

The Secret Society

R. woke early one Monday morning to go to the office at the archives where he worked as a file clerk. He turned 31 years old today. "Insignificant," R. muttered to himself, for this day was just as any other, and each day was no different than the last at work, except he savored the secrecy that came from keeping his birthday undisclosed. The day at work was soon over.

R. was leaving work when at the bottom of the steps that lead to the entrance of the archives, a stranger in a dark, discreet suit waited on him.

"Hello," he said, "Are you, Mr. R.?"

"Yes, I'm R."

"I'm a messenger for the Secret Society," he said, then whispered, "This is for you, Mr. R." As the stranger walked away, R. inspected this 'message' he was given, for it was odd: it was just a blank envelope with an unknown insignia on the seal of it. He tore open the envelope, inside was a letter with 'MANDATE' written on it. The mandate ordered R. to meet with a secretary at midnight that same evening, for he was to be conscripted into the 'Secret Society.' It went on to state that if he declined to become a member, he would lose his position as a file clerk at the Cabal Archives, and it had, as a method of coercion, a typed letter from the curator, R.'s superior at the archives, -It had the curator's signature on it to confirm the authority of the document. The document was signed, X.

As R. reached the front door of his flat, a telephone rang loudly within it, which was strange because he didn't have a phone. He entered the front door to discover that there was a black, rotary phone on the coffee table in his living room, and it continued to ring, as it seemed, with each ring that it rang more loudly until he decided, if not out of curiosity, and with some fearful apprehension, he decided he must as if forced, he was compelled to answer it.

"Hello," R.'s voice was firm, "who is this?"

"I'm Rook." A deep voice replied. "I'm a watchman of the Secret Society, and it's my orders to shadow you, that is until we trust you to operate as a member independently." And the phone went dead.

Exhausted, R. lay down on the couch and took a nap.

R. woke at half-past eleven o'clock. He did not intend to sleep so long, but it had been a long day and was not over yet. He changed into a suit for his meeting with the secretary. He looked over the letter again, gathered up a few things, and went out the door. He stood on his porch for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the dark when he noticed a man standing under a lamp pole across the street. He assumed it was Rook, who said he was to 'shadow' R.; for the man wearing the same dark, discreet suit as the messenger he encountered earlier that day. "Ridiculous," R. mumbled to himself, and then he

began to walk to the archives, as Rook kept a steady distance between them. Rook stayed outside as R. entered the archives and made his way down to the basement where he was to meet the secretary. The secretary introduced herself as Nil. She explained this was not her office, which was an empty room with an empty desk.

"I suppose you are R.?" She asked casually.

"Yes," R. replied, "and what exactly is the nature of this meeting?" "This is your initial interrogation."

"Interrogation?" R. said riddled.

"It's just an arcane way of saying that I have a few questions to ask you and a few documents that require your signature."

Nil asked R. several trivial questions, "to confirm his age and identity," so she said, and last he was given a nondisclosure of information agreement and a document he loathed over for a few minutes without reading no more than 'Oath of Allegiance,' and he reluctantly signed both.

"This doesn't mean anything, you know?" He said to the secretary Nil but as if addressing the Secret Society itself. "It's coercion and nothing more."

"Well, that is all I need from you. Goodbye." Nil concluded and scurried off.

"Yes... Goodbye." R. mumbled to himself, as he stayed behind a few minutes.

"Strange," R. said to himself, for he never knew of this secluded office before tonight, and he knew all the archives very well, indeed, so he thought. "Insignificant," R. said as he shook his head in disbelief at the whole affair. It probably remained locked by the curator, he thought. "Ridiculous." He added, again. R. suddenly felt an ominous air about the archives, alone in the dark basement, and scurried off as well. R. exited the archives, and he noticed the messenger waiting at the bottom of the steps.

"Here, this is for you, Mr. R.," the messenger said, "have a nice night." And he began to walk away.

"How do I get a message delivered to X.?" R. asked.

"You write a letter," the messenger said, turning around, "but it must have the official seal of the Secret Society on it."

"And what name should I put on the envelope?"

"No one's. It must be a sealed blank envelope, and I will see that it is delivered to the appropriate member." And the messenger walked away.

R. decided to wait until he was back at his flat before he opened the letter. It irritated him to have this Rook character watching him the very moment he stepped outside, and it irritated R., even more, to know that Rook had been there this whole time just waiting on him.

R. returned to his flat. He opened the envelope, and in it was another mandate, but this time it was an order to take certain records from the archives and turn them over to the messenger. R. walked outside onto his porch.

"Come here," R. shouted to Rook, and Rook reluctantly walked over.

“I must contact the messenger, is this possible?” “Just dial zero on the black phone.” And Rook retreated across the street.

R. phoned to get a messenger and spoke with the attendant, who said one would be there right away, and just a few minutes later there was a knock on the door.

“Yes,” said R., “did you bring a book of official seals?”

“Yes, here you go, Mr. R.”

R. took them and put a seal on the envelope.

“I must know if this can be delivered tonight?” R. asked.

“Yes, the Secret Society conducts most of its business late at night, for this is when they’re free from their daytime jobs. And who do you want the letter delivered to?”

“X., and tell him I shall expect a reply tonight, and I’m sure he will be meeting with the secretary Nil.”

“Whatever you say, Mr. R., I shall return... if you get a reply.” R. watched the messenger vanish into the dark.

R. was adamant in his letter that what he was ordered to do was against the law, and that confiscating the records he was “ordered” to do could cost him not only his position as a file clerk, but it could cost him his freedom, for he could be jailed. R. had lain down on the couch to get some rest, but he merely rested his eyes and waited for the messenger to knock on the door. But it was just the sound of footsteps that roused him to the door.

“Will that be all for tonight?” The messenger asked.

“Yes,” R. said.

R. closed the door on the messenger, anxious to rid himself of this criminal deed he was ordered to carry out. But to his frustration the letter coldly stated that he had no choice in the matter; R. was to do as he was ordered, lest he end up unemployed and homeless, for the letter made a point to inform him that it was within power of the Secret Society to have him evicted with his landlord’s signature as proof, just as the curator’s signature had been used to coerce him into being conscripted. R. lay down in bed, exhausted. His mind was blank, but spinning with ideas, and he fell into a deep sleep.

R. awoke early the next morning and forgot for a moment all his troubles. He went to the porch and retrieved the paper but didn’t notice Rook standing across the street. R. read the headline, “Crux, Suspected in Ransack.” Then, the memory of the previous night filled R.’s mind, and anger turned his face red. He thought of the files at the archives he was ordered to take, and dread filled his heart.

“Absurd.” He mumbled.

R. put on a black suit and a black tie like the dark, discreet suits the messengers wore the previous day and night. R. knew this would help him go unnoticed; for during a typical week at work, R. wore a suit often enough, every other day, that he would not look too discreet, as if an auditor, and not draw any unnecessary nor any unwanted attention for showing up in a suit on this particular day. He didn't eat breakfast, but he did have a cup of coffee, which he sipped on and looked out the window in the study of his flat. He looked at the black, rotary phone and considered the task that loomed ahead, and he made a call in which he summoned the messenger at due noon so that he could give the files he had been ordered to take. The person on the phone said that the messenger would be there at the specified time and that there was no need to have an official seal of the Secret Society on the files he was to take. Rook was nowhere to be seen, but R. could feel his presence as he walked out the door onto the porch, looked around for a moment, and headed for the Cabal Archives where he had worked for several years. But his focus soon shifted from trying to spot Rook back to the files he was to 'confiscate' from the archives. He wore a leather satchel around his neck -he wore a suit and a satchel that he'd worn many times before so that he could accomplish his mission, while at the same time still going unnoticed.

R. set out for the archives and noticed two men walking, who both wore the dark, discreet suits of the Secret Society. "Strange," R. mumbled, as he now reached the archives, took a deep breath, and entered. He went to the desk where he worked as a clerk, filing records of marriages, births, and deaths; these records were public along with population records, but the records of the law court and economic affairs had restrictions; there were also annals of different institutions and social groups; these were rumored to have restrictions, too, but R. knew there weren't any such restrictions, just that the records had a way of disappearing.

R. sat at his desk and filed some of the previous day's records of births through most of the morning, occasionally going to file the physical records in the file cabinets along the long walls of the archives. Around noon, he took his satchel, which in it he usually packed a sandwich as he did every day at work; but he didn't pack a sandwich that day so that he could go to the restricted records and take the files, which he did. R. then sat at the table in the restricted records section and stared at his satchel for a moment to summon the courage to take the files, which he couldn't; but just as he was going to put the files back, he heard footsteps coming down the interior hall and he hurried out the exterior hall, past his desk, past the front desk, through the foyer, and out the front door. He stood there a moment, shaking, as his fear of being discovered shifted to his anger of being blackmailed. He looked around for a moment and then standing before him in a dark, discreet suit was the messenger. R. handed over the files but said nothing, as the clock tower in the town courtyard sounded noon.

“Thank you, Mr. R.” The messenger said. “Will that be all?” “Yes!” R. said being short.

And the messenger disappeared into the crowd. R. looked at the time on the clock tower as if he didn’t know the time and headed to his flat. On the way, he noticed Rook following him. “Idiot,” R. said under his breath, but he wasn’t sure if he was saying this to Rook or himself. Upon entering his flat, R. noticed the headline of the Cabal Times newspaper again; he had read it this morning, the headline that is, but now it sunk in that the files he had taken were the records of the funds “Crux” was accused of “misappropriating.”

R.’s apartment was quite simple: he had a wooden rocking chair on his front porch; it opened into his study where he had an old desk along the far wall in the corner, and on it was a lamp; in the middle of the room, he had a worn black leather armchair with a travel trunk for a coffee table, and beside it was a small round end table with a wooden lamp that had a red lampshade on it; joining the study was his dining area, which was separated from the study and the kitchen by a little round dining table that had two chairs, one that was filled with old newspapers, most of them never read; through a short hall was a bathroom on the right and a bedroom on the left, which had a small closet, a dresser, a night table, and a full bed that was too big for the room and it took up too much space; this made him feel constricted and was why he stayed most nights in the chair in his study with his feet propped up on the travel trunk. The black, rotary phone he found was on the desk in the corner of the study.

R. looked over the article about Crux and discovered that Crux, -he discovered that Crux was a member of the Cabal Treasury and was under investigation for “suspicious monetary activity.” R. tried to remember what the files he had taken were named but he was too upset to recall them; the file names were written on the letter he got the previous night, which he had torn to pieces on his way home and thrown away on the way home; but he couldn’t remember where he had thrown the letter away along the zigzag path he took home that he took to try and shake Rook off his trail.

R. put the paper down, went and picked up the receiver to the rotary phone, and dialed zero. He asked the attendant on the other end of the line to have the secretary Nil meet him in the courtyard under the clock tower after he got off work, and the attendant told him Nil would be there. R. left to go back to work but got lost along the way as he tried to take the same zigzag path back that he had taken home. Arriving a little late to work he decided to go in and tell the front desk worker to tell the curator that he couldn’t return to work that afternoon because he had an important meeting that had come up; the lady at the front desk said she would let the curator know, and he was off to the courtyard across the way from the archives where sitting on a bench already was the secretary.

“Hello, R.” She greeted him. “How may I be of service to you?”

“Good afternoon, Nil...” R. was considerate. “I have a few questions that I need to ask you.” “It’s a nice afternoon, isn’t it?” She stated.

“Yeah, but...” R. wasn’t there to talk about the weather.

“How was work?” She asked. “This is morning for me; my work for the Secret Society keeps me up most of the night.”

“That is why I wanted to meet with you, Nil, to ask you some questions about your organization...”

“It’s not my organization; it’s your organization, R. I merely work for the Secret Society. You’re a member now.”

“But who do you work for?” He didn’t understand.

“I work for the Secret Society.” She stated, again.

“I know that, but who is the Secret Society?” R. asked.

“I don’t know.” She said.

“You don’t know! How do you not know who you work for?” R. felt defeated, and then anger rushed over him. “Well, how could you work for such corruption!?” “Work for?” She became defensive.

“Don’t forget that you’re a member.”

And R. then shortly said goodbye and hurried off, not wanting to continue the conversation, and not finding any of the answers he sought. He returned to his flat and went to sleep early in his old leather armchair on what was another dreamless night.

R. left for work early the next morning, Rook was leaning on a streetlamp pole, and asleep, it appeared. R. sneaked off to the archives, and he didn’t even check to see if Rook was following him. When he arrived at the archives, there were two men in black suits, but not the dark, discreet suits of the messengers. They identified themselves as agents for the Cabal Revenue Service. They told them their names. The first R. didn’t catch, but the second name he recognized. It was Guy Cash, an old friend of R.’s from childhood. R. introduced himself and Guy quickly picked up on it.

“Well, if it isn’t R.”

“I didn’t recognize you, Cash.”

“I didn’t know you worked here at the archives, R. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” “Yes... What brings you here, Cash?” He tried to look innocent.

“Oh, just business.” Cash paused as his partner walked over to the front desk. “Say, we have an opening for an agent... if you’re interested.”

“Oh!” R. was taken aback; he was expecting to be arrested not promoted.

“What do you say, R.? I would give you a good reference and that’s all you’d need, old friend.” Cash insisted. “Well, just think about it, and either way, come see me at the revenue office.”

R. and Cash spoke for a little longer. Cash took R. aside for a moment and explained to him that the curator was being dismissed due to the missing records and that he was responsible for keeping; them for the revenue, the sector was secure in the Cabal Archives, and these records were restricted and not available to be viewed by the public or anyone outside the Cabal Revenue Service, and the curator was being dismissed. Not that he was a suspect in the investigation, but strictly a formality. And Cash told R. about the files they were looking for and how they were missing, and that they were looking for some 'paper trail' that would tie Crux to the unknown organization he was suspected to have given funds. R. said goodbye to Cash and left a note for whoever was in charge that he had to go to the revenue office and wouldn't be back that day. When he made it to the revenue office to apply, R. spoke to the lady receptionist at the front desk. "Are you Mr. R., the archivist?" She asked.

"Yes, I'm the file clerk." He said

"Mr. Cash phoned and said you would be in today. You'll need to speak with our director, Mr. Zero." She said.

The receptionist told R. he could have a seat, which he did. He was sitting there in the lobby for some time, and he had time to think of the leverage of being an agent if he got the position, -he thought of how this would help him discover who X. was, since he was already aware, at least he assumed, that Crux and the Secret Society were connected. On the other hand, he had little concern with the idea that he might be linked to the missing files he had taken from the archives. And after a while, the director came out to speak with him.

"Hello, are you Mr. R.?" The director asked.

"Yes, I'm R." He said.

"I'm Mr. Zero, but you can just call me plain old Zero." He joked. "Well, Cash's recommendation gives you good favor, but I'll still have to speak with my superiors. It's just a formality. You'll fit in fine around here. It's mostly paperwork here, too. I don't see why you can't have the position." Zero said.

"Well, thank you, Zero." R. liked the idea of calling him just Zero.

"We'll give you a call, R. Just give the receptionist your number."

"Well, I just got a phone... I don't know my number yet." R. felt found out.

"That's okay, just check back in the morning with the receptionist. You can come in or just call." R. walked out of the Cabal revenue office with a sense of satisfaction, a feeling that he could settle the matter of the Secret Society and the nameless X. He looked behind him as he turned the corner, but he wasn't sure if Rook followed him there or not. "Parasites," R. told himself. But his thoughts turned quickly back to the idea of exposing X. and the Secret Society. His mind also shifted to Cash. R. couldn't understand why Cash had been so friendly and offered him a job without hesitation and without R. asking; and, too, he couldn't remember much about his and Cash's childhood friendship; but perhaps it would come back to him, he thought. "Surely." He told himself.

He roamed through the streets, rambling this way and that, walking the same zigzag path he had begun taking the past few days, constantly trying to shake Rook from his trail, without ever knowing if he was there or not.

R. returned home, though, eventually, and he called the secretary, Nil, again; for what he wasn't sure yet. She told him to meet her in the courtyard under the clock tower as they had the time before. It was late afternoon by this time. He had walked in circles all day since his meeting with Zero. R. thought that Nil would be up and around to do the Secret Society's shady bidding. Nil was sitting on the same bench as before, and shadows concealed her face somewhat.

"Nil." R. gave a nod with his head.

"Hello, R." She smiled. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, nothing...." He paused, yawned, and stretched his arms. "It's about time for you to go to work, huh."

"Yes, I am at work," Nil said cheerfully.

"Well," he said, "it must be nice to not have an office to have to go to?"

"It's not. The only people I see are new members, and they're always tired because it's nighttime and they're exhausted from being at work all day. It doesn't make for pleasant conversations." She concluded.

"But aren't they happy they got selected to be new members?" "You should know the answer to that question." She smiled again.

"Well, well... I see." R. furrowed his eyebrows. "I was coerced."

"No one forced you, R." She stated. "But what is it that you wanted with me?"

"Well." He said, and then abruptly added. "So, did you conscript the curator and my landlord, or did they join willingly?"

"The curator and your landlord?" She thought for a moment. "I don't know." "You don't know!?" He flushed.

"I told you, I mainly deal with processing new members." She smiled again to reassure him she was being honest. "Perhaps you can send a letter with the messenger and ask whether or not they are members."

"Perhaps you can find out for me, Nil?"

"I don't know, the Secret Society is rather distant..." She said.

"Isn't that convenient?" He stated.

R. and Nil made some small talk for a little longer and then he muttered goodbye and wandered off down the streets. He wondered what Nil meant by “distant.” It bothered him that the Secret Society might perpetuate such a falsehood as the letter with the curator’s signature, along with his landlord’s signature; but this was only speculation, he would need further evidence to satisfy his intuition. He knew he couldn’t just send a letter with a messenger and ask if the curator and his landlord were members; he would have to find out some other way. But in the meanwhile, Rook was following him, and he had to try and shake him off his trail... “Why?” he didn’t know. R. went home and unwound in the leather armchair in his study, with his feet propped up on the coffee table.

R. woke the next morning and looked at the clock on the wall of his study. It was half past six. R. started out the door, after a glance back and forth to see if Rook was around, then he headed to the revenue office. He took the usual zigzag path he had been taking, which would soon be a habit if these happenings kept up with the Secret Society. He turned the corner on a street and realized he was in front of the revenue office. A look over his shoulder, and he entered the building.

“Hello, Mr. R.” The receptionist greeted him.

“I came to see Zero.” R. was to the point.

“Yes, he is waiting for you.” She said, “Just go on in.”

“Hello, R.”

“Zero,” R. replied and nodded his head.

“I told myself, ‘He’ll come in today,’ and here you are. And I also said to myself, ‘If he checks in with us this morning, he’ll get hired,’ and here you are. I spoke with my superiors, and I got the okay.” Zero seemed sincere. “I’ve got the job.” R. seemed excited.

“Welcome aboard, R. I’ve decided to put you with Cash, so he can get you used to things. Any questions?” Zero asked.

“Not yet.” R. paused. “But since you asked, will I report to you?”

“Eventually. But for now, I’ll have you following and learning from Cash.” Zero looked down the hall.

“Just go down four doors on the left and he should be there in his office, waiting on you.” R. knocked on Cash’s office door. “Come on in, R. No need to knock.” Cash was fiddling with a pen. “I thought you’d be in this morning. I guess Zero already told you that you got the spot.”

“Yes...”

“Well, let’s get to work, and I’ll show you the ins and outs of the Service.”

“The Service?”

“Yeah, that’s who we are, -that’s who you are now, R.” Cash smiled. “Now let’s go. We’re going to your old job, the archives, to check out any other ties that Crux must... well, let’s just go see what Crux has been up to... and with whom.”

“Well, I’m ready.” R. grinned back at him.

“I like your enthusiasm, R.”

“Thank you, Cash.”

Cash and R., partners now would have the same convictions as they were to begin investigating the official Crux. And with Cash’s involvement with the case to begin with, they were granted sanction over the isolated, but not fully dropped, case; for the Service could not substantiate any evidence that would indict the officials. And when agents seized documents from Crux’s office, they were unofficial documents and vague. Cash could not verify what he suspected as the illegal acquisition and use of funds due to the large sensitive document and other revenue records, it just so happened that R. had seized from the revenue records of the Cabal Archives. But Cash noticed one thing, for he was one of those upon the scene when Service agents searched the Treasury offices... Guy Cash noticed large monetary transactions between Crux and a group known only as the Gestalt. Cash took R. through the motions starting with tracking down the funds that Crux was accused of shifting. R., though, was not concerned with Cash, or even more, with Zero finding out that he was the one who had taken the ‘paper trail,’ as Cash called it. R. felt a sense of strength from being in the Service now, and he was renewed with this new status in his life. And he didn’t harbor suspicions about the Service being tied to the Secret Society. This was reassuring to him, and he got some relief from the way he had felt the last few weeks. It was the weekend and Cash and R. worked on Saturday even though the Service usually took a two-day weekend. R. took a walk that Saturday afternoon after work on his way home from the archives, where he had been working. But he was now working there as a Service agent, sifting through the files he once had merely put away. He stopped in the courtyard, under the clock tower that struck noon. The sun shone and he had a seat where he had spoken to Nil several times now. He was warm in the sun that shined down on him, and he propped his feet up on the bench, just as he would at home in the leather chair in his study, and he drifted off into a nap.

R. woke and it was getting dark. R. took off walking, lost in thought, when he met Nil on the sidewalk near his flat.

“Nil?” R. asked. “What brings you into this neighborhood of Cabal?”

“Nothing, just the usual business, I’m coming from my house and on my way to the courtyard, and then later, to the archives to initiate a new member to the Secret Society. So how are things at the archives going for you, R.?”

“Come now Nil, you must know I quit work at the archives?”

“I didn’t know, R. I assumed you would return to work there after we last spoke.”

“No, I’m an agent for the Cabal Revenue Service.”

“Working for the Service now, well, how is that working out for you?”

“Fine, just fine, but do tell me, Nil, have you heard of a corporation known as the Gestalt?” “The company that hired me is called the Gestalt; I found it through an ad in the newspaper. I don’t have any face-to-face dealings with the Secret Society, and the dealings I have with the Gestalt are done now through the messengers. I believe they work for the Gestalt, too, but I can’t be sure... I mainly deal with processing new members.”

“You have never met the group of people you work for; it seems rather strange does it not?”

“No, it seems typical of the usual protocol for the Secret Society.”

“The Gestalt is the same group as the Secret Society?”

“No...” Nil paused. “The Gestalt is an affiliate of the Secret Society.”

“I understand, Gestalt aids the Secret Society. Well then, I assume, or rather, I suppose you don’t know how I could meet with anyone from the Gestalt?” R. probed.

“All I know is where if I can remember the way... all I know is the building where I was recruited and signed my contract” Nil laughed.

“And where is that building where you were recruited?” R. asked.

“I cannot explain to you how it is to get there, at least not at this moment, perhaps I will show you tomorrow, I am in a rush and must go... Goodbye.” Nil scurried off, again.

R. wondered if he could trust that Nil was helping him and not just doing her work as a secretary for the Secret Society and leading him to false conclusions. But what other option did he have, this was the only lead he had in a case that was neither open anymore nor an official duty.

“Legally, this corporation known as the Gestalt exists independently of the persons who have been granted the charter creating it,” R. explained to Cash. “The Gestalt is given the rights and treated as an individual, and so this means it can enter into contracts, buy and sell property...” “Contribute to private political funds,” Cash interjected.

“Yes,” R. stated as he thought to himself this would be the perfect front for the Secret Society.

“Have you heard of the Secret Society here in the city of Cabal?” R. asked without thinking.

“Yes, why do you ask?” Cash asked.

“No reason, it just came to mind, but what do you think about it now that we’re on the subject?” R. said.

“Nothing I can think of, except that it is supposedly pulling the political strings here in Cabal.” Cash told him.

“Do you think such an organization could have been around this long financially and the Service does not know about it?” R. pried further.

“No, because it would have left a paper trail and the Service would have come across it here or there, but no such ‘mark’ as one might call it has ever been brought to our attention.” Cash paused for a moment and then went on to ask, “Why? Is that what you think...?” “What I think the Gestalt is... no, no.” R. laughed.

“Well try to think of things here in the real world, R., we’re not out here chasing shadows you know. Now what was it you were saying about a corporation just before all this Secret Society nonsense?”

“Well, a corporation is treated as a separate individual and not as a group, even though it is made up of a group of individuals, which means it can be affected by individual motives, though no one individual can be held responsible for the actions of the corporation, one such as the Gestalt.” “Yes, and?” Cash waited.

“Well, that’s just it, don’t you see how well it would work to use a corporation as a front for these officials at the Treasury, specifically, Crux?” R. asked.

“Yes, I know all this about a corporation, and we already know that the Gestalt is where the city officials, at least Crux of the Treasury, was perhaps solicited and granted contributions from Gestalt, that is if I can trust my own eyes... that’s bureaucracy and its usual protocol for you. I cannot say how, but I have a feeling there is more to this Treasury dealings than just illegally solicited funds.” Cash confessed.

“It’s more likely that there is more to the Gestalt than accepting and contributing funds for monetary reasons.” R. insisted.

“Well then, what do we have on the Gestalt?” Cash asked.

“Nothing, absolutely nothing,” R. concluded.

R. was relieved that Cash didn’t see that the question he had asked, and the answer Cash had given were what R. suspected was behind the Gestalt ‘pulling political strings’. And even more, relief came as he saw Cash was consumed with the Treasury, and neither did he question whether R. was involved in the Secret Society, nor did he suspect R.’s secret criminal deed.

R. walked out on his porch and motioned for Rook to meet him on his side of the street, and Rook came from under the street post and stood to watch to speak with R. “Send for a messenger, will you?” R. asked Rook.

“I told you before, if you want a messenger just dial zero on the black phone I put in your flat,” Rook said.

“You are the one who put that damn thing in my flat!”

“Yes.”

“Useless...” R. mumbled as Rook walked away and he went back into his flat, called for a messenger to be sent, and sat down to write a letter. A few minutes later there was a knock on his door. “You asked for me, Mr. R.?” The messenger said standing there, and Rook looming in the background in the same attire.

“Here.” R. handed the messenger a blank envelope with a letter to Nil inside and with an official seal of the Secret Society on it, and the letter was a request that Nil meet R.

R. had dinner and was reading the weekly newspaper when he noticed in the classified section what appeared to be an ad but was just a simple yet powerful word at the bottom left corner of the page, and all it read was 'GESTALT.' R. made a note to himself to inquire at the newspaper office as to who had put the ad in the weekly edition of the newspaper's classifieds, but it was most likely that it was done, no doubt, using the anonymous messenger service. There was a knock at the door just after dusk, the messenger had returned with a response from Nil.

"Here you go, Mr. R., have a nice evening." The messenger said as he walked away into the growing darkness and vanished.

Nil requested that R. meet her in front of the archives at half past midnight.

"Probably the conscription of a new member," R. mumbled to himself.

Regardless, R. was waiting at the bottom of the steps that led up to the entrance of the archives. But it was right at two o'clock in the morning before the secretary Nil came walking around the corner to meet with him.

"I use the back entrance to exit the basement," Nil stated.

"I was not aware there was a back entrance or exit to the basement... Strange," R. mumbled to himself alone, "Well, I need you to take me to the building where you were hired, Nil." "Follow me." She said. Nil led R. down a series of walkways behind the archives for what must have been ten or twelve blocks as they zigzagged their way through the business district of Cabal until they stood before a dark, single-story, stone building.

"Here you go." Nil pointed out the Gestalt building.

"That's it... That's all?" R. asked.

"What did you expect?" Nil asked.

"I assumed it would be something more sophisticated or modern and perhaps much larger than this place," R. mumbled to himself.

"Well, I should be going, but let me warn you that you should be careful using the messenger service for business outside the Secret Society."

"Why? Are they going to strip me of my membership?!" R. laughed sarcastically.

"No, but I wouldn't want to lose my job as secretary over it."

"Well, it was the only way I knew to reach you."

"Here..." Nil jotted down something on a piece of paper and handed it to R. "This is my telephone number, if you want to get in touch with me just call this number until I answer, early in the morning and the evening is the time to catch me home. Goodbye, R." Nil scurried off, as she had other Secret Society business to tend to that night.

R. stood and looked at the stone structure for quite some time then decided to knock on the door. But there was no door to what Nil said was the front of the ominous office building, so R. walked to the back, and on the other side of a long corridor was a door. But no one came to the locked door R. knocked. "Just have to come back with Cash to check this place out," R. told himself. R. tried to make a mental map back to the building as he walked away from it, but each walkway seemed to curve around in a way that it crossed the pathway he'd come from so that the map in his mind just led in circles.

R. was up early the following morning, he tried the personal telephone number Nil had given him, but the phone just rang and rang. R. put on his usual black suit and black tie, as he had gotten rid of all the rest of his suits and had now four including this one that he wore as a uniform; for the Service, wore the same attire, and it looked as if one of the dark, discreet suits of the Secret Society messengers and members he was sure he had seen on the walkways.

"That damn Rook," R. mumbled to himself, peeping out the curtain, "always 'shadowing' me are you, Rook?" R. laughed softly with a sarcastic grin on his face, as he decided to go out the back door of his flat, just to leave Rook thinking R. was still in his flat a good while. "Someone is going to be waiting a long time to 'shadow' me this morning!" R. laughed as he exclaimed this to himself and went out the back door to meet Cash at the office where they agreed to meet each morning and mull over this or that thing.

"Morning!" Cash said to R. as he walked into what they called an office.

It was an old office building, and the two shared a room with just two plain desks, each with a pen, stationary, and a stapler, and there was only one phone in the back corner behind the two desks. R. couldn't say anything about the secretary, Nil, but not because Cash wouldn't believe anything he'd tell him about the Secret Society. But for fear of anyone finding out that he was a member R. knew in his mind this would implicate his involvement with the missing files at the archives. "Look what I found in the weekly paper," R. pointed out the Gestalt 'ad' he discovered.

"But there is no phone number or address or anything for that matter, what good does this do us!?" Cash exclaimed.

"We can inquire as to who placed the classified ad at the newspaper office." "I don't think these people would make the mistake of leaving a paper trail, R." "Well, what do you think?" R. asked eagerly.

"I think it's obvious that someone uses the same name as the corporation I saw on the documents at the Treasury, that is all." Cash was frustrated and R. thought of the best way to tell him about the Gestalt building.

“A friend of mine is a secretary, I met her when I worked at the archives... I don’t know her too well and can’t remember her name either, come to think of it, but I met her on the street yesterday evening on my way home... well, to tell the truth of it, I was just walking along and mumbled to myself something about the Gestalt and she must have heard me because after she said hello and asked if I remembered her, I said ‘Yes’ even though I couldn’t recall her name but just her face and that she used to have conversations with me at the courtyard across from the archives. But after she said hello, she said she couldn’t help but notice I mentioned the Gestalt...” “And?” Cash was impatient.

“And she said that’s who she was as a secretary.”

“Did you ask where she worked, I mean a physical address?” Cash was curious.

“Well, that’s the strange thing, then she took me to a building. She said it was easier just to show me the way there than to give me directions or an address...”

“And?” Cash insisted.

“Just give me a minute to gather my thoughts.” R. took a deep breath. “Well, I cannot remember how to get there, it is like a map in my mind that goes in circles...”

“Did you write down an address?” Cash asked with some interest or enthusiasm.

“No... There wasn’t one in the office building.”

“Well, hell, R., what do you mean you cannot remember how to get back there? You must know the general vicinity, take me there and we look together until you recognize the building.” “Impossible,” R. said bluntly.

“What do you mean impossible?” Cash was lost.

“I woke up this morning and thought, for this reason, that I shouldn’t even mention it to you. So, don’t make it any harder for me to remember than it already is now, Cash.” R. was frustrated. “Just forget I even mentioned it.”

“What about the secretary, how can we get in touch with her?” Cash asked.

“That I do not know, I just happened to meet her on the walkway on my way home from the archives.”

“Well, how is that going to help us?”

“I just thought you would like to know, that is all,” R. concluded.

Cash insisted that R. try and take him to the Gestalt building, and even though R. couldn’t recall the zigzagged path along the walkways, he followed random walkways circling about a ten or twelve block area, side by side all that morning until Cash understood the difficult task they set out to accomplish was futile. R. said he was going to keep searching for the secretary and the only lead in the investigation they had in what he secretly worked on. R. followed along a walkway, lost in thought, and looked up to see the Gestalt building he had been at before, and his first thought was to turn around and get his partner. But he feared he could neither catch up with Cash nor find his way back if he did. R. decided to investigate the Gestalt building on his own.

R. knocked on the door and after some indefinite time passed, he heard footsteps shuffling behind the door and then a man dressed in the same dark, discreet suit the messengers and Rook wore, appeared as the door opened.

“Can I help you?” The man asked.

“I need to speak with the person in charge here. Is this the Gestalt?” R. inquired.

“I am sorry; this is just a messenger service.” The man said.

“Well, is there anyone in charge of the messenger service here?”

“I suppose that would be me.” The man confessed. “How can I help you?” He asked again.

“I am with the Service.” R. showed his credentials. “May I come in?” R. saw no harm in asking this.

“There is no one allowed inside here except for messengers.”

“But I’m an agent here from the Service, here to look over your revenue records...”

“Are you an auditor, and do you have an audit?”

“No, but I shall return with one.” And then R. turned and walked away.

He could not get an audit, as he and Cash were not officially supposed to be pursuing the investigation, and R. thought to himself whether to even tell Cash about this man or his return to the Gestalt building. R. tried again to make a map in his mind of how to get back to the Gestalt building, but this ended in the same circles of confusion as the previous attempt.

For the rest of the week, Cash gave R. the duty of going through files an auditor of the Service had seized and was still holding as Crux’s investigation was still pending. Cash and R. were going through the records trying to find a ‘paper trail’ back to the Gestalt. R. looked through hundreds of files that were not on record but confiscated all the same during the investigation; he looked through them when he came across one crumpled piece of paper, a piece of paper that appeared to be a receipt to Crux from the Gestalt. “Messenger services,” R. mumbled as he read the paper. There were no legible calculations on the paper, it just appeared to be what were some undecipherable formulations, and it appeared to be written in code perhaps, but one thing struck R. as odd, on the receipt was scribbled: “Human Resources for the S.S.” And R. could only assume “S.S.” must be the initials for the Secret Society, which R. showed to Cash upon his return to the office.

“Well, it has been a week since we went on the hunt for that building, but at least this is solid evidence it exists, but what do you make of it?”

“Well, I didn’t mention it before because I saw no use in it, and I knew you would have just been more frustrated with the situation... Anyhow, after you left that day we tried to locate the Gestalt office -if it is an office- I was just walking aimlessly along a walkway and happened to look up and there it was, that dark, stone building. I thought it was pointless to try and catch up with you and assumed I couldn’t find my way back to the building even if I did...” “Get to the point R.” Cash said.

“A long story short, the man who came to the door said there were no visitors allowed, I demanded as a Service agent to enter and showed my credentials, but the man calmly asked if I had an audit to serve, and of course, I did not, but this man mentioned the building was used for a messenger service, which is what I think this part here about ‘Human Resources’ refers.” “What’s this messenger service?” Cash was curious.

“Perhaps it’s just a courier, but I was thinking more along the lines that these ‘messengers’ carry out financial transactions between the Cabal Treasury and this corporation known as the Gestalt.”

“It does sound like they know what they’re doing, because most people, or businessmen to be specific, would be intimidated by a Service agent showing up knocking on the door.” Cash concluded.

“What strikes me as very suspicious is a messenger service located so isolated in an unmarked building that one must take what equates to a labyrinth of walkways to the periphery of Cabal,” R. added.

R. decided, at last, to confess how he knew the secretary Nil, how he had been conscripted into the Secret Society, and how Nil was involved with Gestalt, but he would, of course, leave out the ‘mandate’ to confiscate the revenue records from the Cabal Archives, and that it was an order he had carried out.

“R. that is the most bizarre thing I have ever heard from a Service agent... how again did you say they ‘conscripted’ you and for what purpose?” Cash asked.

But ‘for what purpose’ was what R., at least not at this time, -it was what he didn’t want to answer, or couldn’t confess to Cash.

“The Secret Society uses, more or less, coercion as they forged the curator’s signature, my superior at the archives, saying I would lose both my promotion I was working toward and my job at the archives if I did not join, and as for what purpose I don’t know yet. But perhaps they put some distance between them and me; for shortly after this occurred, I began at the Service. And now that I’m an agent, it seems like the type of organization that would at least want to avoid this since they operate secretly.”

“Sounds like you are in someone’s black book...” Cash concluded. “So, are you still a member?”

“I don’t consider myself to be a member of the Secret Society.”

“But you signed a nondisclosure of information agreement, didn’t you? I am sure they have a lawyer that would discredit any information you would give in testimony.” Cash was sincere but acted as if R. was playing some elaborate joke as he laughed and was skeptical of what he called ‘nonsense.’

“I was coerced, I was blackmailed, and I was not joining of my own free will?”

“You are serious about this Secret Society business, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m being serious, and I’m being sincere.”

“What are your orders?”

“Did you say orders?” R. quickly became suspicious. “I haven’t got any ‘orders’ yet, but all this happened a day or two before I met you in the archives and since then I’ve been involved with the Secret Society as a Service agent.”

“Perhaps they are intimidated by you now, being that now you are a Service agent” Cash deduced. “Yes, but if that’s the case, this intimidation on my part won’t help me get any information.” “They would never know this if we undertook such an operation: what if you lost your job as an agent, and instead acted undercover ... they would never know this... you could work undercover for the Service.” Cash stated.

The phone rang just after R.’s confession, Cash took the call, as usual, and it was the man from the Gestalt building asserting a complaint about R.’s ‘trespass’, as the man worded it, -the man wanted to file a complaint against R.’s ‘interrogation’ of the building, which he didn’t name nor did the man leave his name, but he did leave a phone number to their secretary, which Cash told him he would contact after he went over the situation, for there were mitigating circumstances that had to be considered on the account that R. was an agent for the Service, but Cash was clever and quickly replied that such behavior wasn’t protocol and that it wouldn’t be tolerated of a field agent, and that he would see to it that the agent that came to his premises was reprimanded, if not dismissed altogether. Cash explained what the man had said, and R. asserted that “trespass” and “interrogation” were both typical of the Secret Society and the jargon it used, as he reminded Cash that his interview was referred to as an “interrogation” by the secretary, Nil. Upon R.’s suspicions, he checked the phone number of the Gestalt secretary, and it was the telephone number Nil had given him. But this information he would keep to himself for now.

“Well, there you have it, we will release to the newspapers that an agent has been released on harassment charges and you will be free to investigate the matter and make use of your resources as a Secret Society member to help us uncover the Gestalt.” Cash concluded.

“And how shall I go about it?” R. asked.

“Use the messenger service and get a name.”

“I told you I have a name, X.”

“That could be anyone’s mark, R. it is too general, remember we need something specific, a definite name of this person obviously in charge of the Gestalt. Something so that Crux doesn’t get off on a legal technicality like last time.”

The assignment was approved with Zero and the next week R. read in the daily newspaper how a Service agent was dismissed for ‘improper conduct by a revenue agent’. Cash was sure that the Gestalt, or this secret social order R. was now a member of, would see the article in the newspaper and believe he was dismissed, for these organizations were much more likely to give R. “orders” again and give up evidence to the inner operations of Gestalt if he approached the Secret Society and embraced being a member now.

R. hoped on the other hand that Gestalt might give him some idea of how to expose X. R. got assigned a job back at the Cabal Archives as an interim curator, and within a week he received through the messenger service another mandate to confiscate a certain record. The mandate gave R. a full week to carry out this order, this gave him time to review the record before letting Cash know that he had received the “order” to do so, and R. hoped to find something to incriminate X. It was a revenue record that R. was ordered to take from the restricted sector at the archives, he retrieved the file to look it over, but it was just a list of campaign contributions, and they were made out to Crux, the treasurer. This thought of going after Crux made R. uneasy and at the same time angry; for just a short time ago he was a simple file clerk searching for a promotion at the archives, now he was guilty of the theft of State property as far as the Service would see it, and he was guilty of violating his nondisclosure of information contract as far as the Secret Society was concerned; thus both sides could rid themselves of R. within the limits of the law. But neither would win, and all this time R. felt if charges should fall on Gestalt, he should first warn Nil so that she was not caught up in any such criminal activity if she was as innocent as she seemed.

But R. could not warn her unless he knew Gestalt was to be brought down by the Service, and he felt it was out of his hands. All these things went through R.’s mind as he now tried to make sense of Crux’s campaign contributions. What was it that he was campaigning for him or someone else? R. took the record to Cash the next day and explained to him this was the revenue record he was ordered to take, and R. echoed his suspicions that this might be a method of coercion to set him up for public scrutiny. Cash sent the record to have a duplicate official document made as a copy to replace it and instructed R. to go ahead and deliver the record at the end of the day to a messenger as he was ordered by the Secret Society.

“What do you make of it, that it’s a record from Crux that they want to be altered or erased from the archives?” R. asked Cash.

“I am not sure, Crux doesn’t have anything to gain, one would think. This is merely a record with a list of major campaign fund contributors, but these are all contributions made within the legal limit and amount.” Cash went on.

“But couldn’t an official solicit funds from the Gestalt individually and it shows up as two, three, or more than likely many different single donations from each Gestalt charter?” R. asked. “First, we have to find out who or what makes up the Gestalt.” Cash concluded.

It had been a year now since R. was conscripted into the Secret Society, and the twelve months that had passed seemed more like twelve days to him, since every moment he felt that he was getting closer and closer to being able to expose X, and the rest of the Secret Society, revenge for having conscripted him into being a member, to begin with. But these days R. was seeing more and more people wearing the dark, discreet suits of the members of the Secret Society. He would catch himself looking twice at someone in the archives or on his way to work. He would find that he had to take a second look at this or that person, for it appeared at first glance that they wore the dark, discreet suit of the Secret Society, and it seemed as if quite a few of these people he saw at the archives or on a walkway wore them. And he assumed that they were more than likely members, and this strange dark, discreet suit: it was neither black nor was it gray, as if the suit were but a shadow. And that was just as the people appeared to R. in public, just as shadows here and there, and R. thought of Rook and how he “shadowed” him again now back and forth to work, and it took some effort to shed this shadow when R. was obligated to report to his and Cash’s office, and just as R. began to lose hope in his quest for revenge he met a certain gentleman.

“Hello, my name is Mr. Faux,” the gentleman introduced himself, “I represent the Gestalt, our messenger service tells me that you claimed to be a Service agent, and said you even had credentials.”

“Yes, but I was dismissed from my duties for the incident that took place at the Gestalt building, now I am just interim-curator and work here again at the Cabal Archives.” R. tried to sound casual, and yet formal, too.

This man, Faux, had just suddenly appeared to R. atop the steps just beyond the outer doors to the archives; and R. noticed immediately that Faux wore one of the dark, discreet suits of the Secret Society.

“What do you want with me, Faux?” R. almost demanded.

“I’m just here to see what it was you came to our messenger service for that day?” Faux hinted around.

“Don’t you already know?” R. asked.

“Perhaps, but even if I do, I’d like to hear it from you, that is, your side of the story,” Faux suggested.

“Well, I have nothing to say, I was mistaken,” R. said.

“I doubt you believe that,” Faux continued, “but do tell me, who told you where Gestalt was located, to begin with, this is not information our members are permitted to give out. Perhaps you don’t want to get anyone in trouble with their job, but I assure you nobody will be dismissed over this at the Gestalt, just simply given a warning and told not to let it happen again. But you see, R.,” Faux said quietly, “no one in my corporation likes trouble,” Faux then whispered, “They neither like to bother others, nor do they like to be bothered.”

“No one told me how to get there; in fact, this particular person insisted she show me where the building was located.”

“So, it was ‘she’, now I know this much.”

“Well, it was the secretary of a certain society who likes to remain anonymous.” R. played the part of a member.

“I see,” Faux said.

“Now you tell me what the Gestalt is, besides this messenger service building?” R. got to the point of his inquiry.

“That, I cannot say.”

“Perhaps you can give me a clue as to what it does as a corporation?” R. pried.

“Gestalt is like your secretary’s contractor; it likes to remain anonymous as well.”

“It no longer has its full anonymity, and now that we have an understanding, just between us, are you a member of the Gestalt?” R. pointed out.

“No, no... I’m just saying, I simply represent the Gestalt.”

“Then whom or what do you ‘represent’?”

“I represent the Gestalt Corporation...” Faux went in circles.

“You told me this already,” R. stated, “but I lost my job over this, I am sure you can give me an idea, what harm could it bring us? And whom would I tell anything to?”

“If you intend to be so adamant, let us just say I represent a group of people who invest in the organization as an instrument of change for a better tomorrow, a better future,” Faux said. “How sentimental, but you don’t expect me to believe you represent a group of philanthropists who dream of a utopia, do you? Remember, after all, I was a revenue agent.” R. jested.

“That is exactly why I am here, as an ex-revenue agent the Gestalt would like to recruit you.” Faux got to the reason he was there.

“Why don’t they just conscript me?” R. mumbled.

“Excuse me?” Faux said.

“Nothing, what were you saying?”

“The Gestalt would like to obtain your services, as counsel on certain matters,” Faux stated. “Again, what is it that the Gestalt does that it would need my ‘counsel’?”

“That information will be disclosed after you have signed a contract,” Faux said.

“Well... I can’t at this time, go now and come back some other time, please.” R. was exhausted by the conversation.

“Perhaps you will have changed your mind in a month. I will check back on you, there is a generous salary in it for you. If you change your mind and are willing to cooperate with us. Good day now, Mr. R.”

Faux made his way down the steps and vanished into the crowd. R. took off work from the archives, made sure Rook did not ‘shadow’ him, and made his way to the office, told Cash exactly what was said in the conversation with Faux, and asked what he should do.

“You will do nothing for now, we’ll just have to wait and see what he offers when and if he returns in a month.” Cash concluded.

“But how can I sign a contract with Gestalt as their ‘counsel’, even if they’re serious, they’ll more than likely have a nondisclosure of information agreement just as the Secret Society.” R. pointed out.

“That didn’t stop you from telling me information on the Secret Society, did it?”

“Yes, but it will stop anything you try to take to court, even if they are up to some kind of illicit activity.” R. reasoned with Cash. “But if I led this Faux fellow along perhaps, he might slip up and tell me that one name or piece of information...”

“Maybe, but this fellow is a professional, and I don’t think he’ll slip up on anything, if anything he will lead you to slip up.” Cash said.

“It’s all that I’ve got for now, though,” R. stated.

“This is true, but I’m worried that you will, in the process, do something to incriminate yourself.” Cash voiced his concern.

“Incriminate me? What, like slip up and let them know I’m still working for the Service?” “Yes, R., that’s it exactly.” Cash feared.

“What, you think they’re going to kill someone who they find out is working undercover for the Service?” R. laughed.

“Perhaps.” “But that isn’t their style, if anything they’ll retreat in silence or use the same tactics of coercion to keep me silent as they have in the past... Why would they run the risk of exposing themselves to the public with such an act?”

“Well, regardless, it isn’t protocol to enter a ‘contract’ with them as an agent of the Service.” Cash assumed though this was the first time he had worked with an undercover agent, he explained.

“I’ll do all that is in my power to expose the Gestalt?” R. pleaded.

“But is there anything they could coerce you with?” Cash inquired.

“No.” R. ended.

R. made his way home. His thoughts were busy with Faux and the possibility of working for Gestalt; mainly, the idea of exposing X. When he turned the corner there was a messenger on the porch of his flat waiting on him.

“Here you go, Mr. R., have a nice day.” He said as he walked away.

“I hate the tone in his voice when he says that” R. mumbled to himself, “almost like he is being condescending.”

R. opened the letter, it was a message from Nil, she requested that he meet her after midnight and that she had something urgent to discuss with him. R. noticed the writing of the letter was a little erratic, and her tone was not as dry and formal as usual. But even though he was going to meet with her again after midnight, his mind now was occupied with entertaining the invitation from Faux to sign a contract as ‘counsel’ for Gestalt.

R. drank a cup of coffee as he sat and watched Rook through an opening in the window shade, an opening just for this purpose. He had not noticed, but it was already a quarter till midnight, so he hurried off and was out the door to the courtyard. Rook was not far behind him, as usual, and he made his way to the courtyard across from the archives, it was not long until Nil came walking up.

“Hello,” R. said.

“How could you do this to me, R.?” “Do what to you?” R. was clueless.

“You told Faux it was a secretary who insisted on showing you how to get to the Gestalt building.” Nil was in angst.

“They think it was a secretary, perhaps not you?”

“Well, they know, but they’re thorough and would have dismissed me if you had given them my name.”

“I apologize, but it was you who gave me a note from the curator, a note with his signature forged on it, which was the way they conscripted me into the Secret Society, to begin with, otherwise we wouldn’t be having this conversation.” R. retorted. “So, what can you tell me about this Faux fellow, Nil?”

“Nothing! I am not saying another word.” She said angrily. “What did Gestalt say to you about the incident?” “They asked me if I knew anything new about R. who visited the Gestalt building, and I told them: ‘I do not know anything about it’. And they did it through the messenger service, so I’m not sure.”

“Well, who is Faux?” R. asked.

“I don’t know if he’s a member, but he acts like a spokesman for the Gestalt, in a year, he says, Gestalt will be a public corporation, until then it’s to remain as a ‘private individual’ where the words he used to describe it.”

“A ‘private individual’, imagine that.”

“That’s all I know, and if you remember, you signed a nondisclosure agreement contract and you’re not supposed to be sharing any information about the Secret Society with any third party.” “This Faux and the Gestalt are a third party, yet they work with the Secret Society?” R. probed “I don’t know much about it. I know nothing about my employer except that Faux is the one who had the order to recruit me for Gestalt. As part of my duty, I was granted the job I do with the Secret Society, an ‘outside party’ is how it was written, again I don’t know that much about it, and to be honest, I like it that way.” Nil said.

“What else, then, have you heard about Faux?” R. searched.

“That’s all I know, what I’ve told you,” Nil stated.

“You do not have any idea the kind of people you work for?” R. added.

“No, and as I’ve told you, I prefer not to know,” Nil said, again.

“Even if the people you’re working for are conscripting people as members to do their dirty work... even if they’re involved in all kinds of illicit activities, both private and public political propaganda, and still you don’t want to know anything about them.” R. was frustrated.

“Who are you to judge, you chose to become a member and could have chosen not to be one?” Nil pointed out.

“This is true, I suppose, but it isn’t because I’m a coward, however, it is because I, too, didn’t want to lose my job.”

“Perhaps, but maybe you’re just like the other members of the Secret Society, maybe you like being involved in all this ‘propaganda’ as you put it?” “I just want revenge,” R. stated.

“Revenge! –revenge for what, signing up as a member when you could have chosen not to join?”

“Perhaps, so it seems for now. For now, I must go, and I will see you some other time. I hope sooner than later, Nil. Goodbye.”

Nil was left confused and frustrated, a young lady just trying to get by in a world where her life was somehow, R. felt, dictated by inexplicable forces that were beyond their power to control. And R., day by day, felt he had to put up more resistance to whoever or whatever it was that seemed to play the role of his and her fate; and at that moment R. spotted Rook “shadowing” him, and feeling facetious, he dropped back to strike up a conversation with him on the way home.

“Hello, Rook, are you having fun being R.’s ‘shadow’ on this excellent evening tonight?” Rook was silent; he didn’t know what to make of R.’s unusual and suddenly bizarre behavior.

“It’s okay, Rook, after all, you and I spend enough time in close enough proximity that we’re, more or less, just like neighbors, wouldn’t you agree?” “I suppose,” Rook mumbled.

“Tell me, Rook, what do you think about this fellow who works for Gestalt?”

“I can’t say I know who or what you are talking about.”

“You must have met him or heard about him from the messengers, his name is Mr. Faux, and the Gestalt ...” R. broke off mid-sentence, as he remembered what Nil said about the information she gave him, that he was to keep it secret. “Well... this Faux fellow is unimportant to us anyhow. But tell me, did you join the Secret Society voluntarily Rook or were you coerced, I mean were you conscripted as was I.” “I joined of my own free will.”

“Everyone joins of one’s own free will, I suppose, so what did they do, threaten to have you evicted or dismissed from your job?”

“No, I was offered a job,” Rook stated.

“Well, how did you learn about the job, stalk poor R. in the middle of the night and they decided you would be perfect for the job?” R. joked.

“The secretary, Nil, introduced herself as I was coming out of the Employment Office, she said her associates had a job to offer, and it was the way she worded it: ‘associates’ she said, and I knew it wasn’t just another dead-end job, and the Secret Society sees that I’m satisfied: they pay well and see to it that any other needs I have are covered,” Rook told R.

Rook was more open than R. expected. R. thought Rook would just remain silent and let him ramble about this or that on his opinion of the Secret Society. But Rook hadn’t been conscripted, so he said and seemed to be quite content with his job as a ‘shadow’ of R., as a watchman for the Secret Society. Perhaps, R. thought for a brief moment, his life would be a great deal easier if not a great deal less miserable, if he would just surrender himself to the fate of the life of being a loyal member of the Secret Society. But thoughts of revenge suddenly rushed back into his mind and overwhelmed his thoughts. “A ‘private individual’ says Faux,” R. mumbled.

And then R.’s thoughts returned to the decision he must make as to whether he would sign a contract with the Gestalt. Depending on what would be his duty, he thought “Yes,” for he thought he might gain knowledge of the “associates” of Gestalt, all again with the kind of jargon particular to the Secret Society; ultimately, so that he might gain knowledge of X.

R. didn’t feel this decision to be too urgent to the situation at hand, he could always tell Faux he needed more time to think about it. But the idea of asking Faux permission to go over the contract with his lawyer was, in the end, what R. decided he would do. Whether he showed it to Cash was still a question, and he thought of how sincere Rook’s deep voice sounded of loyalty to the Secret Society. R. wondered how many members of the Secret Society appreciated their duty such as Rook and how many were bitter conscripted members, as was he, only following a “mandate” and only carrying out “orders” as was he, and feeling alienated from the secret order they were supposed to be loyal members, the converts of the Secret Society.

R. remembered what a messenger had one time said, that the Secret Society conducted, for the most part, its business late at night; for he decided now that he was back at his flat and bored, to go and roam the walkways behind the archives in hopes he might cross paths with Nil to ask how to reach Faux; for, R. could not get a hold of her on the phone. He was not sure which side of the law he was on, as if the line between him being good and being bad merged, and making it clearer, though, as to where he stood in these ethics of the underground of Cabal. But he almost felt a sense of shame in this façade and only masked it behind a lie. Nil had said she worked for both Gestalt and the Secret Society, and she seemed an honest lady; her only tragic flaw to R. was that she seemed too naïve to know the political and personal agenda she unknowingly helped to propagate: this routine conscription of people who just wanted to keep a job, which the Secret Society exploited.

The notion crossed R.'s mind again that Nil herself might have just been putting on a front, just as he felt he was, that she might be working with the Secret Society and Gestalt, that she was simply feeding him bits and pieces of the riddle but would never reveal the whole puzzle; that critical, crucial piece that would let R. solve this enigma. But just then he saw a shadow walking toward him; and how convenient R. thought that he should meet Faux on these hundreds of walkways he aimlessly wandered that night, on a night he sought Faux out himself all night.

"Faux," R. spoke indifferently. "Strange that I should come looking for you and to find you in the dark of the night, of all places, in the maze of Cabal walkways."

"Let us not be too harsh now, Mr. R., it's just coincidence that we have met here on this walkway, as I just happen to have been coming from the Gestalt building, and I'm sure you knew where you were going at this time of night, and to think you are lost... I just can't believe that."

"Insignificant," R. remarked. "I have a request to ask of you as a representative of the Gestalt." "And what might that be?" Faux was curious.

"I will consider signing a contract with you as 'counsel,' but first let me go over it with my lawyer. Would you sign such a contract without first getting legal consultation or at least a second opinion from an objective party?" "I suppose not, but I'll have to get it approved," Faux stated.

"Approved by whom?" R. insisted.

"By the corporate board, of course, I am only a spokesman for the Gestalt, and I can't make up the rules as I go along. I, too, have superiors." Faux suggested this to see where R.'s loyalty rested: in the Secret Society or something else.

"Let me ask you a question, Faux."

"Please do."

"What do you know about Crux the Treasurer in Cabal?"

"I used to work with Crux some years ago... Why? Is he in trouble?"

"I mention Crux and the first thing you ask is if he's in trouble. Why do you think he's in trouble, Faux, what trouble do you suspect?"

"Well, he's in politics, and one's name is not mentioned on dark walkways late at night in politics unless one's in some kind of trouble."

"Clever fellow, Faux, but I found in my investigation while I was still an agent that corruption is what may trouble Crux. And do you know why?"

"Please, do tell."

"Crux caught our attention when I found a receipt with the Gestalt as having donated funds, but we had our suspicions that he had solicited funds from each charter instead of the Gestalt Corporation, which all the members are considered under the law as an individual, a 'private individual,' as you would say."

“The revenue service would’ve had Crux arrested if the Service had proof of this... Has he been arrested?”

“No, we lacked information, a list of persons who have been granted the charter in creating Gestalt.”

“Then you have nothing but some overzealous agent’s theory, this slander of yours seems to be Crux’s only trouble.”

“Rest assured this was my ex-partner Cash’s notion of Crux, both in business and politics. You must forgive Cash, he’s bitter, sitting behind a desk all day chasing shadows until he comes up with grandiose ideas of corruption.” “I see,” Faux said.

“Well, will you allow me to look over the Gestalt contract with my lawyer?” “As I’ve told you, Mr. R. first I must get approved by the corporate board.”

“Then I have your word you’ll do all that’s in your power that my request is granted?” “If you’re sincere and this is what it will take to get you to sign the contract... Yes, I’ll see to it personally that your wish is my wish and that you be able to go over the contract and its terms with a lawyer before you sign it, but only if you tell me now: even though it is the Gestalt that has sought out your counsel, why do you offer it, considering the ‘contract’ will be agreeable to you?” “I am merely tossing a coin in the air and letting you decide which side it will land,” R. suggested. “What do I have to look forward to anyhow; the duty of a curator or just a file clerk once a decision is reached at the archives?”

R. was so caught up in his efforts to fool Faux of his real intentions that he was sincere, it seemed; he believed in his mind that what he said was the truth, but the truth was that R. wanted to see the Gestalt, Mr. Faux, and the Secret Society and especially X. suffer at any cost now, he believed that everyone in this whole affair was on that line that merged, to where each person believed to some extent that one was beyond the law, that the law didn’t apply to them as an individual but only to the whole group, which in doing so seemed to exclude the individual, all except one’s conscience; and one’s conscience operated toward that of self-preservation, and that’s how R. felt now that he’d been coerced and conscripted to the Secret Society: It was a matter of his survival.

It was early in the morning by the time R. made it back to his flat, and Rook stood at the base of a lamp post where he was to be expected. R. decided to give Nil a call; he picked up the receiver of the black, rotary phone and shuffled some papers on the desk around until he found her number. Nil answered after just a few rings.

“Hello?” Nil said.

“Good morning, Nil.”

“R., is that you?”

“Yes, it’s R., did I wake you?” R. asked.

“No, I just got home from work.” Nil sounded exhausted.

“Good, because I need to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“Cash and I found an ad, well I did anyhow, -I found what appears to be an ad a week or so ago. It’s not even really an ad, but it’s listed with the rest of the classifieds. It reads simply: ‘Gestalt.’ What do you know about it?”

“I was told to put the ad in the weekly newspaper, they said it would make the corporation seem more familiar to people after they read it and asked about it as if potential employees wouldn’t stray away when asked to come work for Gestalt. The idea was to show the ad also when asking a person to come and work for us, it is an odd idea, I know this, but with the Gestalt one is dealing with eccentric individuals.”

“And who told you to place the ad, Faux?” R. insisted.

“Yes, but...”

“Have a good day, Nil.”

“Goodbye,” Nil said as the other end of the line went dead.

R. hoped that someone else had put Gestalt in the classified ads instead of Nil and that she could point him toward such a person, but it was what R. thought was another dead end.

R. returned to work. It took R. the whole morning to locate the register he sought after he first had to search almost half a century of the chronicles to find a single entry that simply read: “Gestalt founded.” It was just a year, not a precise date. R. then had to look through perhaps an entire year of a list of names in the register and the organization that the people belonged to. In the end, R. discovered that there was one page torn from the register, which must have been a list of the charter member’s signatures of Gestalt; for it was nowhere else to be found in the entire register.

“Another dead end!” R. said in disgust, as the pilfering fingers of some thief had managed to conceal the identity of Gestalt. And he wondered: Was he reduced to just a thief?

“Anyone would do it,” R. told himself, “under the right circumstances.”

R. reported to Cash and his office after he was finished at the archives. Rook was nowhere to be seen.

While R. waited on Cash, he was struck with a sudden urgency to arrange a meeting and speak again with Faux. R. scribbled a note to inform Cash he had stopped by the office, but that he had an urgent matter to be dealt with and would report back at noon; and he asked Cash to wait for him to return.

R. made his way back to his flat; he went to the rotary phone and dialed zero to request a messenger be sent, and then he sat down to write a letter to Faux requesting a copy of the contract so he could go over it immediately with his lawyer. The messenger came and R. told him it was urgent and that he was to return a document to him from Faux, to whom the letter he was sending was to be delivered.

“Strange.” R. thought, as the messenger came and left without saying a word about the letter being sent to Faux, the spokesman for Gestalt, and the letter had nothing to do with the Secret Society. This seemed to affirm what R. had already suspected, that the two were one inseparable whole. Though, it was inexplicable to R. the inner workings of the matter, except he felt reassured the messenger service at the Gestalt building was the one the Secret Society used as well. R. lay down on the couch to take a nap, and the messenger returned, announcing with two short knocks on the door.

“Here is your request, Mr. R., have a nice evening.”

R. opened a large envelope and inside was a document, along with a strange but short reply to it: ‘We have decided it’s in both our interests to let you and the lawyer look over the terms of the contract before you sign. We offer this as a show of good faith, for we are confident that you will find the terms of the contract agreeable to you.’ R. gathered his things, slipped out of the back, out of Rook’s sight, and was off to the office.

R. was pleased to see Cash had waited on him at the office; he only had to wait a few minutes for him to write up a daily summary; for R. asked to speak to him alone, the two of them retreated to their office for privacy.

“Faux, or the Gestalt, has sent a copy of the contract so I can go over it first with a lawyer before entering into any obligations,” R. told him.

“And I suppose I’m your lawyer?” Cash said with a curious look on his face. “...don’t you think that we should contact a real lawyer so he can interpret what I’m sure is a nightmare of rhetoric?”

“No. I’m sure that this contract will bind me to silence; and rather than sign the contract in hopes that I might testify what I discover in my undercover work with Gestalt, I have a better suggestion: Gestalt has surely laid out elaborate clauses that will prevent any testimony on my behalf from ever being heard, or at least, never be allowed to be considered in a lawsuit. Instead, I propose we look over the general terms of the contract. I will sign it and go to work for Gestalt, and in doing so provide you with inside information to help you build a legitimate case against Gestalt that denies any involvement on my part. To do so, I will have to officially resign as a revenue agent and will work at the archives if necessary. But I don’t think this will be the case, for Gestalt will be paying me. And in the end, we’ll bring down this veil of secrecy that this corporation is shrouded.” R. explained.

“It sounds like you have your mind made up, and that I couldn’t stop you even if I tried, could I?” Cash said.

“No, I suppose not. I’m determined to not only help bring about the demise of the Gestalt Corporation, but I’m equally driven to expose X. Gestalt is nothing but a treasury, a way to move large amounts of money, which I suspect is just to maintain the secrecy of the Secret Society and to keep the political status quo in favor of the Secret Society. Whatever agenda this organization has can be known through its shadow, the Gestalt. And I can find the paper trail that will lead us to expose it.”

“But I can’t let you take this risk. It’s too dangerous, not as much as is it for you, but it puts at risk the reputation of the Service. Don’t you see, R., what you and I’d be doing would be as criminal as what you accuse Gestalt of doing? And I’d be forced to expose it publicly. And in doing so, Gestalt would surely know you planned to leak information about its activity to me. I’m sorry old friend, but this plan won’t work.” Cash told R.

“But can we put a stop to these people who think all they do is above the law?”

“This may be true; they may think and act as if they are above the law; but you, too, are not above the law. And you can’t fight this way. What you speak of doing is an injustice to the law, the very system that stands for justice, as it would be corrupt in the eyes of the law to follow such a course of action.” Cash argued.

“What are we to do now?” R. pleaded.

“First, you turn down the contract; then we do what may come.” Cash concluded.

R. had come to another dead end, but he had not refused the idea of the contract with Gestalt, which was still an option to be later negotiated. R. returned home and used the black, rotary phone to summon a messenger to his flat. And while he waited, he went outside and crossed the street.

“Good evening,” Rook said with his deep voice, and the greeting riddled R.

“What made you in such a good mood this evening?” R. was quite curious.

“Nothing, except this, is the last night I’ll shadow you,” Rook informed him.

“I can’t say that I’ll miss you, and I’m sure you feel the same. After all, you won’t have any more trouble trying to ‘shadow’ me. Elusive, am I not?”

“Not as elusive as you think. Most of the time I just didn’t bother to trouble myself following you in circles around Cabal, there’s no harm you can bring to anyone anyhow.”

“I may not have brought any harm to anyone, but that was not my intention. I can say I share no brotherhood with any other Secret Society member, for who can one trust? And if one can’t trust one’s brother or sister, one’s alienated, are they not?”

“Why should one feel alienated?” Rook paused. “The Secret Society offers you a chance for brotherhood, doesn’t it? You just refuse to share in it, perhaps.” “And perhaps for good cause, Rook.” R. insinuated.

. walked back to his flat and sat in a chair on the porch. Rook could not see him as he sat in the shadows and waited for the messenger to arrive. The messenger arrived shortly after R.’s conversation with Rook. He had written the message a few days before. It was an attempt to get X. to agree to meet with him.

“Deliver this message to X. and tell him a response is imperative,” R. instructed the messenger.

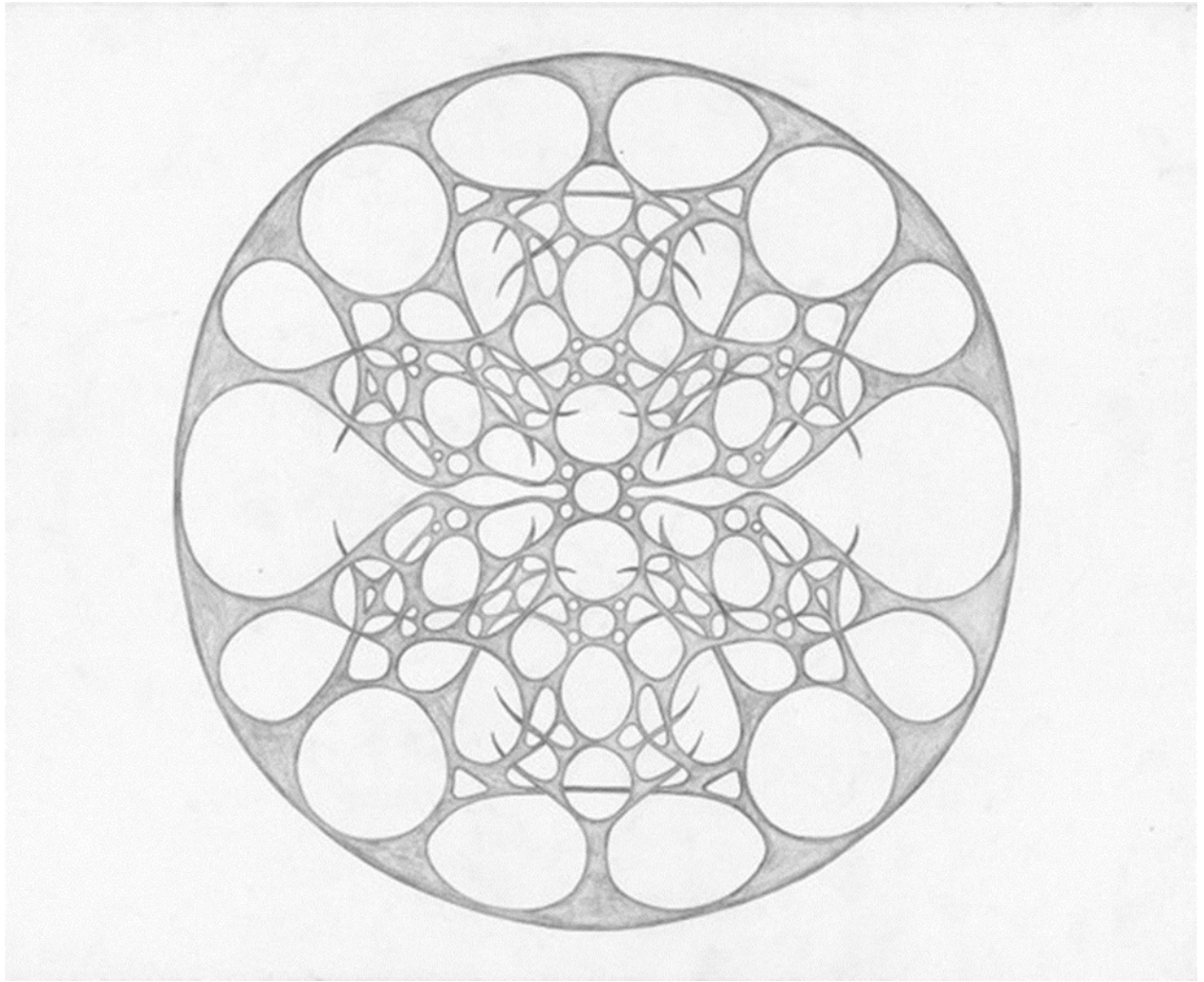
“I shall return by midnight... if it’s at all possible. X. does not deal directly with messengers.”

R. went inside and sank back into his leather armchair as he waited for the messenger to return. It was not clear now what deceived R. In the beginning, it was fear that led him to be conscripted; yet as an agent, he was given a chance to redeem himself. R. sat in the dark, and he waited in his flat for a response that he felt he deserved. And then the rotary phone began to ring, but nothing urged him to answer it.

R. was lost within the shadows of secrecy, relentless for revenge, and nothing will stop him now...

Black Booklist

R. had heard the rumors go around the Cabal Archives, that somewhere, someone, or some group had a black booklist, that not only recommended but required one to read from it and that upon one's name being entered into it, that person would then hold sway over the forces of secrecy that R. had had still not come to terms with in the City of Cabal. The shadow agency, which R. knew as the Gestalt, wielded the book's power and capacity for control and subjected it to their will... But could R. do the same? Who was really in control in Cabal? It was the agency known as the Gestalt, R. deduced and had known this in the back of his mind for some time.



Catharsis (full circle)