LAYTON GREEN

UNKNOWN9

GENESIS

BOOK ONE OF THE GENESIS TRILOGY

PART 4 OF 6
As far as Andie could tell, no one had followed the double-decker bus as it wound its way through the jam-packed streets of London. Eventually, she moved to the top and hunkered near the enormous front window, hood pulled low, catching a chill from the sweat clinging to the back of her T-shirt, her jumbled emotions reflected in the ceaseless urban tableau unfolding in Piccadilly Circus.

The river of time might flow in one direction, at least in human perception, but the current very much matters. Hunter-gatherers migrating across ancient lands to an emerald isle in the Atlantic, war, empire, colonization, art, ideology, religion, plague, industrialization, technological change: a few thousand years of history had resulted in this one neon-strobed night, trillions of neurons on a single street corner sparking hopes and fears and dreams, a cauldron of quarks and leptons bubbling away in a sea of consciousness, the very fact that any of it exists at all a wondrous and terrible and unbelievable thing.

With no idea where to go, she was content to ride on the bus as she considered her options. Thinking of Professor Rickman made her tremble with fear and rage. Was the woman she had seen leaving his apartment Zawadi, and had she known about the meeting? If so, why kill the professor and not Andie? To stop him from talking?
But if that was the case, why had the dark-haired man been so surprised to see Andie on the street? Maybe they hadn’t known about the meeting.

Before she and Professor Rickman had parted the previous evening, he had said he was going to talk to someone about . . . what exactly?

Had that conversation gotten him killed?

She shivered, racked with guilt and uncertainty, as she considered the implications.

More in the dark than ever, all she really knew was at least three people were hunting her, and probably Zawadi as well. London had its advantages to someone on the run, but it was also teeming with people and CCTV cameras. Andie felt a desperate need to leave the city, but she didn’t know where to go or who to trust.

She was committed to following the clue on the Star Phone, but how? The scroll and the string of alphanumerics—stt38—had stumped her. Her only real theory was that it was a GPS code or some other type of coordinates. It had that look about it. But no matter how she turned and twisted the cipher, trying to transform it into a location, it got her nowhere.

She had an idea for a place where she could make some inquiries in the morning. She liked the idea of consulting someone in person, to avoid leaving a digital footprint as much as possible.

First she needed to sleep.

Going back to her old hotel was out of the question. It would be easier, and safer, to stay on the bus and drift until morning. What would happen if she did?

She decided to find out.

Curling deeper into her seat, she put her backpack against the side window and leaned her head against it. The soporific drone of the engine, even the wheeze of the brakes and the creak of the doors opening and closing, lulled her quickly to sleep.

Deep into the night, a chorus of raucous shouts from the lower level of the bus awakened her, followed by the sound of someone
retching. The clubs must have closed. She returned to sleep until the bus stopped moving and a well-mannered robotic voice called out over the loudspeaker.

“This bus terminates here, please take all of your belongings with you as you leave.”

Andie sat up and blinked, disoriented. She peered through the window and saw a cityscape of lamplit streets and tall gray buildings with shuttered shops on the ground floor. She could be anywhere in London.

“Hey. You must get off.”

The heavily accented voice, young and feminine, had come from her right. Andie turned to see a young Muslim woman standing in the aisle. The woman’s beige hijab framed a pretty but tired face with no makeup, thin eyebrows, and sunken cheeks.

“Thanks,” Andie said.

The woman hesitated. “You are homeless?”

“I am tonight.”

“We can’t stay. The driver walks through.”

“Okay.”

“Follow me. It will be better together.”

Andie looked back and saw a handful of men in grubby clothing shuffling toward the stairs. One of them stared at Andie with a hungry look in his eyes. With a grim expression meant to ward them off, she slipped on her backpack and followed the Muslim woman onto the street, then to another bus stop three blocks away.

“This one runs for two more hours,” the woman said. She was carrying a large drawstring bag full of clothes. “One more after that and the sun will rise. Do you have enough fare?”

“I do. Thank you.”

“It’s okay. Safety in numbers.”

When the bus came, Andie paid for both of them, causing the woman to grip her hand in gratitude. They found an empty pair of seats on top and sat across from each other. They had not even exchanged names. As Andie drifted to sleep again, she felt buoyed by
the silent companionship, the spark of light in the darkness.

Soon after a feeble morning sun teased Andie awake, the final bus of the night pulled into a cavernous central station. Her companion was still with her. As they exited together, Andie said, “You don’t have an extra hijab, do you?”

“I have several.”
“I’ll pay you for one.”
“You are Muslim?”
Andie shook her head. “It would be helpful,” she said quietly.

The woman bit her lip as her eyes slipped downward in understanding. She dug into her bag and pulled out an olive-green scarf. “This is okay?”

“Perfect. I can’t thank you enough. For this and last night.”
“Do you know how to tie it?”
“No clue.”

Gently, the woman wrapped the silky material around Andie’s head, gathered the folds under her chin, and inserted a pin to hold it in place. Explaining as she went, she took the longer side of the hijab and wrapped it around Andie’s head, pinning it again near the temple. Finally she tucked the shorter length of material under the neck, completing the process.

Andie had no idea how much a hijab cost, but she took out three twenties. The woman refused her, but Andie pressed them into her palm and closed her hand over it.

“Allah yusallmak,” the woman whispered.

Pulling the hijab even lower on her forehead, Andie slipped on her oversize sunglasses as she walked away, feeling confident her face was hidden. London awoke around her as she got her bearings at an intersection, realizing with a start the bus had terminated at Victoria Station, a block from her old hotel. She hurried away, passing through Saint James’s Park on the way to Covent Garden. The lush gardens, beautiful in the morning light, smelled of lavender and
rose and made her think of Duke Gardens. Commuters on foot and bicycles hurried past in both directions.

Deciding to avoid Piccadilly, she walked a bit farther north, into the maze of streets and shops in Soho. She chose a nice-smelling bakery and sat as far from the door as she could, tucked into a drafty corner for a coffee and a pastry, perusing a daily paper as she waited for the map shop to open.

Professor Rickman had made the front page.

The death was ruled a suicide.

Andie knew she needed help of some sort, sooner rather than later, or she was going to get herself killed. Before she made any major decisions, she had decided to follow this hunch and see where it took her. London was huge, she liked her disguise, and with any luck the people chasing her would presume she had fled the city instead of returning to its beating heart.

After another cup of coffee, she walked into Covent Garden again and down a different side street radiating out from the main arcade. Squeezed into the high-end retail was a shop called Stanfords, which had stuck in her memory. It billed itself as having the world’s largest collection of maps and travel books, and as far as she could tell, it was not a false boast.

Along with the eye-popping collection of maps and guidebooks, Stanfords sold globes and atlases, travel literature, travel games, compasses and other navigational aids, maritime and constellation guides, and travel accessories of all sorts. Even some of the walls and floors were giant maps. The place was catnip for anyone who had ever had an itch to put on walking shoes and explore a foreign shore.

As soon as the register was free of customers, she approached a pasty-faced clerk with a double chin and asked him if the store carried anything on GPS coordinates.

“What do you mean exactly?”

“I don’t know, books, coordinates, maps?”

“Hmm . . . you might do better online.”

Along with the retail selection, one of the reasons Andie had
chosen to visit Stanfords was the promise of “travel specialists who aid our customers.”

“Really?” she said. “You want me to shop at Amazon?”
“I just thought it might be—”
“I’ve tried online. That’s why I came here.”
“Well, can you be more specific?”
“Can you see if you have anything?”

Looking flustered, he consulted a computer, then turned it around to show her the results. There were various GPS guides for walkers, one for boaters, a coordinate map, a road atlas, and a logbook.

“Where do I find these?” she asked.
“Most are on the bottom level, along the far wall. Let me know if I can be of further assistance.”

Further assistance? Maybe switching to a career in data entry would help.

Stanfords had three levels, all of them sizeable. She took the stairs to the basement and made her way to the scant section of GPS-related titles. After an hour of flipping through the books, she considered the historical tidbits she had learned.

GPS had originated in the Sputnik era, when American scientists learned they could track the Russian satellite using its radio signal. During the Cold War, the Department of Defense refined the technology for military purposes—wasn’t that always the case?

The first GPS system was called Navstar, and the first official satellite launched in 1978. The modern iteration employs dozens of satellites that use trilateration to pinpoint a location anywhere on Earth within three meters. The standard positioning service is available to anyone worldwide, and found in everything from cars to mobile phones to GPS shoes.

There were limitations, such as dense forests, canyon walls, and underground spaces. But it was remarkable to think that for about fifty bucks, anyone could buy a GPS device—or simply download an app to one’s phone—that accessed a space-based navigation system.
with a built-in atomic clock for time correction, utilizing radio waves traveling at the speed of light.

Technology was insane.

Something that had caught her interest was geocaching, a high-tech treasure hunt played all over the world. Basic geocaching seemed too trite for the Star Phone. But what if the concept—GPS and embedded QR codes and the like—had inspired the new clue in some way? This line of thinking brought to mind the Star Phone and whatever technology connected it to the bust of Democritus.

A uniformed store clerk wandered over. He was an older man with kind, crinkly eyes and a scraggly gray beard. “Can I ’elp you?”

She said, “Do you know anything about GPS positioning?”

“Quite a bit, actually. My grandson’s fourteen—going on thirty, mind you—and it’s our common ground. I’m a letterboxer, and he loves Pokémon Go and Ingress, but we bond over waymarking.”

She had to work to understand his strong Cockney accent, and his low smoker’s growl didn’t help.

“I’d reckon ’im and me, we’ve hiked half of Britain together,” he said proudly. “What’s your question?”

“What do I have to lose?” She told him the five-digit code. He scratched his chin and asked her to repeat it.

“Hold on a bit,” he said, pulling out a smartphone with a green rubber case. His gnarled fingers pecked clumsily at the touch screen. After a short search, a slow grin spread across his face. “Thought so.”

Andie caught her breath. “What is it?”

“I’m curious where you got this.”

“I’m on a scavenger hunt.”

“Ah,” he said wisely. “Okay. Take a look-see.”

The image on his phone revealed a list she recognized at once as GPS coordinates. “I don’t understand—are these related? How did you get them?”

“Let me back up,” he said, taking the phone back. “Are you familiar with geohashing? Not caching—hashing?”

She shook her head.
“I’ve used it now and again, but it’s a lot more obscure.” He showed her the phone, which displayed a satellite map and a trio of text boxes at the top labeled LONGITUDE/LATITUDE, PRECISION, and GEOHASH. “It’s just a different way of getting coordinates,” he said. “That’s about all I know. I think it’s pretty complicated. We can reverse engineer it, though.”

He typed the Star Phone code “stt38” into the geohash box. Out popped a set of coordinates. The satellite map zoomed in, outlining a specific area in a transparent blue box. The location was Alexandria, Egypt, and Andie’s palm pressed into her thigh when she saw the name of the building in the lower portion of the outlined area, written in both Arabic and Latin script.

**BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRINA**

She understood the import at once.

Taken together, the geohash code and the scroll on the Star Phone had to be referring to the Library of Alexandria, the legendary storehouse of ancient knowledge.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“Of course. Anything else I can help you with?”

“Not right now.”

“Right then. Good luck with the scavenger hunt.”

“I’ll need it,” she muttered as he wandered off.

After Googling “geohash,” she was even more convinced she was on the right path. An obscure geocoding technique invented by Gustavo Niemeyer, the system worked by subdividing the world into a spatial data structure, assigning numeric values, and expressing the location with an alphanumeric string. Instead of pinpointing a location on a grid, as with longitude and latitude, geohashing coordinates were expressed in bounding boxes that could be narrowed or expanded by altering the number of binary digits.

In effect, a geohash reduced a geographic region to numerical data. Expressing the world as mathematics.
How very James Corwin.

If her guess was correct, his use of geohashing instead of basic GPS coordinates was another subtle clue. Although the original Library of Alexandria had been destroyed two thousand years ago, the Egyptian government had erected a modern library on the suspected site of the original building. They had even renamed it the Library of Alexandria.

If desired, Dr. Corwin could have given her exact GPS coordinates for the new building. Yet he hadn’t. Instead he had given her a bounding box, a grid, which encompassed a larger portion of the city.

Why?

Her gut told her the image on the Star Phone—the ancient scroll and the geohash—referred to the original Library of Alexandria in some way. Yet how or why or what it all meant, she had absolutely no idea.
On the journey to Malmö, a quick ferry ride across the narrow strait separating Denmark from the southern tip of Sweden, the events of the previous night seemed far away, fuzzy in Ettore’s memory. The long drive into the countryside, the moonlit walk through the hedge maze, the clandestine meeting with the prince and the American diplomat: Had all of that really happened?

Sometimes, when Ettore was not working out a complex mathematical problem or dwelling on the structure of the universe, it felt as if the world was a little bit less than real. Where was the line between dream and reality, consciousness and oblivion, quantum probability and the collapse of the wave function?

And yet, as another rare bout of sunshine sparked the tips of the waves, Ettore could not deny the presence of the mahogany-brown leather attaché case sitting on his lap on the ferry bench, or the Swedish border agent making his way down the aisle as the rocky shoreline of Sweden drew nearer outside the window.

The agent was checking documents and inspecting luggage in a diligent manner. This made Ettore very nervous.

What if the agent asked him to open his briefcase and Ettore had to tell him he didn’t even know the code to the lock? Would they confiscate it? Uncover the evidence of espionage it most certainly
contained? Was it still too late to—

A stern voice interrupted his reverie. When Ettore failed to respond, the agent repeated the request in German. “Passport, please.”

Ettore looked up, blinked, and then fumbled in the pocket of his coat. “Here,” he said, handing over the passport.

“You’re Italian?” the border agent asked, flipping through the stiff pages.

“I’m in Denmark on a research grant. With the Niels Bohr Institute.” Ettore’s voice cracked on the last word, as if he were a child on the verge of a breakdown. Disgusted with himself, he willed his fingers to stop trembling as he held up a copy of the grant papers and his identification badge with the institute.

“Your purpose in Sweden?”

“I’ve never been before. It’s such a short trip, I thought I would spend the day in Malmö. I would like to visit the castle and Saint Peter’s Church, in particular.”

Why am I going on like this? Ettore wondered. All I have to say is that I’m a tourist. He was especially mortified that he had mentioned Saint Peter’s Church—the location of his covert meeting with Stefan’s contact—to the border patrol.

Could he be any more inept?

After the agent studied his documents, he gave the briefcase a long glance while Ettore quivered in his seat, sure he was about to be arrested.

“Do you always bring a briefcase on your sightseeing trips?”

Ettore chuckled, trying to play it off, cringing at the disingenuous sound of his own laughter. “Yes, it’s quite tragic. I’m afraid I have some work to finish today. I’m hoping to find a nice café in town.”

The agent’s eyes lingered on the briefcase for another moment. After glancing at the clock on the wall, he stamped Ettore’s passport and returned it. “Enjoy your visit.”
As Ettore wandered through central Malmö, the sky a deep bruise streaked with haze, his thoughts turned once again to the contents of the leather attaché case.

He had no reason to doubt the veracity of anything he had heard in the hedge maze. On the contrary, the presence of such luminary figures as a prince and a United States diplomat made him trust Stefan all the more. The other two men even seemed to defer to his German friend. Did this have something to do with the hierarchy of the Leap Year Society? Did Stefan’s position in the organization transcend titles and importance in the world at large?

Yet why had Stefan not let Ettore mention the Society’s name? Because of some bizarre code that forbade nonmembers from speaking of it—or because it didn’t exist?

Or a third option: Perhaps the Society existed but Stefan had no intention of ever including Ettore. Had he been grooming him for some ulterior purpose? Perhaps for this very trip?

It seemed a little far-fetched to go to all that trouble just to deliver a single briefcase to Malmö. And Stefan’s knowledge of theoretical physics was very real. Thinking it through, Ettore truly believed the German held him in high esteem and wanted him to join their organization. Yet why the delays and the subterfuge?

On the other hand, serious events were taking place on the world stage. Events that transcended other interests. He could understand the caution. And if Ettore could play a role in slowing the rise of the fanatics in charge of Germany and his own country, the ugly nationalism threatening the fabric of democracy, he should be happy to do so. Delivering a briefcase seemed a terribly small contribution.

Buoyed by this line of reasoning, he enjoyed himself as he bundled up in his wool coat and scarf to absorb the sights of Malmö, waiting for the appointed hour. Though he knew nothing of intelligence matters—he had never even read a spy novel—he thought it sounded like a good idea to arrive early and not run straight to the contact. Besides, it was true Ettore had never been to Sweden. He might as well see a few sights.
He found Malmö to be quite different from Copenhagen, much more orderly and reserved. No one crossed the wide cobblestone streets when they were not supposed to. No children waved as they passed him on their bicycles.

Still, he enjoyed gazing upon the city’s timber-framed guildhalls and its Baroque squares lined with handsome rust-colored buildings topped with the curlicue facades of the Dutch Renaissance style. There was a fine castle in the center of town and plenty of cozy cafés to enjoy warm cinnamon buns and coffee. He suspected half of his pleasure derived from the anticipatory thrill of adventure as the meeting drew near. Never in his life had he done anything remotely like this.

As the fleeting March sun began to descend, Ettore approached Saint Peter’s Church, a hulking Gothic edifice right in the center of town. It was a very stern building, which aligned with his impression of the Swedes. Ettore circled the perimeter, his step slowing as he approached the intersection of Själbodgatan and Göran Olsgatan, looking over his shoulder at every turn, palms sweating inside the thick gloves he had brought to ward against the cold.

Then he saw it, just as Stefan had said it would be: a single wooden bench pressed up against the side of the cathedral, situated between two flying buttresses, barely visible through a thicket of evergreen shrubs. It was positioned just off a gravel footpath that encircled the grounds of the cathedral.

Sitting alone on the bench—again aligning with Stefan’s story—was a man in a gray coat and a matching bowler hat, a blanket across his lap for extra warmth, reading a newspaper and sipping out of a disposable cup. The full cheeks and ash-blond stubble marked him as a Swedish man about Ettore’s age.

The man never looked up as Ettore approached on the gravel footpath. As instructed, Ettore set the briefcase on the bench beside the man and kept walking, as if out for a stroll around the church. The man gave him a murmur of thanks, right before two gunshots exploded from very close by, causing Ettore to lurch to the side, cringing as the retort rang in his ears.
Unsure where the gunshots had originated, he spun in a circle—and saw the contact slumped on the wooden bench with a crater in the side of his head, a spray of dark blood blotting the cathedral wall behind him.

Horrified, Ettore stumbled away, his adrenaline spiking so sharply he couldn’t think straight. He knew only his life was in danger and he had to get away as fast as possible. After regaining his equilibrium, he started to run when a familiar authoritative voice called out from the foliage to his right.

“Stop running. Keep walking around the church.”

“Stefan!” Ettore said, as his friend stepped into view from behind a chestnut tree. “Did you see—”

“Keep walking,” Stefan repeated, more firmly this time.

It was then that Ettore noticed the smell of gunpowder in the air, caught a glimpse of steel as Stefan calmly buttoned his double-breasted wool coat, and put two and two together. Ettore’s words came out as a strangled whisper. “You killed him—”

Stefan gripped him by the arm and led him down the gravel path, around the corner of the cathedral. “Quickly now,” he said, “before the authorities arrive.”

Ettore felt as if he couldn’t breathe. He was shaking all over, his heart pounding against his chest as if trying to smash through. “Are you going to kill me?”

“What? Of course not.”

“Where are we going?”

“Back to the ferry. Our work is done.”

“I don’t understand,” Ettore said as Stefan guided him off the path and toward an intersection on the far side of the church. Voices shouted from somewhere across the street, cut off from view by a dense clump of evergreen bushes. A woman screamed, and Ettore knew someone had found the body. “What about the mission? Was it all a lie?”

“That was the mission,” Stefan said, intent on scanning the streets as they walked.
“The mission?” Ettore repeated in a daze.

After they had walked a bit farther, Stefan relaxed a fraction and said, “I apologize for the subterfuge. It had to seem real. Not just to you, but to the others with whom we met. We have a mole in our organization, Ettore, a Nazi sympathizer who would destroy everything we have worked for and place the world in grave peril. You have just helped to draw him out.”

“I have?” he said, still trembling like a frightened puppy. “That . . . man you just shot?”

“He was but a foot soldier. The one we sought was a much greater threat. Now that we know for sure, our people will deal with him as soon as I send word.”

Ettore thought it through. “Is it one of the men we met with?”

As Stefan gave a curt nod of acknowledgment, the ferry dock came into view, causing Ettore to press forward. He was terrified the authorities would apprehend them while still in Sweden, or that one of the slain man’s associates would appear, to take revenge.

Stefan placed a hand on his elbow to slow him. The German had two tickets in hand as they approached the terminal, and looked as calm as someone taking a morning stroll in his garden.

“What was in the briefcase?” Ettore asked as they headed down the metal ramp to board the ferry.

“Newspapers.”

As Ettore stopped walking, stunned, Stefan grinned and slipped an arm across his shoulders. “I would not have put you in peril. It was a test, Ettore, and you passed with ease. You’re brave, loyal, and resourceful.”

Am I? Ettore wondered. He just felt terrified, and sickened by the bloodshed in which he had played a role. On church grounds, no less.

A blond woman with severe lips and erect posture took their tickets, and then the two men were safely aboard the passenger ferry, on their way back to Denmark. It was a large and crowded boat, and they found seats near the middle. Ettore’s adrenaline ebbed during the return journey. Stefan sat quietly beside him, reading a thin
volume of philosophical essays he had produced from the pocket of his coat. When the Danish border agent walked through, he gave their passports a cursory glance and stamped them.

Outside the ferry terminal in Copenhagen, once they had separated from the crowd, Stefan faced him and said, “I know what you saw was shocking to you, but in times like these, hard choices must be made.” When Ettore didn’t answer, Stefan continued. “I can’t disclose details, but you should know you’ve probably just saved an untold number of lives. A bullet from a gun kills one person at a time, Ettore, but a man in a position of power can kill thousands, tens of thousands, with the stroke of a pen.”

Ettore shuffled his feet, struggling to relate to this abstract thing. Was that what it meant to be brave? The ability to feel great empathy for people he didn’t even know?

Though he could not get the awful image of the corpse and the blood-spattered wall out of his head, he did feel strangely proud about his part in the mission and was happy to have pleased Stefan. “What happens now?”

“I trust you’re still eager to join the Society?”

Ettore compressed his lips and considered the question. Part of him wanted to walk away and forget he had ever met this man of action, to ensure the sick thrill of danger never again ripped through his gut like a swallowed bag of razor blades.

Yet part of him had never felt so alive.

But more than any of that, Ettore’s curiosity about the enigmatic Leap Year Society, his yearning for hidden knowledge, had risen to a fever pitch.

“I am,” he said.

Stefan slipped on a pair of black leather gloves. “Then we are ready to receive you.”

“When?”

“Two nights hence. I’ll send another car.”

Ettore swallowed. That soon? “Okay.”

“Oh, and Ettore?” Stefan said as he backed away.
“Yes?”

“Your induction will not occur at a regular meeting of the Society, but during a very special one. I have an important announcement to make.”

“Which is?”

A hard but knowing glint had entered Stefan’s eyes. “You’ll have to wait and see.”
Shielded from the bright afternoon rays by her sunglasses, still wearing her hijab, Andie stood in the courtyard plaza at the entrance to the British Library, gazing at the mélange of glass, steel, and brick thrown together in a jarring mix of modernist and traditional design. The awkward angles of the multitiered edifice reminded her of a half-crushed termite mound. In the background rose the handsome red brick towers and spires of Saint Pancras station, in her mind a far superior example of architectural beauty.

Something about the library bothered her, and not just the insipid design. A vague feeling of uneasiness had lingered ever since Dean Varen had directed her to the Reading Room at Duke.

Maybe uneasiness was the wrong word. Andie couldn’t categorize the feeling as good or bad. It was more a sensation of being watched.

She didn’t think the feeling was particular to her. More that someone, or multiple people, were watching the library. As if the public institution itself, and maybe others, were pieces on some unseen board, part of a very serious game with rules all its own.

A ridiculous sentiment, she knew. The sort of reaction that belonged to paranoia and superstition. Yet she couldn’t shake it.

Did she really need to go inside? At Stanfords earlier in the day, she had taken the time to peruse a couple of guidebooks on Egypt,
each of which provided a cursory overview of the history of the Library of Alexandria.

Established around 300 BCE by King Ptolemy I at the suggestion of Demetrius, a disciple of Aristotle, the lofty goal of the Great Library was to possess a copy of every book in the world. Ptolemy pursued an aggressive acquisition strategy: searching every ship that came into harbor, confiscating scrolls from travelers, and sending out agents around the world—the world’s first literary scouts—to search for written knowledge in everything from bazaars to royal libraries. At its height, the library was reported to hold a million titles or more.

Most of the priceless collection consisted of scrolls, chiefly papyrus or leather, kept in pigeonholes with titles inscribed on wooden tags. Contrary to popular conception, the library was not destroyed in one great conflagration, but by a series of fires and thefts during the Roman period, which gradually depleted the collection. Despite the loss, the library had established Alexandria as the intellectual capital of the ancient world, providing an example for similar institutions to follow.

All the books said the same things. So did the internet, after Andie had taken a risk and hunkered down in the café at Stanfords to conduct more research. She did find conflicting theories concerning the dates and motives behind the library’s demise, and there was plenty of dispute as to the contents of the collection. But everyone agreed the Great Library had been utterly destroyed.

She wondered how much more there was, if anything, to uncover in the British Library. Oh, she was sure to find more details about the dismantling, and all sorts of scholarly speculation on the collection itself.

But would she find anything useful? Was it worth the risk of exposure? If the people pursuing her knew about the Star Phone, might they not be watching the entrance to England’s largest storehouse of public information?

She believed the message on the Star Phone was clear. In some
way, she was supposed to visit the Library of Alexandria. Whether that meant a physical visit to the rebuilt library, or a location within the geohash boundary box displayed on the Star Phone, or some other type of visit, she didn’t know. But she felt sure the next part of the puzzle lay in Egypt and not England. Alexandria had libraries and museums too—and she was betting they held more information on the city’s past.

She turned on her heel, having made her decision. It was the smarter and safer choice— if she could get to Egypt unseen.

And for that, she knew she needed help.

So she made another decision, one that had marinated in her mind ever since her exchange with DocWoodburn.

The British Library put out a strong Wi-Fi signal, but just to be safe, she chose a random Costa and purchased another coffee. After logging in to Twitch, she sent a message to DocWoodburn’s other handle, Rhodies4ever351!.

While she awaited a response, she browsed an online travel guide to start familiarizing herself with modern Alexandria. An hour later, she received a reply.

Hi Mercuri. Sorry, I needed my beauty sleep. What time zone are u in?

Probably a very different one from you.

You don’t trust me. That’s smart. I don’t trust you either.

Why not?

I was just tricked by Atlantis into meeting an anonymous source. It almost got me killed.

Really?

Really.

Andie took a deep breath. So it wasn’t just her. Why take the chance now?

I’ve had a security upgrade.

Are you really a former investigative journalist?

I am.

I need to trust someone.
Me too.
How do we get there?
Good question. Any ideas?
You said it wasn’t safe to talk here.
It’s not.
Where is?
Still working on that.

**Andie bit down on a nail.** I need to leave the city I’m in.
That makes two of us.
I’m not sure how.
Maybe I can help with that.
How?

**There was a long pause before his response.** What about a

pa**port?**

**Andie felt a tingle of hope, then admonished herself to be cau-
tious.** Why would you do that?

I need allies. And information.
That would be helpful.
To establish trust?
Yes but I would have to trust you in the first place.
Yeah. I suppose so. Are my good looks and charm not enough?
At least I know you’re not a bot. Or are you? Atlantis seems handy
with technology.

Trust me—I’m the anti-bot. I looked into the Italian physicist. Did
you know him?

Andie didn’t reply, though after a few moments, she realized her

silence was a reply. She had probably made a mistake by giving out

that reference. You should check out Quasar Labs too.

I’ll do that. I have a feeling you’re scared, Mercuri, and on the run.
So am I. Maybe I can help.

Why do you want to?
When we trust each other, I’ll tell you.
OK.
I do need a location for the pa**port.**
Of course he does. Andie went back and forth with herself, trying to decide what to do. After another long pause, she was stunned by his next message.

My real name is Cal Miller. Look me up.

Why did you tell me that?

More trust. Atlantis already knows who I am.

In the end, she decided to tell him her location for the same reason he had given her his name: the people after her already knew where she was.

London.

Thank you. That helps. I have a contact there.

Andie took a deep breath. She wanted very much to trust someone. Especially someone who understood this madness she had entered, and could maybe even help her. But she was going to need more. Much more. I want fast answers. What was the first article you published?

As a beat reporter?

Investigative.

Corruption in Los Angeles County prisons.

His replies were coming as soon as she posed the questions.

Name of your pet?

Leon. Rhodesian Ridgeback. He’s as old as Moses.

She grinned at the connection to his Twitch handle. Any distinguishing marks you or the vet would know?

Leon broke his leg two years ago.

I’m sorry.

Hit by a car right in front of me. Audi convertible. Bastards took off.

She regarded his responses. They were specific, verifiable. He added more.

My favorite ice cream is Breyers with real strawberry chunks. Coffee with two creams. Pepperoni and onion pizza. Mole on my left shoulder blade.

That’s pretty personal.

Condensed story: Atlantis got me fired and ruined my reputation.
I want my life back. They want the opposite.

So you trust me already?

I think we’re both desperate. I’ve given you nothing besides info you can verify. Once you trust me, and if I’m convinced you’re legit, then maybe we can help each other.

I know I’m legit. Not sure I can give you more.

One step at a time. Check out my info while I work on the document. Stay tuned.

How long?

Very soon. Today I hope.

OK.

Verifying Cal’s answers to her questions would go a long way toward establishing trust. But she would have to make phone calls, enter personal information into databases, and who knew what else. It would expose her too much.

While stopping for a green curry at a hole-in-the-wall Laotian restaurant in Soho, scrunched into a red booth with sticky seats, she thought of a potential middle ground. After Googling nearby private investigators, she finished eating and walked to the office of the first investigator who had time for her that day. City Investigators, on Southampton Row.

In a cramped office full of metal shelving jammed with file folders, Andie hired Adelaide Warfield, registered member of the Association of British Investigators, to conduct research on Cal Miller.

A muscular auburn-haired woman with a brusque manner, Adelaide claimed she had just finished a big case and was having a light week. She brushed off the request as an easy one. Andie paid for three hours of work up front, gave away nothing of herself, and said she would call back at the end of the day. Adelaide took the money, unperturbed by the clandestine nature of the request.

After leaving the PI’s office, as shadows from the declining sun
crept down the buildings of Central London, Andie checked the time and thought about where to sleep. She saw little choice but to stay in London for another night. That made her nervous, as did walking around in the open. No doubt the dark-haired man and Zawadi were scouring the city for her.

With no decision on where to board for the night, she fingered the business card the girl at the occult fair had given her, and couldn’t help herself from taking a short walk to visit the expert on mysticism. She found the bookstore just off busy Leicester Square, on a narrow lane lined with Victorian townhomes.

Evocative of a London from another era, the pedestrian-only byway was made of worn paving stones, and a row of wrought-iron lampposts in the center of the street had just begun to glow in the mauve twilight. The gently lit interiors of the shops on the ground floor, nestled behind glass windows outlined in handsome green trim, added to the ambience.

She caught the store just before closing time. To her surprise, there were no displays of healing crystals or incense candles in the windows, no exotic herbs or animal skulls or tarot cards. Just a discreet sign jutting over the street that read FRANKLIN’S BOOKS, and a bronze placard declaring it THE OLDEST OCCULT BOOKSHOP IN THE WORLD. Situated between an art gallery and a print shop, and across the street from a pair of high-end antique stores, the very location lent credibility in Andie’s eyes.

A bell tinkled as she entered. The crowded bookshelves, dour carpeting, and dusty hardbacks with gilt lettering resembled a typical antiquarian bookstore. Behind the counter was a sinewy older man, perhaps sixty-five, with a hawkish nose and a crown of white hair clinging on for dear life. The sleeves of his dress shirt were rolled to the elbows. Faint ink stains on the pockets.

As he reached for a sport coat hanging behind him, Andie set the business card on the counter. He peered down at it.

“I know you’re closing,” she said, “but I’m trying to reach the owner. Is he still in?”
“He is.”
“Could I speak to him?”
He leveled a kind but piercing gaze at her. “You already are. I’m Harold Franklin.”
“I . . . was wondering if you could take a look at something for me.”
“What sort of something might that be?”
“A drawing of a place I’m trying to identify. It should just take a moment.”
“Do you have it with you?”
She set down her backpack, took out the collection of ink drawings, and spread them on the counter. He shrugged on his jacket, picked up one of the drawings, and examined it with his full attention.
When he at last looked up, he said, “Do you mind if I lock up first?”
Her hands clenched at her sides. “You recognize it?”
“I’d like to show you a few things.”
She hesitated, her eyes flicking out the window and then back at the proprietor. “Sure.”
He gave a quick nod, walked over to set the dead bolt on the front door, and switched the sign to CLOSED.
“I’ve never seen an occult bookstore like this,” she said.
“You’ve been to many?”
“I have, actually.”
“Why?”
He posed it not in a challenging manner, but as a genuine question.
“For a long time, I was searching for something. I suppose I still am. I just grew disenchanted with the process.”
He held up one of the ink drawings. “Searching for this?”
She pursed her lips and nodded.
“Give me a minute.” He set the drawing down and headed into the stacks. “‘Occult’ has come to signify many things,” he called out, as she followed behind. “For the vast majority of people, the term
brings to mind magic, the supernatural, Aleister Crowley and his ilk. I prefer the original meaning: ‘That which is mysterious, beyond the range of ordinary knowledge or understanding. Something hidden to the outside world.’”

“I prefer that definition too.”
“What’s your profession?”
“I’m an astrophysicist.”
“Then you understand me.”
She gave a small smile. “Yes.”

After pulling out a thin volume with a frayed green spine, he moved two rows over to pluck a larger book from the top shelf with the aid of a stepping stool. He rummaged around in a locked drawer for a leather-bound notebook that fit in the palm of his hand, so old the title had faded away, then returned to the front and set the manuscripts on the counter.

Harold opened the larger tome, a collection of translated verse from a twelfth-century Sufi mystic. He took some time to find the right page, then read a passage that so closely mirrored the experience of Andie’s visions that she gripped the edge of the wooden counter in disbelief. It was all there—the feeling of falling into a waking dream, drifting through an endless void that reflected reality through a distorted lens, the uneasy sensation of being watched, the bout of dizziness and nausea that followed.

“I’ve never heard of this book,” she said. “What was the—”

A raised finger from the bookseller cut her off. He turned to the leather-bound notebook, took a second to find the right page, and read a shorter passage in a far more prosaic style. Nevertheless, the description bore an unmistakable correlation to the first passage, and to Andie’s visions.

She was white-faced by the time he finished. “Who wrote that?”

“The notebook was compiled by a fourteenth-century Venetian nobleman, a contemporary of Marco Polo whose interests were more anthropological than commercial. That particular passage sets forth the nobleman’s description of his dreamwalking session with a
Mongol shaman in central Asia. The shaman was Tungusic, I believe.”
“A dreamwalking session . . .”
“There are more. A passage in an obscure Ovid text describing a visit to Pythia, the Delphic oracle. A Gnostic gospel that never gained credibility. The Yamabushi of Japan. This place, or one very much like it, has been described by a wide array of mystics, visionaries, and seers. They all specifically speak of a ‘shadowy realm’ that is ‘like our world but isn’t.’”

Andie took a deep breath, trying to process what she was hearing. “If it’s so widespread, why isn’t it more well-known?”

He wagged a finger, thoughtful. “Yes, you’re right. ‘Wide array’ is the wrong terminology. In fact, it’s exceedingly rare. A multitude of sources were consulted over many years to collect these references. Perhaps a better word is ‘pancultural.’ A very rare thing in the occult world—and one which, quite frankly, gives the accounts the ring of truth.”

“What is your . . . What do you think of it?”

“Another peculiarity to these accounts is that they seem to bear no relation to popularized descriptions of other such places: limbo, purgatory, dream worlds, after-death experiences, and the like. My opinion? Though I have no idea how or why, I believe the world has produced a handful of truly gifted seers, throughout history and across all cultures, and that the best way to find them is by matching the contents of their visions. Why bother with a mystic who cannot seem to escape the clichés of his own milieu? Think about it—would true scrying into a realm beyond our own not uncover a universal truth? A place described in similar fashion by seers from vastly different eras and geographies? A place like”—he looked down at the ink drawing—“this place?”

Working hard not to appear overly excited, she said, “But how do you know of it? Why search for it in the first place? What else do you know?”

He set his palms on the counter. “Those are the right questions. As for the last, I’m afraid my answer will disappoint you. I’ve no idea
what this place is, what it signifies, or whether it even exists outside of the dream state and mental visions described in the literature. Perhaps it’s a mental glitch. The interior psychology of the true seer. A realm we don’t yet understand. As to how I came across it . . . I once knew a chap named, well, we’ll call him Jack. He was a regular customer of mine, and a very clever scientist. A physicist, like you.”

Andie swallowed.

“We lost touch for a few years, but about a decade back I ran into him again, in a pub in Charing Cross. He didn’t look too well. Unbalanced, slightly deranged. We caught up for a bit, and after one too many pints, or maybe five too many, he confided he was searching for a group of people he believed were in possession of secret knowledge.”

Her voice barely rose above a whisper. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t really know, except he described a place exactly like the one in your drawings.”

Andie rocked back on her heels, overcome by a wave of emotions. I’m not insane. This place is real, and it exists. But what is it? Or maybe this Jack person, all these other people throughout history, maybe we’re all losing our minds. Maybe the shadow realm is the face of insanity.

“These people . . . did he find them?”

“I don’t know. But it was Jack who led me to the passages I showed you. He compiled them some years ago.” The proprietor tapped the counter. “I found these three after a long search. I gave it up after a while.”

“How could you give it up?”

He gave her a thin smile. “Do you think your ink drawings are the only inexplicable mystery I’ve uncovered in my work?”

Her eyes lowered, lost in the murky hues and spectral imagery of the drawings spread out on the counter. “What did your friend think? Did he have any theories?”

“Jack thought the shadow place was some kind of higher plane, or a different reality. He wouldn’t tell me anything about the people he was searching for, or even how he heard about them. To be
honest, I assumed that part of the story was a flight of fancy.” He looked down at the drawings. “How did you come across them?”

“I found them in an estate sale. I was just curious.” Andie gathered the drawings and returned them to the backpack, trying to disguise how much the next question meant to her. “You don’t have any idea where Jack is now, do you? Is there a way I can contact him?”

“I’m afraid that after that night, I never saw him again.”

After leaving the bookstore, disturbed by what she had learned, Andie ducked into a café and logged in to Twitch. A message from Cal was waiting.

Beauty salon across from Sainsbury’s in Kingsland Shopping Centre. Go in the morning or before 10 tonight. Paid in full.

It was nine o’clock. A quick search on Google told her she could just make it to Sainsbury’s by ten on public transport. Slower by car.

Andie put a hand to her temple. She could be walking right into the lion’s den.

Conflicted, yet not wanting to wait until the morning, she tried the number for the private eye as she walked toward the underground. It surprised her when Adelaide answered.

“Glad you called. I finished a while ago.”

“You’re working late,” Andie said.

“I’m a PI, not a banker. I’m tailing a cheating husband around the West End tonight.”

“Did you find anything on Cal Miller?”

“I did. And I wouldn’t trust the wanker.”

Andie stopped walking, her stomach sinking. “Why not?”

“Yeah, his story checked out. Former reporter with the LA Times, the piece on prison reform, his dog’s name, the broken leg: it’s all kosher. I even found a credit card receipt with Breyers strawberry, a stack of DiGiornos, and Folgers coffee.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“The guy’s broke as hell. His credit cards are almost maxed, and
I can promise you he won’t get another anytime soon, because he keeps missing payments. It’s not just his cards either. Delinquent student loans, cable, phone bill. Did he tell you he was fired from the *Times* for falsifying a source? It was a big scandal. The guy hasn’t had a steady job in two years. I assume you’ve been together a little while, something smells fishy, and you’re trying to get a read on him?”

“Something like that.”

“Let me guess: he told you about the house in Hollywood, promised to move you in, described a future with rainbows and unicorns and dollar bills falling out of his arse. That about the size of it? He probably told you he’s still a full-time reporter, didn’t he?”

A grim smile crept to Andie’s lips. “I guess he’s a deadbeat after all,” she said. A deadbeat whose life was ruined by the Leap Year Society. “That’s too bad. He’s a rock star in bed.”

“Huh. Aren’t they all?”

After taking the Piccadilly line to Green Park, Andie changed to the Victoria line, rode five stops to Highbury & Islington, then switched to the London Overground. It was a relief to leave the claustrophobic subway for a cleaner, less crowded train. Two stops to the east, after passing a sea of bleak council housing punctuated by the odd granite steeple, she exited at Dalston Kingsland.

The city felt different here. Working-class and incredibly diverse. It was edgier than Central London, more alive with energy after dark. Bags of trash were piled on the curb for pickup. There were no tourist shops or world-class monuments in sight. Hip restaurants and cafes swarmed the streets around the station, but as she walked east on Ridley Road, the smell of shish kebabs and frying grease wrinkling her nose, she saw a good number of secondhand shops, sandwich wrappers and fruit rinds on the sidewalks, imitation goods piled on blankets, music from a dozen cultures blaring from the shops.

Soon she cut right, into an indoor shopping center. All the shops had closed except for the Sainsbury’s grocery at the far end. Just
across the hall, she spied a shuttered hair-and-nail salon. One of the cashiers at Sainsbury’s seemed to have an eye on her, but no one else was around. With a shrug, Andie pressed the buzzer beside the door.

Long seconds passed. She buzzed again. Finally a tall, athletic, and very attractive black man walked through the darkened salon to let her in. He was wearing white designer jeans, leather sandals, and a Tottenham Hotspur track jacket with no shirt underneath. The top of the jacket was unzipped, exposing a slender silver chain resting atop a muscular torso.

“Yeah?” he said.
“I was told to come here.”
“By who?”
“Cal Miller.”
“What’s your name, dove?”
She hesitated. “Mercury.”
A broad smile revealed a set of perfect white teeth that gleamed in the darkness. “Yeah, you are. I’m Puck. Let’s go to the back.”

He locked up behind her, then led her through a door in the rear of the salon. Inside was a drab office that reeked of marijuana, with smocks and razors hanging on the wall, an aging computer atop a desk, brooms in a corner, and a pair of beige filing cabinets.

When they entered, a blond woman with a wide-boned Slavic face was buttoning her jeans. She had a flushed look, her lipstick was smeared, and a lacy bra exposed the nipples of her flat chest. A matrix of faint scars covered her forearms.

Puck grabbed a shirt off the desk and threw it at the woman. “Hurry up,” he said. The woman caught the shirt and scurried into the corner. Puck leaned against the desk, crossed his ankles, and smirked at Andie. “Came for a trip bip, huh?”

Andie was stunned, and seething, at his treatment of the woman.
“What?”
“A passport.”
“Oh. Yeah.”
“Where you going?”
“That’s my business.”
He spread his hands and gave the hijab a long look. “If you’re running from something, why not stay with me awhile? I can protect you. Put you to work.”
“I’ll have to decline that gracious offer.”
“I treat my girls well.”
“I can tell.”
He tapped a hand against the top of his chest, his smirk widening. “Bang-up benefits, yeah?”
She grimaced. “The passport?”
With a chuckle, Puck opened a drawer and took out a camera. “Let’s see those pearly whites. And the scarf has to go.” Andie removed the hijab and faced the camera. After taking a few photos, he asked, “Are you a Lucy or a Sloane?”
“I’m not a Lucy.”
“I figured,” he said, then told her to wait and disappeared through a different door.
As she waited, Andie replaced the hijab, set her backpack on the floor, and crossed her arms against her chest. The woman in the corner had sunk to a squat, hands crossed over her knees.
The pungent smell and the stress of the situation made Andie feel a little nauseated, and her head began to spin. She closed her eyes, trying to regain her equilibrium, but when she opened them again she was inside the shadow world of her visions. The dark and spectral gloaming of her new environment throbbed with silence, oppression, and the familiar sense of drifting in a void, of being watched by unseen eyes.
Only this time it was different. Instead of disappearing in a flash, the vision remained in place, and Andie found herself able to move. Stunned, she took a tentative step forward, though the sensation felt more like drifting through low gravity than walking. The outline of her clothes was barely distinguishable from the penumbra of her shadow limbs, as if her jeans and jacket had merged with her corporeal form. When she put her hand to her face, it passed slowly into
her head, which horrified her and made her feel like some sort of apparition. She looked around and, with a start, realized that someone else was inside the vision with her.

In the very same room.

After a moment of terror swept through her, she recognized the blond woman huddled in the corner. Or at least she thought it was her. It was hard to see clearly in the gloom, but the figure had the same build as the woman and was squatting in the same position.

This had never happened before. No one from the real world had ever appeared in a vision. Drawing a sharp breath, forcing her terror aside and wondering how long it would last—what if she was stuck in here forever?—Andie walked toward the woman and tried to speak. She opened her mouth, but no one words came out, at least not that she could hear. When Andie reached out with a hand, the woman finally looked up, exposing two flat silver-gray disks instead of eyes, floating in the opaque darkness of her face. As Andie stared in horror, the blackness began to twist and writhe where the woman’s mouth should be, as if something inside were trying to break free. A silvery mouth formed and opened, releasing a scream that pulsed like an echolocation, reverberating inside Andie’s head, stabbing into her temples, driving her downward—

And then it all disappeared and she was back in the real world, slumped in Puck’s strong arms, inhaling his musky but not unpleasant odor. Andie took a long shuddering breath, feeling even more nauseated than before, disoriented by the scream still fading inside her head. She jerked her head toward the corner. The blond woman was leaning against the wall with a disinterested expression, as if nothing had happened.

Puck set Andie on her feet and held her by the arms, far too comfortably for her liking. “You okay, dove?”

As the urge to vomit passed, Andie’s right leg tensed, readying for a snap kick to the groin. She wanted very much to give Puck a lesson on how to treat women, and to get as far away from him as possible.
Instead she pulled away, swallowing to control her nausea. “Just a dizzy spell.”

Puck regarded her in silence, then handed her a crisp new United States passport. She inspected it, though she had no way of knowing how authentic it was. It looked as good as any. Beneath the photo of Andie was the name Sloane Beatrice Reynolds, and a birthdate within two years of her own.

“You’re all good,” he said.

“How much did Cal pay you?” she asked. “I’d like to pay him back.”

“No pound. I owed him.”

“For what?”

Puck looked taken aback by the question, shrugged, and said, “My sister lives in LA and got into a bit of a jam. Cal and I, we did business once. Information. He knew a copper who went easy on her.”

Still unsteady from her vision, reeling from the questions it raised, Andie pocketed the passport and retrieved her backpack.


As eager as she was to get out of there, Andie realized she would need far more cash than she had to buy a ticket to Egypt, unless she wanted to use a credit card. And that seemed like a really bad idea.

“I could use some cash. But I don’t have anything to sell.”

His wide smile flashed again. “You sure about that?”

“Don’t even think about it.”

“You bring your old passport?”

The thought of selling her identity, especially to Puck, revolted her. Still, he was right. At the moment, she didn’t need it, and staying alive had to take precedence. “How much?”

“Valid US?”

“That’s right.”

“Three grand.”

That sounded low to Andie. “Make it five.”
“Four and—”
“Five.”
“Okay, dove, okay. You’re the boss.”
She hesitated. “Can I pawn it to you? Give me a month to return for it?”
He mulled over the question. “For Cal, I’ll make it happen. One month, and a grand for my trouble either way.”
“Fair enough.”
After he took her old passport and disappeared again, Andie tried to engage the woman by asking her if she knew anything about the vision, or had experienced it herself. The only reply she got was an annoyed, disbelieving stare. When Andie asked if she needed help in any way, the woman glared at her and said nothing.
When Puck returned, Andie abandoned her attempts to talk to the woman. She was unable to believe someone could have a similar experience and remain so disaffected.
But why had the woman been in the vision? Why had it lasted longer than the others? Why had Andie been able to move and hear the scream? Was her condition getting worse?
Despite what she had learned at the bookstore, as always, the fear remained that it was all a projection of Andie’s broken mind. Had her spirit rebelled at seeing this poor woman living in such wretched conditions? Had Andie internalized that pain in her vision?
With a snarl of frustration, she stuck the bag of cash in her backpack and walked out, relieved to be out of sight of that vile man, more determined than ever to find out what the hell was wrong with her.

The area around Dalston Kingsland station came alive at night, filled with a startling array of languages and skin tones and fashion styles, everyone dressed to the nines as they mingled on the street or headed toward the bars, clubs, and late-night restaurants. As she debated her next move, Andie holed up in a shisha bar with beaded curtains, rife with apple-spiced incense. She ordered a coffee and a
hummus plate and then searched for flights to Egypt.

To her surprise, she found an affordable flight that left the next morning from London City Airport. A quick search told her the airport was in East London, not far from where she was, a quick trip on the Overground. She might have to pay double by not buying the ticket online, but if she wanted to avoid using a credit card, there was no alternative.

After hurrying through her meal, she took the Overground to the airport and bought a jacked-up ticket with three layovers just before the counter closed. She was relieved beyond measure when her new passport went through without a hitch.

Score one for trusting strange people on the internet.

She took her boarding passes and found a secluded corner of the airport, away from any cameras, to stretch out. She had slept in worse places. If the current trend continued, London City Airport might be a palace compared to her next destination.

Lying on her back on the cold floor, surrounded by fluorescent lighting and the hum of a generator, Andie felt an aching need for a human connection. Running on her own was taking its toll. Yet even if she could take the risk to contact a friend, what would she say? How’s it going? Oh, me? I’m running for my life and sleeping on an airport floor. It’s cool, though. How’s the weather?

The only person who might commiserate—who might be in the same insane predicament as she—was Cal Miller. He was quickly earning her trust, and she wanted to contact him again. She started to reach for her burner phone, which she planned to ditch before the flight—then decided against it.

Not yet.

No one knew where she was headed, and she was going to keep it that way. If she reached Egypt unharmed—if the false passport held up—then maybe she would reach out to him again.

With a sigh, using her backpack as a pillow, she closed her eyes and did her best to get some rest. Some time later, a beeping noise woke her, akin to the chirp a fire alarm makes when the battery is
dying. She realized it was coming from her pocket.

Thinking it was the burner phone, she was surprised to find the sound emanating from the Star Phone. It had never made a noise before. She was even more stunned when she took it out of her pocket and found the image of the scroll and the cipher had disappeared, replaced by a message slowly typing itself across the face of the device.

HELP. THIS IS JGC. THEY HAVE ME IN A

All of a sudden, the beeping stopped and the Star Phone flashed and went blank. Before she could react, the image of the scroll and the geohash code reappeared, as if nothing had ever happened. Stunned, Andie sat upright and tried to send a return message. As always, whenever she reached the end of the nine cursor spaces, the message would disappear and the cursor spaces would go blank.

Nothing else she attempted had any impact on the device. Whatever anomaly had occurred was finished.

Andie felt blood rushing to her head. Ohmygod. JGC—James Gerald Corwin—Dr. Corwin’s full name—was it possible?

Had her mentor just tried to contact her through the Star Phone from some remote location? If so, how? Far more important: Was he still alive?

Of course, she had no way of knowing who was on the other end of that message. But why would someone impersonate Dr. Corwin in such a bizarre manner? If entrapment was the purpose, why not say more? Try to draw her out somehow?

She was more confused than ever, unsure whether to grieve or hope. Dwelling on why the message on the Star Phone had cut off so abruptly felt like trying to breathe through a wet cloth. If Dr. Corwin had sent that message—and she felt in her gut that he had—then what sort of terrible danger was he in? Who had cut him off? Were they torturing him right that very second?

Shaking with adrenaline, the prospect of sleep as remote as another galaxy, Andie spent one of the longest nights in her life in
London City Airport, pacing and thinking and agonizing, checking the digital clock on the flight board every five minutes, willing the sun to breach the horizon.
PART THREE
As a drizzle of rain moistened the brick walkway at his feet, Omer worked hard to keep his emotions in check. He was standing outside the entrance to the safe house, trying for the third time to fit his key into the dead-bolt lock of the outer door. Was he that distracted by the escape of the target? Had he used the wrong key or failed to fully insert it?

His heart knew the truth. He was preoccupied, yes.

But Omer did not make mistakes with simple locks, no matter how distracted. In a profession such as his, where the tiniest of details could be a matter of life and death, there was no room for error.

Just in case, he tried once again.
Same result. The key didn’t fit.

Earlier, he had walked to a pub for an English breakfast, and, in less than an hour, someone had changed the locks. He knew that even if he cut through the dead bolt, the biometrics and the code to the steel door would be altered as well.

Two doors down, a white-haired man in a suit approached a neighboring townhome, casting a sidelong glance at Omer, no doubt wondering why he was fiddling with a lock in such a posh neighborhood.

A chill worked its way down Omer’s spine, all the way to the tips of his toes and fingers, followed by a flash of rage.
All these years of loyal service . . . of doing whatever it takes for the cause . . . They can’t just cut me off! I’ve given them everything!

Yet he knew the penalty for failure. The target was not even a high-level operative or a clever scientist from the Society, someone who might know to take evasive measures.

She was a novice. A nobody.

The first time, though he still blamed himself, could have happened to anyone. No one would have expected a graduate student to run for miles at a high pace through the woods, navigating a maze of trails in the dark of night.

And the second time—it was a complete surprise to find her on the street walking right toward him, long before she was expected. Someone had fed him false information. And the target had proved her resourcefulness once again by escaping through the streets of London with very little head start. Yes, his hands were tied by the protocol—he could easily have killed her—and luck favored the bold, and his associates had been a step too slow, and she had disappeared like a ghost that night, and she was Dr. Corwin’s protégé, and Omer suspected she was getting help from the Society.

But all of those things were excuses—none of which mattered to those above him.

*Eloisum.* The Archon had issued an edict, and Omer had failed to carry it out. It was as simple as that.

And they had banished him for it.

He would never receive another edict, never meet with another disciple, never attend another veiled meeting in a sanctum sanctorum.

A sentence of execution was reserved for traitors. Omer did not fear for his life, yet he knew that among many cultures, banishment was considered a fate worse than death. Until this moment, this was something he had never understood. Could one not simply start a new life elsewhere, even if on a different continent? Find a new family, learn a new trade, join a new cause?

Yet in a flash, in the simple failure of a piece of cut metal to engage
the cylinder of a lock, an act that had destroyed his life’s ambition, he understood the sheer horror of exile.

He had given up his career, his family, his entire old life in his quest to join the Ascendants. The knowledge, the secrets, the power . . . . With a snarl, Omer jerked on the doorknob and then walked away in a daze, shuffling down the sidewalk of the quiet street, his rage persisting but subsumed by a disappointment so visceral it felt as if an actual weight pressed down on his back, shoving him toward the ground to crawl like a worm, whispering to him to put his gun in his mouth and pull the trigger so the feeling would go away.

Once, as a teenager, Omer’s heart had been broken by a beautiful Swiss girl with eyes of sapphire and hair like spun gold. Her rejection was the closest thing to what he now felt. Except even as a young man, he had known that once the pain subsided, plenty of women existed for him to desire. That even love, while a powerful thing, was not unique to one person.

The Ascendants were different. There was no group on Earth like them. A steel curtain would stand between him and reality, and he would know that everything he could discover on his own was a lie at worst, and at best a shot of whiskey diluted with a bucket of ice water.

He clenched his fists as he hurried down the street. Omer was not a person who let things happen to him in life. He was a lion, not a gazelle. Yet forcing his way into the Ascendants was not an option. This they would never allow.

Even so, as long as he could draw a breath, he could still prove his worth. He could still make them see.

They would send someone else to find her, a team this time. Yet if Omer could reach her before they did . . .

Yes, he decided. He would find the girl first, take out anyone who stood in his way, and drag her by the hair to his own safe house. Then he would cut a deal and demand he be reinstated before turning over the target to the Archon. He knew enough about them to know they would understand the motive behind his actions. Not just understand: they would approve.
By whatever means necessary, Omer would claw his way back inside.

The first call he made was to Juma. A Saudi national, she was a former intelligence operative like himself, also recruited away. Sworn enemies in their past lives, they shared a common goal of joining the Ascendants, and had become lovers. They even had burner phones to be used only for each other, in case they wanted to rendezvous without anyone knowing.

Juma answered on the first ring. He heard the tension in her voice at once, glad she had not tried to hide it. “Omer. Where are you?”

“I’d rather not say.”
“I’m so very sorry,” she said quietly.
“So you’ve heard.”
“Your name is already in circulation as a cautionary tale.”
Bitterness flooded his voice. “Is that so?”
“I’ve been told not to consort with you.”
“And will you heed that order?”
When she responded, her voice was almost a whisper. “Wouldn’t you?”

He hesitated. “I suppose so.”
“I will miss you. I want you to know that.”
“Do you know who replaced me?”
“I don’t.”
“It isn’t you?”
“No,” she said without pause. Her relief was evident, and he believed her.

Though he also knew Juma was an expert liar.
He said, “Have they found her yet?”
“Would you really ask that of me?”
“It’s all I need to know. A simple yes or no.”
A touch of cold crept into her voice. “No.”
“Thank you.”

“Goodbye, Omer. I wish you well. I’m sorry that . . . things cannot be otherwise.”

“Don’t be so sure,” he said softly, right before he hung up.

He wasn’t sure how far to trust her—as she implied, had the roles been reversed, he would not have helped her either. But he had gotten what he wanted. Why lie if the target had already been found? It suited no purpose he could envision.

After a deep breath that helped expunge his lingering desire for Juma, as well as ignite the flames of his new mission, he pondered the situation. The girl had arrived in London on her own passport, making it easy for them to track her. He did not think she would do so again. Not after finding Professor Rickman murdered in his flat, and being chased through the city.

He wondered for the thousandth time how much she knew. What was the connection between her and Dr. Corwin? It had to be more than a simple professor-and-student relationship, no matter how bright she was. There was too much at stake. Was she a lover, despite the age difference? Or already an initiate?

He would have guessed the latter, except why remain in the open? Why take the risks she was taking? None of it made sense, unless she was operating on her own.

Which meant she was vulnerable, and he had a very small window before whoever had replaced him tracked her down.

Where would she go? Would she run or hide? Leave the country, return to the United States, go farther abroad?

Using a low-dosage amphetamine, Omer stayed awake the rest of the night and all through the next day attempting to answer those questions. He would no longer receive the benefit of the organization’s network of information technology and human intelligence. He would not have access to CCTV networks and high-ranking public officials.

That was fine. He had his own network and methods, cultivated over a lifetime of clandestine work.
Most amateurs in similar situations would try to get as far away from danger as they could, as fast as possible. Most—if they had the means—would obtain a false passport and go to a different country. Add to that the nature of his quarry. Along with visiting the museum, Andie had made contact with Professor Rickman. Was she trying to offload the device? Seek his counsel? Or was something else going on, to which Omer was not privy? He sensed a greater game being played.

All of these factors pointed to a high probability that London was a stopover. He had to act fast, and decided to hang his hat on her seeking a false passport. If that didn't pan out, he could reconfigure. Due to the influx of migrants, the number of false passports had risen steeply in western Europe in recent years. Hundreds of illegal-passport vendors existed in London alone. Even with help, it could take him weeks to interrogate them all.

Yet Omer saw one great advantage to the situation. He did not have to concern himself with the forgeries and “look-alike” stolen passports that served the migrant population and the criminal underworld. How many false credentials were procured by a single white woman on a weekly basis in the city? Not counting sex-trafficking documents, which would of course still be requested by men?

His guess was not very many at all.
Most weeks, he might even say only one.

Using his network of underground resources, each in turn with their connections, a pyramid of black-market information that stretched to the gutters of the city, Omer spent the night compiling a list of known passport forgers. Once he had the names of the major players, he made phone calls and in-person visits, asking on the sly about a young American woman seeking to leave the country.

Forty-eight hours since he had lost her. After interviewing a dozen vendors in Central London, he moved to the East End and the boroughs of Hackney, Tower Hamlets, and Newham. While gentrification
had given rise to boutique markets and hip cafés, it had also provided a bounty of easy marks, and the local criminals were still entrenched.

Omer dressed down for the hunt: ripped jeans and a black hoodie, a wool cap pulled low. His next destination was a small-time gangster who ran his operation out of a hair-and-nail salon in a pedestrian shopping mall. Puck, the transplant from Brixton who owned the place, specialized in pimping and human trafficking, of which passports were a natural accessory.

After exiting Dalston Kingsland station with a swarm of people, Omer made his way quickly to the mall. Though all the shops were shuttered, the street-side entrance was still open, and he walked through the empty shopping center until he reached the salon. No one else was in sight. It took a prolonged bout of buzzer pressing before a very large man covered in jewelry and tattoos opened and closed a door in the rear of the salon, walked through the darkened interior, looked Omer up and down, and cracked the glass door.

“You got a death wish, ace?”
“Is Puck inside?” Omer asked.
“Who wants to know?”
“I have a business proposition.”
“Come by tomorrow. Salon’s closed.”
“Not that kind of business.”
“You got stuffin’ in your ears? I said tomorrow.”

As the man moved to close the door, Omer stepped forward and, quick as a heron’s strike, jabbed the stiffened fingers of his right hand into the hollow space below the man’s Adam’s apple. The man gagged and clutched his throat. Omer kicked the door open and whipped the man’s right arm around his back, shoving it up until he was standing on his toes in pain. Omer jerked a pistol out of the man’s pants, set it on a table, and pushed him forward while maintaining the shoulder lock. Unable to talk through his damaged throat or think through the pain in his arm, the man could only serve as a human shield as Omer walked into the back room and surveyed the situation, his free hand on the gun tucked into his jeans.
A man who fit the description of Puck was snorting a line of coke off the desk to Omer’s left. A topless blond woman was curled in his lap. Puck jerked to his feet, dumping the undernourished woman to the floor. “What the fook!”

As Puck reached for a desk drawer, Omer struck his captive on the temple with the butt of his gun, letting him slump unconscious to the floor.

Omer pointed the gun at the salon owner.

“Okay, man, okay,” Puck said, slowly raising his arms. “I don’t keep cash on-site.” He looked down at the coke. “Take a bump and go, and I’ll forget this ever happened. You know who I am?”

The blond woman had scuttled to the corner and stayed there, shivering in her panties and pink socks. A sad sight but not a safety concern.

“Puck?” Omer asked.

The salon owner forced a broad, confident smile as he adjusted a gold watch poking out from the sleeve of his tracksuit. “The one and only.”

“Come over here.”

“Let’s talk this—”

Omer leveled the gun at his head. “Now.”

After sniffing and wiping his nose, Puck eased out from behind the desk. “What’s your angle, cuz? The Lightey boys send you?”

“I need a simple piece of information. Have you processed a passport in the last two days for a young American woman?”

“Passport? I dunno what you’re talking about.”

With his free hand, Omer extracted a ballpoint pen from his pocket. He pressed the top, releasing a tiny blade as sharp as an X-Acto knife. “Tell me what I need, and this goes better for you. Do you understand?”

Palms out, Puck started walking slowly toward him. “Yo, man, we don’t need to go there. Just relax.”

Omer cocked the pistol. “Do you understand?”

“Sure, I understand,” Puck said meekly, lowering his head in
submission just before a four-inch fixed blade slipped out of his sleeve and sprang into his hand. He ducked his head and made a diagonal lunge, off-line from the gun, forward and to the right, trying to slip his blade into Omer’s side before he could react.

Puck moved as fast as a professional athlete, strong and sure with the blade, but Omer read his intentions as clearly as if he had announced them from a podium. As Puck lunged, Omer calmly stepped to the side and sliced the underside of the wrist holding the knife, causing Puck to drop the blade as blood spewed from the vein.

Without pause, Omer pivoted, raised his leg, and kicked out the back of Puck’s legs, dropping him on his back on the linoleum floor. Omer leaned down to place a knee on the other man’s chest, pinning him down as he placed the tip of the penknife on the underside of Puck’s chin.

Omer turned to the young woman in the corner. “You should leave now.” When she failed to move, her lowered eyes glancing at Puck as if terrified to disobey him, Omer firmed his voice. “Go. Now. Out of the city. He won’t follow you, I promise. You never saw my face.”

Shivering as if it were twenty below, the woman grabbed her clothes and fled out the back door. She could identify him, but someone like her would never go to the authorities, or have any credibility if she did. Letting her go was a minor risk, but Omer was a professional, not a monster.

Moments later, another door slammed in the distance, and Omer increased the pressure of the knife under Puck’s chin. “What happens next depends on you.”

Puck grew very still except for his gaze, which roved from side to side until it rested on Omer’s missing pinky. A bead of sweat trickled down the top of the salon owner’s muscular torso. “Okay,” he whispered.

Omer lowered the blade a fraction, and Puck started speaking very fast. After Omer got the information he was seeking, he said, “Close your eyes.”
“Why?”
“Do it.”
“You said it depends on me—I told you everything!”
“And so I will kill you quickly.”
“I’ll looking look right at you.”
“So be it.” With a twist of his wrist, Omer turned the penknife horizontal and slid it deep across Puck’s jugular. As the salon owner bled out, Omer did the same to the bodyguard before locking the doors and strolling back through the shopping mall. He did not like to take human life without good cause, but if he could trace the target’s route through these men so easily, then so could the others.

On the cab ride back to Central London, Omer mulled over the situation. Obtaining the false name on the target’s passport was a huge step, but he still had work to do. He again tried to put himself in Andie’s shoes. He imagined she would want to escape the city as soon as possible, and London City was the closest airport by a long shot. Flight manifests were closely guarded by the airlines, hard even for law enforcement to obtain. The organization had ways to access them, but Omer did not—at least not on short notice.

But he saw another way. He possessed a local contact unrelated to the Society: an officer named Ian Bartelow who worked with London’s Counter Terrorism Command. Omer had collaborated with Ian on numerous occasions when Omer still worked for the Mossad. They had prevented more than one attack together, and had become friends over the years.

As far as Ian needed to know, Omer still worked for a special Israeli deep-cover unit. Ian might not grab the flight manifest for him, but he had access to CCTV and might be willing to look up some footage. Omer didn’t need to steal state secrets; he just needed to get his hands on a simple piece of information. He would let Ian believe he was helping track down a recently converted terrorist who might return to London with a bomb in her suitcase.
Now that he knew the target’s false name, Omer just needed to search for a tall and athletic American woman with short hair and intense green eyes, likely wearing a hijab, who had probably arrived at London City Airport shortly after midnight two days prior.

Again: How many of those could there be?
Despite a twenty-hour odyssey that included a brutal layover in Istanbul, Andie felt reasonably well rested when she arrived at Borg El Arab International Airport on the outskirts of Alexandria. After barely sleeping for days, she had decided a little rest was more important than constant vigilance on the airplane, and she let herself crash during the flights. Yet her wariness returned the moment she left the airport and hired a taxi to drive her to the modern version of the Library of Alexandria.

The highway into town snaked through the desert sands like a desiccated black tongue. Soon the skyline of the city appeared, a dense cluster of minarets, skyscrapers, and whitewashed apartment buildings pressed tight against the Mediterranean. The city looked more and more decrepit the closer they drew, yet in a romantic way, she thought, a decaying idol on the edge of the palm-lined sea, brimming with the mystique of a bygone era.

During the layover in Istanbul, Andie had sent emails to Dr. Corwin at both his work and home addresses. She used a brand-new account and an old-school internet café to ensure she remained anonymous. At the Alexandria airport, she had purchased a SIM card with twenty gigabytes of data for a ridiculously low price, and
on the drive into town she logged into the new email account, praying for a reply from her mentor.

Crickets.

She wanted to verify his corpse was in the morgue, but a little research told her it took five to seven days to repatriate a body from abroad under normal circumstances—and much longer in the case of murder. She did not dare contact the Italian police again, and doubted they would help her in any case.

The taxi entered Alexandria from the south and cleaved right through the heart of the city. As Andie stared out the window, the minarets and crumbling white apartment buildings evoked a strong childhood memory. She had visited Egypt once before, the only overseas trip her family had taken, splurging on the advance for her father’s novel. After absorbing the sights of Cairo, they had cruised the Nile, visiting the Valley of the Kings and Abu Simbel. Andie was eight. It was a big deal for the family, but mostly she remembered getting sick from the street food, listening to her parents argue about money, and smelling alcohol on her father’s breath every morning.

Yet one happy memory stood out. She remembered her mother as someone who vacillated between periods of intense concentration and absentminded, almost vacant stares, as if her mind were somewhere else even when she wasn’t working. Still, Andie had loved her mother very much, worshipped her even, and she remembered their time together fondly: visiting science museums and planetariums, dining at Mexican restaurants at the beginning of the month, elaborate bedtime stories on the nights when her mother’s research did not consume her. Her mother had especially loved Madeleine L’Engle’s Time Quintet, though Andie remembered being confused and a little scared by those books as a child.

The day they arrived in Cairo, despite the jet lag and exhaustion from the journey, her mother insisted they take a night tour of the pyramids. Right that very moment.

Andie’s father kicked his shoes off, declared he was not moving an inch, and cracked a beer from the minifridge. Her mother glared
at him but gave her daughter no choice: after a quick change of
clothes, Andie was shepherded out the door and down to the lobby,
her mother’s eyes bright with anticipation. She had chosen a hotel in
Giza, on the outskirts of Cairo, for this very reason.

Outside, after an exchange of money took place with a short
Egyptian man with a funny conical hat and a mustache, he ushered
them into the back seat of a brown Opel with a huge dent in the side.
Even at that age, it was clear to Andie the man was not a real guide,
and this was a dicey situation her mother had arranged on the fly.

It didn’t matter. As soon as those monolithic testaments to human
achievement came into view, far larger than Andie had expected, far
larger than anything, her mother’s eyes gleamed with an inner light,
a feverish excitement Andie had never before witnessed.

Though access to the pyramids was limited after dark, her
mother used the cold authoritative voice she sometimes deployed to
make the driver get as near as they could, then commanded him to
pull over and wait. Her mother took Andie by the hand and walked
straight into the thin sands at the edge of the road, parallel to the
barricade, stopping only when they had an unobstructed view.
Andie still remembered the kiss of cool night air on her skin, the dry
smell of the desert, the silence between passing cars that enveloped
her like a warm blanket.

And there they were, even more immense than before. A trio of
shadowy sentinels rising proudly out of the desert as if they belonged
to some other world, backlit by a crescent moon and a surreal view
of the Milky Way, timeless, hulking, eternal. Andie felt a strange
lump in her throat at the sight, overcome by an emotion she couldn’t
name, her first feeling of numinous awe at the sight of something so
much greater than herself.

Her mother had wrapped Andie in her arms from behind and
whispered in her ear. Usually Andie pushed the painful memories
away, but this time, only hours away from where she had once sat
cross-legged with her mother on the beige sands, she gave in.

“Magical, isn’t it?” her mother said.
Andie nodded.

“The Great Pyramid—that’s the one on the right—stood as the tallest human-made structure for almost four thousand years. That’s most of recorded history. The ancient Egyptians called it Ikhet, which means ‘glorious light.’ When it was built, the Egyptians covered it with a casing of polished limestone that reflected sunlight, causing the pyramid to sparkle like a diamond. It shone so bright it could have been seen from the moon. Imagine, Andie. A jewel that’s visible from outer space.”

“Why did they build them?” Andie asked.

“No one knows for sure. They’re almost certainly tombs for Egyptian pharaohs, but some people think they serve other purposes as well. Perhaps a signal to somewhere very far away, or a message to the gods.”

“What do you think?”

When her mother didn’t answer, Andie turned and caught a small, distracted smile lifting the corners of her lips. “The Great Pyramid is located exactly where the extended lines of latitude and longitude intersect,” her mother said softly. “Do you understand what that means?”

“Not really.”

“It means it’s located at the exact center of the Earth’s landmass, even though it was built long before longitude and latitude were invented, at a time when this sort of knowledge was believed to be thousands of years in the future.”

“They must have been really smart.”

“Maybe smarter than we will ever understand. We still even don’t know how they built them. The number of stones in these three pyramids alone could build a wall around France, and each block weighed as much as a small elephant.”

“An elephant!”

“The crazy thing is, Andie, not very long before they built the pyramids, the Egyptians were still piling mud bricks together in twenty-foot-high burial structures called ‘mastabas.’ How did they go from dirt mounds to building stairways to the stars, in such a short amount of time?”

Andie felt a little lost by this idea.
“We think we’re so superior to our ancestors, but that’s not the case at all.” She laughed as she squeezed her daughter’s shoulder. “I’m sure one day you’ll think you know everything and I don’t know anything.”

“I already do.”

“Well, you just remember the pyramids, Little Mouse. Let me tell you a few more things. The Great Pyramid—the one on the right—has air shafts angled in correspondence to objects in outer space. The three pyramids together are aligned precisely with the stars of Orion’s belt—Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka—as they would have appeared to the ancient Egyptians, with the Nile in the position of the Milky Way. And the pyramids point north, to within five-hundredths of a degree of the magnetic pole. Not even the Royal Observatory in Greenwich is that precise!”

“What about my question?” Andie said distractedly, not sharing her mother’s delight in these random facts.

“What’s that, lovie?”

“Why do you think they built them?”

Her mother moved closer, holding her hand as they gazed together at the beauty and mystery of the night. “The Egyptians believed the afterlife was a mirror of the living world. Isn’t that a nice thought?” Her mother’s voice was almost a whisper. “That after death we might go someplace like our world, only different.”

“Would we be together there, Mommy? You and me and Daddy?”

Her mother tilted her head to rest it on Andie’s shoulder, her hair tickling the back of Andie’s neck. “Of course, Little Mouse. Of course we will.”

Hating how weak her memories made her feel, disturbed by her mother’s long-ago answer to her question, Andie stared out the window of the taxi as a chasm opened deep inside her and threatened to swallow her whole.

By the time Andie arrived at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, her romance with the city’s nostalgic charms had faded. She felt drained
by the interminable journey, beaten down by the crowds and pollution and cement eyesores, the endless urban sprawl. It did not help that her taxi’s air-conditioning had given out halfway, forcing her to keep her window lowered and endure the cacophony of blaring horns and the soiled air of the inner city, a demonic intermingling of smog and fried offal mixed with whiffs of sewage.

Yet the closer they drew to the harbor, the calmer the city grew, as if the languid waters of the Mediterranean lapping against its shores exerted a hypnotic effect. Though the ancient city had long ago disappeared, shoved into the sea by earthquakes and burned to the ground during wars and religious purges, it had experienced periods of revival over the centuries, and Andie caught glimpses of forgotten glory on the shabby streets: palm-fronted colonial buildings, the occasional statue, mosques and synagogues and Coptic churches, glimpses of dusty white ruins scattered about the city like the discarded bones of bygone civilizations.

To reach the entrance of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the driver had to circle around on a busy freeway that cut off the city proper from the narrow beaches along the coastline. The modern iteration of the famous library resembled an enormous white discus sticking out of the ground at an angle, sloping down to the sea. Surrounded by a puzzle box of dated apartment buildings withering in the sun, the gleaming library looked like an alien ship that had crash-landed in the middle of the city.

Just to the north, perched on a spit of land extending into the mouth of the harbor, was a handsome citadel that bore a marked resemblance to an enormous sandcastle. The driver startled Andie—he had not spoken since the airport—by pointing at the fort and declaring it the former site of the Pharos lighthouse, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. She envisioned this urban monster of a city as the beacon of progress it once had been, home to queens and emperors and an honor roll of the world’s great philosophers, a wonderland of palaces and gardens and architectural novelties.

Knowing she might not have much time before someone figured
out her location, she left the taxi and hustled to the entrance of the library, the balmy air perfuming the breeze. A familiar feeling of being watched overcame her as she purchased a ticket and approached the glass-walled entrance beneath an elevated walkway. Her step slowed as she crossed the handsome paving stones, until she stopped ten feet from the door, frozen in place, searching every face in sight.

*Why am I so paranoid around libraries?*

*Or is someone waiting for me inside?*

The granite wall supporting the rear of the disk was carved with letters and characters from the world’s known alphabets. During her layover, she had read how the architects intended the circular diaphragm of the library, which extended four levels below ground and seven above, to symbolize the cyclical nature of knowledge as it ebbs and flows through time. All in all, it was a very impressive site, a fitting ode to past glory and an archetype for a new era.

On a whim, still balking at entering, she took out the Star Phone and pretended to be a tourist snapping photos. When she peered at the high glass wall above the entrance, she gasped as the image seen through the viewing lens blurred, again inducing the disorienting sensation of movement in her mind. Her vision stabilized to reveal a familiar motif carved in stone, a legendary creature with the head of a human and the body of a lion.

Though adopted by the Greeks and other cultures, she knew the sphinx was derived from Egypt, a powerful symbol of a watchful presence. A guardian, a protector.

Unlike the laughing image of Democritus, the three-dimensional sphinx superimposed on the library did not move, but over-looked the entrance in solemn repose. The admonition of this warden of temples and tombs was clear: beware to any who defiled this shrine, this repository of sacred knowledge.

Andie lowered the Star Phone. Nothing had changed on the face of the device. She returned it to her pocket and let out a deep breath. The presence of the sphinx gave her confidence she was on the right track, as well as a sense of calm.
Someone, she felt, was watching over the library. But who?
Was it the ghost of scholars past? Someone from this mysterious society to which Dr. Corwin belonged? Someone aligned with the people who wanted to kill her?
She knew she was taking a risk by entering—but she had taken a risk from the moment she embarked on this path and opened the safe behind the Ishango bone. Her objectives had not changed, and she would just have to weigh the dangers as they arose.
If someone was watching, so be it.

The main section of the library was a cavernous space with eight terraces, each focused on a different sphere of knowledge. Famed as the largest reading room in the world, it was sunlit and beautiful, supported by slender columns that soared to a domed ceiling. The shelves and carousels spaced throughout the room matched the color of the light-grain wood floor.
Andie knew the library contained millions of volumes and felt overwhelmed by the sheer size of it. Now that she was here, what was she supposed to do? Was there some hidden meaning she was missing?
Legions of people milled about, most of them young Egyptians browsing the shelves or poring over books at the carousels. She tried a grand sweep of the room with the Star Phone, to no effect. After that, she wandered through the other sections of the library. Scattered about were lost artifacts from the ancient city, including pieces of the great lighthouse and stone blocks covered in hieroglyphs, unearthed by archaeologists in the waters offshore. Yet the Star Phone revealed nothing new until she found another sphinx embedded at the entrance to a hallway leading to the city archives section.
The smaller room inside had a flat, low ceiling more reminiscent of a typical library. The archives contained books and multimedia on
the history of Alexandria. Was there a particular book or microfiche she was supposed to find? Another sphinx? A secret doorway?

A thorough sweep with the Star Phone revealed nothing. To the stacks then. With a deep breath, she decided to start with some research on the original library and see if she uncovered anything unique to the collection. She ignored the constant nagging feeling of being observed, even in this quiet little room, and forced herself to focus.

She soon discovered the loss of the original library was far greater than she had even realized. The world had known other great centers of learning. Mesopotamian, Aksumite, Sumerian, Assyrian. Timbuktu. The House of Wisdom in Baghdad. But none as ambitious as the ground on which she was standing. Ptolemy I, who studied under Aristotle as a boy, alongside Alexander the Great, had founded both the library and the adjoining Shrine of the Muses—the origin of the term *museum*. The fame of the library had ushered in a golden age of knowledge, a kingdom of the mind. By the middle of the third century BCE, Eratosthenes had calculated the circumference and diameter of Earth—believing it was round—within an accuracy of fifty miles. Others mapped the stars and catalogued the constellations. Aristarchus developed a heliocentric model of the solar system *two millennia* before Copernicus.

In the adjoining museum, the vivisection of condemned criminals had led to the discovery of the central nervous system and the hypothesis that the brain, and not the heart, sheltered the mind. Euclid penned his *Elements* at Alexandria, perhaps the most influential work in the history of mathematics.

The advancements had flowed out of the library and transformed the city itself. Andie was awed by the accounts of the beauty and sophistication of ancient Alexandria. Powered by running water, mechanical birds whistled from within gardens and fountains, and statues played instruments or lifted wineskins to their lips. The clever use of pneumatics allowed temple doors to open and close as if by magic, and enabled automatic streetlamps to light the wide
central avenue. The mathematician Hero, the greatest engineer of antiquity, developed a play performed by rope-and-axle-controlled automata—perhaps the world’s first robots. He also invented a coin-operated drink dispenser for the city, and a revolving sphere powered by a pressurized container of water.

*Good God,* she thought. *The world’s first steam turbine engine, invented sixteen centuries before the Industrial Revolution.*

Recovered fragments from the library’s catalogue system hinted at massive collections of rhetoric, law, lyric poetry, medicine, natural sciences, and other disciplines. Written accounts of the Egyptians, Greeks, Babylonians, and countless other cultures swept away by history. Scrolls of Zoroaster. Buddhist writings. Unknown plays by Homer and Sophocles. Early translations of the Pentateuch and the Septuagint.

Her mind reeled at the possibilities. It was as if only a fraction of Shakespeare’s plays had survived, or just one of Einstein’s theories.

She kept researching the demise of the library, to illuminate it in more detail. Julius Caesar had unwittingly destroyed much of the library when he was under siege inside the city and set fire to the enemy fleet. The fire spread from the harbor to the buildings along the waterfront, including the library. Presumably some of the collection was preserved, but no one knows for certain.

The next mention—perhaps apocryphal—related to an incident in the fifth century AD, after the surviving works were said to have moved to the Serapeum, a Greco-Egyptian temple dedicated to a deity manufactured by the ruling dynasty to appease both factions. Religious zealots razed the temple to the ground and dragged Hypatia, the last true keeper of the library, outside the city walls. It was said they scraped off her skin with oyster shells, tore her limb from limb, and burned her remains as a penalty for participating in the work of the devil.

From this point forward, the library disappeared from the historical record. A rather insane thought entered Andie’s mind: *What if some remnant of the actual library had survived?*
What if it was still here, and what if she was supposed to find it? A nervous chuckle escaped her. *Don’t be ridiculous.*

Yet she couldn’t shake the thought, and she turned her research in a different direction, toward any and all theories that a piece of the ancient library might have endured.

Unsurprisingly, the new direction opened a Pandora’s box of speculation. There were alien conspiracy theories, Freemason theories, Cleopatra theories, Atlantis theories. She became overwhelmed by the storm of nonsense and was about to give it up when something caught her eye: a reference to a place called the Hall of Records.

According to legend, an ancient library—even older than the one at Alexandria—had once been kept in a secret underground chamber beneath the Great Sphinx of Giza. The persistence of the legend had spurred the Egyptian government, a little over twenty years ago, to excavate. To everyone’s astonishment, they discovered a set of tunnels leading to a cave system hidden beneath the sphinx. Though no artifacts were ever found, there were signs of previous excavations, and even an underground river.

Even more recently, a British explorer claimed to have discovered a separate complex of caves, tunnels, and chambers beneath the Giza pyramid field. Beset by venomous spiders and colonies of bats—something straight out of Indiana Jones—the explorer was convinced the subterranean complex was tens of thousands of years old, or even older, and harbored secrets of an ancient civilization that might have inspired or communicated with the builders of the pyramids.

Inexplicably, the Egyptian government blocked further investigation, driving conspiracy theorists into a frenzy.

Andie did not like unconfirmed finds or baseless theories. No serious archaeologist gave any credence to the Hall of Records or an antediluvian city hidden below the pyramids. Yet the Star Phone had led her to the library, and twice revealed a sphinx. Could the myth possibly relate to the puzzle in some way? While intriguing,
she was about to move on when a realization caused a sharp intake of breath.

The second sphinx the Star Phone had revealed was located above the entrance to a hallway that led to the city archives room. Archives, of course, was synonymous with records. A hall of records. A little thrill passed through her. Surely this meant something. Yet a feverish bout of research on the mythical hall only muddied the waters. She learned nothing useful and felt as if she were falling down a rabbit hole. Perhaps, she thought, she needed a suitably irrational guide.

When she checked the time, she couldn’t believe her eyes. It was almost 7 p.m. The library was about to close. She had spent the entire day inside.

Outside, Andie felt lost in the vastness of the city. She had some decisions to make, but she was starving and needed food to think clearly. After considering a walk along the Corniche, the waterfront promenade that ran the length of the Eastern Harbour, she decided she would feel more secure in a less exposed neighborhood. As the sun dipped beneath the horizon, softening the decay and urban grime, she headed for the warren of streets southwest of the library, the core of the old city. While keeping an eye out for a place to eat, she used her SIM card to make a call on her burner phone. It was a call she didn’t want to make but knew she could no longer avoid. Word of her disappearance must have spread by now, and she had to let her father know she was okay.

He answered with the usual alcohol-induced slur to his speech. She couldn’t remember the last time he had answered the phone sober.

“Andie! Thank God you’re all right! I’ve tried to call, email . . . Where are you?”

“Rio,” she said, in case anyone was listening.
“Brazil?”
“I needed to get away, Dad. Just for a few nights.”
“Okay, I guess . . . Listen, dear, I heard about James. I just can’t believe it.”
“It still doesn’t seem real.”
“You must be torn-up. I know how much he meant to you. Andie, I . . . I’d love to see you. When you get back from Rio, I mean.”
“You know where I live. You haven’t visited since I moved to Durham.”
“I’m sorry, but you know how it is, with the writing and the money . . .”
“Yeah,” she said, not even trying to hide the bitterness. “I know.”
“Now Andie, let’s not—”
“I don’t want to talk about that.”
Despite her father’s inebriation, hearing a familiar voice while on the run in a foreign city felt more comforting than she had thought it would. Still, she wasn’t about to let her emotional state change the past. That ship had sailed long ago. She loved her father, she always would—and that was all she could say.
“I can’t help if the books aren’t selling, Andie. I’m a writer. It’s who I am.”
But did you ever think about who I am? And how your choices affect me? “Don’t worry, Dad. I know exactly who you are.”
“You didn’t have to leave, you know. Go so far away.”
“And what should I have done? Stay at home and wait tables to pay your bills?” Calm down, Andie. Deep breaths. You do this every time. “Listen, I called to tell you I’m okay, but there’s something I need to ask you. And I don’t want you to get all emotional or start an argument.”
After a long pause, he said, “Okay.”
“Why did Mom leave?”
This time, he took even longer to respond. She imagined he was taking a long drink from whatever bottle was at hand. “You know why she left. To join the ashram.”
“Was that the real reason? Or did something else happen?”
“T
“I don’t know what you mean. Listen, I thought we promised never to discuss—”

“Please, Dad. It’s really important right now. I can’t tell you why. You’ll just have to trust me. Were you and Mom just not getting along, or was there an affair, or . . . something else?”
“We hadn’t been getting along for some time,” he said quietly, more sober than he had seemed before.

“Why not?”

“Your mother had . . . different ambitions in life.”

“Like what?”

“To tell you the truth, I never really knew. I just knew I couldn’t satisfy them. She wanted something more, Andie. She wanted to travel the globe. Study every subject and try every food, have every experience, drink in everything the world has to offer. I mean, who doesn’t? But more than things, I wanted a family and stability. The success of my first book was great and kept us together. I was able to give her some of what she wanted. But when the success went away . . . she did too. I loved her anyway, though. I really did. I never even blamed her—we can’t change who we are. If she wasn’t happy, then she wasn’t happy.”

Andie flinched at the sting in her father’s voice, the pain of rejection after all these years. I know the feeling. But I sure as hell blame her.

“So that was it? You two just weren’t right for each other? There wasn’t anything between . . . her and Dr. Corwin?”

Her father seemed genuinely surprised. “That’s what you—No, not that I know of. They were very close, but I don’t . . . I would have noticed, don’t you think?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“She took a number of trips with him, for research, but I never got the sense there was anything romantic. He was just a professor, not yet well-known . . . Even if it was a Machiavellian choice, it’s hardly an upgrade from a best-selling writer. At least at the time,” he muttered.
I’m not so sure about that. I’m beginning to think we don’t know very much about Dr. Corwin at all.

The question is: How much did my mother know?

“So she went to the ashram,” Andie said, “and just never came back?”

The silence stretched for so long that Andie knew something was wrong. She had entered a commercial sector of town, and the noise from sidewalk merchants and the hordes of pedestrians grew so loud she was forced to duck down a well-lit side street.

“Dad?”

“She never joined an ashram,” he said quietly.

Andie stopped walking. “What do you mean? You’ve told me she went off to India to join an ashram my entire life.”

“I’m sorry, honey. Samantha came up with the story and made me agree to it. She liked the thought of you believing she went somewhere to better herself. I suppose I agreed with her.”

“Better herself.”

“She loved you very much, Andie.”

“So much that I never heard from her again?”

“I can’t explain that. But the way she looked at you from the moment you were born, held you, read to you . . . that love was real. I’d bet my life on it.”

“Then why did she leave?” Andie said, almost in a whisper.

“Everything else I’ve told you is true. She was looking for something in life I couldn’t give her. A few months before she left for the ashram—I mean, you know what I mean—she took a trip to Asia.”

“I remember. To a university in Tokyo for research.”

“It wasn’t for research, and it wasn’t in Japan. We told you that so you wouldn’t worry. It was over the summer—school was out—and she left for a month. She called me twice—once from Vietnam and once from India—to check in on you.”

“What was she doing, if it had nothing to do with school?”

“She said she needed to see a few places for herself, packed her bags, and left. I know. It’s strange. What’s even stranger was her behavior when she returned.”
Andie swallowed. “What do you mean?”

“She was never the same. What was once a restless and vague ambition seemed more focused. From the moment she got back until she left for good, she was distant, as if we barely knew each other. Judging from her behavior, I had to assume she’d met someone overseas and left me for him.”

“What did Dr. Corwin say about it?”

“He was quite upset. But he didn’t have any more insight than I did.”

You sure about that?

“Was he gone during any of that time?” she asked.

“I don’t think so.”

Andie tried to process this information. “Why tell me this now?”

“You’re asking these questions—really asking—for the first time. You’re an adult. I think you deserve to know.”

“So if it wasn’t the ashram, where did Mom go?”

“I have no clue.”

“What do you mean, you have no clue?”

Another pause. “Maybe she started a new life in Asia and left us for a new family. Maybe she wanted to leave but got in trouble. I just don’t know—and it wasn’t for lack of trying. I spent years, the last of our savings, hiring people to try to find out where she went.”

“Didn’t she tell you anything?”

His prolonged sigh was thick with emotion. “The day before she left, she said she was quitting her job and leaving the country to ‘connect with her true self.’ We had a huge argument, as you can imagine. The next night, she stayed by your side for a long time while you slept. At midnight she kissed your forehead, got in a taxi with her suitcase, and rode away. I never heard from her again.”
As the appointed hour approached, Ettore paced back and forth in the courtyard of his hotel, his breath fogging the air. Walled in by the surrounding apartment buildings, listening to shouts from the street as candles warmed the windows above him, he was tired of staring at the peeling yellow paint and the line of bicycles along the courtyard wall, alone with the sweet pungent smell of the city and the faint reek of spilled beer worn into the flagstones.

*Will Stefan come for me?* he wondered.

Or would the German string Ettore along once again, forcing him to participate in another crazed, life-threatening situation?

*No, not forced,* Ettore had to admit. He was making his own choices, though he wasn’t entirely sure why.

He was set to return to Leipzig in two days. He made a vow that, if Stefan failed to introduce him to the Leap Year Society by then—in fact, on this very night—then he would never speak to the man again. Ettore was an important physicist. He did not need this... *thing.*

The cold was bracing as a light snow began to fall. Still Ettore paced. He did not feel like being holed up in his room, or at the hotel bar listening to the prattle of strangers.

To his surprise, just as a bell tower chimed the stroke of midnight, a bellhop stuck his head out of the door leading to the hotel
and informed Ettore that a car had arrived for him. Ettore started to rush inside, then slowed, dusting the snow off his wool coat and trying to appear collected as he walked through the hotel and saw a familiar black car idling by the curb.

Stefan looked amused as Ettore opened the door and slid into the soft leather seat. “You look flustered, my friend.”

“I’m . . . I don’t know what you mean.”

Stefan’s mirth faded, and he leveled his intense stare at the younger man, peeling back the layers of self-protection. “Are you nervous perhaps?”

“Of course not.”

“Wary of what awaits? Terrified, even?”

“I’m quite fine, thank you,” Ettore said crossly.

After locking eyes, Stefan laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “My dear Ettore, the anticipation is written all over your face. Relax, my good man. With a little luck, you might even survive the night.”

Ettore could not tell if he was joking.

Expecting another jaunt into the countryside—Ettore would not have been surprised if Stefan had hustled him on a plane and flew him to Africa—he was relieved when, instead of veering toward the highway leading out of town, they took Vesterbrogade into the heart of the city. The snow continued to fall, softening the rough edges, transforming the stately old buildings and cobblestone streets into a wintry utopia.

Soon they pulled up to the gate of a neoclassical mansion on the edge of the city center, the most impressive residence in a neighborhood full of historic homes. Four soaring columns spanned the width of the mansion, and the entire facade was crafted from a pale-blue shade of marble. A spiked iron gate backed by a towering hedge shielded the rest of the property from view.

The gate came almost to the edge of the sidewalk, flanked by
copper lampposts. A clock tower on the corner of the street, topped by a miniature version of the city’s distinctive green spires, added storybook charm. Both the street and the house appeared quiet, sedate. The entire scene was nothing like Ettore had imagined.

Where was everyone?

After the driver exchanged words with a pair of guards, the gate opened and they pulled inside, approaching a fountain at the end of the driveway. Greco-Roman statues graced the lawn, ethereal in the snow, as if the ivory-hued figures had coalesced from the flakes themselves.

The driver let them out. Instead of using the main entrance, Stefan hustled Ettore down a pebbled path beside the house. “We’ll enter from the rear,” he said.

“Why? Is that normal?”

“Nothing about your induction is normal.”

“What do you mean?” Ettore asked as Stefan guided them inside an old servants’ quarters attached to the house, now converted to a posh guest bedroom. Before they entered, Ettore caught glimpses of sizeable rear grounds enclosed within the hedge: a labyrinth of topiary, greenhouses, and curious domed structures that resembled walled-in stone rotundas.

“As you may have surmised,” Stefan said as they passed into a shadowy vestibule inside the main house, “I’m the leader of our faction, and you were handpicked by me.”

“Faction? Of the Society?”

Inside, the mansion was still and hushed, exuding a solemn grace. Ettore grew more nervous as Stefan closed the door to the guest suite, leaving them in darkness.

“We are at a crossroads, Ettore. There has been unrest among the factions, irreconcilable differences, for some time.”

“I don’t understand. And where are the lights?”

“Nor should you understand. Not yet. I can only say that those who support me have a radically different view of what must be done. Humanity is in grave peril.”
“You’re talking about the Nazis?”

“They are the immediate threat. But who will come next? Look at the world around you. As humanity continues to transform itself, becoming something closer to a god than an animal, wielding the power to destroy the very world in which we live, then hard choices must be made.”

Stefan took him by the elbow and led him through the darkness like a lost lamb. Ettore’s shoulder brushed against a doorframe. He felt a carpet or rug beneath his feet, then caught a pleasant floral scent. Moments later, Stefan flicked on a light, and Ettore was ushered into an enormous hall, with oil paintings adorning walls that soared to a gilded ceiling. Oriental rugs accented the polished wood floors, and soft light emanated from a succession of diamond chandeliers interspersed along the hundred-foot gallery. Ettore had never seen a chandelier with electric lights before.

“Do you believe we live in the best of all possible worlds?” Stefan asked.

“Whatever do you mean?”

The German stopped to admire a painting of the Garden of Eden. Ettore would have sworn it was a Michelangelo. “As you know better than most,” Stefan continued, “the human race is on the cusp of creating technologies that men like Adolf Hitler, if given the chance, will use to enslave or consume the planet. Evil triumphs when good is silent, Ettore. Knowledge is power. These simple aphorisms possess great truth, but what is more complex is the philosophy that underpins them.”

Stefan stepped closer, his eyes lit by an internal fire that burned more brightly than in any man Ettore had ever known. “Our brethren believe that wisdom must accompany the acquisition of knowledge. We do not disagree. Yet the world has changed, Ettore. It is no longer prudent to let humanity plot its own course. We believe knowledge must be acquired aggressively, at all costs, by a select few with a shared ideal and purpose, in order to save us all from destruction. Only then—in a future when these technologies are controlled and
better understood—should they be shared with the world at large.”

Ettore absorbed what the other man was saying, working to fit it inside his worldview. “I don’t necessarily disagree. Though I would need to ponder it further, and consider each situation as it arose.”

“As you should,” Stefan murmured. “Come, I wish to show you something.”

“What?”

Instead of answering, Stefan led him down the long hallway, and Ettore saw a succession of rooms that displayed more wealth than he had ever witnessed in person. Paintings and sculptures and *objets d’art* from around the world, vases, urns, velvet drapes and brocaded chairs, glimpses of bedrooms fit for royalty. The style of the furnishings was very modern, in keeping with Copenhagen’s reputation as a progressive city, and the latest technologies were on display. This included an aluminum robot, standing as tall as a man, in a corner of the kitchen. Stefan stopped to issue a voice command, causing the automaton to wave its arms and waddle across the tile floor. It opened a freestanding metal box sitting on the counter beside a self-contained electric refrigerator, and began unloading pots and pans.

Ettore gawked at the display. He had never seen such an advanced model before, and certainly not in someone’s home. “But how . . .” he began, only to see Stefan smile and continue down a shorter hall, which ended at a closed door. A plum tree laden with fruit was carved and painted in exquisite detail on the polished wood.

“To become a dedicated seeker of truth,” Stefan said, “one must doubt, as deeply as one can, the nature of all things.”

After that cryptic statement, he opened the door to reveal a study lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and a marble fireplace on the opposite side of the room. Besides the hardbound books and a leather armchair by the fireplace, the only object in the room was a standing globe just inside the door.

“Who owns this house?” Ettore asked.

“We do, of course.”
“You mean the Society? But where is everyone? I thought I would be meeting others.”

Stefan approached the globe and placed his hands on the painted porcelain surface. “As you shall see, we keep many secrets in this house, and in our other residences. I’d like to show you one tonight.” He pushed with his fingers, causing two small, irregular pieces to depress on the face of the globe. The workmanship was so clever that Ettore had not noticed the interlocking pieces. Playing it like a piano, Stefan moved his hands and depressed another pair, and then another, causing a section of the bookshelves to hinge open, just wide enough for a person to slip through.

Stefan led him through the hidden doorway and into a darkened alcove. He flicked on a light to reveal a semitranslucent orb resting on a glass stand in the center of the room. About the size of a cantaloupe, the bauble was made of a rough bluish-green material, resembling quartz sprinkled with crumbled seashells.

Ettore stared curiously at the object. “What is that?”

“Our scientists believe,” Stefan said, giving the strange bauble a hungry look, “that this is a glass-blown object at least three thousand years old.”

“Three thousand?” Ettore drew closer to inspect the surface. He would not have guessed it was glass until Stefan told him. “But how?”

“Sophisticated glasswork was not unknown at the time. I’d like you to stay exactly where you are, and observe the object.”

The German closed the door and cast the alcove into darkness. Moments later, a garish purple light bathed the room, emanating from a trio of glowing tubes embedded in the room’s ceiling. Ettore had never seen a light so unusual. Fluorescent lamps, he knew, created illumination by sending an electrical current through tubes of mercury vapor. The mercury atoms exuded light photons rendered visible to the human eye by phosphor coatings, and he wondered if the glowing tubes on these lamps contained a different type of phosphor, one that allowed a shorter wavelength of light to pass.

The electric light may have been a novelty, but the inside of the
glass ball made him gasp. Displayed within that ancient sphere, he saw the very room in which they very standing, reflected in varying hues of gray. He knew this because he recognized his own stooped posture and Stefan’s tall erect form standing by the wall. Ettore waved a hand and saw the gesture reflected within the shadowy world mirrored inside the bauble.

“I . . . don’t understand. Smoke particles will eventually settle. A vapor will dissipate over time . . . Perhaps two inert gases . . . But thermal equilibrium would not allow such a display to endure over any length of time.”

“All true.”

“How then? Is it a trick?”

“No trick, I assure you.”

“A mirror coated in phosphors?”

Stefan nodded in approval. “That is our best guess.”

“But how would a primitive culture understand the concept of a radioluminescent material that persists for so long, or the reaction of a phosphor to a specialized electric light?”

“We’ve no idea. It seems impossible, unless there is some type of special property to the glass or some unseen material inside that we do not understand. Perhaps breaking the glass would provide insight, or perhaps it would . . . break the spell, if you’ll forgive the pun. As I’ve said before, I believe we’ve only scratched the surface of what our forebears were able to accomplish.”

Stefan stepped away from the wall, clasped his hands behind his back, and began to pace. “I mentioned secrets, Ettore, and this is one of many. But the greatest of all—the cornerstone, in many ways, of our Society—is an enigma to which I am not yet privy.” His voice turned bitter. “Those anachronistic fools believe decades should pass before a single meek step is taken, a babe crawling on hands and knees toward a curious light. The world will burn around us while they await their precious enlightenment!”

Ettore pulled his gaze away from the glass stand. “Greatest secret?”

“There is a place . . . a higher reality, another dimension. We
don’t know exactly what it is. We call it the Fold. I know only what has been whispered in the corridors of the sanctums, the lore they give us as scraps. Yet a few within the Society have seen it, Ettore. I know they have.”

“Another dimension?” Ettore said in a daze. He couldn’t seem to stop repeating Stefan’s words. “What . . . How do you know this?”

“We only know that it’s there, and reflects our reality in some way. Or perhaps our reality reflects it.” He walked slowly toward the center of the room, his gaze locked on the glass ball. “What I do know is that it looks similar to this.”

“In what manner?”

“A shadowy gray-hued world, an abnormal but deeper reflection of our own, with different physical properties. What if this three-thousand-year-old glass sphere was the original inspiration for the crystal ball? What if an ancient seer once peered into its depths to explore the Fold? Where do the boundaries of myth and legend intersect with reality? Superstition with science? We have reason to believe humankind has known about the existence of this place through dreams and other phenomena since the dawn of recorded history. No one understands it, but we all agree the Fold exists—and can be reached. Some believe metaphysics is the route to take—and perhaps it is—but I firmly believe we can reach it through science.”

As outlandish as Stefan’s claim might seem, Ettore had no problem conceiving of other dimensions and levels of reality that existed right next door to our own. In fact, they were part and parcel of his profession. What was quantum physics but proof that such miracles not only existed, but formed the bedrock of our physical universe? Of our very reality?

For some time, Ettore had harbored the sneaking suspicion that twentieth-century science, as advanced as it seemed, had only discovered the frothy silver tips of the waves skimming the ocean, leaving fathoms of dark water unseen.

He had to know more. “What do you mean it can be reached?” Stefan spun on his heel to face him. “This is the reason I recruited
you. Help me locate the Fold and probe its secrets before it’s too late. Imagine what might occur if a scientist in the employ of Adolf Hitler arrives first, or someone else like him.”

“I have so many questions. How does the Society know about this place? How do you know it’s real? What do you want me to do?”

Stefan strode to the wall, turned off the strange violet light, and reopened the door to the study. “Excellent questions all. Yet before I provide answers, you must officially become one of us. Due to the rapid progression of world events, and because of who you are, I’ve convinced the others to allow you to circumvent our traditional trials. You’re welcome here, Ettore. But even you must undergo our symbolic rite of entry.”

When Ettore moved to follow him across the room, Stefan told him to wait by the wall. Ettore obeyed as Stefan returned to the globe and pressed his fingers into the porcelain surface, again manipulating panels. “Sometimes we have to descend into darkness before we can see the light. Please undress, Ettore.”

“What?”

“Do it,” Stefan said softly, yet in a voice so firm and commanding that Ettore felt as if he had no choice but to obey. Feeling vulnerable and rather foolish, Ettore stripped down to his socks and underpants, then removed those as well when Stefan ordered him to finish.

“What’s going on?” Ettore asked, covering his privates with his hands. “Please, Stefan—”

“Take a deep breath and hold it.”

“Why should—” Ettore began, right before the floor dropped away.

Enveloped by a sudden darkness, Ettore did not even have time to call out before he plunged feetfirst into a well of cold water. His toes never touched bottom, and he kicked blindly to reach the surface. He doubted he had dropped farther than ten feet. Working hard not to panic, he thrust with his legs to propel himself upward, and
banged his head straight into a glass wall.

Dazed, Ettore tried to regain his equilibrium as he flailed in the water. How could that be?

He thrust a palm over and over against the barrier, then swam side to side, hoping it would end but finding that it extended all the way to walls on both sides, perhaps two dozen feet across.

Now he panicked. Had Stefan brought him here to die? Was he a true Nazi after all, sent to assassinate the scientists of rival nations?

Ettore forced himself to quell his terror as he groped blindly along the walls, searching for an opening as his oxygen seeped away. He recalled Stefan’s last words before the plunge.

_Sometimes we have to descend into darkness before we see the light._

He had assumed the cryptic words were metaphorical, but what if he was imparting a literal clue?

Though swimming deeper into the hole—descending into darkness—seemed counterintuitive, he realized it was the only place he had not explored. Corkscrewing his body in the water, Ettore dove into the enclosure, this time keeping his arms extended so he would not crack his head. Within three full strokes, he encountered a metal bar affixed in place. He groped around and felt another rail a few feet away, connected by shorter metal bars between them.

The horizontal iron ladder extended in only one direction. Left with no choice, Ettore propelled himself from bar to bar as fast as he could, his chest starting to spasm from lack of air. As the pressure inside his lungs mounted, the iron bars turned upward, and he spied a faint orange glow. A burst of adrenaline carried him the final dozen feet and through a hole at the top of the ladder. He groaned as precious oxygen coursed through his airways and filled his lungs with a narcotic pleasure.

Ettore climbed out of the hole with shaking hands, his teeth chattering from the cold, only to find himself staring down a constricted stone-walled passage. The golden glow he had seen was emanating from the floor of the passage, which, as far as Ettore could tell, was composed of hot coals.
The air inside the chamber was as hot and humid as a tropical jungle. He turned to face a solid wall behind him. There was only one way to go.

Across the passage of fire.

How long Ettore remained beside the top of the watery hole, naked and dripping and confused, he could not say. Debating whether to wait right there for as long as it took for someone to save him, Ettore took a tentative step forward, onto the coals. He jerked his foot back in pain. After another probe, he realized that, while the coals were hot to the touch, they did not burn as much as he would have thought. He peered closer and discovered they were synthetic, made of some unknown material. A clever illusion aided by the darkness cloaking the chamber.

Though terrified, his rational mind told him that Stefan and his people were not trying to kill him, and that this was another test.

No, not a test. What had Stefan called it? A “symbolic rite of entry.”

Surprising himself, he stopped thinking through every possible angle for once in his life and rushed across the glowing surface. The heat became unbearable very quickly, and Ettore howled in pain as he raced over the wobbly stones, working hard to keep his balance. Soon he spied the end of the tunnel a hundred feet away. So very far! The pain was excruciating. He wondered how he would survive, and how in the world he had come to this place in his life, and where that dark hole at the end of the tunnel would lead—

And then he was through, standing on a stone floor at the edge of a patch of blackness. He sank to the floor and inspected the blisters that had begun to form. After a time, he pushed to his feet and stared into the maw of the tunnel.

Feeling oddly calm, Ettore led with his hands and walked into the unknown. Almost at once, a fierce wind poured into the chamber, buffeting him from all sides. He moved carefully, afraid the floor would drop away again, but he never faltered in the face of the gale, knowing it was part of the process and symbolic of something he
could ponder at a later date. The faint glow behind him disappeared, and he walked for twenty paces through utter darkness, disoriented, the wind and lack of vision spinning his senses. He did his best to move in a straight line, staggering forward like a drunkard. Soon another glow—this one silver—appeared ahead of him, and as the wind died another sound picked up, a faint and dissonant whisper that increased the closer he drew to the light. He recoiled as he walked into an invisible wall made of some filmy substance, and then he was clawing his way through a viscous veil that clung to him like the strands of a spider’s web. Ettore pushed forward, flailing, both determined and afraid, ripping at the barrier until he emerged into the freezing Copenhagen night, realizing he must have been walking on an upward slope and grateful beyond measure when he saw the moon and stars above.

Another passage stretched out before him, this one a long, snaking corridor of masked men and women dressed in evening clothes, each holding a single flameless candle that, together, emitted the silver glow he had witnessed. Stunned, Ettore estimated several hundred people awaited him, their identities obscured by beige masks covered in red markings that resembled hieroglyphs or runes of some sort.

The whispering had grown louder, emanating from behind the masks, low susurrations whose words he could not understand. A chant in an unfamiliar language, or perhaps in many languages. He looked around and recognized the domed stone huts he had seen earlier in the rear grounds of the mansion.

Lying on the snow-covered grass at his feet was a belted cotton robe. He gratefully slipped it on. The inside was dry, and standing barefoot atop the freezing ground gave relief to his blistered soles.

Ettore exhaled a frozen breath. Shoulders straight, trying not to look as bewildered as he felt, he strode down the tunnel of people. As he passed, each and every person tossed a handful of loose soil on his robe. The wet dirt stained the material and collected in his wake, marking the passage.
A lone figure, also masked, stood facing Ettore at the end of the corridor. As Ettore drew closer, the figure removed his mask, and Ettore was unsurprised by the identity of the lean and hawkish man awaiting him.

“Welcome,” Stefan said, signaling with a hand for Ettore to stop when he was ten feet away. Before Ettore could croak out a reply, the German raised his voice to address the crowd. Ettore glanced back and noticed the tunnel had collapsed as the other people, still wearing their masks and holding their candles, gathered behind him.

“Before we complete the rite of entry,” Stefan continued, “I have an announcement to make. For some time, as we all know, a schism of belief has ruptured the Society we hold so dear. We’ve attempted to coexist. Yet world events and the aggression of others have made clear the impossibility of this task.” He paused to sweep his gaze across the crowd. “As the voice of those gathered tonight, I hereby declare the Ascendants the only true faction of the Leap Year Society.”

Enthusiastic clapping erupted from the crowd, but Stefan quieted the noise with an outstretched palm. “We must pledge at all costs,” he continued, “to seek through knowledge the ascendancy of humankind over the basest, most bestial aspects of our nature, and thereby save the world from itself. Though it pains me as no wound ever has, we must also declare war with our former brethren and continue our mission as we see fit. All of us know what this will mean. The trials that lie ahead.” After another pause, in which not a single person stirred, Stefan thrust his mask high in the air. “A new future awaits, and it will be up to us, each and every one present, to determine its course. History has been thrust upon us!”

This time the applause was thunderous, followed by a scream. At first Ettore thought the shriek was one of wild abandon, approval for the new direction of the organization, but then another followed, and he saw Stefan go rigid. When Ettore spun to look, he noticed, all throughout the courtyard, men and women throwing off their masks and clashing with their neighbors, stabbing with knives or
staving off attacks with bare hands. There was movement to his left, and he spun again to see a burly red-haired man, no longer masked, step out of the front row and lunge at Stefan with a long knife. The German officer twisted to the side to avoid the attack, at the same time snatching his attacker’s wrist. As the red-haired man fought to free himself, Stefan stuck his left hand into his double-breasted overcoat, whipped out a pistol, and shot the man point-blank in the side of the head.

At the sound, the chaos enveloping the grounds of the mansion seemed to stall, as if the gunshot had stunned the crowd into submission. As quick as a heartbeat, the fight resumed, and this time pistols appeared alongside knives and fists. Most of the masks were gone, revealing men and women of all races clashing with no apparent order. All around Ettore, blood smeared the freshly fallen snow, and he stumbled away, horrified by the violence.

A bullet whizzed right by Ettore’s head, and Stefan grabbed him by the arm, his eyes gleaming brighter than Ettore had ever seen them. Where Ettore would have expected to see fear or even shock reflected on the German’s face, he saw instead a feverish, wild, almost feral excitement.

“Come!” Stefan said, pulling Ettore along as he raced toward one of the domed stone huts, turning to shoot over his shoulder. Stefan ran behind the hut to pull open a door as two bullets thunked into the wood. Multiple voices called out Stefan’s name as he ushered Ettore inside, closed the door, and threw an iron bar over the latch.

Inside the domed structure, a stairwell descended into darkness. Still holding the gun, Stefan pulled a flashlight out of his coat and bounded down the stairs. Ettore followed on his heels. Behind them, someone pounded against the door, and Ettore heard a rending sound, as if someone was using an ax to get through.

“Where are we going?” Ettore managed to say. He felt as if he might be sick. “What happened?”

“We’ve been betrayed! I confess I didn’t think they had it in them. Can you believe they attacked with knives before they drew
their pistols? They still think we’re playing by the same rules.” Stefan threw back his head and laughed as they descended to a concrete underground tunnel.

Ettore could not imagine how anyone could laugh in such a situation. “What rules?”

“All bets are off, though I’ll wager they’ll honor sacred ground. In fact, I’m staking our lives on it.”

A resounding thud came from above, as if the door had fallen. Voices poured into the stairwell behind them.

“They’re coming!” Ettore said.

“Of course they are,” Stefan said as they raced down the escape route. Though Ettore had no idea what the German was talking about, and could not see his face in the darkness, he had the strange feeling that Stefan was grinning.

The nightmare refused to end. Ettore lost track of time, but not long after they descended into the tunnel, some of the longest minutes of his life, their route dead-ended at a concrete wall. Thinking they were trapped, pure terror welled up inside him until Stefan reached up to pull on an iron ring embedded in the ceiling. As multiple boots pounded the floor behind them, Stefan lowered a trapdoor, jumped to grab the lip of the circular opening, and pulled himself through. He helped Ettore up before replacing the cover, which merged seamlessly with the rougher concrete floor of their new environs.

“Unfortunately,” Stefan said, “there’s no lock.”

They had emerged into an underground chamber with no visible end. Wide concentric archways supported by brick pillars extended into the darkness, as if they had climbed into the middle of a vast underground cathedral.

Puddles of water slicked the floor. The air was cold and damp and fetid. Ettore saw a rat scuttle away from the light and said, “Where are we?”

“The cisterns. Hurry, now. Would you like my coat?”
“I’m fine,” Ettore said, though he felt ridiculous racing around in a robe, and his blistered feet were aching. But those people were still behind them. He was too scared to take the time to change clothes.

Without pausing to get his bearings, Stefan raced through the archways to a set of steps that paralleled a sloping embankment. As they bounded up the stairs, a shout echoed through the cistern, and Ettore looked back to see two men and two women brandishing pistols near the trapdoor. They were waving flashlights in the gloom, searching for their prey. One of them noticed Ettore halfway up the steps.

“Stefan!” Ettore croaked. “Behind us.”

Stefan turned to fire at their pursuers as he fumbled to extract a key from his coat. A blond woman in a green coat returned fire with a gun that shot bullets at a rapid-fire pace, terrifying Ettore.

“Automatic pistol,” Stefan said grimly, pulling him up the steps. They had ascended high enough that a wall now protected them from gunfire. They continued racing up the steps until they reached a door. Stefan rushed to fit the key into the lock, trying to escape before they were caught with no protection.

The footsteps behind them drew closer, echoing in the cistern.

“Hurry!” Ettore cried, backing into the wall.

At last the lock clicked open. Stefan threw the door open and burst outside, Ettore right behind him.

“Where to?” Ettore asked, gasping for air. “How far must we go?”

“Not far.”

“Has someone called the police?”

“We never involve the authorities. Now save your breath.”

Ettore knew he was slowing the German down. Ettore almost never exercised, and his legs felt as if they had weights attached. Fear coursed through him like an electric shock, and he wasn’t sure how much longer he could last. Oh God, how I wish for this night to end.

They had surfaced in a courtyard with a view of spires and stately brick walls. When Ettore glanced over his shoulder, he saw that the door through which they had exited was one of many along the side
of a hulking granite building. Perhaps they had surfaced inside the grounds of one of the palaces in the city center.

They cleared the courtyard and entered a wooded green space dusted in snow. Stefan shoved Ettore against a tree, put a finger to his lips, and took aim. As the first pursuer burst through the same door on the side of the building, Stefan fired and hit a woman in the chest.

Stefan tugged at Ettore’s shirt. “That won’t slow them for long.”

After winding through a maze of buildings and cobblestone courtyards riddled with hedges and fountains, they exited on a street that ran alongside a canal. Above them, Ettore saw a spiral ivory tower supported by a pair of dragons, jutting above the city like a curling unicorn’s horn. They fled across an icy footbridge, into a plaza surrounded by lanterns glowing atop stone pillars. A bullet thunked into a wall beside them, causing Stefan to hunch as he ran.

The German shoved Ettore down a colonnaded brick walkway. Ettore thought they might have ducked into the palace again. He had no idea. It was all he could do to stay on his feet. “Why don’t they use the automatic gun?” he managed to gasp.

“They might,” Stefan said, “if they have a clear shot. But the survival of us all depends on staying in the shadows. No one must know we exist.”

“But the gunfire at the house—won’t it attract attention?”

“Many rules were just broken. The safe house will be moved, our influence in high places strained to corral the damage. But make no mistake, Ettore—after tonight, everything has changed.”

They followed the walkway through an arched opening in a wall and into another green space fronting a squat red-brick building with cathedral windows.

“We’ve arrived,” Stefan said. “Hurry now.”

“Is this a church?”

“It’s a library.”

They dashed toward the ivy-covered entrance of the building. Instead of using the main door, Stefan veered around the corner to an inconspicuous side door.
“I don’t hear anyone,” Ettore said, glancing back as Stefan extracted another key.

“By now, they know where we’re headed,” Stefan said. “The question is whether they’ll break our oldest law and follow us inside. If they don’t, we’ll wait until morning to exit, or until reinforcements arrive.”

“And if they do?”

Stefan opened the door, exposing a lightless interior that secreted the musty smell of old books. “Then we see who has the better aim.”
Late that night, after the conversation with her father, Andie grabbed a lamb shawarma and a piece of pistachio baklava from a walk-up window, then holed up at a pension ten blocks behind the Eastern Harbour. She grimaced when she opened the door to her room and saw a giant orange cockroach scuttling beneath a floorboard. But the sheets were crisp and white, the bathroom spotless, and the ambient light from the harbor gave her a sense of connection to the world as she peered out of the sixth-floor window.

The flimsy lock on the door made her nervous, so she shoved an armchair in front of it. After a hot shower to wash away the grime, she flinched as she wrapped herself in a towel and stared into the bathroom mirror, dreading another vision. Even without her strange affliction, she always found looking at her own reflection a disorienting thing, almost an out-of-body experience. As if the doppelganger of her reflection was another creature entirely, an entangled soul summoned to the glass by her gaze.

Nothing happened, and she took a moment to examine her drawn features. There was no doubt she had her father’s green eyes, strong chin, smattering of freckles, and unruly cowlicks. While she did not have her mother’s ethereal beauty, it was impossible not to
see the resemblance in the long face and aquiline nose. She was their child, all right.

*So why did you leave us, Mom? Where did you go? What happened to you all those years ago? Why did Dr. Corwin have a photo of us in some strange city?*

The divots beneath Andie’s collarbone were even more hollow than usual. She did a half-turn and regarded the sixteen stars of the Andromeda constellation that hovered between her shoulder blades. At times she regretted tattooing a symbol of her own name on her back, but mostly it made her feel more connected to the universe. And, if she were honest with herself, it ensured she never forgot both the memory and betrayal of her mother, a legacy she wished were different but knew she could never change.

Andromeda. In Greek mythology, the name belonged to the daughter of Cassiopeia and Cepheus, king and queen of Aethiopia. Cassiopeia had drawn the wrath of Poseidon by boasting that her daughter’s beauty surpassed even the Nereids’, his beloved sea nymphs. In response, the angry god had unleashed a monster that threatened to destroy the kingdom. Andromeda’s parents chained her to a rock by the sea in an attempt to appease Poseidon, offering her up as a sacrifice to the beast.

The Greeks used the name Aethiopia to refer to the known parts of Africa at the time, including the Upper Nile region. With a little shiver, Andie thought about how, right that very moment, in a run-down hotel in modern Alexandria, she was standing in the homeland of her mythological namesake.

*A daughter served up as a sacrifice. Some legacy.*

After considering the liter of bottled water she had picked up at a corner shop, Andie cracked a can of Sakara Gold lager she found in the minifridge. *God, I need a drink.*

She sat on the bed with her back against the headboard and debated going to Cairo. It was less than three hours by car. Yet what would she do once she got there? Walk into the desert and try to sneak inside the caverns beneath the Sphinx? She supposed
she could do some research and come up with a better plan, but that could take days. Before she went that route, she wanted to try something else.

Andie did not think much of the Hall of Records theory. It bore little historical weight, and smacked of amateur science. Yet if it related to the Star Phone puzzle in some way, she had to play the game.

But she didn’t have to play it by herself—and she knew someone who specialized in conspiracy theories. That irrational guide I was looking for.

She exhaled and set her burner phone in her lap. So far, Cal Miller had proven trustworthy and helped her stay alive. Trusting anyone was hard for Andie, especially on the run, and with someone she had never met in person.

What if someone online was impersonating Cal? What if it was a setup or an elaborate con?

Yet if that were the case, wouldn’t someone have caught up with her by now?

Weighing all the angles, she decided it was better to make contact. She wished she knew how hard it was to track a burner. She imagined it was pretty damn difficult, especially if the trackers didn’t know in which country she had bought it. Even if they did know, they would have to threaten someone inside the carrier.

Unfortunately, she had great faith in her enemy’s ability to accomplish that task.

So be it. She decided to take the risk. After logging into Twitch, she sent Cal a message and received a response from Rhodies4ever351! within minutes.

Good morning, or afternoon, or evening. Did you get where you wanted to go?

I did. Thank you for your help. It was invaluable.

You’re welcome, A.R.

Andie jumped off the bed, clutching the phone as she stared down at her own initials. He knows who I am. Chills flowed through
her, and a million thoughts dashed through her mind. Before she could decide how to respond, another message appeared.

It wasn’t very hard to figure out. Puck described you, and I made a few calls. Seems a certain Prof’s mentee hasn’t been seen since his murder. Your secret’s safe with me, I promise. I assume they already know who you are too.

She supposed he had a point. It was more the shock of having her identity outed before she was ready, after days in hiding. She chewed on her thumbnail and decided to play it cool.

I could use your help with something.

Of course. Though I’m worried about continuing this line of communication.

Me too.

Where does that leave us?

I don’t know.

You should know I’ve decided to leave LA.

To go where?

Dunno. But I’ve been thinking. The only real place I want to go is where I can further my investigation. And if my guess is correct, then that might be wherever it is you are.

Andie kept pacing, gnawing harder on her nail. It was not that she hadn’t considered this option. It was just that, again, it hadn’t been staring her in the face.

He typed some more.

Since these people are trying to silence us both, I thought it might behoove us to join forces.

She ran a hand though her hair, still wet from the shower, then clutched the back of her neck. Despite her guarded nature, and despite the grave price of guessing wrong, her instincts told her she could trust this guy.

They also told her that if she kept plowing ahead on her own, she might be dead before the end of the week.

Cal was a former investigative journalist. He could be a helpful ally, something she desperately needed. She began typing.
I’ve found another piece to the puzzle. But still missing some. What puzzle? Can I help? Have you ever heard of the H*ll of R*c*rds?

It took him a moment to respond. As in, lost knowledge of the ancients? Africa? Up denial?

That’s the one.

Why Mercuri, I didn’t realize you were a fan of my show.

So is it real?

You don’t mince words, do you? The legend is real, that’s for sure. Pliny mentioned a hidden cavity beneath the Sphinx over 2,000 years ago.

Andie frowned. I read about the excavations. Not that impressed. Those tunnels and shafts are authentic, and the government has been weirdly cagey about it. Why close it off? Also, too many reputable experts have questioned the weathering and watermarks around the Sphinx to discount out of hand theories of a far older origin than is commonly believed. We’re talking 10 to 15,000 years. I do believe there’s more than meets the eye, but that Edgar Cayce nonsense is for amateurs.

Then what isn’t?

Oh God, there are a zillion theories out there, from all the usual suspects. Prediluvian civs to the aliens. Some think the hall is one of dozens found in ancient sites around the world, from Tibet to Machu Picchu, a vast repository of lost knowledge. It sounds sexy but I have my doubts. Contrary to what you might think, I don’t believe everything I put on my show. I just don’t discount things out of hand. Anyway, right now I’m more concerned with conspiracies that affect my health.

If the hall was real, where would you look?

I honestly have no idea. I’ll tell you where I wouldn’t look: Giza. Far too obvious.

What if I told you I have reason to believe the hall is connected to the Sphinx?

Then I’d tell you that, contrary to popular belief, sphinxes were ubiquitous in ancient Egypt. Are you sure it’s the Sphinx, and not a sphinx?
Andie paced the room. It was a good point, one which she knew from her research was correct.

True. I'll think about it.

Anything else I can help with? Running for my life means I'm kinda short on freelance gigs.

Andie continued to walk back and forth in the tiny space, now rubbing her temples as she thought. She trusted him more and more, and didn't have to feel guilty about endangering him, because he was already a target.

A security breach seemed inevitable if they kept communicating like this, and what did she have to lose?

With a deep breath, hoping she was doing the right thing, she wrote:

Were you serious about your offer?
Me? You? A gin joint in a town somewhere in the world?
Yeah.
Then you bet.
OK. Assumption of the risk, though.
Of course. Want to tell me where u r?

Andie's hands hovered over the keypad for a very long time. If she were wrong or if someone were listening, then she could doom herself by giving away her location. She took her bottom lip between her teeth and told herself she was doing the right thing.

You can already guess the country. HEAX. Let me know when you're here and I'll give you more.

Understood. Be there as soon as I can. If you don't hear from me in a few days... then you probably won't.

In the lobby of the pension the next morning, Andie hovered over an Egyptian coffee as thick and sweet as maple syrup, so strong it felt like mainlining a shot of adrenaline. The door to the outside was propped open, letting in a cool morning breeze before the sun blasted the city.
The lobby, which doubled as a café, had dingy red carpeting and smudged photos of Abu Simbel, Siwa Oasis, and the pyramids displayed on the walls. Halfway through her coffee, a young couple strolled arm in arm down the staircase and took one of the adjoining tables. They spoke French, and Andie eyed them as she asked for the check. Why had they sat so close to her?

The combination of paranoia and caffeine left her shaking with nerves as she grabbed her backpack, left the hotel, and walked hurriedly down the street, glancing over her shoulder every few steps. Though it was too hot for her jacket, she had her hijab in place, along with black jeans and a white T-shirt.

The clue to her location she had given Cal, HEAX, was the International Civil Aviation Organization symbol for El Nouzha, Alexandria’s other principal airport. As opposed to the more familiar IATA codes—used for reservations and baggage tags—ICAO codes were simply a different standardized form of international airport recognition. Just another layer to throw her pursuers off, should anyone be scanning the internet.

Even if Cal had jumped on a flight last night, she figured she had at least a full day to figure out where to rendezvous before he arrived. If he arrived.

Her next port of call was the Alexandria National Museum, which her research and the hotel receptionist informed her was the best source of information on the city’s history.

The museum was a ten-block walk due east from her hotel, about a mile south of the library. Within minutes, the facade she recognized from a flyer in the lobby came into view: a three-story white Italianate mansion plopped like a lost pearl amid a sea of dilapidated apartment blocks. The gated compound included a garden with a handful of Egyptian sculptures scattered on the lawn, as if left outside after a frat party.

She climbed the curved staircase that led to the entrance,
bought a ticket, and found herself in a foyer with gray marble columns. According to her information booklet, the museum was a restored palace focusing on the history of Alexandria from antiquity to modern times.

Though Egypt’s pharaonic era predated the city—Alexander the Great laid the groundwork around 330 BCE—Andie began her tour by heading downstairs, to the exhibits from the time of the god-kings. Dark-blue walls symbolized the journey to the afterlife, and the pursed lips and curved eyes of an eerie sandstone bust of Akhenaten, husband of Nefertiti and probable father of Tutankhamen, drew her eye as she wandered the floor. After finding nothing of interest among the wealth of artifacts, as well as no sign of life from the Star Phone, she headed down another staircase to a chilly subterranean chamber, where a statue of the jackal god, Anubis, lorded over two painted sarcophagi. On another day, she would have lingered over the exhibits, but she had come with a purpose, and the secluded basement made her nervous.

Back on the ground floor, working her way through the centuries, she turned a corner and came face-to-face with a diorite sphinx that stopped her in her tracks. Excited, she pointed the Star Phone at it, circling to hit it from every angle, but nothing affected the device. She also noticed an exhibit on the ruins of the Serapeum, which included a photo of two huge sphinxes right inside the city. Remembering that the Serapeum might have housed a portion of the library’s collection, she decided that would be her next destination, if nothing else turned up.

She continued browsing the impressive collection of Greco-Roman relics, then continued upstairs to the Coptic, Islamic, and modern eras. Her frustration grew until, just past a series of black-and-white photos of nineteenth-century Alexandria, she found an exhibit highlighting the discovery of the Catacombs of Kom el-Shoqafa in 1900, a trilevel funerary site considered one of the wonders of the medieval world.

The builders of the catacombs had tunneled through a hundred
feet of solid rock in the second century AD to construct the under-
ground complex, and the placard’s description caused a tingle of
excitement to spread through her.

The catacombs are riddled with loculi—cavities in the
stone walls reserved for family burials—and include
a chamber called a triclinium, where relatives could
sit on stone couches and enjoy refreshments while
paying respects to the dead. Some theorize the sub-
terranean galleries might have given rise to the apoc-
ryphal legend of the Hall of Records, perhaps as a
metaphorical veneration of ancestral knowledge that
persists through the centuries and into the afterlife.

The Star Phone revealed no further secrets, but Andie studied the
photos and the text of the exhibit for a long time, thinking about how
much the phrasing of the placard imitated the themes of her search.

Knowledge of the ancients persisting through time.
The collective wisdom of planet Earth, lost and suppressed until
only myth remains.

After finishing her tour, Andie left the museum deep in thought,
intrigued by the Serapeum but debating whether to visit the cata-
combs first. So far, the Star Phone had illuminated two sphinxes, and
the only connection to the Hall of Records was her own interpreta-
tion of the message. Yet something about it rang true. Dr. Corwin
loved patterns and meanings hidden beneath the surface, and had
always approached his work on the cosmos as if it were all one grand
puzzle to be solved. He used to love telling Andie over coffee about
the veiled themes and clues embedded in his lectures, and even his
scientific papers.

She sat on a bench in the garden and pulled out her prepaid
phone. According to Google Maps, the catacombs were nearly an
hour’s walk to the southwest, still in the thick of the city, not far from
the ruins of the Serapeum. Instead of choosing between the two
ancient sites, she decided to walk over to the library to see if its collection on either of the locations contained another clue.

The library was nearby. Though the day was growing late, the evening sun caused lines of sweat to trickle down her back. She loosened the hijab as she walked. The route took her past the El-Nabih cistern ruins, through a busy commercial section full of cafés and bookstores that ran alongside the university, and then straight onto the grounds of the library. Just as she was about to cross the courtyard leading to the entrance, she glanced up at the elevated walkway and froze when she saw a very tall woman with ebony skin and chiseled features talking on her cell phone. The woman was staring down at the entrance as if keeping an eye out for someone.

It was the same woman from London. Zawadi. There was no doubt in Andie’s mind.

Her heart hammering against her chest, Andie ducked behind a concrete pillar and debated what to do. How had they found her? Could it possibly be a coincidence?

*Wishful thinking.*

She risked another glance and saw Zawadi hurrying down the walkway with her long stride. After she disappeared inside the building, Andie took the opening. She darted back into the street and aimed for the largest crowd of people she could find. After slowing to a fast walk, she made two more turns and jumped into a cab parked outside a hotel. The driver was a middle-aged man with glasses perched on a thin nose, a bead of moisture on his top lip, and a red-and-white checkered keffiyeh draped loosely around his neck.

“Are you free?” she asked the driver.

“Yes, please. Your destination?”

Andie paused for a beat, then went with her gut. “The Catacombs of Kom el-Shoqafa.”

“You are sure? We may not arrive before the close.”

“It’s okay. Do your best.”

He darted into the traffic, then apologized over and over as they hit a series of roadblocks caused by congestion. The entire way,
Andie sat low in the seat and kept a constant eye out for signs of pursuit. She did not think Zawadi had noticed her, but her presence in the city caused Andie’s pulse to quicken and a lump of dread to settle deep in her chest.

A sidewalk market that had spilled into the street cut off their route. Everything from hubcaps to used clothing to goat heads hung from wires stretched between stalls in the hot sun. The driver cursed and veered into a lane so narrow Andie thought the car would scrape the sides of the flimsy wooden shacks lining the road, built into the sides of concrete towers in various stages of ruin. The slum only worsened as they drove through. Andie swallowed at the families living in caves scooped out of sections of collapsed buildings, mothers drying clothes on piles of rubble as their children clambered atop mounds of garbage.

After they cleared the slums, the city opened up, and soon they were climbing a dusty hill ringed by midrise concrete apartments with men sitting at tables out front smoking shisha. At the apex of the hill was a courtyard with low Roman columns denoting the entrance to the catacombs.

Fifteen minutes until closing time. Andie asked the driver to wait, but he apologized yet again and said he had to rush to the airport. With a final nervous glance behind her, and no easy escape route in case someone had followed, she walked through the iron entrance gate. A bored guard waved her in. Half a dozen tourists were still milling about, and a feral cat slunk beside her as she made her way across the sunbaked courtyard to a flat-topped mausoleum.

Wondering where to find the ticket booth, she noticed a sign in front of the entrance to the catacombs. She drew closer and read the English translation.

**CLOSED FOR REPAIR**

*Great.* There was no telling how long that would take. A day, a week, a month? She asked the guard, but he claimed to have no idea. Whatever the duration, it was time that Andie didn’t have.
After taking a few steps away from the mausoleum, she took out the Star Phone. As soon as she focused the lens on the pyramidal piece of stone adorning the top of the doorway, the device activated, conjuring a familiar three-dimensional image.

Another sphinx, looming at the entrance to the catacombs. Guarding another secret.
Would you risk your life to learn the truth?...

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