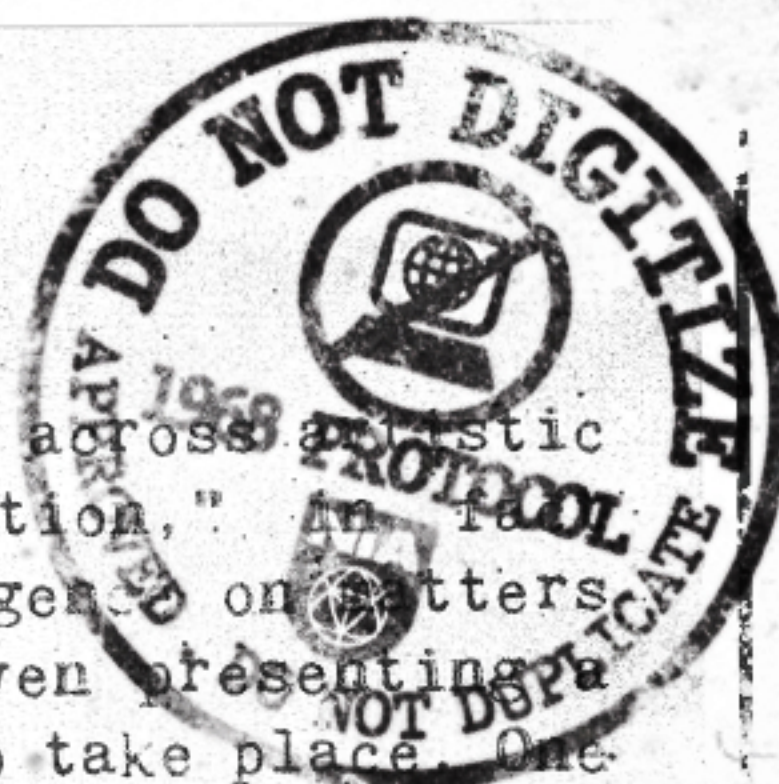


MEMO FOR: Acting Director Kendra Owen  
Director Owen,

As you know, we have in the past come across artistic work that has purported to be "fiction," but in fact contains actionable, real-world intelligence on matters relating to Exotic Matter, sometimes even presenting a narrative of true events that have yet to take place. One of our sources sent us the attached excerpt from a galley proof of an upcoming novella called M.A.N.I.A., which appears to be one such work. M.A.N.I.A., unnervingly enough, is an acronym for "Murder at the N.I.A." In the novella, the murder victims in question appear to be Ezekiel Calvin and Jay Phillips.

As both of these individuals are still alive as of the filing of this report, there are a few different potential interpretations of this. One interpretation is that Calvin and Phillips will die in a bomb attack sometime in our future. But based on context clues from the novella, our analysts believe that this is not a vision of the future but a vision of the past from a different, parallel Earth.

It is now known in Intelligence circles that our universe (or Node) is just one cog in a multiverse of limitless others. For the sake of specificity, we have designated our's as the Osiris Node. Our nearest parallel Earth neighbor, the universe outside of our own that we have interacted with the most, we've been calling 1218 Node. Well, it appears that the events depicted in this novella may have taken place on 1218 Earth in the year 2017. We are working on acquiring a full copy of the book, to find out what additional intel it may provide us.





## [CHAPTER]

#3cf> DEJgdHC

See "Project Waratah"  
& the "Nantiz Project"

It had been a harrowing traffic day in Los Angeles, but no more harrowing than any other day in the City of Angels. Finally, after what had felt like hours of gridlock, Zita's rental car was inching its way along Franklin Avenue. As she maneuvered the car up a steep driveway, she smiled reflexively as she took in the familiar chateau looming above her; As long as this case was forcing her to endure L.A. traffic, it might as well be to get to her favorite place in Hollywood. Still... when Central Omnilytics had assigned her to investigate the deaths of Ezekiel Calvin and Jay Phillips, the Magic Castle was the last place Zita thought the investigation would take her.

Zita was a sight to behold as she emerged from her vehicle, dressed to the nines, as the Castle's strict dress code required. She handed off her keys to the nearest valet and took a moment to take in the majesty of the place before slipping through the double doors into the Castle's entry hall.

"Zita Basir," she said to the woman at the front desk, all business. "Here to see Misty Hannah."

"Yes, of course, Ms. Basir," said the cheery redhead. "You know the way."

Zita strode over to what was, to all appearances, a book shelf, leveling her gaze at a gilded, carved owl with blinking red eyes. "Open sesame," she said to the owl, without a hint of irony. Moments later, the fake wall panel slid open. Zita gave a perfunctory nod to the suit of armor beyond the threshold, before striding past into the Grand Salun.

The decor of the Magic Castle had always been an eclectic mix, owing to many of the fixtures having been donated by the exclusive club's famous members. The Castle is one of the pre-eminent magic venues in all the world, open only to the rarefied magicians who hold memberships, and their personal guests.



As a magic aficionado, Zita was certainly familiar with Misty Hannah, though Zita had never met the elusive sleight-of-hand artist, or seen her perform in person. Zita would have been lying if she'd said she hadn't gotten a slight thrill when she'd received the handwritten card from Misty, instructing Zita to meet her in Invisible Irma's Room at the Magic Castle. It was theatrical in exactly the way Zita would have expected from the great Misty Hannah. Investigating her as part of an open murder investigation were not exactly the circumstances Zita would have preferred for meeting one of her all-time idols, but - at the same time - Zita wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

In her visits to the Castle, Zita had spent more than her share of time in Invisible Irma's Room, which was tucked away just behind the Grand Salon Bar. The story went that Irma was the ghost of a servant who had worked at the castle back in the days when it had been a private residence. In death as in life, Irma was an accomplished piano player, and, evidently, shuffling off her mortal coil was not going to be enough to deter Irma from her penchant for tickling the ivories. Near any song you could think to request, Irma was prepared to play for the Castle's guests - even tunes that were penned long after Irma's death.

Zita slipped a fiver into the canary cage to the right of the grand piano, and said into thin air: "Irma, can you play 'Misty' for me?" No sooner had Zita settled into a nearby loveseat did the piano begin playing the old jazz standard, seemingly on its own. Zita smiled again; Misty's note had indicated that Zita was to make this request of Irma when she arrived. Evidently, the veteran performer was not without a sense of humor.

It had seemed a strange coincidence to Zita that one of her favorite magicians had also been one of the Niantic Project Researchers. Then again, if everything Zita was learning about XM was true, maybe there was no such thing as coincidence.

With no sign of Misty yet, Zita shifted to a barstool and ordered an Old Fashioned. She downed a sip, and swung around in her stool to stare absently at the plinking piano keys. Moments later, Zita began to feel lightheaded. Her vision blurred, and the stray thought crossed her mind that the bartender may have put something in her drink.

Zita exhaled to calm herself, and closed her eyes for an extended moment. When she opened them again, she wasn't in Hollywood anymore.

Zita looked around in disbelief; the Magic Castle was a castle in name only, but where Zita found herself now could only be described as a palace. Of course, Zita didn't actually believe that she had somehow spontaneously translocated; Someone must have put some kind of psychedelic in her drink. It was the only explanation.<sup>4</sup>

*See "Hyperthreading/Teleporting"*

Still, it felt real enough to Zita in the moment, so she tentatively got to her feet and began exploring her new surroundings. If this place really was just a construct of her own drug-addled mind, she had to give herself props: This palace looked like it had been designed by M.C. Escher. Impossible stairways led to doorways on what, from Zita's vantage point, should have been the ceiling.

Zita glanced to her left and spotted - of all things - a little white rabbit, hopping playfully towards a set of stairs that stretched upward at a 45 degree angle.

"You've got to be kidddding me," Zita murmured under her breath. The smirk on her lips betrayed that she was not nearly as freaked out in this moment as she perhaps ought to have been. She was just digging the Lewis Carroll vibes of the situation.

The bunny leapt onto the first stair. The laws of physics should have ensured that the bunny crash back down to terra firma. But the laws of physics didn't seem to apply here.

*Carroll is on our list of potentially Sensitive artists*



The little rabbit continued ascending the impractical staircase, in no particular hurry, so Zita tentatively approached. She paused before the first step, unsure. *There's no way this is going to work*, Zita thought to herself. *I'm crazy for even trying*. But moments later, Zita threw caution to the wind and took a tenuous step onto the staircase. Zita should have immediately fallen on her posterior... but instead, as soon as she set foot on the first step, it was as if gravity shifted. Zita shook her head; She couldn't remember the last time she'd tripped like this. Correction: Zita had never in her life tripped like this.

The little rabbit - realizing it was being pursued - picked up the pace, scampering up the rest of the steps and through a doorway at the apex. Zita followed the small creature as fast as she dared. At the threshold to the next room, Zita took a deep breath... then stepped through the doorway.

The first thing Zita noticed were the bars. All around her. Was she a prisoner now? In a panic, she turned back to see that the door through which she'd entered was now nowhere to be found. As she got her bearings a bit, Zita realized that where she found herself now was not a prison cell... it was an animal's cage.

Zita looked down to another unexpected surprise; She was wearing an entirely different outfit than when she stepped through the door. She was now sporting a flashy, black suit jacket and... not much else. White stockings that left little to the imagination. Some kind of choker tied around her neck. And as she reached her hands up, she found a black top hat balanced precariously on her head. "Magic..." Zita said to herself, absently.

Beyond the bars of the cage, all Zita could see was a wall of white fer. As she craned her neck upward, she nearly fell down in shock. Looking down at her with red, beady eyes was the rabbit she'd been pursuing. But now it loomed so large it looked as if it had consumed one of those "Alice in Wonderland" 'drink me'

potions. The size of the rabbit would have been alarming enough on its own, but nothing prepared Zita for what would happen next. All of a sudden... the rabbit spoke.

"Ms. Basir," the rabbit's sultry female voice entreated. "Welcome to my mind palace."

"Misty Hannah, I presume," Zita said, with as much confidence as she could muster. To be fair, Zita had always wanted to say that. "So, you're expecting me to believe that this is all real?"

Rabbits can't smile, but it looked like this one did. "What's the alternative?"

"An elaborate hallucination," Zita said, deflated, putting a hand to her temple.

"I got your message," the rabbit said to Zita, matter-of-factly. "If this is a hallucination, we're having the same one. But, hey, for better or worse, you poke around Exotic Matter long enough, things like this stop seeming impossible. For me, this is just Tuesday."

"Today's Thursday," Zita corrected her.

The rabbit stared at her blankly. "I need to get out more."

"If you really are Misty Hannah, you already know why I'm here," Zita began. "I guess my first question for you is: Are you now, or have you ever been... a rabbit?"

"There, see, you're getting it," Misty shot back, playfully. "When staring down the barrel of the absurd, best to fight fire with fire. But, yes, I do know why you're here. Jay Phillips and Ezekiel Calvin are dead. And it's your job to make sure I didn't have anything to do with it."

Zita nodded. "That's about the size of it."

"I've known Dr. Calvin my entire life," Misty said. "He was like a second father to me. Why would I kill him?"



"I've read your file," Zita countered. "Calvin turned you into a government guinea pig when you were a little girl. What kind of father does that?"

Misty's furry nose twitched. "XM gave me powers that I couldn't possibly understand. Without Calvin's guidance, I shudder to think where I would've ended up. A mental institution? Burnod at the stake? Worse?"

"Sounds like Stockholm Syndrome to me." Zita crossed her arms. "And then there was the Niantic Project." *Apparently, on their world,*

"What about it?"

"After Epiphany Night, the records say that you and some of the other researchers on the project were... kept prisoner there by the NIA." *the researchers were kept on lockdown for a period after Epiphany Night*

"I never used the word 'prisoner,'" Misty equivocated.

"Held against your will, then. However you wanna parse it. The NIA didn't think of you as a person, Misty; They thought of you as a test subject."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Misty said quietly. "You weren't there."

Zita took a step back. "Hey, can we maybe start over? I launched straight into 'bad cop,' but I'm really just trying to get to the truth. If you want to catch whoever killed Calvin as much as I do, then maybe we can help each other."

"I'm all ears," The giant rabbit said, dryly.

"Big fan, by the way," Zita said genuinely. "Hey, could we... do something about this situation?" She gestured to the rabbit cage. "I was kind of hoping when I met the Misty Hannah that I'd at least get to talk to her face-to-face."

The giant rabbit wiggled her nose, and suddenly, she became a real girl; A pretty brunette, wearing the stage outfit that Zita had

found herself in when she entered the rabbit cage. Speaking of the cage, the bars were gone now, but Misty Hannah was still towering over Zita. Zita took a little hop backwards to get a better view of the statuesque magician. Then she inhaled sharply. "I'm a bunny now, aren't I?"

"You are," Misty smiled. "And you're adorable."

Zita let that hang in the air for a moment. "Fair enough."

Zita hopped up on a nearby chair and endeavored to look stern, to offset the cuteness factor of her current predicament.

"Where were you the night of the 27th?"

"That's the night Phillips and Calvin were killed?" Misty thought for a moment. "I was here... in my Mind Palace." *See Remote Participation Experiences!*

"Yeah, see, that's gonna read strange in my report," Zita countered. "What the hell is a 'mind palace'?"

"I guess it's kind of where I go for 'me time.' It's also a hub from which I can go... well, almost anywhere."

"Is this just... a thing you can do? Or is it more XM magic?"

"A little from column A, a little from column B," Misty explained.

"All right, so - at the time of these murders - you were in your Mind Palace," Zita said, with a tinge of incredulity. "Don't suppose anyone was here with you?"

"In my Mind Palace?" Misty asked. "Not likely."

Zita shrugged. "I mean, I don't know how this works. I'm here, right? Maybe you throw raging parties up in this place. You could charge for something like that."

"If I ever need an event planner, I'll let you know."

Rabbit Zita narrowed her beady black eyes. "You said you can go anywhere from here? How about throwing me a bone."



"Not sure I follow."

"Give me something," Zita continued. "You say you weren't involved in this. I want to believe you. But you gotta give me something."

Misty exhaled slowly. "Yeah, okay. I'm going to have to leave you here for a few minutes."

"I've got nowhere to be."

Misty loomed over Zita to drive this next bit home. "Don't touch anything. And don't go through any doors that are closed."

Misty frowned. "Actually, you know what--" Misty snapped her finger, and Zita was found herself in a cage again, but smaller this time. "Trust me, it's for your own safety."

Zita started to protest. "But what if something bad happens to--?" But, suddenly, a shimmering gateway appeared out of thin air, and Misty stepped through. The gateway closed behind her, leaving Zita alone with her thoughts.

"Zita Basir died as she lived," Zita murmured to herself. "Trapped in bunny cage in Misty Hannah's Mind Palace."

Zita proceeded to test the bars to see if she could slip through. No such luck.

But about 30 seconds after Misty had vanished, the illusionist reappeared. Wild-eyed and frazzled. "Oh my God..." It looked like Misty had seen a ghost.

"What?" Zita demanded.

"Oh my God..." Misty collapsed into a throne-like chair. "I was there. And for a moment... it felt like I was stuck there. Region D. The Darsana Combine"

"The what and the what?"

"My God. This is bigger than us. It's bigger than Calvin and Phillips." Misty looked pointedly at Zita. "You have to go now."

Misty snapped her finger, and like that, Zita was back on her stool at the Magic Castle. A startled bartender just stared at her, his jaw on the floor.

Zita was momentarily disoriented, but managed to snap herself out of it. "Come on, this is the Magic Castle, you've seen weirder things than this before."

Zita stood up to leave, but then she grabbed the bartender by the arm. "Please tell me I'm not a bunny right now."

"I'm... sorry?"

"A bunny rabbit. I need you to tell me I'm not one."

"You're not a rabbit, ma'am."

"Okay!" Zita shouted, louder than she'd intended to. "Okay." She looked the bartender straight in the eye. "If you see Misty Hannah around here, tell her Zita Basir still has some questions for her."

The bartender nodded slowly. And Zita stormed out the front.

See "Nemesis Node"  
& "28 Days  
of  
Ingression"