



Tetraktys

Ari Juels

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Tetraktys (teht-rahk-tus)—(from tetras, four). “Fourness.” Also, the first four numbers, especially when represented as a sequence of four rows of small discs composing an equilateral triangle. The total number of discs in such a triangle is Ten, providing the synonymous name Decad. The Tetraktys symbolizes the perfection of Number and its component elements, the odd and the even. The Tetraktys also contains the integral ratios that, when transformed into chord lengths, produce the intervals in the musical scale, 1:2 translating into the octave; 2:3, to the perfect fifth; and 3:4, to the perfect fourth. The Pythagoreans embraced the Tetraktys as a symbol of the Cosmos, and identified in it the music of the spheres.

*I swear by the discoverer of the Tetraktys
Which is the spring of all our wisdom
The perennial Fount and root of Nature...*

— Pythagorean Oath

PROLOGUE

Two Pythagoreans

Kore: Have we strayed from the path of the just, Kleosthenes, in our quest to enlighten? What deeds does He bless?

Kleosthenes: All deeds that bring harmony to the Cosmos.

Kore: Deceit?

Kleosthenes: There is no deceit when Truth is fixed in the firmament.

Kore: Terror?

Kleosthenes: There is no terror but divine awe.

Kore: Murder?

Kleosthenes: Death visits the body when there is discord in the soul. Death is but the beginning of a new cycle of life...

PART I

The Monad



Biographers of Pythagoras affirmed that his cycles of reincarnation lasted two hundred and sixteen years: After this many years, he would return again to the world to begin a new life, as if he had been awaiting the first cyclic return of the cube of the number Six, which is the principal generator of the soul and, at the same time, a recurrent number, because of its sphericity.

—Pseudo-Iamblichus, *Theologoumena Arithmeticae*

CHAPTER ONE

A Forgotten Appointment

Helen Able, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, looked gradually into the distance from the seventeenth-century château. She visually traced the sandy avenue that ran the axis of the vast gardens. Beneath her lay two garden beds embroidered with green arabesques of faultless symmetry, low-trimmed hedges winding amid soil of a rich reddish brown. These great carpets led from the terrace of the château to the center of the gardens, where a circular fountain sent aloft a towering plume of water. Beyond, lawns stretched smooth and green around basins in which rings of jets gave forth aqueous crowns. Near the horizon, the Grand Canal spread its thin mirror of water under a tiny portico. Still farther in the distance, visible as a notch in the trees, was yet another rectangular lawn, thrusting the strict ethic of geometry into the surrounding forest and up toward the sky.

The only inhabitants of the garden were statues, disposed here and there in decorous solitude: French ghosts of Roman copies of Greek originals—gods and heroes—Diana, Venus, Jove, and Apollo. Stories animated with the memory of motion.

Secretary Able was disappointed. She was looking at the gardens of Vaux-le-Vicomte in a video she'd purchased on her recent vacation in France. Somehow it wasn't at all like the real thing. The water in the fountains didn't sound right, to begin with. Underlying the spray, gurgle, and ripple was a low-pitched, electric pulsation that she didn't think sounded true to life. She didn't remember whether the fountains had actually been working while she was there; she had a vague recollection they weren't. Also, the colors, as usual with these things, were too—could it be?—too photographic.

She had been leaning into the huge monitor on her desk to immerse herself as thoroughly as possible. She now tilted back into the chair behind her smoky glass helm and looked again at the screen. She really shouldn't be spending so much time fussing with these videos.

On vacation in France the previous week, after a summit, she had fantasized about what a woman her status might have been centuries ago—not a senior bureaucrat, but a great and noble lady. She had looked at costumes, jewelry, palaces, and gardens, and spent many thousands of dollars on antiques and reproductions in Paris. She had even bought an eighteenth-century tiara, set with diamonds and sapphires. While other tourists were only able to look uncomprehendingly and snap photos, she had beheld her own reflection in the glass cases of the museums, aptly superimposed upon the jewels, dresses, and other treasures within.

But now it was back to work. She had a staff meeting in an hour. She turned to the black, viperlike microphone rising from the pool of glass that was her desk. "Calendar," she commanded. The garden dissolved from the monitor, giving way to the page of a calendar, scattered with flags and icons somewhat like a military map. A warning message, highlighted by a gaudy red bar, blinked on the top of the screen, and a window popped up. "Reminder: missed appointment."

What appointment could she have missed? Had she simply neglected to click on reminders earlier in the week? Or did her admin screw up again?

Had she been the product of an earlier generation, Secretary Able would have racked her brain for the forgotten appointment. Instead, she automatically consulted the calendar in her cell phone, the permanent annex to her memory. Nothing. She then looked up at the week's calendar now displayed on the screen. No missed appointment was highlighted. She flipped back a week. Still no missed appointment. She flipped back another week. Finding nothing, she flipped forward again. Still nothing.

Perplexed, she spoke again in the direction of the viper. “Go to missed appointment.”

The screen turned a gray blur. A sound like pouring rain saturated the speakers. The calendar software made page-turning noises with each traversed week, and the weeks now whished stormily backward. In the corner, the year was still displayed, but the last digit dropped quickly: . . . 3, 2, 1, 9, 8 . . . The second digit also moved backward, though more slowly. “Stop!” Secretary Able shouted. The year stood at 1965; the week was empty of meetings. “Go to missed appointment,” she repeated in annoyance.

Hand it to Microsoft. This was one hell of a bug. Or worse, could it be a virus? The furious patter of flipped pages resumed. She watched the slowly receding decade digit: 1950s, 1940s, 1930s. The twentieth century was rounded, then 1890s, 1880s, 1870s . . . “Stop!” she cried again, freezing the year at 1870. *Christ!* she thought. Maybe it was something worse than a bug. She spoke more loudly and precisely. “Go to missed appointment.” The vertiginous backward sweep resumed. This time she watched Secretary Able with bewildered passivity. It had never occurred to her to wonder: how far back did these calendars actually go?

1830s, 1820s . . . 1780s, 1770s, 1760s . . . The noise ceased abruptly, and a page displaying the week of 10 June 1754 fixed itself on the screen. A message appeared: “Missed appointment. Should the office assistant schedule a new one?”

In fact, several appointments over the course of the week were marked as missed; the latest of these on a Friday evening, flashed. The entry read, “*Bal chez M. de Crasenos, Saint-Germain-des-Prés*.” Secretary Able had enough French to read, “Ball at the residence of M. de Crasenos, Saint-Germain-des-Prés.” Saint-Germain-des-Prés was a station in the Paris Métro, she knew. She had no idea who M. de Crasenos was.

She explored nearby entries in the calendar, looking for evidence of a bug in the software. There were so many appointments that it seemed as though someone else’s life had been accidentally grafted into an unlikely part of her calendar. This was like finding a hidden passageway in an old house, she thought. Rather fun, actually.

It soon became clear why the ball—along with many other social engagements—had been missed. It appeared that the owner of this portion of the calendar had been bedridden with a long illness. The ministrations of a Doctor d’Ormoys and a Doctor Paré had begun in April of 1754. They had progressed from regular to frequent over the course of May. By the beginning of June, these doctors were at constant attendance. Had Secretary Able’s historical medical French been richer, she would have deciphered descriptions of a vigorous regimen of cupping, bleedings, and the administration of poisonous metals. These medical rigors culminated on 15 June, when the patient had had her last appointment in the book. This was annotated “*La mort*,” “Death.” The fifteenth of June, Secretary Able observed, was her birthday. The fun took an unnerving turn.

She looked farther back. Balls, dinner parties, visits from *Messieurs* and *Mesdames de* this and that marked the whirlwind life of a Parisian grande dame. There were names, times, events, and places, but no more. Even this mere silhouette, however, gave rise to a tantalizing story, as Secretary Able peered further into the life of the nameless French lady. The whole thing now hardly seemed a joke. And she couldn’t see how it could be a software bug.

On 25 April 1749, there was an appointment with a certain Henri at midnight at an address in the Place Vendôme. This sparked the recollection of an unusually warm April night under a full moon when she had driven very late to a side street in Georgetown, alone. She remembered the sharp and sweet mélange of terrors—ideas of having her throat cut in the sparsely peopled street, and the sensual unknowns and sacrifice of the liaison. Even at the time, she could hardly understand why she was doing it. A buffoonish aide named Henry had pestered her for months, wanting to have coffee with her. She had responded by waving her wedding band in his face and joking that she’d have his

banished to Belarus if she heard any more. He had protested that they were mature people and that he only wanted coffee.

She remembered his smiles—as if they had a shared secret, when they hadn't. Her being too uncomfortable to rebuke him privately, because—as she told herself—she had no firm accusation to make. Her yielding to a coffee date. A succession of unnecessary meetings in her office. Her going to see his collection of antique blues albums in his apartment. Precipitate lovemaking on a futon-couch. His brazen indiscretions at work that left her furious, on tenterhooks, dependent, and sometimes happy. Bold lovemaking on certain afternoons. The proud deftness with which she balanced her affairs against a diplomatic schedule that would have broken a lesser woman. His daring her, flouting her, caressing her, threatening to expose her to the press. The first night she arranged to spend with him she had intentionally started a fight with her husband and even felt self-righteous because he was such a bore. She fed voraciously on Henry's brashness and the exquisite whirlwind discomfort he kept her in.

He was seven years younger; she had to know that he couldn't possibly be after anything more than a career boost. And yet there was always that night in Georgetown when she thought she was in love. She had banged her knee on the steering wheel, leaping up in fright as Henry tapped on the window, grinned, raised his eyebrows, and held up a bunch of roses.

The trysts had gone on for a year, several afternoons a week, and occasionally a whole night. Once a whole weekend in New England. These were mirrored in appointments in the calendar: "*Voyage en Bretagne avec Henri*," "*Rendez-vous aux Deux Chiens*," and "*Rendez-vous chez Henri*." At some point, she had grown more serious; she even thought of leaving her husband. Henry had counseled against it, an act that branded their liaison with a new, unspoken name. The torment had become unbearable. She slept badly. People thought she was ill. The discomfort was corrosive and loathsome. Henry's indiscretions like filth in a public bathroom. She had only dared confide these things—like most of her life—to her diary, carefully encrypting it with military-grade software under a password she never told anyone and didn't write down.

Then she caught Henry fondling an intern in an empty conference room. He made a stupid joke and dared to send roses to her house. "One of my staff sucking up to me. I don't take any pity on him," she told her husband, truthful for the first time in ages. She locked her grief and rage away like secrets in a safe. She believed that she never showed them; she progressively effaced her feelings with an extra half hour at the gym, an extra touch of cold steel at the bargaining table, an extra sleeping pill. They drowned out their waning cries. At the corresponding time in the calendar of the grande dame, May 1750, the rendezvous with the French woman's Henri ended.

She went farther back. There were a dozen trivial engagements which seemed vaguely but impalpably to trigger memories. Then, on 18 December 1730, there was "*Funerailles de tante Jeanne*," "Aunt Jean's funeral." Could she remember the day, the weather? Was the low-hanging gray sky a postdated, symbolic trick of memory? Her sister, to whom she hadn't spoken in three years, called to tell her that Aunt Jean was dead. Two weeks later a lawyer hired by her sister called to tell her that there was a crazed boyfriend of sorts in the picture (and she remembered her disgust at how the word "boyfriend" was used to describe the eighty-year-old man). The lawyer was trying to pry the old woman's legacy away from this interloper. The "boyfriend" wanted to funnel it to a church. Time had been difficult in those early days when she was getting her master's degree. The aunt had been a wealthy widow, a fragile octogenarian. Even while her aunt was living, Helen Able had never been entirely successful at fending off daydreams of an inheritance. She almost never saw the old woman who refused to leave the Bronx, where Helen herself certainly wasn't going to go. The aunt had sent \$50 checks and garish greeting cards on Helen's birthday and on holidays. Helen had always sent back dutiful thank-yous. She simply hadn't noticed that nothing had come from Aunt Jean for a year and

half.

Her sister, having gone to clean out the apartment, had called her again. The old woman, it turned out, had been a miser and a pack rat, and had lived in squalor. The apartment was a morass of burned-out lightbulbs, moldy wallpaper, broken radiators, crumbling plaster, heaps of old newspapers waiting to catch fire, mice, and tattered doilies, amid a miasma of dust, furniture polish, and urine. Helen had felt unspeakably guilty and palliated her guilt by telling herself that the old woman had never asked for her help.

The calendar made a firmer accusation. In a matter-of-fact way, like a reminder for a lunch appointment (which it was), the entry read, "*Empoisonnement de tante Jeanne*," "Poisoning of Aunt Jean."

"No," Secretary Able protested out loud. "No, I know what that means! That's a lie." She shook her head. "It wasn't my fault," she said to herself. "If she had ever asked for help—ever—I would have helped her."

She angrily dug deeper into the calendar. What other accusations were there? She read and reread the calendar entries, trying to ferret out all of the secret correspondences. If the history of the grand dame matched her own, then she had only two more years to live; her antecedent had died at the age of forty-nine.

Secretary Able's meeting was beginning in a matter of minutes. Bewildered and exhausted, and paying little attention to what she was doing, she made her way back to her own era. Instead of keying in the current date into the computer, she held down the forward-arrow key with her index finger. Three weeks advanced. The years hastened by: 1750s . . . 1760s . . . 1770s . . . 1780s . . . She traversed the blank corridors, devoid of appointments, of the late eighteenth, the nineteenth, the early and mid-twentieth centuries, from Aunt Jean's funeral and the balls, fetes, and deaths, back to her own epoch. Rounding her birthday in the year 1970, she came upon the following entry:

an. 1970 – an. 1754 = 216 = 6^3
hic incipit saeculum vitae novum .
[Here begins a new cycle of life.]
Reincarnate.

CHAPTER TWO

A Computer-Security Conference

Ambrose Jerusalem finished the slides for his presentation before his flight landed at Heathrow. After a brief layover, he arrived in Naples in the early morning. Heavy with sleep, he took a taxi to the marina. He waited on a dim concrete pier, empty of passengers but occupied by stray dogs flopped over on their sides and stomachs. One cocked its ears and rolled its eyes after Ambrose as he passed; the others lay sunk in sleep or lethargy.

The morning brightened, and small clusters of travelers formed. Soon it became crowded and noisy. As the hydrofoil for Amalfi approached, the passengers swiftly massed at the end of the pier. Ambrose, in his stupor, found himself at the end of the queue and last to board. Just as the ferry left the pier, he secured a seat beside one of the brine-stained windows. He gazed across the enamel blue water toward the coast, watching the slow approach of Mount Vesuvius. Across the lower slopes of the volcano, the outlying suburbs of Naples spread heedlessly in its shadow.

Contemporary Italy, Ambrose remembered his father saying—particularly southern Italy—is not a solid, self-regarding civilization. It is the fragile plastering-over of an ancient, massive armature that cracks through here and there, as buried nations and natural forces stir and shake themselves to life. Even today, the streets of central Naples follow the ancient Greek layout. On the city's outskirts lie shabby houses and apartment buildings around and atop the Roman town of Herculaneum and its half-buried, half-resurgent city blocks. Down the coast is Pompeii, with her Roman buildings and statues, her mosaics and murals of fresh color where the lava and ash have been laboriously removed. The city is largely still buried. One day—perhaps before Pompeii is fully uncovered—the ancient destroyer Vesuvius will shatter its crust and erupt again.

As the hydrofoil passed the southern extremity of the city, the smog fell away. Cliffs and rocky hills rose along the coast, crenellated with juniper and cypress trees and indented with high-perched caves. Travel-weary as he was, Ambrose decided that he needed to see beyond the dirty windows. Perhaps there was someplace to stand outside. He walked to the aft door. He came upon a group of colleagues sitting on the opposite side of the vessel: the French contingent, with whom he was on large, amicable terms. Among them, though, was Denais, who avoided his eye; he and Ambrose had exchanged frosty words over precedence in publication. Ambrose waved and pointed inquiringly to the aft door as an invitation to the group to join him outside. After a few friendly gestures, they resumed their conversation.

Atop a flight of stairs outside was an open deck. Here the more exploratory passengers were sitting or standing, talking loudly above the churn of the engine, and photographing the bright white and pastel buildings clustered like birds' nests on the steep hills. Ambrose leaned against a pole and looked into the distance. The island of Capri materialized off the port side as a hard-edged mist. Soon, though, Ambrose, the ferry would be approaching Li Galli, the tiny islets from which the Sirens had sung the songs of deadly beauty to Odysseus. He watched and listened. The sounds of the motor and the wind flicked around his ears, and the sea, fixed vaguely in his eyes, blurred into a blue void; he almost believed that on the threshold of audibility, thrumming faintly, elusively, lay the promise of something fantastical.

“Ambrose?”

He turned. A man stood poised to buttonhole him. “Yes?”

“It's Allen. Allen Dunn.”

“Oh, yes. I’m sorry. I didn’t recognize you.” The man’s features were only vaguely familiar at first. They snapped into coherence as Ambrose realized that a ponytail and goatee had gone missing. He shook hands. “Good to see you.” Dunn had finished his dissertation recently. With employment having evidently come more conformist grooming, Ambrose noted. Dunn’s youthful penchant for writing about viruses had found expression in more profitable channels; his black hat had been exchanged for a white one.

“Let me show you what I’m working on.” (Daphne was always complaining to Ambrose about the dislocating absence of pleasantries among his colleagues.) Dunn eagerly fished a loose-leaf binder from a stout briefcase beside him on deck. He flipped to a page containing a hand-printed, rectangular array of abstract symbols intermingled with block letters, some of them reversed. Centered prominently beneath and drawn with primitive crudity, like a cave painting, was a cross overlaid on a circle. “This isn’t our usual academic stuff. It’s off the beaten path. But take a look. I think I’m on to something.”

“What are those letters and symbols?”

“This is the Zodiac killer’s last undeciphered message.”

“The Zodiac killer?”

“Yeah. You don’t know about the Zodiac killer?”

“No, I’ve never—”

“He was a mass murderer. In the sixties. Really twisted and devious. He sent encrypted messages to the newspapers. A schoolteacher cracked one of them. It talks about how the souls of the people he killed will be his slaves in the afterlife. But no one has ever deciphered this message . . .”

Beyond the Bay of Naples, the rocks and ledges grew fantastic in shape; the villages brightened and performed ever more ambitious acrobatics on the hills. Now and then, watchtowers of rough stone appeared, medieval bastions against marauding Saracens. Ambrose peered longingly over the railing at one of these ancient fortifications, which beckoned to him from an outcropping behind Dunn’s back. Dunn continued.

“I think I’ve made some progress. You see, the double pluses must mean that he used a small symbol set. It can’t be a simple substitution cipher . . .” Politeness compelled Ambrose to listen.

“It’s not real science—just a pet project. But you know, we spend so much time doing theoretical stuff. I’m figuring,” Dunn said, “that this is the way to get your name in the newspapers. Don’t you think?” Another enchanted Saracen tower rolled away to stern.

Dunn’s explanations went on for twenty minutes, until at last, with an unceremonious word (“O geez! Hold on, I’m supposed to be rooming with that guy over there . . .”), he hastened after a colleague who appeared in the hatch at the top of the stairs.

Liberated, Ambrose sat alone by the stern. From visits long ago with his father, he conjured up the memory of weary-legged exploration of the paths on these cliff-tops, precipitous drops to the sea, dangerously narrow passes, lizards, olive trees, wild thyme, and that sun-soaked, ageless rubble that profuse in the countryside of Italy as litter in its southern cities.

The hydrofoil docked in Positano. He saw Dunn disembark, followed in absentminded haste by the French contingent. Very odd, Ambrose thought. Were they staying here, so far from Amalfi? As the hydrofoil departed, Dunn ran frantically up the pier, dropping his suitcase midway and waving to the boat to return.

Ambrose fell asleep in his hotel in the early evening. He rose restlessly just before dawn. He rarely stayed up late enough or woke early enough to see the sunrise. This morning, though, the jetlag invigorated him. It rendered his nerves raw and receptive to even the gentle tonic effect of fresh squeezed orange juice on his unfurling senses.

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