PART TWO
The heavy Boeing jet roared away from Raleigh-Durham International Airport, soaring high above the geometric loop and tangle of roadway, the emerald pastures and office parks, the spiderweb of creeks and rivers.

The higher the plane rose, the more a pattern materialized out of the chaos below, reminding Andie of zoomed-out shots of Earth, the solar system, and the Milky Way. She suspected the whole universe was like that, a pattern made of patterns, mimesis on a cosmic scale, everything a matter of perspective.

Turtles all the way up, down, and in between. Turtles hurtling through space and time.

She had a layover in Toronto, descending into the Canadian city as the horizon drew a line of fire above shadowed earth. Despite her frayed nerves and her promise to stay awake, she fell asleep during the red-eye to England.

As soon as the plane landed at Heathrow, she squeezed past her German seatmate without a word and hurried to customs. The line was horrendous. By the time she made it through, still blinking the sleep away, jet lag making everything fuzzy, it was 3 p.m. London time. She grabbed a cappuccino and an egg sandwich at Costa, hunkered down at a table, and debated what to do. Just to be safe, she
kept her phone off and purchased a burner with a prepaid internet plan at the airport.

The crush of people passing through Heathrow was dizzying. Andie had been to London before and loved it, but this time, the incessant flow of bodies and babble of foreign languages made her feel vulnerable.

Had someone watched her deplane? Followed her through customs?

A quick search told her the Victoria and Albert Museum closed at a quarter to six. By the time she could get there, it would be well after five. She didn’t want to rush her visit, and decided to wait until morning.

A year ago, after a presentation by Dr. Corwin at Imperial College, she had accompanied him on a visit to Professor Rickman’s third-floor flat near the Thames in Central London. She still remembered how to get there. As she finished her sandwich and tossed the wrapper into a futuristic recycling bin, she decided not to call him beforehand, and to do her absolute best to make sure she wasn’t followed.

The Temple station was the closest tube stop to the professor’s flat. A straight shot east from Heathrow on the Piccadilly line to Earl’s Court, then a change to the District line. Yet as the underground train bulleted past the rows of granite chimneys squatting grimly among the forests of glass and steel, she studied the wall map of the subway lines and made a snap decision to take a detour. Professor Rickman might not even be home yet, and she could further cover her tracks.

At Leicester Square, she changed for the Northern line, taking it five stops north to Camden Town. She exited with a pack of Londoners and tourists into a cauldron of grungy humanity. The smell of leather and incense and street kebabs. Tattoos of every type imaginable. Ripped clothing, piercings, hair dyes across the visible spectrum.

Andie felt right at home.
She knew CCTV was omnipresent in London. The question was whether the people pursuing her had access. Either way, she felt better as she ducked in and out of the maze of shops and crowded street stalls, winding her way toward the canal. She stopped to buy a British flag T-shirt, a lightweight green field jacket, a pocketknife, and a pair of sunglasses, then changed into the new outfit. She stuffed the knife in her pocket, and her other clothes in the backpack.

After grabbing a Cornish pasty for fuel, she decided it was time to get going. On the way to Professor Rickman’s flat, she changed tube lines three more times, hopping onto trains at the last second. Maybe she was being overcautious, but by the time she emerged into the city at the Temple station, she was reasonably certain she had managed to arrive unobserved.

The mercurial weather, which seemed to change block to block, had turned cooler, and the twilight sky began to spit rain. The gray sweep of the Thames was just across the street. Following her phone, she walked a block up to Fleet Street, where tall, handsome residential buildings with ground-floor commerce lined both sides of the avenue, punctuated here and there by a massive stone landmark. The crowd was whiter and far more conservative than in Camden Town. She walked a few blocks down Fleet, to a cobblestone lane squeezed between the buildings. Directly ahead loomed the dome of Saint Paul’s Cathedral.

After passing beneath an overpass and winding alongside an ancient pub, the little byway opened into a courtyard ringed by three and four-story brick flats. A tree with white blossoms twisted out of the ground in the center of the courtyard. She approached the first building on the left, unlatched a waist-high iron gate, and pressed the buzzer for Dr. Rickman’s apartment.

As she waited, she recalled what she knew about him. A tenured professor in Imperial College’s prestigious theoretical physics department, specializing in black holes and other condensed matter, Dr. Philip Rickman was a Welshman who had studied and taught in the United States for much of his career. He had been at Princeton at
the same time as Dr. Corwin and Andie’s mother. In addition to his love of cricket, she knew him to be a cellist and an accomplished chef who dabbled in molecular gastronomy.

She wasn’t sure how well he would remember her, if at all, but when he opened the door, he blinked and then greeted her with a hug.

“Andie Robertson? What in the devil are you doing here?”

She gave the courtyard a quick, nervous glance. “Can I come in?”

He blinked a few more times, perplexed, then ushered her up a flight of stairs and into his sitting room. The flat was small but well appointed, with a view of Saint Paul’s through the window.

A portly man an inch or two shorter than Andie, the professor had an owlish face and a trimmed beard that had grayed considerably since their last meeting. “I didn’t realize you were in London. I figured you would be . . .”

“Attending a funeral?” she said quietly.

“Yes. Yes, I suppose that’s right.” His face crumbled as he sank into a leather armchair facing a wall of bookshelves. “I can’t believe he’s dead.”

“Me either.”

“I’m sorry—may I offer you a drink? When did you arrive? Why didn’t you call?”

She took a seat in another armchair. “A glass of water would be nice.”

When she failed to explain further, he walked to the kitchen, returning with a glass of cold water.

“Is everything all right?” he asked gently. “I assume grief alone did not bring you across the Atlantic.”

Andie drank half the glass in one swallow and closed her eyes.

“I’m not sure where to begin.”

“Begin with what, dear?”

After setting the glass down, she steepled her fingers against her mouth and summarized the events of the last few days, leaving out the discovery of the Star Phone, Dr. Corwin’s journal, and the bizarre items she had found in his desk.
Professor Rickman’s pasty face turned even whiter, his blinking now incessant. When she finished, he rose to pour himself a Laphroaig single malt. “Would you care for one?”

“I think I will.”

He splashed more Scotch into a cut-glass tumbler. “I can’t believe someone tried to kill you.”

“Just so you know, I have no reason to think anyone followed me to London, and I took every precaution coming here.”

“Thank you. I’m glad you came. But isn’t it time to involve the authorities?”

“Dr. Corwin said not to trust anyone,” she said, leveling her stare at him.

After a moment, he said quietly, “Then why me?”

“You’re his closest friend. I need answers, or at least some insight.”

Instead of taking a seat again, he moved to stand by the window, pensive as he sipped his Scotch. “I’m afraid I don’t know what to say. Do you have any idea what he might have gotten himself into?”

“I came here to ask you the same question.”

“This project with Quasar Labs . . . he never mentioned it?”

“Never.”

“Nor to me. I suppose we didn’t know James as well as we thought we did.”

Her gaze slipped downward, stung by the truth of his words and frustrated by his lack of knowledge.

“If you’re not going to the authorities with this,” he said, “what are you planning to do?”

She looked up, eyes flashing. “I’m going to find out who killed him. *Then* I’ll go to the police.”

“Andie, I don’t think that’s—”

“I didn’t come to ask permission. I came for information. Promise me you’ll keep this between us for now, until I figure out what’s going on.”

He gave a slow nod. “If that’s your wish. Though I’m not sure
what to say, or how I can help.”

“You have no idea about a secret project he might have been working on?”

“My guess is you would know before I would.”

That surprised her. “Why would you say that?”

“Because he thought very, very highly of you, my dear.”

Andie buried her face in her glass, breathing in the peat, until she had control of her emotions. “But you knew him on a different level. You were peers.”

He hesitated, gently clinking his ice cubes.

“Dr. Rickman?”

“It’s probably nothing, just a strange conversation we had recently. I’m not sure I should break confidence and bring it up, but given the circumstances . . .”

“Please. Anything could help.”

“Well . . . you’re familiar with his pet project, the mathematical universe theory?”

She gave a soft smile. “He called it MUT.”

“That’s right. Quite frankly, I don’t give it much credence.”

“I think he saw it as a way to tie all the other theories together.”

“Of course, of course. I understand James’s mind-set. The theory of quantum physics, as we know it, is either incomplete or inconsistent. How can the observable universe consist of underlying particles that cannot even be measured until observed? Who did the initial observing? Where is the line drawn? And yet while we don’t understand why quantum theory functions as it does, we know the wave functions that describe these particles do work.”

“Wave functions are just math,” Andie said, “but if they work, then they must be real on some fundamental level.”

He rubbed his thumb against the glass. “In our last conversation, James postulated that reality, at the most basic level, might not just be described by mathematics—it might be mathematics.”

“He mentioned that to me before.”

“Maybe he was being metaphorical. But I don’t think he was that
I’m not sure what you’re saying.”

“We know our basic reality consists of four-dimensional space-time and the subatomic particles that underlie it. Setting aside the theoretical multiple dimensions of superstring theory, mainstream science acknowledges a deeper level, the place where the wave functions defining these quantum particles live.”

“Hilbert space,” she said.

“That’s right. An infinite-dimensional geometric construct that, again, we don’t really understand, but we use to describe the spaces in between. Just like with quantum physics, James thought there might be a way to utilize the infinite-dimensional formulas without really understanding them.”

“Hilbert space has been extensively studied.”

“Of course, my dear. Yet as far as I know”—he tipped his head and chuckled, as if whatever he was about to say did not bear much weight—“no one has tried to reach it.”

It was Andie’s turn to blink. “I don’t understand.”

“In our last conversation, James asked me quite earnestly what I thought would happen if we found a way to access Hilbert space.”

“Access it how? With a microscopy device? We’re nowhere close.”

Dr. Rickman returned to his seat and finished his Scotch with one swallow. “With our minds.”

“With our—that sounds like nonsense.”

“I thought the same,” he said quietly.

“And if it isn’t?” she said, taking a moment to digest his words.

“What would that even mean?”

“Quite frankly, I’ve no idea.”

“Did he tell you more about it? Why he thought this was possible? What he thought it would accomplish?”

“I asked the same questions, and he laughed them off, saying it was just a wild theory, and wouldn’t it be neat if we could peer behind the curtain?”

“Yeah, sure,” Andie said. “That would be neat.”
They both fell silent, and when Dr. Rickman rose to refill their glasses, Andie waved him off. She had to think clearly.

"Does the name Zawadi mean anything to you?" she asked. To her surprise, his eyes glanced quickly to the side, and she saw him swallow ever so slightly.

"I'm afraid not. Why?"

"The Unknown Nine? LYS? The Ascendants?"

"I've never heard of any of those."

"Why is he lying about Zawadi? Or isn't he?"

"I found a drawer in Dr. Corwin's desk," she said, thinking furiously about how much she was prepared to reveal. "It contained research on unexplained phenomena. Things like astral travel, ESP, and near-death experiences. I also saw the names I just mentioned."

"I've never heard him talk about these things."

"Me either. What about a Majorana Tower?"

"As in Ettore Majorana?"

She held a palm up.

He continued shaking his head. "The only field of speculative research I knew to interest James was electromagnetism. He'd go out on a limb there."

"I know he revered Tesla and Faraday."

"He was also intrigued by the mathematical concepts involved in consciousness, and their relation to the electromagnetic field surrounding the human body." He rose and started to pace. "I'm shooting in the dark here, but what if he was working on a way to tap into the body's energy field with a device of some kind? The establishment would laugh, which is why he'd keep it secret."

Andie began to gnaw on a thumbnail. She wanted to ask him about the Enneagon and the Star Phone but knew she couldn't trust him completely.

"If James broke new ground in the quantum arena," he said, "then you must understand how important this could be. We've all been waiting for the next leap. Whatever it is, the value to science—and commercial interests—will be incalculable. If someone even
thinks Dr. Corwin developed something groundbreaking . . .”

“A man with a gun just chased me five miles through the woods in the middle of the night. I think I’m aware of the seriousness of the situation.”

“Yes, yes, of course you are.” The professor’s eyes flicked nervously to the window, and he stood in the center of the room, looking very lost. “What can I do, Andie? How can I help?”

“If you think of anything else that might be relevant, shoot me an email.”

“That’s it?”

“For now, yeah. I can’t put anyone else in danger.” As she rose to leave, she kept thinking about that glimmer of recognition when she had mentioned Zawadi. She wasn’t sure what it meant, but there was too much at stake to let it go, too many unanswered questions.

“Who’s Zawadi?” she said, staring right at him.

“What? I already told you—”

“That folder I mentioned, in Dr. Corwin’s desk? Your name was listed right beside hers.”

Her lie made an impact. Dr. Rickman started to say something in response, thought better of it, then walked to the window and turned his back to her. The long silence spoke for itself. Still facing the window, he said, “Come back tomorrow night, at eight p.m. I have a function after work but will come home straightaway.”

“Why can’t you tell me now?”

“Eight p.m. And I can’t make any promises.”

“Promises about what?”

“I have to . . . talk to someone. I won’t mention your name. I promise.”

“Talk to who?”

“You’ll have to trust me.”

“Why should I?”

When he turned back around, a strange light had entered his eyes, shrewd and troubled. Somehow, he seemed taller than before, his posture more erect, his demeanor more confident.
“Because James did,” he said.
That caused her to pause, torn between her desire for answers and her wariness at his sudden change in behavior.
“I’ll meet you,” she said, reasoning she could always change her mind. “But not here.”
“Where?”
She thought for a moment. “The pub outside the courtyard. Come alone.”
“Fair enough. You don’t have to worry, Andie. At least not about coming here.”
“I hope not.”

Her face tucked inside the hood of her green field jacket, Andie hurried away from the professor’s flat, keeping to the shadows. Night had fallen, and she had to make a decision about where to sleep. Reaching into her memories of the city, the best option she could think of was Victoria Station, which had plenty of cheap hotels and access to transportation. It was also close to the V&A Museum.

Just to be safe, she took another circuitous route on the tube, thinking through all that had happened. She had never felt so out of her depth.

It was obvious Professor Rickman knew more than he had told her—but how much?
And who was this Zawadi person?
Despite his caginess, Andie felt like the professor was on her side. Still, not trusting the situation—which might be out of his control—she was relieved he had agreed to meet in a public place. She also reasoned, should her instincts about him be wrong, that he would be less willing to cause a scene in a pub right outside his flat. And it was a busy part of London, easy to get away if needed.

In her mind, the meeting was worth the risk. But she felt as if she were flying blind in the darkness, rushing into unknown peril with no copilot and no radar.
Tomorrow night I might have some answers.
One day at a time.

Starving and wired, she surfaced at Covent Garden to grab a bite to eat. All of the expensive shops were closed, leaving an assortment of flower vendors, pubs, sidewalk cafés, and street performers to entertain the tourists still clogging the main arcade. After grabbing fish-and-chips from a street vendor, she spied a side street that made her pause. Along the street was a line of stalls draped in black cloth and colorful silks. She drew closer and noticed a preponderance of body piercings, tattoos with occult symbology, and crystal jewelry.

Andie recognized the vibe from the old days, when she was still searching for an arcane answer to her visions. She had tried them all over the years: Wicca gatherings, faith healers, magic conventions, New Age festivals, ESP demonstrations.

The red-bearded man behind the first stall—a neodruid dressed in a black kilt and bronze wrist bands inscribed with runes—told her the market was a monthly gathering of the London Occult Society. On a whim, she took out one of the ink drawings she had found in Dr. Corwin’s desk and showed it to him. He had no idea what it was, but she started showing it around, asking if anyone had ever seen or heard of such a place.

The practitioners ran the gamut: theosophists, witches, clairvoyants, fortune-tellers, MK Ultra survivors turned remote viewers, tarot readers, the Society of the Inner Light. As with her past inquiries, no one had anything credible to offer. A hoodoo practitioner with dreadlocks hanging to her knees told Andie that for a small fee, she would throw the bones and see what they had to say. A LaVeyan Satanist leaned over a candle flame and professed that the drawing represented the prison of Andie’s own mind. She more or less agreed with that assessment.

Behind the next-to-last stall, a teenage girl with spiky green hair, dressed all in black and wearing purple lipstick, watched insouciantly as Andie approached. Her stall displayed a stack of books about the life of Aleister Crowley, pamphlets for the Ordo Templi Orientis,
and sample instructions for the Gnostic Mass.

The girl lifted a cigarette out of an ornate silver case. The head of a ram was tattooed on her neck. “You selling something?”

“No,” Andie said. “Why?”

She lit up, releasing an odor of cloves. “I saw you asking around.”

The teenager had a Caribbean accent, and the lighter shadows in the background of the ink drawing matched the color of her skin. After debating walking away, Andie decided she might as well show her the drawing. “Have you ever seen anything like this?”

The girl took the drawing and peered closer. “I think so.”

“You have?” Andie took a step forward, leaning over the stall.

“Where? When?”

“Silent Hill.”

“What’s that?”

“A video game.”

Andie yanked the drawing back.

“No, really,” the girl said. “What is it?”

“It’s not a game is what it is,” Andie snapped.

“C’mon. I was just winding you up.”

“Not what I need right now.”

“Look, I might know someone who could help, if I knew what it was.”

Andie put a hand to her temple in frustration. “I have visions sometimes. They look like this place. That’s all.”

The girl took a long drag and blew smoke out of the side of her mouth. “I’m just watching the stall for Mum. All this”—she waved a hand—“is for tourists.”

“Of course it is.”

“Then why bother? No offense, yeah, but it sounds like you need a good psychologist.”

Andie shook her head and started to walk away.

“I work at a bookstore a few nights a week,” the girl called out. “It specializes in religion and mysticism. The real stuff.”

Andie turned back, her voice mocking. “The real stuff?”
“Hey, I’m just into the music and the games. But the old white guy who owns it, all kinds of people come to see him. Mum says he’s *the* expert in London.” She took out a card from behind the stall. “In case you want it. And, hey, cool ring. Where’d you get it?”

Andie took the card and glanced down at the circular jade band entwined with silver on her left ring finger, feeling a twinge of long-buried pain. “It was my mother’s.”

As she walked away, she took off the ring and pocketed it, realizing it might be picked up on camera. Without much interest, she slipped the card the girl had given her into the same pocket. Andie had never seen anything come of her inquiries over the years, and doubted anything would change.

Even at night, a swarm of people choked the streets around Victoria Station. Tourists and commuters and off-duty laborers packed the dizzying array of pizzerias, kebab stands, bars, and street-side patios. The area was one of Andie’s least favorite in London, but at least she felt anonymous.

A plethora of cheap hotels in grungy Victorian buildings ringed the transport hub. She chose one at random and paid cash for two nights. Her room was cramped and musty, but she collapsed on the sagging bed, thankful to escape the beggars on the corners, the obnoxious tourists, and the claustrophobic streets reeking of garbage and stale beer.

Her mind was too piqued to sleep. In the madness of the last few days, she had not had time to research any of the weirdness she had found in Dr. Corwin’s journal. With nothing else to do, she lay on her side and did a little searching on her burner phone.

She learned that Zawadi was a feminine name in Swahili that meant “gift.” It was also a hotel in Zanzibar. She supposed it could refer to a meeting place involving her mentor, though judging from the conversation with Professor Rickman, she felt like it referred to a specific person.
Besides a few pop culture references, she found nothing useful on the Ascendants.

A search for “the Unknown Nine” was also unproductive. However, *The Nine Unknown* was a novel by an English-born American writer named Talbot Mundy. The title referred to a mythical secret society founded in ancient India to preserve and develop books of hidden knowledge.

A symbolic reference perhaps?

Googling “Leap Year Society” turned up nothing except for some innocuous groups formed by people born on February 29. Frustrated, she kept searching, scrolling through pages and pages of useless data. She paused when she found a Yahoo! Answers question posed by someone called DocWoodburn.

*Anyone out there know anything about the Leap Year Society?*

DocWoodburn Ÿ 9 days ago

The recent date caught her eye. So far, there were no responses to the inquiry.

Interestingly, she found the same question posed with the same username on Reddit, 4chan, and a number of other chat forums. The 4chan posting—which was mocked mercilessly by a few responders—asked anyone with knowledge of the Leap Year Society to contact DocWoodburn at *Seeker’s Corner* on Twitch.

Andie was familiar with Twitch. Gamers gravitated to it, but it attracted all sorts of people looking for a voice online. Curious, she created a new user ID, Mercuri999, based on her favorite scientist. She logged on and discovered a weekly broadcast billing itself as a live show crowdsourcing the truth out of modern conspiracies. The host was someone with the handle of DocWoodburn. The show was mildly popular, closing in on ten thousand followers. She listened to the most recent episode—which had occurred during the last week—and heard the host describe how a black van had pulled up right outside his residence, just after he mentioned the Leap Year Society.
Andie sucked in a breath. Before the last few days, she might have written that off as a publicity stunt. She did not do conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, or alien sightings. The host sounded like a kook. But if he knew something about the Leap Year Society . . .

She noticed DocWoodburn was online right that very moment, or at least had left his Twitch account open. She chewed on a thumbnail as she debated whether to contact him. Putting herself out there in any form was hazardous, but she was using a burner phone in an anonymous hotel room in London. In her mind, just like contacting Professor Rickman, acquiring information outweighed the risk of discovery.

She thought hard about what to say, then fired off a query.

Hey Doc r u there?
I am big fan and want discuss Atlantis New Hypothesis
Let’s see how smart DocWoodburn is.

She made the assumption that whoever had sent the black van to his house had a bot on the internet searching for mention of the Leap Year Society. She also had to assume that another bot, perhaps even a live user, was monitoring his Twitch account.

Ten minutes passed with no response. She figured he must be offline, or had failed to understand the reference. She left the account open, just in case, and resumed her other searches. Half an hour later, a response to her message appeared.

Aloha Mercuri! Do you mean a new theory about Atlantis?
No. I mean Atlantis New Hypothesis. A-N-H. Do you know it?

Inspired by the code Dr. Corwin had used on the Moleskine note, Andie had created a simple alphabetic cipher to disguise the name of the Leap Year Society, counting out the same number of letters between the initials. Thirteen letters separated L from Y, and counting backward, six from Y and S.

LYS = ANH. Atlantis New Hypothesis.

To connect the dots further, she had done all this in response to his post about the Leap Year Society.
Had he understood?
Sorry I am Latvia girl my English is not so great, she wrote.
It’s OK I understand completely
Thank you.
What’s the theory? I’d be very surprised to hear anything new about Atlantis.
Could Atlantis not we early taken alien life kreatures? She quickly corrected her purposeful typo: Very sorry be not we.
Andie bit her nails harder as she waited for his response. She had just sent him another encoded message, using the first letters of each word. Could Atlantis not we early taken alien life kreatures?
Can we talk?
She hoped the line was strange enough to catch his attention, and that he was clever enough to figure it out. For all she knew, her first veiled message had passed right by him, and he was simply humoring a foreign fan.
Half an hour later, she got a response.
You’re making me laugh, Mercuri. Do you mean could the people of Atlantis have been taken away in pre-history by alien life forms?
Yes!
Anything’s possible, but I’ve heard that one a thousand times.
Sorry. Thanks for listening to the show ☺️ welcome
DocWoodburn logged off of Twitch. She left her account open and paced the room, wondering if he had understood.
Twenty minutes later, she had a friend request from a user named Rhodies4ever351! The subject of the message was “Who Are You?”
A little thrill passed through her.
Just to be sure, she rattled off a quick response after she accepted the friend request.
Is this a house call by the doctor?
At your service. Though I usually only call on the last day of February.
Exactly what I wanted.
Your English seems to have markedly improved. Especially your alphabet.
Paranoia affects my speech patterns.
You too?
100%
Who are you?
A friend. Maybe.
Why maybe?
I don’t know you.
I don’t know you either. But I want to talk about “Atlantis.”
Me too.
It’s not safe here.
Where is safe?
Let me think about it and contact you.
Here?
For now yes.
When?
Soon.
OK.
Stay tuned and be smart. I think they are very dangerous.
Andie typed with a vengeance. I know they are.
How do you know?
Read the news about the physicist killed in Italy.

After that last message went through, Andie shut it down. She had gone as far as she was prepared to go, at least for the night. After checking the window and drawing the lone curtain tight, she put on some ambient electronica and curled into bed.

The next morning, Andie took a tepid shower and stuffed her belongings into her backpack, in case she wasn’t coming back. Relieved to see the Star Phone still worked, she wondered if it was solar-powered. She had heard Dr. Corwin speak of a theoretical electromagnetic battery that utilized quick sips of power and could last months
at a time. Maybe Quasar Labs had developed the idea.

After a takeaway coffee and croissant near the hotel, she took the Circle line two stops west to South Kensington. A five-minute walk down busy Cromwell Road brought her to the doorstep of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

She paused on the marble steps as tourists flowed like ants in and out of the monolithic arched entrance. The random chatter made her feel both invisible and all-knowing, as if everyone around her were actors in a play of which only she—and the shadowy people chasing her—were aware. A metareality she had stumbled onto and could not escape.

Pushing away thoughts of her impending meeting with Professor Rickman, she gripped the Star Phone in her pocket and stepped beneath the carved muses of Knowledge and Inspiration overlooking the twin doors of the museum.
As soon as Omer cleared customs in London, he taxied to a safe house in the West End, using a key to unlock the dead bolt on the outer door. The ivy-covered three-story brick townhome blended right in with the other residences in the posh Knightsbridge neighborhood.

The inner door, built into a customized foyer, was crafted from African blackwood with a reinforced steel core. The keypad restricted entry with a nine-digit code, as well as a biometric hand-geometry reader. Once inside, Omer climbed to the second floor as he gave a series of commands to an AI voice assistant programmed especially for the safe houses. Coded to Omer’s preferences, the AI turned on the lights, ran through the nightly menu options, and pumped a selection of modern violin concertos through hidden wireless speakers.

Though he had not slept more than a few hours over the last three days, and had remained alert during the flight, he did not succumb to exhaustion. Especially not after the escape of the target in Durham. Omer had given up everything for his ambition: family, home, even his true identity. But the Ascendants had recruited him to complete specific missions. They did not tolerate failure.

So instead of collapsing, he stripped down and stepped into a glass enclosure for a freezing-cold shower. Because he was conditioned to withstand extremes of temperature, the twenty-minute
shower melted away the stiffness, and after toweling off he performed his breathing exercises on a Persian rug in the bedroom.

Omer was a faithful adherent of hormetism, the practice of subjecting oneself to low doses of substances or activities that in larger amounts were harmful—even fatal—to the human body. The biological phenomenon of hormesis was similar to homeopathy, yet not unknown to traditional science, which had learned that organic systems generally respond in a positive manner to negative stimuli, as long as they are given time to adapt. Alcohol, caffeine, and trace amounts of metals can all have beneficial effects but are toxic in the extreme. An athlete lifting weights, a yogi, a long-distance runner: every time muscles are broken down, the body rebuilds them stronger. The flu vaccine works on the same principle. Same with allergen immunotherapy.

The old adage was true: that which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

While the Mossad had trained him well, the race to acquire the world’s top technologies was a ruthless game, played out across the globe by governments, multinational corporations, and a rogue’s list of shadowy organizations. To gain an upper hand, Omer had embraced hormesis. If the practice worked for some things, he hypothesized, why not for others? Why not for all things?

Dioxin, a cousin to Agent Orange, had benefits at low doses. So did heat shock. Calorie restriction. Hyper-gravity and anti-gravity. Poisons. Suffocation. Viruses. Not only had Omer developed resistance or immunity to a laundry list of harmful agents, but he had developed an amount of control over physical processes that modern science would scarcely believe. He could regulate his body’s production of hormones, such as adrenaline and serotonin and, with enough time for meditation, could even influence his nervous and immune systems.

He slipped into a silk robe and checked his phone. No word yet. He entered the kitchen and downed one of the drug cocktail packets: combinations of vitamins, minerals, and performance enhancers
with which all the safe houses were stocked. For dinner, he devoured a grass-fed rib eye, sautéed duck livers, and a side of broccolini, all washed down with a glass of Argentinian malbec.

If only Juma were in town! The very thought of her perfect breasts and lips like crushed velvet made him wonder if the principles of hormetism could somehow be applied to intense sexual behavior.

He was sure that it could . . .

After sinking into the king-size bed, secure within the safe house, Omer slept until dawn. He took another cold shower, dressed, stuck his zip gun into a concealed holster, and strapped a high-carbon full-tang fixed blade into his boot sheath.

The text he was dreading came during breakfast.

Call us.

After a swallow of coffee, he stared down at his smoked salmon, knowing his superiors were not pleased. Trying to imagine their response was tormenting him. The punishment for dereliction of duty in the organization was not death, but something just as final.

Abandonment.

Omer did as he was told. A digitized voice answered the call on the second ring. “Contact has been initiated.”

Omer sat up straight. “Where is she?” They gave him an address for a hotel near Victoria Station. “Should I take her now?”

“Rest. See where she goes today. We have others in place.”

“Understood.”

There was a long pause. “When the time is right, we trust she won’t escape this time? The Archon was not pleased.”

A flicker of fear swept through Omer, despite his mental training. Archon simply meant “ruler” or “lord” in ancient Greek, and the secrecy around the head of his order was so great that not even a given name was known. It was not just that the Archon could snuff Omer’s path to Ascension—or his life—with a whispered command to the others. There were strange stories, tales of secret knowledge at their leader’s disposal. Stories of prisoners who had killed themselves rather than face prolonged interrogation.
He took a deep breath to bring his apprehension under control. Caution was healthy, normal. There would always be people more dangerous than he.

Fear, on the other hand, was a distractor. A mental weakness that, like any other, can and should be controlled.

Omer spoke quietly into the phone. “I’ll do better.”

“We hope so. You should know the protocol has changed as well.”

“To what?”

“Elotisum.”

The line went dead without further explanation, leaving Omer to figure out the rest. With a little shudder, he began adjusting his preparations, thinking through how to proceed. Elotisum was a special, elevated version of the deliverance protocol. An edict of the highest importance.

Elotisum meant the Archon wanted to conduct the interrogation.
Beverly Hills isn’t even a real place, Cal thought as he drove down a commercial avenue lined with expansive gold-framed windows displaying an endless parade of luxury goods, shuttered for the night but still gleaming in the aura of the streetlamps. Meant to emulate the finest old-world Europe had to offer, the architecture instead smacked of new wealth, nothing subtle or refined about it.

Porsches, Range Rovers, and Bentleys were as common as minivans in a suburb. A Lamborghini Aventador had just roared by. Cal’s battle-worn Jeep Cherokee felt like an old Yugo sputtering down the Moscow Ring Road on the way to a vehicular nursing home.

The destination was the Mandrake Hotel, a limestone tower right in the diamond-studded, silicone-laced heart of the neighborhood. If Dane’s info was any good—and it always was—then the company that owned the black van was in turn owned by a man, Elias Holt, who frequented a secret club called the Infinity Lounge on the thirteenth floor of the Mandrake on select nights of the month.

Tonight was just such a night. Not wanting to be seen when he arrived—or rolling up in a pedestrian ride sure to raise eyebrows—Cal parked two streets over from the hotel. He grabbed a peak-lapel tuxedo jacket from the back seat and threw it over a silk gray T-shirt.
and his lone pair of designer jeans. The outfit had served him well over the years, when he needed to mingle. He had splurged on the tux for a friend’s wedding over a decade ago and was pleased it still fit. A frugal lifestyle was good for the waistline.

Carefully trimmed stubble, a pair of slip-on loafers, and Cal felt right at home. His real disguise was the bleach-blond wig, horn-rimmed tinted glasses, pencil mustache, and zirconium stud earring, all of which he had taken from his props chest. Following the advice an actor friend had given him long ago, Cal changed his walk to an arrogant swagger, a peacock’s strut. Observers keyed on body language as much as appearance.

He knew he was taking a risk, but Cal wanted to lay eyes on Elias. Besides, they already knew where he lived, so what changed if they spotted him in a public place?

He tried not to think too hard about the potential answer to that question. His strange Twitch chat with Mercuri999 had left him even more convinced he was on the trail of something important, and perhaps very dangerous. Whoever she was, unless Cal’s guess was way off, Mercuri knew about the Leap Year Society. He had gotten chills when, following her tip, he read about the physicist gunned down in Bologna. The news report said it was a robbery gone wrong, but an American professor shot to death outside a nice hotel in a sleepy part of western Europe, by some random guy in a hoodie?

Unh-uh.

Halfway down the block, Cal cut through a narrow lane with immaculate paving stones, its line of dumpsters tucked discreetly behind tiled walls and potted palms. Goddamn, even the alleys are nice.

Dane had provided an identity and the name of the club. Cal’s own research had uncovered that Elias Holt was the founder of a business, Aegis International, which specialized in security for technology companies. Cal dug a little deeper and uncovered a number of employees with backgrounds in intelligence and private defense firms. He had investigated enough of those types to know that, except for deep undercover ops, people with those backgrounds did
not conceal their former employers. They simply didn’t disclose the nature of their work. “Overthrew a foreign government” or “expertise in persuasive interrogation” was never a good look on a résumé. Unless, he mused, you were searching for a job in sales.

Onyx sculptures of faceless human figures, chandeliers hanging from a thirty-foot ceiling, and a polychromatic waterfall fountain greeted Cal in the lobby of the Mandrake Hotel. After walking in like he owned the place, he nodded to the concierge, took a wrong turn into the restroom, then doubled back and discovered the elevators were situated behind the sheet-thin flow of the waterfall.

Like many hotels, in a nod to triskaidekaphobia, the Mandrake did not have a thirteenth floor. Cal viewed the avoidance of the number 13 as a ridiculous practice—but one that he followed himself, if it didn’t put him out too much.

He was fully aware that humanity had a long history of succumbing to ignorant beliefs based on primitive superstition. On the other hand, the world was teeming with unexplained mysteries. There was usually some fact behind the fiction, and as the old adage went, sometimes the truth was the strangest thing of all.

After exiting on the fourteenth floor, Cal found a staircase and descended one flight to a landing, where a door led back into the hotel. A thirteenth floor did exist—it just wasn’t for guests.

That was about all Cal knew in advance, except the cover charge was a cool hundred dollars, and two grand for table service.

What a load of LA bullshit.

The door opened onto a hallway with Moroccan-patterned carpeting and blue velvet walls, dead-ending at a red lacquer door. From behind him came the echo of a set of footsteps on the stairs. Another potential patron, he hoped.

But maybe not.

Notes of remixed electro pop floated down the hallway. When he opened the door, he caught a clubby aroma of musk and cedar. The muscular Japanese doorman standing just inside, with his earpiece and fancy vest, looked on loan from the yakuza.
As Cal was being frisked, he heard the door to the stairwell open. He glanced back and saw with relief that it was just a leggy brunette wearing high heels and an iridescent cocktail dress. She shimmered with the sort of almost-movie-star good looks that were as common in LA as traffic jams.

The Infinity Lounge had plenty of open space and a funky retro-future vibe. Lots of neon streaks under dim lighting, silver banquettes, cocktails served in geometric blown glass and smoking with liquid nitrogen. Most of the people were dressed in getups from the Roaring Twenties, gangsters and molls and Gatsby clones.

All in all, a very LA speakeasy. Cal didn’t quite understand the theme. But he never really did.

He sidled to a portion of the bar next to a fish tank lit with psychedelic coral. Along the far wall, downtown glittered through a line of pinched windows. He ordered a fancy bourbon cocktail, the first on the menu, and scanned the room.

It took a minute of casual observation before he noticed Elias sitting in a semicircular banquette, dressed in a chocolate-brown four-button suit with a vest. He was performing a card trick, to the delight of the small crowd surrounding him. The back of the playing cards depicted a rocket shooting into outer space.

Cal moved closer. Elias had changed so much from his online photo that at first Cal didn’t recognize him. Instead of the awkward young genius whose gaming start-up was gobbled up by Sony—the only picture of him online—the sandy-haired, cleft-chinned CEO holding court at the silver banquette was as suave and attractive as the aspiring actors in the room. Though still thin, his face was firm-jawed, his tanned skin flawless. Sharp cerulean eyes demanded attention. White teeth gleamed. When the trick was finished, Elias stood and spun the cards through his fingers so fast it was hard to follow. He built a multilayered pyramid in seconds, right in the center of the table. Mesmerized, the crowd clapped when it was over, and Elias graced them with a bow.

According to Cal’s research, Elias had graduated at the top of his
class from Stanford, obtaining dual degrees in math and computer science. He was on the chess team, a member of the Magicians Club, and had won an award for a published journal article on machine learning, a rare feat for an undergrad. After graduation, he designed some apps and then helmed a virtual reality start-up. In an interview with *Wired* magazine, Elias—wearing thick glasses and clothing that looked secondhand—had referred to himself as a computer nerd and talked about his love of video games, as well as his struggles to relate to others throughout his life.

After selling his first company, as far as Cal could tell, Elias had fallen off the radar. There was no mention of him in any press release or public forum, except for his listing as CEO of the security company with the California Secretary of State, a required financial reporting. But Aegis was formed nearly ten years after Elias sold his first company.

Where had he gone? What had he done?

Cal never forgot a face. That was Elias Holt; he was sure of it. Yet as he watched him flirt with the knockout redhead beside him, he wondered what had caused such a radical transformation.

It was almost as if, somewhere along the way, Elias had become a completely different person.

Cal snapped some photos of Elias and his admirers by palming his cell phone against his thigh. When a seat at the adjoining banquette opened up, Cal sidled over.

Elias had switched from card tricks to mentalism. He began by “reading the minds” of the people around him, and then took a slow walk around the detached banquette, lifting jewelry off of a burly Latino man without him noticing. When pressed for his secrets, Elias spouted psychobabble about how the human brain can process only so many things at one time, and how magic is simply another form of technology that appears supernatural to those who do not understand it. Quantum physics labs around the world, he claimed, were performing feats that would appear “magical” to nonscientists.

Cal had no beef with that.
When the crowd around Elias dwindled, Cal left the hotel, retrieved his Cherokee, and idled down the street in front of a sushi restaurant with a view of the entrance to the Mandrake. He ignored his hunger pangs as the night went on. Cal loved sushi. He wished he could still afford it.

An hour later, Elias stepped out with a pair of women, followed by two men in dark suits. After the entourage climbed into a custom Lincoln Navigator, Cal used binoculars to catch the plate, then followed the Lincoln from a safe distance as it turned onto Santa Monica and later into a flat, manicured, palm-lined neighborhood. Once they began to climb into the landscaped hills, where the true wealth resided, Cal grew nervous about the lack of traffic. He had to fall back or risk being spotted.

After rounding a curve and encountering an empty road, he spotted the lights of the Navigator disappearing down a driveway accessed by an ornamental iron gate. Cal kept driving so as not to raise suspicion. He caught the house number but could see only the flat-topped roof of the mansion above a Mexican-tile wall that surrounded the property. He also noticed security cameras atop the gate.

After cruising up the hill, he parked as far away from Elias’s house as he could while keeping the gate in view. Unsure what to do next, he debated trying to order a pizza to a parked car when a pair of headlights swung into view. He gripped the steering wheel as a black van sped up the hill, the gate to the mansion opened, and the van disappeared inside.

_Thank God I parked near the top._

Worried a neighbor might get nervous and alert the cops, Cal left and took a different route home. He reheated a plate of pasta as he scratched Leon’s ears, cracked a beer, and ate on his patio, deep in thought.

Halfway through his second beer, he returned inside and fired off a text to Dane.

_I need help. Call me._

To his surprise, Dane called him back within minutes. He sounded
as alert as ever, despite the fact that it was 2 a.m. “Help with what?”

“The name you gave me,” Cal said.

“What kind of help?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Okay . . . Why don’t you tell me more. As in everything.”

“I can’t pay you,” Cal said. “At least not yet. I had to give up cable this month.”

“It’s not all about money.”

“Then what?”

“Is it my imagination,” Dane said, “or did you not text me five minutes ago asking for my help?”

“What I have in mind could get very real. Just like you, I prefer to work with transparent motives.”

“This coming from a man whose former job description included the art of disguise and false entry? Let’s just say I’m intrigued, had too much caffeine today, and that Aegis International and I have very different philosophies on how the world should work. I’m afraid that’s all the motive you’re going to get. Take it or leave it.”

Cal debated how far to trust him. The man had his faults, for sure. In a room full of people, Dane would probably piss off 99 percent of them. Also, despite his gruff exterior, he was an idealist. Cal didn’t trust idealists. When push came to shove, he feared Dane would put his ideologies ahead of Cal’s interests, and maybe even his safety.

On the other hand, Cal was also a bit of an idealist, and if he wanted to take this further, he needed the sort of help Dane could give.

Seeing little alternative, Cal told him about his research on Aegis and Elias Holt, and everything he had witnessed that evening. “I need to get inside that house,” he finished.

After a long pause, Dane gave him a new cell phone number to look out for. “I’ll be in touch.”

As noon rolled around, while Cal was scrambling to meet a deadline for an internet news site in Australia, a piece on transcontinental
political conspiracies during the Vietnam War, he received a text from the number Dane had given him.

Gates open at 3 p.m. No guards on-site.
No owner?
Spa appt.
How do you know?
Unimportant.
Unless it’s false info.

There was no response to that, so Cal shook his head and added, Anything else?
Check your mailbox, and use only this number.

After hurrying down his front walkway, Cal found an anonymous package wrapped in brown paper inside the mailbox. After returning inside, he opened the package and found a USB flash drive.

He set it on the kitchen table and exhaled a deep breath. He knew what Dane wanted, and he wasn’t playing around.

The afternoon appointment did not surprise him. Security was tighter at night in most places.

So let’s do this.

He had already thought through the scenario. After renting a van for the day, he finished the conspiracy piece and fired it off, then paced his living room to steel up his nerve. He was afraid of these people and how deep in the shadows they lived. Whoever they were, he got the sense they played for keeps. Mercuri999 seemed to think so too.

But one did not succeed as an investigative journalist without learning to deal with fear.

And one most certainly did not get one’s life back without taking a few risks.

Just before 3 p.m., under a blazing midday sun, Cal turned his white rental van onto Elias Holt’s street. An hour earlier, after leaving the house dressed in jeans and a blue work polo with a SUNSHINE
PLUMBERS logo, he had picked up the rental and plastered a matching decal on the side.

Years before, Cal had ordered the uniform and the car decal for just this sort of situation. None of the neighbors would look twice. The question was whether Dane could deliver what he had promised.

Just as Cal reached the driveway, the high iron gate hummed and began to part. He caught his breath and prayed Dane was right about the lack of on-site bodyguards. If not, Cal was about to be stuffed into a black van and disappeared.

The gate closed behind him as soon as he pulled through. The driveway led up a hill lined with manicured cypress. He assumed Dane had overridden the security cameras, and hoped the hacker was keeping an eye on him.

Cal parked as close to the modern trilevel mansion as he could get. Up close, the gleaming white villa was a stunner, an elegant jigsaw puzzle of glass and marble. The patio was a whisper of slender pillars and billowing canvas sheets that opened onto an infinity pool overlooking the golden-brown hillside. The Mexican-tile wall and lush landscaping ensured complete privacy.

Cal had no idea how much the place was worth, but there was no time to dwell on the lives of the rich and famous. He hurried to the front door, flinching at the presence of another camera. Before his hand reached the doorknob, the keypad lock whirred and the door opened on its own. He guessed the entire house was wired to the security system. Very safe and convenient—until someone like Dane decided to hack it.

Inside, Cal took a moment to orient himself, knowing he had very limited time to find a computer and hoping Elias had not carried his laptop to the spa. The bottom floor of the mansion was full of gadgets, fancy appliances, and sleek white furniture that looked about as comfortable as a church pew. A circular robot whirred into the living room, startling him. He assumed it was picking up dust and ignored it.

Just because there was no security didn’t mean there were no
visitors. Could Dane see into all the rooms? He took a moment to text him.

I'm in.

The reply came swiftly: I know.

U sure I'm alone?

Reasonably.

Cal swore and hurried through the kitchen, dining room, living room, piano room, and guest suite. No sign of a computer.

He took the stairs two at a time, ears cocked for an approaching vehicle. All of the doors on the second floor had been removed, and the rooms were full of mixed-media paintings and objets d’art on elaborate stands. The art was of the modern ilk—abstract and bizarre—and sported a theme: the transformation of mankind and planet Earth by technology. Much of the work resembled a digital fever dream of people and places warped into pixelated images. Papier-mâché figures made of bytes, emerging out of caves in the bushveld. Pop-art tapestries of classic cars driving into outer space. One entire room had been cleverly painted to induce a three-dimensional feeling of stepping into a futuristic cityscape.

On the third floor—the living quarters—Cal worried someone would pop out of one of the doors in the long, silent hallway. Yet no one did, and he grew excited when he found a Lenovo desktop in the study attached to the master bedroom. He didn’t bother trying to figure out how to unlock the screen; he inserted the flash drive and texted Dane.

We're on.

The computer expert repeated his earlier reply.

I know.

Cal rolled his eyes and paced the room. The paneled study had a private elevator and vintage wooden furniture. The decor was an ode to the art of stage magic: enameled decks of playing cards; handcuffs and wands and other props displayed in glass cabinets; framed photos of Houdini. A floor-to-ceiling bookshelf was stocked with historical tomes on illusions, escapes, mentalism, and other tricks.
The blend of magic and technology in the house, reminiscent of the Infinity Lounge, made Cal wonder if Elias sponsored the private club himself.

Or what if the club had another purpose? A gateway into the Leap Year Society for a select few, like the online puzzle?

*He probably started it to get laid.*

*Not that he would need it.*

When the desktop unlocked, Cal rushed over to take a look. The background image was a grayish circle that filled most of the screen, blurred at the edges to lend it a mysterious, otherworldly aura. Two words were inscribed in fancy font along the bottom, though Cal had to move some folders and app icons around to read them.

*Ascensio Infinitus*

After rearranging the desktop a bit more, he gripped the mouse when he saw a large *L* filling the left side of the background image, and an *S* on the right. The *Y* in the middle stretched artfully across the entire diameter of the circle.

*LYS*

Cal’s eyes whisked hungrily across the screen, scanning the names of the folders. Most of them appeared to pertain to Aegis, and he knew he didn’t have time to sort through them all. He thought Dane would have taken control of the cursor, but the USB drive was flashing, so the big man must be content with a remote data transfer.

The names of the folders drew Cal’s attention. Nootropics. Paleoacoustics. Ocular Nanotech. Compelling stuff, but there was an itch he wanted to scratch. After pulling up the search bar on the start menu, he typed in his own name, not really expecting a result.

To his surprise, there was a hit: a zip file nested in an archived folder titled *Closed Marks*. A hollow feeling started to expand inside him when he saw his name in alphabetical order among a long string
of others. When he clicked on his name, he saw his entire life laid out before him, in a series of Word docs and PDF files.


Opening the Personal Information file revealed a list of his hobbies, haunts, favorite restaurants, daily routine, dog walk routes, everything. Chills swept through him as he checked the dates on the folders and the zip file. As best he could tell, they had started a file on him the same day he had published the piece on PanSphere’s black-site lab.

The last entry was the day he was fired.

He stared at the file in disbelief. These are the people. These are the bastards who ruined my life. With a shaky hand, feeling in his bones that somewhere in the zip file was proof that his source had been authentic and the evidence against him falsified, he started to move the file onto the USB drive, just to be sure it got on, when the screen flashed twice and went blank.

Stunned, he started pressing keys at random, trying to unlock the screen. A buzz from his phone caused him to look down. It was Dane again.


Cal pounded on the keyboard. “No, goddammit!”

But he knew it was useless. He jumped to his feet, wanting to take the entire desktop and instead grabbing the USB drive. The desktop was too heavy to run with, it might have a tracker, and it was surely now compromised. After stepping toward the elevator and deciding that entering an automated coffin was a bad idea, he dashed into the hallway and raced to the stairs.

A floor-to-ceiling window on his left provided a view of the street below Elias’s house. At the edge of his line of sight, he saw a black van turn onto the street.

I’m never going to make it.

By the time he fled down the stairs and out the front door, he
could hear the van’s engine roaring up the hill. Dane had left the gate open, and Cal raced for his rental, trying to judge whether he could reach the gate before the van blocked him in. He doubted it. But he didn’t see another option.

As he sprinted away from the house, a familiar electronic whir caused his stomach to lurch. He reached the driveway and confirmed his suspicion: they were closing the gate on him. The black van didn’t even have to beat him to the house. They could just trap him inside.

In a panic, he thought about where he could hide, and debated ramming the gate with the rental van. He discarded both ideas, turned, and sprinted for the wall behind the house. It was out of view of the driveway. If he cleared it quickly enough, he might have a small window to escape. The problem was the height of the wall. Nine feet at least. In high school, Cal could dunk a basketball, but that was twenty years and thirty pounds ago.

Already huffing from the run, he jumped for the top of the wall, managed to grip it with both hands, and hung on for dear life. His toes slipped through the ivy as he scabbled for a foothold. Shouts came from the driveway as his forearms burned with the effort. At last he found a notch in the stone, dug in with his left foot, and threw an elbow atop the wall. He risked a glance back and saw two armed men in dark suits slipping through the gate just before it closed. With a heave that brought him the rest of the way up, unsure if the men had seen him, Cal threw himself over the wall and onto the scrub-covered hillside below.
Cautiously hopeful the bust of Democritus held a secret connected to the location of the Enneagon, or would help her solve Dr. Corwin’s murder in some way, Andie stepped through a set of double doors that granted access to an entrance hall supported by marble pillars.

Admission was free to the renowned gallery, which boasted the world’s largest collection of decorative art and design. Millions of paintings, ceramics, costumes, textiles, and other objects filled the museum, spanning over five millennia of human history. Inside a vast hall to her right was a reconstructed Roman villa, replete with life-size statues, fountains, and carved Ionic columns. The ceiling rose up through the higher floors and set the tone for the grandeur of the museum.

After checking her backpack and passing through security, she took a moment to orient herself. She had studied the map online but wanted to be aware of her surroundings in person, especially the exits. She observed the other visitors as well. No one jumped out at her as suspicious, but there were so many people it was impossible to keep an eye on everyone. She would just have to get on with it.

With over seven miles of galleries, the museum resembled a gigantic square doughnut, four massive wings on four main floors surrounding an open-air green space in the middle. Before leaving
Durham, she had called to verify the bust of Democritus was on display, and after asking for directions at the information desk, she walked through the gift shop toward the central courtyard, where dozens of visitors were basking on the lawn or dipping their toes in the shallow basin of the fountain. Just before entering the courtyard, she ascended a wide staircase to the third story—in British parlance, the second floor.

Halfway down a hallway covered in frescoes and mosaics, she turned down a wide corridor with a line of glass display cases in the center. More cases were attached to the wall on her right. To her left, a balcony overlooked the Roman villa.

According to the information desk, this hallway was home to the Democritus bust.

Dozens of small objects filled the glass cases: statues, masks, pottery, metalwork. Andie walked the room once, didn’t see the bust, and then returned more slowly, eyeing each and every piece. She finally spotted it in a display case in the center, about halfway down the hall. The carving was made of beige soapstone and much smaller than she had expected, not even six inches high. The bust portrayed Democritus with a beard and a sharp nose, dressed in the classic robes of a Greek philosopher. The head was turned slightly to the right, covered by a tight-fitting hat similar to a skullcap. A sly grin suggested the wily old scholar was in possession of a secret.

*Let’s see about that.*

As a steady stream of tourists wandered through the hallway, Andie bent to study the bust. Unlike the larger pieces in the museum, the knickknacks in the display case had no descriptive placards. She stared at the bust for some time, unsure what to do, and felt eyes on her back. Trying not to overreact, she turned and saw a smiling woman with cropped gray hair limping toward her, a museum badge pinned to her chest.

“What can I help with anything?” the woman asked.

“Just browsing.”

“Of course.”
“Actually—do you have any more information on this bust of Democritus?”

The worker pointed at a tiny crystal cube in the display case, placed between Democritus and the next piece over. “That tells you where to look in the information booklet.” Her finger moved to a corner of the room, where a binder dangled from a chain attached to one of the cases.

Andie leaned in. She had noticed the crystal, but not the number 32 lightly engraved on the surface. What an odd way to provide information. Maybe it was meant for the staff.

“They called him the Laughing Philosopher,” the woman said, “because of the way he mocked human folly.”

“We’re a pretty easy target.”

“The sad chap next to him is Heraclitus, the weeper. They were often paired together in eighteenth-century sculpture. The stone is steatite, you know. It’s quite rare.”

She wandered off, leaving Andie questioning why she had spoken to her and no one else. Was she being paranoid? Or was it a message of some sort?

What if the woman was about to go report her presence to someone?

A glance at the binder revealed the artist, Johann von Lücke, and the date, 1757. The woman had conveyed the rest of the pertinent information.

Andie grew nervous about standing in the hallway for so long. A heavyset Indian man with glasses, chapped lips, and hair curling out of his ears had entered not long after Andie. He was still there, perusing one of the cases near the far end, wearing a puffy gray jacket that seemed too warm for the season.

Was she missing something? What was she supposed to do? Or was the image of Democritus on the Star Phone a red herring, a simple screen saver? Was all of this a product of her twisted imagination, like her visions probably were?

Forcing away her doubts, she recalled what she knew about the ancient philosopher. Why had Dr. Corwin chosen Democritus
instead of Heraclitus, the old man sitting right beside him?

Was it a statement? Laughter over tears? Or was someone laughing at her?

Born around 460 BCE, Democritus was a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher who made a startling array of contributions. Though none of his writings survived, his works were quoted and referenced by plenty of ancient writers. He had penned lengthy treatises on subjects as wide-ranging as epistemology, aesthetics, literary critique, ethics, language, politics, anthropology, biology, mathematics, and cosmology. Democritus had believed in a spherical Earth and the existence of multiple worlds, and posited that the Milky Way was a dense mass of stars.

Knowledge far, far ahead of its time.

Yet the reason many—including Dr. Corwin—considered Democritus “the father of modern science” was his work on atomism. Democritus had argued—shocking Andie when she had discovered it—that all matter is composed, at the basic level, of tiny invisible atoms; that these atoms are always in motion and are indestructible; and that a void exists around and among these atoms.

Before Andie began studying science, she had never even heard of Democritus. In college, she would have pegged the Enlightenment—at the earliest—as the genesis of atomic theory. And to some extent, she would have been right. Plato fought to bury Democritus’s ideas. Aristotle respected him but rejected his ideas on the atom. Due to conflicting philosophies and other factors—chiefly the suppression of scientific theory by the church—atomic theory would not be revived until Descartes and Boyle in the seventeenth century.

Incredibly, Democritus had hypothesized the invisible building blocks of reality two thousand years before the West threw off the shackles of Aristotelian physics.

*In reality, we know nothing, since truth is in the depths.*
A saying attributed to Democritus. Andie gave a little shiver thinking about how far humanity might have progressed had his ideas caught on.

While she bowed to his intellect, she identified with sadness more than laughter as representative of the human condition. The ancient philosopher had urged his followers to strive for a state of ultimate good or cheerfulness, in which the soul lives in tranquility. That was something Andie couldn’t get behind. Democritus was a trust fund baby who had traveled the ancient world on his parents’ dime. How hard was it to have a sunny disposition when loafing around the agora or strolling through the Hanging Gardens of Babylon?

She stared hard at the bust. Those parted lips seemed to mock her. After glancing around and noticing the Indian man bent over a different glass case, she took the Star Phone out of her pocket. If he or anyone else was watching, they must already know she had it.

Or maybe not. Maybe no one but she knew what Dr. Corwin had kept inside that safe.

In any event, she didn’t know if she would have another chance at this. Feeling rather foolish, she waved the Star Phone around the room, then aimed it at the bust of Democritus. When nothing happened, she peered through the camera eye and got the same disappointing result.

Maybe the appearance of the old woman—where had she disappeared to?—had significance. She had led Andie to the information booklet, yet before that, she had pointed out the tiny crystal cube beside the steatite bust. Pretending to snap a photo, Andie aimed the Star Phone directly at the cube. No effect. She pressed the device to her face and peered into the camera eye, and then the room started to spin.

Reeling, Andie lurched backward and stumbled into someone, thinking she was having another of her visions. But no shadowy realm appeared, and the room stabilized as soon as she looked away from the Star Phone.

After apologizing to the startled teenager behind her, realizing
the device must have caused the effect in some way, Andie exhaled and tried a second time, doing her best to look innocuous. As soon as she focused on the crystal cube, the room spun again. This time, she held on as the cube expanded into a life-size image of Democritus, similar to looking through an augmented reality lens. She guessed the cube must have some sort of embedded code aligned to the Star Phone, maybe RFID or a block cipher.

But how in the world had Dr. Corwin managed to attach it inside a glass case in a world-famous museum?

She could worry about that later. The enlarged image of the philosopher, still dressed in flowing robes and a skullcap, was moving like a GIF: every few seconds, the old philosopher shook with laughter, and the gnarled hands clasped at his belly spread apart to reveal a nine-digit code string of numbers, letters, and symbols. Excited, Andie memorized the sequence and then examined the rest of the image, aware how vulnerable she was.

The only other deviations in the augmented image were two symbols in the top corners. On the right was the same marking she had seen on the replica Enneagon: the representation of an atom with a black hole in the nucleus. In the top left loomed a white circle inscribed by a black border, with infinitus written along the bottom. An elongated $Y$ filled the center of the circle, set between an $L$ and an $S$.

She caught her breath. LYS. Leap Year Society.

Three shapes hovered in the white space above the $Y$: a hollow square, a sun, and a lemniscate—commonly known as the infinity symbol. She had no idea what it all meant.

When Andie finally looked away from the phone, the Indian man was gone. That made her nervous. Had he left to seek help?

As much as she wanted to try the new code in the Star Phone, she decided it was time to get the hell out.

Taking a different route, she passed through a section filled with silverwork and jewelry, then hurried down a set of stairs in the opposite wing, which led to the cafeteria. She merged with the crowd and inhaled the aroma of fresh pastry. The cafeteria spilled into the
courtyard, and she squinted in the bright sun. When she reached the gift shop, she almost collided with the thick-bodied Indian man. It took all of her self-control not to react. Though he gave no sign of recognition, she didn’t like the way his red-rimmed eyes lingered a moment too long on hers.

After retrieving her backpack and checking to ensure everything was in place, she slipped into a hallway to the left of the main entrance, aiming for an elevator. With constant glances over her shoulder, she slipped inside and shut the doors. The elevator opened onto a subterranean tunnel that Andie had scouted online. To her right, a sign pointed her toward the Science Museum. A much-longer tunnel on her left led to the South Kensington underground station.

Reasoning that anyone following her would guess she was aiming for the tube station, she hurried down the shorter tunnel and made the turn for the Science Museum. So far, no one had exited the V&A behind her.

Once inside the Science Museum—another gigantic and free exhibit—she hurried to the restroom and locked herself inside a stall. Excited, she took out the Star Phone and input the nine-digit code.

Instead of disappearing, the code locked into place, backlit by a sapphire light. The image of Democritus dematerialized, and a new image appeared: a gray scroll with a white ribbon tied around it. Displayed below the scroll was a short sequence of numbers and letters.

stt38

Andie frowned. She had no idea what to do with that.

The nine-digit code disappeared, reverting to a single blank cursor.

For the rest of the day, she avoided the outside world by wandering through the comforting exhibits of the Science Museum, pretending to study the displays while she chewed on her nails and pondered the new clue.
By 7 p.m., Andie was tucked into a secluded table at the Gryphon’s Beak, the pub outside Professor Rickman’s flat. According to a plaque by the door, the establishment was the former guesthouse of a monastery, converted to a tavern in 1538, and rebuilt after the Great Fire of 1666. Frequented by Charles Dickens and Samuel Johnson, it was one of those atmospheric English pubs that fulfilled the fantasy of every weary traveler: a mahogany-walled common room lit by wall sconces, scuffed wooden floors, cozy booths with red upholstery, taps stocked with real English ale, the aroma of bitters and shepherd’s pie, a stone hearth ready to warm the patrons in colder months.

Yet the pub had hidden depths. A set of creaky wooden steps, with a ceiling so low Andie had to duck as she descended, led past a warren of alcoves tucked behind iron-barred posterns, as if the place had once been a dungeon. All the posterns were open, and candlelit tables for two occupied the recesses of the alcoves. It could have been 1712, she thought, as a passage at the bottom of the stairs spilled into a basement bar with plaster peeling off the brick walls and dusty casks of sherry along the perimeter. Besides the bartender, she was the only person down there. The quietude both relieved and unnerved her.

After padding across the sticky cement floor, she ordered a pub burger and took a seat at a secluded wooden table in one of the alcoves. As she ate, she pondered the new image unveiled by the Laughing Philosopher.

If the Star Phone led to the Enneagon in some way, as Dr. Corwin’s journal had intimated, then the bust of Democritus was a bit of a gimme. Though not obvious at first glance—and, granted, it did require travel to London—it was not that difficult to research the location of that particular piece, find it in the V&A, and point the Star Phone at the crystal cube.

She remembered the note in the journal on the first step of the staircase. *Arche.* The beginning.

There were nine steps on the staircase. What if the journey had just begun? The thought made her queasy, though it did seem like the sort of intellectual puzzle Dr. Corwin would devise.
But why?

A waiter brought her food. She devoured her burger and fries but made no progress with the string of letters and numbers displayed on the Star Phone. Google didn’t help. Neither did her training in mathematics and astronomy. The figures must be a cipher of some kind, but if so, she had no idea how to go about solving it.

She focused on the scroll icon. There was nothing to distinguish it from any other depiction of rolled parchment. She assumed the scroll and the alphanumerical code tied together in some way, but again, she was at a loss.

Eight o’clock came and went with no sign of Professor Rickman. That was fine; he had said he might be late. Just in case, she ordered a half pint of Samuel Smith and took it upstairs, to an upholstered pew that overlooked the alley and the courtyard. If she leaned far enough to her left, she could see the entrance to Professor Rickman’s flat.

At eight thirty, she noticed movement out of the corner of her eye. Turning to the window, she saw a tall and athletic black woman, taller even than herself, closing the door to Professor Rickman’s flat. The woman’s face was smooth and sculpted, as if carved from obsidian, and she moved with intent, stepping lightly through the gate and hurrying down the alleyway toward Fleet Street.

The woman looked too young and statuesque to be Professor’s Rickman’s mistress. She could be a friend or colleague, though how many casual acquaintances had access to his flat? And why had she hurried away so quickly?

A name came to mind, based on her ethnicity. A name with Swahili origins written in Dr. Corwin’s journal, and which had caused Professor Rickman to pause when Andie had mentioned it. Zawadi.

By the time nine o’clock rolled around, Andie decided she had to check on the professor. After closing out the tab, she slipped on her backpack and left the pub. The faint smell of diesel laced the air, with a trace of wild roses. Except for a shout or two drifting over from Fleet Street, the courtyard was silent and empty.
She buzzed the door to Professor Rickman’s flat, then buzzed again when there was no response. All the curtains were drawn.

Glancing over her shoulder, nervous the woman might return, Andie tried the front door. Unlocked. That was strange. She stepped inside, closed the door, and stared down a dark hallway with jackets and umbrellas hanging on the wall to her left.

“Professor Rickman?” she called out.

No answer.

Not liking the situation one bit, she opened her knife before creeping up the stairs to the second story, where a landing opened onto a short hallway with a pair of closed doors. After calling his name again, she eased the door to the sitting room open and saw him lying on his back in a pool of blood on the polished wood floor. His arms were akimbo, wrists slashed vertically halfway to his elbow. Sightless eyes stared in mute accusation at the ceiling.

The visceral, metallic odor of fresh blood cut the air as she rushed over to check his pulse. No trace of a heartbeat. Fear coursed through her, and then anger, and then guilt at waiting so long to knock on the door. She was certain he was dead, but in case there was a chance of saving him, she called emergency services on her way out.

A voice in the back of her mind implored her to search his flat, but she couldn’t risk explaining her presence to the police, and she worried someone else might wander in.

Or maybe the killer was watching her right now.

It seemed clear the tall woman had killed the professor. Andie envisioned her breaking into his flat earlier in the day and waiting for him to return. Maybe the professor had stopped by home to use the restroom, or for some other reason, on his way to meet Andie. The woman had constrained him and slit his wrists, arranged the body to look like a suicide, and probably searched his flat before leaving.

*What if he had met with me first? Would we both be dead?*

As Andie hurried into the courtyard, trying to appear calm but clenching her hands in rage and fear, she wasn’t sure which scenario was more disturbing: another murder of a scientist connected to
whatever madness she was involved in, or Professor Rickman committing suicide on the very night he was supposed to meet her.

The sight of his pale corpse stained with blood made her think of Dr. Corwin, crowding her mind’s eye as she retraced her steps through the alley. Feeling sick to her stomach, blinking away tears, she emerged on Fleet and turned toward the tube station—then stopped as if jerked by a rope.

A hundred feet away, clearly illuminated on the well-lit street, was the dark-haired man who had chased her through the woods in Durham. He was passing a flower seller and walking right toward her.

They noticed each other almost at the same time. He stilled, just as surprised as she was, then began sprinting in her direction.

For a split second, Andie felt rooted to the ground, too terrified to move. Then her adrenaline kicked in, and she fled back down the cobblestone lane, worried the tall woman might be waiting for her if she ran down Fleet. She remembered that the alley continued on the far side of the courtyard, and she would have to take her chances.

As she ran past the pub, drawing stares from the patrons by the window, she yearned with all of her being to return inside and shout for help. But she didn’t trust that would save her. Maybe her pursuer wouldn’t kill her in front of a dozen witnesses—and maybe he would—but he could easily create chaos by shooting out a window or pulling a fire alarm, then drag her away during the confusion.

No. She couldn’t put herself at his mercy. She was better off running.

The cobblestone alley led to a deserted cul-de-sac. After a moment of panic, thinking it was a dead end, she saw a couple emerge arm in arm from a footpath between two of the flats. Andie put a finger to her lips as she sped past them, hoping they would get the hint and stay quiet. The footpath led to another courtyard ringed by buildings. A vine-covered trellis gave access to a cement-walled corridor that wound through a web of modern glass buildings. A commuter byway of some sort. Surely, she thought, it had to lead to a road, where she could flag a police officer or jump into a cab.
Except for the ominous sound of footsteps pounding the pavement behind her, it was eerily quiet as she sprinted through the corridor. When she entered an office park with no apparent exit and glass and brick soaring above her on both sides, an urban Greek labyrinth, she began to wish she had taken her chances with Fleet Street.

She tried a few of the doors. All rear entrances, and all locked. She scampered among the buildings until she stumbled onto a landscaped terrace facing a building with living walls, fronted by a brick walkway exiting the park in both directions.

The footsteps drew closer. She had to choose. Gasping for breath from the sprint, noticing more light to her right, she ran across the brick walkway, finally emerging on the sidewalk of a busy street. Relief poured through her as she ran forward, scanning for a taxi, but the predominance of residential apartments made her curse. She had ended up in one of the least touristy sections of Central London.

Several taxis passed by, but no one stopped when she waved. At the edge of a neighborhood park, she glanced back and saw the dark-haired man exiting from the same corridor as she had. They locked eyes again, and he ran straight for her as she cut into the park.

A gravel path meandered through the gnarled trees. She raced right through the middle of the park, leaping over rocks and benches, debating whether to hide in one of the dense copses of bamboo. Too obvious, she decided.

A rock in the middle of the path caused her to trip. She fell hard, scraping her arms on the gravel. Swallowing her cry of pain, she picked herself up and kept running, thankful not to have sprained an ankle and wondering how much longer she could last at this pace.

On the other side of the park, she scrambled over a fence and noticed, not too far away, a castle-like structure with high stone walls and a parapet rising above the other buildings. After looking to both sides—still quiet and residential—she dashed across the street and down a lane that tunneled between the buildings. Her heart dropped when it dead-ended at an eight-foot brick wall with a gated entrance and a card swipe for property owners. To her left was a Thai
restaurant with a sign overhanging the street. Without pause, she stepped up on the ground-floor windowsill, clambered from there to the sign, jumped, and clung to the top of the wall. Her pursuer entered the narrow lane just before she dropped to the other side and sprinted into the residential complex.

Running beside a high brick wall, she made her way to a lush courtyard on the other side of the gated community. She slammed into the iron door granting access to the street, furiously twisting the knob. As she burst through to the sidewalk, she saw the fortress she had noticed, looming just across the street and protected by a high stone wall topped by spikes, like something out of Harry Potter. A thought came to her, based on where she had started, that it was probably one of the Inns of Court, a collection of ancient buildings housing London's legal society.

When she looked to her left, she saw a blue sedan whipping onto the street, threatening to hem her in. Her heart pounding with terror, Andie ran straight for the nearest entrance to the castle, looking frantically for a way inside. The walls and iron gate were too high for her to climb. A camera overlooked the entrance, and she waved and shouted for help, in case someone was watching in real time.

A shuttered, flat-topped guard tower extended three feet above the wall. She dashed around to the other side and noticed a terra-cotta drainpipe reinforced with circular notches. Breathing heavily, she grabbed the pipe and started climbing, praying it would hold. The notches, set a foot apart and just wide enough for a toe, held fast as she climbed to the edge of the roof. She scrambled atop the guardhouse and risked a quick glance back. The blue sedan had come to a stop near the gate, disgorging a short-haired blond woman and the heavyset Indian man from the museum. Andie caught a glimpse of a handgun holster inside the woman's coat. The dark-haired man caught up to them, and they all noticed Andie perched atop the guardhouse.

“We just want to talk!” the dark-haired man called out, right before Andie dropped down on the other side of the wall and kept running.

Talk, my ass.
Her only question was why they hadn’t shot her, and she had to assume they wanted to take her alive and interrogate her. Or maybe the cameras had stayed their hand.

All around her, fortresses of stone rose from the darkness, stentorian guardians lit by the occasional glow from a lamppost. There was no one in sight, and the sounds of pursuit—scrabbling on the drainpipe—faded as she ran. The solitude bore weight, suffocating, and she pushed herself to the limit as she wound through the ageless buildings, racing through parking lots and courtyards and jumping over hedges. Her new fear was that the stone wall encircled the entire complex and she wouldn’t be able to escape.

That worry faded when she found a green space that backed onto a public street. Another iron fence separated the park from the road, but the overhanging branch of an old yew provided an easy escape route. Unable to sprint any longer, Andie cleared the fence and continued as fast as she could down a quiet side street, following the noise and lights until she emerged onto a busy thoroughfare. Her lungs burned as she raced, waving her arms, for a red double-decker bus just as it was pulling away. Tires screeched in the distance. She knew she had moments before her pursuers saw her.

The bus didn’t slow.

Andie dug deep. Chest heaving, she caught up to the front of the bus and paced alongside it, holding up her bloodied arms as she mouthed for help. Still the driver refused to turn his head.

She wanted to scream and beat on the door in anger. Instead, as the bus started to accelerate, she swallowed her pride and put her hands together in a praying motion, keeping up with the bus for as long as she could, pleading with her eyes until the driver finally looked over.

Just as she began to fall back, the bus decelerated a fraction and the door popped open. Andie used the last of her reserves to catch up and leap onto the steps. She gave the driver a five-pound note and collapsed in an open seat in the rear, soaking in sweat, not daring to look out the window but saddled with the stabbing fear that the people chasing her had seen her board.
During the Easter break, Ettore’s grant took him to Copenhagen to conduct research at the Niels Bohr Institute. He would soon return to Leipzig, but for a month he would work alongside Bohr himself, a Nobel Prize winner as well as a friend and mentor to Werner Heisenberg.

Ettore had mixed feelings about the trip. It was good for his career, true. And Germany had become a political pressure cooker. Yet he was sad to part ways with Werner, even for a short time, and the trip also drew him away from Stefan.

Though Ettore had met with the charismatic sergeant major half a dozen more times in Leipzig, always on a walk in the city that ended up outside Ettore’s apartment, Stefan had not yet introduced him to the mysterious Leap Year Society.

Was it all a farce? Was Ettore the butt of some cruel joke, as had been the case throughout his schooling?

He wanted to believe the Society was real. He wanted to believe there was more to the world than meets the eye, to join the secret club. In the past, he would never have believed there were people in the world who possessed more knowledge or performed more cutting-edge work than Ettore and his colleagues. Now he wasn’t so sure. Stefan’s range of knowledge, including his scientific acumen, was astounding. And it
was true that governmental institutions were limited by funds, ethical considerations, the political climate, and the visions of their founders. Even if the Leap Year Society was just a collection of like-minded people searching for greater truths, if they were as smart and engaging as Stefan, then Ettore wanted to be a part.

But he had come to doubt their existence. As far as he could tell, there was not a single mention of this organization in the historical record. He had come to suspect it might be a covert group of Nazis who wanted to subvert Ettore to their cause. That, or Stefan was a paranoid schizophrenic who had drawn Ettore into his web of self-delusion and lies.

Oh well, he thought with a sigh as he sipped his coffee in the flagstone courtyard of his hotel on a quiet Saturday morning, enjoying a rare bout of Scandinavian sunshine. I must forget about Stefan and concentrate on my work. New breakthroughs are occurring in the quantum world on a daily basis. This is where I must focus, not on some ridiculous covert society that is likely a figment of a troubled imagination.

The temperature was surprisingly mild for March in Copenhagen. Frost still clung to the bushes and windows, but Ettore was able to sit outside in his peacoat without a frigid wind cutting him to the bone. He had seen nothing but gray clouds and gloom since his arrival, but today a hint of spring was in the air. To celebrate, he decided to walk to the royal observatory, which he had been meaning to visit since his arrival.

After finishing his coffee, he strolled past the line of bicycles in front of his hotel, heading toward the city center. He cut through the busy train station and walked east on Vesterbrogade, past the whimsical arched entryway to the Tivoli amusement park. The pleasure ground was legendary throughout Europe, and as the cries of delighted children floated to his ears, it brought a wave of nostalgia for his own childhood, as well as a stab of regret for not having wed.

How very human we are, he mused. My heart lies with science, yet the cry of joy of a single child, flying through the air from a Ferris wheel, makes me reconsider my entire life in an instant.
Copenhagen was a flat, immensely walkable city. Quite different from Rome and Leipzig, the Danish capital managed to be both cosmopolitan and bohemian, progressive yet laced with tradition. The contradictions fascinated Ettore. He also liked that the city did not take itself too seriously, smug with the superiority of its own culture, as Germany and Italy were.

Ettore did not consult a map but let himself wander through the cobblestone streets. He felt bewildered by the crush of people on Strøget, the main pedestrian artery through town, yet once he entered the narrow lanes veering off in every direction, he became lost in the ivy-covered walls and courtyards, enjoying the street musicians and jugglers, the spray of fountains and the aroma of fresh pastries, the stiff but reviving breeze that carried the tang of sea air, the parks and quiet cafés. The lack of tall buildings imparted a rare feeling of intimacy for a European capital.

After passing through the university district, he made his way toward a cylindrical brick tower jutting above the city like a giant thimble. This was the Rundetaarn, or Round Tower, the beloved landmark that everyone told Ettore he simply must visit. Not one to dwell on historical facts, he knew little about the seventeenth-century edifice except that it boasted great views of the city and housed one of Europe’s oldest observatories.

Inside, a ramp of inlaid brick—broad enough for a motor vehicle—spiraled upward around the whitewashed core. There were no stairs in sight. It was quite a unique building. As he set foot on the walkway, someone touched him on the shoulder from behind, startling him. His surprise turned to shock when he turned to find Stefan’s piercing blue eyes glittering with amusement from beneath a tweed cap.

“A fine morning for a walk, ja?”

A familiar double-breasted woolen coat wrapped the German’s tall and lean figure, all the way to the tops of his black boots. Ettore noticed the military insignia was nowhere in sight, and wondered if Stefan had removed it or owned more than one coat.
“I admit it is, but what are you doing here?”
Stefan studied him for a moment. “This is your first time to the tower?”
“Yes.”
“Then come. Let us talk above the city.”
As the German officer led the way into the higher reaches of the observatory, Ettore followed behind, drawn as always by the man’s hypnotic charisma.

_I wonder if some human beings exert more gravitational pull than others. Or perhaps the source is not gravity, but the mysterious body of energy that surrounds us all, repelling and attracting the spirit rather than the corporeal body. How else to explain the ability of men like Adolf Hitler to bend a nation to their will?_

The slope on the long and winding ramp was quite gentle. Along the way, windows recessed into oval archways provided excellent viewing points, as well as nooks that sheltered delighted children hiding from their parents. Halfway up the tower, Ettore and Stefan passed an open door that led to a connecting corridor.

Ettore stopped to peer inside. Displayed in glass cases were a variety of historical objects: a sextant, an old copper globe, a collection of antique telescopes, and a set of crossed stone keys. A star map on the wall connected the constellations with dotted yellow lines.

“When the tower complex was first built,” Stefan said, “this corridor led to a library, which housed the entire collection of the university. The width of the ramp allowed a horse and carriage to transport books to the library, as well as instruments to the observatory.”

“Remarkable,” Ettore said, though he was not that interested.
“Do you believe public libraries should provide access to all books, Ettore?”
When he glanced over at Stefan, surprised by the non sequitur, he found the German affixing him with an intense stare. “Why wouldn’t I?” Ettore said.

“Perhaps because you have never thought deeply about the question.”
“Oh,” he said, flustered. “Do you not agree?”

“Is some knowledge not unfit for public consumption?”

“I don’t believe banning literature is beneficial to society. I’ve heard it rumored that the Nazis”—Ettore couldn’t help glancing with distaste at the sleeve where Stefan normally bore his military rank—“wish to make a bonfire of literature that conflicts with their myopic worldview.”

Stefan caught the downward glance. “Yes, of course that’s an affront, a buffoon’s attempt to silence his critics. An easy target. But what of morally reprehensible books that might offend the sensibilities of women and children? Books illustrating the sexual practices of various cultures or discussing in detail the perversions of man? Books containing explicit descriptions of violence?”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. There should be some limits.”

“Do not simply agree with me, Ettore. You should think long and hard about this question. It is one of the most important mankind has to answer.”

“Is that so?” Ettore said, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

There was a knowing light in Stefan’s eyes, as if he had anticipated Ettore’s rebuff. “You are more aware than most of the incredible advances of science in recent years. Every day, we unlock more and more of Mother Nature’s secrets. I ask you: Should a library contain the recipes for deadly poisons and chemical weapons that can be manufactured in the home? The blueprints for every single detail of our capital cities? What if someone were to prepare a vat of phosgene and mustard gas and unleash it in a subway in Rome or London or New York City?”

“What a horrible thought! But, yes, I . . . I suppose you have a point there.”

“And what of your own field of study?” Stefan’s lips parted in a grim, humorless smile. “Tell me, Ettore: Should we teach every man and woman on the street how to split the atom?”

“That is an impossible task, outside of a handful of institutions.”
“Is it?” he said calmly, which took Ettore aback. “But that doesn’t answer my question. We both know the technology will one day be far more accessible. The query remains: Should we teach such a thing? Do we make all knowledge accessible to the general public?”

“Perhaps not every form,” Ettore mumbled.

“Oh, no? Who are you to judge! Why should you become a censor and not Adolf Hitler, or a farmer from Lower Saxony, or a bushman from an indigenous culture in the Amazon jungle?”

The German’s rebuke confused Ettore. He had never met anyone so unpredictable. “Because I have experience with these technologies. I understand the awesome potential of their power,” Ettore said.

“And?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Are you so arrogant to think the ramifications of this awesome ‘power’ cannot be explained to others? Did you yourself create the atom? Why should your position as a scientist give you the moral high ground? Should not the public decide? The church? The state? A body of international observers? A committee of farmers and bushmen? Who, Ettore?”

Ettore opened his hands, flustered, but said nothing. Stefan chuckled and clapped him on the shoulder. “I was not seeking an answer, my friend. At least not today.” His penetrating gaze locked Ettore in place, making him feel as if he were the most important person in the world. “I ask only that you consider the implications of these questions for yourself,” he said gravely, “as you go about your work. Agreed?”

Ettore shrugged. “Agreed.”

“Good.”

They continued upward, stopping to peer inside the planetarium before accessing the observation deck via a claustrophobic stone staircase at the top of the tower. Ettore appreciated the metaphor of the long walk up the ramp to the observatory, spiraling into the heart of the cosmos.

As they exited onto an open-air viewing platform surrounded
by a wrought-iron lattice and buffeted by the wind, they saw below them the city unveiled: its canals and palaces and green copper spires, chimneys and sloping red roofs, the gossamer blue table of the sea. Stefan pointed to the east. “Over there is the tip of Sweden. This morning is a rare treat.”

Ettore squinted into the haze, wrinkling his nose as the wind carried a whiff of cloying perfume from a trio of older women. “I didn’t realize it was that close.”

“Ja, only a few kilometers.” After absorbing the view for a while, Stefan continued, “How are you finding the institute?”

“It’s adequate. Niels is a bit tiresome, to be honest.”

“Isn’t he considered one of the founding fathers of quantum mechanics?”

“I suppose, if one’s father is rather senile, drinks beer like a dock-worker, and is grumpier than a babushka.”

Stefan gave a hearty laugh and led him across the wooden planking to a more isolated section of the deck. Quietly, out of earshot of any listeners, he said, “We need your help, Ettore.”

“Who does?” he said absently.

“The Leap Year Society.”

A hiccup of disbelief escaped Ettore, until he looked over at Stefan and saw how very serious he was. “Help with what?”

“With an important mission.”

“I don’t understand. What kind of mission?”

“Do you trust me, Ettore?”

“I don’t really know, to be honest.”

“That’s fair. You need validation. Something to prove I am not simply a master of spirited rhetoric, or perhaps even insane.”

It’s as if he can read my thoughts. “I suppose, yes,” Ettore said faintly.

Stefan gripped the railing as he stared out at the city. “You have asked me before how I can wear the uniform of an SS officer. I can tell you now—I had to learn to trust you as well—that our society is working to subvert the Nazis from within. The elections in Germany
were rigged, and Hitler has seized full power. He is a cancer that must be stopped. There are things happening in my country—depravities—of which the public does not yet know. Corruptions you would not believe attributable to the mind of man. The Nazis must be deterred, Ettore.”

“I cannot disagree. But what can I possibly do?”

“Right now, a small but important task. Everyone who seeks justice has a role of some kind to play—never forget that.”

“What sort of task?”

“Help us with this, and I promise you will be granted membership to the Leap Year Society. Not in some indeterminate future, but before you leave Copenhagen.”

“What—the Society is here too?”

Stefan’s eyes gleamed in the rising sun.

That evening, according to Stefan’s instructions, Ettore stepped out to meet a black coupe de ville with curved fenders that pulled in front of his hotel at precisely ten.

_Tonight, Ettore thought, we shall see if he is mad or not._

When the rear passenger door opened, he saw Stefan waving him in, clad in a pair of wool trousers and a crisp white shirt, his overcoat folded across his lap. The driver was invisible through a partition of smoky glass separating him from the passenger section. Ettore found that odd—he had never seen such a thing before—but said nothing.

Stefan offered him port and a cigar, which Ettore declined. After a few minutes of small talk, the German was uncharacteristically quiet as he puffed on his cigar and sipped from a fluted glass. When questioned about their destination, he said it was better to wait, and that all would be revealed in due course.

Highly curious and more than a little uneasy, Ettore consigned himself to riding in silence as the car left Copenhagen and entered the Danish countryside. The towns and road signs grew sparse, the
road turned rough and narrow. A gibbous moon revealed glimmers of flat grasslands dotted with lakes and forests, as well as the occasional church steeple marking the presence of some shuttered village.

Judging by the long drive and the direction they had left Copenhagen, Ettore’s limited geographical knowledge of the region told him they must be nearing the southern tip of Zealand, the main island. Where in God’s name was Stefan taking him? Was he about to be kidnapped and ferried across the border, held hostage in Berlin while forced to develop advanced weaponry for the Nazis?

Just before midnight, Ettore thought he was dreaming when they pulled into a long, paved drive that led to a fairy-tale castle backlit by a starry sky. He blinked twice. The castle was still there.

Though small, the fortification was quite fetching, tall and elegant and graced with a forest of spires and conical towers. Instead of taking the bridge across the moat, the driver veered down a service road, parking beside a high wall covered in ivy. Stefan exited the vehicle, switched on a brass flashlight, and beckoned for Ettore to follow. The driver waited inside, still unseen.

After passing through an iron gate set farther down the wall, they entered a landscaped portion of the castle grounds marked by fountains, dormant flower beds, and rows of cypress. The smell of damp soil settled in Ettore’s nostrils. Stefan led them to the far side of the gardens, where they passed through another iron gate and entered a passage lined on both sides with a hedge of sharp holly, which rose well above their heads. As the passage twisted and turned and split off in multiple directions, Ettore realized they were inside a hedge maze.

“It’s designed on sacred geometry,” Stefan said in a low voice as they walked.

“What is sacred about geometry?”

“Do you not find order in the grand design? What is not sacred about geometry?”

“I suppose it depends on your meaning of ‘sacred.’”

“I’ll allow that ‘sacred’ means different things to different
people, but it doesn’t change the nature of the word. Whatever one believes, the incredible repetition of certain shapes and proportions is a fact of nature. The plants in this very garden are brimming with the Fibonacci sequence. The shells of the snails that eat the plants reflect the spiral arms of the galaxies. Repeating patterns are the law of the natural world, of the universe itself. Infinite symmetry. You should know this better than I, Ettore.”

Ettore smiled to himself. He knew a very great deal about such things. He was only being contrary and had wanted to hear what Stefan had to say. “Is there a particular geometric inspiration for the design of this garden?”

“The vortex,” Stefan said softly, after a moment.

“And why is that?”

But the German never answered.

They probed the maze for at least half an hour. Despite the confidence with which Stefan guided them, Ettore began to wonder if they were lost. As he grew more and more nervous, realizing he had yet to see another human being in close proximity to Stefan besides the thugs in Leipzig, not even the face of their driver, Ettore was relieved when they rounded a corner and saw two middle-aged men conversing by the light of a kerosene lamp hanging from the hedge. The passage dead-ended where the men were standing.

“One thing,” Stefan whispered as he and Ettore approached the men. “Do not mention the Leap Year Society.”

“Why not? Are they not part—”

Stefan silenced him with a finger. “They are. But you are not. Just follow my lead, please.”

Feeling rather like a devoted beagle, Ettore shadowed Stefan as he entered the clearing and greeted the two men. Ettore caught his breath when Stefan introduced the taller of the two—a spindly, dark-haired man with kind eyes and a widow’s peak that formed a narrow isthmus down his forehead—as a member of the Danish royal family. A prince, no less, whose face Ettore remembered from a portrait at the Copenhagen institute. He was very respected among
the Danes, and his presence lent gravitas to the midnight meeting, as well as raising Ettore’s estimation of Stefan.

The German soldier bowed to the prince and shook hands with the other man, whom he introduced by title instead of name: a senior member of the US State Department. Despite their prestigious positions, both men seemed to hold Stefan in high regard.

When Ettore himself was introduced, the two men shook his hand with respect, nodding gravely as Stefan summarized his scientific accomplishments.

“It’s an honor,” the prince said, causing Ettore to blush in the shadows of the kerosene lamp. “I’m the scientific liaison to the crown and am kept well apprised of the institute. Niels speaks very highly of you.”

“He does?”

Stefan blew on his hands as he studied the high walls of the maze. “I trust there is no possibility of interference?”

“The castle is nearly empty this weekend,” the prince said, “and this corner of the maze was designed expressly for this purpose. No other passages are within reach of eyes or ears.”

“I’ve checked for listening devices myself,” the American added. He was much more businesslike than the prince.

As Stefan nodded in satisfaction, the prince bent to pick up a padlocked leather attaché case. “The documents are in order,” he said, then shocked Ettore by holding it out to him. Unsure what to do, Ettore sensed Stefan’s stare boring into him and felt he had no choice but to take the attaché case.

“Thank you,” Stefan said to the prince. “It will reach its destination safely.”

The prince addressed Ettore. “Your assistance in this matter is greatly appreciated. You’re doing the crown—and the people of Denmark—a great favor.”

Ettore had no idea what they were talking about but sensed that Stefan wanted him to play along. “It’s my pleasure,” he murmured.

After a round of handshakes, the meeting adjourned, and Ettore
found himself returning through the hedge maze with his friend, fraught with questions. Once they were settled in the car again, on the way back to Copenhagen, Stefan calmly lit another cigar and cracked the window to expel the thick smoke as he puffed.

Ettore could contain himself no longer. “What in the world is this about? What am I supposed to do?”

Once the cigar was fully lit, Stefan said, “We need you to deliver this briefcase to my counterpart within the Society in Malmö, Sweden—the city just across the strait from Copenhagen. As part of his many duties, the prince assists with military defense and diplomacy, and needs to ensure these documents arrive safely in the hands of the Swedes.”

“What’s inside?”

“Trust me, it’s better if you’re not familiar with the contents.”

“But I don’t understand. Why me? What does this have to do with science?”

Stefan’s smile was wolfish. “Not a thing. German spies are everywhere now. The borders are not secure. But you’re an outsider, unknown to the intelligence services.”

“What if they search the briefcase?”

“You work at the institute, with an impeccable international reputation. No one will dare touch you.”

“I don’t know about this,” Ettore said, trying to stem a rising tide of panic. “I could lose my position, or worse.”

The German patted Ettore’s knee. His voice was paternal, warm with understanding. “I cannot assure you there will be no risk. I can only say that I would not ask you to do anything I did not have full confidence you could accomplish. Dark days are upon us, Ettore. The world needs its heroes.”

“I’m hardly a hero.”

“As I said, every man plays his part.”

“I haven’t even agreed yet.”

“Yet I believe in you. Will you aid us, my friend? Will you join us in our cause and help fan the flames of democracy?”
Despite his misgivings, despite the surreal nature of the evening and the gravity of the request, Ettore found himself once again soothed by Stefan’s confident demeanor, lulled into a sense of security and desiring only to please the German soldier.

“I will help you,” Ettore said, so softly he could barely hear his own voice.
After twisting up a serpentine road into the parched hills above Hollywood, high above the iconic sign, Cal stepped off the DASH bus with a crush of other tourists at the entrance to Griffith Observatory.

Perched atop the south-facing slope of Mount Hollywood, resembling a cross between the White House and a mosque, the observatory’s trio of copper domes overlooked all of central Los Angeles yet stood a world away from the smog and busy streets. The beloved attraction was free to wander through, and hosted a busy calendar of exhibits, astronomical viewings, and presentations on the cosmos. *The city planners got this one right.*

It was four in the afternoon, hot and windy. In one hour, if nothing suspicious drove him away, Cal was scheduled to meet the anonymous source who had first brought the Leap Year Society to his attention. The public exposure made him jumpy, but he was excited by the prospect of gaining more ammunition in his newly declared war on the enigmatic organization that had ruined his life.

The rendezvous at the observatory was happening at his request. The lone road to the top of the hill made it hard to trail someone unobserved, and after exiting the bus, he stood on one of the terraces for the next half hour and watched every single person who arrived by bus or hiked up from one of the public parking lots. Even if the
communications with his source had somehow been intercepted, the observatory was swarming with schoolchildren and visitors from around the world, and he couldn’t imagine anyone making a play in such a crowded place. Especially people who lived in the shadows.

As he watched and waited, Clippers hat pulled low and hands tucked nervously into his jeans, he reflected on the events of the last twenty-four hours. After scrabbling down the dusty hillside behind Elias Holt’s mansion, terrified he would get shot in the back, tripping over rocks and ripping his clothes and skin on the cacti and thorny underbrush, he had stumbled into a ravine that led to the bottom of the hill. No one came after him. He assumed they hadn’t seen him climb the wall and had instead searched the mansion. Once Cal found a road, he jumped into a taxi and sped away.

But he had crossed a line by leaving the rental van—procured in his own name—parked at the mansion. He had to go dark and figure out what to do.

When Cal arrived at his house, he asked the taxi driver to wait while Cal inspected his Jeep. The glove box and all the compartments had already been emptied.

Trying not to panic, fearing they were still in the house, Cal waited in the taxi while he called 911 to report a burglary. When the police arrived, Cal told them he had seen someone in the house through the kitchen window, rummaging around as the taxi pulled up. The police snooped around long enough for Cal to grab what he needed: his dog, Leon; his passport and cash, hidden under a floorboard; and spare clothes. Most of the drawers had been upended, but he kept his laptop in a secret desk drawer and was relieved to find the chalk dust on the lock had not been disturbed. They simply had not had time.

He stuffed everything in a backpack and hurried to the Jeep as soon as the cops left. No doubt they had planted a tracking device, so Cal ditched the Jeep in a public lot and called in a favor. He asked an old pickup basketball buddy who lived in the desert, Brett Stellis, to take Leon for a while. They met at a busy fountain at The Grove,
a ritzy outdoor shopping center, and Brett took Leon without ques-
tion, knowing the risks of Cal’s profession.

Feeling very alone without Leon, Cal did his best to lose himself
in the crowds as he wove his way on foot to La Brea. He paid cash for
a cheap motel, grabbed some cold peanut noodles at a Vietnamese
place next door, then holed up in his room and tried to get a handle
on the disturbing turn of events.

He had just seen, with his own two eyes, evidence the Leap Year
Society was real and connected to Elias Holt. Far more important,
they had opened a file on Cal at the same time he had run the story
connecting the CIA and a handful of prominent defense contractors
to the black-site lab of a global technology company.

Cal’s source—a Bolivian scientist working at PanSphere’s black-
site lab—had blown the whistle on forbidden research into genetic
engineering, nanotech chemical agents, and other highly regulated
technologies conducted on-site and sold to various players. Bizarrely,
his source had also claimed an unknown entity was siphoning off
the best research and leaving the scraps to the CIA and corporate
defense firms, right under their noses. Unfortunately, the scientist
had gone dark—or been disappeared—before he could flesh out this
part of his story.

Four things had gotten Cal fired: the sudden desertion of his
source, the outright denial of the Bolivian government of the exis-
tence of the lab, the miraculous appearance of falsified evidence
that contradicted Cal’s claims in his article, and the lawsuit against
the *Times*.

The CIA, or even one of the defense contractors, could have
pulled all of that off. But Cal had always suspected his mention of
this elusive metaconspiracy was the real trigger.

And now he had proof.

Who *were* these people?

The knowledge that such an organization existed—hidden
in plain sight—terrified him. But it did not surprise him. No one
had a handle on anything anymore. Technology was too complex,
spiraling further out of control every day, metastasizing like some cancerous AI overlord. It took a genius to fully understand one little part of the puzzle, like microchip components or modern programming languages. Everyone was so specialized that no one had a handle on the big picture.

He didn’t have the choice to walk away anymore. He had pulled on the dragon’s tail—twice—and been caught. It was publish or perish in the most literal sense.

When he had plugged the USB drive with the stolen data into a computer at the public library, he had found nothing but encrypted gibberish. He needed Dane, but the computer guru was not taking his calls or responding to his emails. Though frustrated, Cal couldn’t blame him.

In desperation, he had reached out to his original source, the one who had turned him on to the LYS in the first place.

To his surprise, she had responded to his chat request with a simple but chilling message.

My bo*fr*end came back. And he isn’t the same.

After a hard swallow, Cal had replied immediately. What do you mean?

I . . . saw something. Someone should know.

What is it?

I’m not sure email is safe.

Are you in danger?

I don’t think so but he might be.

Cal knew he had to play it cool. What do you suggest?

I don’t know.

I’m a former reporter. I might be able to help.

How?

Where are you located?

Thinking he had pushed too far, too fast, he released a huge sigh of relief when she finally replied.

San Diego area.

Her response thrilled him, but it also put up his guard. Then
again, the Golden State had forty million people and bred conspir-acy theorists like minks. He suspected quite a number of his listeners lived nearby.

I’m in L.A.
Really?
20 years and counting. Maybe we could meet?
Her response was again slow to arrive. I don’t know.
I’ll come to you and take every precaution.
I think it’s better if I come up there. Less chance he follows me.
OK
When?
Cal told her the truth. Sooner is always better.
It would have to be public.
Of course.
Let me think about it.

She emailed him three hours later and agreed. After considering his options, Cal asked her to meet him at Griffith Observatory during daylight hours.

The situation made him wary. It was a little too convenient. But he had talked to enough potential and anonymous sources to know her responses felt natural.

Even if she was compromised or one of them was followed, the sheer popularity of the planetarium should protect him. He had taken another precaution as well: taking a cue from Dane, he had purchased a burner phone so he could text the actual location right before they met. He also texted Dane about the meeting, though he had not received a response. With a sigh, Cal supposed he would have to figure out something else to do with the USB drive.

A bang in the crowd snapped him back to the present. Thinking it was a gunshot, he whipped around to find a parent scolding a child holding a bag of those small white poppers Cal had loved as a kid.

Get a hold of yourself, buddy. You’re a pro. Act like it.

With twenty minutes to go, he moved inside, scanning the crowd as he walked past the exhibits in the Central Rotunda and the Hall of
the Eye. Crackling, bullet-like strikes of contained lightning awed a crowd watching a demonstration of the Tesla coil. Cal kept moving until he reached the edge of the giant Foucault pendulum, pretending to watch the mesmeric swing of the bronze ball suspended from the ceiling while he sent an email to his source that contained the number of his burner phone. Even if someone was watching, no way they could track a burner phone that fast.

Moments later, she texted him.

Are you here?
Yes.
Me too.
Meet me at 5:00 Event Horizon show. Back left row, two seats by the aisle. I'll save you one.
Do I need a ticket?
No.
K.

Tingly with anticipation, he made his way to the main elevator. The show in the Event Horizon, a presentation theater on the lower level, would be less crowded than the show at the wildly popular Oschin Planetarium. Easier for him to procure seats and ensure his instructions were followed.

He was fifth in line when the doors opened. He hurried to the back left of the tiered auditorium and draped an arm over the seat next to him, discouraging other visitors.

As the minutes ticked by, the auditorium filled to half capacity, but no one sat anywhere near him. Almost everyone had crowded into the bottom half, close to the giant screen. He wondered what had happened to his source when five o’clock arrived and the lights faded to black, casting the theater into darkness.

Had she changed her mind? Been intercepted?

Growing nervous, he decided to call it off as a booming musical score heralded the arrival of an exploding star on the presentation screen. He recoiled as someone brushed against his shoulder, then realized a woman with long hair had slipped into the seat next to
him. He sank back down, relieved, as the camera zoomed into a vast cluster of stars so dense and iridescent it took his breath away.

How to start the conversation? He had to build as much trust as possible during the brief show. He guessed she would want to leave before it was over, escaping in darkness as she had arrived.

A floral sweetness in her perfume reminded him of running through a childhood meadow, the sultry summer air laced with honeysuckle. As he leaned over to speak in her ear, the theater screen panned to an image of a black hole, the classical score soared even louder, and someone shoved a foul-smelling cloth over his mouth.

The smell of vinegar washed over him. He shook his head back and forth, trying not to inhale the toxic substance as two pairs of hands lifted him out of his chair and carried him away in the darkness. Cal’s muffled shouts for help were drowned by the rag over his mouth and the thunderous music.

A crack of light appeared. They carried him through a door, either in the back of the theater or in the hallway, that opened onto a gray, dimly lit stairwell. He struggled to free himself, but his limbs had started to numb, and the men holding him were strong.

By jerking his head from side to side, he caught glimpses of two large men hustling him down a flight of steps. One was blond and pale, the other a balding black man with a keloid scar on the side of his neck. Both were dressed in shorts and polo shirts. They could have been tourists visiting the observatory with their families. At the bottom of the stairs, they took him through an unmarked door and into a long hallway lit by a faint glow at the far end.

_This is it_, he thought. _This is where I get stuffed in the back of a van._

As they passed a series of closed doors in the hallway, Cal’s lassitude increased until he felt almost weightless. He was about to pass out, his shouts for help dying before they left his throat. Another closed door loomed at the end of the hallway. The stocky blond man hurried ahead to open it, revealing a blue Kia Sedona idling in the sunlight. Behind the vehicle was a small paved area and a dumpster squeezed against the side of the hill. The shouts of children drifted
down from the main entrance, but no one else was in sight.

When he saw the waiting vehicle, Cal’s adrenaline spiked, giving him a burst of energy for one last struggle. The man carrying him like he was a recalcitrant child held him tighter, and Cal failed to break free. The rag was still pressed against his face. The brief exertion had sapped the last of his energy. His limbs felt like water.

The blond man held the door for his partner as the side of the minivan slid open, exposing a retrofitted cage cordonning off the front of the vehicle. The shadow of someone very large was visible in the driver’s seat. As Cal was carried outside, he noticed a blur of movement from behind the planetarium door as it closed. A hulking figure stepped into view, and before anyone could react, the figure stiff-armed the blond-haired man across the neck so hard his eyes rolled back before he hit the ground.

Dane’s broad face was twisted with anger, his long hair framing his face like a Viking raider. Elation shot through Cal, but his heart sank when he realized the café owner had arrived barehanded.

The man holding Cal released him, and Cal fell coughing to the ground, without the strength to keep his feet. As his captor reached for a weapon, Cal heard the pump of a shotgun, and a familiar calm voice calling out from inside the van.

“That would be unwise.”

The passenger window had lowered to reveal the double-barreled snout of a shotgun pointing at the remaining captor, who stood very still with his hands raised. Sefa’s enormous head leaned over from the driver’s seat as Dane pounced on the second assailant, knocking him out with a heavy elbow to the temple.

Dane looked shaken as he checked to make sure both men were unconscious, then dragged them toward the back of the van. The rear door lifted automatically, and Sefa hurried over to help lift the two men. Cal could see the unmoving legs of a third man, presumably the driver, already inside.

After shutting the door, Sefa hustled to the driver’s seat as Dane helped Cal up. “Can you walk?”
“Not yet.” Though his voice was barely a whisper, he could feel his strength returning.
“You need a doc?”
“Don’t think so. Just go.”
The big man stuck him in the front seat, awkwardly straddling the console between him and Sefa. Cal looked back and saw a padlock on the cage separating the rest of the van. The rear door had no handle. A prison meant for him.
Sefa circled back to the top of the planetarium on a service drive, headed back down the hill, and parked in the public lot at the bottom, along with hundreds of other vehicles. After lifting each of their captives’ wallets and taking photos of their faces, Dane and Sefa locked the Kia, threw the keys into the woods, and helped Cal limp across the parking lot to a silver Toyota Prius.
Cal managed to croak, “Whose car is this?”
“Mine,” Sefa said, as the two of them helped Cal into the back seat, then lowered their heads as they scrunched into the front.
“Do you realize how ridiculous you two look in this car?”
Sefa looked wounded. “Just trying to help the planet, man.”
After a moment, Cal said, “It could have been me back there. Would have been. I thought you’d written me off.”
“I wasn’t sure where I stood,” Dane said. “Not sure I do now. The way they intercepted my hack at the mansion and sent it back at me so quickly . . . These people are the real fucking deal.”
“How’d you know about the meeting?”
“We got your message and decided to follow you off the radar. Stay in the shadows and see what happened. But when that Kia swung around the building after you went inside, we didn’t like the look of it, so we tracked it down the service drive.” Dane popped an energy drink. “Thirsty?”
“Like a dog in the desert.”
The big man handed him the can, popped another, and took a sip. “After the two men who grabbed you went inside, I ran the plate
on the van. It belongs to a man in Topeka, Kansas.”

“Who?”

“Someone named Frank Lietzer. He died two years ago.”

Cal gazed out the window as they entered the frenetic, palm-lined streets of Hollywood. He had the sense they had just poked a grizzly bear in the eye in its own den.

“I don’t think that van was going back into the corporate fleet,” Dane continued. “I think it was going off a cliff with you in it. My advice is to back the hell off this thing.”

“When you can do nothing,” Sefá added, “what can you do?”

“Thanks for the Zen,” Cal muttered. He lowered his window and took deep draughts of air, the caffeine and the fresh oxygen helping to rid his system of toxins. “Where’d you learn to fight?” he asked Dane.

The big man chuckled. “That was a combination of martial arts movies, Australian rules football, and me being bigger than the next guy.”

Cal put a hand to his temple. “Goddammit, thanks for saving me, but these people are killers. We got extremely lucky back there, and they won’t make the same mistake twice.”

The two of them exchanged a glance. “Which is why we’re holing up at the café from now on,” Dane said.

“That’s a good idea.”

“And you’re banned from coming in.”

“I’d never put you at risk like that.”

Dane turned to level his intense stare at him. “Tell me you’re skipping town for a while.”

Cal considered the question, realizing his throat was still very dry. “Got any more liquid poison?” After Dane tossed him another can, Cal took a long drink and said, “That’s probably the best idea.”

“You might need some help with that, depending on where you’re going.”

“I can’t put you in danger.”

Dane belched and crushed his can. “I researched your dad. He
was fired from the airline and lost his pension, just like you said.”
“I never said I lied about that. Just that he was a dick.”
“I don’t get it.”
“That’s because while you may be a tech genius, you suck at understanding people.”

After a moment, Dane said, “I won’t intervene again. Not in person. But I might be able to help in other ways.”
“I said I don’t want to—”
“I’m not doing it for you, kemosabe. I have my reasons too. You’re a fool if you don’t back off, but . . .” He held out a palm, not to shake hands, but as if requesting an offering. “I’ll help where I can.”

Cal regarded the outstretched hand. “Do you want something?”
“The USB drive.”

Dane had surmised that someone had hacked Cal’s email, intercepted his communications with his source, and catfished Cal into going to the observatory. On the way downtown, they stopped at a random café while Dane cleansed Cal’s computer and gave him a different USB drive loaded with internet-anonymizing software, to help defend against surveillance. Dane also gave him a dark web onion address to log into in case they needed to talk. Cal planned on involving him as little as possible, but it helped to know he was out there.

Three hours after dropping Cal at a rattrap hotel near Skid Row, Dane had called to inform that the USB drive Cal had inserted into Elias Holt’s computer was absolutely worthless. Cal hadn’t understood all the jargon, but the gist was that Elias’s desktop had extremely complicated antivirus software installed, designed to derail just such an attempt.

Cal supposed he should have expected nothing less from the CEO of an internet security company. But that was okay. As much as it hurt to lose the physical proof on that computer, Cal had seen the evidence for himself.

Evidence that could set him free.
He knew he had to go underground to fight these people—and not just online. As Dane said, it was time to leave LA.

The knowledge pained him. He didn’t like being driven from his home. He also wasn’t sure how he would survive. His mortgage was upside down, his emergency savings dangerously low. He might have enough on his single remaining credit card for a couple of plane tickets and a few weeks of bare-bones living, and that was about it.

For all of these reasons, his voice was grave later that night when he sat with his laptop on the frayed bedspread, logged on to Twitch, and addressed his listeners for what could be his final broadcast. He skipped the intro and went straight to his prepared speech.

“Tonight’s episode will be a very short one. In fact, it isn’t an episode at all. It’s a warning. You may not hear from me for some time, and if things go poorly, perhaps never again.” Cal paused for a sip of bad coffee as he let that sink in. “I have no doubt tonight’s broadcast will be erased from the internet. Wiped from the collective digital memory. But no one, no matter how powerful, can take away what we hear and see for ourselves. They can try to subvert, and confuse, and manipulate, but they cannot erase our minds. For those of you who are listening right now, you will hear. You will be awake. I know for a fact the Leap Year Society is real and very dangerous. I don’t know what it is yet, or how far it reaches. I do know Elias Holt and Aegis International are involved, and that they’re trying to silence me. I suspect that if I survive long enough to find out more, one of the world’s most powerful conspiracies will be exposed. A new world order that is trying to control our information networks and silence opposing voices and determine the course of history. So far, I’ve seen precious little. The tip of a dirt-encrusted fingernail reaching out from a grave in a forgotten cemetery, hidden from the world at large for years untold. But now I’ve seen the evidence with my own eyes. They exist.”

As Cal paused to catch his breath and consider his final words, a moment of emotion overcame him, rage and fear and a confusing stab of melancholy for a lost innocence, a way of life that could never be recovered—both his own and society as a whole.
No, the world was not all right.

“We’re lab rats, friends. Everything we eat, everything we hear in the news, everything we think we know about history and the nature of our world and the universe—everything is filtered down to us from someone, somewhere, something. We are born into ignorance, and so we remain. Enough, I say. We may never know the whole truth—I believe that as human beings we are damned to exist in a middle ground of self-aware ignorance. And I know we all have our unassailable belief systems, our political views, our religions. Our battlefields we draw from reading the same things we have always read and listening to the same voices we have always heard. It’s far too easy for those in the shadows to hold us in thrall, especially those of us with warm beds and full stomachs, those who enjoy worldly success, those in the First World who cling to belief systems and societal structures that preserve the status quo. But for those of you who yearn to know as much of the truth as possible, who desire to take the red pill, who desire to wake from that long, dark sleep and drop the scales from your eyes and stare deep into the abyss of reality, then I implore you to never stop searching. Never stop believing in a better world. Stay alert, stay aware, stay focused. And never forget what I’ve told you tonight, for it may be the only record of an essential truth.”

The chat line was exploding. Cal logged out of Twitch, shut his computer down, shoved a chair in front of the door, and closed his eyes to get some long overdue rest.

He had a feeling he would need it.
The Leap Year Society's veil slips ever so slightly...

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