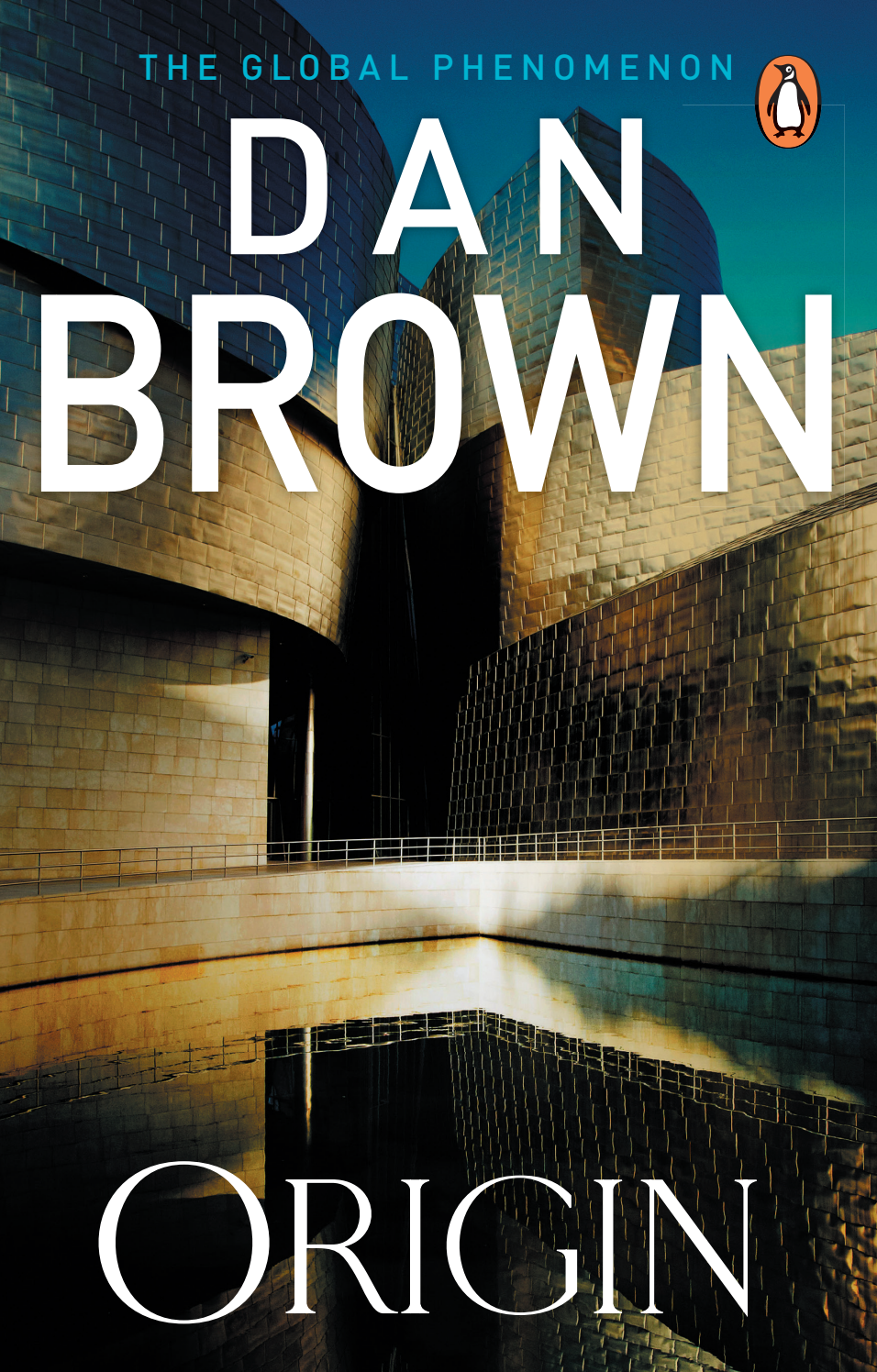

THE GLOBAL PHENOMENON
DAN
BROWN
ORIGIN

DAN BROWN

is the bestselling author of *Digital Fortress*, *Deception Point*, *Angels & Demons*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Lost Symbol*, *Inferno*, *Origin* and *The Secret of Secrets*. Three of his Robert Langdon novels have been adapted for the screen by Ron Howard, starring Tom Hanks. They have all been international blockbusters.

Dan Brown is a graduate of Amherst College and Phillips Exeter Academy, where he has taught English and Creative Writing. He lives in New England.

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BY DAN BROWN

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'As engaging a hero as you could wish for'
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IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER

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We must be willing to get rid of
the life we've planned, so as to
have the life that is waiting for us.

– JOSEPH CAMPBELL

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Prologue

As the ancient cogwheel train clawed its way up the dizzying incline, Edmond Kirsch surveyed the jagged mountaintop above him. In the distance, built into the face of a sheer cliff, the massive stone monastery seemed to hang in space, as if magically fused to the vertical precipice.

This timeless sanctuary in Catalonia, Spain, had endured the relentless pull of gravity for more than four centuries, never slipping from its original purpose: to insulate its occupants from the modern world.

Ironically, they will now be the first to learn the truth, Kirsch thought, wondering how they would react. Historically, the most dangerous men on earth were men of God . . . especially when their gods became threatened. *And I am about to hurl a flaming spear into a hornets' nest.*

When the train reached the mountaintop, Kirsch saw a solitary figure waiting for him on the platform. The wizened skeleton of a man was draped in the traditional Catholic purple cassock and white rochet, with a zucchetto on his head. Kirsch recognized his host's rawboned features from photos and felt an unexpected surge of adrenaline.

Valdespino is greeting me personally.

Bishop Antonio Valdespino was a formidable figure in Spain – not only a trusted friend and counselor to the king

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himself, but one of the country's most vocal and influential advocates for the preservation of conservative Catholic values and traditional political standards.

'Edmond Kirsch, I assume?' the bishop intoned as Kirsch exited the train.

'Guilty as charged,' Kirsch said, smiling as he reached out to shake his host's bony hand. 'Bishop Valdespino, I want to thank you for arranging this meeting.'

'I appreciate your *requesting* it.' The bishop's voice was stronger than Kirsch expected – clear and penetrating, like a bell. 'It is not often we are consulted by men of science, especially one of your prominence. This way, please.'

As Valdespino guided Kirsch across the platform, the cold mountain air whipped at the bishop's cassock.

'I must confess,' Valdespino said, 'you look different than I imagined. I was expecting a scientist, but you're quite . . .' He eyed his guest's sleek Kiton K50 suit and Barker ostrich shoes with a hint of disdain. ' "Hip," I believe, is the word?'

Kirsch smiled politely. *The word 'hip' went out of style decades ago.*

'In reading your list of accomplishments,' the bishop said, 'I am still not entirely sure what it is you do.'

'I specialize in game theory and computer modeling.'

'So you make the computer games that the children play?'

Kirsch sensed the bishop was feigning ignorance in an attempt to be quaint. More accurately, Kirsch knew, Valdespino was a frighteningly well-informed student of technology and often warned others of its dangers. 'No, sir, actually game theory is a field of mathematics that studies patterns in order to make predictions about the future.'

'Ah yes. I believe I read that you predicted a European monetary crisis some years ago? When nobody listened, you saved the day by inventing a computer program that pulled the EU back from the dead. What was your famous quote? "At

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thirty-three years old, I am the same age as Christ when He performed His resurrection."'

Kirsch cringed. 'A poor analogy, Your Grace. I was young.'

'Young?' The bishop chuckled. 'And how old are you now . . . perhaps forty?'

'Just.'

The old man smiled as the strong wind continued to billow his robe. 'Well, the meek were supposed to inherit the earth, but instead it has gone to the young – the technically inclined, those who stare into video screens rather than into their own souls. I must admit, I never imagined I would have reason to meet the young man leading the charge. They call you a *prophet*, you know.'

'Not a very good one in your case, Your Grace,' Kirsch replied. 'When I asked if I might meet you and your colleagues privately, I calculated only a twenty percent chance you would accept.'

'And as I told my colleagues, the devout can always benefit from listening to nonbelievers. It is in hearing the voice of the devil that we can better appreciate the voice of God.' The old man smiled. 'I am joking, of course. Please forgive my aging sense of humor. My filters fail me from time to time.'

With that, Bishop Valdespino motioned ahead. 'The others are waiting. This way, please.'

Kirsch eyed their destination, a colossal citadel of gray stone perched on the edge of a sheer cliff that plunged thousands of feet down into a lush tapestry of wooded foothills. Unnerved by the height, Kirsch averted his eyes from the chasm and followed the bishop along the uneven cliffside path, turning his thoughts to the meeting ahead.

Kirsch had requested an audience with three prominent religious leaders who had just finished attending a conference here.

The Parliament of the World's Religions.

Since 1893, hundreds of spiritual leaders from nearly thirty

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world religions had gathered in a different location every few years to spend a week engaged in interfaith dialogue. Participants included a wide array of influential Christian priests, Jewish rabbis, and Islamic mullahs from around the world, along with Hindu *pujaris*, Buddhist *bhikkhus*, Jains, Sikhs, and others.

The parliament's self-proclaimed objective was 'to cultivate harmony among the world's religions, build bridges between diverse spiritualities, and celebrate the intersections of all faith.'

A noble quest, Kirsch thought, despite seeing it as an empty exercise – a meaningless search for random points of correspondence among a hodgepodge of ancient fictions, fables, and myths.

As Bishop Valdespino guided him along the pathway, Kirsch peered down the mountainside with a sardonic thought. *Moses climbed a mountain to accept the Word of God . . . and I have climbed a mountain to do quite the opposite.*

Kirsch's motivation for climbing this mountain, he had told himself, was one of ethical obligation, but he knew there was a good dose of hubris fueling this visit – he was eager to feel the gratification of sitting face-to-face with these clerics and foretelling their imminent demise.

You've had your run at defining our truth.

'I looked at your curriculum vitae,' the bishop said abruptly, glancing at Kirsch. 'I see you're a product of Harvard University?'

'Undergraduate. Yes.'

'I see. Recently, I read that for the first time in Harvard's history, the incoming student body consists of more atheists and agnostics than those who identify as followers of any religion. That is quite a telling statistic, Mr. Kirsch.'

What can I tell you, Kirsch wanted to reply, *our students keep getting smarter.*

The wind whipped harder as they arrived at the ancient

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stone edifice. Inside the dim light of the building's entryway, the air was heavy with the thick fragrance of burning frankincense. The two men snaked through a maze of dark corridors, and Kirsch's eyes fought to adjust as he followed his cloaked host. Finally, they arrived at an unusually small wooden door. The bishop knocked, ducked down, and entered, motioning for his guest to follow.

Uncertain, Kirsch stepped over the threshold.

He found himself in a rectangular chamber whose high walls burgeoned with ancient leather-bound tomes. Additional freestanding bookshelves jutted out of the walls like ribs, interspersed with cast-iron radiators that clanged and hissed, giving the room the eerie sense that it was alive. Kirsch raised his eyes to the ornately balustraded walkway that encircled the second story and knew without a doubt where he was.

The famed library of Montserrat, he realized, startled to have been admitted. This sacred room was rumored to contain uniquely rare texts accessible only to those monks who had devoted their lives to God and who were sequestered here on this mountain.

'You asked for discretion,' the bishop said. 'This is our most private space. Few outsiders have ever entered.'

'A generous privilege. Thank you.'

Kirsch followed the bishop to a large wooden table where two elderly men sat waiting. The man on the left looked timeworn, with tired eyes and a matted white beard. He wore a crumpled black suit, white shirt, and fedora.

'This is Rabbi Yehuda Köves,' the bishop said. 'He is a prominent Jewish philosopher who has written extensively on Kabbalistic cosmology.'

Kirsch reached across the table and politely shook hands with Rabbi Köves. 'A pleasure to meet you, sir,' Kirsch said. 'I've read your books on Kabbala. I can't say I understood them, but I've read them.'

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Köves gave an amiable nod, dabbing at his watery eyes with his handkerchief.

'And here,' the bishop continued, motioning to the other man, 'you have the respected *allamah*, Syed al-Fadl.'

The revered Islamic scholar stood up and smiled broadly. He was short and squat with a jovial face that seemed a mismatch with his dark penetrating eyes. He was dressed in an unassuming white *thawb*. 'And, Mr. Kirsch, I have read *your* predictions on the future of mankind. I can't say I *agree* with them, but I have read them.'

Kirsch gave a gracious smile and shook the man's hand.

'And our guest, Edmond Kirsch,' the bishop concluded, addressing his two colleagues, 'as you know, is a highly regarded computer scientist, game theorist, inventor, and something of a prophet in the technological world. Considering his background, I was puzzled by his request to address the three of us. Therefore, I shall now leave it to Mr. Kirsch to explain why he has come.'

With that, Bishop Valdespino took a seat between his two colleagues, folded his hands, and gazed up expectantly at Kirsch. All three men faced him like a tribunal, creating an ambience more like that of an inquisition than a friendly meeting of scholars. The bishop, Kirsch now realized, had not even set out a chair for him.

Kirsch felt more bemused than intimidated as he studied the three aging men before him. *So this is the Holy Trinity I requested. The Three Wise Men.*

Pausing a moment to assert his power, Kirsch walked over to the window and gazed out at the breathtaking panorama below. A sunlit patchwork of ancient pastoral lands stretched across a deep valley, giving way to the rugged peaks of the Collserola mountain range. Miles beyond, somewhere out over the Balearic Sea, a menacing bank of storm clouds was now gathering on the horizon.

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Fitting, Kirsch thought, sensing the turbulence he would soon cause in this room, and in the world beyond.

'Gentlemen,' he commenced, turning abruptly back toward them. 'I believe Bishop Valdespino has already conveyed to you my request for secrecy. Before we continue, I just want to clarify that what I am about to share with you must be kept in the strictest confidence. Simply stated, I am asking for a vow of silence from all of you. Are we in agreement?'

All three men gave nods of tacit acquiescence, which Kirsch knew were probably redundant anyway. *They will want to bury this information – not broadcast it.*

'I am here today,' Kirsch began, 'because I have made a scientific discovery I believe you will find startling. It is something I have pursued for many years, hoping to provide answers to two of the most fundamental questions of our human experience. Now that I have succeeded, I have come to you specifically because I believe this information will affect the world's *faithful* in a profound way, quite possibly causing a shift that can only be described as, shall we say – disruptive. At the moment, I am the only person on earth who has the information I am about to reveal to you.'

Kirsch reached into his suit coat and pulled out an oversized smartphone – one that he had designed and built to serve his own unique needs. The phone had a vibrantly colored mosaic case, and he propped it up before the three men like a television. In a moment, he would use the device to dial into an ultrasecure server, enter his forty-seven-character password, and live-stream a presentation for them.

'What you are about to see,' Kirsch said, 'is a rough cut of an announcement I hope to share with the world – perhaps in a month or so. But before I do, I wanted to consult with a few of the world's most influential religious thinkers, to gain insight into how this news will be received by those it affects most.'

The bishop sighed loudly, sounding more bored than

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concerned. 'An intriguing preamble, Mr. Kirsch. You speak as if whatever you are about to show us will shake the foundations of the world's religions.'

Kirsch glanced around the ancient repository of sacred texts. *It will not shake your foundations. It will shatter them.*

Kirsch appraised the men before him. What they did not know was that in only three days' time, Kirsch planned to go public with this presentation in a stunning, meticulously choreographed event. When he did, people across the world would realize that the teachings of all religions did indeed have one thing in common.

They were all dead wrong.

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Professor Robert Langdon gazed up at the forty-foot-tall dog sitting in the plaza. The animal's fur was a living carpet of grass and fragrant flowers.

I'm trying to love you, he thought. *I truly am.*

Langdon pondered the creature a bit longer and then continued along a suspended walkway, descending a sprawling terrace of stairs whose uneven treads were intended to jar the arriving visitor from his usual rhythm and gait. *Mission accomplished,* Langdon decided, nearly stumbling twice on the irregular steps.

At the bottom of the stairs, Langdon jolted to a stop, staring at a massive object that loomed ahead.

Now I've seen it all.

A towering black widow spider rose before him, its slender iron legs supporting a bulbous body at least thirty feet in the air. On the spider's underbelly hung a wire-mesh egg sac filled with glass orbs.

'Her name is Maman,' a voice said.

Langdon lowered his gaze and saw a slender man standing beneath the spider. He wore a black brocade sherwani and had an almost comical curling Salvador Dalí mustache.

'My name is Fernando,' he continued, 'and I'm here to welcome you to the museum.' The man perused a collection of name tags on a table before him. 'May I have your name, please?'

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'Certainly. Robert Langdon.'

The man's eyes shot back up. 'Ah, I am so sorry! I did not recognize you, sir!'

I barely recognize myself, Langdon thought, advancing stiffly in his white bow tie, black tails, and white waistcoat. *I look like a Whiffenpoof.* Langdon's classic tails were almost thirty years old, preserved from his days as a member of the Ivy Club at Princeton, but thanks to his faithful daily regimen of swimming laps, the outfit still fit him fairly well. In Langdon's haste to pack, he had grabbed the wrong hanging bag from his closet, leaving his usual tuxedo behind.

'The invitation said black and white,' Langdon said. 'I trust tails are appropriate?'

'Tails are a classic! You look dashing!' The man scurried over and carefully pressed a name tag to the lapel of Langdon's jacket.

'It's an honor to meet you, sir,' the mustached man said. 'No doubt you've visited us before?'

Langdon gazed through the spider's legs at the glistening building before them. 'Actually, I'm embarrassed to say, I've never been.'

'No!' The man feigned falling over. 'You're not a fan of modern art?'

Langdon had always enjoyed the *challenge* of modern art – primarily the exploration of why particular works were hailed as masterpieces: Jackson Pollock's drip paintings; Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup cans; Mark Rothko's simple rectangles of color. Even so, Langdon was far more comfortable discussing the religious symbolism of Hieronymus Bosch or the brushwork of Francisco de Goya.

'I'm more of a classicist,' Langdon replied. 'I do better with da Vinci than with de Kooning.'

'But da Vinci and de Kooning are so *similar*!'

Langdon smiled patiently. 'Then I clearly have a bit to learn about de Kooning.'

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'Well, you've come to the right place!' The man swung his arm toward the massive building. 'In this museum, you will find one of the finest collections of modern art on earth! I do hope you enjoy.'

'I intend to,' Langdon replied. 'I only wish I knew *why* I'm here.'

'You and everyone else!' The man laughed merrily, shaking his head. 'Your host has been very secretive about the purpose of tonight's event. Not even the museum staff knows what's happening. The *mystery* is half the fun of it – rumors are running wild! There are several hundred guests inside – many famous faces – and nobody has *any* idea what's on the agenda tonight!'

Now Langdon grinned. Very few hosts on earth would have the bravado to send out last-minute invitations that essentially read: *Saturday night. Be there. Trust me.* And even fewer would be able to persuade hundreds of VIPs to drop everything and fly to *northern Spain* to attend the event.

Langdon walked out from beneath the spider and continued along the pathway, glancing up at an enormous red banner that billowed overhead.

AN EVENING WITH
EDM0ND KIRSCH

Edmond has certainly never lacked confidence, Langdon thought, amused.

Some twenty years ago, young Eddie Kirsch had been one of Langdon's first students at Harvard University – a mop-haired computer geek whose interest in codes had led him to Langdon's freshman seminar: Codes, Ciphers, and the Language of Symbols. The sophistication of Kirsch's intellect had impressed Langdon deeply, and although Kirsch eventually abandoned the dusty world of semiotics for the shining promise of computers, he and Langdon had developed a

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student–teacher bond that had kept them in contact over the past two decades since Kirsch's graduation.

Now the student has surpassed his teacher, Langdon thought. *By several light-years.*

Today, Edmond Kirsch was a world-renowned maverick – a billionaire computer scientist, futurist, inventor, and entrepreneur. The forty-year-old had fathered an astounding array of advanced technologies that represented major leaps forward in fields as diverse as robotics, brain science, artificial intelligence, and nanotechnology. And his accurate predictions about future scientific breakthroughs had created a mystical aura around the man.

Langdon suspected that Edmond's eerie knack for prognostication stemmed from his astoundingly broad knowledge of the world around him. For as long as Langdon could remember, Edmond had been an insatiable bibliophile – reading everything in sight. The man's passion for books, and his capacity for absorbing their contents, surpassed anything Langdon had ever witnessed.

For the past few years, Kirsch had lived primarily in Spain, attributing his choice to an ongoing love affair with the country's old-world charm, avant-garde architecture, eccentric gin bars, and perfect weather.

Once a year, when Kirsch returned to Cambridge to speak at the MIT Media Lab, Langdon would join him for a meal at one of the trendy new Boston hot spots that Langdon had never heard of. Their conversations were never about technology; all Kirsch ever wanted to discuss with Langdon was the arts.

'You're my culture connection, Robert,' Kirsch often joked. 'My own private bachelor of arts!'

The playful jab at Langdon's marital status was particularly ironic coming from a fellow bachelor who denounced monogamy as 'an affront to evolution' and had been photographed with a wide range of supermodels over the years.

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Considering Kirsch's reputation as an innovator in computer science, one could easily have imagined him being a buttoned-up techno-nerd. But he had instead fashioned himself into a modern pop icon who moved in celebrity circles, dressed in the latest styles, listened to arcane underground music, and collected a wide array of priceless Impressionist and modern art. Kirsch often e-mailed Langdon to get his advice on new pieces of art he was considering for his collection.

And then he would do the exact opposite, Langdon mused.

About a year ago, Kirsch had surprised Langdon by asking him not about art, but about God – an odd topic for a self-proclaimed atheist. Over a plate of short-rib crudo at Boston's Tiger Mama, Kirsch had picked Langdon's brain on the core beliefs of various world religions, in particular their different stories of the Creation.

Langdon gave him a solid overview of current beliefs, from the Genesis story shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all the way through the Hindu story of Brahma, the Babylonian tale of Marduk, and others.

'I'm curious,' Langdon asked as they left the restaurant. 'Why is a futurist so interested in the past? Does this mean our famous atheist has finally found God?'

Edmond let out a hearty laugh. 'Wishful thinking! I'm just sizing up my competition, Robert.'

Langdon smiled. *Typical.* 'Well, science and religion are not competitors, they're two different languages trying to tell the same story. There's room in this world for both.'

After that meeting, Edmond had dropped out of contact for almost a year. And then, out of the blue, three days ago, Langdon had received a FedEx envelope with a plane ticket, a hotel reservation, and a handwritten note from Edmond urging him to attend tonight's event. It read: *Robert, it would mean the world to me if you of all people could attend. Your insights during our last conversation helped make this night possible.*

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Langdon was baffled. Nothing about that conversation seemed remotely relevant to an event that would be hosted by a futurist.

The FedEx envelope also included a black-and-white image of two people standing face-to-face. Kirsch had written a short poem to Langdon.

Robert,
When you see me face-to-face,
I'll reveal the empty space.
– Edmond



Langdon smiled when he saw the image – a clever allusion to an episode in which Langdon had been involved several years earlier. The silhouette of a chalice, or Grail cup, revealed itself in the empty space between the two faces.

Now Langdon stood outside this museum, eager to learn what his former student was about to announce. A light breeze ruffled his jacket tails as he moved along the cement walkway on the bank of the meandering Nervión River, which had once been the lifeblood of a thriving industrial city. The air smelled vaguely of copper.

As Langdon rounded a bend in the pathway, he finally permitted himself to look at the massive, glimmering museum. The structure was impossible to take in at a glance. Instead, his gaze traced back and forth along the entire length of the bizarre, elongated forms.

This building doesn't just break the rules, Langdon thought. *It ignores them completely. A perfect spot for Edmond.*

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The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, looked like something out of an alien hallucination – a swirling collage of warped metallic forms that appeared to have been propped up against one another in an almost random way. Stretching into the distance, the chaotic mass of shapes was draped in more than thirty thousand titanium tiles that glinted like fish scales and gave the structure a simultaneously organic and extraterrestrial feel, as if some futuristic leviathan had crawled out of the water to sun herself on the riverbank.

When the building was first unveiled in 1997, the *New Yorker* hailed its architect, Frank Gehry, as having designed 'a fantastic dream ship of undulating form in a cloak of titanium,' while other critics around the world gushed, 'The greatest building of our time!' 'Mercurial brilliance!' 'An astonishing architectural feat!'

Since the museum's debut, dozens of other 'deconstructivist' buildings had been erected – the Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, BMW World in Munich, and even the new library at Langdon's own alma mater. Each featured radically unconventional design and construction, and yet Langdon doubted any of them could compete with the Bilbao Guggenheim for its sheer shock value.

As Langdon approached, the tiled facade seemed to morph with each step, offering a fresh personality from every angle. The museum's most dramatic illusion now became visible. Incredibly, from this perspective, the colossal structure appeared to be quite literally floating on water, adrift on a vast 'infinity' lagoon that lapped against the museum's outer walls.

Langdon paused a moment to marvel at the effect and then set out to cross the lagoon via the minimalist footbridge that arched over the glassy expanse of water. He was only halfway across when a loud hissing noise startled him. It was emanating from beneath his feet. He stopped short just as a swirling cloud of mist began billowing out from beneath the walkway.

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The thick veil of fog rose around him and then tumbled outward across the lagoon, rolling toward the museum and engulfing the base of the entire structure.

The Fog Sculpture, Langdon thought.

He had read about this work by Japanese artist Fujiko Nakaya. The 'sculpture' was revolutionary in that it was constructed out of the medium of visible air, a wall of fog that materialized and dissipated over time; and because the breezes and atmospheric conditions were never identical one day to the next, the sculpture was different every time it appeared.

The bridge stopped hissing, and Langdon watched the wall of fog settle silently across the lagoon, swirling and creeping as if it had a mind of its own. The effect was both ethereal and disorienting. The entire museum now appeared to be hovering over the water, resting weightlessly on a cloud – a ghost ship lost at sea.

Just as Langdon was about to set out again, the tranquil surface of the water was shattered by a series of small eruptions. Suddenly five flaming pillars of fire shot skyward out of the lagoon, thundering steadily like rocket engines that pierced the mist-laden air and threw brilliant bursts of light across the museum's titanium tiles.

Langdon's own architectural taste tended more to the classical stylings of museums like the Louvre or the Prado, and yet as he watched the fog and flame hover above the lagoon, he could think of no place more suitable than this ultramodern museum to host an event thrown by a man who loved art and innovation, and who glimpsed the future so clearly.

Now, walking through the mist, Langdon pressed on to the museum's entrance – an ominous black hole in the reptilian structure. As he neared the threshold, Langdon had the uneasy sense that he was entering the mouth of a dragon.

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Navy admiral Luis Ávila was seated on a bar stool inside a deserted pub in an unfamiliar town. He was drained from his journey, having just flown into this city after a job that had taken him many thousands of miles in twelve hours. He took a sip of his second tonic water and stared at the colorful array of bottles behind the bar.

Any man can stay sober in a desert, he mused, *but only the loyal can sit in an oasis and refuse to part his lips.*

Ávila had not parted his lips for the devil in almost a year. As he eyed his reflection in the mirrored bar, he permitted himself a rare moment of contentment with the image looking back at him.

Ávila was one of those fortunate Mediterranean men for whom aging seemed to be more an asset than a liability. Over the years, his stiff black stubble had softened to a distinguished salt-and-pepper beard, his fiery dark eyes had relaxed to a serene confidence, and his taut olive skin was now sun-drenched and creased, giving him the aura of a man permanently squinting out to sea.

Even at sixty-three years old, his body was lean and toned, an impressive physique further enhanced by his tailored uniform. At the moment, Ávila was clothed in his full-dress navy whites – a regal-looking livery consisting of a double-breasted white jacket, broad black shoulder boards, an imposing array of service medals, a starched white standing-collar shirt, and silk-trimmed white slacks.

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The Spanish Armada may not be the most potent navy on earth anymore, but we still know how to dress an officer.

The admiral had not donned this uniform in years – but this was a special night, and earlier, as he walked the streets of this unknown town, he had enjoyed the favorable looks of women as well as the wide berth afforded him by men.

Everyone respects those who live by a code.

'¿Otra tónica?' the pretty barmaid asked. She was in her thirties, was full-figured, and had a playful smile.

Ávila shook his head. *'No, gracias.'*

This pub was entirely empty, and Ávila could feel the barmaid's eyes admiring him. It felt good to be seen again. *I have returned from the abyss.*

The horrific event that all but destroyed Ávila's life five years ago would forever lurk in the recesses of his mind – a single deafening instant in which the earth had opened up and swallowed him whole.

Cathedral of Seville.

Easter morning.

The Andalusian sun was streaming through stained glass, splashing kaleidoscopes of color in radiant bursts across the cathedral's stone interior. The pipe organ thundered in joyous celebration as thousands of worshippers celebrated the miracle of resurrection.

Ávila knelt at the Communion rail, his heart swelling with gratitude. After a lifetime of service to the sea, he had been blessed with the greatest of God's gifts – a family. Smiling broadly, Ávila turned and glanced back over his shoulder at his young wife, María, who was still seated in the pews, far too pregnant to make the long walk up the aisle. Beside her, their three-year-old son, Pepe, waved excitedly at his father. Ávila winked at the boy, and María smiled warmly at her husband.

Thank you, God, Ávila thought as he turned back to the railing to accept the chalice.

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An instant later, a deafening explosion ripped through the pristine cathedral.

In a flash of light, his entire world erupted in fire.

The blast wave drove Ávila violently forward into the Communion rail, his body crushed by the scalding surge of debris and human body parts. When Ávila regained consciousness, he was unable to breathe in the thick smoke, and for a moment he had no idea where he was or what had happened.

Then, above the ringing in his ears, he heard the anguished screams. Ávila clambered to his feet, realizing with horror where he was. He told himself this was all a terrible dream. He staggered back through the smoke-filled cathedral, clambering past moaning and mutilated victims, stumbling in desperation to the approximate area where his wife and son had been smiling only moments ago.

There was nothing there.

No pews. No people.

Only bloody debris on the charred stone floor.

The grisly memory was mercifully shattered by the chime of the jangling bar door. Ávila seized his *tónica* and took a quick sip, shaking off the darkness as he had been forced to do so many times before.

The bar door swung wide, and Ávila turned to see two burly men stumble in. They were singing an off-key Irish fight song and wearing green *fútbol* jerseys that strained to cover their bellies. Apparently, this afternoon's match had gone the way of Ireland's visiting team.

I'll take that as my cue, Ávila thought, standing up. He asked for his bill, but the barmaid winked and waved him off. Ávila thanked her and turned to go.

'Bloody hell!' one of the newcomers shouted, staring at Ávila's stately uniform. 'It's the king of Spain!'

Both men erupted with laughter, lurching toward him.

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Ávila attempted to step around them and leave, but the larger man roughly grabbed his arm and pulled him back to a bar stool. 'Hold on, Your Highness! We came all the way to Spain; we're gonna have a pint with the king!'

Ávila eyed the man's grubby hand on his freshly pressed sleeve. 'Let go,' he said quietly. 'I need to leave.'

'No . . . you *need* to stay for a beer, *amigo*.' The man tightened his grip as his friend started poking with a dirty finger at the medals on Ávila's chest. 'Looks like you're quite a hero, Pops.' The man tugged on one of Ávila's most prized emblems. 'A medieval mace? So, you're a knight in shining armor?!' He guffawed.

Tolerance, Ávila reminded himself. He had met countless men like these – simpleminded, unhappy souls, who had never stood for anything, men who blindly abused the liberties and freedoms that others had fought to give them.

'Actually,' Ávila replied gently, 'the mace is the symbol of the Spanish navy's Unidad de Operaciones Especiales.'

'Special ops?' The man feigned a fearful shudder. 'That's very impressive. And what about *that* symbol?' He pointed to Ávila's right hand.

Ávila glanced down at his palm. In the center of the soft flesh was inscribed a black tattoo – a symbol that dated back to the fourteenth century.



This marking serves as my protection, Ávila thought, eyeing the emblem. *Although I will not need it.*

'Never mind,' the hooligan said, finally letting go of Ávila's arm and turning his attention to the barmaid. 'You're a cute one,' he said. 'Are you a hundred percent Spanish?'

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'I am,' she answered graciously.

'You don't have some Irish in you?'

'No.'

'Would you *like* some?' The man convulsed in hysterics and pounded the bar.

'Leave her alone,' Ávila commanded.

The man wheeled, glaring at him.

The second thug poked Ávila hard in the chest. 'You trying to tell us what to do?'

Ávila took a deep breath, feeling tired after this day's long journey, and he motioned to the bar. 'Gentlemen, please sit down. I'll buy you a beer.'

I'm glad he's staying, the barmaid thought. Although she could take care of herself, witnessing how calmly this officer was dealing with these two brutes had left her a little weak-kneed and hoping he might stay until closing time.

The officer had ordered two beers, and another tonic water for himself, reclaiming his seat at the bar. The two *fútbol* hooligans sat on either side of him.

'Tonic water?' one taunted. 'I thought we were *drinking* together.' The officer gave the barmaid a tired smile and finished his tonic.

'I'm afraid I have an appointment,' the officer said, standing up. 'But enjoy your beers.'

As he stood, both men, as if rehearsed, slammed rough hands on his shoulders and shoved him back onto the stool. A spark of anger flashed across the officer's eyes and then disappeared.

'Grandpa, I don't think you want to leave us alone with your girlfriend here.' The thug looked at her and did something disgusting with his tongue.

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The officer sat quietly for a long moment, and then reached into his jacket.

Both guys grabbed him. 'Hey! What are you doing?!'

Very slowly, the officer pulled out a cell phone and said something to the men in Spanish. They stared at him uncomprehendingly, and he switched back to English. 'I'm sorry, I just need to call my wife and tell her I'll be late. It looks like I'm going to be here awhile.'

'Now you're talking, mate!' the larger of the two said, draining his beer and slamming the glass down on the bar. 'Another!'

As the barmaid refilled the thugs' glasses, she watched in the mirror as the officer touched a few keys on his phone and then held it to his ear. The call went through, and he spoke in rapid Spanish.

'Le llamo desde el bar Molly Malone,' the officer said, reading the bar's name and address off the coaster before him. *'Calle Particular de Estraunza, ocho.'* He waited a moment and then continued. *'Necesitamos ayuda inmediatamente. Hay dos hombres heridos.'* Then he hung up.

¿Dos hombres heridos? The barmaid's pulse quickened. *Two wounded men?*

Before she could process his meaning, there was a blur of white, and the officer spun to his right, sending an elbow smashing upward into the larger thug's nose with a sickening crunch. The man's face erupted in red and he fell back. Before the second man could react, the officer spun again, this time to his left, his other elbow crashing hard into the man's windpipe and sending him backward off the stool.

The barmaid stared in shock at the two men on the floor, one screaming in agony, the other gasping and clutching his throat.

The officer stood slowly. With an eerie calm, he removed his wallet and placed a hundred-euro note on the bar.

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'My apologies,' he said to her in Spanish. 'The police will be here shortly to help you.' Then he turned and left.

———

Outside, Admiral Ávila inhaled the night air and made his way along Alameda de Mazarredo toward the river. Police sirens approached, and he slipped into the shadows to let the authorities pass. There was serious work to do, and Ávila could not afford further complications tonight.

The Regent clearly outlined tonight's mission.

For Ávila, there was a simple serenity in taking orders from the Regent. No decisions. No culpability. Just action. After a career of giving commands, it was a relief to relinquish the helm and let others steer this ship.

In this war, I am a foot soldier.

Several days ago, the Regent had shared with him a secret so disturbing that Ávila had seen no choice but to offer himself fully to the cause. The brutality of last night's mission still haunted him, and yet he knew his actions would be forgiven.

Righteousness exists in many forms.

And more death will come before tonight is over.

As Ávila emerged into an open plaza on the riverbank, he raised his eyes to the massive structure before him. It was an undulating mess of perverse forms covered in metal tile – as if two thousand years of architectural progress had been tossed out the window in favor of total chaos.

Some call this a museum. I call it a monstrosity.

Focusing his thoughts, Ávila crossed the plaza, winding his way through a series of bizarre sculptures outside Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum. As he neared the building, he watched dozens of guests mingling in their finest black and white.

The godless masses have congregated.

But tonight will not go as any of them imagine.

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He straightened his admiral's cap and smoothed his jacket, mentally fortifying himself for the task that lay ahead. Tonight was part of a far greater mission – a crusade of righteousness.

As Ávila crossed the courtyard toward the museum's entrance, he gently touched the rosary in his pocket.

3

The museum atrium felt like a futuristic cathedral.

As Langdon stepped inside, his gaze shifted immediately skyward, climbing a set of colossal white pillars along a towering curtain of glass, ascending two hundred feet to a vaulted ceiling, where halogen spotlights blazed pure white light. Suspended in the air, a network of catwalks and balconies traversed the heavens, dotted with black-and-white-clad visitors who moved in and out of the upper galleries and stood at high windows, admiring the lagoon below. Nearby, a glass elevator slid silently back down the wall, returning to earth to collect more guests.

It was like no museum Langdon had ever seen. Even the acoustics felt foreign. Instead of the traditional reverent hush created by sound-dampening finishes, this place was alive with murmuring echoes of voices percolating off the stone and glass. For Langdon, the only familiar sensation was the sterile tang on the back of his tongue; museum air was the same worldwide – filtered meticulously of all particulates and oxidants and then moistened with ionized water to 45 percent humidity.

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Langdon moved through a series of surprisingly tight security points, noticing more than a few armed guards, and finally found himself standing at another check-in table. A young woman was handing out headsets. *'Audioguía?'*

Langdon smiled. 'No, thank you.'

As he neared the table, though, the woman stopped him, switching to perfect English. 'I'm sorry, sir, but our host tonight, Mr. Edmond Kirsch, has asked that everyone wear a headset. It's part of the evening's experience.'

'Oh, of course, I'll take one.'

Langdon reached for a headset, but she waved him off, checking his name tag against a long list of guests, finding his name, and then handing him a headset whose number was matched with his name. 'The tours tonight are customized for each individual visitor.'

Really? Langdon looked around. *There are hundreds of guests.*

Langdon eyed the headset, which was nothing but a sleek loop of metal with tiny pads at each end. Perhaps seeing his puzzled look, the young woman came around to help him.

'These are quite new,' she said, helping him don the device. 'The transducer pads don't go *inside* your ears, but rather rest on your face.' She placed the loop behind his head and positioned the pads so that they gently clamped onto his face, just above the jawbone and below the temple.

'But how—'

'Bone conduction technology. The transducers drive sound directly into the bones of your jaw, allowing sound to reach your cochlea directly. I tried it earlier, and it's really quite amazing – like having a voice inside your head. What's more, it leaves your ears free to have outside conversations.'

'Very clever.'

'The technology was invented by Mr. Kirsch more than a decade ago. It's now available in many brands of consumer headphones.'

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I hope Ludwig van Beethoven gets his cut, Langdon thought, fairly certain that the original inventor of bone conduction technology was the eighteenth-century composer who, upon going deaf, discovered he could affix a metal rod to his piano and bite down on it while he played, enabling him to hear perfectly through vibrations in his jawbone.

'We hope you enjoy your tour experience,' the woman said. 'You have about an hour to explore the museum before the presentation. Your audio guide will alert you when it is time to go upstairs to the auditorium.'

'Thank you. Do I need to press anything to—'

'No, the device is self-activating. Your guided tour will begin as soon as you start moving.'

'Ah yes, of course,' Langdon said with a smile. He headed out across the atrium, moving toward a scattering of other guests, all waiting for the elevators and wearing similar headsets pressed to their jawbones.

He was only halfway across the atrium when a male voice sounded in his head. 'Good evening and welcome to the Guggenheim in Bilbao.'

Langdon knew it was his headset, but he still stopped short and looked behind him. The effect was startling – precisely as the young woman had described – like having someone *inside* your head.

'A most heartfelt welcome to you, Professor Langdon.' The voice was friendly and light, with a jaunty British accent. 'My name is Winston, and I'm honored to be your guide this evening.'

Who did they get to record this – Hugh Grant?

'Tonight,' the cheery voice continued, 'you may feel free to meander as you wish, anywhere you like, and I'll endeavor to enlighten you as to what it is you're viewing.'

Apparently, in addition to a chirpy narrator, personalized recordings, and bone conduction technology, each headset was equipped with GPS to discern precisely where in the

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museum the visitor was standing and therefore what commentary to generate.

'I do realize, sir,' the voice added, 'that as a professor of art, you are one of our more savvy guests, and so perhaps you will have little need of my input. Worse yet, it is possible you will wholly disagree with my analysis of certain pieces!' The voice gave an awkward chuckle.

Seriously? Who wrote this script? The merry tone and personalized service were admittedly a charming touch, but Langdon could not imagine the amount of effort it must have taken to customize hundreds of headsets.

Thankfully, the voice fell silent now, as if it had exhausted its preprogrammed welcome dialogue.

Langdon glanced across the atrium at another enormous red banner suspended above the crowd.

EDMOND KIRSCH
TONIGHT WE MOVE FORWARD

What in the world is Edmond going to announce?

Langdon turned his eyes to the elevators, where a cluster of chatting guests included two famous founders of global Internet companies, a prominent Indian actor, and various other well-dressed VIPs whom Langdon sensed he probably should know but didn't. Feeling both disinclined and ill-prepared to make small talk on the topics of social media and Bollywood, Langdon moved in the opposite direction, drifting toward a large piece of modern art that stood against the far wall.

The installation was nestled in a dark grotto and consisted of nine narrow conveyor belts that emerged from slits in the floor and raced upward, disappearing into slits in the ceiling. The piece resembled nine moving walkways running on a vertical plane. Each conveyor bore an illuminated message, which scrolled skyward.

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I pray aloud . . . I smell you on my skin . . . I say your name.

As Langdon got closer, though, he realized that the moving bands were in fact stationary; the illusion of motion was created by a 'skin' of tiny LED lights positioned on each vertical beam. The lights lit up in rapid succession to form words that materialized out of the floor, raced up the beam, and disappeared into the ceiling.

I'm crying hard . . . There was blood . . . No one told me.

Langdon moved in and around the vertical beams, taking it all in.

'This is a challenging piece,' the audio guide declared, returning suddenly. 'It is called *Installation for Bilbao* and was created by conceptual artist Jenny Holzer. It consists of nine LED signboards, each forty feet tall, transmitting quotes in Basque, Spanish, and English – all relating to the horrors of AIDS and the pain endured by those left behind.'

Langdon had to admit, the effect was mesmerizing and somehow heartbreaking.

'Perhaps you've seen Jenny Holzer's work before?'

Langdon felt hypnotized by the text coursing skyward.

I bury my head . . . I bury your head . . . I bury you.

'Mr. Langdon?' the voice in his head chimed. 'Can you hear me? Is your headset working?'

Langdon was jolted from his thoughts. 'I'm sorry – *what?* Hello?'

'Yes, hello,' the voice replied. 'I believe we've already said our greetings? I'm just checking to see if you can hear me?'

'I . . . I'm sorry,' Langdon stammered, spinning away from the exhibit and looking out across the atrium. 'I thought you

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were a *recording*! I didn't realize I had a real person on the line.' Langdon pictured a cubicle farm manned by an army of curators armed with headsets and museum catalogs.

'No problem, sir. I'll be your personal guide for the evening. Your headset has a microphone in it as well. This program is intended as an interactive experience in which you and I can have a dialogue about art.'

Langdon could now see that other guests were also speaking into their headsets. Even those who had come as couples appeared to have separated a bit, exchanging bemused looks as they carried on private conversations with their personal docents.

'*Every* guest here has a private guide?'

'Yes, sir. Tonight we are individually touring three hundred and eighteen guests.'

'That's incredible.'

'Well, as you know, Edmond Kirsch is an avid fan of art and technology. He designed this system specifically for museums, in hopes of replacing group tours, which he despises. This way, every visitor can enjoy a private tour, move at his own pace, ask the question he might be embarrassed to ask in a group situation. It is really much more intimate and immersive.'

'Not to sound old-fashioned, but why not just *walk* each of us around in person?'

'Logistics,' the man replied. 'Adding personal docents to a museum event would literally *double* the number of people on the floor and necessarily cut in half the number of possible visitors. Moreover, the cacophony of all the docents lecturing simultaneously would be distracting. The idea here is to make discussion a seamless experience. One of the objectives of art, Mr. Kirsch always says, is to promote dialogue.'

'I entirely agree,' Langdon replied, 'and that's why people often visit museums with a date or a friend. These headsets might be considered a bit antisocial.'

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'Well,' the Brit replied, 'if you come with a date or friends, you can assign all the headsets to a single docent and enjoy a group discussion. The software is really quite advanced.'

'You seem to have an answer for everything.'

'That is, in fact, my job.' The guide gave an embarrassed laugh and abruptly shifted gears. 'Now, Professor, if you move across the atrium toward the windows, you'll see the museum's largest painting.'

As Langdon began walking across the atrium, he passed an attractive thirtysomething couple wearing matching white baseball caps. Emblazoned on the front of both caps, rather than a corporate logo, was a surprising symbol.



It was an icon Langdon knew well, and yet he had never seen it on a cap. In recent years, this highly stylized letter *A* had become the universal symbol for one of the planet's fastest-growing and increasingly vocal demographics – atheists – who had begun speaking out more forcefully every day against what they considered the dangers of religious belief.

Atheists now have their own baseball caps?

As he surveyed the congregation of tech-savvy geniuses mingling around him, Langdon reminded himself that many of these young analytical minds were probably very anti-religious, just like Edmond. Tonight's audience was not exactly the 'home crowd' for a professor of religious symbology.

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4

 ConspiracyNet.com

BREAKING NEWS

Update: ConspiracyNet's 'Top 10 Media Stories of the Day' can be viewed by clicking here. Also, we have a brand-new story just now breaking!

EDMOND KIRSCH SURPRISE ANNOUNCEMENT?

Tech titans have flooded Bilbao, Spain, this evening to attend a VIP event hosted by futurist Edmond Kirsch at the Guggenheim Museum. Security is extremely tight, and guests have not been told the purpose of the event, but ConspiracyNet has received a tip from an inside source suggesting that Edmond Kirsch will be speaking shortly and is planning to surprise his guests with a major scientific announcement. ConspiracyNet will continue to monitor this story and deliver news as we receive it.

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5

The largest synagogue in Europe is located in Budapest on Dohány Street. Built in the Moorish style with massive twin spires, the shrine has seats for more than three thousand worshippers – with downstairs pews for the men and balcony benches for the women.

Outside in the garden, in a mass burial pit, are interred the bodies of hundreds of Hungarian Jews who died during the horrors of the Nazi occupation. The site is marked by a Tree of Life – a metal sculpture depicting a weeping willow whose leaves are each inscribed with the name of a victim. When a breeze blows, the metal leaves rattle against one another, clattering with an eerie echo above the hallowed ground.

For more than three decades, the spiritual leader of the Great Synagogue had been the eminent Talmudic scholar and Kabbalist Rabbi Yehuda Köves, who, despite his advancing years and poor health, remained an active member of the Jewish community both in Hungary and around the world.

As the sun set across the Danube, Rabbi Köves exited the synagogue. He made his way past the boutiques and mysterious 'ruin bars' of Dohány Street en route to his home on Marcius 15 Square, a stone's throw from Elisabeth Bridge, which linked the ancient cities of Buda and Pest, which were formally united in 1873.

The Passover holidays were fast approaching – normally one of Köves's most joyous times of the year – and yet, ever

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since his return last week from the Parliament of the World's Religions, he had been feeling only a bottomless disquiet.

I wish I had never attended.

The extraordinary meeting with Bishop Valdespino, Allamah Syed al-Fadl, and futurist Edmond Kirsch had plagued Köves's thoughts for three full days.

Now, as Köves arrived home, he strode directly to his courtyard garden and unlocked his *házikó* – the small cottage that served as his private sanctuary and study.

The cottage was a single room with high bookshelves that sagged under the weight of religious tomes. Köves strode to his desk and sat down, frowning at the mess before him.

If anyone saw my desk this week, they'd think I'd lost my mind.

Strewn across the work surface, a half-dozen obscure religious texts lay open, plastered with sticky notes. Behind them, propped open on wooden stands, were three heavy volumes – Hebrew, Aramaic, and English versions of the Torah – each opened to the same book.

Genesis.

In the beginning . . .

Köves could, of course, recite Genesis from memory, in all three languages; he was more likely to be reading academic commentary on the Zohar or advanced Kabbalistic cosmology theory. For a scholar of Köves's caliber to study Genesis was much like Einstein going back to study grade-school arithmetic. Nonetheless, that's what the rabbi had been doing this week, and the notepad on his desk looked to have been assaulted by a wild torrent of hand-scrawled notes, so messy that Köves could barely make them out himself.

I look like I've turned into a lunatic.

Rabbi Köves had started with the Torah – the Genesis story shared by Jews and Christians alike. *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.* Next, he had turned to the instructional texts of the Talmud, rereading the rabbinic

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elucidations on *Ma'aseh Bereshit* – the Act of Creation. After that, he delved into the Midrash, poring over the commentaries of various venerated exegetes who had attempted to explain the perceived contradictions in the traditional Creation story. Finally, Köves buried himself in the mystical Kabbalistic science of the Zohar, in which the unknowable God manifested as ten different *sephirot,* or dimensions, arranged along channels called the Tree of Life, and from which blossomed four separate universes.

The arcane complexity of the beliefs that made up Judaism had always been comforting to Köves – a reminder from God that humankind was not meant to understand all things. And yet now, after viewing Edmond Kirsch's presentation, and contemplating the simplicity and clarity of what Kirsch had discovered, Köves felt like he had spent the past three days staring into a collection of outdated contradictions. At one point, all he could do was push aside his ancient texts and go for a long walk along the Danube to gather his thoughts.

Rabbi Köves had finally begun to accept a painful truth: Kirsch's work would indeed have devastating repercussions for the faithful souls of this world. The scientist's revelation boldly contradicted almost every established religious doctrine, and it did so in a distressingly simple and persuasive manner.

I cannot forget that final image, Köves thought, recalling the distressing conclusion of Kirsch's presentation that they had watched on Kirsch's oversized phone. *This news will affect every human being – not just the pious.*

Now, despite his reflections over the last few days, Rabbi Köves still felt no closer to knowing what to do with the information that Kirsch had provided.

He doubted Valdespino and al-Fadl had found any clarity either. The three men had communicated by phone two days ago, but the conversation had not been productive.

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'My friends,' Valdespino had begun. 'Obviously, Mr. Kirsch's presentation was disturbing . . . on many levels. I urged him to call and discuss it further with me, but he has gone silent. Now I believe we have a decision to make.'

'I've *made* my decision,' said al-Fadl. 'We cannot sit idly by. We need to take control of this situation. Kirsch has a well-publicized scorn for religion, and he will frame his discovery in a way to do as much damage as possible to the future of faith. We must be proactive. We must announce his discovery *ourselves*. Immediately. We must cast it in the proper light so as to soften the impact, and make it as nonthreatening as possible to the believers in the spiritual world.'

'I realize we discussed going public,' Valdespino said, 'but unfortunately, I cannot imagine how one frames *this* information in a nonthreatening way.' He sighed heavily. 'There is also the issue of our vow to Mr. Kirsch that we would keep his secret.'

'True,' al-Fadl said, 'and I too am conflicted about breaking that vow, but I feel we must choose the lesser of two evils and take action on behalf of the greater good. We are *all* under attack – Muslims, Jews, Christians, Hindus, all religions alike – and considering that our faiths all concur on the fundamental truths that Mr. Kirsch is undermining, we have an obligation to present this material in a way that does not distress our communities.'

'I fear there is no way this will make any sense,' Valdespino said. 'If we are entertaining the notion of going public with Kirsch's news, the only viable approach will be to cast *doubt* on his discovery – to discredit him before he can get his message out.'

'Edmond Kirsch?' al-Fadl challenged. 'A brilliant scientist who has never been wrong about anything? Were we all in the same meeting with Kirsch? His presentation was persuasive.'

Valdespino grunted. 'No more persuasive than presentations

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made by Galileo, Bruno, or Copernicus in their day. Religions have been in this predicament before. This is just science banging on our door once again.'

'But on a far deeper level than the discoveries of physics and astronomy!' al-Fadl exclaimed. 'Kirsch is challenging the very *core* – the fundamental root of everything we believe! You can cite history all you like, but don't forget, despite your Vatican's best efforts to silence men like Galileo, his science eventually prevailed. And Kirsch's will too. There is no way to stop this from happening.' There was a grave silence.

'My position on this matter is simple,' Valdespino said. 'I wish Edmond Kirsch had not made this discovery. I fear that we are unprepared to handle his findings. And my strong preference is that this information never see the light of day.' He paused. 'At the same time, I believe that the events of our world happen according to God's plan. Perhaps with prayer, God will speak to Mr. Kirsch and persuade him to reconsider making his discovery public.'

Al-Fadl scoffed audibly. 'I don't think Mr. Kirsch is the kind of man capable of hearing the voice of God.'

'Perhaps not,' Valdespino said. 'But miracles happen every day.'

Al-Fadl fired back hotly, 'With all due respect, unless you're praying that God strikes Kirsch dead before he can announce—'

'Gentlemen!' Köves intervened, attempting to defuse the growing tension. 'Our decision need not be rushed. We don't need to reach a consensus tonight. Mr. Kirsch said his announcement is a month away. Might I suggest that we meditate privately on the matter, and speak again in several days? Perhaps the proper course will reveal itself through reflection.'

'Wise counsel,' Valdespino replied.

'We should not wait too long,' al-Fadl cautioned. 'Let's speak again by phone two days from now.'

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'Agreed,' Valdespino said. 'We can make our final decision at that time.'

That had been two days ago, and now the night of their follow-up conversation had arrived.

Alone in his *házikó* study, Rabbi Köves was growing anxious. Tonight's scheduled call was now almost ten minutes overdue.

At last, the phone rang, and Köves seized it.

'Hello, Rabbi,' said Bishop Valdespino, sounding troubled. 'I'm sorry for the delay.' He paused. 'I'm afraid Allamah al-Fadl will not be joining us on this call.'

'Oh?' Köves said with surprise. 'Is everything all right?'

'I don't know. I've been trying to reach him all day, but the *allamah* seems to have . . . *disappeared*. None of his colleagues have any idea where he is.'

Köves felt a chill. 'That's alarming.'

'I agree. I hope he is okay. Unfortunately, I have more news.' The bishop paused, his tone darkening further. 'I have just learned that Edmond Kirsch is holding an event to share his discovery with the world . . . tonight.'

'Tonight?!' Köves demanded. 'He said it would be a *month*!'

'Yes,' Valdespino said. 'He lied.'

6

Winston's friendly voice reverberated in Langdon's headset. 'Directly in front of you, Professor, you will see the largest painting in our collection, though most guests do not spot it right away.'

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Langdon gazed across the museum's atrium but saw nothing except a wall of glass that looked out over the lagoon. 'I'm sorry, I think I may be in the majority here. I don't see a painting.'

'Well, it is displayed rather unconventionally,' Winston said with a laugh. 'The canvas is mounted not on the wall, but rather on the *floor*.'

I should have guessed, Langdon thought, lowering his gaze and moving forward until he saw the sprawling rectangular canvas stretched out across the stone at his feet.

The enormous painting consisted of a single color – a monochrome field of deep blue – and viewers stood around its perimeter, staring down at it as if peering into a small pond.

'This painting is nearly six thousand square feet,' Winston offered.

Langdon realized it was ten times the size of his first Cambridge apartment.

'It is by Yves Klein and has become affectionately known as *The Swimming Pool*.'

Langdon had to admit that the arresting richness of this shade of blue gave him the sense he could dive directly into the canvas.

'Klein invented this color,' Winston continued. 'It's called International Klein Blue, and he claimed its profundity evoked the immateriality and boundlessness of his own utopian vision of the world.'

Langdon sensed Winston was now reading from a script.

'Klein is best known for his blue paintings, but he is also known for a disturbing trick photograph called *Leap into the Void*, which caused quite a panic when it was revealed in 1960.'

Langdon had seen *Leap into the Void* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The photo was more than a little disconcerting, depicting a well-dressed man doing a swan dive

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off a high building and plunging toward the pavement. In truth, the image was a trick – brilliantly conceived and devilishly retouched with a razor blade, long before the days of Photoshop.

'In addition,' Winston said, 'Klein also composed the musical piece *Monotone-Silence,* in which a symphony orchestra performs a single D-major chord for a full twenty minutes.'

'And people *listen*?'

'Thousands. And the one chord is just the first movement. In the second movement, the orchestra sits motionless and performs "pure silence" for twenty minutes.'

'You're joking, right?'

'No, I'm quite serious. In its defense, the performance was probably not as dull as it might sound; the stage also included three naked women, slathered in blue paint, rolling around on giant canvases.'

Although Langdon had devoted the better part of his career to studying art, it troubled him that he had never quite learned how to appreciate the art world's more avant-garde offerings. The appeal of modern art remained a mystery to him.

'I mean no disrespect, Winston, but I've got to tell you, I often find it hard to know when something is "modern art" and when something is just plain bizarre.'

Winston's reply was deadpan. 'Well, that is often the question, isn't it? In your world of classical art, pieces are revered for the artist's skill of execution – that is, how deftly he places the brush to canvas or the chisel to stone. In modern art, however, masterpieces are often more about the *idea* than the execution. For example, anyone could easily compose a forty-minute symphony consisting of nothing but one chord and silence, but it was Yves Klein who had the idea.'

'Fair enough.'

'Of course, *The Fog Sculpture* outside is a perfect example of conceptual art. The artist had an *idea* – to run perforated

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pipes beneath the bridge and blow fog onto the lagoon – but the *creation* of the piece was performed by local plumbers.' Winston paused. 'Although I do give the artist very high marks for using her medium as a code.'

'*Fog* is a code?'

'It is. A cryptic tribute to the museum's architect.'

'Frank Gehry?'

'Frank *O.* Gehry,' Winston corrected.

'Clever.'

As Langdon moved toward the windows, Winston said, 'You have a nice view of the spider from here. Did you see *Maman* on your way in?'

Langdon gazed out the window, across the lagoon, to the massive black widow sculpture on the plaza. 'Yes. She's pretty hard to miss.'

'I sense from your intonation that you're not a fan?'

'I'm trying to be.' Langdon paused. 'As a classicist, I'm a bit of a fish out of water here.'

'Interesting,' Winston said. 'I had imagined that *you* of all people would appreciate *Maman*. She is a perfect example of the classical notion of juxtaposition. In fact, you might want to use her in class when you next teach the concept.'

Langdon eyed the spider, seeing nothing of the sort. When it came to teaching juxtaposition, Langdon preferred something a bit more traditional. 'I think I'll stick with the *David*.'

'Yes, Michelangelo is the gold standard,' Winston said with a chuckle, 'brilliantly posing David in an effeminate contrapposto, his limp wrist casually holding a flaccid slingshot, conveying a feminine vulnerability. And yet David's eyes radiate a lethal determination, his tendons and veins bulging in anticipation of killing Goliath. The work is simultaneously delicate and deadly.'

Langdon was impressed with the description and wished his

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own students had as clear an understanding of Michelangelo's masterpiece.

'*Maman* is no different from *David*,' Winston said. 'An equally bold juxtaposition of opposing archetypal principles. In nature, the black widow is a fearful creature – a predator who captures victims in her web and kills them. Despite being lethal, she is depicted here with a burgeoning egg sac, preparing to give life, making her both predator and progenitor – a powerful core perched atop impossibly slender legs, conveying both strength and fragility. *Maman* could be called a modern-day *David*, if you will.'

'I *won't*,' Langdon replied, smiling, 'but I must admit your analysis gives me food for thought.'

'Good, then let me show you one final work. It happens to be an Edmond Kirsch original.'

'Really? I never knew Edmond was an artist.'

Winston laughed. 'I'll let you be the judge of that.'

Langdon let Winston guide him past the windows to a spacious alcove in which a group of guests had assembled before a large slab of dried mud hanging on the wall. At first glance, the slab of hardened clay reminded Langdon of a museum fossil exhibit. But this mud contained no fossils. Instead, it bore crudely etched markings similar to those a child might draw with a stick in wet cement.

The crowd looked unimpressed.

'Edmond did this?' grumbled a mink-clad woman with Botoxed lips. 'I don't get it.'

The teacher in Langdon could not resist. 'It's actually quite clever,' he interrupted. 'So far it's my favorite piece in the entire museum.'

The woman spun, eyeing him with more than a hint of disdain. 'Oh *really*? Then *do* enlighten me.'

I'd be happy to. Langdon walked over to the series of markings etched coarsely into the clay surface.

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