, I will be pulling in to the Paris Nord station, after which I will secure a taxi to de Gaulle for my eventual flight to Babylon. After getting dressed earlier that morning, booking a flight was the first thing I did before getting the taxi. I was fortunate to still find an available flight at this late hour. The news of the president's death had spiked travel, as the whole world seemed to be converging upon the political capital. But despite the city's newly elevated status, there was still no direct flight from Brussels to Babylon. There is, however, one from Paris to Baghdad. Therefore, the Thalys proved the quickest way to get me to the next stop on my destination.

The train actually is quite fast. And economical. I sometimes think about how the older generation marvels at the technology that we take for granted today. From artificial intelligence to

self-automated vehicles, space drones, free internet worldwide, self-driving trucks, bioprosthetics, the advances mankind has made in the last thirty years have been amazing. Developments in rail transportation alone are enough to astound those old enough to remember the days of conventional travel by road, rail, and air. And there is ongoing testing for the Hyperloop system of train travel, with speeds of up to more than 1,200 kilometers per hour (760 miles per hour) through an oversized vacuum tube. In today's world, speed is key.

Just before she passed away, my grandmother rode on a high-speed train to Austria. What once took six hours in her day has been reduced to just under a two-hour journey. Upon her arrival, she repeatedly asked my mother, "How did we get here so quickly? I don't understand!"

Time is like that. Fleeting. Always running. And frequently deceptive. I think about my own brief life and often wonder the same thing—*How did I get here . . . and so quickly?* It's a question not too dissimilar to the one I posed to the president at the start of our second official interview session, which took place not long before our permanent move to his operational base at Babylon. In contrast to the relaxed villa atmosphere of my initial interview, this one was scheduled to take place over two days at the provisional office facility in central Rome. Instead of a gentle breeze blowing off the water, the office building was filled with chatter and traffic as staff, administration officials, and aides bustled past one another in a perpetual rush hour.

Though I was not an official member of the government, I did come close to at least *looking* the part, having upgraded my dress code to a blazer and tie. At 9:00 a.m., I was led into a small conference room, where a lone pot of coffee greeted me. I took a seat near the head of the long table and waited. And waited. Before long, I grew uncomfortable and anxious as thirty, then forty-five minutes

passed. Then, some fifty minutes past our scheduled starting time, the wooden conference room door opened, and in walked the most important man on the planet.

His dark suit was contrasted with a white dress shirt and a royal-blue tie. Attached to his lapel was the familiar Alliance pin with ten white stars against a sky blue background, with a lone gold star in the center. Black Italian leather shoes shone on his feet. I know they were Italian leather as I recognized the brand from a magazine advert on the plane from Brussels to Rome that morning. Flipping through the magazine, I had wondered, *Why are such expensive shoes advertised in a flight magazine? And what kind of person would spend so much money on them?*

I now had my answer.

Jumping to my feet, I greeted the president, and he shook my hand and asked me to sit. He then whispered something to his loyal aide, who nodded compliantly and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

“My deepest apologies for my late arrival. I had to attend to some time-sensitive documents as well as a briefing by my military counsel. Unrest is brewing to the north, and I am not sure we will be able to prevent what is shaping up to be an inevitable conflict.” He exhaled slowly. “But I trust some good can come from it. Now, on to our time together. How have you been, De Clercq? It’s been a few weeks since we last spoke. I trust you’ve been given ample access to the source files for your research?”

“Absolutely, Mr. President. Your staff has been most accommodating and helpful to me. The printed documents and the secure online files provided have been very useful and informative.”

“Excellent! Now, as for today and tomorrow, I believe we have allotted two one-hour slots for this, so with no time to waste, let’s get started, shall we?”

I noticed the president’s demeanor was considerably less cordial

and relaxed than it had been during our previous interview at the villa. His countenance communicated, "Let's get this done. I'm a busy man." I reminded myself that this appointment with me was only a small part of his agenda, as his itinerary included multiple meetings throughout the day. I glanced down at my prewritten questions.

"Of course, sir." I grabbed my pen while simultaneously hitting Record on my digital device.

"So, Mr. President. Apart from the official background bio provided by your staff and what can easily be ascertained by anyone via an internet search, I wanted to hear more about your background in your own words. The bulk of what I will officially write should come straight from you, sir. This is your story, as told by *you*."

"Right. You said that last time, as I recall," he said, a twinge of impatience in his voice.

"Yes, sir. So, my first question links with our previous conversation regarding your sudden rise to prominence, as previously you were relatively, well, sort of *unknown*. Some have referred to you as 'the Man from Nowhere,' which is an obvious overstatement. But that being said, why don't you take us back to your early, formative years. What made you the man you are today?"

His shoulders relaxed, along with the furrow in his brow that had been lingering since he walked into the room.

"Hmm, formative years," he mused. "Fair enough. And I can appreciate the direction of your inquiry. Stay on track with your questions, and be careful not to try and lead me with them. And don't ever put words into my mouth."

"Absolutely. I won't do that," I responded, feeling a bit rebuked.

"Perhaps I should begin with my dear parents, who, above anyone else, have influenced and marked me. Despite ridiculous internet rumors about my having 'clandestine beginnings,' I came into this world like everyone else. I was born early on the morning

of June 6, 1988, at the University of Zurich Hospital, which incidentally traces its beginnings back to the year 1204, making it one of the oldest hospitals in all of Europe. At the time of my birth, my father was enrolled in that university's doctoral program—"

"Pardon the interruption, sir, but may I ask what his field of study was?"

"Good question. He earned his doctorate in banking and finance, soon after which our family returned to Milan, Italy, *his* birth city. As my father rose up the ladder of the banking industry, this precipitated some six moves in twelve years. As a result, I never really developed many, what you might call, 'close friends.' And you may also be surprised to learn I was quite reserved as a child. I kept mostly to myself. From an early age, my mother nurtured me with a great affection for reading. It was a passion we shared. Much of my childhood and adolescent years were spent in libraries, reading nooks, or the rear gardens of our many homes. I would get lost for hours attempting to satiate my voracious appetite for mental stimulation and knowledge, mostly through books on fantasy, history, and philosophy."

"Fantasy, sir? Would you care to expand on that a bit."

He shrugged. "Certainly, though there's not much to say, really. I have long been fascinated with stories of alternate worlds. Civilizations that exist in other times or dimensions. The clashing of battling kingdoms, rival thrones, and realities where supernatural occurrences were commonplace—those kinds of things. As you'll discover, however, my primary passion by far is history . . . and the *real* world."

"Very interesting," I murmured.

Circling back to my original question, he went on.

"Of course, as anyone can learn from my website, my formal education included a bachelor's degree in humanities from the relatively obscure Leiden University in The Hague, Netherlands.

From there, I traveled the short distance to Erasmus University in Rotterdam, where I earned a master's degree in history, specializing in a rather odd combination of ancient history and international relations. But what is missing from that website bio are the two years I spent traveling the world following the completion of my graduate degree."

"Oh? I was unaware that you—"

"Yes, after gorging for years on academia, I became quite anxious to liberate myself from the classroom and study cubicle. So, I packed a bag and traveled to places I had always wanted to visit, sites of particular historical interest to me—America, France, Germany, Russia, Austria, England, Egypt, and Israel. And as I was on no particular timetable, I visited them at leisure, immersing myself as best as I could into those cultures, absorbing knowledge concerning significant events and movements, touring battlefields, studying their governments, and contemplating the impact left behind by their great leaders. I became a constant fixture in numerous museums, spending days upon end poring over historical documents, watching archival footage, and analyzing artifacts and displays of antiquities. Governments. Wars. Rulers. Relics. Weapons. Maps. These were my constant companions."

"Hmm. And did you travel with a friend? Girlfriend?"

"No, no," he laughed. "Mine was a solo adventure all the way. My pace and routine would have been highly incompatible with traveling companions."

"On a side note, sir. You remain undoubtedly one of the world's most eligible bachelors. Is there any particular reason why you have never married? Has there been a significant other? Then or now?"

"Julien, if you're trying to ask me whether I am a homosexual or bisexual, the answer is no. Truth is, I simply don't have a serious desire or interest for a relationship with a woman for one simple reason."

“That being?”

“*Stewardship*,” he answered definitively.

“*Stewardship*, sir? I’m afraid I don’t follow what you’re saying.”

“Well, given my daily schedule and perpetually full calendar, I just don’t have the luxury to invest the enormous amount of time required for a romantic relationship. I have to be fully committed to my calling. Leadership is my wife and lover. And I must effectively manage my time and gifts in a way that yields the maximum return. I realize that perspective may seem a bit out of place in a day when people are desperate for relationships, but in order to help create a world where others can experience love and family, someone has to make a sacrifice. And that someone is me. So yes, *stewardship*. And besides, trust me: no woman would want to be married to a man like me.”

“Got it,” I said, making a mental note not to bring up the subject again.

He smiled, twirling a pen on the large oak table. And I returned to the subject at hand, inquiring, “And did you find any one country or experience that stood out to you in those two years of traveling?”

The president paused, as if a conversation were going on in his head, debating whether he should permit himself to divulge further. Then, with a nod of the head, he puckered his lips slightly and continued.

“So, *memorable encounters*. If you will indulge me for a moment, there were three unforgettable experiences which stand out in my mind—London, Jerusalem, Egypt—in that order. I particularly enjoyed my many visits to the British Museum, where I spent a considerable amount of time gazing in wonder at exhibits regarding histories of the most majestic empires on earth, particularly Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Rome. All these mighty governments eventually failed or were conquered. My father once remarked to me that during those two years away I likely spent more time with

the dead than with the living.” He laughed, then acknowledged, “And I suppose he would be right. History, however, can be such a marvelous and seductive mistress, for she always satisfies, while simultaneously imparting wisdom of the ages.”

The corners of his mouth turned up. “Oh, and there is also a fascinating antiquarian bookshop just across from the British Museum there in London, sandwiched between shops containing tourist trinkets. You must visit it if you ever go there, Julien. I spent more money than I care to admit in that shop, acquiring first-edition works and military maps from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Often, I dipped into my food budget in order to feed my literary addiction. But missing a few meals is nothing compared to the satisfaction of knowledge gained, right? I was then, and continue to be, a hopeless bibliophile.”

An enormous sense of pride beamed from his confession. And yet, there was also a magnetic warmth associated with such arrogance.

“By the way,” he added. “I have hundreds of photos from my old travel days. If you think they may be of some use to you in compiling my story, let me know and I will arrange to have them dug up for you.”

“Thank you, sir. That might actually be enlightening. I am making note of it.”

The president’s aide entered suddenly, interrupting our flow of thought. He handed the president a small piece of stationery on which was written something I couldn’t read. The president scanned it, then said, “Unacceptable. Tell him my original order stands, and that he best get behind it immediately.”

The aide bowed slightly and scurried out of the room.

“Where were we, Julien?”

“Your most memorable experiences?”

“Yes, London. The second experience that comes to mind concerns my time in Jerusalem. This ancient city is a fascinating

intersection into which the world's three most prominent religions converge. Each of them makes some claim to this little sliver of the promised land, with Jews and Muslims perpetually at each other's throats over it. Both religions trace their roots to particular sites there, and to a shared patriarch, Abraham. And, of course, the Christians' Jesus was crucified there. But it wasn't primarily the religious significance of the city that intrigued me as much as the measure of human gravity the city represents.

"Specifically, the Temple Mount area aroused my deepest curiosity. As you may know, this portion of the city is sacred in the sense that it has, for centuries, been the focal point for billions of religious seekers. You could argue that this tiny area is sort of a 'Rosetta Stone' for mankind. There, we see both the brilliance as well as the decay of mankind's glory. Through the legends and tales of men like Abraham, Muhammad, and Jesus, we are reminded of the virtues of sacrifice, leadership, and love. And yet the irony is that each of those religions has also brought much conflict, death, and division to the world.

"I only spent two weeks in Jerusalem proper, but while there I imagined what it would be like if the world could someday reimagine this place as a source of human unity instead of division. Sounds just like something an idealistic twenty-five-year-old would say, right? And yet, there remains, I believe, in all of us, a fundamental desire to lay aside our differences and come together in peace and harmony. And I still believe we can do that if we're all properly motivated! So many look to Jerusalem. If she only realized the power of peace that is well within her grasp," he declared, raising his voice a bit. His tone subsided as he snickered, "Now I sound like I am campaigning."

"No, it's fine. Whatever you want to say, sir. There is no script here."

He moved on without acknowledging my comment.

"But two weeks was enough. I spent another few days in

solitude in the surrounding desert. But that's perhaps a story for another time."

I wrote on my pad: "Desert?"

"I suppose my most memorable, and dare I say *mystical*, moments of my world tour came, however, during a visit to the Great Pyramid of Giza. As you may know, it's the most ancient of the seven wonders of the world, and a stunning, intimidating work of design and precision engineering. Rising out of the desert sand at over 450 feet tall and weighing some six million tons, this magnificent structure dwarfs all those who encounter it. And to think, it was built as a tomb for one man—the pharaoh Khufu, from the Fourth Egyptian Dynasty. By the way, if you ever visit the Cairo Museum, you can see a tiny ivory figurine of this pharaoh, whom the Egyptians, of course, hailed as a god. It's just three inches tall, but nevertheless exudes a mysterious power worthy of such a notable ruler."

The president's eyes were fixed in a trancelike gaze as he spoke, as if I were suddenly invisible to him. And then, with a blink, he returned his attention back to me.

"But you were asking about my experience, not a lecture on archaeology. Julien, the real reason I found that particular visit so meaningful was, as I paused to rest on one of those massive granite blocks that formed the pyramid, I was awestruck not only by the structure itself but also by the reason for its existence. Granted, Khufu commissioned the pyramid to be built for himself, but the mere fact that he *could* decree such an undertaking overwhelmed me.

"Contemplating this fact while sitting under a blazing Egyptian sun, it occurred to my young mind how ultimately unique such an accomplishment was. Consider that the vast populace of humankind is made up of billions who do not possess even the slightest portions of purpose or passion. These persons are born . . . and for what? To achieve their maximum potential and make a significant and lasting contribution to mankind? On the contrary. Rather, they

go on to lead lives of utter futility, filling their days with work, food, entertainment, and sex. And again, for what?”

The president rose from his chair and strolled to the window overlooking the busy street three stories below. Peering down at the street and sidewalk traffic, he said, “Look at all these people, Julien. What do you think is going through their minds right now? What are they thinking about? Visions of greatness? How to make the world a better place? Thoughts of real significance? No. They’re thinking about getting to the next appointment. Where to eat for lunch. What movie they’ll watch online later tonight. Worthless mind debris.”

His nostrils flared as he turned back to me.

“Mere sheep! They are weak, and are deservedly weeded out by natural process. They become stepping-stones for those who actually know where they’re going. And soon they are all forgotten. They join billions whose lives meant nothing. *Less* than nothing. They breathed the air, contaminated the world with their consumerism, all the while taking up valuable space with their presence. So uninspiring. Their days are marked by a meaningless monotony of trivialities, with no thoughts beyond themselves and their immediate urges.

“But just occasionally”—he slowed his cadence, while his enthusiasm remained vibrant—“occasionally, history steps in and saves the day, surprising us—birthing Khufu, Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, or Napoleon. Men like these achieved greatness of a titanic measure, attaining godlike status. They are lifted high, towering over Earth’s historical landscape like Himalayan mountain peaks. And that day in Giza, I found myself relaxing against a colossal monument honoring one such individual.”

His disgust at the common man had quickly turned pensive. “And while taking a drink from my water bottle,” he reflected, “a thought formed in my mind: *Will the world ever witness such majestic greatness again? And if so, what would it look like? And who would achieve it?*”

“These questions kept reverberating in my brain, so incessantly that I could not dismiss them. And while pondering this human predicament, I heard a voice so clear I would have sworn someone was standing directly behind me. But turning around, I discovered I was all alone, with the exception of a few fellow tourists below at the pyramid’s base. The voice I heard simply asked, ‘Why not you, Adam?’”

He appeared for a few seconds to be frozen, paralyzed by thought. Then he once again picked up the pen, nervously stroking it with his thumb.

“The experience sent shivers down my back, Julien. I initially attributed the incident to heat exhaustion, as the temperature was blisteringly hot that day. And I also had not yet eaten. I have been exhausted before, even dehydrated. But I’ve never heard voices inside my head. I have always been one to side with rationality over subjective experiences or silly mysticism. And yet, this incident troubled me the rest of the day and on into the night. Finally, unable to sleep, I arose from my hotel bed and ambled toward the balcony door, thinking a bit of fresh air would do me good. Stepping out onto the terrace, I gazed up into the Egyptian night sky. Ah, the stars shone with such clarity against the velvet heavens that evening. I can still see them. And standing on that terrace, I reflected upon my experience at the pyramid, fondly recalling a proverb often repeated to me by my parents:

‘One may spend his days learning poetry, history,
religion, or science.

But no greater teacher, and no better friend, is the
priceless gift of self-reliance.’

“From childhood, my mother and father taught me this self-reliance as a basic operating principle for survival and success. And as the constellations would guide ancient mariners, since

that time I have adopted that principle as my own guiding virtue. Consequently, I have never looked to others for my needs, and never entertained the entitlement mentality that has infected the minds of so many in our day. Instead, I embraced the responsibility and the obligation to look after my own affairs. ‘Friends, family, and even lovers will let you down, son,’ Father would say, ‘but when everyone around you fails, you are inevitably left with yourself. Lean *inward*, son. The answers are found within.’”

“Your parents really did have a profound influence on you, didn’t they, sir?”

“Yes. Yes, they did,” he sighed. “And I have never forgotten their guidance. Today, I trust no one explicitly but myself. Though some have mistaken this for arrogance or having an air of ‘aloofness’ about me, nothing could be further from the truth. This autonomous self-government approach is, in reality, a wonderful gift to others and to the world, for it removes the burden for us to unnecessarily depend upon our neighbor. If everyone were responsible to fully care for themselves, the planet would be in a much better place than it is today. The so-called golden rule says to ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ But tell me, how can you ever do any good for anyone else if you have first not done good to yourself? You cannot skip over this critical step. It’s time we replace the golden rule with the more valuable *Platinum Rule*—‘Do unto yourself first, so that you are *able* to do well unto others.’”

“And how would you say this personal philosophy has served you, Mr. President?”

“Perceptive question. To begin with, this self-rule and independence was what saw me through college and graduate school. It’s what helped me win my first job in local government among dozens of other well-qualified applicants. It’s what drove me to run for election in the Italian Chamber of Deputies, and it enabled my appointment to the Committee on International Relations, which

I eventually chaired. You see, Julien, I had keenly watched from a distance my father's ascent through the ranks of Italy's Unicredit Bank. I don't have to tell you that becoming the chief financial officer of that world-renowned institution didn't happen by accident. His ambition was fueled by a fundamental belief in himself. Without it, he would have been left to the mercy of others and to the changing trends of the banking industry."

I interjected. "So, when the great disappearance last fall occurred—"

"Precisely!" he shot back emphatically, his open palm striking the table.

"This tragic, international crisis created a global leadership vacuum, as countries were virtually imploding by the hour. Simultaneous to this was the infighting and confusion which reigned in their houses of governments. While impotent world leaders wrung their hands in paralyzing confusion and misery, it was then I realized I no longer needed some mystical 'voice from a pyramid' to motivate me. No, it was my *own* voice which spoke to me this time, 'Why not me?' And, well, here we are. I am occupying what is undeniably the most influential chair on the planet. And it's exactly where I belong. All because of self-reliance."

And with those words came a knock at the conference room door, which then opened. "Mr. President, it's time for your meeting with the Russian ambassador."

The president nodded, turning to me with a self-assured expression. "Antonio," he called out, "what time am I meeting with Julien tomorrow?"

"You're scheduled for 2:00 p.m., sir."

"Right, 2:00 p.m.," he repeated. "Well then, I'll see you tomorrow at two, De Clercq." And he exited the conference room.

"Yes, Mr. President. I look forward to our next interview."

But it was not to be.