

HOLTES & SIETSMA

BACK UP
AS FAR AS THE
WORLD STRETCHES

NOTHING IS WHAT IT SEEMS

PART 1

< BACK-UP >

As far as the world stretches

Book 1

<

Holtes & Sietsma

**To my dearest,
without you this book wouldn't have existed.**

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Cover design: Mei Visuals
Photo on cover: Greet Meesters

BACK-UP trilogy

Book 1 'As wide as the world stretches'

1st edition 2018

Book 2 'Bridge in time'

1st edition 2020

Book 3 'Perspective'

1st edition 2023

Book version BUP1.EN.E.H&S.2019.06

Publisher eBook: Holtes & Sietsma

Publisher paperback: Holtes & Sietsma

Independent publisher

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ISBN Paperback 9781081394868

Translated by: [Martin Meijer](#)

For our free eBook, all information and contact about this book and information about our translator, please see

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The rest is up to the reader's imagination.

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However, not being able to follow the links does not affect the content of the story. It is purely for additional information.

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You can contact us via our website.

[Thank you in advance!](#)

FOREWORD

Thank you for being interested in our book.

We are Bert Holtes and Wop Sietsma, two Dutch authors who wrote the book series 'BACK-UP'. This book is our debut and the first part of the trilogy.

After a long time of writing and research, we managed to self-publish our first book independently in 2018.

This story is a mix of genres, characters and storylines and wrapped up as a fictional thriller with some extras.

As part of the 'BACK-UP' trilogy, our second book BACK-UP 'Bridge in Time' was added in 2020.

The third volume BACK-UP 'Perspective' was published in December 2022, which brought the series to an end.

To introduce you to our writing style and story, we decided to offer the eBook of part 1 as well as part 2 for [free as a promotion](#).

This way people can easily obtain the eBook and you can also give it away as a gift.

We depend on word of mouth and ask you to gift the eBook to someone else, or forward the link from our website.

Because after all, what's more fun than giving a gift!

If you want to read the paperback of the book, you can find all the information on our website where you can buy it.

We hope the story appeals to you and that you will enjoy it.

We wishes you much pleasure reading!

Kind regards,

Bert & Wop

PROLOQUE

It was done. The emotional wave of contentment could be cherished, a well deserved reward. Many rotations ago, the first attempt had been made, which did not bring what was desired.

Wolfing, reproducing, fighting, dying. There could be more. Much more.

While absorbing the life-giving sunrays, the beautiful azure planet, entwined with hazy clouds, slowly rotated around its axis, encircled by its companion which, with her presence, regulated the cycles of all its life.

Many times more often than it had already done, the planet would have to rotate around its axis, before the result of this work would be noticeable.

Nothing is what it seems

He was about to close the opened door behind him.

He went on his way to do something that would astonish the world.

Something he... only he could do. There were no other options.

It was him or me.

And softly squeaking, the door closed behind him.

FIVE GLOBAL MINUTES

< 01.01

The older gentleman, neatly dressed in a golden brown three piece suit with a pair of immaculate dark brown loafers below, slowly approached and, with a sigh of relief, sat down on a small bench at the side of the street. Like every day, that is when it was dry and not too cold, he came here to enjoy the coffee he brought, with a treat.

This time it was a 'gevulde koek' (*a typical Dutch biscuit with a sweet almond filling*).

He took his pocket watch, an heirloom, out of the pocket of his waistcoat and saw the clock hands pointing at exactly eight o'clock in the morning. Satisfied, he ascertained that he walked the distance from his house a bit faster yet again. His stamina was improving. Nonetheless, he was happy that he could rest for a bit now.

He liked sitting here, for this place gave him a nice view of the street and the [Peace Palace](#).

It was the first day of June and it promised to become a fine day. The summery green of the trees, combined with the colorful floral splendor of the bushes all around, was wonderful to see. He also enjoyed the traffic that passed by, which, due to the international nature of the district, was as colorful as the nature.

He was never bored, for there was always something to see. From the pretty Nigerian secretary in her perky pink Fiat 500 to the Russian diplomat who was driven to the palace in a bulky limousine, whether accompanied by an escort or not.

But this early in the morning, only the administrative staff of the Peace Palace would hurry to work. Only from ten o'clock onwards would the first expensive cars pass by. After his wife had passed, he couldn't bear being alone in his empty, silent home in the mornings anymore and, also because his wife had asked him to do so, he had forced himself to go out and be among other people.

For the last two months, he had sat on this bench almost every morning. By now he was well known. Often someone would sit next to him and they would talk about all kinds of subjects. Just the other day, an employee of the Liberian consulate had shared her lunch with him. He hadn't been able to remember the names of all the exotic treats she had offered him, but he could still recall the taste very well.

Just like today, it had been a nice, warm day and she had told him about her youth in Liberia and how she ended up in The Hague.

He was a good listener and he had heard several stories by now that left a deep impression with him. He was sincerely involved, since he still remembered his own experiences during the Second World War very well. He was often reminded about them, especially in the last two weeks, during his dreams. He was thinking about compiling a book from those stories, as an indictment against all the violence in the world, but he was still doubtful about that. After all, a lot of it had been told to him in confidence. Well, he would see about it all next winter. For now, he was happy that he got company, more and more regularly. It distracted his thoughts and gave him the opportunity to process the death of his wife. He took his vacuum flask filled with coffee and suddenly it dawned on him how peaceful everything was.

Normally, here on the Scheveningseweg, it was very busy. Everyone who had business in the Peace Palace, had to use this road, which was now deserted.

Although he was already retired for ten years – he had been a police officer for exactly forty years, of which the last ten years consisted of working for Interpol – his occupational interest was caught, and he started to look at his surroundings in a different way.

It was a usual Wednesday morning, but it seemed like a Sunday. That impression was even enhanced by the slow, echoing sound of the church bells. The only person he saw, was at the other side of the street. The man was standing in the porch of a colossal, monumental city villa, the type of which more were standing alongside this road. A white male figure with a Slavic face, disfigured by scars. He was the size of a giant, almost seven feet tall, he estimated, with a square-shaped head and short, spiked hair. Despite the distance, he was able to see that the

man's teeth were in bad shape. The remarkably quiet street and the way that guy stood there, alarmed him. Something was wrong. The man was holding a cell phone right next to his ear, in a strange way. And since he owned a smartphone himself, he knew that they weren't used only for calling, but also for texting, pinging, taking pictures and even filming. It looked a lot like he was doing the latter.

Other than himself – better known as former police officer Jan de Jong – and the man at the other side of the street, no one was to be seen here.

Sunk in thought, he was startled by a pigeon that came flapping down, softly landing on his left side. The bird hopped a few times back and forth, and then sat down, completely comfortable, as if she wanted to hatch an egg.

The pigeon looked at him for a moment and apparently decided that this human was harmless.

She tilted her head to the left and watched the man on the other side of the street for a while, after which she turned her little head even further left and stretched her neck, like a passenger wondering what's taking the bus so long. He must have imagined it, he thought. When the pigeon looked at him, it looked like the bird's right eye was focusing, like the lens of a camera.

< 01.02

Not even a mile from there, three black, blinded SUV's drove into the parking garage of the Victory building. The big, heavy tires made gruesome squeaking noises on the smooth concrete floor, until the vehicles came to a halt, near the passenger elevator to the floors above. Each SUV contained five men, dressed in black, who were preparing for action.

The man sitting next to the driver in the first SUV, about thirty-five years old and with broad shoulders, looked at his watch and saw that it was exactly eight o'clock. They were perfectly on time and the code which gave them access to the garage had been correct. He'd had different experiences in the past, with nasty consequences. Pleased, he took his

smartphone, typed: 'reached position, awaiting further instructions' and sent the message.

< 01.03

At the same time, in the penthouse of the Hilton hotel, with a beautiful view of the Peace Palace from her balcony, a woman was sitting on her bed, in front of a laptop, playing with the connected joystick.

Her pretty face, framed with an opulence of blonde hair, was serious, while she was staring at the monitor. Her left hand was tapping softly against the joystick and she was happy she had practiced this so many times, for in the real world it proved to be a bit more challenging than in a testing environment.

A moment later, the groove between her eyebrows disappeared, and she shouted: "I landed!"

She let go of the joystick she had been using to maneuver a small airplane to a landing spot on her monitor and stretched her back, holding her arms up. She did it and she was proud of herself for, after months of crafting and practicing, being able to maneuver all kinds of flying objects so easily.

On the bed next to her sat a muscular Asian man, also controlling a joystick. "How are you doing, Tjan?" His eyes were focused on his monitor and he said something in his mother tongue, which she didn't understand, but it sounded approving.

In order not to disturb him, she laid down, closed her eyes and tried to relax. God, she was relieved it had worked out. She really wanted to do this herself and the responsibility weighed heavily on her. Her lips curled towards a wide smile.

Without noticing, she almost dozed off, until she felt her smartphone vibrating.

She pulled it out of her pocket and read: 'on my way, good luck xxx'. The message came from her best friend and affectionately she thought about that moment, more than twenty years ago, when she had met him. It was forever engraved in her mind, how that big man, with his waving blonde

hair, plucked her from the air before she could fall and be smashed to smithereens. Since then, they were friends for life. She had never met such a sweet, funny, intelligent and through and through sincere man, who could make her laugh time and time again and who was always there for her. Because of him, her life had changed drastically.

She seldom even used her own name. Everyone, including herself, called her Marilyn, after she had attended a 60's party once as Marilyn Monroe and had received many compliments about the spot on resemblance. After she had heard someone say "that an orphan could never come close to the allure of a star" in a self-conceited way, he had helped her with her research about her ancestry. It turned out that she had every right to behave like Marilyn Monroe. He had also helped her with developing her, until then unknown, talents and during the last few years, she had been able to live life to the full.

Although he was her best friend and she trusted him with her life, he was not the love of her life.

Mother Nature had decided that she would feel attracted to women, and to her joy she had found that love four years ago.

Since then she had been overjoyed.

Her girlfriend inspired and supported her, because of which she got great results. From super intelligent devices and systems to all kinds of smart solutions that her friend needed.

Her work would have rewarded her with various Nobel Prizes, but due to the nature of this mission, she couldn't publish her inventions. They were meant exclusively for the close group of people that surrounded her friend and were necessary to change the world.

It made her happy that she could contribute, and even more happy that her big love, born from Indian parents in the USA and now active in her motherland, was involved in the same mission, of which the second part would soon commence. In four days they would see each other again and with a little bit of luck, they would be able to spend a few days together.

She startled out of her daydream when Tjan said: "Pay attention, the finish is almost reached!" She shot up, grabbed her smartphone, selected the only extension number in it and let her thumb hover above the 'send'

button.

On Tjan's laptop they saw a car, driving down an idyllic avenue. The car was only a few feet away from the banner with the word 'Finish' on it, which was strung above the road. "Wait for the bumper to reach the homestretch and then press 'send'", Tjan murmured. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Just mind your own job", she replied, her eyes fixed on the monitor. Both kept staring concentratedly at the monitor, which showed the nose of the car reaching the finish not much later. Marilyn pressed the 'send' button and shouted laughingly: "SHOW TIME!"

< 01.04

A few minutes earlier, an older man had walked out of the same hotel, dragging a large travel suitcase behind him. Slightly wobbling, he used the wheelchair ramp to walk to the waiting cab that had been ordered for him. He handed his suitcase to the driver and got in the back of the car with difficulty.

As soon as he found a comfortable position, he pulled a smartphone out of his inner pocket and turned it on. When the driver asked him where he was heading, he looked up slightly disturbed. In flawless Dutch he answered: "The Hague Central Station, please." Directly after answering, he turned his attention back to his cell phone, which had received a message in the meantime.

His face was showing a satisfied smile when he read it, after which he quickly typed a text message and sent it. He double tapped a small icon quickly, leaned back in a relaxed way and watched the images he now received with interest.

The driver had taken his place behind the steering wheel in the meantime and was just about to accelerate, when the hotel porter stopped him.

Annoyed, he lowered his side window, stuck out his head and shouted with an accent that made it crystal clear that he was from The Hague: "Hey, weirdo! What do you want from me? Get lost!"

The porter didn't say a word, but he pointed towards the exit of the parking garage next to the hotel. A shining, black limousine came out,

and was immediately surrounded by a group of police motorcycles. With their engines roaring heavily, they passed the cab.

The passenger looked up from his display and saw the motorcyclists split up in groups of two, to escort the limousine in a tight formation, after which the procession left off. While muttering curses about the preferred treatment some folks got, the cab driver stepped on the gas and drove off with squeaking wheels.

The porter walked back into the hotel lobby, shaking his head, looking for a guest who would appreciate his service.

< 01.05

Six time zones from there, Robert J. VanderBeek IV, called 'Kingsize Bob' or 'KSB' by many people, lay awake in his well sized bed. With two fluffy pillows supporting his back, he comfortably watched the news on a formidable monitor which was attached to the wall, quite some distance in front of the big bed.

He was carrying a wireless ear plug, to prevent anybody from hearing what he was watching. That was no one's business.

His wife wouldn't disturb him either. They had slept separately for years now and he knew for sure that she wouldn't come and visit him here.

Now and then he took a sip from the beautifully cut glass that he had filled to the brim with X.O. Cognac from his own vineyard, ignoring all etiquette.

No one would tell him what to do, and with his own, unique interpretation of the family motto 'Deo volente' (*God willing*), he took good care of himself.

He had earned many billions of dollars with his companies, but even more important, he had become more influential. He was known as one of the richest cattle farmers in the world.

Other than that, something no one knew, he had huge interests in the oil and arms industry.

Through his business executives, who were totally dependent of him, but for whom he remained the big, unknown Mr. X, he controlled each major

company on the world market. To his deep shock, that suddenly changed two months ago. He blamed himself. Because of his lavish lifestyle of the last ten years, he wasn't as sharp as he used to be. Like a clap of thunder out of a clear sky, within a few days all the people on his secret payroll, working in the top and middle management, were arrested. He had to take drastic precautions immediately, to protect himself and limit the damage as much as possible.

Judging by the evidence, on which he of course managed to put his hands, there must have been whistleblowers within his organization, working with the police and justice departments. Images which could have been captured only by people within the framework were raised as evidence, not to mention the various telephone taps and e-mail messages exchanging incriminating information between his executives.

He had been forced to do a major cleanup and remove all the loose ends that could be connected to him. On all continents, suddenly people went missing and many companies, warehouses and other objects were destroyed. Also, some executives, who he suspected of having acted as whistleblowers, died of food poisoning, heart attacks and curious accidents, even in prison. Up till now, his business executives had executed Operation 'Spic & Span' splendidly. Its last phase would start in less than fifteen minutes.

This final action would increase the general sense of insecurity more than ever and the measures to increase security that resulted from that, would make his bank account grow significantly. He chuckled at the thought of the screaming headlines and the bleating on news channels that would evaluate the big loss to death.

In the meantime, his legal executive had sent an army of top lawyers to make sure that the people who were loyal to him would be released due to lack of evidence, after which they would be fully employable again. An extra advantage was the fact that out of gratitude, they would be of service to him even quicker.

As soon as Operation 'Spic & Span' was done, one of them, a detestable looking man known as 'Casanova', would be flushed down the drain with the wastewater.

Gradually, this arrogant cock had increased his demands and if there was something he loathed, it was greedy folks who thought they could abuse his weakness. The bastard had overplayed his hand and would soon face the consequences. He had already found a replacement, who, as test of his skillfulness, would free him from his Casanova-problem. The little Mexican already let him know that he was in position and ready for action.

The apotheosis of his meticulously planned operation should have been put in motion by now, after which he would be in full control again, as he was used to.

Before he could doze off, under the influence of the excellent cognac, his smartphone vibrated. He was wide awake instantly and the adrenaline rushed through his body. He looked at the small screen and read: <https://everywhereconnected.com/spicandspan.html>

He used the remote control to switch to the internet.

He started Google and typed in the link. He immediately saw the result between a whole bunch of crap movies.

No one could suspect that this particular movie clip would be global news within short notice.

He clicked on the link and the television screen showed the expected panorama.

Waiting for the things that were about to happen and give him so much joyous satisfaction, he shook up the cushions and let himself fall against them comfortably.

< 01.06

Dick could imagine very well that John Bingham, who was sitting next to him on the Chesterfield couch and was the main prosecutor for the International Criminal Court, would be very fond of his office. Situated at the modest courtyard of the Peace Palace, it looked out on the phenomenal fountain.

It was a monumental, nicely decorated room, in which you didn't notice any of the city hassle outside. The combination of the high ceiling,

decorated with beautiful ornaments and paintings, with the oak paneling, emphasized this peaceful atmosphere.

Without a doubt he could work in peace here, at a bit of a distance, but without being completely isolated.

The feisty discussion they were having, though, had nothing to do with work. They both were fervent fly fishers and after a few fishing trips together, a sporting rivalry had arisen and now they tried to outmatch each other with the best self-designed fishing lure. Just the other day, Dick had tried a new one, very successfully. That's what this was about. John tried to find out what Dick had added or altered to his last experiment, but Dick didn't want to reveal any of it. What John didn't know, was that Dick didn't want to admit that the lure was a gift from Hakon for his seventieth birthday, with the remark that Hakon wouldn't now have to listen to Dick's stories about failed attempts anymore.

It was this man, Hakon Torstein Eriksson, director of the [United Nations Bureau of Investigation \(UNBI\)](#), for whom they were waiting. The UNBI was a special service, founded four years ago for the investigation and trial of each entity that was directly or indirectly responsible for war crimes and terrorist attacks against nations and/or individuals.

Yesterday evening, Dick had called him with the urgent request to arrange this special meeting. It was necessary for Hakon to give clarification about the investigation techniques that had been used, as he would be called as the main witness at the International Criminal Court this afternoon. Dick had rescheduled all his appointments in order to make this conversation possible, and had flown all the way from New York for this occasion, after chairing the UN general meeting. It must be something very important if the attendance of the UN secretary was required, and he hoped this would be a one-time thing, as flying around the world at his age wasn't that easy anymore.

< 01.07

Around eight o'clock in the morning, everything was quiet in the canteen on the thirtieth floor of the Victory-building in The Hague, where the Dutch department of Interpol was situated.

The deputy director of UNBI, Lémarc Tasker, was drinking a cup of coffee, accompanied by James Taylor, commissioner at Interpol, before they went to work.

He hadn't liked James at first. James was a pedantic man, always neatly dressed, who liked to show off his latest purchases.

But gradually, Lémarc had come to respect him more and more.

After working together intensively for weeks, the British James turned out to be extremely driven. Police work was in his blood.

For two months now they had been drinking coffee together at eight o'clock every morning, to discuss the outlines of the investigation into the organization called 'Spiderweb'.

Executives in the oil and arms industry and various politicians connected to this worldwide operating conspiracy had been arrested on a large scale, being suspected of, among other things, fraud, encouraging violence and crimes against humanity.

Spiderweb's policy was focused on controlling armed conflicts from an economic point of view, with the purpose of creating a demand for their products, and by doing so, increasing their sales massively. Billions of dollars had already been made this way.

The way it looked now, there was conclusive evidence proving that this organization, by means of intrigue and violence, was responsible for over a hundred armed conflicts and seven wars between various countries.

Africa was considered a perfect training ground to test their weapons and tactics without considering the environment, which would remain polluted and infested for multiple decennia, and without considering the pain they would cause to the people.

There was also evidence indicating that by directing oil embargos, a lot of money had been made and that the shortage that resulted from this had been used as a means to put unwilling governments under pressure. They also believed they would be able to prove that Spiderweb had been responsible for multiple terrorist attacks. These attacks had taken place in order to create a massive sense of insecurity and to force the governments of countries unwilling to start a war, to invest a lot of money in counterterrorism.

They were able to prove that this organization had influenced the legislation around security in many countries by bribing or intimidating politicians.

Based on this evidence, it became clear that a large part of the spiral of violence and environmental pollution in the world was created and maintained by this organization.

The latest headlines stated that it was believed that the entire leadership of the organization had been caught and Spiderweb had been unraveled.

For today, June first, both of their agendas showed that they would attend the witness examination of Haken Torstein Eriksson, the chief investigator for UNBI. The main prosecutor for the International Crime Court, John Bingham, had summoned Hakon in order to clarify how all the evidence had come into UNBI's possession. It was so conclusive and overwhelming that based on it, those responsible would without doubt be condemned. From the quality and quantity of the evidence, one could only conclude that an entire network of whistleblowers would have had to have been responsible. It was unclear however, something the defense would certainly make use of, whether the most important pieces of evidence – video recordings, audio recordings and copies of emails and text messages that had been sent between themselves – would be admitted, because they had mainly been obtained through anonymous sources.

That's what the discussion was about, whether the evidence that was gathered in this way would be legally valid. Some of the suspects declared firmly that some of these recordings were made while they were alone, although the camera angle indicated that the person who was recording, would also have had to have been in the same room. Still, the suspects insisted that they had been completely alone. Images of surveillance cameras in these rooms supported those statements.

For that reason, the main prosecutor wanted to interrogate the chief investigator himself as a witness.

Hakon's testimony would be decisive. If the evidence was eligible to be admitted, the entire process would be nothing more than a formality. If the evidence was deemed unlawful, it would become a difficult case. Based on the rest of the evidence, there wouldn't be much left to work

with. It would mean that further investigation would have to take place, with all the delay that came with it.

Lémarc knew Hakon very well and was confident about the case. James was less convinced and assumed they would still be working together on this case for a long time.

He saw James looking at the clock, eager to demonstrate his newest toy. In a few minutes they would drive to the Peace Palace together in James' new SUV, a special model, equipped with the most modern gadgets to be able to work as efficiently as possible.

James wouldn't stop talking, proud as he was of his new 'command vehicle'.

< 01.08

Sunk deep in thought, the lord of the castle sat on the wide windowsill of the eastern tower of Castle MacMarkland, located on the southernmost island of the Scottish Inner Hebrides. From here, he had a nice view of the harbor of the fishing village that was situated below. He liked to watch the activity before the boats set sail. But today, he had more important things to do. Holding a mug full of steaming, hot coffee, he was eating a sandwich with smoked salmon.

While eating, his mind had wondered off to the past. To the horror of more than ten years ago, which he miraculously survived. That experience had changed him. No, not so much changed as it had made him aware. It had opened his eyes and since then, he tried to live as healthily and responsibly as possible.

He also tried to limit his whisky consumption. Quitting was out of the question. Impossible! As a descendant from an ancient noble Scottish family, he owned a few distilleries which produced excellent, if not the best, Scottish whiskies in the world.

As had been the tradition for hundreds of years, each vintage was pre-tested by the lord of the castle himself. Only after his approval would the whisky receive the famous Markland seal of the castle lord, Lord Alasdair Murdoc MacMarkland. In the past, he had enjoyed his own product more

than once and that gotten quite out of hand at times, but now he managed to keep himself under control. A maximum of one glass per evening, two on holidays. One should still stay alive, shouldn't one? After all, whisky – 'Uisge Beatha' in Scottish – meant 'water of life' and with the many vintages that had to be tested, he got his royal share of it. In a few days it would be time for the semi-annual tasting again.

After the official part was done and all the VIPs had left, the rest of the day would be spent in private. A gentle female voice interrupted his thoughts. He left his coffee mug on the windowsill, walked towards his luxurious chair, which had stood in the throne room downstairs for centuries, but had now been moved up here, and sat down comfortably. From this chair, all his ancestors, who were portrayed imposingly in the numerous paintings that adorned the walls in his castle, had made important decisions.

And in a few minutes, a piece of world history would be written in which he was involved himself.

To honor the tradition, he wanted to witness this while sitting in this chair, dressed, as prescribed, in a kilt that had been passed from father to son for generations.

Despite the great age of the garment, the three colors of his tartan (*checked, woolen fabric with a family motif*) were still bright, and with the sporran (*purse*) in front of the crotch and the sgian-dubh (*Scottish knife*) tucked into the right sock, he looked pretty impressive.

Affectionately he thought about his son, who would be the next bearer at some extremely special occasions. Just like himself, when he got dressed this morning, his son, too, would feel the strong connection with his ancestors. Despite the pleasant temperature in the room, he got goosebumps when thinking back to that moment. Today, his own father would be proud of him. With a smile, he looked sideways.

For this occasion, all things considered a holiday, a glass of the finest whisky was already waiting. Self-conscious and full of expectations, he looked forwards.

The chair he was sitting in, was placed in such a way that he had a perfect view of the wall that was completely covered by the GRID, a supersized monitor which was divided in three areas.

The left one showed the world map, with the names of places and people underneath it, which changed position as the situation progressed. Each person was indicated by his or her nickname, or when there wasn't any, an alias which Sandra had come up with, based on their characteristics.

To make it even more clear, together with each name, an avatar representing the person or object was also shown. At a glance you could see where and by whom each activity was being executed.

The right part was split in two, the upper part consisting of twelve different image areas.

The lower part was reserved for the report. That part showed, right down to the second, which activities were going on, who were involved and what the status was. All activities, files, objects and persons were connected, and each change was directly converted to one clear image. This made him able to see directly what was going on and if he needed to intervene.

He looked at the progression. The operation had been active for a few minutes now. The start was led by Sandra, who would have resolved and reported any problems before he could even blink his eyes. Still, he wanted to be present himself now to follow the progress.

He was convinced that the outcome would be successful, since all available means had been employed at the same time, and he was proud to be the first who would have the complete overview.

Sandra politely asked for his attention a second time.

After a courteous break, she briefly summarized the operation so far, directly followed by the current status. She affirmed what he had seen on the GRID. He thanked her and asked her to inform him about the most important movements in-between. While looking at the images one by one, his attention was caught primarily by the image of an imposing man with a horribly marked face, standing in a porch. It looked like he was calling with his cell phone. The corresponding avatar showed his personal data and on the left side of it, he saw the connected nickname 'Casanova' and the information that he was currently in The Netherlands. In the porch of Villa Turquoise, Scheveningseweg, The Hague, to be exact. The image was razor sharp. He looked at the area next to it, to

look at the images that, as he was aware, were made by the man at this exact moment.

In the textbox he read that the recording was being transferred to a different part of the world by satellite. The clear recording showed a wide street. On both sides of it, there were trees, with various benches placed between them. On one of them, sat an old man. A short distance from him, sat a pigeon.

With his full attention he kept watching, waiting tensely.

< 01.09

On the eighty-first floor of the telecom building of one of the biggest commercial news organizations in New York, [International News Network \(INN\)](#), sat Barbara Kronkite, peacefully enjoying the quietness in the editorial department.

Her old, small world receiver, which she had gotten from her grandmother and carried with her on her trips around the world, was tuned in to her favorite jazz channel.

Although her employer claimed to be a 24-hour channel, normally no live shows were broadcast between midnight and five a.m. Only repeats were broadcast then, and thus the entire department was deserted, except for her.

She was listening to the music and leaned back lazily in her worn out chair, letting her legs dangle over an extended drawer of her desk. Her carelessly kicked out shoes lay on the floor beneath it.

With her eyes half closed, she enjoyed the small sips of coffee that she took from the big mug in her hand. Her feet moved to the rhythm of the music automatically, while her thoughts wandered off to the work she had just finished.

Her investigation had started after she had received a message from her most important tipster. Although she still hadn't been able to figure out who that was, it had given her a wonderful scoop on a case that would become known as Spiderweb. Since then, so incredibly much had been discovered, that Spiderweb had become one of the most important news

items of the century. It turned out to be a widespread organization, which appeared to not only be involved with abuse of power and environmental offenses, but also with arms trafficking and terrorist attacks.

Also, the suspicion that Spiderweb would have had to have something to do with 09/11 became stronger and stronger. Now, after two months of full-time research, her work as an investigative journalist was done and she had finally finished organizing and archiving this huge pile of information.

Tomorrow the International Criminal Court would commence this sensational case. She had wished the chief investigator, Hakon Eriksson, who was a close friend of hers, good luck via a text message. She thought about some of the pictures and witness testimonies that she had seen during her investigation and truly hoped he would pull it off. The reporting of it, which she would of course follow, would be done by colleagues, so that she would be able to focus on other cases. She still had some cases on the shelves, but they were a mere pittance compared to Spiderweb. She yawned and saw the big clock on the wall indicating that it was a quarter to two. It was time to go home.

< 01.10

After a quiet night, the change of shifts had taken place smoothly, and it was only a few minutes past eight when the head nurse of the emergency department (ED) walked through the new fire doors from her department, into the hall of the Elisabeth Hospital in The Hague, and stood there for a second. The sound-insulating partitions were removed, and all the doors leading to other departments were wide open for ventilation. It was the first time for five months she stood here, and she looked at the result of this renovation with pleasure.

The enormously spacious hall of this monumental hospital looked marvelous. From outside she had already seen that the facade, which was richly decorated with ornaments, had been restored to its former glory, together with the ornate gutters. Now, she could see that the marble floor and the paintings on the ceiling had also been restored to

their original state. Luckily, it had also been decided to leave the high windows intact.

The upper part of the twenty windows still consisted of stained glass, each window showing a scene from biblical and national history.

The morning sun, shining through, brought the colors to life and the entire picture was truly wonderful.

The walls were decorated with tapestries, and works of art were spread across the room. In the newsletter they received every month, she had read that only natural materials like wood, cotton and silk had been used, and that they should represent life. They had been made by local and national artists. Some of the works had also been made by celebrities who had a certain connection with this hospital.

The showpiece was a bust of Elisa Elisabeth, sculpted by the former queen who had been born in this hospital. She thought everything fitted together nicely. The carefully selected seats made the room look not only posh, but also cozy. She admired the designer who had made it such a tasteful whole.

The only thing that was changed architecturally was the entrance. The immensely heavy wooden doors were replaced by a wide, automatic revolving door made of glass. An improvement even, for this enhanced the spacious feeling even further and made the shine and color look even better.

Tomorrow, the queen would officially open the hall, so right now, all was still nice and quiet. Other than herself, only two other people were in the room. A receptionist, who was making a telephone call behind the counter, and a janitor, who was busy with a cleaning machine. She wished them both a good morning and walked on, hoping her husband would already be there to pick her up. She was tired. Although most of the nights went by without any incidents worth mentioning, the night shifts began to take their toll. She wanted to discuss with him what to do about that shortly. The problem was that they could really use the extra money, now that her husband had had to claim sickness benefit because of a burnout. He was improving, but only slowly, and getting his old job back was out of the question. Well, she would have the next few days off, and maybe they would find a solution.

She walked outside, through the revolving door, and already saw their ten-year-old Volvo waiting in the disabled parking space in front of the sidewalk. Basically, that wasn't allowed, but the parking attendants knew her, and they knew that her husband was only here briefly to pick her up.

Despite her tiredness, she walked light-footedly down the five steps of the terrace, and around the flowerbed that perked up the front of the hospital. It was arranged in the form of a heart and was well kept with seasonal plants.

In the middle stood a marble pedestal with a statue of Elisa Elisabeth on it, the nun after whom the hospital was named. It held out one arm in a stretched position, inviting you to walk in. Weathered and smeared with bird droppings, the life-size bronze statue had stood there for a hundred years. While passing by, she noticed how nice everything smelled here. She stopped, and with her head bent backwards, she deeply inhaled the rich, flowery smell.

It promised to be a beautiful day and she would suggest to her husband, that in the late afternoon, after she had slept, they go for a stroll and picnic in the dunes of Scheveningen.

And after that, she would have another four days off, splendid!

< 01.11

Jan de Jong forgot about his coffee, which was slowly cooling down. The package with his 'gevulde koek' lay next to it, untouched.

"Jan, dear boy, you're imagining things", he muttered to himself. "Whatever is happening today, a pigeon is just a pigeon. Stay focused, will you?"

The last echo of the church bells had died, leaving a silence. He looked around attentively once more. Other than the guy on the other side of the street, there was no one to be seen and nothing to be heard. Even the bird at a short distance from him sat silent as a rock, and an unpleasant, worrying feeling came over him.

It seemed as if the whole area around him held its breath, and would burst out in a roaring rage within a few moments.

He was about to stand up and have a little chat with the guy on the other side of the street, when he heard the humming sound of motorcycles coming from a distance, growing louder and louder.

Just like the pigeon, he looked to his left, and from the side road he saw a motorcycle escort approaching. Four motorcycles at the front, followed by a shiny, black limousine, with behind it four other motorcycles. There was about 60 feet between the motorcycles and the car, he estimated.

Now he understood why it had been so quiet. This whole area had been closed to traffic.

It had to be a very important person who was on his way. He saw that the crossroads further up, behind the escort, was now being blocked by police cars, and scanned the roofs of the residences along the road to see if there were any scouts and sharpshooters. Bingo. Because of his police background, he knew what to look for, and although they were hidden very well, he was still able to discover a few.

Before he could wonder why he and the ugly guy had been able to do as they pleased without being interrupted, he heard a helicopter flying low overhead. He recognized the AH-64A Apache, the most important fighter helicopter of the American military forces, and he saw that it was fully ready for action. In the distance, another one of those was flying, keeping an eye on the motorcycle escort.

He looked at the procession again, saw that it was moving slowly and estimated it would take about half a minute before it would reach him. Enough time to observe the ugly guy, whom he still didn't trust. The longer he watched the man, the more it gave him the chills. He was sure the man was still secretly filming. He didn't know what to think of it. Was he perhaps a paparazzo? He seemed vaguely familiar, but Jan couldn't quite get a grip on who he was.

The pigeon, strangely enough still sitting peacefully a short distance from him, was looking in the same direction. Strange bird.

The motorcyclist at the front had now passed him and he watched the limousine curiously.

He was able to see that the person in the back was reading a newspaper and the moment the shiny car slowly drove passed him, he could see the

passenger's profile.

When the man turned his head towards him, he saw the charming face and a flash of recognition came over him.

A wave of memories came up and, in a reflex, he waved until it dawned on him that he was looking with his mouth open, while the car had already driven by.

Wonder-stricken by the strange coincidence that he saw this man here, so early in the morning, after more than ten years, he kept staring at the procession.

< 01.12

Barbara hadn't found the strength yet to get up and get moving. The huge task had been done and each snippet of information had been meticulously archived.

She listened satisfied to the jazzy music and wanted this moment of relaxation to last for as long as possible. She looked at the clock again. Only a few minutes left before it would be two o'clock. Whatever, what would it matter? It was not the first time she'd be home late. She had no husband, no kids, no pets waiting for her. Not even a goldfish, she thought to herself with a smile. It was a good thing, for she was a real night owl and didn't mind working evenings at all. During these times, at least one didn't get interrupted all the time. The computer system also worked more quickly after eight, so you could make some good progress. And there was another advantage: when something happened on the other side of the world, she would be the first one to notice it. She had gotten some nice scoops this way more than once. But for now, she was going to call it a day.

This morning she had been the first one to enter the office, as she had wanted to organize and archive all the Spiderweb data as neatly as possible. Unfortunately, she hadn't managed to do so entirely, so after a short pizza break, she had continued her task.

She put her arms back as far as possible, stretched out comfortably, took her legs off the drawer and grabbed her shoes. While squeezing into

them, she threw away the empty cup and turned off her little radio. She grabbed her bag and was already on her way to the exit when she remembered her smartphone was still laying on her desk. She went back to get the bright yellow device and was just about to stow it in her bag, when the thing started jingling.

It appeared to be a text message from her most important tipster and it would no doubt be worth her attention. She opened it right away and saw that it was about an internet address.

She ran back excitedly, threw her bag on the ground next to her chair and turned on the computer. She opened the browser and typed the link. A page with a movie clip on it appeared. As soon as the page was loaded, she activated a program which would copy the clip right away. Impatiently drumming on the desk with her fingers, she waited for the first images to appear. She was full of curiosity. What was shown to her a few seconds later, however, was less sensational than she had expected. The recording showed an older gentleman, who was sitting on a bench, looking around. Judging by the trees along the road, it had to be summer. And still early, for there was no traffic at all. A short distance from him, a pigeon had settled down. The bird mimicked all the man's movements, which was a funny thing to see. The surroundings reminded her of a park, with a long, wide avenue leading to a massive, stylish country house. It might have had been a palace as well.

Wait! In a flash she remembered the monthly INN-magazine each employee received via email. She paused the clip and opened her inbox. With the cursor she scanned the index and she had soon found the article she had remembered. Just two mouse clicks and there it was. The article was about Ewin Lefoors, who became a foreign correspondent in The Netherlands, after having been a war correspondent for twenty years. Right next to the article, there was a picture of him, posing in front of the Peace Palace in The Hague. There he would start his new job, which was reporting about the Spiderweb trial. This palace was the building that she saw in the movie clip.

She complimented herself on her memory, let the recording continue and saw the screen moving slowly to the right.

In the distance, motorcycles came from around a corner. They were followed by a limousine, with even more motorcycles behind it. She believed she caught a glimpse of the license plate, clicked on the 'pause' button and rewound the clip slightly. Yes, there it was. Just the first part was shown very briefly, but she could distinguish the letters UN quite clearly. Now she knew what she was looking at! This was without a doubt Hakon, being escorted to the International Criminal Court. How had her tipster found out about that? And how was it possible that this had been recorded? These were unique images! Without even thinking for a second, she paused the image again and called her boss. He picked up the phone and with a sleepy voice, he growled hoarsely: "Yes, where is the fire?" She told him who he was talking to and explained in a few sentences what she was on to. In order to present this as a scoop in a Breaking News item, she needed support. Even though he didn't sound fully awake yet, he didn't hesitate for a second. He would take care of it right away.

Just to be sure, he would also call her assistant and the standby team, a small core team consisting of technicians and reporters.

There was a thud, followed by a murmured curse, after which he hung up. She chuckled as she put the cell phone away, took the camcorder out of her drawer in a hurry and put it on a pile of old newspapers. After that, she connected it to her computer, so that her report would be sent to the server instantly and would be available right away.

She turned the camcorder slightly, in order to not only see herself in the display, but also the monitor of her computer. At the same time, her hand was going through her bag, until she found her make-up purse. She quickly improved her appearance with the help of a comb, lip gloss and powder box, and turned the camcorder back on. This was a great scoop and the whole world would know it was hers.

She let the recording continue and saw that the procession had driven around the corner now, slowly approaching.

In a routine manner, she started describing the images and giving background information. The technicians would be able to prepare an interesting news item from both her report and the movie clip and if it

proved to be worth the effort, which she had no doubt about, it would appear as Breaking News on many TVs all over the world.

STRICKEN

< 02.01

Unbelievable, Jan thought. Those reporters really were everywhere, whether it was for tabloids or news reporting. In his day it had been like that occasionally as well, but nowadays you'd more likely see a reporter than a police officer. Technology may have had progressed rapidly, but the world itself was deteriorating with the same speed. It became harsher and more corrupt each day. Security services were simply as leaky as a sieve.

That guy on the other side of the street was simply working. Employed or as a freelancer, he didn't care. It was all the same to him. Thank God he was retired and had nothing to do with it anymore. Shaking his head, he watched the procession reach the crossroads with Carnegie Square in front of the Peace Palace, about 300 feet from him. The reporter would probably be done by now and might like a cup of coffee. If he had a chance to chat with him, he would remember where he knew him from. Besides, he was kind of curious about how things went in the world of media.

He stood up, took another look at the motorcycle escort and saw that the front motorcyclists had already driven up the square, while the limousine turned right, towards the Peace Palace.

At the same moment, it was as if lightning struck and he heard a deafening bang. The limousine had turned into a big fireball. It was as if the car had turned into a fire breathing dragon. It flew a couple of feet up in the air and came down on the street with a big thud. Despite his long time working for the police, during which he had experienced a situation or two, he was now completely overwhelmed. He lost control of his body and collapsed in front of the bench. He couldn't move anymore, and he felt a warm stream of air, combined with a smoky, rubberlike, biting smell, slide across his face. He automatically registered the falling of the motorcyclists who, full of bruises and in blackened scraps of clothes, dazedly tried to get up in an attempt to reach the limousine. The latter was laying crumpled on the crossroads and burned like a torch. The fire came for a large part from the interior of the car and was so hot that the passengers weren't likely to have any chance at all.

The doors of the car stayed closed.

He wondered what took the reporter so long. The guy should call for help! Jan turned his head to the left with difficulty and could just see the man put his smartphone in his inner pocket, turn around with an ugly grin and walk away in the opposite direction. He didn't understand. Where was the man going? No one could be that antisocial, right?

He tried to scream, but it was useless. It was as if his body was torn from his head. He heard himself whisper: "Not him, not him." He cried and felt all the energy being drained from his body.

He lay in front of the bench like a rag doll and witnessed, without being able to move, how the pigeon flew away in the sunlight, its wings flapping.

If this had only been a dove of peace, he thought sadly, as he sunk further away, into a blackening emptiness.

< 02.02

The taxi driver steered his cab skillfully through the busy peak traffic in The Hague. During the ride, his physically slightly disabled passenger was watching a movie. Probably not a very interesting one. He had caught a glimpse of a burning car, before the man had turned off the movie to send a couple of text messages. Like many of his colleagues, he started a conversation and asked his customer if he had been in The Hague for business or pleasure.

The man looked up disturbed and for a moment it seemed as if he didn't remember where he was. "No, no, neither. I was visiting family and going home now."

He turned off his cell phone and sagged down with his eyes closed. That's as clear as it gets, the driver thought, although he had wanted to ask the man what action movie he had been watching. He left him be and not much later he drove up the station square. He parked the cab, pulled the suitcase out and put it on the sidewalk. The man got out of the car with some effort and paid for his services.

Apparently, the man was in a hurry, for he could keep the change. For such a royal tip, I would have carried his suitcase, he thought while staring at the man, who dragged his suitcase to the entrance, walking with difficulty. It was no use going after him to help, for although the man had difficulty walking, he moved pretty quickly. He looked at his tip once more. "I wish all customers were so easy and generous."

He turned around and by the time he sat in front of the steering wheel again, he had already forgotten about the man.

< 02.03

In the parking garage of the Victory building, three dark black SUVs were parked as close to the elevator as possible. The people in the cars, big guys who were unrecognizable in their uniform clothing, were quietly waiting. Not a word was said.

As if on command, they all moved at the same time, to look at the little display they were carrying around their arms. They all read: 'Proceed to status 1. Expected deployment in a few minutes.'

< 02.04

With a sigh of relief, the Slavic man turned off his phone. He took the sim card out and bit it into pieces, which he threw away. While putting the smartphone in his inner pocket, he looked briefly at the result of his work. He turned around laughing and walked away casually in the opposite direction, leaving the black column of smoke which was slowly swirling up behind.

He was in a fine mood. An artist, he was. One that had just said goodbye with a grand finale. He had pulled it off and had instantly gained several million dollars. In one blow, to put it like that. We laughed wholeheartedly. When he had gotten this assignment, it had seemed like an impossible job, but he had managed to find experienced specialist who had done their part even better than he dared hope. This was just perfect. He had proposed to his employer to just take the man out with a sniper rifle, but

his employer would have none of it. He wanted it this way, or not at all. He had shrugged and said that everything was possible, as long as the price was right, and he increased his price enormously.

He knew very well that there weren't that many people who could execute such a specialized wish. Everything had gone as expected. His client had agreed with his terms.

And now he had lived up to his reputation for the last time. The impact that his last deed would have, forced him into retirement. That's why he had so openly shown himself and had recorded himself at the end of the video. Too bad the elderly man on the other side of the street had collapsed. A witness would have been nice this time, although he must admit that he was surprised.

According to his information, the entire area should have had been cleared, also of pedestrians. Well, it didn't matter anymore.

This is where his career ended and soon the whole world would know who he was. His name would be written in history books. There would also be a high price on his head. He would become an outlaw, and everyone would go looking for him. In vain, of course. In Brazil, a whole new face was waiting for him. He would disappear to fully enjoy his second life, with a new and more attractive appearance. A rich, carefree life. But now he needed to hurry. His contact wouldn't wait for him. He quickened his pace.

The massive headache he had had when waking up this morning, had luckily diminished. It was as a result of last night, when he had a few drinks too many in a bar in the Red-Light District of The Hague. He was a fanatical supporter of the soccer club from his hometown. In his youth, the many punch-ups with the supporters of the rival second club of the town had hardened him, and he had become quite skillful in street fighting, which had automatically led to what he was doing nowadays.

Yesterday evening, his club had played in the Champions League. Because his opinion was that you should either enjoy a soccer match in the stadium itself or with a group of supporters, he had been looking for a bar where a lot of his fellow countrymen came. The Netherlands was a multicultural society where each ethnic group had some kind of meeting point of their own, and it hadn't taken him long to find a suitable place.

Against all expectations, his club had won, which had made him stay a bit longer. Although he had kept a bit of a distance, he had enjoyed himself tremendously and drank one too many to the victory.

Nothing was wrong with him, until he tried to get up and was hindered by a drunken supporter. Not even a fellow countryman, but a shabby Italian who had reeked like the sewers in Paris. No, even worse, because compared to him, the sewers would have smelled like Eau de Cologne. That filthy guy with his horrible accent had persisted with a loud voice to toast with him. So as not to draw attention, he had agreed. He had no idea what he had drunk, but it had definitely tasted as disgusting as it looked.

Thinking about it gave him the chills. If he hadn't had this assignment, he would have treated the guy to a different drink, from the urinals, that was. The guy had been lucky.

As soon as he had gotten up, the victory drunkenness had been driven away by a massive headache. That last glass had not fallen well.

A few aspirins had helped him suppress the worst part, but the muffled pounding had annoyingly persisted. By now he had reached the crossroads which were blocked by the police. The police officers were hurrying towards the disaster area. Like he had expected, they paid him no attention.

He discreetly mingled among the employees of the Peace Palace, who were kept at a distance, and a bit later walked on, unnoticed, without being bothered.

< 02.05

"Alright, let's start with a cup of tea", Torstein said. He put the tray carefully on the big terrace table and let himself slump into a chair.

It was only nine o'clock, but the sun had been up for nearly five hours and it was getting quite warm on the banks of the Numedalslågen in Kongsberg, Norway.

"Did it go alright?", Marit asked while setting the table for the both of them. The day before yesterday he had made a sudden movement,

which had caused him a backache. Despite that, he had been weeding the kitchen garden this morning. “Yes, I’m alright. I can still feel it, but it seems like I’m improving”, he lied.

His wife of course knew him longer than today, but he didn’t want to openly admit that it still hurt quite a bit. Nonetheless, he’d choose pain and a well-kept garden over rest and seeing weeds spring up everywhere. Marit looked like she was assessing him. “Well, in that case you can pour us some tea while I take the baguettes out of the oven, alright?” She walked towards the house. “That’s what you get for it”, he grumbled good-naturedly to himself, while putting a spoonful of honey in each cup and pouring tea over it. When you’re married for this long, you just know each other too well. But he hadn’t lied. Not really. The hour of weeding had actually done him good. Besides, the kitchen garden was looking well-nurtured as well now. He sat down contently. From here, he had a wide view of the broad river that bordered their garden.

At the jetty lay a beauty of a two-master. It was owned by the family and had a long history. The sunrays shone askew along the front mast and proudly he established that she looked just fine. His grandson, who would come over in a couple of days, could be happy.

It looked like some nice days lay ahead and of course they would go sailing. The only downside in his opinion was that Hakon still hadn’t managed to find a wife or serious girlfriend.

He didn’t understand. His grandson was a good kid and when he still lived here, there had been plenty of nice girls who were interested in him. Hearing his name being called interrupted his thinking.

Eric, his neighbor and best friend, came walking towards him, holding a piece of paper in the air. That meant that Hakon hadn’t been able to call, and therefore had sent an email to the neighbors. They didn’t own a computer themselves. He knew all about what was possible with one, but he and Marit didn’t consider it necessary to buy one. The old phone hanging in their hallway was working just fine and would remain their only connection to the outside world. Therefore Eric, or sometimes his grandson Sven, who lived with them, occasionally came by with a printed version of a digital message.

Normally, his grandson called every three days, and often, mostly to please Marit, he’d send postcards from the place where he was staying.

Marit collected those postcards and already had several scrapbooks full of them. As soon as she received a postcard, she'd try to imagine what it would be like there, and often when she would ask Hakon about it later, she had been right about it as well. She didn't feel a need to travel herself. She said the postcards were enough for her and this way, the world came to her, instead of the other way around.

Marit had noticed Eric as well, and walked up the terrace with him, holding the baguettes, plates, cups and cutlery. While pouring him some tea, Eric sat down and came to the point right away. That was typical of his friend. A true torrent of speech. "Even before having breakfast, Sven took a look at his email. He had a whole list of new messages and there was one for you as well. Sven and I suspect Hakon has made some kind of mistake. It's a very strange message. We don't understand any of it. Here, have a look yourself." He handed the print to Torstein, who received it with curiosity.

The white piece of paper showed only one sentence containing three words.

< 02.06

Apart from John's continuing questions about his new fly lure, the stylish room of the main prosecutor was a nice place to spend your time.

To escape from it for a bit, he had allowed himself to be poured a nice cup of Dutch coffee. In the meantime, he tried hard to find a different subject to talk about. "... don't you think so, Dick?", John asked, looking at him and waiting for an answer.

Before the silence had a chance to become embarrassing, he was saved by a text message that he received on his smartphone. He gestured John to have some patience, put his cup of coffee down on the small table next to him and took out his cell phone. The message came from Hakon, for whom they had been waiting. It was a short message. One sentence, containing only three words.

< 02.07

After an introductory description of the panorama, beautifully shone over by a kind morning sun, Barbara had revealed some minutiae about the Peace Palace. She was still speaking her final sentence, telling the viewers that the International Court of Justice was based here, when the angle of the recording suddenly changed and she saw Hakon sitting in the back of the limousine. He was reading a newspaper and briefly looked outside before reading further. The perspective moved smoothly back, and she saw the procession drive further. It drove by the bench with the older man sitting on it, still accompanied by the pigeon. Both of them were staring at the procession. Apparently, the man had recognized Hakon, for he held up his arm in a greeting. With a commentary voice which was pleasant to listen to, she explained who Hakon was and where he was escorted to. That explanation was followed by a summary of the Spiderweb process, until suddenly there was a bright flash.

With her eyes wide open and her face pale white, she stuttered: "Www... Oh ... No ... This can't be true." Completely dazzled she stared at the screen and repeated whisperingly: "Oh, God. No, this can't be true ..."
Tears welled up in her eyes and with her mouth convulsively contracted so she wouldn't cry, she moaned again: "Oh, God ..."
While her voice was fading away slowly, she became fully aware of the fact that a close friend had just been killed in a horrible way.

< 02.08

Kingsize Bob had happily watched the images and was ecstatic about the spectacle. He excitedly swallowed his cognac in one big gulp and bellowed loudly.

Just before the end, he saw Casanova's ugly face, grinning like he had won the jackpot, after which the movie clip ended and the internet page reappeared.

He closed the browser with a frown, opened it again and typed the link into the search bar once more. The movie clip wasn't there anymore. The link had disappeared, and every trace with it. Casanova might be a greedy, ugly bastard, but he was good at his job. And although he could

be extremely violent, he apparently also had some kind of artistic talent. The movie clip he had just watched with joy, had been clear, without any interruptions of the screen, and taken from the right angle. It was a pity he had become too cheeky and had to be removed from the payroll.

He knew that his new fixer would go into action and carry out his first assignment. It didn't matter to him how it was done, as long as it was done within half an hour after Casanova had finished. Relying on the reputation of the man, he didn't expect any problems to arise. He didn't know what to think of Casanova's latest move, but decided not to worry about it. In half an hour, Casanova wouldn't be able to cause any trouble at all anymore.

He switched back to the TV. It wouldn't take long before the first shocking images would be broadcast.

< 02.09

In the Carlton Ambassador hotel, Ewin LeFoors was satisfied, after having a delicious breakfast. When he was in The Hague, he always stayed in this luxurious hotel. Today, it was just perfect, as this was the day the Spiderweb trial would start, and the Court of Justice wasn't far from here.

Since he quit his job as a war correspondent for INN two months ago, he basically lived in The Netherlands.

The moment the unraveling of the Spiderweb conspiracy had commenced, he had decided to quit. After having been a war correspondent for more than twenty years, he had just had it. He was tired of the irregular lifestyle, tired of the traveling, tired of the violence and, well, basically tired of everything. Both physically and mentally he just couldn't pull through anymore.

INN wanted an experienced, dedicated correspondent here in The Hague, and had offered him the position. He had taken this opportunity with both hands, to the delight of his wife and children.

Although the last two months had been hectic – arranging his family's emigration from Wisconsin to The Hague and getting trained on his new

job – this wasn't that big a deal.

Especially not compared to the enormous stress you were confronted with as a war correspondent. Next week his inventory would arrive and his family the week after. Despite all the pre-arrangements, he was more relaxed than he had been in years and was already looking forward to soon leading a normal family life.

His cameraman sat down with him and a little while later, he listened fascinatedly as Charles showed him all that was possible with his new camera.

A mighty handy device, which could send all material via satellite, right to the editorial office in New York. Much better than having to carry a radio-beam transmitter all the time. Should problems still arise, the recordings would be saved and automatically sent as soon as the connection was re-established. In a moment they would test everything, in order to be able to report live from the court room this afternoon. Testing the equipment wouldn't take too much time. Hard- and software became more advanced by the day.

He thought back to his first mobile phone, a huge device with a separate battery. In those days it was a technical wonder and looking at how quickly technology had advanced, he wondered what would be possible in ten years. A cell phone with all the applications you could possibly imagine and with a huge storage capacity fitted easily in a pocket of your pants nowadays. Rotary dial telephones had become an oddity. As had kids without a cell phone.

Chuckling to himself, he drank his tea and was just about to suggest to Charles to get on their way, when he heard a muffled bang. He almost choked as memories of Iraq and Afghanistan popped up, where he had been working during the past ten years. He was certain this was an explosion. He was familiar with the sound and couldn't believe this was happening here in The Hague.

Astonished, he looked at Charles, who stared back at him with big eyes full of disbelief. They shot up at the same time and moved directly to the hallway, wondering where the bomb had exploded.

This was probably an attack on an embassy. But which one? There were so many in this neighborhood that it was no use visiting them all.

They quickly agreed that he would go to his room to see if he could discover anything from his balcony.

Charles would drive the car out of the parking garage in the meantime and wait for him in front of the hotel. He was lucky, as the elevator was already downstairs, so he could go up right away.

He was even more lucky, since the maid had just opened his door to start her cleaning activities. He almost knocked her down in his hurry to reach the balcony.

He pulled the facade doors open and saw the column of smoke, in dark contrast with the sky.

It didn't take him a lot of effort to orientate himself and he came to the conclusion that this must be near the Peace Palace.

He ran out of his room, into the hallway again, and noticed his lucky streak was over. The elevator was already on its way down.

Without thinking, he ran to the stairwell and rushed down the stairs. Because he had picked up jogging again from the moment he had moved to The Netherlands, he reached the hall sweaty, but not noteworthy tired.

Through the revolving doors he could already see Charles waiting in their brand new car with the notable INN logo.

< 02.10

To his annoyance, chief inspector Johan Lam, crisis and disaster manager in this region, had only been told yesterday evening that Dick Holyester, UN secretary, had suddenly decided to visit The Netherlands.

Because his department was responsible for the security of all government buildings and embassies, including all their high ranked employees and visitors, both national and international, he had been sitting at his desk in the crisis center from seven o'clock this morning. It had become night work to make all the necessary arrangements and the alarm clock had started its annoying beeping sound way too early for his liking.

He had started by checking the agreements that had been made last

night, and had by now received confirmation that the secretary had been safely taken from the airport to the Peace Palace. No problems, no oddities.

By now his third cup of coffee of today was standing in front of him. He enjoyed the last puff of his thin cigar and blew the smoke towards the wide open window, after which he closed it and took his computer off sleep mode. By now his employees came trickling in.

He heard them wishing each other a good morning while looking for their workspaces. There were sounds of bags being put on the floor, computers being switched on, papers rustling and muffled talking.

The daily routine had started, and he opened the most important file, which he had laid next to his cup of coffee and hadn't taken his eyes off for a second.

Other than the usual work, there was one case that required maximum coordination and security, namely the transportation of Hakon Eriksson, chief investigator for UNBI.

He had to be escorted from his hotel to the Peace Palace and, one hour later, from there to the building of the International Criminal Court, a bit further up.

He had insisted on using his own car, and because it met all security demands, like bulletproof windows and special tires, this request had been agreed upon. Eight motorcyclists from the Military Police had been assigned to escort the vehicle and two Apache helicopters would keep an eye on the procession from the air.

To avoid any risks, the transport had been prepared in secret and there were only a few people who knew the departure time and route.

He watched as the escort was grouping around the limousine, after which the procession started moving.

Everything's going just fine, he thought cheerfully, while he kept watching the boring images that were sent from the Apaches.

He had just decided that it was time to start answering his mail, when he saw the limousine turn into a fireball in front of his eyes. Full of disbelief, he kept staring at the monitor for a few seconds, before he managed to tear his eyes off the horrible images and shot up. With shivers crawling down his spine, he ordered his employees, who were all staring at their

monitors like statues, to call the central control room, which needed to send security services and the police to the catastrophe.

Also, John Bingham and Dick Holyester needed to be informed. In the meantime, his hands seemed to have grabbed the telephone by themselves and dialed the mayor's telephone number. As soon as he was informed, Johan would also tell commissioner Schenk about the situation.

With his telephone stuck to his ear, he watched the disaster on his monitor with sad eyes.

< 02.11

John had forgotten all about fly fishing and the desired lure, and saw Dick looking frowningly at the display of his cell phone. "What's up? Don't tell me Hakon has cancelled our appointment." "No, it's not that", Dick replied. "He sent me a message in Latin, saying..." "In Latin? That's strange. No, that's...", he said, when the door burst open. They turned around simultaneously and saw John's assistant standing in the doorway, gasping and with tears in her eyes.

This must be something bad, John thought. During the twenty years she had worked for him, he had only seen her like this once. That had been at the start of his career. He was still a lawyer, and she was already his assistant.

Back then, a fatal accident had happened in front of her eyes and she had stood in his office in exactly the same way, with the same desperate expression on her face. She walked falteringly into the room and stuttered: "It's terrible. Oh, God, so sad ..."

Tears welled up in her eyes, rolling slowly down. John grabbed her by the arm and led her to the couch, where she sat down. He laid his hand comforting on hers and gave her his handkerchief, wondering what could have happened.

He had sent her to the doorman to wait for Hakon, so she could escort him here. Full of empathy, John watched how she sat there huddled up, and crying silently.

“Dick, be a good sport and get a glass of water, will you?”, he asked. He was reaching for his smartphone on the coffee table, in order to call his second assistant, when the phone started ringing. He picked it up, listened for a moment and stiffened. Dejectedly he looked at Dick and said in a monotonous voice: “There has been an attack ... on Hakon.”

< 02.12

On the highest balcony of the Hilton Marilyn and Tjan stood watching the thick, black column of smoke rising up near the Peace Palace with glimmering eyes. “Come on, Tjan. It’s time for you to pack”, Marilyn said. She herself kept standing there, scanning the sky.

She didn’t have to wait long before her pigeon landed flappingly on the edge of the balcony and after that, sat down trustfully on her held out hand. “Well done, girl”, she complimented the bird, after which she put her carefully in the pigeon basket that was already waiting. She picked up the basket and walked into the room.

Tjan had already stuffed their belongings into the travel bag and had taken care of the beds. One was looking nice and tidy, while the other one was looking as if it had been heavily used.

The only things they would be leaving behind, were a few packages that had laid there on stand-by since yesterday evening. In a few hours they would be picked up. Until then, they would be safe here, since the reception had been instructed not to disturb them until three o’clock this afternoon. Just to be sure, she checked them again.

She nodded to Tjan. “Everything’s fine, we can go.” She opened the door to the elevator, which could be reached exclusively via the small hallway of their suite, to guarantee the guests full privacy. With her room key she activated it and Tjan pressed the button for the parking garage. Without a sound, they whizzed downwards.

Just before they walked out of the elevator, Marilyn held a small card, which looked like a credit card, against the control panel.

“Good, that one is out of order for now.” She looked at Tjan with swooned eyes and continued cooingly: “Sweetheart, let’s go.” Like a couple that

were heavily in love, they walked chattering to their car, him with a backpack and shoulder bag, her with a pigeon basket, and a little while later they drove out of the garage.

< 02.13

It was extremely busy in the hall of The Hague Central Station. Rush hour was at its peak and hordes of travelers, commuters, tourists and day trippers were hurrying crisscross in all directions. In the background there were muffled, echoing announcements, repeated in many languages, and the kiosks were thriving.

In front of the ticket booths and windows there were long lines of people waiting. In this crowd, a much older gentleman carrying his suitcase wouldn't be noticed. He walked, remarkably quickly for his age, straight to the toilets.

It was a lot less crowded here. There were only 2 men standing in front of the urinals and only four lavatories were occupied. The moment he entered the room, the first of them was opened. A skinny Asian guy came out, a large digital camera hanging around his neck. The man saw him approaching and held the door politely open. He went inside quickly, dragged his suitcase in with some effort, and closed the door.

Ten minutes later, an Italian middle-aged man came out.

In his right hand he was carrying a small travel case and under his armpit he clamped a New York Times. With his left arm he reached behind his back, closed the door, and walked towards the sinks. Attached to the doorknob was now a cardboard sign on which 'out of order' was scribbled next to an image of a toilet with a red cross over it. He looked watchfully into the mirror, studied his face carefully, took a step back and nodded approvingly at his reflection. His tailored suit sat perfectly. It was a great match with his shirt, and his colorful tie made it complete. Perfect.

While he was washing his hands, a man walked into the lavatory without paying attention to the 'out of order' sign. The door slammed shut. The warning sign had disappeared. He dried his hands and now saw the same man come out, dragging a big suitcase. The man stood next to him. After a last look in the mirror, he straightened his cuffs, shoved a big,

golden signet ring over his right little finger and spoke in rapid Italian: "Alright, I'm ready for the journey."

He nodded at the man next to him, grabbed his little travel case and newspaper and left the toilets.

< 02.14

Casanova saw his tram arriving in the distance. The light box indicated that the final station would be The Hague CS. The people that were waiting, stood up and formed a sloppy queue. He kept a bit of a distance as he joined them. The moment he was about to step in, on his way to freedom, he didn't realize that his retirement would be postponed. His euphoric mood, despite two months of barely sleeping and having a constant headache, made him less alert, for which he was now being punished.

He didn't suspect a thing when a handsome woman with a huge bunch of red hair asked him something in Dutch. He had already seen her standing there, with a city map, looking around questioningly. He was just about to answer her, in English, since he didn't understand any of that strange Dutch language, when it dawned on him that he was distracted on purpose.

Still, that fraction of a second proved fatal to him. He felt a stab in his right butt cheek, while he heard someone whisper in his ear with a haughty English accent: "With the compliments of His Lordship."

He realized it was game over. He tried to turn around, but the poison had already paralyzed him too much.

He sank to his knees, lost his balance, fell backwards, hit his head on the street and laid there without moving. It would have given a normal person a skull fracture, but his head was as solid as reinforced concrete. Although he was completely paralyzed, he was still conscious and feared what would come next. He saw the redheaded woman drop her city map and heard her scream: "Help! Help! He's had a heart attack!" She pointed at his body on the ground.

Coincidentally, an ambulance was just driving by. The bystanders that had flocked this way, directly guided it towards the lying man.

By now, the redheaded woman was busy giving him a heart massage like crazy, although it was more as if she wanted to cleave him in two. In the meantime she had quickly searched through the pockets of his pants and jacket. An unsuspecting bystander would have thought that she was looking for a possible heart medicine. Cursing his own sloppiness, Casanova lost consciousness.

The woman made way for the paramedics that had hurried their way and saw the blood drain from his face. They knew this was a cardiac arrest, and directly took out the defibrillator. His expensive, silk shirt was cut open, revealing a huge torso full of tattoos and scars. While slime was drooling out of the corners of his mouth and a wet spot appeared at his crotch, the paramedics put two gel pads on his skin, placed the paddles on top of them and gave him the maximum shock. The patient had a big body, and in these cases there would be relatively little damage if they managed to get the heart pumping again right away.

The condenser discharged a few hundred joules in his body.

The colossal body got an enormous shock. Casanova's blood started circulating again. His breath squeaked, and he now felt the complete desperation his victims had felt when he had watched them, fascinated while torturing them in imaginative ways while they were completely helpless, like he was now.

He cursed himself and the whole world while he was being put on the stretcher and pushed into the ambulance. One of the paramedics, a young man, checked his pulse again and empathetically put a thin blanket over him. They looked at each other and while he was looking into the most beautiful hazel-colored eyes he had ever seen, he lost consciousness again. The ambulance rushed to the hospital, with its lights flashing rapidly and its sirens screaming. In all the hassle, no one noticed the redheaded woman had disappeared.

Having received their instructions, the three SUVs started moving immediately. Balaclavas were pulled over heads, communication methods were tested and weapons were loaded.

In the front car, the tension within Holger Bersal, the team lead, increased. He enjoyed the feeling that made him intensely aware of himself and his surroundings. It had been exactly five hours ago that his smartphone let out a special sound, indicating his presence was required. He had been fast asleep, but as he had learned during his military service – sleep whenever possible and instantly react to specific sounds – he had woken up immediately. The message had come from the central control room, which coordinated all ATs (*Arrest Teams*). Because the call had come directly from them, he had known it had to be about a serious and special operation. The contents of the message had confirmed that, being more extensive than usual.

‘Get ready for deploy. Code A1. Support international HQ Interpol The Hague with arresting Casanova. Activate 3 teams. Standby 08.00 parking garage Interpol. Passcode 26021957. Deploy SUVs near elevators. Air support A12 possible if needed. Radio silence until leaving garage.’

After Holger had read this, he had been wide awake and ready for action.

His girlfriend hadn’t moved and was still laying on her side, with her legs pulled up. She had been sleeping comfortably, not aware that all too soon he could possibly find himself in a life-threatening situation. But that’s what he lived for.

Since he was young, he had been an active athlete, who was constantly exploring his own limits. Whether it was skiing, parasailing, mountaineering or parachuting, it didn’t matter how crazy, he had had to try it. He hadn’t yet found his limit. Not even in his job as head of the special AT for the EU. This team, EUAT92, had been set up especially for the cross-border fight against terrorism. He was able to put all of his energy into this job and in the last six years, all the operations that he had been part of, had succeeded without any incidents.

Because Casanova was the target, he was extra motivated. He had decided to use maximum armaments, as he didn’t want to risk this dangerous criminal and colleague-murderer getting away.

He had instructed his number two and knew that the teams would be fully armed and ready for the briefing an hour later, after which a helicopter would fly them to the deployment area. He had immediately been grasped by the same excitement that you felt prior to doing sports at the peak of your ability, and enjoyed each challenge to deliver a perfect result. One single mistake could have disastrous consequences. If you were successful, you were rewarded with that great, euphoric feeling that you could take on the whole world.

He had wanted to wake up his girlfriend to tell her that he had to go to work, when she had sleepily turned around, which had caused the sheet to slide down a bit, revealing her slightly tinted and muscular body. The work request and the sight of that beauty of nature next to him had turned him on, resulting in a quick, but no less passionate game of love.

After they had rested entwined, he had told her he'd had to go. He had taken a red-hot shower, after which he had turned the faucet to cold and had kept on standing there for another minute. Dressed in his black fighting outfit, with his body glowing and full of energy, he had told his Thai girlfriend to follow the news on TV today. In a lethargic way she had wished him good luck and had sensually ordered him to come back safe. With a grin he had stepped on his mountain bike, and as if he was cycling in the Tour de France, he had reached the EUAT92 Headquarters near Brussels within five minutes. Now, barely five hours later, him and his men were here, in this parking garage. The standby command had already been given a few minutes ago, and he was getting impatient.

The men around him moved restlessly, but before the waiting could turn into complete boredom, he received new orders on his display: 'UNBI and Interpol come out of the elevator. 1p. Escort to Elisabeth Hospital in support of C's arrest at ED. Use main exit. Take left door next to reception. Isolate dept. until C gets picked up.'

Holger forwarded the message to his men, put on his specially prepared gloves and waited for the elevator doors to open.

Jan realized vaguely that he was lying on the floor and that everything was hurting. His chest felt a bit bruised and he had a massive headache. A great deal of noise came from somewhere, and he smelled the nauseating smell of burned rubber and chemicals.

Confused, he tried to remember where he was, then suddenly he remembered. Dizzy as he was, he tried to get up, but fell backwards with a moan. He was lucky that in the meantime a coat had been shuffled under his head. In a blur he thought he saw the blackened face of a chimney sweep, until he realized it was one of those motorcyclists who had fallen down. He heard him say: "Just keep lying there, sir. The ambulance is on its way. Just try to relax."

He wanted to, but he couldn't. Each breath resulted in heave jolts of pain in his chest. Although his throat felt like sandpaper and his mouth was as dry as the Sahara, he hoarsely asked: "How is Hakon doing?"

The Military Police officer who had resuscitated Jan and was happy it had worked, didn't understand him, and shook his head questioningly. Jan, who took the shaking of his head the wrong way, sunk away into a deep darkness again, from which he wouldn't wake up soon.

< 02.17

While he was half listening to James, who couldn't stop talking about his new, gorgeous, deep cobalt blue car, Lémarc carefully took a sip of coffee, which was far too hot and too bitter for his taste. This early in the morning, he preferred the American version, which wasn't nearly as strong.

He didn't understand how the Dutch could drink so much of it without getting a stomach ulcer from it. Still, he had taken a second cup, as it promised to be a long day. He added another scoop of sugar, stirred a bit and blew over it, so as to make it cool down quicker.

He was just about to check whether he could drink it without burning his tongue, when he saw his assistant run into the canteen. Jens looked around bewilderedly, in search of his boss.

“That’s not good”, he interrupted James’ story. He put his arm in the air and beckoned. Jens saw them, rushed towards them at high speed and slid to a halt against James. James opened his mouth to scold Jens, when the latter, out of breath and stuttering with emotion, reported the attack on Hakon. He added that it had been reported that because of a heart attack, Casanova was being brought to the Elisabeth Hospital by an ambulance. Both Lémarc and James were thunderstruck at Jens’ announcement. Lémarc had been prepared for everything when he saw his assistant run into the canteen, but he absolutely hadn’t expected this. Hakon, his chief, whom he admired like no other. His big example.

He let his coffee cup slip out of his hand defeatedly, after which it burst apart with a loud noise in front of his feet. The terrible news dawned slowly on them. They weren’t aware of the painful coffee splashes that left stains on their pants that became bigger and bigger. “Bloody hell”, he heard James whisper. He barely grasped the fact that Casanova was basically handed to them on a silver platter. Hakon was so much more important right now. With a hoarse voice he asked, impatiently and tensed: “How is he doing now? What exactly happened? How could this have happened at all? Half the security service was around him, damnit!” Jens answered that he knew only that there had been an attack on Hakon’s transport, that all help was still underway and that it was too early for any detailed information. “What now, chief?” Lémarc couldn’t, wouldn’t, assume the worst. Other than the fact that it had been an attack, they knew nothing yet. He quickly thought through the consequences and possibilities. “James, you’ll take a few men with you to the hospital and make sure Casanova can’t escape. I’ll go to the disaster area. We’ll keep in touch.” To Jens he continued: “You’ll come with me and take care of the communications.”

As he and the others hurried out of the canteen, he heard James behind him, busy making telephone calls and giving orders. Although Lémarc had been standing almost at the back of the canteen, he was one of the first to reach the elevator. And although the elevator button indicated that the elevator was on its way up, he banged his fist against it like it was his enemy.

< 02.18

Casanova had been moved and the curious crowd had lost their interest. Apart from one man. A short, slender man had watched in astonishment at how the giant had collapsed and was then taken away by ambulance.

He had prepared his assignment carefully, but hadn't considered this twist at all. Although he didn't understand a word of the Dutch language, he understood that the man had had a heart attack. He knew that if Casanova would survive this, he'd be forced to stay in bed for a while. A hospital bed, that was. His stiletto was still ready for action in the sleeve of his jacket. He put his favorite weapon away, walked to the nearby park, found an empty bench and sat down. He needed to think carefully about what to do before sending his text message.

He knew he could only send one message, because after that, he'd need to destroy the sim card. He still saw ways to execute his assignment successfully, but he needed to word his message thoughtfully, for this was his only way of communicating with his employer. After a few seconds, he typed: 'Colleague stricken by heart attack and taken to hospital. Will visit him there.' He sent the message and removed both the sim card and the battery. He used his lighter to burn the sim card and threw the remains in an arcing motion into a flowering bush behind him. In the distance he saw the black column of smoke was now intertwined with different shades of grey, and that the police had moved the cordon in the direction of the park. Behind the cordon, the crowd of interested people grew quickly. Let the herd gape, he thought disdainfully, the wolves among us have more important things to do.

He whistled through his teeth while walking slowly back through the park, to the taxi stand he had been dropped off at an hour earlier. Although he was in a hurry, since he wanted to find Casanova before his identity became known, he stepped calmly. Running would attract attention.

After about ten minutes, he reached the cabs, beckoned one and ordered the driver to take him to the nearest hospital.

Just a few seconds after the taxi had driven off towards the hospital, a motorcycle stopped. The motorcyclist, a tall man in a contemporary, neat business suit, left the engine running, pulled the extra helmet off his arm and handed it to the red-haired woman who had come running from the

park. The moment she sat down, he accelerated, and they followed the taxi.

< 02.19

At his high location, the Scottish lord of the castle looked at the GRID. For minutes he had been watching tensed. The limousine had exploded beautifully, at exactly the right time, and now burned like a torch. Of course, it had worked out fine. He hadn't doubted that for a second, but still he felt a sense of relief. His eyes scanned the GRID. The world map was replaced by the map of The Hague.

According to the situation, either the entire world map was shown, or the GRID would zoom in on the location where a status changed. On the left side of the screen, various persons had switched places. All the way at the top, three red avatars were lighting up.

There was a scenario for this situation as well. If he or Sandra didn't intervene, the program, being specifically written for that, would carry it out entirely independently, based on the input from the central brain. He was perfectly content that everything was functioning flawlessly and that the operation was going so smoothly. While looking at the work of the rescue team near the Peace Palace, he stood up and grabbed the whisky that was standing next to his chair. With a serious face he greeted the Grid in a formal way, after which he drank the entire glass abruptly.

The first phase was finished, and everything was going according to plan. He wouldn't be needed anytime soon, so he had some time to stretch his legs.

He told Sandra that he would go to his wife for five minutes and left the tower room, leaving it behind in complete silence. Other than the jumping images on the GRID, nothing moved.

< 02.20

At the front of the elevator, with his face almost pressed against

the doors, James tried to suppress his impatience. It had taken the elevator at least a full minute to finally get all the way up. He had always thought it was stupid that the canteen was located on the thirtieth floor, and right now it was even more annoying. His mood went down with each time the elevator stopped to let people in. It was crammed full of people and he just hoped it would manage to carry the weight, so they wouldn't all drop down.

He silently cursed Lémarc's assistant, who had ruined his brand new outfit, a handmade, traditional English suit. Jens had been slipping and as he had been falling, he had grabbed James' right sleeve in order to keep his balance, resulting in it now being half torn off. And as if that hadn't been enough, Lémarc had also dropped his coffee, causing numerous dark brown stains on his fancy, cream colored pants.

But the worst is yet to come, he thought sadly. Eriksson, their most important witness, was most probably dead.

Should Hakon have survived the attack, which he certainly hoped, for he seemed like a competent guy, he would at least be heavily wounded.

Having to continue without his testimony, was a great blow for the spiderweb proceedings, which would be hugely slowed down because of this.

At the same time some kind of miracle had happened. Casanova, one of the most dangerous criminals in the world, had been handed to them on a silver platter. A heart attack indeed. How was that possible? Unbelievable. And he, James Taylor, would put him in shackles.

After more than thirty years of police work, of which twenty years were at Scotland Yard and the last four years at Interpol, this controversial arrest would be the crowning moment of his career, which was already impressive as it was. He shouldn't forget to get dressed. The way he looked now he couldn't appear in front of the media.

To his relief, he saw the counter of the floors jump from "0" to "-1". The elevator had finally arrived at the parking garage. As the doors opened, he flew to his command vehicle like a projectile that had been shot from a catapult.

< 02.21

With all her willpower, Barbara suppressed her grieve over Hakon. Soon she would allow it. Later, when there was time. First, she had to tell Ewin LeFoods. He was in The Hague and was able to get there first for INN. He might also be able to discover as much as possible for her personally. She had paused the movie clip and sent him a hasty text message. She forced her tears back convulsively and let the clip continue, while reporting the attack on Hakon. With a deadpan voice, she described the situation in front of her. The bright burning car, the debris, the motorcycles scattered around everywhere, and the police officers who, dazed and tattered, stood up wobbling. She looked at the video's progress bar and was relieved to see that the end was in sight. But again, she was surprised. Suddenly, all kinds of lines and blurs appeared, after which the face of a man loomed up.

The merciless closeup showed a monstrous face, with a grin so evil that it gave her the chills. This was the one who had recorded the attack, and he might even be the attacker himself. In any case, he had something to do with it.

In a similar tone she finished her report. She turned off the camcorder and put it back into her drawer.

The video had ended, and was copied and sent directly to the server, together with her report. Her eyes were now staring at the last, now still, image. It was as if the creep was looking directly at her, with an evil, scoffing look. It gave her goosebumps.

He was a remarkable type. The police wouldn't find it difficult to identify him and track him down. It wouldn't surprise her if he turned out to be involved with Spiderweb.

< 02.22

Surrounded by at least a dozen employees, Lémarc almost bumped into one of them while exiting the elevator. Why don't they move on, he

thought, irritated. At the same time, he saw the German Holger Bersal standing next to a black SUV. Behind it, two identical SUVs were parked. What was EUAT92 doing here with three cars, he wondered. In this case it was beneficial, but without his authorization they shouldn't even be here.

He walked towards Holger who, as he now saw, helped a dazed looking James stay on his feet.

Before he had the chance to ask Holger what in heaven's name was wrong with James, the German told him they had been waiting here for them. When the elevator doors had opened, James had smacked against his car door at full speed. The door hadn't yielded, for he himself had been standing between. "I picked him up, but I don't think he's completely there yet", Holger finished his explanation. "The victim is", they heard at that moment. With an angry face, James tried to free himself from Holger. "Are you made of concrete or something? It's like I've run into a solid rock.

Goddamn, let go of me!" James carefully touched his forehead, on which a big lump had appeared. "And don't laugh at me, cunt!", he growled at Lémarc, who hadn't been able to fully keep a straight face at the thought of the dent in James' ego, which must have been at least as big as the lump on his head.

It sounded like James hadn't suffered any permanent damage, and he started to hastily inform Holger about Casanova. He was surprised when Holger interrupted him, telling him that he was already updated on the matter and that the department where Casanova was lying, would be completely isolated and secured. "Fine", Lémarc answered. "James will follow you. Wait for him. He will take care of the formal arrest, since it's officially Interpol business. We should at least give him that satisfaction. You know he's been hunting him down for years." Murmuring "In ordnung", Holger quickly got into the car. Before the door was closed, Lémarc heard an electronic voice say that their destination would be reached in two minutes.

The SUVs sprang to life with a roaring sound and drove off quickly, with squeaking tires, leaving everyone in a cloud of exhaust gas and stinking rubber. Lémarc stopped James for a brief moment and advised: "Be sensible. Take a few aspirins from the first aid kit and let one of your men

drive. The hospital is only two minutes from here.” With a sour face, James nodded in acknowledgement, after which he walked to his new, high command vehicle, accompanied by five of his men. The SUV was colossal, extended and was a dark blue color. It had room for three passengers in the front and three in the back. The rest of the space was taken by all kinds of high-tech devices. Although it cost him quite some effort, James had decided to follow Lémarc’s advice and sat in the back.

With the first aid kit on his lap, he searched for the pain killers. The lid of the box was flung painfully against his hand as the driver, internally known as ‘Mad Harry’, stepped on the gas and raced towards the exit.

In the meantime, Jens had driven his boss’s car to the front and was now waiting for Lémarc with the engine idling. Of all the men he was the last one to get in. He took a seat next to Jens and said: “We have a tougher job ahead of us, son. We have to go to the disaster area near the Peace Palace. Let’s hope it’s not as bad as we fear and Hakon has survived the attack. While we’re underway, I’ll call his grandparents. I don’t want them to hear it from the media.” While fastening his seatbelt, Jens drove out of the garage calmly.

< 02.23

Casanova slowly regained consciousness and was surprised to establish that he was in an ambulance. He had expected to be laying in the back of a van or truck, on his way to torture followed by execution. His head felt as if someone was refurbishing the inside of it, jamming nails into his skull with a big hammer. It was as if his chest was on fire. He still couldn’t move and felt sweat coming up as he realized a lot of effort had been made in order to get to him. Why had they used poison? A knife would have been simpler and quicker and would have done the deed. He realized he was in big trouble, for he was eliminated, but not directly executed. But he was still alive and might get a chance to escape.

He decided to wait, since he couldn’t do otherwise anyway, and let himself slip away into a state of consciousness which relieved him from his pain.

< 02.24

In Texas, Kingsize Bob switched to the news channel INN. As soon as there was any relevant news, they would probably be the first to announce it.

He stood up, walked to the adjoining bathroom and washed his face and hands. Refreshed, he poured himself another glass of cognac and lay down on his bed again comfortably, just in time. The Breaking News broadcast had already been announced and started with recording of a woman, sitting behind her desk, watching a video on her computer while talking into a microphone.

The text area underneath her said that she was Barbara Kronkite and that she had managed to acquire this material. This was the woman who had announced the start of the hunt for his organization as a worldwide scoop! The camera zoomed in on her computer, after which it switched to widescreen.

What he saw next, was identical to the video that he had watched on the internet a few minutes earlier. How was it possible INN had laid their hands on this? And this quick! Casanova! He cursed loudly. That ugly bastard had of course sold his video to that bitch of a reporter for a lot of money. How he done it, was a mystery to him. Casanova's smartphone had been set up in such a way that the recording should have been exclusively sent to one pre-programmed address. Apparently, Casanova was smarter than he thought. But not smart enough. He wouldn't live long enough to enjoy this 'bonus'. His new fixer was already in place and had let him know he would soon be in action. It wouldn't be too long before the Casanova problem would be dealt with once and for all.

He needed to find out more about that reporter as well. This was the second time that woman was reporting a news item that involved him. Coincidence? Could be, but he wanted to know for sure.

< 02.25

Lémarc Tasker was driven to the disaster area with flashing lights and sirens on by his assistant Jens. It was close and the ride didn't take long. He barely got the chance to think over the events.

Someone from the escort had directly reported the attack to the alarm central, whom had informed Interpol and UNBI. Jens had been on his way to the canteen when he was called. Two seconds later, he and James had been informed.

In the meantime, Casanova had been found. He had had a heart attack near where the attack on Hakon had taken place, and was transported to the Elisabeth Hospital. A very remarkable coincidence. This criminal might just have had something to do with the attack. Hopefully he'd stay alive and regain consciousness again soon, so he could be interrogated.

Then there was EUAT92. It was a great advantage that they had been waiting in the garage, but he hadn't been informed about it. They were activated without his authorization and he had to find out how that was possible as soon as he could.

All in all, it very much seemed that the security at both UNBI and Interpol wasn't as waterproof as he had always thought. At least James now had enough support to arrest Casanova. That was a good thing, for Casanova could do strange things. The more he thought about it, the more he thought it was likely that this criminal would've been involved in the attack on Hakon. He might even have been responsible. Oh, God, let me find him alive. Heavily wounded, half dead even, but alive. Please!

From a distance he had already seen the thick clouds of smoke and when they drove up the Scheveningseweg, the burning wreck of the car came in sight.

They stopped next to the tape that the police had put up across

the road and hastily got out. "Hold a second, Jens. I need to answer this one." It was the central control room, asking if the EUAT92 was still in need of air support near the hospital. He thought about it for a second. He didn't know how serious this heart attack was, and if Casanova still managed to escape, it would be sensible to have air support at hand right away. With his mobile phone on one ear and a finger in the other, he yelled his permission.

He let Jens know he was ready, and together they entered the area behind the tape. The helicopters and sirens made such a loud noise that it was as good as impossible to have a conversation. He could barely hear himself think. He walked to the burning limousine, as a trauma helicopter was approaching from beyond. The closer it came, the more his hopes diminished.

Two fire trucks were busy working with all their might, trying to extinguish the fire with a blast of foam.

His worst suspicions were confirmed by the fire chief, when he inspected the ravaged scene and shook his head.

He felt Jens' hand on his right shoulder, pinching softly. He should be able to keep his calm in all circumstances, but however much he had tried to suppress his emotions, this was just too much. Overcome by grief, nauseous because of the noise and smoke, he let his tears run freely. With empty eyes he stood there, watching the burned, blackened remains, while remembering Hakon's smiling face.

He totally missed the fact that the press had just arrived, had started filming and were zooming in on his crying face.

He wasn't aware that his tears would become the opening shot when INN in New York switched to this Live report from The Hague.

< 02.26

Lord MacMarkland was on his way to the room at the back of the castle, which he had had refurbished and turned into an atelier for his wife, for the incidence of light was best here. His PIM (*Personal Information Manager*) had let him know that she was currently there. He didn't doubt it for a second. Everyone in and around the castle had been marked. The residents and employees permanently, guests temporarily. This had originated for security reasons, but turned out to be mighty useful. In the past, finding each other could take a lot of time. His father, for example, had been looking for him for more than an hour once, while he was just playing around in the castle. It later turned out that they had just missed each other a few times.

Things like that never happened anymore.

When mobile phones were introduced, they had seemed to be the solution, but they, too, hadn't

quite functioned satisfactorily. It had happened quite a few times that people forgot to take their phones with them, their battery was empty, or some people simply didn't have one. No, PIM was efficient, safe and a hundred percent reliable.

By now he had reached his destination. With his head in the doorway, he knocked on the door. His wife could get engrossed in her work and he didn't want her to be startled.

She looked up from her work, he now saw she had been sculpting a dragon, and smiled. She excitedly said: "Look, I finally got the wings right. The tail still needs a bit of work, but I'm almost done. How do you like it?" He stood next to her, examined the statue from all angles and complimented her. "Sweetheart, it's gorgeous. I couldn't have done it myself."

They both looked at the 'ashtray' he had made a year earlier and laughed while giving each other a kiss.

"I have some great news. It is time. Casanova will very soon be arrested. Finally!"

She looked at him, her eyes glimmering, and without thinking about her hands, which were smeared with clay, she hugged him intensely. Entwined, they kissed each other passionately.

< 02.27

Without even slowing down for a second, Ewin ran outside, while pulling his smartphone, which was ringing and vibrating, out of the pocket of his pants. He sat down next to Charles and quickly informed him about what he had seen from his balcony.

Charles, a calm and reliable guy, sat behind the steering wheel in a relaxed way. Nothing indicated that he was in a hurry, but nonetheless he accelerated quickly and skillfully maneuvered between the traffic. In the meantime, Ewin opened the text message and read: 'Attack on Hakon

near Peace Palace, eta for images? Barbara'. He was surprised Barbara already knew it was an attack and on whom. He quickly replied that they were on their way and it wouldn't take too long before they would be able to send images.

In the meantime, Charles was zigzagging through the traffic like he was racing in the slums of Baghdad.

They arrived at the square almost two minutes later.

What they saw there, was quite similar to what they had been used to during their time in the Middle-East, though the surroundings were quite different. A car wreck that was completely devoured by flames and was still burning, stood in the middle of the crossroads on Carnegie Square, in front of the Peace Palace, surrounded by a bunch of police motors that lay there as if they had been dumped there haphazardly. Those who had sat in the car, must have had been completely lost.

He had reported this kind of violence more than once and knew the results of it.

Still Ewin hoped, against all odds, that Barbara had been misinformed this time and that Hakon would be elsewhere. He'd had the opportunity to interview him a few times and always thought his charm and inspiring passion was sympathetic. He had liked him from the first time they had met. No other news reporters had arrived yet, so he and Charles could walk through without being disturbed. Charles set up his camera and started filming, while Ewin looked at the images on his tablet pc.

A wide shot contained the burning car wreck, the motorcycles that lay scattered around, the group of battered policemen between them and the fire trucks that had just arrived.

At the same time, he started to describe the drama saying that an attack had just been made on the UNBI chief investigator, and with that an attack on the entire judicial system. He was speaking with a raised voice because of all the noise around him and hastily rearranged his earphone as a Jaguar XJ6 with blue flashing lights was arriving.

He instantly recognized the person who came out. He told Charles to come with him, and together they walked towards Lémarc Tasker, who

was screaming to someone on the telephone and walking with his driver to the burning car.

They approached Lémarc at the moment when his companion laid a hand on his shoulder and tears were welling up in his eyes. Charles filmed the devastated Lémarc, with the sad remains that the fire fighters were covering with a blanket of foam in the background. No commentary was necessary. The silent images said everything.

Charles made a quarter turn and zoomed in on the helicopter, which was descending wobblingly and landing with a lot of noise. Then he turned back to Ewin, who had reached Lémarc. Ewin asked him if he was able to confirm that the victim was Hakon Eriksson, and who the driver was. He got no answer, however.

Lémarc suddenly ran away from him, then stopped a bit further up, near a group of bushes. Bent forward and shaking, he clearly needed to get rid of his breakfast.

< 02.28

In New York, Barbara and her colleagues, who had arrived by now, were watching the Breaking News program about the attack on the chief investigator into Spiderweb, Hakon Eriksson, who had been on his way to the Peace Palace in The Hague in an escorted limousine. She watched herself on the big, centrally placed TV screen and tried very hard not to cry as Hakon's face was briefly shown in a close up.

She closed her eyes and listened sadly to her own, still cheerful voice, which started stuttering and dying away in disbelief a short moment later.

Although everyone had already known what was coming, she still heard shouts of surprise and disbelief, which turned into cries of horror when Casanova's face showed up. Her colleagues had soon found out who the creep was: an assassin who had been on the run for more than ten years. She felt such a big wave of hatred boil up that it startled her. She had never realized she was capable of hating a fellow human being so intensely.

Only when she heard the newsreader promise that after the break, he would be back with live images from The Hague, did she open her eyes. The first thing she saw, was the coffee her assistant Russ was holding in front of her nose.

She automatically took the cup, pulled the lid off and took small, careful sips. Sneakily looking over the edge of her cup, she watched her colleagues, who were talking about the news with faces that expressed pure horror. The commercial break was over and everything became silent again.

Ewin LeFoods' report commenced. As she watched the broadcast, she immediately recognized the style and craftsmanship of Ewin and Charles, when a crying Lémarc Tasker was shown in a respectful way. It was just getting too much for her now. She ran to the hallway, into the nearest bathroom and yanked open the first door she stumbled across. While walking, she had already unbuttoned her jeans. She rapidly stripped down everything that was in the way, and dropped down on the toilet. As she sat there peeing, she couldn't control herself anymore and, finally, surrendered to her grief. Bent forward, with her face in her hands, she sat there, crying silently. She saw Hakon's face looming up. So open, so sweet. Her thoughts jumped back to the time she had been trying to hit on him. They had already gone out multiple times and she had found him more and more interesting and nice. They had had pleasant, intelligent conversations and had gotten along very well. But that was all there was to it.

When she had tried to go a bit further, he had elegantly and tactfully told her that he loved to be friends with her, but that that was all. She had been very disappointed, but at the same time didn't want to lose him, so she had swallowed her pride, which eventually led to a very close friendship.

When she later met Marilyn, she had believed she understood why Hakon wasn't sexually interested in her. Only later she had discovered that Marilyn couldn't have had been the reason either.

She had always wanted to ask him about it someday, because she felt they absolutely shared a connection. Now that would not be possible anymore. She would never see him, talk to him, smile with him. She

would never be able to ask him for advice again. Now that she fully realized this, she started crying uncontrollably.

While sniffing, she tried to get control over her breath, when suddenly she saw Russ's hand showing up from under the door, holding a cup of water. She thankfully took a sip and after breathing in and out a few times, she regained her self-control. She blew her nose on a big piece of toilet paper, stooped to pull up her pants and clumsily hit her head against the door.

It dawned on her that she was in the men's room, for the ladies' rooms had much more space. In a hurry she had gone into the men's room. Whatever, worse things happen, she thought sourly.

She quickly washed her hands and made herself as decent as possible. While looking at herself in the mirror, she realized she had not so much cried about herself, but about the fact that a great, kind human being was taken away from his life in just a fraction of a second. Removed from this world on purpose, by another human being, planned with premeditation.

She, in turn, felt like she could kill the murderer.

< 02.29

Marilyn skillfully steered the rental car through the streets of The Hague. Through the earphone that was connected to her specially adjusted smartphone, she was in constant contact with SCOUT, which guided her flawlessly through the crowded city.

As if an invisible pilot was sitting next to her, whispering which turn to take and what to pay attention to, she could drive almost blindly. When she had had the first 3D satellite images in her possession, she had immediately started developing a system that would bring her from A to B quickly and efficiently, so that she didn't have to worry anymore about direction and route. And that was no luxury, because although she was the best in many areas, she had absolutely no sense of direction. It didn't matter where she was - in a city, in a hotel, or somewhere in free nature - she got hopelessly lost everywhere.

Through the years she had refined and extended the system more and more, and now it functioned as an information source that was always available for everything she encountered on her way.

Next time she wouldn't even need an earphone anymore. Nanotechnology had made her able to make the send- and receive unit so small that it could be implanted. It was currently being tested by the boss himself. Normally she tested her own work, but this time he had insisted on being the guinea pig himself, because testing an implanted device was a little bit different from testing a flying machine. She had agreed on the condition that she was allowed to go into the field this time.

Normally she never got the chance to, because fieldwork would be too dangerous for her. No risks were taken with her. Now she had demanded the trade, and hadn't regretted it, for it had brought her all kinds of new ideas. In his last message, he had let her know that the implant was functioning perfectly, and everything was going according to plan. She was curious to hear about his findings. He, in turn, would want to know everything about her fieldwork.

In the meantime, she had also thought of the solution for some navigational problems the FOs (*Flying Objects*) had. As soon as she was back, she would work out everything and give instructions to the main program. She was able to communicate with it better each day, and now that it could work completely independently, facts and aspects a normal human being wouldn't think about, were even pointed out to her.

The others also gave her a lot of input, and that combination resulted in her being able to get to results even quicker.

Next to her, Tjan had taken his breakfast out of his backpack and started enjoying it. Well, breakfast? Could you call it that? Here in the Netherlands he had discovered the 'bamibal' (*a deep-fried ball with noodles in it*), and couldn't keep his hands off it, whether it was hot or cold. She could have told him that a normal, regular breakfast was much healthier, but knew that it would fall on deaf ears. He even looked a bit like it himself, she thought amused. He was at least one head shorter than her, and pretty big in size. When they had gotten out of the car this morning, he had grumbled that those tin cans were getting smaller and

smaller. She didn't let it mislead her, however. Tjan consisted only of muscles. He was strong as a horse.

There was a whisper in her ear, telling her they would arrive at the central station after the next turn. She warned: "Tjan, you have to clean up, we're almost there." Accurately guided by SCOUT, they reached their destination a little while later.

They would leave their car here. Joost was already waving at them. Joost, the éminence grise of the group, was smiling broadly when he saw her. She knew he liked her very much, and that feeling was mutual. In recent years, he had treated her like a daughter more and more, and she hadn't minded that at all. He was just typically Dutch, was open to everything, and was a real clown. Despite the fact that he had never finished his education at school, he had a sharp mind. He read everything there was to read and knew a lot. As always, he was carrying a book, and his face revealed that he had found something interesting. Like some kind of sparring partner, she discussed all her ideas with him, and with his inventive mind, he was often able to suggest even more possibilities and practical solutions.

She wouldn't be bored on her journey to Amsterdam with him!

They had barely gotten out of the car, before she was hugged intensely, after which she gave him three kisses on his cheeks, like they were used to in The Netherlands. Tjan gave Joost a friendly pat on the shoulder which, as she knew, he would still feel in three weeks. Tjan sometimes didn't know his own strength, and in his excitement, he sometimes forgot about that. Joost turned towards him with a grimace and protested: "Ho there, take it easy, will you? Last time I wasn't able to play darts for a month." Tjan murmured something to himself, pulled Marilyn towards him, and hugged her carefully, like if she was a porcelain doll that could break at any time. She gave him a kiss on his cheek and whispered: "send him my regards and please keep him alive."

Joost took a look at his watch and shouted: "Hey, Don Juan, hurry up. Your train is about to leave!" After a last, careful hug, Tjan let go of her and said to Joost: "You know what will happen if something happens to her, right?" "Says the man who just try to hug her to death", Joost parried.

Tjan pulled his backpack a little bit higher up, waved and started running to the platform. She watched him running and chuckled. It was funny to see him running. He had a very strange way of walking, but despite that he was incredibly agile and quick as a rabbit.

< 02.30

Kingsize Bob was lying on his back, watching the aftermath of the explosion. As he had expected, INN was there first to bring the news to the world.

A little sooner than he had planned, but that didn't matter much. What was important, was how they had done it. That woman, Barbara Kronkite, had apparently been in contact with Casanova. Soon that treacherous criminal wouldn't be a problem anymore. As far as that woman was concerned, he had already taken his precautions. At this moment, she was being thoroughly checked, and he wondered what they would find out about her, for everyone made mistakes and everyone had their secrets.

He would soon know all about her, and perhaps he could use that to convince her to support him. Convincing people wasn't hard, as long as you possessed the right leverage...

In a joyful mood, he kept following the news. His plan had been nicely executed, and his position of power had been re-established. No one in the entire world would ever suspect him, let alone accuse him. Other than himself, no one knew how strong his grip on the world was, and it would stay like that no matter what.

He had once shown what he was capable of in public, and he still regretted that incident. During a meeting of his political party, against his will he had been involved in a discussion between some snobs who believed they had a big influence on the world. The group had consisted of various industrialists and a military officer from the general staff. At the end of the evening, they hadn't been sober anymore and they had dared each other, in order to decide who was the most powerful, or who would be. One of them had believed that the nicely designed gadgets his company created, would mean a technical revolution. Another one had

insisted that his hybrid motorcycle was the ultimate invention, which would be the answer to the decreasing oil supply, and thus would save humanity. After discussing back and forth a bit, they had come to the conclusion that the attending general would be the most influential. With just one phone call, he would be able to get a million units on the move with their material.

He remembered that he had been quite impressed by that, and had decided that he would soon approach the general to recruit him. He had remained in the background himself, and had been glad no one was asking him anything.

The fact that he would be able to put an oil embargo in place or organize the fall of a president with just one telephone call, was something he of course couldn't say in public.

That wouldn't exactly benefit his reputation as a do-gooder. Still enjoying everyone admiring him, the general had said that he had noticed Bob hadn't contributed anything to the discussion. He knew, like everyone else, that Kingsize Bob was a rich Texan cattle farmer who often made the news as a do-gooder for some kind of charity. It had been clear that he wasn't impressed. The officer had looked at him briefly with an estimating look, and had derisively said: "I assume you wouldn't be able to get one million cows moving with just one telephone call", followed by a self-contempt smile. That remark and arrogant smile had touched a chord.

For the first time in his life, he had lost his carefulness. The elegant woman that was passing them at that moment, was wearing an artistic brooch in the shape of a butterfly, and that had given him an idea. On impulse, he had said that quality was much more important than quantity, and had proposed a challenge. His bet would be ten million dollars, the general's bet would be his career. The general, who was in a cheerful mood, hadn't taken him seriously and had smilingly asked what kind of challenge that would have to be, to justify such a high bet. Inwardly, he had been furious, because these meaningless people thought they could belittle him. He had responded calmly, something he remembered precisely and would never forget: "Listen, I can make the president say any word I want, at any given time." Everyone, including the general, had looked at him, baffled, bursting into laughter just a second later.

When they were done laughing, they had understood that he hadn't meant it as a joke. With a smug face he had proposed the word 'butterfly', which, after a small discussion between the gentlemen, had been accepted. The general had accepted the challenge, for he was sure he wouldn't lose. At the first public speech, the president would have to say the word 'butterfly' in his very first sentence.

Everyone knew that this would be during the State of the Union and a word like that would definitely not be in the first sentence...

The day after this official speech, general James E. Earl had officially announced his resignation.

The man had kept his word, something he appreciated.

After his resignation, it hadn't been hard to recruit him into his organization. The former officer was, without knowing, hired as one of his very own advisers.

In party gatherings people had looked at him differently since then and although everyone had wanted to ask it, no one had dared to speak to him. He enjoyed this respectful attitude and the feeling of power that came with it, but at the same time he knew it hadn't been wise to so openly display his influence. It would never happen again, no matter how tempting it might be.

Other than himself, no one should know that very little happened in the world without it being to his advantage. Possible obstacles could usually easily be bypassed or removed, something that had been made clear yet again. The attack on his empire, led by Hakon Eriksson, had made him very pissed off. They had overestimated themselves with their 'Spiderweb trial', which had no chance of succeeding anymore now. Something Eriksson's adjutant had to realize as well, he saw. That numbnuts just stood there, crying. Disgusting. He contemptuously turned off the TV. The rest of the meaningless tittle-tattle that was being broadcast, didn't interest him in the slightest. He put a pillow under his neck, pulled the sheets over himself, turned off the lights and would soon be fast asleep.

< 02.31

Lémarc looked shamefully at his breakfast, which lay unrecognizable between the bushes. This had never happened to him before. He had seen the most horrible things, but he had always been able to keep cool. He wiped off his mouth and took a Tic Tac. Now that his stomach was emptied, he felt a lot better.

That microphone had been the catalyst. He had suddenly gotten terribly nauseous and if he hadn't walked away, he would have thrown up on Ewin LeFours on the spot. He would apologize and hoped they hadn't filmed him. But he needed to inform John Bigham first. After that he would have time for the media. If they would promise to not use the weak moment he had just had, he would allow INN to have the scoop.

He rearranged his tie and while walking, pulled out his smartphone.

He chose the main prosecutor's number and thought about how to best word the sad message he had to bring. After seeing the limousine which had been consumed by intense heat, and after the quick talk with the fire chief, only one conclusion could be drawn.

The people in the car had been burned. They hadn't had the slightest chance to survive.

< 02.32

James Taylor sat in the back of his brand new SUV, recovering from everything that had happened to him. The day had seemed to have started so successfully.

After all the intensive work it had taken to dismantle Spiderweb, the first day of the trial had finally started. He had dressed carefully and had been looking forward to his first ride in his new car, when everything had gone terribly wrong.

He had been drinking coffee with Lémarc, when Lémarcs assistant had come running into the room. The kid had used him to prevent himself from falling and had torn half of the sleeve off his jacket.

Because of the spilled coffee, his pants were now full of ugly stains and numerous little, annoying burn spots were pestering him. The terrible news about Hakon, however, had almost knocked him out, and pushed everything else to the background. Lémarc was on his way there now. He couldn't even imagine what it must be like for him. Even though he had never seen him lost self-control, he knew Lémarc must be devastated because of this. And now that he needed to arrest Casanova himself, he couldn't even be there to support his colleague. Even worse, Lémarc had been worried about him when he had rushed against that car door.

He carefully touched his forehead and felt a big, painful lump. Which idiot had parked his car in such a ridiculous place? And now he even sat in the back, in his own car if you please. But why were they driving so incredibly fast? And who was driving? James pulled himself up and was completely shocked. He was being driven by none other than Mad Harry, the worst driver of the corps. Apparently, he hadn't learned much from the additional course he had recently taken. And this was the guy driving his SUV!

His hands were searching for his weapon, so that he could force this lunatic to stop, when they made a turn far too quickly. Oh, God, they would overturn. He braced for the inevitable and felt the vehicle shake a few times, before it miraculously landed on its wheels again. He looked up, relieved, just in time to see they were driving at an insane speed towards the SUVs of the EUAT92 team that were parked in front of the hospital. They swayed around the parked cars and hit the curb with a huge bang. James was painfully restrained by his seat belt, then slammed back against the backrest. The seat belt was so tight on him, that he could barely breathe.

Because of the high speed they were travelling at however, the car continued moving for quite a while. With a high-pitched, tearing sound, the front of the car was lifted, and he was pushed against his backrest even tighter. Through the front window he briefly saw a blue, cloudless sky, before the car came to a sudden stop. While he was hanging half over his seatbelt and realized he had lost control over his bladder, James' agony was smothered by a suffocating airbag.

< 02.33

The Peace Palace wasn't honoring its name at the moment. The news about the attack on Hakon Eriksson had hit like a bomb, and everywhere people were talking to each other with upset faces. Many others were hastily walking through the corridors, entering rooms, or came out of them in a hurry, searching for information or colleagues. Responsibility for the attack hadn't been claimed yet, and the security level had been increased to the max, meaning that the building would be isolated from the rest of the world until further orders.

For Dick, it was as if time was frozen for a moment when John told him. He couldn't, no, he didn't want to believe that Hakon was dead. He had known him for years. Hakon was his protegee and he had stuck his neck out for him when he proposed him as a director for the new department of UNBI. If there was someone whom you could trust, it was him. Hakon had proven that time and time again for many years, from when they had first met.

As a chief investigator for UNBI, he had also never abused this trust, and he had had many, sometimes enormous, successes. It was no wonder that he had made quite a few enemies with that, and that he had received several death threats as well.

John's assistant had looked at them with sad eyes, and had told them how she had been waiting by the doorman. Because it had been such a beautiful morning, she had walked outside and had seen the escort approaching, when the limousine had suddenly exploded. It had taken a while before she had realized that this was an attack and that Hakon couldn't have had the slightest chance. The car had burned like a torch, and no one was able to get close.

She had come running here distractedly to tell them. New tears were welling up while she mumbled in a suffocated way: "Oh, God, it is not possible he survived this. I saw it happen couldn't do a thing ..."

He and John had been trying to comfort her, although they had barely been able to grasp it themselves.

By now, John was sitting opposite him, shook his head in disbelief, and loudly said what he had just been thinking himself. "It's terrible, Dick. Despite all the precautions and security, they got to him. Those filthy,

cowardly jackals. Of course, you understand that this is connected to Spiderweb.”

John defeatedly continued about how hard, if not impossible, it would be to get a big part of the evidence admitted, now that the chief investigator and at the same time main witness couldn't be questioned anymore. That there wouldn't be that much left of the whole process that had seemed so promising. Some small fish would be caught, but they could forget about the big ones.

Dick, who understood him very well, was half listening and thought back to the telephone call he had had with Hakon the evening before. He had been the only one whom Hakon had told about the undercover operation he was working on. Hakon hadn't given him any details, so as to not burden him with facts that could be used against him. He had only mentioned the reason. It would not be without risk, and Hakon had asked him to do something, despite what would happen to him. He needed to wait to see if he would be called and receive a message with a coded sentence. The second part of his operation would then have commenced ...

Wait a minute, could it have anything to do with that Latin sentence? Dick decided to wait and see if he received a message containing the same sentence. Should that happen, he would do as Hakon had asked him. He had always trusted him, and this was the least he could do for him.

He heard John say something about the people at the top, followed by a frustrated “Dammit!”, as he hit the handrail with his fist.

“It indeed won't get any easier”, he answered absently. John's smartphone was ringing, and at the same time his second assistant entered the room, with a few security people close behind her. John gestured them to wait a moment and answered the phone. He pointed at the device and wordlessly let them know that it was Lémarc. The conversation didn't take long. John made an approving sound a few times, thanked Lémarc, hung up the phone and told them the sad news. There was no room for doubt, Hakon and his driver had died in the raging sea of fire.

The head of security politely cleared his throat, bringing the deadly silence to an end. He informed them that the highest level of security had

been activated. This meant that he and John and a few of the staff members got personal security guards, and that no one was to leave the building.

Dick nodded, let the seriousness of the situation sink in, and realized they were waiting for his instructions. Inwardly sighing, he asked John's second assistant to do a few things.

She had to organize a staff meeting in the auditorium at ten o'clock. At noon, he wanted to talk to the press in person. Also, his car needed to be driven to the entrance of the building, against all security advice, as he wanted to go to the disaster area. He owed that to both himself and Hakon.

It was up to the security service and bodyguards to make it work. He ignored all the objections and looked at John: "I take it you're coming with me?"

< 02.34

Torstein pensively folded the paper a few times and put it in his pocket. He looked meaningful at Marit and said: "I don't expect our grandson to come here for now." "Oh, that's a shame", Marit replied disappointedly. "I was really looking forward to it. It has been such a long time since we last saw him." She briefly put her hand on his and squeezed it a little bit in recognition.

"Okay, stop it, you two. Even a blind man can see something's going on. Come on, tell old Eric about it", Eric started. "Nothing to worry about, I hope?", he continued worriedly.

Torstein shook his head. "No, everything's fine. Let's first have breakfast, before the buns get cold", and he took one from the basket. He cut it and put a thick layer of butter on it. Then the telephone rang. "You stay here, I'll answer it", he told Marit.

He walked inside without hurrying, despite the penetratingly shrill ringing, and picked up the phone.

Not much later, he was thanking Lémarc Tasker, who had carefully informed him about the attack on his grandson. He hung up the phone

and slowly sat down. He didn't know what to make of it.

There had been an attack that had probably cost his grandson his life. Mister Tasker had personally informed him, to make sure he wouldn't hear the news through the media first.

Worried, he stood up, walked towards the TV and turned it on. He searched for the INN channel, which according to Hakon always showed the most recent worldwide news. The screen lit up and showed horrible images of a car that was on fire, motorcycles scattered around and battered and befouled people. Fire fighters were walking around, yelling and pointing at things. As the reporter confirmed the terrible news he had received, the first thick rays of foam were disappearing in the flames.

Torstein thought for a moment and turned off the television. Marit had to know, and it was about time Eric was informed of the whole story.

He looked at the painting above the mantelpiece. It showed a bulky man with long, blond hair, sitting on a throne and watching in exactly the same way Hakon would sometimes watch.

He swallowed and hoped that his grandson knew what he was doing, and that he would have more luck than his father had had.

He touched the piece of paper in his pocket and feeling a lot more at ease, he walked back to the terrace.

"Couldn't you ask to call back?", Marit asked. "You've been talking for so long that your bun has gone cold."

He took her hand in his, looked at his friend and said: "Eric, what I'm about to tell you now, is something you shouldn't be startled about. It's time you knew everything", and he started.

< 02.35

At the back of the Elisabeth Hospital, under the porch in front of the entrance to the Emergency Department, two ambulances came to a halt. Two teams led by doctor Jan Swart, were ready to take over the patients and stabilize them as quickly as they could.

About the one that was carried out of the ambulance first, the medic said that this male patient had a good pulse but wasn't responding to any stimuli. Doctor Swart examined him and had to admit he wasn't able to find any cause. "I can't find any abnormalities, but his eyes tell me he's in pain."

He gave the order to add a pain killer to the infusion. He scribbled a short note on his clipboard and pointed at the stretcher. "You can take him over. He can be moved inside."

He turned around and bent over the second patient, an elderly man.

He was unconscious and lay motionless on the stretcher, his face pale white. This case was more serious.

The medic updated him about it. The man had been found on the street and a police officer had resuscitated him on the spot. He examined the man in a professional manner and established that there was a pulse, but an irregular one. It wasn't life threatening right away, but the patient needed to get help quickly. He instructed the second team, which skillfully maneuvered the patient into the ED. While still working on updating the patients' statuses, someone tapped on his shoulder and asked: "How is he doing, doctor? Is he still alive?"

He looked and saw a motorcycle cop wearing a tattered uniform. His young face was covered with black stripes. In one hand, he held a dented motorcycle helmet full of scratches.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

The police officer responded: "I resuscitated him and thought I did well, but he lost consciousness again afterwards. I came with him in the ambulance. Is he dead?" "No, you can relax", the doctor answered in a comforting way. "You did well. His pulse is irregular, but he certainly has a chance." The face across from him relaxed a bit, and he asked: "You must have been a part of Mister Eriksson's escort."

What I don't understand, is how an elderly man", his head nodding in the direction of the entrance, "could have been involved in that." The police officer thought for a while and said: "He must have seen the attack. When I stood up myself, I accidentally looked his way and saw him collapse. I immediately ran to him, moved him a bit, and started resuscitating."

The medics took over and because I was there anyway, I got the order to go with him.” He sighed deeply, and the doctor saw tiny pearls of sweat appearing on his forehead. “Alright”, he said, “please come with me to a treatment room, so you can recover a bit.” They walked towards the entrance of the ED together, the officer with his shoulders hanging from tiredness, the doctor dejected and with his head bent down. He had heard from his companion that none of the people that were in the car had gotten out.

< 02.36

“And now you know everything Hakon has told me”, Torstein finished his story. Eric looked from him to Marit and back, opened his mouth, and closed it again. It didn’t happen regularly, but right now his neighbor didn’t know what to say.

“Maybe we should have confided in you sooner, but Hakon asked us to keep it a secret.

Right now, though, we think you and Sven should know as well.” Marit stood up. “You two stay here, I’m going to get us some coffee.” She put the remains of the breakfast on the tray and disappeared into the kitchen. Eric looked at him and finally asked: “But what about the attack? How could he have survived that? He must be heavily wounded at the least. Aren’t you terribly worried?” Yes, he and Marit were very worried. After seeing Hakon’s burning car, all hope had been drained from him. “Yes, of course. But we put faith in the emails he sent us. We have no choice.” Both of them were silent, and they watched Marit come back with a tray jam-packed with a pot, cups and a bowl of biscuits.

After she had poured them some coffee, Eric asked: “So, what now?” Torstein added a royal shot of milk to his coffee and answered: “All we can do, is wait. You need to inform Sven as well. The boys have been friends since they were born. You two come and have dinner here tonight. Sven will undoubtedly have a lot of questions.”

The sun, which by now stood a bit higher in the sky, was shining over the clear water, which was quietly rippling, reflecting tiny flashes of light. At

the terrace a little further up, it was warmly shining on the people who were silently drinking their coffee, all sunk in their own thoughts.

BY GOSH!

< 03.01

While she had been walking outside, the head nurse had heard several ambulances disappear with screaming sirens, and she knew it wouldn't be long before her colleagues at the Emergency Department would be very busy. She had been standing still for a second to deeply inhale the fresh, flowery air, when she heard the sound of sirens approaching quickly from the distance.

Apparently, the first ambulances were already on their way back in a hurry. She, herself, had just finished her shift.

She was already looking forward to her days off and was just about to continue walking, when three dark SUVs came racing her way from around the corner, in a sea of blue flashing lights and deafeningly wailing sirens.

Petrified from the shock, she saw them driving right at their Volvo. Her husband was in there! They would ram him!

At the last moment, they dodged. Two of them to the left side, the third one to the right. With smoking tires they came to a halt, in a cloud of stinking rubber.

The doors were swung open and men dressed in black jumped out, their weapons drawn. They immediately surrounded a big man. It had all happened so fast that she only realized her husband was unharmed when she saw the armed men.

Relieved, but with her knees shaking from the shock, she wanted to move on, wondering what these guys were doing here, when a fourth SUV came racing her way from around the corner, balancing on two wheels. As if a miracle was taking place, the gigantic car didn't flip over. Now, however, it came at them with an insane speed, right towards the Volvo and the three SUVs.

She yelled at her husband. He had to get out, but she knew it was pointless. She stood there frozen, unable to tear her eyes away from the rapidly approaching monster car, which at the last moment managed to avoid hitting all the other cars and was heading towards the curb with an incredible speed.

She saw the enormous tires slamming against it, the car getting launched, flying over the flowerbeds and crashing against the statue with a deafening bang.

The sirens fell silent at once, while the vehicle was hanging on the pedestal, moaning and creaking and with a completely crumpled front side. She stared at the ravaged scene, completely stupefied, and heard a second loud bang behind her, followed by the sound of shattering glass. The SUV had hit the statue of the nun like a bomb, breaking the statue at its feet and launching it towards the main entrance like a rocket.

It had broken the glass revolving door, shot into the hallway with a huge noise and come down in a rain of glass. It was now sliding further across the floor. The stuck-out finger of the statue scraped over the shining Italian marble, producing a high-pitched, shrill, harrowing sound. With a long, tormented moan, the statue came to halt in the middle of the hallway. In the following silence, you could hear a threatening sound, similar to the breaking of ice. Little cracks started to appear in the glass of the windows. It was as if it was hesitating at first, but soon the brightly colored stained glass scenes dissolved into crazing.

The head nurse had no time to let it all sink in, for at the same moment, an Apache fighter helicopter swooped downwards with a thundering sound, hovering in the air right above their Volvo. The enormous downdraft blew her over and the windows of the hall gave up their fight with a rustling sound. As if a hailstorm was falling on them, with a clattering, tinkling sound, the floor was covered in small fragments of glass that looked like diamonds. In her panic, the cleaning lady had ducked behind a work of art. The receptionist, who was on the phone with the alarm center, was convinced the hospital was under attack. The telephone slipped out of her hand, and while screaming for help, she sought cover underneath her desk, where she sat, shivering and covering her head with her arms.

Like a last drunken partygoer, the telephone was slowly swinging back and forth in front of the desk, in time with the loud, thumping helicopter sound.

< 03.02

The man in the Volvo wrapped a handkerchief around the sensitive red fingers of his left hand. He had been about to pour in some tea for his wife, hoping her shift hadn't been too rough, when he had gotten distracted by a couple of all terrain vehicles, which were approaching him at high speed.

In his shock, he had poured the tea alongside of his mug, and the hot liquid had dropped on his left hand. He had cursed these idiots, taken his handkerchief, wiped up the tea as well as possible, and bandaged his hand with the wet cloth.

He looked aside and saw the vehicles coming to an abrupt halt. Men dressed in black were getting out. Even before he had time to wonder what business they had here, a fourth SUV came rushing to the scene. Directly towards him! In panic, he ducked and tried to cover his head with his arms. He heard a thwack, followed by a terribly loud bang.

It took a while before he realized that he was still in one piece and in his car, which was still standing there unscathed, next to the sidewalk.

He was shaking as he looked outside, and couldn't believe his eyes. The SUV was hanging there, in the middle of the flowerbed, surrounded by a circle of rubble, as if it had fallen from the sky. His mouth fell open, but was shut again, as his car began shaking heavily and he heard a deafening sound which caused the whole car to vibrate.

His nerves, which were already tensed to the max, shut down and he screamed in panic, as he saw a helicopter coming at him through the sunroof of the car, with all lights on, apparently getting ready to land on the car. Petrified and with wide open eyes he looked above, and he nearly had a heart attack as his car door was suddenly pulled open.

< 03.03

The female operator of the alarm center, who was talking to a receptionist at the Elisabeth Hospital, suffered from minor ear damage as a high-pitched, shrilling sound reached her through her earphone. She choked on the big bite that she had just taken from her doughnut, and collapsed

with her face turning red. Her chief, who was just walking behind her, thought his corpulent employee had just gotten a heart attack. He immediately told a colleague to call an ambulance and start resuscitating. He looked at the plot board and saw that she had recently been in contact with someone from the Elisabeth Hospital, and that the line was still open. All medical teams had been on their way to the Peace Palace and he assumed that she had been discussing where to take the victims to. He put on the headphones and asked who was on the other end of the line. No one answered, but in the background, he heard thumping sounds and the shattering of glass. A woman's voice was crying for help. She yelled a few words. Bomb? Helicopter? He tried to understand what he had just heard, and at the same time saw the light of an automatic fire alarm flickering on the panel beside him.

It was the same hospital as the one he was connected to right now!

He had no idea what exactly was going on, but ten minutes ago, an attack had taken place, and this didn't sound like a joke to him. While behind him someone was gasping for air, he tried to get in contact with Johan Lam. The manager of the crisis center had to call the mayor, so that the contingency plan could be activated.

< 03.04

The bright morning light unmercifully showed each detail of the damage. From the main entrance of the Elisabeth Hospital all the way down to the heart-shaped area, there was glass on the ground, debris, clods of dirt, broken twigs and leaves. The head nurse had crawled up with some effort, and was staring dazed at the mess around her, until her glance rested on the middle of the flowerbeds. The statue had disappeared and was now replaced by a crumpled SUV, leaning against the pedestal like a drunk. She simply couldn't believe what her eyes were registering. She became aware of the helicopter noise and the thumping rotor, which relentlessly pounded through her body. She wanted to get away. Away from this mess, away from that noise. She ran towards the Volvo, yanked the door open and dove inside.

< 03.05

Just as crumpled and damaged as his SUV, James Taylor was hanging in his seatbelt, which was pinning up his body, but had also been his saving. The air was slowly released from the airbag, and while staring at the blue sky that was now appearing, he was slowly coming back to his senses.

He was broken. He couldn't find a single spot that didn't itch or sting. His whole body was painful. Judging by their cursing and moaning, his colleagues were in the same boat. He was trying to free himself from the pinching seatbelt, when the car door on his side was yanked open and Holger stuck his big head inside. James saw his worried face make room for relief, and was startled a moment later by the gigantic knife Holger summoned, his face now grim with anger. While muttering German curses, he cut the seat belt loose in one flowing move and carried him out of the car like he was a little kid.

While Holger supported him, again, he was examined by the medic of the EUAT92 team. Except for his bruises, small cuts, a lump on his forehead the size of a ping pong ball and his nose, which was swollen from the force of the airbag, he was okay.

His blood pressure had risen to undiscovered heights as a result of Mad Harry's kamikaze ride, and adrenaline was the only thing that kept him standing now.

His handmade Harris Tweed was now totally ruined. The second sleeve was also gone and around his crotch, a big stain, which was beginning to smell by now, had increased in size. Red with shame, he wanted to start a conversation with Holger, but the latter was quicker than him. Holger was already looking intensely at him, and barked: "James, listen to me. You and your people stay here for now. As soon as I'm in and have control over the department where Casanova is staying, I'll come back with medical care for you guys. In the meantime, try to recover yourself."

"Yes, but...", he tried. "No 'buts'. James, you really have to recover first. You look like shit and I think all of you can use a few minutes rest." "Yes, but I need to arrest him, so...", he tried again. "No, James, not now.

There's no time to waste. You are the one who's going to arrest Casanova, but only after I summon you and tell you everything is clear. Absolutely nothing can go wrong anymore."

When he had finished his sermon, Holger turned around and gave instructions to his men, who had already regrouped. After a quick check, the team, led by the German, rushed towards the main entrance. James' pride was in tatters.

He stared at them until the annoying pounding sound of a helicopter got to him. He turned around and saw the flying machine hang above a Volvo. At the same moment, a woman, clearly in panic, yanked open the car door, jumped in, and immediately shut the door behind her. Despite all the noise, he could hear her scream.

This was madness. And what was taking the police and fire fighters so long? Had they been warned at all? He couldn't just stand here, doing nothing, while everything was a mess and Casanova had to be caught, could he?

He manned himself, and decided to follow Holger anyway, when he saw something moving in the corner of his eye and noticed Mad Harry. He was instantly blinded by rage and, the anger taking over, he yelled the most profound curses at him, ending with:

"... and the moment I have the time, you're mine! Don't even think about steering anything from now on, not even a tricycle! You complete moron!"

Miraculously, his burst of anger had done him good. He forgot all about his physical discomforts and moved towards the main entrance, following Holger and ready for battle, ignoring Holger's advice. With his experience from the parking garage still in the back of his mind, he ran through the broken revolving door, careful of any obstacles, and ... lost his balance.

With his arms swinging wildly through the air, he slipped into the hall. He suffered the same fate as Holger and his men had suffered.

Because shattered pieces of glass lay all over the marble floor, it had turned into a treacherously slippery surface, and the whole team, except for Holger himself, had gone down.

The men were lying in a sloppy pile in front of the reception. He didn't want to bump into them. As if he was sliding down a snowy mountain on

a sled, he tried to dodge by swinging his legs wildly in all directions. And it worked. He managed to maneuver himself to the center of the hall, where the statue of the nun was lying.

Instead of bumping into a pile of men, he banged against the statue, which, as some form of protest, hit him with her stuck out finger, right in his crotch. His scream echoed through the hall of the hospital, and via the corridors slid into the patient- and treatment rooms.

Many a patient had been upset by the nun entering the building with a lot of noise. Barely having recovered from that, the patients were again shocked by a gruesome scream.

< 03.06

The Mark12 communication satellite, which was hovering above The Netherlands was one of a string of 12 satellites which, strategically placed around the earth, were property of Markland Communications, the market leader in telephone- and internet traffic.

With a few useful inventions, the company had conquered the entire market for this category in just four years. Affordable smartphones and tablet pcs containing extremely user friendly software were offered with worldwide coverage.

A large part of the success was caused by, other than the hard- and software, the very affordable rates and the guarantee that people were able to have a stable connection all around the world.

The company slogan 'everywhereconnected.com' had been lived up to for three years and had already provided them with hundreds of millions of satisfied customers, who were happy to pay \$1 per day for unlimited use of telephone connection and internet, with excellent coverage and a data transmission speed of 1 gigabyte p/s, both up and down.

In cooperation with Unicef, the company sponsored development aid by offering this service for free in inhospitable and remote areas, where telecommunication without the use of satellites was impossible. Despite that, the company remained extremely profitable. In addition to the standard equipment needed for sending and receiving user information,

all satellites were equipped with a special, secret module, containing an advanced camera with a microscope functionality, among other things. The program that was specifically written for this purpose, SCOPE, was continuously taking pictures of the earth's surface. It synchronized all overlapping images and independently selected the best quality pictures.

At this moment, only a small percentage of its total capacity was being used, as only The Netherlands, New York and Texas were being permanently monitored.

Another tiny, but very advanced program called SPY was active, searching 24/7 for images from other sources, like pictures, films and videos that were digitally saved, recordings made by smartphones and recordings by (surveillance) cameras in (public) places. SPY was extremely well hidden and didn't leave any traces.

The collected material was encrypted and inimitably sent to a location in Scotland at the speed of light, where it was put into the system and analyzed with the help of CRYPTO (*the hacker*) and FACE (*facial recognition*). The system had an amazing capacity and featured a series of super high speed processors, making the results almost instantly available.

System administrator Sandra would then interpret, arrange and summarize them and place them on the GRID. In order to be able to execute her task as independently as possible, within certain parameters she was authorized to give commands and make adjustments to the script. Should she need to take a decision outside of those parameters, she needed to consult with the chief. And that was the case right now.

The activities which took place around the Elisabeth Hospital in The Hague, which had been continuously monitored since this morning, forced her to report.

< 03.07

From somewhere far away, all kinds of sounds seemed to grow louder and louder. He heard voices, metal objects clinking and some kind of strange rustling. People were walking back and forth, and a telephone

was ringing somewhere. The fog in his head started lifting a bit, and he felt someone touching his chest, which by the way felt as if a steam roller had driven over it. After several painful attempts, he managed to open his eyes.

The incredibly bright light was blinding him. His head hurt like hell and he felt a stinging pain, as if the devil himself was puncturing his brain with a red hot fork. He wanted to cover his eyes with his arms, but simply wasn't capable of doing so. In a flash, he remembered what had happened. He was in deep trouble. Still, it seemed as if the poison was losing its effect, for his left arm started tingling. He could barely feel it, so it would still take a while, he thought sourly. It would be best not to let anyone notice. In the meantime, he would keep his eyes and ears open, and only when he had regained complete control over his body, would he get the heck out of here.

< 03.08

Johan Lam thoughtfully put down the phone. He had just had two miserable conversations and in his mind, he repeated the question both the mayor and commissioner Schenk had asked him: "How could this have happened?" A good question, which he was incapable of answering right now, and maybe even forever. Everything had been arranged in secret and the people involved had been, and were still periodically being, thoroughly checked.

Nowadays, everything was possible, but he couldn't imagine someone from this group would've leaked.

He could at least exclude himself and Hakon. Also, the place, time and route had been kept secret until the very last moment.

It was a mystery. With a sigh, he stood up and walked towards the glass door, which was wide open, as usual.

By now, everyone was being called and it wouldn't be long before the entire department was fully staffed.

All monitors came to life, and the few people who weren't making telephone calls, were trying to make themselves heard, yelling through

transceivers or radio telephones.

After he had closed the door and sat back in his chair, he opened the file, which had been carefully kept secret up till now, and was just about to start reading it, when the telephone rang. It was the chief of the alarm center, who immediately started speaking. "Johan, shit has gone loose at the Elisabeth Hospital. We were just on the phone with them as ambulances had been sent to that attack. The line is still open, but no one is answering. In the background I heard a lot of noise, pounding and the shattering of glass. There were screams for help and a woman was yelling something about a bomb. The phone is glowing red hot here at the moment, as half the town is calling the emergency number with reports about chases and car accidents. I don't know what's going on, but it's clear that the mayor should activate the contingency plan!" During this rain of words, he had been sitting more and more upright, and while sitting up even further, he answered: "Another attack? Goddammit! Elisabeth Hospital, you said? Alright, if you call the fire chief, I'll inform the mayor and the police commissioner."

He flung down the telephone, opened the door and summoned his assistant at once. The contingency plan had to be prepared and commissioner Schenk had to be informed. He would call the mayor himself. Shit, it was only nine twenty and he already had to report a second disaster.

< 03.09

"Good, the boss can be happy again", Ewin said, as he turned his microphone off and pulled his smartphone out of his pocket. A few minutes ago, the device had already let him know that a message had come in. Charles grumbled approvingly and asked, while pointing around: "Maybe shoot some images of the aftermath?" "Yes, of course. Better to have too many images than too..." He stopped talking as he read the text on the display.

"How did she get to know that? Hey, Charles, Barbara says EUAT92 is on its way to the Elisabeth Hospital to arrest Casanova. You know, that criminal? Here, read it yourself." He showed him the message. Charles

held up two fingers and nodded in the direction of their car. In other words: If they hurried, they might be in time to get a second scoop. They left the still smoldering car wreck and the chaos behind and hurried back. He took the lightweight tripod that Charles had unscrewed while walking, and opened the car lock at the same time. He threw the tripod in the back of the car.

“I know where the Elisabeth Hospital is approximately, but I haven’t been around here long enough to know for sure.” He looked it up. “I hope we’re not too late.” “I’ll do my best. The boss will pay for any fines, I think”, his colleague answered while skillfully attaching a special accessory to his shoulder and clicking his camera in. Without the need to hold it, it automatically followed the movements of his head, so that his hands were free.

The route appeared. They followed the electronic instructions and were on their way to the new destination as quickly as possible.

< 03.10

His mouth had let go of hers. He pressed his wife intimately against himself. God, she smelled nice. With a series of little kisses, his lips eagerly sought a way from her neck downwards, when he was roughly interrupted. His PIM rang with a shrill, compelling, double ringtone. This meant Sandra needed him, something he certainly hadn’t expected.

They reluctantly let go of each other. “Darling, I have to go. Duty calls.” He kissed her, stroked a lock of hair behind her ear and promised: “Tonight I’ll be yours.” She smiled and dismissed him out of her atelier.

He closed the door behind him, wondering why Sandra needed to speak to him so urgently.

< 03.11

After talking to the press, Lémarc turned around and walked away. What he had just said, would be taken as a standard reaction, but still he had meant every word he said. No matter how well they hid themselves, he

would find the bastards who were responsible for this. Jens, closely followed by two men, lifted him out of his vengeful mood. His assistant introduced him to commissioner Schenk from the local police, and an inspector who happened to be in the neighborhood because of a different investigation. His first impression was that these were reasonable and experienced men, who were suitable for their jobs and were willing to cooperate.

They soon agreed on the jurisdiction, and agreed that the local police would collect the evidence and open it up to UNBI and Interpol. The inspector, introducing himself as Wycher Sytsema, reported that there was a witness. "An elderly man, who had collapsed after seeing the attack, and was taken to the Elisabeth Hospital by ambulance." He took out his notebook, quickly read through the notes and continued. "According to officer De Wit from the Military Police, who resuscitated the man, this witness asked if Hakon had gotten out of the car, before losing consciousness again. De Wit was ordered to accompany the witness in the ambulance, so that he can let us know whether or not we have a witness."

He closed his notebook and continued: "According to De Wit, it wasn't looking good, but he might just make it and be able to tell us more." Inspector Sytsema put away his notebook and asked: "By the way, how was the man able to get there by foot? Wasn't the whole area cleared?" That was a good question, Lémarc thought, and he nodded approvingly as commissioner Schenk suggested his men sort it out.

The fire chief reported that the fire had been extinguished.

As soon as everything had cooled off, the car would be completely covered, and a tow truck would bring it to the technical service for investigation. Lémarc thanked him and asked inspector Sytsema if he wanted to coordinate the transport and the investigation. As soon as DNA had been taken from both bodies, he would personally make sure it was sent to a special department at UNBI, and that the analyses would be taken care of with the highest priority. The inspector nodded in acknowledgement, said goodbye and left.

In the meantime, a big Mercedes had approached and Lémarc recognized the mayor of The Hague.

Commissioner Schenk gestured briefly at the Mercedes and updated him in a few sentences about the responsibility of mayors in The Netherlands when it comes to public order and safety. A little later, hands were shaken and after everyone had been introduced, the newcomer was informed and updated about the arrangements that had been made. The four of them were walking towards the car wreck, when three different ringtones went off simultaneously. As one man, the mayor, the commissioner and the fire chief picked up and started talking at once. Lémarc didn't understand Dutch, but nonetheless understood that something was wrong at the Elisabeth Hospital.

The three Dutchmen were talking with each other in that non-understandable language and he was forced to assert his authority.

He interrupted the mayor and explained that he hadn't had the chance yet to inform everyone about Casanova's arrest by Interpol, supported by EUAT92, and that he didn't know if it had been finished yet. The mayor looked at him strangely, and spoke in flawless English: "I don't know if it's related, but there seems to have been an explosion. The patients are in a panic and the building is on fire."

He excused himself briefly and resumed the conversation on the telephone, while rushing after the other two.

He wondered what in heaven's name could be going on, looked around to see if he could find Jens somewhere in the crowd and saw the tall young man, standing between the tattered motorcycle cops, having a conversation on the telephone. He zigzagged between the emergency workers, stepping over cables that were lying everywhere and made his way towards him. In the meantime, he tried to reach James by telephone. Jens saw him, stopped his conversation and walked towards him, excited. "Chief, there has been another attack. On the Elisabeth Hospital!" On the way to their car, as Jens was reporting about what happened at the hospital with a cracking voice, Lémarc was getting more worried. James still wasn't answering.

Holger came to a halt, turned around and observed the scene. When he had freed James from his car, he had been thankful for the air support the helicopter provided. Now, however, he realized how much damage the Apache had caused, resulting in this misery.

He had been the only one who had managed to stay standing, because of his fine sense of balance, which he had developed by playing ice hockey for years and being active in the short track world. He had instinctively 'skated' to the nearest pillar, while his men went down and ended up in a chaotic pile in front of the reception desk. As far as he could tell, apart from some bruises, lumps, bloody noses and cuts, they weren't severely wounded.

While he was still thinking about how to get them up and to the entrance of the Emergency Department, the crazy British guy came in and, of course, went down. Wildly swinging his arms and legs, James slid sideways on his butt through the hall, and ungently got stopped by the nun.

He let out an icy scream that got more and more high-pitched, died away slowly and transformed into a pitiful moaning. James hadn't followed his advice and was becoming quite a nuisance. The job, which was actually quite simple, hadn't been done yet, and it wasn't getting any easier. The simple task to arrest a man who had suffered a heart attack, although he was a highly dangerous criminal, had turned into this bizarre situation. He had been through a lot in his life, but this beat everything. First, Casanova needed to be contained in such a way that he absolutely couldn't escape. After that, he would worry about James, who had stayed lying there like a moaning rag doll. Tears were streaming from his eyes and from out of his mouth came a long string of saliva. He wouldn't go anywhere for now and at least would not get in his way.

Now he needed to make sure that his men came to the entrance door to the ED. Scouting for possibilities, he saw the solution. Quickly and agilely, he moved towards it. He looked compassionately at his team. If the situation hadn't been this serious, he would have burst out laughing. It was like an extremely funny slapstick. They were lying disorganized on top of each other, frantically trying to free themselves

and get up. Especially those two at the front, who tried to 'swim' away, with their weapons in hand.

It was too sad to see. His men, skillful and well-trained, had lost all control and there was no order left whatsoever.

Suddenly furious, he yelled at them that he would toss the fire hose towards them, so that they could use it as a lifeline. He took the thing off the wall, rolled it out and picked up the heavy copper nozzle. He estimated the distance to the reception desk, moved the weight a couple of times and fiercely threw the nozzle, which would serve as a grappling hook, over the entanglement, so that it would land behind the reception desk. Just as he let loose, his second in command, also a good friend, managed to get up, with his arms widely spread so as to remain balanced.

He couldn't guide his throw anymore and tried to grab the firehose in order to stop the thing, but it was already too late. With horror, he saw the heavy metal object bashing into his friend's face, turning it into a bloody fountain. Knocked off balance, his colleague fell backwards, and in a reflex, his index finger pulled the trigger of his Heckler & Koch MP5. A rain of bullets flew rattling through the hall, forcefully penetrating the wall next to the entrance to the ED.

The works of art that were standing and hanging everywhere exploded. Chunks and splinters of wood and stone fell clatteringly on the floor, followed by strings of cotton and silk a few moments later. The last bullet pierced the doorpost where he had just stood. Seeing the moving hand, Holger had instinctively ducked away from the danger zone.

He stayed lying on the floor, thankful for his own reflexes and sweating with adrenaline. While catching his breath, his eyes scouted the bullet holes. He realized that it had been damn close this time.

< 03.13

In all departments of the Elisabeth Hospital it was noticeable that the soundproof and dustproof baffles had been removed, and that all swinging doors were wide open.

For the first time in months, the stuffy smell had disappeared.

The fresh air did carry the specific smell of a newly refurbished environment, but that wasn't disturbing. It actually gave the impression that the whole hospital had been freshened up.

Peter had enjoyed it when he started his shift at the heart monitoring department and had felt pity for his colleagues at the ED. As long as all the doors in the rest of the hospital were wide open, the doors there were kept shut, so as to not disturb the patients.

By now, he wasn't that positive anymore.

He was quite busy helping his patients, who were still extremely nervous after the clinking of glass, the shrill sound, the pounding and that horrifying scream at the end. It seemed to have come out of the hallway, but he couldn't imagine what would have caused it. He gave the patient in bed number four a new infusion, when they were all startled again by a loud crackling sound.

The elderly man in bed two, behind him, shouted: "The Germans are here! Take cover!" At the same time, his nose registered that someone had let everything go. Peter had had it.

The problems were coming in faster than he could solve them. He didn't care which action group it was that pulled a stunt this time, apparently accompanied by the use of fireworks and firecrackers. Before he could take care of his patients, first the doors needed to be closed.

He called the reception three times, but his calls weren't answered. The line was, and stayed, busy.

< 03.14

He didn't understand why Sandra had called him away from his wife. It couldn't be anything serious, for the entire script was extremely well thought out and endlessly talked through.

He was curious and hurried towards the tower room. He rushed up the spiral staircase, proud of how easy that went. A few years ago, he

absolutely couldn't have done that. He cheerfully walked up the last steps and went inside.

As soon as he closed the door, Sandra told him that worrying messages and images had been received from The Hague, and that these developments weren't present in the original script. She had taken the liberty to make some adjustments about which she wanted to inform him.

Lord MacMarkland walked towards his chair, and while sitting down, he said: "Alright, go ahead." "First of all, I can share that searching Casanova yielded no results. His smartphone is empty and the sim card is missing. Other than that, there are two things.

Firstly, arresting Casanova resulted in more difficulties than expected. On monitor eight, you can see the current situation outside the hospital. I have also found images from within the hall, which you can find on monitor nine. Commissioner Taylor is down for now and EUAT92 has been slowed down due to unforeseen circumstances." On monitor eight he saw a heavily damaged SUV half lying on a pedestal in a flowerbed, with three bloodied people crawling out. Behind it, he saw, the main entrance had been destroyed and the glass in all the windows had shattered. Monitor nine showed men, dressed in black, lying in a pile in front of the reception desk.

Only because the images were so clear, was he able to establish that these were members of the EUAT92. He saw a man lying on a statue in the middle of the hall, his clothes in tatters. A movement caught his attention, and he recognized Holger Bersal, moving in a strange, gliding way towards the entrance of the ED.

He was about to ask Sandra what had happened and what she had changed in the script, when a new character was added on the left side of the screen, including an avatar. He read the name 'Stiletto' and frowned, surprised. Sandra was a step ahead of him and continued: "The second point is about the picture Arda has sent, of a man who seemed to have a suspicious interest in Casanova when the latter was being resuscitated.

According to SPY, this is Jose Antonio Martínez-Hernandez, also known as Stiletto. Mexican, 32 years old, 5.2 feet tall, dark curly hair, son of

circus artist, skilled knife thrower. He is the suspect in two murder cases and disappeared one and a half years ago.

On their own initiative, Arda and Tim have observed this person and when he sent a text message, SPY was able to trace it. The message was sent to the same server Casanova sent his images to. You can read the text in GRID.”

He read the short message: ‘Colleague stricken by heart attack and taken to hospital. Will visit him there’, after which he let Sandra know that she could continue. She went on: “Based on the facts, I have come to the conclusion that it is as good as certain that Stiletto had been sent to take down Casanova.

I ordered Tim and Arda to follow him, and instructed Arda to take action in order to prevent this from happening.”

He wasn’t happy with the twist in this plan.

He answered pensively: “Yes, that’s fine. All the focus should be on keeping him alive, so that he can be transferred to Interpol. We cannot lose this source of information. What is his current location?” “Casanova has been brought to the ED and is now lying in a treatment room. There are no images available from that department. Because of the refurbishments, cameras there are turned off. We do have live images via Mark1, showing the back of the hospital, where the ambulance entrance is located.

The satellite camera is fully functional and all information regarding that zone is continuously being processed by SPY. Based on the latest analysis, extra fire trucks and ambulances from other hospitals stand ready to support.” “Fine. Can you inform Holger Bersal about Stiletto, please?”

He leaned back, content. The situation was under control and there was no reason to be worried. Holger Bersal was very capable. He would give Casanova any chance of escaping, but would protect him at the same time. He decided not to leave the tower room until Casanova was safely behind bars.

He wondered if he should tell anyone about the change of plans, but decided not to do so yet. As long as Sandra didn’t think it was

necessary, he would just calmly follow what was coming. He had automatically taken his glass, poured a good gulp of whisky in, and taken a big sip, without really tasting it.

< 03.15

Holger realized he needed to have eyes in the back of his head today, and was slowly losing his patience. He had never been under friendly fire before and he had been incredibly lucky.

The loud, disturbing rotor sound from the helicopter pounded unabated through the hall. Yelling, he ordered someone to anchor the firehose somewhere near the reception desk, and said the paramedic should stay there to take care of his second in command, after which he should help James.

Before he was done yelling, the firehose had already been secured and the first men were reaching him.

< 03.16

Even without a route planner indicating he and Charles were approaching their destination, it was clear that they were getting close. The characteristic sound of a helicopter grew louder, and the first sensationalist disaster tourists were rushing towards the scene. Charles turned on his camera and a moment later, they made a turn. As soon as they drove around the corner, they saw an unprecedented mess and it was as if they were back in Beirut.

Black SUVs were randomly parked, an ordinary Volvo stood between them, and above it hovered a fighter helicopter which made dust, leaves and all kinds of loose garbage blow into the air. The deafening whoop-whoop-whoop the rotors produced, thumped through everything. Charles had to park almost in the middle of the street, askew behind the higgledy-piggledy SUVs.

Charles spoke his thoughts out loud. "Those belong to the arrest team, that's for sure." They moved towards the main entrance and saw a fourth

SUV hanging on top of a pedestal in the flowerbed in front of it. Around it, it was one big demolition site and a little bit further up, a thick layer of splintered glass lay on the floor. The bright daylight made it glimmer and gleam. Four cars. That meant at least sixteen, maybe 20 men had been deployed here, Ewin thought. What could have taken place here?

Had Casanova made an attempt to escape? He warned Charles and extremely cautiously, they walked on. Just like he was back in the Middle East, Ewin started to describe how the Apache helicopter was hanging very low above a parked Volvo.

< 03.17

Self-confident, as if nothing had happened, Barbara walked back to the department, and saw that nearly all desks were occupied. On her way to her own desk, she stumbled into her boss, who briskly asked her how she was doing. She suppressed her embarrassment, put up her thumb, full of bravado, and quickly walked on. On the TV screen she saw Lémarc Tasker speaking, correct as always.

“The only thing I can confirm, is that the director of UNBI, Hakon Eriksson, and his driver, are the victims of this cowardly act of terror. A very thorough investigation will be started, and I have no doubt that soon, more facts will be revealed about what exactly has happened here. I am grateful that the members of the escort, other than some superficial injuries, don’t seem to have suffered any major damage. The UN secretary will give a press conference at twelve o’clock. I can only tell you that everything will be done to find and bring to justice those who are responsible for this tragedy. That will be all for now.” Determinedly, he turned around and walked away, after which Ewin was back on the screen.

While her colleague was busy with the closing summary, Barbara heard her cell phone ringing somewhere. She was lucky that the thing made a sound, for it had fallen from her desk, into the bin right next to it. She pulled it out and saw that she had an old, unread text message. She opened it.

Oh, God, it had been sent by Hakon. He had sent it to her while he was on his way to the Peace Palace, where he would never arrive. Swallowing fiercely, she held the telephone convulsively in two hands and read: 'Non quod videtur!'

If she remembered correctly, it meant something like 'Nothing is what it seems'. Strange. She looked away and stared thoughtfully at her computer monitor, which still showed the back of Hakon's car, which had even been specially adapted for safety reasons. The license plate, UN 67, was still readable. While staring at the monitor absent-mindedly, she suddenly sat up straight. This was not the license plate number of Hakon's car! It should have been UN 76, his year of birth. How was this possible? What did it mean? At the same time, she remembered something.

Only a few days ago, they had spoken with each other briefly, and at the end, Hakon had clearly said "that everything we experience, is not always what we see."

She had taken it as wise advice, but now, when she combined that with the strange message and the recent happenings ... She hastily looked for paper and pencil.

< 03.18

He stealthily looked at how, apart from the two who were still at the desk, they stood in front of the entrance door to the ED. The big guy had briefly talked to them, after which they disappeared into the hallway. Without making a sound, he breathed, relieved. Maybe he could get away from this mess unnoticed.

After he had managed to polish the entire floor before eight o'clock in the morning, he had treated himself to a cigarette, which he had secretly lit in the corner.

With his back against the wall and his eyes half closed, he was enjoying his smoke, when he was utterly startled by a bomb that was thrown in, immediately followed by a horrifying, high-pitched sound, which turned into a cracking, breaking sound. He had stood there petrified, and when

he had cautiously opened his eyes, he had seen that the statue which always stood outside, was now lying in the middle of the hall, followed by a trail of glass splinters.

After that, he had heard a thumping sound that had grown louder and louder, and suddenly the windows had shattered. The glass splinters had come down like a waterfall, after which the thumping sound had sounded twice as loud. And still the nightmare hadn't been over. A lot of armed men had rushed inside, slipped, and crashed into the reception desk. Not much later, another guy had followed. He had been thrown forcefully against the statue, and had screamed and moaned in a horrifying way.

Astonished, he had blinked his eyes a few times in order to wake up from this bad dream, but it appeared it was reality. With his knees shaking, he had squeezed himself as tightly against the wall as possible, and had stood there silently, trying as hard as he could to be invisible. He wasn't thinking about the half smoked cigarette anymore, which had slipped from his fingers unnoticed. The cigarette end had rolled for a bit and had ended up against the wooden bottom of the work of art that was standing left of the entrance. The glowing tip was now being fueled by the wind in the hall, and slowly grew to be a small flame, which hungrily reached for the cotton strips which hung from the structure, ending just above the ground.

< 03.19

The team was assembled in the vestibule. Now that the swinging doors were closed, Holger noticed how quiet it was here. You could hear almost nothing of the wind and the noise in the hall. If there hadn't been a firehose between the doors, it would have been totally quiet. The padded bulkheads which were placed against the door parts, indeed gave the impression that one was inside a psychiatric ward, but they were extremely effective.

Expressionless, he looked at his group of 'professionals', who were watching the picture of Stiletto he had sent them on their wrists. He warned them to be extra watchful for this assassin, who had supposedly been sent out to kill Casanova. He also didn't like it at all that the ED had

a direct connection to the outside world at the back, and he decided to have two SUVs moved there, in order to block the ambulance entrance.

He ordered the drivers of SUV1 and SUV2 to each take a broom from the closet on the left side, to sweep clean a path in the hall, to move their vehicles to the back side and block the ambulance entrance. After that, he pointed at six men and ordered: "There are six treatment rooms. You'll guard these until I've found Casanova. No one is to go in or out without my permission." At the end of this sentence, he had begun to talk louder, to overcome the sudden noise that was accompanied by a gust of wind when two drivers, each pushing a broom in front of them, had entered the hall through the swinging doors.

He turned towards the rest of the men and continued. "As soon as I get a signal that the cars are on their way, we will inspect each treatment room one by one, until we find Casanova.

In the meantime, you guys check your gear and stay sharp. This is a mean bastard, who has more tricks up his sleeve than David Copperfield." While he was watching how his men checked their equipment, he was notified of the cars being on their way. He pulled the balaclava from his head and said: "Attention!! We're going now!" He swung the swinging doors open and rushed into the hallway, followed closely by his team.

At each door they passed, one of the men stayed behind. About halfway down, a doctor came out of one of the treatment rooms. Good, he thought, he should know where Casanova is.

< 03.20

He hadn't been hit. A miracle! When the shooting began, he had let himself drop down quickly and had made himself as tiny as possible. Slowly and carefully he stood up.

His eyes scouted the room, which seemed to have instantly changed into a demolition site. All windows were gone and where the revolving door had been, the only thing left was a huge hole. The all-dominating pounding - which he understood now, was a helicopter - was still there,

and now that everything was open, the wind could freely swirl around. He saw the person who had crashed into the statue making several failed attempts to get up. There were two terrorists at the reception desk and two others were busy with their brooms. They must have caught the receptionist, for he couldn't see her. Again, he squeezed himself against the wall as tightly as possible, and he wished he could sink into it, to escape this misery.

While constantly muttering to himself in order not to panic, he searched for a better place to hide, or even better, a possibility to get out unseen. He looked enviously at the two terrorists, who threw their brooms aside and walked outside. His glance moved to the other side of the hall, where he saw the faintly curved line of bullet holes, chunks of stucco lying scattered around, fallen works of art and tapestries which had been shot to pieces and were blown in different directions by the wind. Jeez, such destruction and such a lot of dust. He tried very hard not to cough, deadly scared he would be discovered, and stared in shock at the work of art, which had fallen against the tapestry next to the window and was suddenly catching fire. Not even a second later, the tapestry was also on fire and sparks and pieces of burning material were shooting in all directions.

Aghast, he watched as the wooden window frame of the big window caught fire and the fire moved towards the antique, newly painted roof frames. Thick clouds of smoke were blown outside.

Shit! His cigarette! Now he remembered. He had been smoking when the terrorists attacked. He couldn't remember where he had left that cigarette at all. He closed his eyes tightly and tried his best not to panic. If he stayed here, they would find him and that would be the end of him. There was only one way out.

He had to try to get to the exit without being seen. Tightly pressed against the wall, he started to shuffle sideways, towards the revolving door.

< 03.21

Doctor Jan Swart had guided the stressed out motorcycle cop to treatment room three, and had sat him on a chair. On their way there,

they had encountered nurse Grietje, whom he had asked to bring them some tea with sugar, and if possible, some gingerbread cake or a sandwich. If there was anyone who should be capable of doing so quickly, it would be her.

While he was still busy examining the cop, she had already come into the room, setting down a tray with two large cups of tea, two sandwiches and a few slices of gingerbread cake. Not only efficient and practical, but also a pretty girl to look at, he thought. Tall, lean, a pretty face with big eyes, and a full bush of blonde curls. They must miss her at the maternity ward, where she had finished her internship a week ago.

He thanked her and handed the young man a cup of tea and a slice of gingerbread. Just as Grietje was leaving, his co-assistant walked in, almost bumping into her. He couldn't help staring after her. Well, he thought, that probably won't be the last time that happens. He asked: "Well, how are our patients doing?" His co-assistant regained himself and said: "There's that big guy in treatment room one, who isn't responding to any stimulus. He is stable and his functions seem to respond normally. Blood has been taken from him, which is already on its way to the lab. He is currently stable, but not out of danger."

"Okay, I'll see him", he responded, and pointing at the officer, who had already regained a bit of color in his face: "Please stay sitting here and eat something in the meantime. I'll come back for you later." He followed his co-assistant to treatment room two, where the older patient, monitored by medical equipment and connected to an infusion, was showing signs of life.

His eyes opened and he looked sadly at him. The man tried to talk, and while he bent forwards and tried to understand what the man was saying, he heard the doors to the ward being flung open, after which it was as if a horde of elephants were rushing down the hallway. He looked tiresomely at his co-assistant and said: "Could you take over, please? I'll go check what's going on." He walked out of the room, closed the door and was almost immediately surrounded by a group of armed men, dressed in black, who looked pretty tattered. The only guy who didn't seem to have a scratch, tall and blond, asked him in a loud and demanding voice: "Where is Casanova?"

< 03.22

In treatment room one, Casanova had fully woken up. Too bad that everything other than his left hand was still paralyzed. But he could already move his fingers and the tingling feeling had spread from his left arm to his chest and shoulders. He was also able to see clearly again, although he could only look upwards, and the pain had started to decrease. This was going the right way.

He vaguely remembered that a doctor had been working on him. He strongly suspected he was lying in a regular hospital, although there was quite some noise further up, and he heard some yelling as well. Maybe it was the sickbay of a prison or something.

He hoped not, because that would reduce his chances significantly. Goddammit, how could he have been so stupid? Just at the end of his last assignment, had he let his attention slip. He could beat himself up, and wished that was possible. He wasn't even able to grit his teeth. Damn, he was such an idiot. You bet that as soon as he had a chance, which he knew he would get, he would disappear in no-time. He longed for the capital and the new life that was waiting for him.

< 03.23

Ewin looked around cautiously, and moved in the direction of the hall. Charles followed him in blind faith, while recording imperturbably. Through the noise of the helicopter they could hear sirens, and they knew that their scoop would soon be over, for their colleagues, although without sirens and flashing lights, would arrive just as fast. Carefully and slowly they walked on, when suddenly their attention was caught by something moving. Several people, tattered and bloody, were crawling out of the SUV, which was hanging heavily damaged on the pedestal. Ewin pulled Charles with him as he walked towards them to interview them and find out what had happened.

< 03.24

From around the corner, the same one Mad Harry had taken on two wheels, a taxi was approaching. The driver was surprised by a group of people standing on the street, and he was just able to avoid hitting them.

Not even a second later, his eyes opened wide in disbelief, as he saw the scene in front of him. He forgot to hit the brakes and crashed into a clumsily parked car. He hit it full in the side.

His passenger smacked forwards and whacked his face against the headrest. Thunderstruck and with a heavily bleeding nose, he looked at the randomly parked SUVs and the helicopter that was hovering in the air, above a Volvo which was shaking on its tires. He cursed. Again, he was being confronted with a situation he hadn't expected.

< 03.25

He had experienced a lot of things, but he had never been surrounded by armed men with balaclavas. The only guy without one, big and blond, had barked at him for a bit, after which he wanted to know his name. Before he knew it, he had introduced himself as doctor Jan Swart, "pleasure". Fortunately, he had been able to keep his hand away just in time, as the man harshly continued: "Well, doctor Swart, where's Casanova?" He had no idea what the man wanted and asked: "Casa who?" The man briskly responded: "Casanova. The man who suffered a heart attack and was brought here." Ah, they meant the older patient. In an understanding manner, he said: "Yes, he is here. Why do you want to know?"

He was starting to feel uncomfortable and looked suspiciously at the group. The captain, he presumed, declared: "This is the man we're looking for. He is an incredibly dangerous terrorist and we need to arrest him."

The doctor within was waking up. He pointed at room number two, where his elderly patient was treated, and said: "The patient is still under

treatment. No one is going inside. He is still very fragile, and no one is to enter that room until I say so. Besides, who are you anyway?" The blond man answered: "I am inspector Bersal of EUAT92, a specialized arrest team from the police. We were ordered to secure this department, so that Casanova can be taken into custody." While shaking his head in denial, he answered: "I have already told you that no one is allowed near the patient at the moment", suspicious, he continued: "And how do I know you are indeed a police officer? This all looks like a scene from some kind of American action movie with SWAT-teams. I'd like you to identify yourself, please." The man haughtily looked down on him and groped in his right chest pocket. It was empty.

In a much less arrogant way, he pleaded: "Eh, that won't be possible right now. Apparently, my ID is lost." Triumphantly, and deliberately extremely formal, he said: "In that case, I won't be able to help you.

I cannot just allow anyone to enter my patients' rooms and take them from the hospital. Especially not without being notified about it upfront. We have procedures for that." He turned around. Before he could take one step, however, the captain grabbed him.

< 03.26

On their way to the hospital, Lémarc tried to reach James again, but the transceiver only produced a rustling sound. Let's try the mobile phone once more, he thought. After beeping a few times, the telephone switched to voicemail. Frustrated, he closed the device and stared outside. He didn't know Holger's frequency and he had no idea what was going on. Something must be wrong, or Ewin and his cameraman wouldn't have left in such a hurry. Next time, he'd better drive along with the press, for they were always first on the spot, he thought crankily.

< 03.27

Barbara stared at her notepad and hastily read what she had written down:

- Cryptic advice
- Mysterious Latin sentence
- Different license plate: UN 67 instead of UN 76

* Are there any more abnormalities?

* Let Ewin look into Lémarc Tasker; something is not right!

She put a checkmark beside that last point. She had sent her colleague a text message. Absent-mindedly, she scribbled a sequence of at-signs and hashes, after which she entrusted the paper with her secret hope. Maybe he would still be alive ...

< 03.28

Ewin and Charles hadn't even walked five meters, when behind them they heard two cars crashing into each other. Simultaneously, they immediately turned around. "Damn, there's a taxi inside our car", Charles noted laconically. "I hadn't noticed. Come on, let's record it right away. Do you have enough memory available?" Charles nodded. "Yes, plenty. It has a double disc."

While Charles was filming the result of the crash and the growing crowd, Ewin summarized it briefly, joking that the chaotic situation in this part of The Hague even confused the taxi drivers.

They walked closer in order to interview the taxi driver, when a short guy with a bloody face jumped out of the cab and rushed away in a hurry. "Well, he got scared, alright", Charles said. "Yeah, and he's also lost. If he's heading for the hospital, he's running the wrong way", Ewin answered.

In the meantime, they had reached the two crumpled cars, and after a brief and loud interview with the dazed driver, they walked back towards the crashed SUV. On their way there, Ewin again received a message from Barbara. Could he ask Lémarc Tasker why Hakon hadn't been driven in his own limousine? If he was willing to push it a bit, he might even find out more. She had a strong feeling something wasn't right.

He let Charles read the message, after which Charles bent towards him and yelled in his ear: "This is Barbara, so it's probably important. That chick doesn't miss much." That was true. He quickly typed: 'Alright, we

will. Thank you for tip HP', and sent the message to his colleague in New York. With a sigh, he thought to himself that this could turn out to be a long day.

He had expected something different from his first day at work ... Oh well, they would do the report at the hospital first, and after that, they'd need to find Lémarc, who would probably turn up here soon enough.

< 03.29

He left the toilets, saw that he was well on time, and headed towards the platform from which the train to Schiphol Airport would leave at eight thirty-five.

At the first kiosk he encountered, he bought a large cup of coffee and two old cheese sandwiches.

A bit later, he plumped down on a bench, and put his briefcase with the newspaper on it flat on his lap. He took the sandwiches out of the paper bag and started eating hungrily.

While looking around, he saw the skinny Asian guy whom he had seen before near the toilets. He was busy walking back and forth, taking pictures of the silliest things.

He swallowed the last bite of his sandwich, wiped his mouth with his napkin and put it into the paper bag, which he rolled up into a ball and put next to his coffee cup.

He opened the briefcase and, just to be sure, checked his travel documents once again.

After reassuring himself that everything was there, he took his passport, which identified him as Mario DiStefano, and pulled out the postcard he had bought.

He put everything back, except for the postcard, pulled a pen out of his inner pocket and started writing. When he was done, he put away his pen, assembled his belongings and continued on his way towards the platforms. On his way there, he threw the paper ball into a bin, posted the card, and decided to drink his coffee when he was on the train.

The train was already waiting. The information sign indicated it would leave on time. Good, he would make his flight to New York easily.

He entered the first class wagon, stowed away his luggage and searched for a seat next to the window. He pulled the lid from his cup of coffee and enjoyed a big sip.

He was happy he could stay seated for a while. It had been an intense night, and he had only slept for three hours. A little after four he had woken up and hadn't been able to fall asleep since. He had gone through the whole scenario several times, to be absolutely sure he hadn't missed anything, and when he really couldn't find anything, his thoughts had wandered off to the role he was going to play. After rehearsing all the facts and material one last time and memorizing all the postures and gestures, it had been time to get up and put the operation in motion.

He saw his reflection in the window of the train compartment and couldn't help laughing. The face that was looking at him, was absolutely not his. His friend Harold the wigmaker had delivered top notch work once again. With his advice and years of practice, he had become very skillful in impersonating others.

This time, helped by Harold and with a few tricks from Marilyn, he had become the lookalike of Mario DiStefano, a captain from the Italian carabinieri, who had been selling information to the highest bidder for a lot of money during the last three years, and had been living a luxurious lifestyle.

Last week that had all ended abruptly. The corrupt police captain had died in a car crash, which had led to this operation. His thoughts were interrupted by a well-dressed lady, who was trying to stow away her luggage, and seeing that Mario was famous for being a womanizer, he took this opportunity to get into his role.

He gallantly stood up and without any effort, he jauntily lifted her luggage and put it in the luggage rack.

With a broad smile, he asked her in deficient Dutch, with a heavy Italian accent, if she was going to Schiphol as well. She nodded and told him that she was going to France for two weeks. She went silent for a while, and then thanked him for his help.

He charmingly answered: “Faccio tutto per una bella donna” (*I’ll do anything for a pretty lady*), and walked back to his seat. Before he sat down, he gave her one more look, and saw how she blushed slightly and quickly looked the other way. That had gone just splendidly, he thought, grinning. If needed, he could use her company as extra camouflage at Schiphol.

He grabbed his newspaper to read the comics section, before attempting the puzzle, when the compartment door got yanked open wildly, and the massively built Tjan came stomping in. He pulled his backpack off, threw it neglectfully in the luggage rack and flexibly plumped down on the couch opposite him. His much leaner brother Tony, with his camera hanging from his shoulder instead of around his neck, followed behind him. His hand rested on the device, and he stuck his thumb up. With an expressionless face, he walked on and sat down a few seats further up. He had seen the thumb. It meant that all the people that had been in his vicinity since he had left the toilets, as well as all the passengers on this train, had been photographed.

All material had been encrypted and sent to a satellite, which had been hovering at a fixed location above The Netherlands for quite a while. Through this satellite, everything was sent to the receiver, which analyzed all the images. He hoped that no abnormalities would show up. He browsed to the comics page, but had to put down his newspaper again, in order to grab his smartphone.

With a perfectly manicured thumb, he opened the text message and read: ‘M on his way to A’dam + extra people. Gr. J.’

Relieved, he put away the device, and felt a little shock. The train had started moving, taking him and his friend on a risky journey. Outwardly looking very comfortable, he picked up his newspaper, inwardly begging all the gods to aid them.

< 03.30

Johan sat at his desk with a fresh cup of coffee, absently tapping against the table edge with a pen.

The normal workday had only started half an hour ago, but it felt like a whole day had gone by already.

Was it really just two hours ago that he had checked Hakon Eriksson's transport and had smoked a little cigar before the daily routine started? He could barely believe it. And now, he had a problem. Correction, a mega problem. Within fifteen minutes, two horrible disasters had taken place, which he had needed to coordinate with the help of the alarm center, while at the same time, strange and mysterious things were happening.

It had started with the news on INN, which wasn't showing and commenting on the aftermath of the disaster, as he had thought at first, but had actually shown the whole attack from start to end. Including the close-up of a top criminal who had been on the run for years. It had also appeared that different orders had been given, resulting in multiple people accessing a closed and controlled area. And not just some homeless guys. No, a murderer and a possibly innocent elderly man. And judging by the camera angle of all the received material, there had to be at least one more person with them. This person hadn't been found, but the two others, how on earth was this possible, had suffered a heart attack shortly after the attack, almost simultaneously. Both of them had been taken to the Elisabeth Hospital.

And at that hospital, a little while later, without him or the alarm center having given orders for it, one of the supporting Apache helicopters had shown up, sending images from a completely failed EUAT92 mission.

No one had given orders for the deployment of this team either. For today, only the usual security teams had been deployed. EUAT92 was only deployed for special, highly dangerous missions. It had turned out that EUAT92, led by Holger Bersal and James Taylor, Interpol agent, had been directed to the Elisabeth Hospital, because Casanova would be there.

Who had given that order, was still unknown.

The first recordings the Apache had broadcast, were very clear images of the main entrance.

It was obvious that the helicopter had hung irresponsibly low. He had immediately recognized Holger, but it had taken him a while to distinguish

James, who wasn't really looking that clean, and was even looking pretty mangled.

Because neither he, nor the alarm central had known about the given orders, it was crystal clear that someone must have hacked into their system. And, he had to conclude, not someone who was just trolling, but someone who was very well informed about their workflows and protocols.

It also had to be someone who was involved in both disasters. This was just too much of a coincidence. He frustratedly took a big gulp of coffee. The best thing to do would be to shut down the system, have the IT specialist conduct a thorough investigation, and give everyone new login codes and passwords. This would, however, have a huge impact on the provision of information, which he so desperately needed right now. The hacker, who was most probably involved in the attack, had directed both the safety workers and the police to the right places at the same time.

For outsiders, especially the press, it seemed as if the crisis center was functioning super efficiently. He cut the Gordian knot, put down his pen and reached for the telephone. The IT specialists needed to make sure they tracked down the hacker, and they needed to prepare new codes for everyone. For now, the system would stay operational.

< 03.31

After zigzagging back through the crowd for a while, he slowed down and eventually came to a halt. He carefully lowered the handkerchief, which he had been firmly pressing against his nose. The bleeding had stopped and it wasn't that painful anymore.

He put the smudgy cloth in his back pocket, slowly walked back and disappeared into the crowd of sensation seeking spectators.

He assumed that Casanova had been brought to this hospital, but doubted this as he watched the great havoc. Thinking of a way to get in, he saw two SUVs disappearing round the back. Now he was sure his target was here. Casanova had been identified and an arrest team was already on their way to take him into custody.

That didn't give him a lot of time. He followed them with haste.

< 03.32

Tim, who was driving towards the Elisabeth Hospital with Arda on his back seat, needed all his driving skills to avoid the many obstacles, both human and non-human.

Just like the taxi driver had been not long ago, he was surprised to see the heavily damaged front side of the hospital, and all the hassle around it. People were rushing towards it like it was some kind of sale. He kept calm, and swerved flexibly around an INN camera crew who were filming their car, which had just had an accident with a cab.

Luckily, those guys were wearing bright, poisonous green colored vests, on which the INN logo was printed with big, bold letters, so he had noticed them at once and was easily able to avoid driving into them.

The last thing they wanted, was accidentally being filmed. He drove towards the side of the hospital, from where they had a good view of the hall and everything that was happening there. Unfortunately, they had lost track of Stiletto in all the hassle.

Arda dismounted, tapped him on the shoulder, and at the same time used her other hand to take off her helmet. With her fingers, she combed through her wig, which was cascading down in waves like a red waterfall, and asked: "Any idea where he went?" Tim, also taking off his helmet now, scouted the growing crowd to see if he could see any sign of the lean Mexican, but wasn't able to spot him and shook his head in denial. "We'll have to wait for new intel." Together, they watched the activities that were going on around them, in the meantime keeping vigilant in case Stiletto showed up, when Arda's smartphone beeped with the message they had been expecting. She read it, briefly tapped the SCOPE icon and saw how the display changed into a map of the back side of the hospital, with Stiletto's avatar brightly lighting up.

"Look, there he is." She gave him the device and continued: "But it will be difficult to get there." Her head nodded in the direction of all the police officers who were now clearing the area with tape and police cars,

blocking the route they needed to take. He nodded in acknowledgement and said: "Yes, I saw that. I think they called in everybody. The place is full of police." Tim typed something on the mobile phone and said: "I'll ask for an alternative route."

< 03.33

And again, something was going wrong, Holger thought. This time it was his ID, which he wasn't able to show. His chest pocket was torn, apparently from ducking behind the pillar, and he must have lost the pass somewhere on the way.

He saw that all the doors were guarded and he knew which room Casanova was in. He had just received the information that the two SUVs were blocking the back of the ED, and that the drivers were checking the entrance. It was starting to look like he had the situation under control, and he didn't see a reason to force his way in. He wanted to take care of the arrest in a nice clean way. He let go of the doctor and said: "Please be so good as to wait here. I'll get a commissioner from Interpol, who is currently in the hall. After the commissioner has identified himself to you and explained the situation, I have no doubt you will let him near Casanova, so that he can be arrested as quickly as possible." Holger pointed at a team member and ordered: "You'll stay with the doctor until I come back." He gestured towards treatment room two and continued: "The rest of you, guard that room."

He turned around and walked towards the hall, hoping James would be back on his feet by now. He probably wouldn't look too clean and wouldn't feel too good either, but that was all thanks to himself. He should have listened. In the meantime, he had passed the swinging doors again, which slapped shut behind him, and he pushed the big doors to the hall open. As if it had been waiting for him, at that exact moment the fire alarm went off. Unpleasantly surprised, he thought, irritated: Scheiße, what now?

< 03.34

The moment Lémarc noticed how crowded it was, Jens turned on the flashing lights and took his foot off the gas. He carefully maneuvered between the many spectators, and around an INN car that had been hit by a taxi. Then he boldly parked the car on the left side of the street, half on the pavement, and turned off the engine. The first thing that caught Lemarc's attention as he stepped out of the car, was a helicopter that, in his opinion, was hovering very low. Its presence seemed overwhelming and threatening.

When he had given permission for the air support, he hadn't thought of the number of sensation seekers and curious people this would attract. As soon as he was certain Casanova had been arrested, he would order the pilot to move to a higher altitude. From there, the alarm center, which would have arranged extra support by now to keep the crowd at a distance, would be able to follow the situation just as well.

He looked sideways and saw the commissioner, he thought his name was Skenk, talking to his people. From the gestures he made, he could understand that the curious crowd needed to be directed back. He asked Jens to pick him up, and saw two SUVs from Holger's EUAT92 team disappearing quickly between two groups of spectators, with their blue flashing lights on. That had to mean that they had caught Casanova and were going to transport him via the back side of the hospital.

Seeing the havoc and the enormous crowd here, at the front of the hospital, he had to agree with Holger. Fortunately, this criminal had been disarmed. Now he only wanted to know what was happening here, where James was and why he couldn't reach him.

As Jens and the commissioner came back, the first police cars arrived, blocking all entrances with rhythmically blinking red and blue lights. In the meantime, the police began to drive back the curious onlookers. He wondered what had happened here and signaled to Jens that he should take the commissioner with him.

The three of them walked to the destroyed entrance of the hall, when they saw three bloodied people sitting against the side of James' SUV, at least what was left of it. Another one stood next to it, tinkering with a first-aid kit. It didn't look particularly good, but it didn't seem life-threatening either. He didn't see James anywhere.

In a hurry, he pulled open the right rear door and saw that the airbags had worked. Apart from a lot of loose rubbish, glass and some bloody smears, the inside was empty.

He turned to the tinkering man. Screaming, to make himself understood despite the helicopter noise, he asked him what had happened and how James was doing. "Oh", the man shouted back, "it all happened rather quickly. It takes some getting used to a new car, doesn't it? And James, he was taken out of the car by Holger. He went after him later." The man pointed to the hall of the hospital. "That journalist went there as well." He explained: "The man from INN. He was just here. He wanted to see you." Lémarc turned around to the hall and indeed saw Ewin standing there, with his cameraman next to him. It seemed as if smoke was coming out of the windows on the left side. The commissioner and Jens had noticed as well. They were walking hastily towards it, when they heard the man add: "And be careful! There were gunshots inside!" As if commanded, all three of them froze. Just like himself, Jens had already drawn his weapon.

The commissioner, who looked a bit pale, spontaneously offered to take care of the coordination of the upcoming rescue teams. Lémarc, who had already been under fire several times in the past during various actions in the Bronx in New York, was not saddened by his suggestion.

In situations like this, you didn't need an office clerk who would probably only get in the way. He told him that was an excellent idea. Clearly relieved, the commissioner walked back, turned around for a moment and shouted: "I will also call on the regional AT as support."

With a hand gesture Lémarc showed that he had heard him, and ran to the hall with Jens, where they were picked up by Ewin, who pushed a microphone under his nose and shouted to him: "Barbara Kronkite has asked me if you can explain why Hakon was transported in a different car. Because Lémarc saw Holger, who was bursting into the hall through a set of swinging doors at the same time, and because the sudden question hit him, he snapped: "Doesn't ring any bells." And even louder, because the fire alarm started howling: "Out of the way, the hall is a forbidden area for everyone, and that goes for you too." He leaned towards Jens and instructed him to stay at the entrance and make sure that no one, especially not the press, entered the hall, and to make sure

that the commissioner arranged medical assistance for the Interpol agents, who couldn't expect much from the clumsy guy with the first-aid kit.

With his back covered by Jens, he carefully entered the hall. Holger was in the middle of the room, lifting someone from a statue. To his dismay, he recognized James. While he was trying to figure out how he could have ended up there and in that condition, a man in a dust coat slipped by, running off like a hare. While he was wondering who that might have been, he went to Holger and James.

< 03.35

Taking advantage of all the cover that the area had to offer, he had been able to reach the back of the hospital unnoticed. At the entrance of the ED, there were two ambulances and the two black SUVs. Without making any noise, he sneaked closer and hid between the bushes to the side of the entrance. He looked carefully through the leaves and patiently explored the surroundings in detail. With a minute movement, he shook his arm for a moment, until he felt that his stiletto was slipping into place, ready for use.

< 03.36

By now, the central control room seemed to have turned into an ants' nest. All the flashing control panels that looked like Christmas decorations were manned, and in the various departments there was a coming and going of employees. The control room chief, who was coordinating the whole operation, had sweat on his forehead.

In his relatively quiet office further on, Johan Lam had studied all the information he had available so far. His desk was littered with documents and prints. On his computer display was a colorful overview, and the larger screen next to it showed the images that the Apache transmitted from the Elisabeth Hospital. He looked at the entire overview on his computer, which clearly showed that it was indeed structured. After the

attack on Eriksson and apart from a series of contradictory orders, it seemed very likely that the mysterious hacker had suddenly offered a helping hand. All the emergency services had been swiftly directed to the necessary places in the correct manner. To be honest, they couldn't have done better themselves.

Also, the Elisabeth was now under control. This was clear from EUAT92's request to withdraw the Apache to stand-by distance, which he had just granted. On the images that zoomed out a little later, he saw that a taxi had rammed the INN car amidships. A smile of amusement appeared on his face. This time they could make a news item about themselves. The pilot flew his aircraft diagonally away and the screen now showed the street in front of the hospital, where the curious crowd was kept at bay by the police.

Just before the streetscape disappeared, he saw a woman taking off a motorcycle helmet and shaking out a beautiful tumble of red hair. You had to be blind to not notice something like that.

< 03.37

The new route appeared in a split second. Tim nudged Arda, showed it to her and let the smartphone slide into his inner pocket.

He inserted the earpiece, put on his helmet and started. As soon as he felt Arda's arms around him, he gunned the throttle and tore off with a roaring engine. SCOUT led him through the gardens next to the hospital, but hadn't taken into account the fact that waste from the renovation had ended up everywhere, so he had to pull off the weirdest antics to stay upright.

He didn't want to waste any time and, as if it were an off-road race, he swung around and jolted and bumped over the obstacles in his way. Happy with SCOUT's instructions, he let go of the throttle and drove out of the bushes to end up on a narrow, asphalt path. He steered sharply and opened the throttle again. In the nick of time, he again avoided hitting two people from INN. They were like poisonous green weeds that appeared everywhere, he thought annoyed. With difficulty he kept the motorcycle under control and got it straight again. He accelerated, and

they rushed to the last curve at high speed. Just before it, he let go of the throttle, lightly applied the brakes, and turned smoothly with the curve.

To the left in front of him, he saw the ambulance entrance. He quickly steered to the right, drove through the bushes and stopped behind a thick tree. They stepped down and slid their visors up. "I think this is a nice place. Look, almost right opposite the back." He pointed at the SUVs that blocked the entrance. "On the right is the morgue. There is no cover there. To the left of the ED it is overgrown, just like here. If Stiletto is around, he'll be there." Arda nodded approvingly. "If the press wasn't here, I could have tracked him down, taken him out and left him in party packaging for those guys from the arrest team." She grinned, exposing her white teeth. Seeing her like this, he was glad that she was on their side. "We continue to observe from here. Only when he reveals himself, do we go after him, you hear?" She cast her eyes down and answered politely: "Yes, Tim."

< 03.38

While the forensic team was still busy around him, inspector Sytsema was thoughtfully looking at the burnt-out limousine, wide-legged and with his arms crossed. It would take some time before the special tow truck would arrive and then the wreckage had to be packed and hoisted onto it, sealed. Only then would it be transported to the forensic laboratory and the shed next to it, together with all the other material.

For his own information, he had briefly examined the blackened car, which was ticking and pinging while cooling down. With his smartphone he had taken a few pictures of the surroundings and, slowly walking around it, several detailed pictures of the wreck itself. From different angles he had photographed the two charred, person-like contours.

He had also drawn the junction and written the estimated distances. He had everything he needed to write a thorough report. Yet something was nagging. He had the feeling that he had overlooked something, and experience had taught him to trust his gut feeling. Something was wrong, but what? He checked the wreckage for a second time, but couldn't find anything. The license plate had already been taken off for him by a

forensic worker and had been wrapped up in plastic. He examined it meticulously.

He couldn't find anything out of the ordinary, except that it was a diplomatic license plate with the inscription UN 67. He checked the license plate on the front of the car, but there was nothing left to read. The feeling that he was missing something, that he couldn't see something obvious, continued to nag him. He slowly walked back and forth and looked around again.

Out of the ordinary, the swarming of the experts at a crime scene and the spectators behind the fences, he didn't notice anything special at all. Frustrated, he clamped his jaws together and looked at the wreckage for the umpteenth time. He couldn't find anything strange about it. All seemed perfectly normal for the situation. He was still pondering as the transport arrived.

< 03.39

While endlessly murmuring "Scheiße, Scheiße, Scheiße", Holger tried to block out the howling of the fire alarm and the unrelenting rotor noise of the helicopter. He peered through the smoke and saw that in the right-hand corner of the hall, two pieces of art were on fire, as well as the tapestries next to them.

The flames were already licking out of the windows. He took his radiotelephone, retreated to the small hall and reported the fire to the control room. At the same time, he reported that Casanova had been localized and was being guarded by EUAT92. He asked for the Apache to be withdrawn, but to remain on standby. Back in the hall, he ran along the cleaned path to the center, where the medic was dealing with James. To be honest, he didn't think he looked too good. The man should go... A familiar voice shouted his name loudly and interrupted his thoughts.

He looked back and saw Lémarc come in, holding a weapon in his hand. He pointed it around him and raised his eyebrows questioningly.

In telegram style he summarized the events and concluded with: "The department where Casanova is located, has been secured. I came to

fetch James to do the arrest, but you can take over now. Also, the doctor is giving me a hard time, because he wants to see an ID and I've lost it. I suggest leaving James here with the medic." Lémarc nodded in agreement. " Alright, I'll go with you. We can leave things here with peace of mind, for I have Jens standing outside. He will take care of the assistance and will have things organized here soon." Lémarc put his weapon away, and as they walked into the small hall together, Holger heard the thumping sound fading, indicating that the helicopter was retreating.

< 03.40

Lord MacMarkland restlessly rotated the empty whisky glass in his hands. He hadn't heard from Holger Bersal yet, and the sudden appearance of Stiletto worried him.

The whole scenario was very well thought out and every situation had been taken into account. And now a wildcard had popped up in the game. Of course, there was always the human factor, so no plan could ever be watertight. But a brand new player? The only things he knew about this Stiletto, were the few facts Sandra had put on the GRID. Background, behavior and character couldn't have been studied in depth, let alone been predicted. The most frustrating thing, however, was that he had disappeared from the radar.

He had carefully followed the events on the GRID and could see that the developments concerning the attack on Hakon went exactly as planned. The same was true for The Hague Central Station. Both scenarios were running smoothly. However, the scenario for Casanova had taken a completely different turn, resulting in quite some additional material damage in and around the main entrance of the Elisabeth Hospital. In the meantime, the police were present in large numbers and keeping the crowd at bay with all their might. He had watched how two SUVs from EUAT92 had driven to the back of the hospital and how a taxi had rammed the INN car.

The passenger, Stiletto, as it turned out later, had gotten out in a crouched position, and had run away. Shortly after, he had seen Tim

driving towards the scene, with Arda on the back. With a wide curve, Tim had steered his bike around the media, after which they had stopped and looked around attentively.

Even without confirmation from Sandra, he would have known that they had lost sight of Stiletto. He thoughtfully said: "There is no way he can enter the hospital through the main entrance. Most likely he will try it at the back." Sandra was already ahead of him and let him know that SCOUT had found a route there and had sent it to Tim and Arda. "I also took the liberty of pointing SCOPE at this location. Within a few minutes, the focus will be on the back of the Elisabeth Hospital", she concluded.

< 03.41

As he explored the area, the fire alarm had gone off and he had quickly withdrawn a little. Apparently, fate was in his favor. In the event of a fire, patients were evacuated, i.e. taken outside, causing quite a bit of chaos. It wouldn't prove difficult to pick Casanova out. He only needed one second. With a bit of luck, no one would notice, and he could walk away without arousing suspicion. He cheerfully waited in patience.

< 03.42

On the other side, Holger and Lémarc came out of the hall and entered the ED. Compared to the hall, it was an oasis of tranquility, undamaged and clean. The fire alarm sounded muffled, and the only things that didn't contribute to the illusion, were the black dressed, armed men, who stood all over the place, in stark contrast with the bright, sterile background.

He pointed out to Lémarc in which treatment room Casanova was lying, but before they could reach it, the door opened. A stretcher was pushed out, on which a patient lay under a blanket. He was connected to all kinds of equipment, the meters and lights of which were placed criss-cross on and next to him. He recognized the doctor who was walking next to it, and called out, commanding him to stand still. The doctor turned around and positioned himself unyieldingly in front of his patient, with his arms

crossed. “The heck with you. In the event of a fire alarm, the standard protocol is to evacuate everyone, regardless of what is going on.” The doctor looked at him in a challenging way.

Inwardly seething with anger,

Holger replied in an extremely polite manner that that was not possible in this case. The doctor lost his patience and replied: “Well, I think it is. What on earth can this old man do? He almost died and I assure you he won’t get up in the next few days. End of discussion.”

He turned around and gestured at the nursing staff to walk through, after which he turned around again with an angry look.

With a small gesture, Holger had made it clear to his men that they should not let them through. While carelessly holding the stretcher, they kept looking at their leader, awaiting further orders. Next to him, Lémarc calmly said: “Let him be put in the ambulance. If you guard him, he can’t go anywhere, and he can be transported as soon as we are ready. Agreed?”

Lémarc was right. They had caught Casanova and there was little chance he would be able to escape. He gathered the teams and ordered them to accompany the doctor and surround the ambulance. He emphasized that they should not let their attention slip for a moment.

As soon as he reported that Casanova had been stopped, he would accompany Lémarc to formally arrest him. Good-humored, he was about to pass on the message, when behind him the swing doors were thrown open with force. He and Lémarc quickly turned around, with their weapons at hand, prepared for anything and ready to fire.

He was relieved to recognize James, who came stumbling towards them in rags. James had turned out to be a pain in the ass, but he had to admit that he did not know many people who possessed such a fighting spirit and willpower. The man was like a terrier who kept biting your pants.

< 03.43

He didn’t need to know what the medic had injected him with. The only thing that mattered, was that, as if by magic, he felt a lot better. He

clumsily scrambled up and found out from his saviour that Holger and Lémarc had gone to the ED together to arrest Casanova. Well, they could forget about that. He, James Taylor, wouldn't just let himself be sidelined. Determined, he went after them as fast as he could. He knew he looked like a homeless person who had just crawled out of a garbage container, but he didn't care anymore.

The fact that, after all he had been through, they had left him like old garbage, made him angry.

He felt like he had been broken up, his body was on fire and his balls felt like swollen coconuts. Nevertheless, he was limping forward fairly fast.

He aggressively slammed open the swing doors and stood absolutely still, staring at the weapons he suddenly saw pointed at him. Lémarc and Holger had recognized him, the looks of pity had not escaped him. Even more angry, he limped on and asked briefly: "Casanova?" Lémarc pointed to the exit and informed him that he was under guard in an ambulance. "Can I finally arrest him now?" The way he asked it, however, indicated that Lémarc shouldn't have the guts to say no. Lémarc nodded affirmatively and replied: "Come on, let's go."

< 03.44

Of course, Sandra had thought of arranging the provision of information as optimally as possible. He had to learn to put more faith in her, he thought somewhat remorsefully. It was stupid no one had thought about using a Flying Object, since that would have been a lot easier. He discovered the empty glass in his hands, and with a vicious tap he put the filthy thing down next to him. On monitor three, he followed Tim, who, with Arda on the back, brought his bike to life with a roaring sound and drove off at a reckless speed. Oh, boy, please watch out and both come back in one piece. He put aside his concern and listened to Sandra, who reported that a fire had started in the hall of the Elisabeth Hospital. "The fire brigade is already on its way and the patients are being evacuated. There are no casualties. Holger Bersal has also called in. Casanova has been put under surveillance and the air support has been

withdrawn.” Relieved, he leaned backwards. The monster couldn’t go anywhere. Everything would be fine. Reassured, he let his gaze wander over the GRID. Monitor two showed the work at the Peace Palace, which was done in a routine way, without any peculiarities. On the left side of the GRID, you could still see the map of the back of the hospital.

Saundra politely cleared her throat again. Who the hell had taught her that? She informed him that SCOPE was now in position.

The left side of the GRID came to life, and he saw the map change to a top view of the back of the hospital, which got zoomed in quickly and fluently. The use of 3dSc technology provided a clear picture of the covered ambulance entrance. Underneath were two ambulances, of which he could just see the front. They were blocked in by two EUAT92 SUVs. On monitor three, he saw Tim and Arda seeking a way there, winding right through the gardens, in search of Stiletto, who had to be somewhere in the vicinity.

< 03.45

Accompanied by Lémarc and Holger, James headed for the ambulance.

Holger let him know he could get in, and he climbed in stiffly. As he shuffled further in, he forgot about his anger and physical discomfort. Casanova was here. The monster had been captured and the chase was over. He had kept his word and hadn’t rested until he had found him. Finally, the time had come. He could let his colleague’s widow and the many other victims know that he had kept his promise.

He triumphantly leaned forward, opened his mouth and froze. He blinked his eyes a few times and looked incredulously and with complete bewilderment at the face, which certainly did not belong to Casanova.

In fact, this was Jan de Jong, a former inspector at Interpol. Not so long ago, he had been talking to him, during a reunion. He saw Jan’s carotid artery beating, otherwise he would have thought he had deceased. He gently shook his shoulder and, trembling, Jan’s eyes opened. “Jan, it’s me, James Taylor. We spoke at the reunion, remember?” He saw Jan regaining consciousness and continued: “What happened to you? How is

it possible that you are lying here?” Jan murmured: “I have no idea where I am. I remember seeing Hakon passing by and a little later his car was blown into the air.” “What? Were you a witness to that?” Jan nodded, exhausted. More to himself than to Jan, James said in a low voice: “I don’t understand a damn thing about it. This is where Casanova should be lying.” Jan pulled at his sleeve and whispered: “He was on the other side of the street, filming with a smartphone. After the explosion I saw him walking away, in the other direction. That’s all I know. I’m terribly sorry.” A tear slowly slid down his temple.

James wiped it off with a tip of the sheet, after which he said goodbye to his former colleague. He looked back, wished him a speedy recovery and climbed out of the ambulance. Defeated and suddenly completely exhausted, he sat on the footboard. He was devastated.

Lémarc and Holger looked at each other in an unfathomable way. At the same time, through each other, they asked what was going on and whether it was worse than he had thought at first.

He looked up at them, saw their incomprehensible glances and suddenly angry, he shouted frantically: “What kind of puppet show is this? Which retarded moron is responsible for this?” As he gestured backwards, he continued: “That’s not Casanova.

It is a former colleague!”

Frothing with anger and frustration, he shouted: “You idiots!” Holger looked at the doctor, who had come after the commotion, and said accusingly: “You told me that that man had been admitted with a heart attack.” He pointed to the ambulance. “Yes, that’s right. That man did have a heart attack. What’s so strange about that?”

James, in spite of everything, watched with fascination how the always so self-confident Holger Bersal couldn’t say anything in reply and finally admitted that he didn’t know how this could have gone so wrong. Frustrated, he shouted: “And where is Casanova, damn it?”

Barbara was roused from her ponderings by her cell phone. A text message had come in. She folded in two the sheet of paper on which she had scribbled a whole series of strange signs as if she were in a trance. She then grabbed her canary-yellow smartphone and read Ewin's response to her request to ask Lémarc about the reason for changing Hakon's limousine.

He was probably in a hurry, she thought to herself. His message was not very clear. 'Alright, we will. Thank you for tip HP'. HP? She shrugged her shoulders, put away the telephone and saw Russ, who had turned up next to her. With the remark "Eat girl, you will need it", he put a cup-a-soup and a bag of salty crackers on her desk. And, how was it possible, for once the commercial did not lie. She really felt refreshed by it. That boy always knows exactly what I need, she thought, while she was checking out Russ, who disappeared into the department's small kitchenette.

With a ping, her computer let her know that there was mail. She quickly shook the last crackers in her hand, stuffed them in her mouth and while chewing, opened the message, which came from Red/Tec. They wanted to know if she wanted to add any comments to the material from Ewin and Charles, which had just arrived from The Hague. She had expected new recordings of the surroundings of the Peace Palace, or possibly a conversation with some important official. Now she was surprised by the images that had been taken from a moving car and were showing a badly damaged building and complete chaos around it. As the camera came closer, more and more details could be discerned. She heard Ewin's voice, saying that they were approaching the Elisabeth Hospital, where the sought-after criminal Casanova would be located.

This dangerous criminal would soon be arrested by Interpol, supported by EUAT92. Hearing the name 'Casanova' caused her anger to flare up like a white-hot spear. She silently cursed the monster who was (co-)responsible for the attack on her best friend, when the penny dropped. 'HP' ... Hospital, of course! But why did Ewin decide to thank her for the tip? It might be almost a quarter to three at night, and maybe she was a bit tired after a long day at work, but she did know what she was doing. Unless she had suddenly become psychic and had sent a text message in trance, containing information about something she hadn't known

about until a few seconds ago, she thought sarcastically. No, it hadn't been her. Someone else must have done that. Her anonymous source perhaps? Until now, she had assumed that they would only pass on information to her. Although she didn't have any reason to believe so, she realized, a little disappointed. But it could also have been someone else. One thing was clear: someone had used her name and pretended to be Barbara Kronkite. That was very disturbing.

In the meantime, she followed Charles' images and Ewin's commentary on her computer. Jeez, it was as if a bomb had exploded. The loud, pounding sound of a helicopter indeed made them think, as Ewin reported, that they were in a war zone. He had also wondered whether the murderer, who had been at large for so long, had been arrested in the meantime.

Given the devastation, it was quite possible that he had escaped or been freed. In any case, it was abundantly clear that the arrest of this dangerous man was not hassle-free. The short interlude of the taxi that hit Ewin and Charles' car made her smile. The people in the director's office wouldn't have to go to much trouble to turn this material from The Hague into an attractive news item. Ewin was now at the destroyed entrance to the hospital and for a moment, too briefly in her opinion, the situation inside could be seen. There was broken glass everywhere. In the middle of the room a man lay half over something, and further on there seemed to be smoke. The camera swung aside and Lémarc Tasker appeared in the picture. To eliminate all background noise, she pressed her headphones as firmly as possible against her ears with both hands, and listened tensely. Knowing Ewin, he wouldn't forget her question. Despite the noise in the background, he and Lémarc were clearly audible and she could clearly hear Ewin's question.

However, Lémarc's reaction was disappointing.

No info at all. Lémarc disappeared, and her colleagues were dumped. Shit! The whole thing reeked. Definitely. And it was very coincidental that Casanova had suddenly been found in a place that was such a mess now as well. No, it didn't just reek, it smelled completely rotten! She had to come up with a plan of action to make sure that things would come to the surface and, not to forget, she also had to try to find out why someone used her name.

Next to her, something plunged down. She looked up disturbed and moved the headphones a bit. Russ had sat down half on her desk and asked: "Why are you looking so angry? By the way, I come with a message from the chief. He asked whether you know why Ewin and Charles left the scene of the attack." "Oh, that", she said absently. "Ewin and Charles are now at the Elisabeth Hospital to make a report about the arrest of Casanova by Interpol and EUAT92." "Huh? Go away. That can't be true." "No, really. I'm looking at it now." "Buggers, you've arranged that nicely. Two scoops in one day. Classy!" He jumped off the desk and hurried back to their chief. She wanted to call him back, but knew it was pointless. She couldn't prove that she had nothing to do with this scoop.

She gloomily put her headphones back in place. The footage didn't show much new, and she decided to make the material play a little faster, until she could watch it live.

< 03.47

Like a cat in front of a mouse hole, he'd watched the ambulance entrance motionlessly. He had been right. The first patient had been brought outside. Unfortunately, there was a cordon of armed policemen around him. There was no doubt, Casanova would be very heavily guarded. After they put him in the ambulance, it was surrounded by at least a dozen heavily armed guys. He had immediately realized that he didn't stand a chance with his knives. If it had been three or four, he would have taken the risk, but not against so many at the same time.

To his disappointment he had realized that he couldn't get the job done here. Maybe later, but then he had to find out where Casanova was taken first. Moody, he had kept watching, well hidden between the bushes. The next patient, victim of a robbery or something like that, had come out on his own.

To his surprise, he was allowed to enter Casanova's ambulance. To his even greater surprise, the same guy came out a little later and sat down on the footboard. The way he sat there, he gave a despondent, defeated impression. Was Casanova dead? The group at the open ambulance doors had meanwhile started arguing with the battered guy and the

doctor, with that battered guy starting to scream louder and louder. He understood English very well, but he couldn't make any sense of this.

With his ears pricked, he was listening, when another stretcher was pushed outside and parked by the second ambulance, which was close to him. He kept quiet and heard someone scream: "And where is Casanova, damn it?"

< 03.48

Before the image of that redheaded woman had even disappeared from John's retina, there was a brief knock on his door and his assistant came in to hand him a list with a chronological record of all the given instructions. In order to make the whole thing more transparent, where it was not known who had approved the instructions, he had marked them in red. More than half of the list was red now. The first red line concerned the activation of EUAT92 at 02.57 hours, early this morning. The last one was from less than a minute ago. His assistant gave him two more sheets of paper. The first came from the IT department. They stated that, for reasons of perspective and lighting, among other things, the images of the attack transmitted by INN were a combination of the recordings that Casanova had made and the material that the old man must have recorded. It was added that, in view of the fact that he had recorded himself, it could be established with certainty that Casanova had actually filmed the attack on Eriksson. However, no evidence could be found to prove that the old man had done so as well. If they could examine the cameras with which the recordings had been made, there might be more to discover.

The other sheet contained a graph showing the times related to actions taken by managers, emergency services, police, the mayor, the press and the unknown hacker who was referred to as 'X'. What was immediately noticeable, was that INN had arrived at the scene of both attacks very quickly. "There is only one conclusion to be drawn from this", he said to his assistant. "INN was warned in advance. By our 'X', Casanova, that old man, or by someone who is still unknown to us today. This group certainly consists of more people. Check it out." He raised his

fingers one by one and continued: “Two persons filming Eriksson, hacker ‘X’ and those two from INN. That’s five already. Exactly what happened in the Elisabeth Hospital is not yet clear, but you can assume that several people must have been involved as well. We are talking about a terrorist network of considerable size. It’s quite possible that INN is only indirectly involved for the purpose of obtaining material, but that doesn’t alter the fact that they are complicit and therefore just as punishable.”

He thought for a moment and continued: “We have to make sure that we get information. The quickest way is to detain those two from INN and interrogate them thoroughly.” Although his assistant tried to stop him, after all, journalists could not simply be arrested and blah, blah, blah, he called Lémarc Tasker. As he had already thought, it didn’t take him much effort to persuade Tasker to give his permission. The second man from UNBI would do anything to find out the identity of those who had murdered his boss.

After he had hung up, he instructed his assistant. The AT2 unit that was already on its way to the Elisabeth Hospital had to detain the two INN-employees on suspicion of conspiracy with Casanova. He also instructed him to contact Holger Bersal of EUAT92. In addition to Casanova, Bersal also had to arrest the old man and confiscate both of their smartphones. With satisfaction, he pulled the list towards himself. It felt good to finally be able to do something!

< 03.49

As if he had been carved out of granite, Holger was grimly looking at Lémarc, who was talking to the doctor. The mission had turned out to be a fiasco, and he was responsible. From the moment James had run into his SUV, things had gone wrong. Because of the embarrassing situation in the hall and the time pressure, he hadn’t listened to the doctor very carefully.

It was his own fault. The doctor had indeed said that his patient was an old man. He could have slapped himself in the face that he had so quickly killed his impeccable service record . He had to find Casanova at all costs and was about to order his teams to comb the ED, when a

stretcher came out, which was pushed to the other ambulance by two nurse's assistants.

One of them went in and the one at the head end was pulling the sheet straight, when he was suddenly roughly pushed aside. James, who had been staring at the stretcher like a gloomy zombie, had rushed to the stretcher and had grabbed the patient's head with both hands.

Before he could even blink his eyes, something flashed through the air and he heard a dull plonk. James shouted and fell over the stretcher like a sandbag.

In his head the jigsaw pieces suddenly fell into place. Knife, Stiletto, assassination attempt, Casanova. Holger looked in the direction from which it must have been thrown, and saw a figure sneaking away.

Lémarc and the doctor had already come to the rescue of James, and as he gestured to his men that they should control as much of the area as possible, he sprinted after the knife-thrower.

< 03.50

Slightly bent over, Lord MacMarkland looked nervously at Tim and Arda's wild ride. He was holding his breath and expected to see them crash at any moment. Tim, however, managed to keep the motorcycle on its wheels and they had almost reached their final destination, when Sandra made herself heard. She reported that INN had managed to get close.

The cameraman was already shooting and it wouldn't be long before the press would show up at the ambulance entrance. The recordings they made, would be intercepted and copied by SPY before they were transmitted. Sandra would synchronize the material with the satellite recordings and place it on the GRID as a picture-in-picture at the bottom left of the screen.

She felt that this could be a valuable addition and assumed that it would be more pleasant for him to watch this way. Of course, she had no influence on what INN decided to record. Even before she had finished speaking, he saw the frame appear. It showed a not so very wide, asphalt

path, along which trees and shrubs stood on both sides. Suddenly the path seemed to wobble. It became stable again and he saw Tim and Arda pass by. Arda's hair waved like a cheerful red flag. They drove straight on, followed the path round a bend to the left and disappeared from the scene.

On the top view he saw that they went down the path past the bend and disappeared into the bushes on the right, no longer visible to SCOPE because of the dense foliage.

He could tell from the position of their avatars that they were not far from the path. Relieved that they had reached their position in one piece, he saw that there was movement in the bushes a little further on.

A man appeared, who matched Stiletto's description.

He saw him take a few steps in the direction of the leftmost SUV and halt. He made a quick move, ducked behind the SUV and snuck past it. Meanwhile, Sandra reported that this person had been scanned and identified as Stiletto.

With fascination, he watched how Stiletto came from behind the SUV and started to run, followed not much later by Holger Bersal, who had emerged between the two SUV's, had spotted Stiletto and had started the chase. At top speed, Stiletto ran to the path where Tim and Arda had come from before, then suddenly jinked. His escape route was blocked by the two people from INN, who came walking up the path from the bend. In the frame, he clearly saw Stiletto's frightened face, before he turned around and sprinted away from them, not knowing that Tim and Arda were close by.

At full speed, he ran against Arda's raised leg, which, with a whirling pirouette, had been shot out of the bushes like a jack-in-the-box. As he staggered backwards, Arda was picked up by Tim and they rode off, spinning up leaves and grit as they went.

That guy had to be an incredibly tough type, the lord thought to himself, as he saw that Stiletto, instead of being knocked out, was able to regain his balance and after having shaken his head once, resumed his flight. However, it had slowed him down.

Holger Bersal had caught up with him. Loud and clear he heard him warn Stiletto. "Halt. Police. Stand still or I'll shoot." Stiletto looked back for a moment and then increased his speed, to suddenly turn around and sink to his knees. Out of nowhere, there was suddenly a knife in each hand, which he flung at Holger, faster than the eye could follow.

Glued to the GRID, the lord saw one knife sticking out of Holger's chest and the other disappearing into his upper right arm. Immediately, Holger's arm dropped, limp. The gun slipped out of his powerless fingers, but even before it landed on the street, Holger had pulled and fired his other gun with his left hand. Stiletto collapsed and remained motionless on his back.

< 03.51

To Holger's great surprise, Stiletto, who was running away from him as swiftly as the wind was blowing, had unexpectedly shifted his course to the left. While chasing him at full speed, he was once again surprised by someone who suddenly jumped out from behind a tree, made a flashy pirouette, raised one leg and in the same flowing movement kicked Stiletto.

Before he had the chance to realize what was going on, this figure had jumped on the back of a motorcycle, which immediately drove off roaring. Although he had no idea who that might have been, he was grateful for the help. He was close enough to arrest Stiletto, and commanded him to stop. In disbelief, he saw the man run away again, only to give up a little later. At least, that's what he had thought at first. Stiletto had turned around and before he could react, a couple of knives were thrown at him. At the same time, he had felt a sting in his right arm, immediately followed by a blow to his chest. His right arm had fallen down unusable, and in a reflex, he had left-handedly pulled and shot his Glock 17.

Now he stared, dazed, at the Mexican who, with a neat little hole in his forehead, lay lifeless on his back. Reality slowly dawned on him. The hours of practice in two-handed shooting under all conceivable circumstances had not been in vain and had even saved his life today. At

the same time, he realized that he had reached his limit. He had been sloppy.

In his years with the police and then as a leader of EUAT92, he had always managed to get his hands on the suspects alive, albeit sometimes somewhat tarnished. During this mission, however, he had made a mistake, resulting in his being responsible for the death of another human being. He joylessly watched his team members, who spread out over the area. Two of them knelt down by Stiletto, confirmed his death after a quick check and said that he should now take care of himself. Given the fact that two knives protruded from his body, they added dryly. He did not even hear the remark. Lémarc had walked up to him, gave him a jovial poke and said admiringly: "Bottoms up, Holger. Good shot!", to immediately add, shocked: "You're hurt! What are you still doing here? You fool!" He didn't even feel the light tap Lémarc gave him with his fist. But he did suddenly feel the knife in his arm. He looked down, saw the glistening knife sticking out of his chest, and pulled it out with difficulty.

The strength he needed, made him realize that if he hadn't been wearing a bulletproof vest, the knife would have gone right through his heart.

< 03.52

"Well, that one is out", Holger said flatly, and he stuck the knife

behind his belt. Lémarc bent down and picked up Holger's handgun from the street. To be on the safe side, he pushed the safety catch back, after which, carefully keeping Holger's arm out of the way, he stuck the Walther P5 in the holster. "And this one is in", he rebuked. Holger's arm was bleeding heavily and, like a leaking tap, the droplets of blood fell in an ever-growing puddle at his feet. In a decisive tone he continued: "I want you to come straight to the ED, before you topple over here and we have to carry you."

While arranging for the coroner and forensic technicians by phone, he saw the big blond German nodding, and heard him instruct his men to stay with the body until the experts arrived.

In the meantime, Lémarc's mobile phone was ringing. He hurriedly finished off and picked up. It was the crisis manager, who had strong indications that the press was involved in the attack on Hakon and asked his permission to arrest the journalists concerned. Journalists? That was quite risky. On the other hand, it could provide clues and help speed up the investigation into the perpetrators. He didn't have to think long. He agreed and said that the detainees should be handed over to Sytsema, the inspector who was coordinating the investigation into the attack.

He put his cell phone away and beckoned Holger. On the way to the ambulance entrance he comforted Holger and told him that James, who had fallen unconscious over Casanova, was being cared for in the ED. For Casanova, nothing could have been done. Casanova had been killed instantly.

Stiletto's knife had ended up right in Casanova's ear, straight through James' hand, which had been pinned to Casanova's head by it. They had driven the stretcher to the ED, where Casanova's death was established. James was unpinned, regained consciousness and was now being treated. Casanova's body remained under guard and was taken to one of the treatment rooms, where, believe it or not, they had found a motorcycle cop asleep, who had not noticed anything of the commotion. He still had to chuckle about it.

A little surprised, he looked aside. Next to him, Holger walked on stiffly and did not give any response. The stabbing of the knife had to be causing him more pain than he wanted to admit, Lémarc thought worriedly. To distract him, he continued. "My assistant, Jens, has informed me that the fire in the hall has been extinguished and that the fire brigade is already cleaning up. The hall itself is a ruin, but the fire damage was not so bad. The patients are all back and apart from the havoc at the front, things are back to normal in the hospital." Luckily, they were there. Relieved, he handed the abnormally quiet Holger over to the nursing staff, looked for a chair and sat down.

What a morning. Better said, what an hour. It wasn't even a quarter to nine.

FICTION

< 04.01

While Barbara kept half an eye on Ewin and Charles' speeded up footage, she informed Red/Tec by means of a short e-mail that she had nothing to add to it. Casanova's file was known and Ewin's commentary was well articulated and complete. The remarks she could add about this filthy murderer, would not exactly be suitable for broadcast.

She kept looking at the screen and hoped it wouldn't take too long. The images were of little interest, and following them took time. Time she could have spent much better investigating the attack on Hakon. Russ, a broad smile on his dark face, came in nonchalantly, pulled up a chair and crashed next to her.

He gestured towards the screen and asked: "Still stuff from The Hague? It looks like they're going for a Sunday afternoon stroll." She nodded. "Mm-hm. They want to go to the back of the hospital. They don't stand a chance at the front anymore, everything is sealed there." "Aaah, right", he replied. He reached out his hand and continued: "You get a big pat on the back from the chief and, please stay calm, he asks if you can write a tribute about Eriksson. Because you were friends with him, he thinks you should do it."

She put the headset's right earpiece into his outstretched hand. "You keep an eye on this exciting movie." She narrowed down the video frame and moved it a little in his direction. She quickly opened a new text document, typed 'Homage: Hakon Torstein Eriksson', saved it and closed it.

"There you go. If the chief asks for it, you can honestly tell him that I started it." Russ looked at her questioningly, but she didn't want to share with him her doubts and tiny hopes that Hakon might still be alive. Darn it. She wanted Ewin to hurry, so she could go on investigating. Not long after a couple had raced past on a motorbike and Ewin and Charles were still following the narrow path, the recording changed to normal speed. Together with Russ, she saw that their colleagues were finally able to see the back of the hospital, after which they both suddenly shot upright, focusing all their attention on the screen. At the same time, they each put

a finger in their free ear and curiously followed the now much livelier images.

A boy had come running diagonally from the left, and a little later he seemed to be rushing straight at the camera.

As he approached, Barbara saw that the running figure was not a boy, but a man.

A slenderly built, southern type. He was very handsome and she estimated him to be about thirty years old.

Visibly frightened of Ewin and Charles, he shifted his course without holding back and ran away from the camera. To his right, a woman suddenly showed up, who spun once around her axis, seemed to bend, raised one leg, and in a whirlwind of red hair planted a foot in the runner's handsome face. Less than a second later the woman was picked up by a biker and the couple had disappeared, leaving the young man dazed.

Wobbling, he started to move again, as a big blond policeman came running from his left. He identified himself and ordered the runner to surrender, while holding him at gunpoint. Luckily, the man was wise and gave up. His shoulders slumped forward and he fell down on his knees. Judging by Ewin's comments, he assumed the same. The apparently criminal man would be handcuffed and arrested. But they were wrong. The man made a quick move and suddenly the policeman was wounded. There was a knife sticking out of his chest, and another one out of his right arm. While his gun clanged onto the street, the policeman stoically pulled another gun with his left hand, and fired. Even before the bang echoed away, the young man had already collapsed. He fell on his back and lay there motionless. For a few seconds the image stayed on the policeman who was staring at the motionless body, after which it changed to the man who had been shot. Slowly it zoomed in, ending with a close-up of the handsome face. In the middle of his forehead was a hole that, except for a thick drop, did not even bleed anymore.

The image shifted back to the policeman, who didn't seem to have moved a single millimeter. Contrary to the gunshot wound, the knife wound in the right arm of the officer was bleeding considerably, the knife still sticking out of it. The blood dripped down steadily along his hand.

Because of the shot they heard, his colleagues rushed in. While Lémarc Tasker took the officer with him, his colleagues spread out and Ewin and Charles were taken to the side of the hospital.

Shocked, Barbara looked to the side, straight into Russ's calm, brown eyes. "Casanova had a helper", she whispered.

"God, I hope he hasn't escaped." "Well don't immediately assume the worst, Barb. You'd better find out first who that guy is, uh, was." He was right, of course. She nodded and rewound until the moment the pretty face came into focus. She stopped the recording, made a screenshot and sent it to Mike with an urgent request for information. Russ looked at her cheerfully and said: "Unbelievable! What a stroke of luck! It doesn't often happen that the police shoot a suspect in front of the camera. The chief is euphoric. All after a tip from you. Girl, your career is in full swing. I don't have any champagne in stock, unfortunately. Coffee, then?"

She nodded in agreement, turned her gaze away and let the recording go back to 'live'. She didn't like that tip about Casanova at all. She could pretend she did, but sooner or later it was guaranteed to bite her in the ass. How on earth could she find out who was responsible for this? She would prefer to get to work on it straight away, but Charles' camera was still recording, for God's sake. She saw that her colleagues were following the cops like tame sheep. Wise. They had done a good job. They would probably make a formal conclusion at the front of the hospital and finish the reportage.

She kept looking at the screen from time to time and took her notes on the attack on Hakon, trying to figure out how best to do her research. From her early days, she remembered what an older colleague used to say: "If you get stuck, start over at the source." Okay, that's what she would do first. Quickly tapping, she sent a request to Mike to provide her with all the information related to the attack. Everything he could get his hands on.

Her colleague had the necessary contacts and would have collected everything there was to find in no time. Almost immediately after she had sent the message, a message came in from him. Mike had already found out that the dead one was Stiletto, a knife thrower who was suspected by

the police of two murders. She sent a copy to Red/Tec and opened the attached file.

Russ put two cups on the desk, took a seat next to her again and put the earpiece back in. Barbara tapped on the screen with her nail and said to him: "I was quite right. The man who was shot was a criminal. While we are watching, we can go through the file. There won't be much more exciting happening anyway.

Hopefully we will read that he has nothing to do with Casanova at all."

< 04.02

As soon as Arda had launched herself away from him, Tim had started the motorcycle, driven around the tree up the path, and had been ready just in time for Arda to jump on the back again. As soon as Arda had grabbed him, he had rushed off at full speed without looking back. Again SCOUT had directed him through the gardens, until they had reached the side of the hospital, much more calmly than the outward drive, and he was ordered to stay there and wait until further notice. With his long legs, he casually kept the bike in balance as he handed Arda her helmet.

"Here, put it on. It rides pretty badly with one of those things on my arm. I suppose you left Stiletto horizontal?" "I wouldn't know. I gave him a nice kick and saw him wobble backwards, but I didn't look back", she replied, casually shoving her shoulders. "Not much to worry about. I'd rather have the sparring parties with Tony. Much more interesting." He saw the eager expression on her face at the thought of that. Arda was a very formidable opponent, he knew from his brother, who had enormous respect for her. A dangerous woman. Both immersed in their own thoughts, they waited for further instructions, which were not long in coming. Tim started and pointed backwards. "Jump on the back again, lady. Sandra reports that Stiletto has been eliminated. We can continue towards the Central Station."

< 04.03

Without protesting, Ewin and Charles let some members of EUAT92 drive them back around the corner of the hospital, where they had been cared for by a few other agents, who now took them to the front of the building.

Why be difficult, Ewin thought, satisfied. After all, they had managed to get their second scoop, a big one even. They had witnessed the incident from beginning to end and had been able to record everything. It could not have been any better.

After they had made a short, not very interesting report on the crashed SUV, they had carefully walked on to the hall where, apart from a few short shots, they had unfortunately had little success. Lémarc Tasker had declined their request and immediately after that they were sent away resolutely. The way he did that had annoyed Charles, but he had only raised an eyebrow and calmly said: "You know, every building has an entrance at the back.

When we were by our destroyed car, I saw two SUVs driving that way. Makes you think, doesn't it?" Unnoticed, except for a near-collision with a reckless motorcyclist, they had managed to reach the rear. As soon as they had come out of the corner,

they had a perfect view of the entrance to the ED.

There were two ambulances under the roof, with the two SUVs behind them, which were blocking the entrance by being parked at an angle. What had taken place since then was simply UNBELIEVABLE!

A South-American looking man had come running straight towards them. He had spotted him and Charles and at full speed had turned right, away from them.

Not a second later, a woman had jumped out of the bushes, who according to him was the same redheaded passenger as the one on the bike that had almost driven them over. She had turned around once and, like a Jean-Claude van Damme, had kicked the man who was running her way. In one flowing movement the woman had then jumped on the back of a motorcycle, which had raced off mighty quickly.

The victim had still been staggering, when a large, blond EUAT92 agent had come running. He had drawn his gun and warned the woman's victim that he was a police officer and that he had to stand still. For a moment

he had thought that the man had given up, but in the blink of an eye he had thrown two knives at the policeman. Both hit. The officer's gun had dropped on the street, but he had pulled another one with his other hand and fired it at lightning speed. The knife thrower had collapsed. The policeman, with two knives in his body, had stood motionless. A little later, Lémarc Tasker had appeared and picked up the wounded policeman. The whole site was now guarded by EUAT92 and he and Charles were handed over to a bunch of other officers, between whom they now walked silently.

He looked stealthily at Charles, who nodded his head equally meaningfully towards the main entrance.

The police were busy placing fences and tapes and it was crawling with rescuers. In the meantime several news agencies had also shown up, having no chance at all to make an item like theirs. They would feel very jealous as soon as INN broadcast their sensational item. In less than an hour they had been able to send two scoops to New York. Great! Their time in The Hague had started splendidly!

< 04.04

The knife-throwing assassin Stiletto was dead. Lord MacMarkland didn't need Sandra's confirmation, for he had clearly seen the small, round hole in the middle of his forehead. He was relieved that Tim and Arda had escaped in one piece and that Holger Bersal was still standing. The events had followed each other very quickly and had apparently been so exciting that he hadn't blinked his eyes once from start to finish. Only after he had opened and closed them powerfully a few times was the dry, burning feeling gone. Then, on the GRID, he had watched Lémarc Tasker take the wounded Holger to the ED and seen how EUAT92 agents brought the area under control, guarded Stiletto's body and brought back the two from INN.

In the meantime, Stiletto's status had changed from red to black with a white cross. Casanova's remained reassuringly green and it would not be long before this criminal spent the rest of his life in one of the most heavily guarded prisons. He watched the GRID with satisfaction.

Everything had ended up fine, despite the sudden appearance of the assassin Stiletto.

With her pleasant voice Sandra broke the silence by announcing that she had intercepted a conversation between Lémarc Tasker and crisis manager Johan Lam. She informed him that Casanova had been killed by Stiletto. At the same time Casanova's status changed, just like Stiletto's, to black with an identical white cross. Death. He was dead! It was a setback that he could no longer be questioned. Any traces of Casanova's employer had now been permanently wiped out. But in spite of this, the tense feeling that had been lying on his stomach had disappeared as if by magic and he felt relieved of an enormous burden. And although he truly regretted the fact that two men had lost their lives - people shouldn't kill each other - he finally, finally, felt free. Now, after waiting for years, he could devote himself to the concluding ritual. He thanked Sandra and headed straight to the library.

< 04.05

Ewin had been in a good mood and had let the Dutch AT agents gently take him to the front of the hospital. In a little while they would be allowed to pass through the barrier and he and Charles could make a nice closing report at their leisure. Thanks to Barbara they had managed to make a great report.

Maybe he should call her. He had already sent her a text message, but a personal thank you would be nice. After all, it had been her tip to go and have a look at the hospital, which eventually resulted in this spectacular news item. Though it may be a quarter to three at night in New York, he knew with certainty that she would stay in the department until INN had broadcast the shooting incident on TV. She had to have very special sources to get such information this well in advance, he thought, choosing her number. He started a video call and heard the dial tone beep a few times. In the meantime he was absent-mindedly looking at the grim faces of a few AT agents, who came marching towards their group.

He listened to the ringing of the phone and looked at the display, expecting to see Barbara's surprised face in a moment. Suddenly he was completely taken by surprise by a policeman, who grabbed him and tore his smartphone and tablet pc out of his hands. Before he could react, his hands were handcuffed behind his back and he was told that he and his cameraman had been arrested. He looked back at Charles uncomprehendingly and saw that he too had been dealt with firmly. His colleague, normally calm as no other, shouted that they were journalists and that they should get the hell out of here. It didn't matter. Not a moment later he was lying on his belly in a grip, moaning. His arms were roughly pulled backwards and in a jiffy his wrists were strapped as well.

Charles' camera had slipped out of the shoulder frame and fell bouncing on the cobblestones, where, after having rolled over a few times, the device finally came to a halt. Unsuspecting that his action would have major consequences for himself and the corps, a policeman with, according to his ID-card, the rank of commissioner, kicked the camera to pieces. "There you go. Those images won't be broadcast." He pointed at it and ordered haughtily, with a short snap of his finger, to pack up all the confiscated things and take away 'all the junk'.

Not being aware of all the modern technical possibilities, the man would later have a lot to explain to his superiors, after his actions had been shown live on TV and a stream of criticism had started. After receiving the last recording, an overview recording of the crashed SUV on the pedestal, with the completely destroyed front of the Elisabeth Hospital in the background, shit hit the fan at INN.

< 04.06

Tim saw Joost and Marilyn standing by Hakon's sports car from afar. He turned off the engine and slowly coasted up next to Marilyn, who had been waving enthusiastically. "I'm glad you're here, Tim," she said, putting an arm around his waist in a friendly manner. "You can easily catch the next train. Your brothers are already on their way." He looked down on her blond crown and was happy with the treatment. He had long been used to the fact that she did not hide her affection for him and his

brothers. Tjan and Tony liked it, but he wasn't used to such a public display of affection. His brothers often said he was a cramped, stiff guy. Carefully - she meant well and he didn't want to hurt her feelings under any circumstances - he loosened himself and took a step back. Arda, already greeted by Joost in his own Dutch way, gave Marilyn a kiss on her cheek and said: "Lucky that we could make it in time. Everything went smoothly, until suddenly a guy showed up, chasing Casanova. Tim had to drive like a madman." Knowing her extensive story style, he quickly said: "But Arda managed to stop him." He gave Joost his hand and saw the grimace on his face. He knew immediately that the man was thinking about a few days ago. A meeting had been scheduled and on the way there they had had to pick up Arda. Because the traffic had been favorable, they had arrived a bit too early and had seen her still training. Joost, who now knew better, had approached her unsuspectingly. Thank God he had had the faint-hearted idea to stand still immediately, when she had thrust her toe to his neck in a flash. It had been a light touch, but now Joost knew that when Arda was training, you absolutely shouldn't disturb her.

He didn't give Arda a chance to elaborate and immediately said: "Only after we got the green light, were we able to come here."

The moment he had interrupted Arda's story, Tim had known that he was on thin ice, and he carefully maintained his innocent attitude. She looked at him with sparkling eyes and ... laughed. Her white teeth glistened in the sunlight. It gave him goose bumps and he was very happy that they were about to go in different directions.

He was relieved to see her light-footedly and flexibly jump on the motorcycle and tuck away the package that Marilyn had given her. He laughed and, in his opinion, far too innocently, Marilyn said emphatically: "Don't forget, Arda. You know how important it is, don't you?" "Yeah, I'll pay Mr. Tasker a visit," was the cheerful answer. "I will do my utmost best," she added with a mischievous wink. She put on her helmet and started the motorcycle. Before she left, she looked back at Marilyn and shouted: "You're going to lose the bet, sweetheart!" With a bang she closed the visor and rushed off. "What was all that about?" Joost asked with a curious look at Marilyn. "You don't have any secrets from me, do you?" "Seems unlikely to me," Tim said cheerfully. He was extremely

relieved that Arda had disappeared. “Everyone knows that you are two hands in one glove.”

After much urging from Joost and at first unwillingly, but gradually smiling more and more, Marilyn talked about the bet that Arda had made with her. “And you know that she just takes what she wants. I never expected her to reach 100 within the agreed time, but she consistently kept me informed. The counter is at ninety-nine and now she has set her sights on Lémarc. She finds him attractive and wants to win the bet with him as a trophy. She thinks she then has proven that love at first sight does not exist.”

Joost, who now laughed as broadly as she did, asked what was in it for her. Marilyn’s face became less cheerful. “If I lose, I have to take ten self-defense lessons with her,” she confessed, moaning pathetically at the thought. “Although I don’t think that’s a bad idea at all, I don’t think she’s going to be able to do it. Lémarc is a big boy and can take care of himself,” Joost answered comfortingly, and he immediately laughed again.

Tim looked from one to the other, wondering if he was the only normal one in the party. What impertinence. That man-devourer had to get back what she did to others, so she could feel what it was like to be used, he thought vengefully. He disapprovingly kept himself at arm’s length. He had absolutely no intention of interfering in such matters. “I wholeheartedly hope you’re right, Joost”, he heard Marilyn say. She looked at her watch. “Guys, it’s about time we left. In a few minutes your train will leave, Tim.” They wished each other good luck and said goodbye. Of course Marilyn had to give him a hug before she could sit down next to Joost in Hakon’s car. He briefly raised his hand by way of a greeting, after which he hurried to the station hall.

< 04.07

“Boy! Interesting,” Barbara said to Russ. She closed the file and continued: “We still don’t know if Stiletto had anything to do with Casanova or not.” She sighed deeply. “Man, how I’d like to know if they arrested him or if, God forbid, he managed to escape.”

“Of course, I don’t know, Barb, but I think that Stiletto tried to help Casanova escape and I suspect that he didn’t succeed. He was caught and fled. Out of necessity the officer had to shoot and I didn’t see any activities that indicated that those AT’ers were looking for another escaped criminal. I assume that Casanova has been caught.”

He looked at her open-heartedly, took her hand in his, gave her an encouraging squeeze and held it just a little too long before he let go again. Before he could turn his gaze away, she had seen it. Her heart was missing a beat, and where did those butterflies in her belly come from? She was not easily shy and to her annoyance felt that she was blushing.

To hide her embarrassment, she grabbed her coffee, coughing. Coughing gave you a red head, everyone knew that, right? While taking a far too big sip, she tried with all her might to suppress the sensuous feelings for him. Less than an hour ago, Hakon had died - maybe not, maybe not after all ... - and now she was sitting here longing for a game of lovemaking?

Jeez! That couldn’t be true, could it? She’d better concentrate on her work. She moved a little away from him and when she saw the smile in his eyes and the position of his mouth, she realized that her reaction had not escaped him. With an uncomfortable feeling she stared stubbornly at her computer and tried to ignore Russ, freshly showered, clean-shaven, nice smelling ... Without talking, they sat side by side, drinking coffee, looking at the screen, which showed Charles taking a picture of the square in front of the hospital. It was swarming with police, fire brigade and ambulance staff.

As she tried to get Russ out of her head and watched three people being treated near a crashed SUV, the ringtone of her smartphone came through to her. She grabbed it from the table and saw that it was Ewin who was requesting a video connection. She quickly pressed the icon, interrupting the canary song that fitted so nicely with her bright yellow mobile phone.

For a brief moment she saw Ewin’s face, before it disappeared with a look of astonishment, and a big hand appeared. The display faded and turned black. “Ouch!” Russ had poked her and shouted: “Barb, Bár! Look!”

On her computer screen, she saw Ewin standing between a bunch of AT men.

With his arms on his back he looked, uncomprehendingly, straight into the camera which two other AT agents in combat clothing were walking towards. She saw two pairs of grabbing hands and heard an order being barked loudly above the Charles' cursing. The images suddenly shook vigorously back and forth and, after a few more vague spinning stripes, showed the destroyed SUV in front of the hospital, as if nothing had happened.

The recording lasted for about five seconds, until a policeman appeared. She heard him calling something in Dutch, after which the man's shoe quickly went for the lens and, absurdly enlarged, put an end to Charles' camera. Stunned, she and Russ looked at each other for a moment, then her smartphone went off again. It was Ewin again, but now his icon was red. Someone had tried to turn off Ewin's smartphone, not knowing it was secured with his fingerprint. How fortunate that they had recently, via connections from Hakon, received these smartphones on a trial basis.

They had all kinds of new features on them, including this security gadget. As soon as someone other than the registered user wanted to turn it on, apparently nothing happened. Unauthorized disconnection also seemed to be possible, but the device did remain active. It continued to record image and sound, and the detection signal also remained intact. Everything that was registered was sent to a paired smartphone, which was hers right now.

In both cases, the Markland alarm center was notified. She had listened carefully to the tall Briton in his three-piece suit, while he explained all the new functions. She knew exactly what to do. She pressed the red icon and listened. There was a lot of stumbling and screaming that she couldn't understand. Above that an insulting voice could be heard, which in all probability came from Charles. She carefully put her smartphone on the desk and hastily said: "Russ, I need you to do a few things for me. First, you have to inform the chief. Then you rush to Red/Tec. A man named Hans works there, I don't know his surname, but he has Dutch parents and I know he understands it. Have him come here so he can translate. Furthermore, someone has to make sure that the sound and images that come in on my smartphone are sent directly to the network,

so that we can watch and listen to them. Who knows what kind of important information we can still pick up.” She handed him her smartphone. “Russ, you are the first and only person I give it to.

Take care and make sure the connection is not disconnected.” “Will do, girl”, she heard him answer, as she bent down and grabbed her bag. She pulled out her wallet and searched the compartments, looking for the Markland card she got with the new smartphone. There it was. She pulled it out from behind one of her credit cards, reached for the landline and quickly typed in the remarkably long number. She had already prepared herself for a long wait and then being passed around endlessly, but was almost shocked when a friendly, sympathetic sounding woman answered almost immediately.

< 04.08

Lémarc looked at his watch and noticed that it was almost nine o'clock, for God's sake. He had been sitting here for 15 minutes now and still did not know how Holger was doing. Maybe he should be so rude and go into the treatment room, or find a nurse and ask about him.

Before he had even sat down, a nurse had already come towards him. “You are waiting for our action hero?” she had asked with a smile, together with the question if she could bring him a cup of tea or coffee. He answered that this was indeed the case. He had turned down the lovely offer. Surely, she had something else to do than serve him, and at the same time he had wondered what such a beautiful woman, almost a girl still, was doing here. She could easily pass for a model or a mannequin. Tall and slender. A full head of curly hair that framed her pretty features and large, grey-green eyes. You'd almost wish you were admitted here as a patient, so you could see her regularly. He imagined how nice it would be to have anyone at all to come home to. Unfortunately, there was no such thing for him. His profession required him to go where he was needed, so he was often away from home for a long time. So far, no relationship had lasted. The right woman for him - independent, spirited and reasonably intelligent - probably didn't even exist. After a few disappointments, he had accepted it.

Unintentionally he had sighed deeply. Immediately worried, the nurse had asked him if he was all right and had suggested she get him a glass of water. "No, not necessary," he had reassured her and, looking at her name tag, he had tried to pronounce her name. "Ggg... grrr, ggurrh..." He had given up. She had laughed warmly. She had slowly articulated her name. "Grié-tjuh".

In the past two months he had learned a lot of Dutch, but he simply couldn't master certain sounds. He was almost right a couple of times, but had stumbled over that 'G'-sound again and again. His buzzing phone had put an end to the fun. He had answered and Grietje had retreated giggling. Johan Lam, who had kept it short because of the hustle and bustle, had let him know that these guys from the press had been arrested and would be handed over to Sytsema as soon as possible. At the Peace Palace and the Elisabeth Hospital, the state of emergency was still in force and emergencies were being taken care of by surrounding hospitals.

Two agents from EUAT92 had been transferred. His assistant had had to have been informed in the meantime. He had thanked Lam and, before they hung up, urged him that the journalists should be treated with the utmost care as long as their involvement in illegal cases had not been proven. In order to keep a finger on the pulse, he had told him that the transport of the detainees should not take place until his assistant, who was to accompany the local police, arrived. Afterwards he had called Jens. His assistant was busy once again, but had apparently put the other line on hold in order to be able to answer the call. He could indeed provide him with all the details about Holger's colleagues. The healing process would take some time, but their injuries were not critical.

Happy with the good news, he had instructed Jens to finish his work and come to the ED. In the meantime, he could take a look at Holger himself. The German had been so withdrawn, so ... unapproachable. Earlier he had assumed that it had to be because of the pain, but it could also be that the extremely sporty Holger had already known that he might never be able to use his arm properly again. A prospect that had to be a real nightmare for him. Lémarc knocked on the door, pulled the door ajar and put his head inside. The doctor, who had a syringe in his hand, looked up, looked at Holger, who indicated that it was okay, and invited him to

come in. After he had found a place where he could not stand in the way of anyone, he said: "Doctor, we have met before under rather unpleasant circumstances. Let me introduce myself. My name is Lémarc Tasker and I am deputy director at UNBI. I see that Mr. Bersal is in good hands with you." In very good hands, he thought amused. Holger, whose temporarily bandaged right arm was resting on a brace, was sitting on the couch with his upper body bare.

The two nurses, who were waiting with instruments and bandages, could not take their eyes off him. As if they were competing to find the first fat molecule, their eyes kept sliding from his impressively muscular arms, through his broad chest to his ribbed, rock-hard looking 'washboard', only to start all over again after brief eye contact with each other. Judging by the face he pulled, the doctor knew exactly what he was thinking.

He replied: "The gentleman here ...", he pointed at Holger with the syringe, "... is lucky today. It's so quiet that the staff are simply fighting for patients." His face lost its amused expression and in a serious tone of voice he continued to speak. "He was very lucky anyway. The vest saved his life and the cut in his chest only needs a few small stitches. The other knife stuck at least three inches deep into his biceps, but got stuck in the thick muscle tissue and miraculously didn't hit any vital parts. I don't expect any complications. Because the knife was long, thin and very smoothly sharpened, the wound is deep, but will probably heal very well. I estimate that in two or three weeks' time he will be able to start a light workout carefully. Definitely not before then, because the wound has to close very well first. Too much tension on it too quickly, will definitely tear things apart and that could lead to much greater damage."

He gave Holger a few narcotic injections around the chest wound and continued: "By the way, under the supervision of a forensic expert, a bit of material has been taken from both knives and sent to our laboratory, where it is currently being tested for toxins. The fact that I have not seen any symptoms so far does not mean that all danger has passed. In addition, I want to ensure that there can be no interaction with the tetanus vaccination and antibiotics."

Lémarc was quite impressed by this doctor, who was now skillfully working with suture and scissors, and told him so with sincere admiration. "Hats off, doctor. You've really thought of everything." He looked at

Holger, who seemed to as emotionless as a statue, but was apparently listening.

During the doctor's story he had nodded understandingly a couple of times, but his face, as someone who is concentrating one hundred percent, was devoid of any expression. The doctor had finished the four beautiful, regular stitches, put his things on the tray that one of the nurses held out to him and ordered: "Cover with a piece of gauze, please. We're going to do the arm now."

He filled a new syringe and said: "Mr. Tasker, if you find it interesting, you can watch. Come a little closer, but keep some distance, please." While the doctor and nurses were busy, he told Holger that his injured team members were doing well and that they too, like him, would be fully deployable over time. He finally saw Holger's face, who apparently was a lot more relieved than he wanted to admit, thawing. His eyes lost that staring gaze and his lips folded in half a smile. "Both okay. Beautiful. So my second man won't be out of the running either?" Holger looked at him in a penetrating way. Deliberately quasi serious, Lémarc replied: "Unfortunately, son. Your attempt to get rid of him failed miserably. He's been reassembled and a dental technician has already been arranged to fix his teeth." "Boy." Holger's half smile has now turned into a whole one. "Now the ugly one gets a good-looking head for free. Some people really are always lucky." He hadn't finished yet, but he had to yawn deeply. "Sorry, Lémarc. I'm not quite there yet ..." His eyes closed. He was asleep.

Holger's face relaxed and Lémarc looked with pity at the innocently sleeping man, who was in for a tremendous blow. He had no idea that his comrade, with whom he had been through so much, had been murdered an hour ago. Lémarc watched as the two nurses put the bandaged arm half over his chest, carefully slipped a pillow under his head, and together spread a thin blanket over him.

As soon as the man was awake, he had to tell him the terrible news about Hakon. No pleasant prospect, he thought gloomily. Before he could ask Dr. Swart how long Holger would stay asleep, the latter took the floor. "I gave him a light sedative, so that he could completely relax for a while. Believe me, it will do him good."

Dr. Swart dried his hands and continued: "In about an hour he will be awake and you can come and pick him up." With his hand outstretched, the doctor walked to Lémarc, winked at him and joked: "I suppose that the ladies, provided they can fit it into their busy schedule, will come and have a look at him once in a while." Lémarc shook his hand and asked if it was all right for him to visit his other, older patient. "If you don't give him any excitement, it's okay, although I'm afraid he hasn't regained consciousness yet." On good terms, he said goodbye to this competent physician and left the treatment room. Jens was not there yet, so he walked alone to the room where Jan de Jong was supposed to be lying down, who turned out to indeed be a former policeman and ex-colleague of James.

He had Jens check him out and now knew that the man had also worked with Hakon in the past. How they had managed to get so close to the Peace Palace was still unknown, but he and Casanova had both managed to be present at the attack. A quarter of an hour later they were both here in the ED. It was inevitable that the two had to have something to do with each other. It was up to him to find out how, who and why. It was clear why. His boss, also friend and mentor, did his job too well and had been hated and feared by the underworld for years.

And even if it were to be his death, the how and who, the great unknown(s) for whom people such as Casanova and possibly de Jong worked, he would find them so that justice could be done.

He fiercely pulled open the door and ventured inside, to come to the pleasant discovery that the nurse present turned out to be nurse Grietje.

She greeted him kindly and told him that her patient would not recover for the time being.

At his request she handed him everything that Jan de Jong had brought with him. She pointed at the plastic bag and said: "I don't know many elderly people who can handle such things." He saw what she meant. The smartphone it contained was an ultra-modern device, which he knew hadn't been on the market for long. As he signed the receipt, he asked her to call him as soon as her patient was available. Then he thanked her, pulled open the door and stepped into the hallway with a friendly "see you later, nurse", without even trying to pronounce her name.

< 04.09

Under police supervision, the tow truck maneuvered between the masses of spectators and reporters. With a loud, hydraulic hiss, the vehicle came to a standstill near the wreckage. Sytsema patiently waited for the driver to come out of the cab.

Commissioner Schenk had given him responsibility for this investigation, which would undoubtedly remain in the limelight for a long time to come. He would not tolerate any mistakes on anyone's part, not even on his own. He would not even think of losing sight of the burnt limousine. There was something about that car, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He was extremely annoyed that his brain refused to cooperate. "Morning, chief." He saw the driver coming at him with his hand outstretched.

"Good morning, Klaas. Far too beautiful a day for a disaster like this, don't you think?", he replied, shaking his hand. "You could say that, yes. I had turned on the TV this morning because today the Spiderweb process would start and suddenly Eriksson's limo explodes. I was shocked to death. Shortly after that I was called to bring the whole bunch to The Barn. Man, man. What a mess."

Klaas' gaze moved to the burnt-out wreckage and he kept looking at it, shaking his head pityingly, with his hands in his pockets. He was right. Gradually it became quite frustrating to be able to be of any use in the service of Lady Justice, he thought pessimistically. He also could seldom complete his affairs successfully.

That is to say: not the small, common occasional crimes, but the more complex cases. It was increasingly common for witnesses to drop out, disappear or be found dead.

It wouldn't take long before no one would dare to revolt against organized crime, and the people would live under a dictatorship, unwittingly, in a sham democracy.

He was dismayed to see that the forensic experts who had scrutinized Carnegie Square had packed up their belongings.

A figure detached himself from the group and headed in his direction. "Attention, chief! The deep-frozen she-wolf is approaching," warned Klaas. Upon hearing the nickname of Dr. D.F.K. Winter, head of the forensic team, he put on his most neutral, businesslike look. He prepared himself spiritually for the intelligent, but ice-cold woman, who walked towards him and Klaas with sharp, well measured steps. He greeted her and asked if her people had found anything meaningful. Dr. Winter lived up to her name and responded coolly, formally and disdainfully that it had been a waste of her time. Although the square had been thoroughly and meticulously combed, not a single grain of evidence had been found. If there was any trace to be found, it would have to be in or near the car itself. In addition, the neatly controlled method used to blow up the car was unique. Further research would have to show whether this would be a clue in itself.

At this moment she could not give him any answers. The wreckage first had to be taken to The Barn of the forensic laboratory, where she could use all her equipment. A short nod indicated that there was nothing more to report.

Asking for more information, or a hypothesis, would not do him any good, he knew.

After asking whether the driver had taken the roll of material with him, he called in Klaas, who confirmed with a little bit of annoyance that the special heat-resistant foil was on the back of his car. Dr. Winter gave a short nod, explained how she wanted the wreck to be wrapped and that she would send one of her people to help him. He knew all too well that this was not a nice gesture towards Klaas, but a disguised message, intended to ensure that the car was packed according to her instructions. Well, that was totally okay as far as he was concerned. If afterwards something turned out to be wrong, she was responsible.

Her ice-blue eyes looked at him piercingly, as she wanted to know at what time she could expect the wreckage at The Barn. After some consultation with Klaas, he agreed with her that they would be at The Barn by ten o'clock at the latest. He also informed her that he himself, as the responsible detective, would come along to be present at the first investigation. After a businesslike "Fine, I'll see you later,"

she quickly walked back to her crew with her back straight.

“Boy, is it my imagination or is it suddenly a lot warmer here?” sounded the voice of Klaas. “I think that in a previous life she single-handedly sunk the Titanic”, he continued with an exaggerated shudder. “I wouldn’t be surprised”, Sytsema answered absently, and at the same time he gestured to Klaas to be quiet for a moment, because the central control room called him via his walkie-talkie. He reported in and was told that the secretary of the UN had come to visit the scene of the attack in person. He had to welcome and accompany him. In addition to the usual security measures, the regional AT3 team, led by Pieter Jan Dekkers, had also been called up due to the state of emergency. He put his walkie-talkie back, beckoned Klaas and informed him that the packing had to be postponed for a while because of the visit of Dick Holyester.

Just like Klaas, he only knew him from TV and was curious how the man would come across in person. They got no more time to prepare for the high-level visit.

As carefully as Klaas had driven his truck, just as recklessly the two SUVs from AT3 arrived. Before a helpful agent had the chance to remove part of the tape, the first car had already driven straight through it. They drove on and stopped abruptly a few meters before the wreck. Like fleas from a dead rat, half a dozen men jumped out of each SUV and spread out in a circle after a short order from the leader. The leader himself, who had to be Pieter Jan Dekkers, walked towards them. With a powerful handshake, accompanied by a broad grin, he introduced himself. They were allowed to call him Piet, just like everyone else. He told them openly that they had been called up for support at the Elisabeth Hospital, where a second attack was said to have taken place, but had received other instructions halfway through. At first, he had been quite angry, until he had heard what it was all about. Now he was happy with this assignment, which would undoubtedly look very nice on his service record. Subsequently - he and Klaas had not been able to get a word in between - the enthusiast bombarded them with all kinds of questions. No, the truck did not contain any potentially dangerous cargo. No, no co-driver(s). No, the forensic team was ready. Yes, one of them would stay here. No, apart from themselves and the forensic expert mentioned above, there were no other persons present.

“Beautiful, I know enough,” Piet ended his interrogation. “I’ll give my people an update. The secretary could show up at any moment.” He briefly, but no less bone-pulverizingly, shook their hands and briskly walked away from them.

While he massaged his painful hand with the other one, he heard Klaas sigh deeply, ending in a soft murmur: “... for Piet’s sake ...”

< 04.10

With the telephone handset clamped between ear and shoulder, Barbara, frantically tapping, followed the instructions of Markland’s friendly helpdesk assistant. In no time she had two extra programs on her desktop: a globe and a camera. The woman briefly explained their function to her, wished her success and then disconnected. Curiously, she opened the camera program, which was supposed to display the image and sound of Ewin’s smartphone on her computer. She put in the earpieces of her headset and, startled, slid the volume control down a long way, as a lot of noise assaulted her ears, with, above that, the voice of a furiously shouting Charles.

Her screen came to life, but showed no more than a few shaky, unbalanced recordings, in which she could only distinguish vague faces and limbs. The sound, on the other hand, was clear and despite the messy background noise she clearly heard voices talking.

As she was told, she quickly changed the settings of the program and chose English [US].

Every spoken word, no matter which language it was, was about to appear in English at the bottom of the screen. She had become so absorbed in her activities that she only noticed that Russ was back when he tapped her on the shoulder and put her smartphone on the desk, with exaggerated caution.

He had brought Hans with him, who regrettably confessed that it had not been possible to get Ewin’s information into the network via her mobile phone. Ah, here came the translation. She said: “That’s okay. Just look,” and pointed to her computer.

“Hey, how the hell did you manage that?”, Hans asked in amazement. She shrugged her shoulders and answered carelessly: “Relationships, boy. Relationships.” Russ, who had grabbed an earpiece from her, was impressed and said: “Look at this. The text of each voice comes in a different color. Barbara, where the hell did you get such software? Do you have the copy program...” “Of course, what did you think? I wasn’t born yesterday. Everything is copied and sent to the server. Hey, look. Isn’t that Lémarc Tasker’s assistant?”

The face had only been in the frame for a short time, but she had indeed recognized him. She, Russ and Hans continued to look in fascination at the images, which a little later showed a big hand. Something rustled and crackled, after which the images came through much more blurred and the sound was a lot more muted. Nevertheless, both remained easily recognizable and Barbara was able to distinguish clothing, shoes and police equipment. “I think they put the phone in a plastic bag,” she said. “Let’s see where the thing goes.” She opened the globe program. A map of the Netherlands appeared, with an arrow pointing at The Hague, after which they zoomed in and a clear map was displayed. A flashing telephone icon was moving in front of the Elisabeth Hospital. “Wow, cool,” it sounded at the same time. Yes, she thought. It is indeed interesting, but this could take a lot of time. She asked: “Say, guys, would you keep an eye on this for me? Then I can continue working on Hakon’s tribute.” And do some more investigation, she thought. “Sure, no problem,” replied Hans. Russ added: “We’ll move to my desk, that is, if my account still has access to your computer, because we need to be able to access those handy programs of yours.” “I haven’t changed anything, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

She thanked her colleagues and suddenly noticed how hectic it had become in the department.

Judging by the angry and indignant faces, the arrest of their colleagues in The Hague was now well known to everyone. Normally she would be the first to find out how and why, but this time she was forced to leave it to others.

She had seen Lémarc’s assistant and in all probability Tasker herself was somewhere near him. If she wanted to know about Hakon’s limousine,

she first had to find out what their mobile numbers were. Mike was her best option and would willingly find out for her. Her eyes searched the department, but he was not to be seen anywhere. In that case, let's send a message. She conjured up her smartphone and started typing an urgent message with quick fingers.

< 04.11

As he had expected, when Dick suggested that he go with him to the place where Hakon died, John hadn't hesitated for a second. The head of security, on the other hand, had done his utmost to prevent them from doing so. The latest news reported a second attack, this time on a hospital, which, like the first, had not yet been claimed by any group. They were in the dark and the risk could not be assessed.

Mr. Secretary would do better not to leave the Peace Palace. However, his decision had been made and the man had not dared to go against his wishes. He had reluctantly given in.

"Sir, I will make the necessary preparations, but we cannot guarantee your and Mr. Bingham's safety outside this building. You will understand that I must mention this in my report." He had informed the man that, of course, he had understood very well. If anything should happen to John or him, which seemed very unlikely to him, the security service was not to blame at all. Admittedly, this was an exceptional situation and the man could not be blamed for covering himself and his company.

"I will do my best to arrange everything as soon as possible, but the preparations will take some time."

After this announcement, everyone, except John and two bodyguards who were stationed at the door, had left the room and peace had returned to John's office.

John, who had apologized, was sitting at his desk telephoning, making an occasional note. Before they could leave, he had to instruct his staff. He himself had taken a seat on the Chesterfield and allowed himself to relax for a moment.

As head of the UN he was used to the pressure of work and the long days, but now he suddenly felt old and his seventy years of life made their mark. Grateful for the short break, he let his head rest on the backrest. The terrible news about Hakon, who was like a son to him, slowly dawned on him. The violence. The pointlessness. His heart cried. By making every effort, he finally managed to reduce the pain that threatened to tear him apart. He was not allowed to give in, nor to collapse. Even now that Hakon himself was no longer there, he had to continue to support him. He remembered his request: '... no matter what,' all too well.

John's voice came through to him. "Of course. I will put him on the line. One moment, please." John held the telephone handset against his belly and asked him in a penetratingly hissing voice: "Dick, Di-hick! The Prime Minister wants to see you." John, who had seen him get up, politely said goodbye and handed him the receiver.

After expressing his condolences, followed by a short introduction, the Prime Minister informed him that, due to the state of emergency, no one from the government was allowed to visit Carnegie Square. Because of the international nature of Hakon Eriksson's work, the situation had to be regarded as both a domestic and a foreign matter. In order to keep the lines of communication as short as possible and to avoid confusion, the Prime Minister asked him to keep him personally informed. They exchanged a few more general matters, after which the conversation was ended.

John put the horn back on the phone and said, "I like him, the Prime Minister. He shows initiative and exudes decisiveness." "Yes, John, you're right. He'll have to do that, by the way. The murder of Hakon is not only an attack on international criminal law, but was carried out here in The Hague, where the government resides, and therefore affects the heart of politics as well. I fear that we will all have to face many problems in the coming period." "Mm, mm," John agreed with him, to add, practically as always: "In order to rule out possible future inconvenience, I suggest that we visit the toilet." It was clear that people were extremely concerned about their well-being. Accompanied by two bodyguards they reached the toilets, where they had to wait until one of the bodyguards had checked the room. Only after his approval, were they allowed inside,

accompanied by him. Fortunately, the man was so discreet as to stand with his back to him and John until they had washed their hands.

They were kindly taken back to John's office by their guardians, where they sat next to each other on the Chesterfield. "I hope we can leave soon, John. It's almost nine o'clock already, damn it." "Undoubtedly, Dick. But you can see that they want to be extremely careful, especially when it comes to your security." He was right, of course. But sitting idly waiting wasn't his strongest point.

He was reminded of Hakon's grandparents, who had been waiting for their grandson to spend a few pleasant days together.

"Damn it, John. In Norway it must have hit hard. I really feel sorry for his grandfather and grandmother. They must be devastated."

"I don't know, Dick. Lémarc said it was one of the saddest and at the same time strangest bad-news conversations he has had to date. He spoke to Hakon's grandfather and had the impression that the old man didn't seem very upset at all. According to Lémarc, he remained very calm and sober, almost as if it had been said that Hakon would come home a bit later. He didn't seem to realize that Hakon is dead and will never come home again. Lémarc couldn't get it through to Hakon's grandfather in any way. It must be the age. He's well into his seventies, isn't he?"

Dick nodded. "Soon, on June 11th, he'll be eighty. Hakon had already prepared the feast and arranged some days off." In a soft tone John said: "It's so sad. You turn eighty, and your only grandchild was murdered just a month before. Terrible." Dejectedly sad, he remained silent.

What else was there to say, Dick thought to himself. Probably there wasn't even much of Hakon's body left to bury. He would visit the old people and assist them as much as possible. He knew damn well how they must feel.

"Dick, it's time," he heard John say. He looked up and saw the head of the security service coming in.

"Gentlemen, when you're ready?" Surrounded by bodyguards, they left John's room and descended the [monumental staircase](#) into the hall of the imposing palace.

Both of them were so absorbed in their thoughts that they saw nothing of the magnificent arches, the matt shiny floors of Italian marble, the artfully decorated pilasters and the beautiful works of art.

Their feet moved gradually over the work of art 'Sol justitiae illustra nos' (*Sun of Justice, shine on us*) inlaid in the marble floor. They walked to the main exit.

The doorman had already opened the heavy Art Nouveau doors made of bronze and steel for them and nodded to them with a solemn face.

Outside they were greeted by a friendly sun, which made the armored limousine shine.

The distance to the site of the attack was less than 300 yards, but was nevertheless covered by car. The bodyguards helped them to sit down and only after he and John were comfortably seated in the back, were the doors closed and the limousine slowly set in motion. Surrounded by heavily armed bodyguards, the limousine drove at a walking pace and with softly crunching tires along the gravel path to the gate.

< 04.12

Lémarc had left Jan de Jong and the charming sister Grietje behind, and while walking, he admired the ultramodern mobile phone that was in the plastic evidence pouch. A beautiful thing. Ultra flat, slightly rounded corners and, instead of the usual black, produced in a subtle, deep green glossy color.

Wham! With a bang the fire doors closed.

When he looked up, he saw Jens rushing towards him. "Ah, Jens. It's good to have you here. Is everything arranged?" "Yep. There's a lot of damage, but there are relatively few wounded. Two from EUAT92, a couple who sat in a car apathetically and a woman who was hiding behind the counter. All five were taken to surrounding hospitals. The area around the hospital is closed and everyone who has no business here is behind the fences. I was already on my way here, when someone from the Dutch AT asked me to come along. They arrested two journalists, a team from INN, who they took to one of the boardrooms. Their

belongings ...”, he held up two plastic bags, “... have been confiscated. A broken camera, a tablet pc and two smartphones. Will they be guarded until I return?” Jens looked at him questioningly. “Yes, Lam has strong indications that these people have something to do with the attack on Hakon.

Now that we have lost our main source of information due to Casanova’s death, they are currently our best point of contact.”

He looked at Jens with penetrating eyes to let him know that he was serious.

“I have agreed with Lam that you will work with the Dutch on behalf of UNBI. You ride along and make sure that those two INN’ers are booked in with us. Tighten the thumbscrews.

If they have information and they provide us with it immediately, we will see how lenient we can be. In any case, try to find evidence, because then we will have more of a chance to make them talk. I’ve always disliked that anti-terror law, but now I won’t hesitate to make use of it. The same goes for the old man.” He gave Jens the plastic bag and continued: “He had this stuff with him. His name is Jan de Jong and he is a former Interpol inspector. Make sure that nothing, nothing at all, is overlooked. Who knows how long the murder of Hakon has been prepared.” He continued to look at his assistant, whose face had become increasingly grim, and continued: “Give the bags to Sytsema, then he’ll have all the evidence in one place. He is coordinating the investigation and has to take the wreck to the forensic laboratory anyway. We’ve already talked about it, but tell him again that the DNA examination has priority.”

He briefly put his hand on Jens’ arm and asked emphatically: “Can I count on you, Jens?” “You don’t have to ask that, Lémarc,” Jens replied, somewhat confused. “You know that. Hakon was also my friend.” The kid was right, he thought repentantly.

“Sorry, Jens. You’re right. Of course, I don’t doubt you. I never did, you hear?” Jens nodded, accepting the apology, and was preparing to go on the road. “Wait a minute, Jens. I still have a few things to collect. Tell Sytsema that I...”, he looked at his watch, “... will drop by around eleven o’clock with the rest of the stuff, yeah?” Jens was already on the move. As he left, he dug the smartphone out of his pocket, briefly raised the

bags and shouted: "It's all right. See you later!" The boy would do better with that thing attached to his ear, he thought, while he was following Jens. In one hand his assistant carried the three bags of evidence, which swayed gracefully along with his steps. With the other he clasped his cell phone to an ear, yet again engaged in a lively conversation.

< 04.13

There was nothing left of the pleasant mood Ewin had been in after the two fine items he and Charles had been able to send to New York. On the contrary. Before he knew what was happening, his arms had been tied to his back and he had been pulled along quite roughly to the boardroom of the Elisabeth Hospital. Somewhere behind him he had heard Charles rage, but he had no idea where his colleague had been taken.

By now, he had been lying there for some time, tightly handcuffed and extremely uncomfortable, half over a sofa, on which he had been put by a bunch of big AT'ers. He had been pondering about it like crazy, but with the best will in the world he couldn't figure out why he and Charles had been arrested and why on earth they were being treated so roughly.

He was in a terribly uncomfortable position, his hands and feet painfully strapped with PlastiCuffs and he knew he was hopelessly stuck. He was being watched by an armed AT'er, who was standing like a statue with his back against the wall next to the door and his legs spread wide.

In vain he had asked the man why he had been brought here. He had first tried it with reason, hoping for some humanity and decency. When that didn't help, he had lost his temper and had become angry, but that hadn't been any use either. Just like his last humble prayers to at least loosen the cuffs, because they cut deeper into his skin with every movement. Not a sign of pity. The grumpy guy kept looking right through him. He might just as well try to get an answer from the hard stone wall behind him.

He heard screams and suddenly the door was thrown open so wildly that it hit the wall with a thump. He recognized Charles' voice and turned his head in terror, for although he could hear that his colleague was furious,

there was also pain in his voice. He saw his comrade, with two AT'ers at each arm, hurling and struggling, being dragged into the room and deposited on the other sofa like a piece of garbage. "Motherfuckers", Charles hissed at the imperturbable AT'ers. "My arms are almost twisted out of the socket. Oooohhhh ... You are not rid of us yet. As soon as they know at INN the conditions under which we were arrested and detained, you will be nailed to the pillory! Have you ever heard of freedom of the press?"

The grim-looking guys were not at all impressed by the threat. With Charles' question in their wake, the AT'ers silently left the room without looking back.

< 04.14

There, the message to Mike with the request to trace the mobile numbers of Lémarc Tasker and/or his assistant Jens was sent. Barbara sat down and stretched herself.

She started to feel the long working day, but going home and resting was not an option. Not now that her colleagues in The Hague were in trouble, and certainly not now that she had so many questions about the attack on Hakon. As long as she could stay upright, she would keep digging until she had all the facts on the table.

The feeling that something was wrong somewhere did not let go of her. Usually she was instinctively right. Besides, knowing herself, she wouldn't be able to relax completely until she had turned the last stone anyway.

Determined to find out the truth of the matter, she groped for her mouse and checked her mailbox. No message from Mike yet, of course, but the archive had been working hard and had sent a whole load of images and newspaper clippings to her. As long as she was deprived of new information, this was all she had to work with. She opened the document she had made for Hakon's tribute. Slowly typing, she drew the general outline. She would fill in the details while going through the submitted material. She pushed the document aside for a bit and opened the first clipping that was in her mailbox.

< 04.15

At a snail's pace and far too conspicuously for his liking, they reached Carnegie Square. "We're here, Dick," said John, which was a rather superfluous comment. A small army of policemen kept the curious crowd and intrusive press at bay and here and there he also saw several AT men with black helmets at strategic points. A little further on he noticed the place where the disaster must have taken place. He caught a glimpse of a blackened, burnt-out car, two dark SUV's and a huge truck with a kind of crane on it. He could distinguish two men, who seemed to be talking to each other.

Alarmed by their arrival, one of the two rushed towards them. He didn't get a chance to look more closely, because the doors were opened and under the continuous irregular flash of cameras and a cacophony of shouted questions, he and John got out of the limousine. Like snakes necks with strange, one-eyed heads, many arms were sticking out above the heads of the masses of spectators on the chance of filming them. Not that it would be of much use. As soon as they stood upright, he and John were surrounded by bodyguards. Their security guards made room for a moment to admit a man, after which they immediately closed the ranks again.

The newcomer, of not very conspicuous appearance, introduced himself as inspector Sytsema. The man was not fat, not thin, not long, not short. His sleek, salt- and pepper-colored hair was already beginning to give way and Dick estimated him somewhere in his mid thirties.

Like the inspector, he and John went under the barrier tape, which was held up by helpful policemen. They followed him to the wreckage. John, who had slowed down a bit, stood still and said, with his face white: "I'll leave it at that. I've seen enough already, I'll wait here for you." Dick understood. John, excellent at legal work, wasn't exactly used to this kind of practice. He left him under the guardianship of security and walked on with Sytsema. Now that he was close, he saw that Lémarc was right. In the Korean war he had all too often had to deal with these horrors. He knew that no one, not even Hakon and his driver, could have escaped

alive from this burnt-out carcass. Yet he wanted to take a closer look at the interior with his own eyes. In order not to have to smell the penetrating stench, he grabbed his handkerchief and held it in front of his mouth and nose as he walked to the passenger side. The fire must have been scorchingly hot. The charred remains did not even remotely resemble human ones. Only the contour of a human body indicated that a person had been sitting here.

He pulled his head back and walked to the driver's seat. With the handkerchief pressed firmly against his nose and mouth, he leaned forward to look through the window that had been knocked out, and accidentally hit his arm. The cloth shifted, so that the disgusting air immediately penetrated his nose.

To his surprise it was not the stench he expected. He smelled again and bent forward even more. The only thing he caught was the nasty smell of burned rubber and oil, mixed with all kinds of unpleasant, chemical smells. Everything but that characteristic, most charming smell of burnt human flesh, a smell that had been engraved in his memory since the Korean war.

At first he had no idea what this meant and walked to the back again. He stuck his head in for a second time and smelled ... nothing. There was no trace of the hated stench anywhere. There was no way that that smell could have disappeared so quickly. Pensively he let his eyes go around again and eventually could only draw one conclusion. In this car no people were burned ... and ... how could ... Then ... Hakon ... His heart missed a beat and a hot wave, which at the same time felt ice-cold, ran through him. For a moment his legs could barely bear him and he had to find support. He clasped the door so as not to fall. Suddenly he remembered something, and a little later he understood it too. Relief soon won over the initial anger and was immediately followed by admiration. He was very impressed that Hakon had managed to do this. He remembered Hakon's instructions word for word. He was expected to carry them out, no matter what. He now knew exactly what Hakon had meant.

< 04.16

The melodious sound of the pendulum sounded loud in the quiet library, where Lord MacMarkland had been daydreaming in his favorite leather armchair, which had been worn down by many years of use. It could only have been fifteen minutes at the most, but it seemed to him that he had been sitting here for hours since he left the tower room.

Once he had entered his library, he had walked straight on to the antique mahogany display case in which he kept his private collection of whiskies. He had taken out the most exquisite one. He had solemnly broken the seal, removed the cap and poured himself a large glass from the special bottle he had reserved for this glorious moment years ago. It was a unique specimen more than a hundred years old. This whisky was distilled on the day of his grandfather's birth and bottled on the day his father was born.

With a strong sense of connectedness he looked at their portraits, which were hanging on the wall opposite him. In the past, the MacMarklands had never let themselves get crushed,

and he had always remained strong himself too.

While he smelled the delicious fragrance that had been released, he thought back to Casanova, who had taken him away from his luxurious playboy life more than ten years ago. Under the direction of this monster, he had been kidnapped.

Casanova had humiliated him, tormented him and made him beg for mercy, bleeding and drooling.

It had been a gruesome experience that had given him a decade of unpleasant dreams. Still his cruel face, with those hard, terrifying eyes, appeared in his nightmares, from which he often woke up with his heart beating hard, and bathed in sweat.

“ He is dead,” he had heard himself say out loud. And then it had really gotten through to him. His tormentor no longer existed.

The group had discovered Casanova by chance and with the help of the great technical possibilities of this digital age, they had devised a plan to have him arrested. It was obvious that this criminal would never be

released and would never hurt anyone again. And now this monster, fortunately through no fault of their own, had been eliminated for good.

He had nodded at the portraits seriously, knowing that they would have been proud of him, and had taken the first sip. He had, with his eyes closed and his head slightly backwards, let the drink roll through his entire mouth before he had slowly swallowed it.

With his eyes still closed, he had been able to appreciate the mild, rich taste, which seemed to fit his mood perfectly. He was glad that he had decided to experience this ritual alone, because it had disturbed him worse than he had expected.

The realization that Casanova was dead and that he was relieved of the continuous fear for his loved ones, had seized him in such a way that he could hardly have stopped the tears of relief. The lump in his throat had been difficult for him to get rid of. Overpowered by emotions, he had taken a large sip and the memories had surfaced.

The kidnapping itself, his existence before and his life after it. If Casanova had not kidnapped him, he would never have met Hakon, then commissioner at Interpol, who had finally freed him from his predicament. During the operation, all but one of the members of the gang had been arrested and had been put behind bars for the rest of their lives.

The leader of the kidnapping, however, had escaped and had furiously sworn that he would take revenge. For the next ten years, the man had managed to miraculously stay out of the hands of the police. Although he himself had gotten his life back on track and had later even found the woman of his dreams, the death threat remained over him like a heavy blanket. After his release, Hakon continued to assist him in word and deed, and a close friendship had gradually developed. Hakon had a very specific view of life and had picked him up, patched him up and inspired him to such an extent that he had drastically changed his own, hitherto profligate, way of life.

Gradually Hakon's work, the tireless pursuit of people like Casanova, had become more and more interesting to him.

They had often discussed the situation in the world. The prevailing injustice, the growing crime, the increasing violence and many other themes. A regularly recurring topic was that people who fought these

abuses had to deal with tight budgets, bad material, corruption and opposing politicians. All this made an effective investigation method impossible.

In addition, the law had to be adhered to, giving the other party free rein. And when it came to the point where they had to go to court, the very best lawyers were hired with their illegally obtained money to frustrate the process as much as possible. Or even worse: witnesses were bribed, intimidated or molested. Not to mention the question of whether the judge involved was objective and honest. There was not even any hesitation in letting a troublesome investigating officer disappear without a trace, or if necessary, to execute him openly. They had also tried to eliminate Hakon a few times, but he nevertheless continued to do his work tirelessly. Not that Hakon was under any illusions. In a rare, gloomy mood, he had once said that if things were really taken seriously, he wouldn't make it either. Nobody was untouchable and, in the end, there was always someone who could find a breach in the defense.

As a result of this conversation he had decided to do something to help his savior. After a long period of reflection, he had suggested that the expertise and talents of people from both of their circles of friends should be combined in order to find all the possible tools to carry out the work more successfully. During the seven, no, eight years thereafter, he had expanded and intensified his business activities in order to finance the costs involved.

In addition, he had provided structure with regard to communication and logistics and as a matter of course he had become the central point within their group with regard to the provision of information.

A large part of his assets and annual profits were made available by him and he had not regretted it for a second. No, it was the best decision he had ever made.

Since he had a wife and two lovely children, he had used everything in his power to protect them, Hakon and all the members of GAIAS. Hakon, then still commissioner for Interpol, but now the UNBI chief of investigation, after months of thorough and patient investigation, had finally succeeded in uncovering a large part of the Spiderweb.

To everyone's surprise, Casanova had been sighted.

The hastily organized brainstorming session had led to the operation that had started this morning. The attack had been successful and everyone but a few people who had received the Latin code 'non quod videtur', i.e. 'nothing is what it seems', had been put off track.

After that, Casanova had fallen into a neat trap and was finally, unfortunately not as intended, rendered harmless.

But this wasn't over yet. At the moment, the next phase was being prepared, although it would still take hours before it would actively start.

The stakes were horribly high and the plan, which had been worked out to the letter, was not allowed to fail under any circumstances. Unforeseen events such as this morning would have disastrous consequences this time.

He did not have to worry so much, he told himself. The whole further operation could just as well go exactly as planned. In that case the spider in the middle would be exposed and arrested. The whole Spiderweb could then be rolled up and cease to exist.

The plan was bold, but ingenious and GAIAS had the most advanced means at its disposal. In addition, they had Marilyn, their highly gifted genius. The inventions of Norma Jeane Gifford, as her name officially reads, had given the close-knit group a big head start.

Deep in thought, while enjoying the powerful single malt whisky, his gaze glanced over the centuries-old paintings in their gilded frames, the shiny antique furniture and the rows of precious books, without actually noticing the tranquility and beauty that the whole emanated. Smiling, he remembered the moment he first saw Norma Jeane.

As one of Scotland's most coveted bachelors, he had fully enjoyed his life as a playboy and was immediately interested in the beautiful, blond young woman. After being introduced to each other, he had casually slipped his hand along her waist and hip, assuming she would be flattered. That turned out to be a huge mistake.

He still felt his toes, into which she had drilled her stiletto heel with a charming smile, but with flaming eyes. He had never before been rejected in such a painful way.

A friend at the time told him later that he had gotten off well. Although she looked like a tempting blonde, she was not such a sweetheart.

She had to be very intelligent and absolutely not available for the male population.

He thought that was, and still is, a huge loss for his gender. Years later he met her again, when she was accompanying Hakon to the party in honor of his liberation.

In the beginning they had treated each other fairly coolly, but later they got to know each other better and better. Because of their mutual interest they had grown ever closer together.

Now, after his wife, she was his dearest friend. Thanks to his wealth she was able to work unhindered and she had surprised him time and again with her talented inventions. But she, too, was just a human being, and it was not always possible to prevent damage occurring. This time there were injuries and even deaths. Material damage was not a problem, such damage could be compensated. The pain of wounds could be alleviated as much as possible. But death was final and could not be undone ...

The tinkling chimes of the clock had torn him loose from his muttering and he told himself not to be distracted in this way. The nine strokes ended with a light rattling, after which the regular ticking began again. The antique thing was about ten minutes behind, so in reality it was already ten past nine.

He looked at his glass, which to his regret was almost empty. The old drink had a strong alcohol content and with a small trick he would get the very most out of it. Carefully he added three drops of water to the rest, which brought out the maximum in taste and complexity. Slowly he slid the last bit into his throat and put the glass next to him. For a moment he remained seated, after which he jumped up energetically and, as if reborn, left the library light-footedly.

< 04.17

Lémarc was still looking at Jens when he was called. He looked aside and saw Dr. Swart, who put his head around the door of James'

treatment room. If he had some time, Mr. Taylor would like to see him. That was very convenient, he thought satisfied. Now he could immediately take care of everything one thing at a time, without needlessly having to wait for the doctor.

Swart greeted him with a cheerful greeting: "Good morning again, Mr. Tasker." "I suppose Mr. de Jong isn't conscious yet?" "No, unfortunately," he replied with a little sadness. "I would like to ask him a few questions, but I assume that I will have the opportunity to do so later."

Excitedly he walked to the bed from where James, sitting upright, washed clean and dressed in a hospital gown, looked expectantly at him. His legs were bandaged with a thin gauze and on his forehead there was a fine bump.

The gown covered the rest of his body, which was probably largely blue and colorful. It didn't seem to bother him. He was beaming with satisfaction. "Ha, James. You are still alive! How are you feeling? You look a lot better than when you were brought in here. Man, you scared us all to death." And that wasn't a lie. They thought he must have had a heart attack, which wouldn't have been so surprising after all the bad luck that had happened to him that morning. James smiled. "We went after the wrong man. I realized that the moment I saw the face of that patient being driven outside, while you and Holger were busy with your tea party. I wanted to grab him by the waist when Casanova grabbed me in my crotch with one of his coal shovels. Things there were already quite sensitive and I clocked out." James briefly shrugged his shoulders and pointed with his healthy hand at the bubble that could be seen between his legs under the shirt. "Ice. The business needs some cooling." He pointed at his bandaged hand. "And when I woke up, I got the best news of my life. Casanova was murdered with a stiletto, which stuck through his ear into his brain. Unfortunately it had to go right through my hand. Not very nice, but the doctor says it will heal well. I'll get a scar from it, but I don't mind at all. It will be a nice souvenir, that will always remind me of the day that the dirty killer died. I'm even less sorry than nothing that this son of a bitch is dead." He no longer laughed. A lot more seriously, he asked: "Hakon? Your turn, Tasker. Tell me."

Sadly, Lémarc told James the bad news and informed him about Jan de Jong and the two journalists, after which he briefly summarized that the knife thrower Stiletto, in turn, had been shot and killed by Holger, who was wounded but doing okay. “Beautiful. So nothing is lost,” James reacted belligerently. Ignoring his remark, Lémarc continued. “I’ve been in contact with Interpol and arranged with them that you, if you think you’re capable of doing so, will speak to the press.

Would you like that?

In any case, your name will appear in my report. Officially you arrested Casanova, just before he was killed by Stiletto. Something no one could foresee. Even Holger couldn’t prevent Casanova’s murder, even though he had had a tip that Stiletto was on his way.”

James nodded. “I’ll be able to do that. Under one condition.” “And that is?” “That my wife can get me a new suit with a matching pair of shoes in time. Can I borrow your mobile phone, Lémarc?”

Lémarc just prevented himself from laughing. Typical James.

Even if the world was about to perish, his appearance would be given the highest priority. “Of course, James. I’ll pick it up later.” He nodded to the doctor. “Will you come with me?”

< 04.18

Just as Ewin had done himself, Charles tried as hard as he could to maneuver himself from his belly to his side. While muttering quite a few curses, interspersed with sighing and moaning, he finally succeeded and they could see each other. In Charles’ eyes, Ewin’s own misunderstanding could be read.

“Shit, Ewin, we’re lying here like a bunch of roulades.” The sofa creaked as he moved again to find a slightly better position. “Ai, pff. Are you tied up so insanely as well? I can barely move my fingers. I think they’re starting to tingle.” “Yes, damn it. They’re even bleeding. This is not normal. I don’t know why. So far no one has informed me. Do you know what’s going on?” He looked at Charles expectantly, but the latter shook his head. “I have no idea what we’ve done to justify this. We’ve always

been on the public roads and I don't think we've done anything illegal. The only thing I can think of is that I parked the car at a slight angle, but that's not in proportion to how we were treated. Dogs are treated better, it's a God damn..."

The door opened and Ewin recognized the man who came in as Jens, Lémarc's assistant. The flash of hope was immediately extinguished again, when Jens, with a face full of anger, immediately asked them what they knew about the terrorist network and how they had gotten the information, which had enabled them to be at the Peace Palace and the Elisabeth Hospital so quickly.

Looking even more threatening, Jens brought his face right in front of his and continued: "Ewin, personally I think you've gone too far in your drive for firsts. Everything indicates that you were informed prematurely. And don't come up with that bullshit about source protection and other journalistic bullshit. I, Lémarc, everyone at UNBI and Interpol, have lost a friend and colleague in a terrible way.

We are 'pissed off' to the nth degree. So you understand that I'm not here to talk about the weather."

The plastic bag with their belongings, with which Jens had emphasized his words over and over again, came to a standstill. Jens continued, calmly but in an icy tone: "You have been arrested on suspicion of collaborating with terrorists and therefore fall under the new anti-terrorism legislation.

You may be aware that there isn't much we are not allowed to do to get the truth out of you. I will briefly inform you of the current state of affairs. Casanova, the assassin, has been murdered. We're not mourning about it, but this means that we're not in a position to get information out of that guy anymore. There was someone else present at the Peace Palace, but this person is not yet approachable. That brings us to you." Now very worried, Ewin saw in Jens' eyes a white hot anger shimmering behind his icy look. He knew that he and Charles had already been convicted. With the courage of desperation he tried not to show any sign of the panic that was spreading in him. Without making the slightest movement, he looked quietly at Jens, who again shook the plastic bag in front of him and, louder than ever, proclaimed: "While the emergency services still had to

arrive, you were already on the spot. No need to deny it, we can prove it. Ergo, you have to have been informed prematurely. I'll give you one chance to tell what you know. I will not elaborate on all the things that await you when we grill you under the cover of the anti-terrorism law. You will then end up in a process in which you will soon regret that you were born. Believe me, I have seen enough.

You can prevent that misery by giving me a clear and unambiguous answer to the next six W's.

Who gave you this information, what information was that, where did you meet the informant, when did you receive this information, what way did you receive this information and, last but not least, why didn't you inform the police?" Each 'W' was accompanied by a fierce movement of the bag, which repeatedly just barely missed his nose. Apparently the worst of Jens' anger was over. In an almost friendly tone he continued: "Give me answers that I can work with. Then we loosen the cuffs a bit and life will become a lot more pleasant again. So think carefully before you say anything." Ewin realized that he and Charles had really gotten into a lot of shit.

During his whole career he hadn't been in such an absurd situation, and this was happening in The Hague, for God's sake. Shit, shit, shit. He thought at top speed and desperately tried to find a way out.

He knew that if he just told the truth, which wasn't much, it wouldn't be enough to satisfy Jens by a long shot. Coughing up Barbara's two tips wouldn't help them at all and would only get Barbara into trouble. Wait a minute ... Barbara ... He had just called her when they were arrested. His smartphone was in the plastic bag that Jens had waved so demonstratively to reinforce his words. His ultra-new cell phone would now be in alarm mode. This was maybe, just maybe, a way out of this misery ...

"Well, is it going to happen?", shouted Jens, shaking his shoulder with fervor, causing the bands to cut even deeper into his flesh and make his wrists feel moist. "Ewin, tell me! My patience is running out. Now!"

In a loud and clear articulation, Ewin shouted: "We are in the boardroom of the Elisabeth Hospital. We have been arrested unnecessarily and we are being abused. Get a lawyer. Do something to get us out of here!"

Jens took a step back and looked at them coldly. "Oh, boys, you're going to be so sorry," he whispered, whereupon he turned around and briskly walked out. With an almost inaudible click he closed the door, leaving behind a threatening silence.

< 04.19

Together with the doctor, Lémarc walked to the next treatment room. "A real go-getter, that Mr. Taylor," said Dr. Swart. "Yes," he agreed, remembering his first encounter with James Taylor. Contrary to his expectations, a fine detective appeared to be hiding behind James' neatly starched and ironed appearance. "James is someone who doesn't give up easily," he continued. "It took him at least ten years to find Casanova." "Plus quite some physical discomfort, which he will feel for a week or two," added Swart.

One of Holger's colleagues opened the door and stepped aside to let them through. Lémarc walked in behind Swart and was pleased to see that his instructions had been properly followed. On two adjacent stretchers the bodies of Casanova and Stiletto lay neatly stretched out on their backs and near each of them there was a black body bag laid out.

Swart and he stood still. Silently they took a moment. Two murderers, thought Lémarc. As different as day and night. Casanova was big, coarse, strong, tried and tested, with the signs of a rough life spread all over his body.

Even though death had calmed his traits, his face had lost none of his cruelty. In spite of his closed eyes, it radiated pure hatred. Next to him, Stiletto seemed like an angel who had fallen asleep. Tenuous and handsome. All that was missing was the blush of a healthy young man. In the hard fluorescent light, the contrast could not be greater. It seemed like a stark scene in an alternative, modern performance of 'the Beauty and the Beast'.

Swart, who had been mumbling, made a cross and looked at him. "Shall we?" He nodded. "Let's start with Casanova." Swart gave him a pair of latex gloves and as he put them on, he walked to the head of the stretcher. From Casanova's pierced ear, a mixture of blood and

cerebrospinal fluid had dripped, which was already drying up under his head in a reddish-brown puddle with bits of grey-green. He had been there when the knife was removed.

After measuring it, it turned out to have protruded over four inches deep into the brain. The knife had been razor-sharp, just like the stilettos that had hit Holger. All three had been double-packed as a precaution, before they were put into the evidence bags. On each label he had written a warning in red, and he had wondered how you could hide three of those things under your clothes, for God's sake, without hurting yourself on all sides. The knife-throwing killer had already proven himself to be an artist, but he found the ability to handle such sharp tools safely to be an art in itself.

He began to search Casanova's clothes carefully, avoiding the gunk next to his neck. Opposite him, on the other side of the stretcher, Swart was already at the ready with evidence bags, a pen and labels. He examined everything carefully, but even after a second search he could not find anything.

He examined the stretcher on which Casanova was lying, but this also yielded nothing. It couldn't have been that the man hadn't brought anything with him, could it? According to Lam, he must have had a smartphone with him, with which he had filmed the attack on Hakon. After consultation with Swart, the treatment rooms and ambulances were thoroughly investigated and the staff interviewed. It soon became clear that Casanova had been admitted in the clothes he still wore today and that he had not carried a bag or anything like that with him.

Of course, Lémarc thought. Casanova had lost the smartphone or, more likely, dumped it. Pretty worthless.

Especially now that Casanova was dead, they could not afford to lose any piece of information. He impatiently picked up the department phone and called Lam.

Every possible route Casanova could have taken, from where he had filmed to the point where he had been picked up by the ambulance, had to be meticulously investigated. Lam promised to take care of it. He thanked him and hung up.

“Now, let’s move on,” he said to the doctor who, as before with Casanova’s body, was already standing by the stretcher on which Stiletto was lying. He carefully cut off the clothes and skillfully searched them. When the body was completely stripped, his loot consisted of thirteen knives in different sizes and an empty smartphone. “Gee ...”, said Swart “... the guy was a walking arsenal.” “A famous knife artist ...”, said Lémarc, “... who has worked in the circus for years and has committed at least two murders. He had been under the radar for some time and who knows how many people he killed during that time.” Swart looked down on the naked body with a sad face. “Such a shame. Such a fine-looking young man. Imagine it was your son.”

The doctor shook his hand and continued: “I have to go on, there is still work to be done. I’ll see you later, when Mr. Bersal is awake.” He left the treatment room and at the same time let in two undertakers. Lémarc watched as they slid the bodies into the body bags and closed them in a jiffy, emotionlessly and almost indifferently. Casanova and Stiletto had become unrecognizably transformed into no more than two black, bulky shapes, ready for transport to the forensic lab mortuary.

He signed the undertaker’s form ‘release of seized remains’ and headed to James to pick up his smartphone. He needed to call Dick.

< 04.20

An alert, old boss, that Holyester, Wycher thought to himself. He looked at the group that had swallowed up the secretary and was now on the way to the limousine nearby.

People made way, cameras were flashing and the constantly buzzing murmur in the background swelled and weakened, to become louder again and to weaken again. He closed his eyes and felt the summer heat. The occasional increasing noise was a bit like surf on the beach. When was the last time he had been there? He didn’t know.

Years ago. This summer it wouldn’t happen either. He couldn’t remember when he hadn’t been buried under his work. And now this came on top of it. All other things were, as usual, moved down the priority list. And this one, the murder of Hakon Eriksson, was pretty important. This case was

the biggest one he had ever been in charge of, and would get a lot of attention.

It was not without reason that the secretary of the UN had come to take a look in person. He had shown him the havoc and the man had, just like he had before him, looked around with eagle eyes and sniffed the wreck like a bloodhound. He had even stuck his head inside a few times. Yet it must have been too much for him. When the man had withdrawn his head, he had been very pale and he had to make an effort to stay upright. Quickly he had walked up to him, afraid that Holyester would faint, or worse.

Thank God that hadn't happened. Holyester had turned away his helping hand and he had assured him that everything was fine. Still, he had the strong impression that the old boss had seen something that had upset him, but whatever it might have been, Holyester hadn't said anything about it.

Holyester's chalk-white face indeed looked a lot healthier, and with great interest he had asked about the next procedures. He had told him that the burnt-out car would be packed and sealed and transported to the forensic laboratory, which was known to the police as 'The Barn'. First of all, DNA samples would be collected, which, as Mr. Tasker had promised, would be processed with priority. Together with any other material that might have been found, this would probably provide more clarity about the circumstances of the attack. Hopefully the investigation would provide enough evidence to identify the perpetrator(s).

With an approving nod, Holyester had told him that he had every confidence in this professional approach. After a polite thank you, in which he expressed his appreciation for the fact that he had been given the opportunity to inspect the wreck personally, the secretary had turned around and retreated. Oh well. Calmly he shrugged his shoulders. What was crooked and what it could be that Holyester might have noticed, would eventually come to his mind. It was on the tip of his tongue. Annoyed, he gave Klaas a signal. First they had to make sure that everything was securely packed, safe in The Barn. He didn't doubt that it would come to him later. That's how it usually went. When you were busy with other things,

that one fact that you couldn't think of, just popped up.

< 04.21

Despite the late hour - it was around half past three, Barbara saw - she had been able to read her way through the pile of information quite quickly. Although she hadn't discovered anything strange, the articles were interesting and it didn't take her long to come up with an attractive text for Hakon's homage.

Another ten minutes and then she would be ready, she estimated. Hopefully by that time, Mike would have found the information she had asked for and she would be able to get more information from Lémarc or his assistant. She wasn't a rookie and knew that when you formulated your questions cleverly, even if they weren't fully answered, you could find out quite a lot. She clicked on the next file. The newspaper article that appeared in front of her was from the time that Hakon worked at Interpol. At that time he was in charge of a spectacular case, which she remembered, now that she was reading it. It was about a kidnapped Scottish lord, who had been tracked down in time and had been rescued in the nick of time. She raised her eyebrows in wonder. That was quite a coincidence. That lord had the same surname as the company she had contacted recently because of Ewin's smartphone. She frowned.

It was remarkable that this name now suddenly appeared in connection with Hakon as well. She pulled up her notebook, made a note and penciled a double line under the name.

< 04.22

It wasn't often that he had the opportunity to lounge around, Wycher thought to himself. He had no choice but to wait until Klaas had sealed and hoisted up the pathetic remnants of the limousine, which had been blown to bits.

Except for the one guy, who supervised Klaas' work by order of Dr. Winter, the whole forensic team had disappeared and just now all AT3

men had raced away as if the devil was on their heels.

He stood relaxed with his back to Klaas' truck and saw that the majority of the audience was also losing interest. The queues were thinning considerably and the policemen had little business with it anymore. They strolled around, chatted a bit and walked on.

It wouldn't be long before most of them would be called back and a cleaning crew would arrive. Not only to clean up the burned spot that was caused by the explosion, but also to clean up all the mess the people had left behind. You would be amazed at how much rubbish a group of people was capable of producing in such a short period of time. Colorful wraps from candy, polystyrene foam boxes, plastic bags, paper napkins and whatnot. Between the bars of one of the fences someone had even clamped a toilet roll. The long, unwound strip occasionally moved languidly on the weak wind, like the arm of an exhausted, breath-hungry palooka. Or perhaps, half dead from hunger, to get hold of the nearby half-bag of fries with a blob of mayonnaise. His attempt to remember that one obvious thing had to look just like that in his head, he thought, amused. He imagined a clod of grey cells that stretched and stretched and desperately reached for the one fact that was annoyingly close, but just out of reach.

To his regret he had to leave the roll to itself.

His walkie-talkie started crackling and killed all daydreaming. He called in and listened to the new instructions, looking at Klaas, who skillfully wrapped the special foil around the wreckage. The forensic staff member who was standing a little further down the road, had little more to do after he had given Klaas a hand with the heavy roll. The man looked sour and was visibly bored.

Wycher hung the walkie-talkie back and let his body lean comfortably against the truck again.

Klaas, who had been squatting, got up puffing. "Alright, that's it. The last piece of foil is in place." He addressed the lab technician and continued: "As far as I'm concerned, you can go back to your boss, kid. Tell her that I'm going to lift the package and that it's coming." He put up a handkerchief and unfolded it.

As he wiped the sweat off his forehead, he walked to his truck. “Well, Sytsema, everything is packed. I’ll hoist it up and then we can go.” He pulled a bunch of keys out of his pocket and a little later the truck started to growl. Klaas jumped out of the cab again, walked back and pulled a control panel out of the holder. While he was busy with the operation and the hoist was moving in a squeaky and creaky manner, the lab technician had already gone away. Now that Klaas was busy with all the buttons and levers, the wreckage came up with loud, protesting, metallic groans. Slowly but surely Klaas maneuvered it to the truck.

The giant package, wrapped in foil, swung back and forth for a while, but finally hung still, after which it was neatly put on the bed of the truck by Klaas. He secured both the hoist and the cargo and walked around the whole truck again, carefully checking everything. Satisfied with the result, he said: “Well, inspector. Everything is tightly packed. We can go to The Barn.” He pointed to the cab. “Let’s go satisfy Her Majesty the Frozen She-Wolf, before she freezes to her own ass.” He chuckled broadly. Involuntarily laughing, Wycher raised his hand. “Sorry, Klaas. We can’t leave yet. We have to wait for AT3, who will come here with a bunch of suspects.” “Well, that’s nice,” replied Klaas. He pulled a messy packet of tobacco out of his back pocket and started to roll a cigarette. “I don’t care, you know. As long as I get paid for each hour.” Yeah, Wycher thought. It seemed that they had arrested a few people who were involved in this attack and although he was the responsible manager, the whole thing was officially under UNBI authority.

Tasker had ordered that the detainees and their confiscated belongings be transferred to him here, after which everything could be transported to the UNBI building, the forensic lab next to it and The Barn, under the supervision of AT3. “I think your bill will not be too high,” he said to Klaas, who leaned next to him against the truck and puffed some clouds of smoke into the air. “I think they’re coming.”

In the distance he saw an SUV with flashing light and siren approaching at high speed. Before they could break the tape again, he sprinted their way and welcomed them. Even before the enormous vehicle had completely stopped, with its tires smoking, Piet jumped out, closely followed by a man in civilian clothes.

He assumed that this was Tasker's assistant, who had to do the transfer. It turned out that he was right. The man shook his hand, showed him his ID card for a moment and introduced himself. "You can call me Jens. No one ever calls me by my last name. Okay?" Without waiting for his reaction, he continued: "Come on. The detainees are in the back." While he listened with half an ear to Piet's talk about the chaos at the Elisabeth Hospital, he let himself be taken to the back of the SUV. Between a bunch of sturdy AT'ers there were two men, who looked up at him with a pleading expression. They both wore jackets in a horrible green color, on which the logo of their employer was printed in deep black. On the face of the bigger one there were a few abrasions and traces of a recently contracted nosebleed. Wycher knew types like these. Such figures tried to overcome their fear and despair with anger. The man was not the first, and probably not the last suspect to look at him in this way. Although they were pitiful, he had little sympathy for them.

He only found it sad that people could sink so low.

"This is all the confiscated stuff," said Jens. He held up three plastic evidence bags. "Each bag is marked with the name of the owner, plus the place, date and time of the seizure." Jens handed them over to him and stated: "The two big ones are from the journalist and his cameraman. The third, the small one, contains the stuff of a former Interpol inspector who was present at the attack. What he has to do with it, we don't know yet. He has had a heart attack and is in the ED. Unfortunately, he's still unconscious, but it looks like he'll be recovering at any moment." "Ah, hence the hurry. Since I have to go to The Barn anyway, I can deliver everything directly to the lab." Jens nodded. "I don't have to explain to you that we're all eager for information. Lémarc wants to have all the information from the tablet pc, camera and smartphones down to the last bit as quickly as possible, but stresses that the DNA research has the highest priority. Stick at it and as soon as you know something, call him and he will come to you. Okay?" Wycher barely had the opportunity to answer, for Jens immediately continued his monologue. "AT3 will ride in front of you and will thus clear the way for you. You take the turn to The Barn and I arrange for those journalists to be booked in with us. Okay?" Without waiting for an answer, he grabbed his cell phone from his inside pocket and walked away from him, calling.

Piet looked at him grinning. "Quick guy, huh? Immediately taking care of things and arranging them without any nagging. I like that, I must say." Wycher muttered something unintelligible and pointed to Charles. "What happened to him?" "Oh, that one," answered Piet carelessly. "Resistance at the arrest and the transport. Corrective taps were necessary, otherwise he wouldn't get in the car." "Beware of these kinds of people. From now on try to keep them as whole as possible. You never know with these press folks. For all you know, they might just have a hidden camera in their clothes and before you know it you are being charged over God knows what," he warned him.

Piet's cheerful face fell for a moment before he gave a thoughtful answer. "No, that is impossible. They were searched by AT1 and they really know what they are doing. Besides, I've heard what they're up to with these guys. They won't make a report for quite some time." Wycher shrugged his shoulders. "Well, know for yourself. Your responsibility." Apparently, Piet had no experience with the media yet. You'd better keep them on friendly terms. "Ah, they're fine," said Piet carefree. "As soon as we have delivered them to the UNBI building, I am rid of them and we go straight on to the Elisabeth Hospital." He looked cheerful again. "Man, it's a mess there!"

Wycher walked to the truck. Those AT'ers weren't quite normal anyway. Piet seemed to regard everything as a big action game. Screwball.

He climbed into the cab, sat down and put the plastic evidence bags on his lap. As soon as the door closed, he was in an oasis of peace. In the background he heard a famous Dutch singer singing a love song. Klaas switched gear, hit the throttle and said: "Nine thirty-five. It's a quarter of an hour's drive." He looked satisfied. "We will be at The Barn well before ten o'clock."

< 04.23

Barbara only had to read two articles when she was disturbed by Russ, who was asking for her attention in an agitated way. She looked up at him questioningly. Russ explained at a fast pace that a voice had suddenly came out of Ewin's smartphone.

In between all the crackles and rustling, he and Hans had managed to understand a few things.

“It seems that Ewin and Charles are in even worse trouble than we thought.

Apparently, there is evidence that they are involved in these attacks and they have been arrested on suspicion of collaborating with terrorists. Ewin must have seen his smartphone in the vicinity and known about the alarm function, because he screamed very loudly and clearly for help.” The disbelief could be read in his eyes, while he added indignantly: “They are being tortured!” He took a noisy breath and continued: “The chief is constantly on the phone, so I will go to him to inform him. Hans will continue to follow and listen to Ewin’s smartphone. He has already asked Red/Tec to optimize the sound as soon as possible, so that we will soon know more about what has been said.”

Barbara indicated that she had heard him. “What are you still standing here for? Go.”

This could not be true, she thought. Ewin and Charles involved in terrorism? With Casanova? And there was proof of that? No. No way. Someone must have made a mistake, or maybe Russ and Hans misunderstood. After all, Russ himself had said that the signal had been jammed. Although she wanted to listen to the sound file right away, she had to be sensible and wait for the clean version. She didn’t have time for it right now anyway. After all, she could only do one thing at a time.

Moreover, she had plenty of competent colleagues who would do anything to get Ewin and Charles out of trouble.

Let’s see, where was she again?

“Whaa!” She had been so absorbed in her thoughts that she hadn’t noticed that Mike was there again. She freaked out when he tapped her on the shoulder. “Sorry. Didn’t want to scare you. I looked at the images of the attack for you and worked out a short report of what I noticed.” He handed her a few enlarged photos and a multi-page report. “As far as Tasker and Jens’ mobile numbers are concerned, I haven’t been successful. The arrest of Ewin LeFours and his cameraman has ensured that all contacts keep their distance. I still have a few possibilities, but don’t really expect anything to come of them. I’m really sorry I can’t help

you, Barbara. I did what I could. As soon as I have something for you, I'll come forward." She thanked him very much and put the documents in a neat pile on her desk. Although she couldn't wait to examine them, she first read the last two articles in her mailbox and finished Hakon's homage.

Without pausing, she then grabbed the documents and eagerly began with the report.

Her eyes glided quickly over the part that described the car and she read that the license plate had indeed been UN 67, both at the front and at the back. The number plates were not incorrect. It was indeed a different car.

She took her notebook, turned over the top sheets until she had a clean one and noted: 'Was this limousine as armored as the usual one?' Then she read the next section, which contained the information about the occupants, with great concentration.

The driver had been an Asian man, who had only been told half an hour in advance who to transport and where to.

How awful, she thought, when she read that he had only been on duty for ten days. She hurriedly pulled a handkerchief out of her drawer.

Once again emotion struck and tears threatened to appear. She blinked her eyes vehemently as she read on.

The passenger was a blond man with dark brown eyes, dressed in a blue blazer, light blue shirt and dark blue tie. This was Hakon Torstein Eriksson, forty years old. Copies of all the pieces concerned were included in appendix A. Ho. Stop. What did it say? She read it again and took the enlarged picture. She looked at the man sitting in the back of the car with a folded newspaper in front of him. He seemed to look straight at her through the side window.

Staring at her friend, she suddenly realized what was wrong, hit her desk with her flat hand and shouted: "Mike!" Mike, who was engrossed in his work near his desk, quickly turned around and asked: "What? What's the matter?"

A little calmer, but with hopefully glittering eyes, she said: "You write that Hakon's eyes are dark brown." "So what? Isn't that right? Look at the picture," Mike defended himself.

With a cry of joy she jumped at him, gave him a kiss and shook him up and down like a little boy. She shouted: "I knew it! I knew something was screwy and now I know!" Mike stared at her incomprehensibly, astonished.

< 04.24

While behind him the remains of the two criminals were driven away, Lémarc walked back to James, who was still on the phone. By the sound of it, he was instructing his wife about the color combination of the clothes she had to bring.

All well and good, but he needed his cell phone and gestured James to hurry up.

He sat down on the chair next to the bed, grabbed his notebook and wrote down the subjects he had to pass on to Dick. He turned the sheet over. While next to him James was talking about a tie and shoes, he started to write down a number of point-by-point questions, because a number of things were still completely unclear to him. Like:

- Who had approved the deployment of EUAT92 under the direction of Holger? Not the emergency call center or crisis management, because Johan Lam also had not known about this.
- How could it have happened that Casanova and Jan de Jong had been able to enter the secured area unhindered?
- Who was the woman who had kicked Stiletto's ass?

Holger's shot had been a masterpiece, but the redhead shouldn't be underestimated either. Too bad he hadn't seen her face. Even more unfortunate that she was picked up in no more than a millisecond. He had seen the driver's back for only a few seconds and they had driven away so fast that he hadn't been able to read the license plate. But there was still a glimmer of light.

The woman was clearly well trained in one or more martial arts and had remarkably long, red hair.

It could never be difficult to track her down and he expected her to be picked up today.

- And then there were those two from INN. Coincidence?

As soon as he had spoken to Dick, and if Jan de Jong had still not recovered, he should go to the forensic lab and see how far along they were. That way he could discuss a few things with Sytsema right away. If the lab couldn't provide any answers yet, he would go to the UNBI building to personally interrogate the two journalists.

The information they would cough up, plus everything they would find out later today from Jan de Jong and that redhead, would definitely do the trick. The forensic investigation would take time, but they too would find traces.

All in all, there would be enough clues to find the culprits. He was absolutely convinced of that.

In the meantime, James was done calling and he handed him his smartphone. "Everything arranged according to your wishes, James?" James nodded and pointed to the notebook.

"Can I get a couple of sheets? And your pen? While I'm waiting for my wife, I can prepare my chat." Lémarc tore a few pages out of his book and gave them to his colleague, together with his pen. "What more does the gentleman want? Tickets for the opera? Five-star dinner, perhaps?"

He had intended it to be funny, but James suddenly looked earnest. "Man, as soon as I can just move a bit again, I will arrange that for you. I, uh, want to thank you for..." Lémarc interrupted him. "Now I'm sure you've taken a good hit. If it still works up there, you'd better start thinking about your text. Can I get on with my work now? You fool."

He looked away from James and opened the address book on his smartphone.

He tapped on Dick's picture, and a little later the famous voice said: "Lémarc. I'm so glad you finally called."

Somewhat embarrassed, she let go of Mike, who fell back on to his chair in bewilderment. Russ, who came hurrying from the kitchenette, asked worriedly: "What's wrong, Barb?" And again he looked at her with that look, which woke up all the butterflies in her belly at once. She looked away from him and suddenly she noticed the unusual silence. Everyone had turned to her and they were all looking at her with a wait-and-see attitude.

She banished all the fluttering insects and took the floor provocatively.

"I always had the feeling that something was wrong. About the attack on Hakon, I mean." She pointed to Mike's report and burst out: "And now I know for sure! The color of the eyes is different. It couldn't have been Hakon Eriksson who was in the limousine!"

For a moment all remained silent, then a barrage of questions were fired at her. Their chief, drawn to the commotion, gestured for silence and asked: "Is that all? The color of his eyes? Don't tell me..." "Wait," she interrupted him, "There's more. Because of the unusual license plate, I went on looking and with your help ...", she nodded thankfully to her colleagues, "... I have discovered much more. The eyes in the picture are brown, while I know that Hakon has blue eyes. On top of that, the clothes don't match either. What the man is wearing resembles the modest outfit of a bank director, while Hakon is always strikingly dressed, with at least a colorful necktie."

"Sorry, girl. I do understand that you can't believe you've lost one of your best friends, but this doesn't prove anything," her boss reacted compassionately.

"He was the chief investigator on a very important case, so he decided to dress a little more seriously. I can understand."

Hiding her frustration and determined to convince him, she quickly said: "Just listen and let me finish. Less than an hour ago I received a text message. It was only one line and was in Latin. Translated, it means: 'Nothing is what it seems.' I always get tips from this source, which so far have proven to be 100% reliable, and it reminded me of the last time I spoke to Hakon. When we said goodbye, he said that 'everything we experience is not always what we see'. At the time I thought of it as some kind of good advice, but now I think differently about it. It fits in perfectly

with that Latin proverb and that can't be a coincidence." In order not to give anyone the opportunity to interrupt her, she continued in one breath.

"On his right hand he has a strange kind of scar and there is no sign of it in the picture. Here, take a look." She gave her boss the enlarged picture, in which the hand holding a newspaper was clearly visible. "See? Just smooth and totally undamaged. Nothing that resembles a scar at all." Her boss looked again silently at the picture and hesitated. From experience she knew that he only needed one push now. "All in all, it indeed seems a bit strange, but...", he started. "Indeed," she confirmed, and immediately rattled after it: "And when I get the time for it, I'm sure I'll discover a lot more. Imagine if I could prove that something else is going on. Maybe at the same time I'll discover something that can help Ewin and Charles, or something that will absolve them outright. That would be a great scoop!"

She had her permission. The last two arguments were decisive. Possibly new facts that the lawyers could use for their colleagues in The Hague, which in itself would have a positive effect on the costs, and at the same time a potentially sensational news item, which was important for the viewing figures.

She could almost hear him think it, she thought, grinning internally. With a nod he gave her back the picture and said: "Okay, dig on for now." With huge strides he left the department. "Folks, the party is over. Let's go, let's go. Let's get to work!"

< 04.26

The drive back to the Peace Palace had been torturously slow, Dick thought. The distance was at most a few hundred yards, but he felt like they had been driving for hours. After he, again completely enclosed by a hedge of bodyguards, had been returned and had taken his place in the back of the limousine next to John, the door had clicked shut, after which all the sound was shut out. It was not until halfway through the slow return journey that John had spoken. He had looked at him carefully and had said in a gentle tone that he couldn't imagine what it must have been like to see the charred body of his protégé. It had been a difficult moment. He wasn't allowed to inform John about his findings yet, but he

didn't want to lie to him outright. With a short nod he had indicated that he had heard him, and then silently stared outside.

After what had seemed like an eternity to him, they had arrived at the Peace Palace and returned to John's office. John had told him to sit down while he was getting something they both needed.

He had returned with a bottle and two glasses, which he poured full to the brim. He pointed to them and said: "I rarely use them, but now it's necessary. Drink." Carefully he grabbed the full glass and, like John, emptied it at once. It didn't taste bad at all. The drink burned its way down and heated his entire diaphragm. With a deep sigh he relaxed. "Not bad, huh?", John asked.

"This is one of the better heart restoratives I've found here." He held up the rectangular bottle for a moment. Dick read: 'Kettle 1,' and filled both glasses again. As he turned the cap back on the bottle, he said with satisfaction: "Alright, this must be enough." He returned the bottle and picked up the phone. "I'll have part two of the medicine brought to you right away. Fresh coffee, that is." While John was ordering, Dick's own smartphone was ringing. Quickly he answered. "Lémarc. I'm so glad you finally called." Listening to Lémarc, who had a lot to say, he walked, almost relaxed, to the other side of the room, as far away from John as possible.

With his back to him, he informed Lémarc that the smell of burnt human flesh had been missing. Lémarc was one of the few people he could trust.

He agreed with Hakon that Lémarc was 100% loyal to UNBI. He could tell by Lémarc's breathing that he was surprised, but he agreed with him that they should not immediately draw conclusions from this. It was best to wait for the results of the forensic investigation. After that they could determine the direction of their investigation.

After they had agreed that Lémarc would call him again anyway for the press conference scheduled for 12.00 hours, they ended the conversation. Behind him he had heard someone bring in a tray and while he was walking back he saw that John was busy pouring. "A cup of coffee, Dick. Then it's time for your chat with the staff."

John was right, he thought gloomily. At ten o'clock he would address the staff and officially inform them that Hakon and his driver had died, although he knew this was not the truth. He hated lying and the by the way excellent coffee, brought little comfort.

< 04.27

"That was quite a conversation," said James. He looked aside curiously. "Who were you talking to?" Lémarc rubbed his warm, sticky ear and answered distractedly: "Dick Holyester. He and John Bingham went to Carnegie Square, where the attack on Hakon took place."

James' face became gloomy. "Oh, right. That mustn't have been easy, I guess. But if I've understood correctly, you're not entirely without clues, are you? And did I understand correctly that people from the press were arrested? Risky, though. I'd be a little careful if I were you. If you're wrong, you'll have quite something to explain." "Mmm, mmm", Lémarc murmured.

He only half listened, because he had his thoughts on what Dick had just told him in confidence. Suppose Dick was right, that no people had been in the limousine. Then the attack had to be a diversionary tactic. Yet Hakon was missing. The only logical thing he could think of, was that Hakon would have been... "Hey, Lémarc," interrupted James, while he snapped his fingers loudly. "Are you listening? What are you staring at? Did you come up with an idea to squeeze out those journalists? Tell me about it. How are you going to deal with them?" "Uh, yes, something like that."

He turned his gaze to James and continued: "Although Casanova is no longer among the living, we're not completely empty-handed. We currently have at least four people we can interrogate and..." "Four?", James interrupted him. "Three, you mean." "No, James. Four. Two journalists from INN, that ex-police man De Jong, and then there's that combative redheaded lady who's currently being frantically searched for. Surely she will be arrested sooner or later." "Beautiful! Plenty of work. I'd better make sure to get back on my feet quickly. You and I both know that without me you won't get much done, mm?"

Visibly enjoying the fact that he had the last word, James let himself fall backwards into the cushions. As the smile on James' battered face widened, the door opened and Lémarc's favorite nurse entered.

"Well, gentlemen ..." Grietje was carrying a tray with a plate of sandwiches and two steaming soup bowls. The smell suddenly made Lémarc realize that he was hungry. Grietje put down the tray and looked at them both severely.

"There you go. This is offered to you by the hospital, to prevent further accidents. It also prevents other problems, such as acid regurgitation and ulcers."

She placed a bowl for each of them and continued: "I have to see to it that you take the medication on Dr. Swart's insistent orders. Go for it." She didn't have to say that to Lémarc twice.

He took a sandwich and decided to give himself 15 minutes to enjoy this pleasant surprise.

< 04.28

Not at all dissatisfied with herself, Barbara went back to her workplace, turned her chair and crashed onto it. Again she wondered why Hakon had not been transported in his usual car. Why another limousine? She made to grab her notepad, but missed it and it fell to the ground. Sighing, she bent down and picked it up. Flipping the front sheets, she came across her previous note. Oh yes, she would check that too. It would probably be just a coincidence, but she wanted to make sure that there was no connection between Lord MacMarkland and the company Markland, which had provided her and some colleagues with new smartphones.

She wrote her new questions underneath and pensively bit her pen. What if she was right and Hakon hadn't been in the car at all? Who else could it have been?

Was there some kind of important person missing at the moment? An important person who happened to be very similar to Hakon? There could be a simple explanation for the use of another limousine, and the

color of the eyes could easily be changed with the help of lenses, but a scar? A normally striking scar? And even then, suppose you could hide something like that, why on earth would Hakon have done that? No, she couldn't think of any reason. So it was not unthinkable that the passenger with the newspaper hadn't been Hakon ...

Jeez. The questions spun through her head and she started thinking in circles. She had to stretch her legs for a while and was also in the mood for some coffee.

She put down her pen resolutely and walked to Russ and Hans. "I'm about to get some coffee. Do you want some, too?"

With two bottles of water and a cup of coffee she walked back to the boys. She put the drinks down in front of them and asked: "How are Ewin and Charles? Discovered something new?"

Russ shook his head. "We have seen some blurry images. We think it's a dark SUV, don't we, Hans?" Hans nodded. "Yes, Ewin and Charles were pushed in pretty hard. We've heard Charles protesting and he's been hit a few times." Russ looked at her grimly and continued: "They are on their way to the UNBI building. Unfortunately, the bag with their belongings has been given to someone from the police in The Hague, some guy called Sytsema, who is on his way to the forensic lab with it. We will keep an eye on Ewin's smartphone. Maybe we'll catch something interesting."

Hans nodded in agreement and said: "Unfortunately we can't follow our colleagues. We know where they are being taken, but we can only guess what will happen to them. Hopefully, the lawyers will be able to invalidate the evidence in time and they won't have to endure too much." "I guess that sound file isn't ready yet, either, is it? It would be nice if we could get some more information out of it." Russ shook his head, swallowed his water and said: "When the time comes, you'll be the first to hear it." She avoided his gaze, thanked him and taking her coffee with her, walked back to her desk, where Mike was waiting for her.,

He got up from her chair and gave her a picture and a sketch with all kinds of lines. "Barbara, I looked at the images again and I noticed that initially the motor escort was filmed from around the houses. When Hakon came into the picture, it was filmed from the other side, from the park.

I called in the technicians and they concluded that Hakon's picture was made by another camera. It's a three-second piece and it's been edited into the main shot." He remained silent for a moment and she looked at him questioningly. "And?" "So there were two people who were filming at the same time. While the images were sent to the internet, the relevant part was cut out and inserted between the main shot.

The quality of the three-second clip is different and the angle of the camera is of course different. The guys from the technical department have carefully figured it out. They are very jealous, because they say that the method used is unknown and they don't understand how it could be put in between so quickly. The times have been reviewed and all in all it must have happened within a few seconds. Unbelievable. They are very curious about how it was done." Barbara, who wasn't very technically skilled, nevertheless understood very well what he meant. Another mystery that had to be investigated. Her list of questions to which she had to find an answer was not getting any shorter.

She took her notebook and put the two sheets of paper between them. She turned her eyes to Mike. "By the way, I have another request. Would you like to do something for me?"

"Yes, tell me." "Can you check for me if there is a connection between Lord MacMarkland, the communication company Markland and Hakon?" Mike raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"How so? What are you thinking about?" "I don't know. Nothing concrete yet. It's more like a feeling I have. During my internship, one of my mentors said that if you get stuck in an investigation, it's best to start again at the source. If you still can't do it, then look further in the vicinity of your source and simply browse through all the related information.

So that's why. I came across the name and I'm curious."

Mike smiled. "You? Curious? Who would have thought ..." He grabbed a yellow post-it and noted her question. "I'll see what I can find out. You'll hear." He whistled falsely between his teeth as he walked away.

She was glad Mike wanted to help out. That saved her a lot of time. She took out her notebook and looked for all the documents. As she thought about where to start, she heard her yellow cell phone ringing. It sounded

shrill and the ringing sounded totally unknown to her. Frowning, she picked up the device.

It was a text message from her anonymous informant.

With her fingers suddenly shaking nervously she opened it and read in amazement that she had to call the 'international number' mentioned below at 'exactly 04.30 hrs'.

FACTS!

< 05.01

Crisis manager Johan Lam was staring outside grumpily with yet another mug of coffee in his hand. The aroma tickled his nose and outside a bird was singing joyfully.

It seemed like a beautiful day, but that wasn't exactly the case. Not by a long shot, damn it. From the moment that Hakon Eriksson was murdered, which should have been impossible, it had gone downhill. They had hardly had time to react adequately, when hell broke loose in the Elisabeth Hospital. He hadn't even known about that mission. Goddamn fucking hacker ...

But apart from that, EUAT92 had made a mess of a simple arrest, something that was routine for them, resulting in a lot of damage and two deaths. How could Holger Bersal have blundered so terribly? The man was known to be highly capable and to have a perfect record. And that was not all. The arrest of those two INN people had also not gone as it should.

In his annoyance and frustration, he gritted his teeth so hard that it hurt. That prick of a Schenk, with his retarded behavior, had already been shown on the morning news at nine o'clock. And not in a positive sense. The whole drama, from the arrest to the destruction of those people's cameras, had been widely broadcast, resulting in him and his people being called all the time.

Every news agency had bombarded them with questions. Everyone - colleagues, press and politicians - wanted to know 'what the hell was going on'. If you could see through all the chaos, it was actually quite simple, he thought. Eriksson had been murdered, two criminals were dead and two suspects, coincidentally members of the press, had been arrested, so that the police could start their investigation.

Grindingly, he wondered how on earth it was possible that such highly trained professionals had fucked it up so badly. Just like the so-called technicians from his IT department. Because of the fumbling of these bastards, a hacker had managed to penetrate their system and sprinkle around orders here and there ... in his name.

It might look as if this guy didn't mean any harm - he had to admit that he couldn't have done better himself - but it could just as well be a psychopath, playing a game and turning against them later on.

Where were those IT guys? It was already ten o'clock in the fucking morning and he was becoming more and more worried by the minute.

< 05.02

Dr. Winter's eager welcome at the arrival in 'The Barn' was unfortunately not meant for him and Klaas, but for the wreckage. Flanked by one of her assistants, she quickly walked towards them. Even in the mercilessly harsh light of the fluorescent tubes she looked terribly attractive, Wycher thought. Even before she stood still, she immediately started spreading instructions in her characteristic way. Wycher was told that he was allowed to be there, as long as he didn't make himself heard and didn't disturb her at all. Klaas was ordered to put the wreck on the garage bridge as soon as possible. After all, she didn't have all day.

He could see by Klaas' tightly pressed lips that the man struggled to be the wisest. After a short nod, he made his way to his truck and in no time at all satisfied Dr. Winters wish, after which he left his truck with a wide open door, its diesel engine idling.

Klaas strolled towards him and said loudly: " Well, Syts, I have to go. Hoist job on the ring." With a straight face he nodded in the direction of Dr. Winter and continued in a muted tone: "Good luck with Mrs. Icicle, dude. I don't envy you." Klaas gave him an encouraging poke and raised his hand in farewell, while he walked back to his truck.

< 05.03

Lémarc was about to attack his soup when he heard James sputtering: "Fff ... ff... f... Hot. Sh ... Hot! That soup is boiling hot, man. I think I have blisters on my tongue." Demonstratively James stuck out his tongue. Lémarc looked at James seriously for a moment before he said: "You look terrible, boy. The way you look now, I mean. Not your tongue. If

there are blisters on it, it's because you talk too much rubbish, but ... thanks for the warning. I'll give Lam a call."

He immediately grabbed his cell phone, chose Johan's number and miraculously got him on the line almost immediately, so James didn't get a chance to react and for once didn't have the last word. Johan sounded pretty frustrated, when he told him that they had to deal with computer problems and intrusive media. Casanova's smartphone had not yet been found either. He could only have walked one route and those few hundred yards had been meticulously examined.

He was sorry, but at the moment he couldn't give Lémarc any significant news. However, the search was continuing until they found the thing. Johan assumed that they had to be able to find it somewhere. Casanova hadn't brought it with him, so he must have thrown it away. As soon as he had any news, he would come forward. He quietly put his cell phone away. He hoped that Johan's people would have a result soon. To find Hakon's kidnapper(s), he could use all the information that could be found.

While on the phone, he had been constantly stirring his soup. His stomach was empty and after carefully tasting it, he eagerly attacked. In no time he had emptied the bowl. Chewing on the last sandwich, he silently thanked Swart, for the food worked wonders. Although it had apparently taken James' last strength - since he was laying there asleep - he himself felt revitalized.

Silently he stood up, left the room on the tips of his toes and closed the door carefully. Now he first had to visit Holger and tell him that Hakon's limousine had been blown up. Not exactly an easy job, especially now that he had heard from Holyester that the stench of burned flesh had been missing.

With his head completely focused on the upcoming conversation, he almost ran into Commissioner Schenk, who was on his way to the exit with huge strides. He apologized and after shaking hands briefly, the man told him in a hurry that everything in the hospital was under control. There was no evidence that other terrorists were involved, apart from the two dead ones and that couple of INN's. The preliminary investigation showed that all the damage, direct and indirect, was the result of the joint

operation of Interpol and EUAT92. The commissioner gave him another weak, sweaty handshake. "I have to go. I am needed there because of the arrest of those INN guys. The press is giving us a hard time."

He snorted with contempt. "Nowadays you have to treat criminals with all due respect. Unbelievable, isn't it?" Well, Lémarc thought. That's what you could expect.

You always had to be careful when dealing with the press, especially when you were detaining its members. The commissioner, the same office clerk who had run off so quickly at the hospital hall earlier, probably said something wrong or whatever.

He was confident that Johan would be able to cope with such an incident.

< 05.04

Still grumpy and increasingly anxious, Johan was staring at the sunny day outside, when behind him the door opened and his assistant came in with a new pile of papers. "Boss, it looks like we're going to catch the hacker soon. All IT manpower is on standby. As soon as we get another breach of our protocol, we will grab him. At the last assignment we were only a hair's breadth away from tracing him. The next one will be a hit." More irritated than he intended, Johan asked: "What kind of assignment?" "An order to Holger." His assistant flipped through the documents, found the message and gave it to him.

With his lips pressed tightly together, Johan read: 'Form a new team of available EUAT92-members and then, until further notice, act as bodyguard of Lémarc Tasker. Stay with him at all times.' The authorization code below it was his. There it was again. He had already thought of arranging a bodyguard for Eriksson's sidekick himself, but because of all the hustle and bustle the note was still on his desk.

Damn, damn, damn ... Who the hell could this be? It had to be someone from his own ranks, there was no other option. And even though he hadn't immediately thought of the wounded Holger, he couldn't think of anyone more competent. Even with a useless arm, the man was a formidable opponent. He returned the document to his assistant and said,

resignedly: “Mmm, leave that order intact. After all, Holger and his team are already in the Elisabeth anyway. Lémarc is also there. I have just been in contact with him.” He looked at his assistant and asked: “What about the search, by the way? Still haven’t found anything?” “No, no result yet. Tracker dogs have now been arranged, which are currently sniffing around the entire route.” His assistant looked at him with conviction. “It’s only a matter of time before they find Casanova’s smartphone.” Christ, it was all a waste of time.

Still no meaningful results and he couldn’t fucking answer anyone. Not even Lémarc, who had sounded resigned and absent. He sat at his desk and picked up the new stack of lists.

“Well, speed things up and DO SOMETHING ABOUT THAT HACKER,” he barked at his assistant. “Top priority!” As his assistant rushed out the door, he sighed and started to browse through the first list. He had no choice but to wait for his department and the white coats at The Barn to come up with results. It could be a long day, he thought, gloomy, not knowing that he hit the nail on the head.

< 05.05

After he had finally been able to celebrate the release of his torment in the library, lord MacMarkland had returned to the tower room. Sandra had greeted him, but had not been heard from since. There was little point in asking her about the state of affairs. Everything she knew, was eventually shown on the GRID anyway.

Now he had been sitting in his comfortable family chair for over an hour watching the images and reports. Although there wasn’t much activity on it, the GRID gave an account of a smooth operation. In the frame in which he could follow the INN broadcasts, he had seen the same news again and again, which consisted almost exclusively of the attack on Hakon, the shooting incident that Stiletto had lost his life in and the arrest of the INN people. The same images were constantly being shown, followed by the opinions of various experts interviewed, each of whom proclaimed the same thing in their own way.

At exactly ten o'clock his butler had come in to provide him with sandwiches and coffee. The moment could not have been more appropriate, he thought.

He had gradually had his fill of INN, which in the past hour had done nothing but repeat these items to the brim. He asked Sandra to turn off the image of INN. While on the GRID the current broadcast changed into a grey rectangle, he ate and drank with relish.

With half an eye on the GRID, he served himself a second cup of coffee and a sandwich. He had just sunk his teeth into it, as he saw a new character appear. The face on the passport photo belonged to a certain inspector, Sytsema.

It turned out the file had already been reviewed by Hakon and there was a 'turret' next to it, the sign that he was in the group that was being watched as a potential for GAIAS. The map indicated that he was now in 'The Barn' in The Hague. He read the summary of Sytsema's behavior and decided to keep a close eye on this man.

With the exception of a few crumbs, he had by now finished his plate. With the napkin that had been lying on his lap, he wiped his mouth and dried his fingers, which he had just put through the bowl with lemon water.

He put the white cloth neatly folded in four on the plate and rinsed away the remaining bread with the second cup of coffee. In the meantime, he realized that he had to be careful not to get a second addiction.

That special blend that Joost had given him, a combination of coffee beans that had been put together by his family years ago, tasted damn good. He poured the coffee in his cup until the jug was empty. While he was sipping his coffee, he looked languidly at the image frames on the GRID. Five of them were on stand-by for the rest of the operation and showed little activity.

Only in the third frame could movement be detected. He saw Barbara Kronkite sitting behind her desk. A little bent forward she read the written notepad in front of her on the table. As he watched her, lord MacMarkland saw a deep frown appear between her beautiful eyebrows. With her strange throat-clearing sound, Sandra interrupted his thoughts. She waited half a second, after which he heard her quiet voice say:

“Based on the new variables, the script has been recalculated. The arrest of the INN team will probably give an extra dimension to the research Barbara is doing. During the arrest, the security mode of Ewin LeFoods’ smartphone was activated and Barbara now has the images it transmits analyzed. SPY and CRYPTO are keeping an eye on things. Furthermore, all text messages have been sent and have been read by now.”

As if Sandra had to breathe for a while, she took a short break, after which she continued:

“Another point of attention is Marilyn’s report. She thinks that, according to her verbatim report, ‘Arda’s hormones’ may pose a risk. Arda seems to have pointed her arrows at Lémarc Tasker. I have compared her other escapades after a similar action to today’s with the possible consequences and would advise to let her finish the assignment anyway.

Mr. Tasker’s emotional profile has been assessed and it shows that he is a stable person. It is highly unlikely that he will be distracted by her.” Oh, oh, oh, that Arda, he thought shaking his head. Despite her commitment to behave, she stubbornly remained the group’s enfant terrible. Her assignment wasn’t particularly difficult and he couldn’t really imagine how she could screw that up. “I agree with you, Sandra. I agree. Thank you for the update.” Again, Sandra civilly cleared her throat. “There is more. We have a confirmation of the location. It appears to be something different than we thought. Onawa is now on the scene and is investigating.” At the same time two new image frames lit up on the GRID. One showed footage taken from above, on the other he saw images from a camera on the ground.

Both recordings had little color, because it was still night there. He studied them with interest and wondered what they would find there. If their information was correct, they would get one step closer to the leader of Spiderweb. On the world map, near the town of Broetstheil in Texas, Onawa’s avatar now lit up.

He continued to look at the night’s images with tension.

After a brief meeting with the irritated Commissioner Schenk, Lémarc wiped his clammy hand on his pants. He walked on to the small room where Holger was. After knocking, he went inside.

He had assumed that Holger was still asleep and was surprised that he was fully dressed on the bed when he found him. Holger had been talking to a handful of colleagues, who stood and sat around him as well as they could. Each and every one of them was a large type and it seemed to Lémarc that the space had shrunk a lot since his last visit.

Despite the necessary bumps and scratches, the men looked good. Also Holger himself, who was sitting upright, with his right arm clamped tightly in a sling against his chest.

Holger raised his hand in greeting and beckoned him to come closer. Lémarc squeezed himself between two guys, looked at Holger and knew immediately that he had already heard of Hakon. Contrary to the friendly impression he made, an ice-cold anger smoldered in his eyes. Hardly noticeable the mouth of the great, blond German moved for a moment.

“Ha, Lémarc. It’s good that you showed up, so we don’t have to go looking for you. By order of Johan Lam we have to take care of your personal safety with immediate effect.”

Holger made a hand gesture that indicated that contradiction was meaningless and continued: “And that’s very convenient for us. Knowing you, you will do everything you can to find Hakon’s killers and we ...”, his eyes glanced at his team members, who were all nodding in agreement, “... are going to help you with that. Those who are responsible for this will not get away with it with it.

I can guarantee you that.” Lémarc knew that there was little point in going against Lam’s instructions and that there was no point at all in persuading Holger and his motivated comrades-in-arms to change their minds. He didn’t think his personal safety would be at risk, but a couple of enthusiastic helpers could probably come in handy.

He nodded at the men who were waiting for him. “Fine. Now, I would like to go to The Barn first.”

< 05.07

Barbara pensively put her cell phone away and looked at her watch.

Still 25 minutes to go.

Who would expect a phone call at that time? The long phone number, which according to the message was international, had not allowed her to find out which country she was going to be calling. Of course she was curious, but at the same time a bit nervous. Worried, she wondered who it could be that had sent her this assignment.

She suspected that it had to be a high-ranking person. Someone who could not or did not want to draw unwanted attention to themselves. But this time this person had known of an attack and, with the exception of a tip to her, had apparently taken no further action. And she could not fathom that.

The tips she had previously received proved to be solid again and again and hadn't been bad at all. On the contrary. And now suddenly this message, which actually looked more like an order. This time there was no sign of the happy, expectant feeling she always got when she saw the name of her informant. Could she really trust this source completely? It seemed that she had been used all along, like a puppet on a string. Did she have to obey the puppeteer again? Of course it was not a real question, because she knew very well that she had little choice.

She could only hope that she wouldn't get herself into trouble. It would be wise to trust someone so that she had a safety net and she knew right away that it could only be Russ. Her calm assistant, who had never let her down.

Besides ... As if she had been shaking a wasp's nest, suddenly a whole swarm of jitters shot through her belly. It made her feel unpleasantly warm. She didn't have time for this now. She had better prepare herself for the phone call.

Resolutely she grabbed her bag and went on her way to the toilets. A bit embarrassed by the memory of her earlier crying fit, this time she walked diligently through the door which had a female figure on it. She was lucky, all the booths were empty. Although she was not a prude, she liked the fact that the room was unoccupied and she could not be distracted.

She hastily peed, washed her hands and after quickly washing her face, she cleaned herself up with things from the purse she always had in her bag.

Then she quickly brushed her teeth and checked her makeup. She saw that there were small, red dots in the corners of her eyes. There was nothing she could do about it. She was glad it wasn't any worse than this. After all, she had been up and running continuously for almost twenty hours. Well, it was her own fault. She didn't give up easily. That's just the way she was. The face in the mirror stared back mockingly. Nah, she was still looking pretty decent, she thought. Refreshed, she shook her hair back and walked back to her workplace. On her watch she saw that it had only taken her ten minutes of work. She had a whole fifteen minutes left. Fifteen more long minutes before she was allowed to call.

She frowned at her notebook. All pieces of the puzzle, none of which fit together. She sighed softly and read the paper, which was full of remarks and question marks.

- The trifles she had noticed and the facts that didn't seem to be right.

- The attack had been filmed, even by two people. A serious criminal and someone else. The old man? Someone who had stood behind him somewhere?

- The speed with which the video had appeared on the internet and, according to Hans, the professional expertise of Hakon's close-up that had been put in between.

- The arrest of her colleagues in The Hague. She frowned. She had always received a message from her informant, so that she was on top of it and could have gotten the firsts for INN.

She could not deny that. Damn it! That number she had to call. Could it have something to do with her arrested colleagues? She made a quick calculation. If it was half past four at night here, it would be half past ten in the morning in The Hague. She looked at her watch for the third time. In a moment, she would find out.

She walked to Russ and Hans and after asking if there was any news, Hans told her that Ewin's smartphone was in a research room called 'The

Barn'. The research had yet to begin and he feared that it would all take some time.

"Mmm, then I can borrow Russ, yeah? I need him for a while."

She looked at her assistant in a meaningful way.

"Will you come with me?"

She took him to the canteen, where she picked out a quiet corner and pulled her yellow cell phone out of her pocket. "I'm going to make an important phone call later. After that I have to talk to you."

< 05.08

It was already around half past ten when Joost and Marilyn were finally able to enter the center of Amsterdam. In order not to damage Hakon's Triumph Spitfire 4, Joost had driven very calmly and they had been stuck in traffic on the highway for some time. However, as Marilyn had expected, the ride had been over before she knew it. On the way she had talked to Joost about all kinds of subjects and had a great time with his razor-sharp mind and humor.

In between she had watched her specially adapted tablet pc, with which she could directly view the GRID in Scotland and thus stay informed about the operation 'Non quod videtur', as Hakon had christened it.

The tablet pc was the newest model of Markland Communications, but she had put a number of extra applications on it she had invented herself, so that it had become only a transfer station for information. The actual data was in Scotland.

With this tablet pc, she was able to access everything, view everything and adjust it if necessary. The best thing about it was that not a single bit of data was stored on the device itself.

She also had the thing super well secured, because it only functioned when she herself held the tablet pc. As soon as she let go, the connection was automatically disconnected and the temporary memory was immediately erased. Her tablet pc only worked when she had it in her own hands. Relieved, she had seen that the operation was running

smoothly and she was glad that the attack had created the desired effect. The development at the hospital had been completely different from what they had expected, but she was not worried about that at all. Sandra was inventive and flexible.

She became more competent by the day and would adjust any abnormality very well. The lord, who had been as nervous as a virgin bride as long as Casanova roamed freely, would undoubtedly agree with her now. When it became clear that Casanova and that Stiletto guy had lost the battle, she did not really care that much. Her concern was for Hakon, who was on his way to an unknown battlefield and had to come back in one piece.

Meanwhile, while Joost drove with a smooth turn from the Spuistraat to the Herengracht, she commanded her tablet pc to remind her that she wanted to go through the whole scenario for Hakon again. Unexpected twists and turns, such as at the Elisabeth Hospital, were under no circumstances allowed to occur again. Hakon took a huge risk and every little thing they hadn't thought of could cause him not to survive. She didn't want to think about that. She also told Sandra to let her know as soon as Arda had handed over the documents to Lémarc. After her undoubtedly flawless analysis Sandra may have advised not to intervene, but knowing how reckless the perfectionist Arda could sometimes be, she preferred to keep a finger on the pulse herself. People, especially Arda, who was hunting her hundredth prey, could sometimes act very unexpectedly.

In the meantime Joost had turned around the corner, made a sharp turn to the right and braked. He stopped in front of two large, wooden garage doors, which decorated the spout facade of a large warehouse with large hinged wings made of processed wrought iron. The doors gave access to one of the oldest warehouses in Amsterdam, with the appropriate name 'The Perseverance'.

The monumental building was part of a complex of buildings that had been in the possession of the Erikssons since 1792, the year in which Hakon's great-great-grandfather had bought it.

And now Hakon was the owner.

The block also included the adjacent guesthouse & brown café on the corner. Its name, 'The Harlequin', was written in curly letters in a faint arc on the windows. A sensor in the garage door had recognized the car and silently the doors turned inwards, to open up a space of five by seven meters.

Joost drove straight on and as soon as the car stopped, the doors closed again. With a sound as if a bank vault was being closed, the electric locks fell into place, after which the wall in front of the car slid up into the ceiling. Behind it, a large hall became visible.

As soon as the opening was high enough, Joost slowly drove in.

The space was reminiscent of a garage.

In addition to a car bridge and workbenches with an enormous variety of tools hanging over them, there were five other classic passenger cars, the latest model BMW station wagon, an almost new Land Rover and a Ford van. There were also several motorcycles and mopeds of different ages.

The entire collection also included a couple of bicycles, which were neatly placed next to each other in a rack. The grey-green motorcycle with sidecar in the back could easily have been driven away from the set of a war movie about the Second World War. The dark green Puch Maxi, restored by Joost, with which she occasionally crossed the city, stood next to it. The area and the equipment were kept in tip-top condition by Joost, who cherished the collection of vehicles as if they were his children.

The building, which used to house a garage, now served as GAIAS' operational base.

To camouflage this, from the outside it seemed that the garage was still in operation.

A sign at the entrance indicated that services were only provided to regular customers. By regular customers, of course, they meant only GAIAS members. The warehouse was designed in such a way that people could drive in via the Herengracht and out on the other side, which ended up on the Singel, and vice versa.

As soon as Joost had turned off the engine, Marilyn jumped out of the car and sniffed out the gasoline-like smell that was still hovering in the room. It reminded her of the garage of a school friend with whom she had spent many hours during her studies. Together they had put together all kinds of things. But she didn't have time to get stuck in the past.

She couldn't wait to go to her own workspace and walked right on. As she hurried to the cargo elevator in the corner, she shouted over her shoulder: " Joost, I'm just going to assemble those parts, you know. I'm almost bursting with curiosity. I need to know if it works."

During the ride, Joost had told her that the long-awaited final parts for her latest invention had finally arrived from China.

No way could she just leave them. She wanted to try it out immediately, because if it worked out the way she thought it would, she would have made a big breakthrough. It would save her a lot of time in the future. She had reached the elevator and through the beautiful openwork elevator doors she saw Joost lift the bags out of the trunk.

Before she could disappear, he shouted warningly: "You have one hour. I expect you at the bar at half past eleven, because I want you to eat something. You will get a nice cup of coffee with it!"

As if on command, her stomach, growling softly, let her know that this was not a bad idea at all.

Just the thought of that fantastically delicious coffee of his ... However, the desire to work on her last invention was stronger, and she decisively pressed the button marked '2'.

The second floor was largely furnished for her and on her craft floor, as she called it herself, she had over 250 m² at her disposal. The fencing closed and the elevator took her up. Somewhere between the first and second floor Marilyn had already forgotten her stomach and the promised coffee.

All she could think about was her newest construction and while her head was filling up with diagrams and calculations, she automatically followed the route to her territory, which was so familiar to her by now. As soon as she opened the door, she smelled the fresh scent that was present here

and she walked straight to the peculiar construction that stood in the middle of the room.

To an outsider the strange construction would seem to be a random mountain of parts, consisting of all kinds of tubes, various colored drums, shiny rods, cylinders and lights. Someone with more knowledge would probably recognize some parts of a 3D printer in the middle of the colored disorder. Only Marilyn knew what she saw in front of her and called it her 3dSCreator.

As soon as the last parts were in place, she could make all the objects she needed for her work and she didn't have to waste any more time specifying them first, having them made and waiting for them to finally be delivered. And, unlike an ordinary 3D printer, which could only produce hard objects, her machine would also be able to make flexible objects. At least, that's what she assumed. All she had to do was prove it.

On her workbench she found the box that Joost had left behind. She had no idea what the Chinese signs meant, but she did recognize the logo of one of her regular suppliers of precision technology. In order not to arouse suspicion, all parts that could not be made via the Markland Group were ordered from different companies, making sure that they could not have anything to do with each other. Just like this time, she usually used Luit, the guy that arranged things for her. He might look like a shady rag dealer, but he had a huge network and could negotiate well.

Probably he suspected that she was more than just a simple lab assistant, but until now he had remained loyal, her punctual payments might have had something to do with that as well.

In addition, she kept in touch with some of her former fellow students and occasionally called on them for information or the manufacture of specific parts.

None of them had any idea what she was really doing. She quickly removed the packaging. The box she now had in her hands weighed almost nothing. She eagerly opened it.

In the middle of a wilderness of weeds, the house was marked out against the night sky. A house like so many others in Texas. Old and dilapidated. Left to the elements for far too long, it stood idly waiting for a bulldozer to wipe out the last remnants. Light clouds slowly passed in front of the three-quarter full moon, making it look a bit spooky.

On her guard, she carefully moved a few feet forward, stood still and observed the surroundings with her whole being. There was not a single light to be seen in the wide area.

Only the faint loom of the town six miles away and a weak glow from a ranch five miles in the other direction, proved that there must still be a civilized world somewhere. Here everything was dark and deserted. She had been keeping an eye on the house for quite some time now, but, apart from the rustling of the leaves and the scurrying of small animals, she had not been able to detect anything alarming. Not in the area and not in the house itself.

She knew this was the right place, although this was not what she had initially expected. As normal as it seemed, something was wrong. Before she went out, she had looked at the images that had been made and analyzed for her and the conclusion was clear. Old but not dilapidated. It only seemed that way. Although the windows were nailed with coarse planks and the door seemed to be barricaded, it was remarkable that the front door was closed with a modern cylinder lock that still shone somewhat.

And that was suspicious.

As agile as a cat, she sneaked through the weeds to the back. In the dark of the night she didn't stand out and her smooth moccasins didn't make any noise when she entered the old veranda. All her senses were on edge and before long she knew for sure. The back was also kept artificially dilapidated. She saw that it was impossible to enter through the broken windows.

The thick, splintered planks were secured and only a chainsaw would help. She knew enough, she had to go up on the roof. She should try to get in through the small window in the roof. With a device that looked like a small horn, she briefly listened against the wall. Except for a very light

buzz, she didn't hear anything. Reassured, she moved stealthily towards the corner of the veranda and got ready to climb up the roof.

< 05.10

Barbara sat with Russ in a corner of the company canteen, each with a cup of coffee in front of them. While Russ was looking at her thoughtfully, she had dialed the long number exactly at 04.30 hours. Anxiously she waited to see who she would get on the line and in amazement almost dropped her phone when it was answered with "Dick Holyester." She had expected to get anyone on the phone, but the secretary of the United Nations was the last person she had thought of. For a moment she didn't know what to say, but her brain was working at full speed and she remembered that Hakon had known him for over twenty years.

Why would her informant have told her to call this man? A fraction of a second later she got a grip on herself, introduced herself and then told in one go the story she had also told the editors. When she concluded with "that the text with 'Non quod videtur' had been a kind of eye-opener for her," she heard the secretary sigh deeply before he said: "I'm glad you called. I was expecting such a call, but I didn't know who it would be from. Now that I think about it, I have to admit that I'm not really surprised that it turns out to be you. I know you've been friends with him for a long time." He sighed again. "Our friend has a very surprising way of working this time, I have to say." Holyester then suggested naming each other by their first names, since that felt more comfortable.

Barbara was pleasantly surprised that this man, this well-known senior official, came across as so ordinary and kind. After her approval, Dick said: "I was called yesterday by Hakon. He has informed me that he is engaged in a very complex, secret undercover operation, with the intention of finding out the person ultimately responsible for Spiderweb and to be able to arrest him. He expects to be able to complete this within two days."

Dick paused for a moment, as if he knew what impact his words would have on her. Hakon had not been murdered.

He was still alive ... A wave of emotion hit her and tears of relief sprang into her eyes.

Her cell phone saved her. Like a drowning person, her fingers clasped around her canary-yellow lifebelt, while she did her utmost to keep breathing normally. Fortunately, she didn't have to react, because Dick continued to speak calmly. "He told me that a few weeks ago he accidentally tracked down an infiltrator at Interpol. During the investigation it turned out that this person leaked information to a secret address that according to Hakon can be linked to Spiderweb. As a result of this investigation, he unfortunately established that UNBI was also infiltrated. However, it is not yet known who the mole is. At the same time, however, it was discovered that front men from Spiderweb were preparing an attack on Hakon. He used this to find out who is running this organization and thus create the possibility of arresting this person or persons. I don't know how he wanted to do that. He deliberately did not give me any information.

He wanted everyone to respond truthfully. He apologized. He says he didn't see any other possibility."

Barbara had found her voice by now, but before she could cast a word, Dick said: "I assume you're full of questions, but let me tell you my story first. It's quite possible that this will clarify things for you." Barbara silently let Russ, who looked at her worriedly, know that she was all right, while listening to Dick. "He told me three more important things.

First of all the following: If I received a text message with the text 'Non quod videtur,' it would mean that the first phase of the operation had been completed successfully.

And although there are witnesses who saw Hakon in the car and there are even images of him, I have known for half an hour that it is not what it seems. Like everyone else, I was shocked when the news of the attack came out. I was convinced that Hakon's plan had failed. Fortunately, I know more now.

I've just been to the scene of the attack and I didn't smell the same scent that one normally smells when a human body is burned. Unfortunately, I know that from experience.

Despite all the convincing information, I am now personally convinced that no one was in the car, not even Hakon.

I don't know how he managed that, in the presence of witnesses, of course, but for the time being I have to act as if Hakon actually died." Barbara heard him swallow before he continued.

"Secondly: I would be called by someone who would also have received a message with the saying 'Non quod videtur'.

I was only allowed to share this information with that person. And that is you. I am impressed that with so little information you figured out so quickly that something was wrong with the attack and that Hakon still had to be alive."

Barbara nodded, realized at the same time that Dick couldn't see that and said: "I didn't know anything about Hakon's plans and, like you, was devastated by the idea that he had been murdered. What exactly does he expect from me ... I'm not sure, but I think he's counting on me to do my usual job and get enough information to show that there was no one in the limousine. As soon as I can prove it, INN will come out with it. Hakon wouldn't expect anything else."

On the other side of the line Dick said: "Yes, that's right. This is the third point Hakon was talking about. He said that that person should continue the investigation in the usual way and bring out the result when the evidence was clear enough.

However, you can't use the information you're getting from me right now for that. You have to find out for yourself. I stay out of the picture. Hakon asks if you would like to discuss it with me first, before you bring it out into the open. I very much hope that you will cooperate, because as soon as INN broadcasts the news, phase two of Hakon's plan would start. Besides tracking down the leadership of Spiderweb, he also hopes to lure the infiltrators at Interpol and UNBI out in the open. Hakon thought he'd get a result within two days."

Dick kept quiet before he asked again: "Will you please call me in advance?" While Dick was waiting for her answer, Barbara realized that she herself was now part of Hakon's plans.

She doubted. She had to be careful that her journalistic ethics were not compromised.

Normally, as soon as it was demonstrable, she would walk straight to her boss with such news. But what about now? Publishing too early could have major consequences and might endanger Hakon. And that was the last thing she wanted. In addition, it would be ethically acceptable if she could prove that the delay would result in extra journalistic value.

It would be great if this made it possible to trace the leadership of Spiderweb and also to expose the infiltrators at Interpol and UNBI.

She made her decision and promised Dick that she would call him first. She wanted to say goodbye, but Dick interrupted her. "Wait a minute, Barbara. Before we hang up, you should know that I met inspector Sytsema at the scene of the attack. He is in charge of the investigation. I had the strong impression that he too knows that something is not right. He insisted on going to the forensic lab with the limousine."

She thanked Dick, after which she ended the conversation. Still with her thoughts on the conversation with Dick Holyester, Barbara thought about everything she had heard.

Hakon was alive ... She had been right and she was sure she would somehow find the evidence for it. She wasn't worried about that. When the time came, she would indeed call Dick first. Now that she had made that decision, it wouldn't keep her awake anymore. What kept her pondering was the unknown identity of her informant, the one who had sent her golden tips more than once and who had put her on the trail of Spiderweb.

This informant had her call the secretary of the United Nations, after which she and Dick had shared their knowledge and because of which she was now aware of what Hakon was up to. Hakon. Hakon was in the middle of this. How? Why? She was shocked when Russ, who had gotten another cup of coffee without her realizing it, put a second cup on the table with a tinkling sound. He sat opposite her again and looked at her inquisitively.

"Are you all right, Barb?" She knew that he wouldn't ask her anything else. He would patiently wait for her to sort everything out. She poured some evaporated milk into the cup, stirred for a moment and stared at the

hypnotic rotation pattern of the cream that slowly dissolved in it. She was tired and had the feeling that her brain was spinning through her head in exactly the same way, after everything that had happened today. In the midst of the hassle, it had become clear that there was more between her and Russ than the camaraderie of two colleagues who got on well with each other.

Last night it had suddenly clicked with an astonishingly loud bang. Despite all the sadness and hustle and bustle that followed, she had fallen in love. As slowly as the mixing cream and coffee, Barbara realized that she had still been waiting for Hakon.

It was only when she thought he was gone that she could have let go of him and the scales had fallen from her eyes. And as now, Russ had waited patiently for her. She could not get off to a false start. She had to tell him everything. That was the least he deserved. She turned her eyes and found his. "Although it is not allowed, I will tell you everything. One thing is certain: we haven't finished unravelling Spiderweb yet." Halfway across the table top their hands found each other. Neither could know that they would soon be right in the middle of it.

< 05.11

For more than half an hour, he had been watching Dr. Winter's investigation with suspicion. During the course of the work he had become increasingly frustrated. The report, which was also recorded with a camcorder for further evidence, had made it abundantly clear that no one had been in the car at all. As soon as he heard her dictate it, he had known what he hadn't been able to remember. How was it possible that he could not have remembered that smell, that disgusting smell of burned people?

He still had a bad taste in his mouth when he remembered that terrible accident he had had to deal with in his first week as a street cop. While he had thought that he would never forget something like that, this deep-frozen ice rabbit had just been the one to point it out to him. He could have slapped himself in the face.

The only time he had asked a question, which was only logical for the person in charge of the investigation, she had treated him like he was a toddler. How beautiful it would have been if, just once, he had been able to beat her to it ... Damn it. The way she had treated him ... She hadn't said it out loud, but from her posture he could only conclude that he'd better sit in a corner and keep his mouth shut.

Half an hour later, Winter's research had already ended. His not too good mood had reached zero by the time she had ordered him to "get that Tasker here as soon as possible."

That way she could use her knowledge while she was still here. Her "time was precious."

He had almost reflected straight back that he had every sympathy for this, because of course there were more victims waiting for her to suck out their blood. It had been close, but he had just barely managed to control himself.

He had only nodded, after which he had left her domain, leaving the beautiful, but unfortunately so arrogant doctor to her fate. More and more sadly, he had considered her findings. She had found no human remains. No DNA. In fact, nothing at all. He had never experienced a situation like this before. An attack without corpses. Although he only knew Eriksson from the TV, he was glad for him that he had apparently never been in the car. And not only that, there hadn't appeared to have been a driver in it either. But what was he supposed to do with this? The whole case had immediately collapsed.

Cursing inwardly, he had realized that the investigation into the assassination of the famous UNBI director had been relegated to the settlement of the deliberate destruction of a car with some peripheral phenomena.

A report of at most one page would suffice. This case was no longer worthy of honor and it was certainly not the big case that would have given his career a push in the right direction.

There had been no other choice than to call Tasker, so that

Winter could give him the good news herself.

Through the central control room he had been able to get in touch and now, just fifteen minutes later, he was waiting for him with a bad temper, biting his nails. As soon as the whole thing was finished, he would silently disappear into the anonymity of the ordinary detective routine.

< 05.12

As usual, Lémarc was seated in the back of his Jaguar and was being driven. But this time the conditions were unusual. Instead of the blond hair of his assistant Jens, he now saw in front of him a short-shaven head that belonged to one of Holger's colleagues. On the chair in front of him was another type dressed in black and next to him was Holger himself. Holger, who had been on the phone for minutes, seemed to be completely recovered.

The fact that he couldn't use his right arm, which was firmly in a sling, didn't seem to bother him at all. He was pleased to listen to Holger's instructive voice. He sounded calm, quiet and extremely professional. Apart from being a good shooter, Holger turned out to be an excellent organizer and a smart thinker who could make decisions quickly. He could not just let this man go. Holger had told him that he wanted to leave EUAT92 now that he had blundered so badly in the hospital. Lémarc could imagine that he could not just accept that. Holger had discovered that he too could make mistakes. That he was just a human being and not a Robocop.

Hopefully he would change his mind and if not ... Well, he had to see if he could find a suitable job for him at UNBI.

In the meantime, he understood from the conversation that a whole security structure had been set up around his own person. AT2 had been sent ahead to strengthen the security at the forensic lab and The Barn. AT3, which had delivered Jens and the two arrested INN journalists to the UNBI building, was still there and was instructed to stay there for the time being.

AT1 was located at the Elisabeth Hospital, to protect James Taylor. They had to escort him home after his speech, after which the building had to remain under active observation until further notice. Holger closed his

smartphone and said: "There you go. That has been arranged. It may take some getting used to having more than one shadow, but we want to keep you and James in one piece." "How long do you think..." Holger wouldn't let him speak.

In a decisive tone he said briefly: "As long as it takes." More kindly he said: "You must have heard that I had Lam on the phone. The second search for Casanova's smartphone didn't yield any results either. The dogs ...", Holger smiled a moment before he continued, "... the four-legged ones, only found a broken SIM card. It was so damaged that nothing can be done with it anymore."

He shrugged his shoulders and his face was hard when he continued: "Little disappointment. But don't worry. We'll find those bomb-sick bastards. No matter what." The same ice-cold glow that he had seen earlier in the hospital flickered in Holger's eyes and Lémarc could have sworn that it suddenly got a few degrees colder in the car.

Holger looked away from him and apparently did not expect an answer.

Lémarc wasn't scared easily, but Holger's tone and threatening gaze managed to make him feel uncomfortable and he was almost happy that his smartphone was making a noise.

He was not surprised to hear the voice of inspector Sytsema, who asked in a flat tone if Lémarc could meet him at The Barn as soon as possible.

He looked at his watch and told the inspector that he would arrive at about ten to eleven.

< 05.13

Her climb up had been effortless, but to open the rusted roof window silently, she had needed a little more time. Without the handy devices she had with her, she would never have been able to do it. She was certainly not inexperienced. After all, she had been sneaking in everywhere unnoticed for years, but now that she had a whole series of new tools at her disposal, it had become a lot easier.

A night out in a big city would be more dangerous than what she was doing right now. She had everything under control, knowing that

nowadays she also had eyes in the back of her head. The six cameras that were mounted in her headband ensured that she was watched over, so that she could fully concentrate on her climbing and burglary work. A careful check of the attic had not yielded anything. With the exception of a few old, ramshackle pieces of furniture and some dusty cobwebs, the space was empty.

Without making the slightest sound, she had managed to get down the rickety stairs and, having studied the floor plan of the house in detail, she knew exactly where she was. In the corridor between the front door and the kitchen she stood still for a moment and listened again. Nothing moved.

She carefully checked the ground floors. Like a ghost, she moved through the kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. There was nothing special to discover here either. From the things she found, she could see that the house was inhabited by a man. Or had been inhabited. It seemed as if he had disappeared into thin air overnight. The furniture, the utensils, the remnants of a breakfast and the half-decayed bedding seemed to strongly indicate this.

Meanwhile she had arrived at the door of the living room, where she hoped to find more.

Until now she could have walked in anywhere, but this door was locked with a new cylinder lock. Before she broke it open, she wanted to take a look. She grabbed a box from her belt bag, took a cockroach out of it and put the insect in front of the door, where it remained quietly seated. Then she rolled up her left sleeve, revealing the black plastic-like tube she had around her arm.

The tube, which now suddenly felt stiff, was made of a very peculiar substance. As soon as she pulled her sleeve over it again, the thing would immediately become flexible again, so that it could not hinder her in her movements.

With her thumb she briefly pressed on it, after which a small screen unfolded and on the spot where her watch would otherwise be, she saw the little touchpad gently glowing.

With tiny finger movements she made the cockroach crawl under the door, take off and fly in a circle along the walls. As she was surrounded

by a cloud of freshly scented citrus blossom, she looked at the screen and saw something unexpected.

Because it was dark in the room, it was all the more noticeable that colored lights were flashing. In the middle of a shining translucent hemisphere, bright lights in yellow, red, orange and green flashed quickly on and off.

She knew that headquarters were watching through her wristband and that the images were already being analyzed. Until this was done, there was little she could do other than keep observing and wait for further instructions.

< 05.14

Because it was no longer so busy in The Hague at this time, they reached the site of The Barn well before eleven o'clock. Lémarc knew that all forensic research for the entire region took place here, but had previously seen no reason to come here personally. At the entrance they were asked to identify themselves and the purpose of their visit was verified. They were given permission and were allowed to drive on to The Barn itself, where inspector Sytsema was already waiting. The man did not look very cheerful, Lémarc noticed.

Holger gave Sytsema his left hand, after which he informed Lémarc that he was not coming in with them. He and his colleagues wanted to look around a bit and he would be waiting for them in the hall. Holger disappeared and Lémarc and Sytsema continued walking.

"I see you are still carrying the evidence that Jens gave you?" asked Lémarc. Sytsema nodded in the affirmative. "As soon as Dr. Winter has informed you of the results of her investigation into the wreckage, I will personally hand it over to her.

This way I can be sure that nothing could have happened to it in the meantime." "That's a good thing," said Lémarc. "I've managed to gather some things myself." He showed Sytsema the plastic bags that contained the belongings of Holger and Stiletto. He pointed to the biggest one and

said: “Did you know that the kid had sixteen knives with him? And that they are all as sharp as a surgeon’s scalpel?”

They were just hidden in his clothes. You couldn’t see a thing. Really incredible.” Sytsema just whistled and asked: “You stripped him yourself?” Lémarc nodded, and Sytsema said: “Then you can be damn happy that you still have all your fingers.” He smiled crookedly. However, the half smile disappeared like snow in the sun as soon as they saw the woman waiting for them. Lémarc thought she didn’t look unkind, but the whole of the dark rimmed lenses, the tied-up hair, the tight mouth, the white lab coat and the clipboard that she had in her hand, gave her a chilly and repellent look. Sytsema pointed from one to the other and introduced them to each other. Shaking hands with her briefly, he did his best to make sure that the first, unsympathetic, impression he had had from this Dr. Winter, could not be read on his face.

He deliberately omitted the ‘pleasure’ part. By the way, Dr. Winter didn’t even give him a chance.

As soon as their hands let go of each other, she asked the gentlemen to follow her. Although she had made it sound polite enough, Lémarc had clearly heard the underlying order. Without saying anything else, the woman took them to what was undoubtedly her office.

While he and Sytsema sat down on the chairs she pointed out to them, Lémarc observed the space. He didn’t see anything personal anywhere. In the well-stocked bookcase he could only discover scientific titles and the only thing that adorned the light walls were her diplomas. Aside from a computer and a folder next to the keyboard, her desk was empty. Didn’t this woman have a social life at all? A secret life perhaps? Intrigued, he looked at the woman who, as soon as she sat down, opened the folder. Her eyes scanned the contents for a moment, after which she looked straight at them and said in measured sentences that it was one hundred percent certain that no living creatures had been present in the car during the explosion. “You don’t seem very surprised, Mr. Tasker.”

Over the edge of her glasses, Winters’ sharp eyes took him in with suspicion for a moment, before she continued to speak and informed them that her employees were still busy with the parts under the bonnet.

The gentlemen could assume that the investigation would not be completed within a day. Lémarc replied in carefully chosen words that nobody expected this. He pointed out the evidence bags on the ground between him and Sytsema and suggested that they divide up the work. UNBI had a very advanced technical department at its disposal and because he was particularly interested in the content of the smartphones of De Jong and INN, he would have them examined there. He put the other two bags on her desk and gave her a form. "If you please?" Without a single word of protest, she signed the transfer slip with quick scribbles.

Lémarc was more than satisfied. Dr. Winters' conclusion proved that Holyester had been right. Chances were that Hakon was still alive. Also, the meeting with this stiff woman had gone without annoying complications.

He was itching to say goodbye, but Sytsema considered it necessary to remind Dr. Winter of her confidentiality obligation.

As if she had burned herself, she pulled her hand out of his, grabbed the two bags from her desk and walked out of the door, her back straight, looking at Sytsema with a disparaging gaze. None of the three could even have imagined how superfluous Sytsema's remark had been.

< 05.15

He was lying in a deep sleep, when in Texas in the early morning, just after four o'clock,

Kingsize Bob slowly woke up to a repetitive annoying sound at his left ear.

Still half asleep he realized that the ringing of his smartphone had pulled him out of his sleep. Gruntingly he worked himself half up and grabbed the thing from his bedside table.

It was his foreman, who of course had a problem yet again. Scraping his throat, he hoisted himself up a bit more, then took the call and answered snarlingly. "Sorry to bother you, boss, but the Irishman, with his drunk head, beat up another drunkard. The Sheriff asks if he should resolve it as usual."

Damn it. Did they really have to wake him for something so trivial? Stupid fool. The Irish bastard may be an annoying pain in the ass and cause problems on a regular basis, but when it came down to it, he did his job extraordinarily well. He briskly replied that of course it had to be taken care of and immediately ended the conversation with his foreman, because in the meantime he had seen that there was still an unread message on his phone. It was an automatically generated message from his SMS service, announcing that a text message had arrived for him at 01.22 hours.

Although he couldn't view the content of the text message - he had to connect to the internet before he could do so - he was sure that it had been sent by Stiletto. Stupid.

In his festive mood he had completely forgotten to check whether Stiletto had kept his promise. Immediately after the attack he would have solved the Casanova problem and within half an hour after that he would confirm this by text message. The statement of the cheeky guy: "Small knife, great success, send SMS" had made him laugh. Unbelievable that he had just fallen asleep. Jesus Christ. He was only 55 years old. He couldn't have become senile now, could he? Thank God the Mexican had kept his word, but nothing would come of sleeping anymore. He was wide awake now.

He knocked off the duvet, got up and walked straight to the adjoining bathroom. Damn, he really needed to pee. He whistled between his teeth and emptied his bladder into the urinal mounted at his height. Looking at the stream he produced - a horse could take an example from that - he regretted not being able to see how Casanova had died.

The moment Stiletto's steel put an end to his life, he would have loved to see his arrogant, pock-marked face. Next time he would arrange for it to be recorded.

But now he had to get dressed and have breakfast a.s.a.p.,

because he was really starving. On the videophone next to the doorpost he pressed the 3, so that the staff automatically got a signal that his breakfast had to be prepared and that it had to be served within fifteen minutes. In a routine way he soaped his face and shaved away the beard stubble with the razor that had once belonged to his grandfather, after

which he took a quick shower. As usual, his clean clothes were already ready and it didn't take him long to put on his daily work clothes. With one hand he held the tails of his red-blue checkered shirt, while with the other he pulled his jeans on top. Then he skillfully pulled the braided cowhide belt through the loops and closed it with a click, so that the two parts of the matt silver buckle formed a broad ox-head, the logo of his ranch. He quickly tied the colorful bandana around his neck and put on his old, but very well maintained, handmade boots of rattlesnake leather.

Finally, he put on his Stetson. For as long as he could remember, he had worn a Stetson, even indoors. It was the only garment he rarely changed. His reflection satisfied him. He was in perfect health and still looked splendid for his age. He didn't stand for long.

He was hungry. Through the videophone he told his wife that he wouldn't wave her goodbye, because he would stay in the office all day.

He wished her a good trip to her mother, that witch he really hated. His wife wouldn't like it, but by now she had gotten used to the fact that he was a busy man. It was very convenient for him that she couldn't disturb him today with all kinds of trivial matters. He could go about his business in peace and quiet. He took his smartphone and the golden watch that his cousin in New York had given him from the bedside table.

While he was putting on the watch, he saw that it was already about half past four. In The Hague it was seven hours later. There it was now 11.20 AM and everyone would be in turmoil. Chuckling, he thought of the images he had seen on TV.

With the smile on his face, he left the bedroom in a good mood. First a hearty breakfast and then up to enjoy a fascinating day. A day that would prove to be much more exciting than he could ever have dreamed of.

< 05.16

While Marilyn was holding the nozzles in place one by one, Sandra informed her of the latest developments. After the surprising turn that the first part of the operation had taken, the second part went completely according to plan.

Her last analysis, in which she had now been able to take into account the unknown factors and results of the first part, was looking good. Spiderweb had lost two prominent players, which strengthened Hakon's undercover position and increased the chances of success by 14.7%.

At Marilyn's request, she had also gone through Arda's script again, including a cross-reference with everything she had been able to find out about Lémarc Tasker. The result was the same, so no adjustments were needed. Lastly, she could only tell Marilyn that everyone was in the right place and that there was no reason to worry.

More than satisfied with Saundra's findings, which couldn't have been better, Marilyn couldn't help not being completely reassured. Arda, like many of their group, was not exactly average. Although she was very honest and Marilyn liked her, she had to admit that she was not always very stable.

Just like a cat, Arda could, seemingly for no reason at all, suddenly swing out her claws without thinking of any consequences at all. This unpredictability was the problem. While she was trying to find a solution to teach Saundra this human factor, Marilyn cleverly mounted the last nozzle. She proudly looked at the end result. Per-fect! She hurried to her computer wall, grabbed her glasses and put them on. Although the big screen looked just like the one the lord had, hers functioned completely differently. Just like her tablet pc, it could only be activated and deactivated by her personally by detection of her bio-profile.

As soon as she was within reach, she started the new software with a small movement of her index finger and asked Saundra to perform a check. While one line of code after the other appeared on the wall on the left, she updated her logbook.

Although it didn't look like that at all. If someone could have watched her, they would probably think she was mad. Like a sorceress who was working on a complicated spell, she was gesturing in a vacuum with her fingers moving at breakneck speed.

In reality, she was using the 3D Virtual Holographic Keyboard, which floated between her and the screen at a fixed height and distance from her body. As soon as she had put on the glasses, it had appeared to her. She didn't have to physically touch any of the keys and because the

program had scanned her posture, movements and gaze at first use, the software knew what she wanted to click on before her hands did. During one of her security projects, she had studied the functioning of the human eye. The speed with which the iris reacts to perception had made her think. Why wait for the brain to send the right signals if the iris was already registering it? With Sandra's help, she had built a program that responded to the most minute movement of her eyes, so that, quicker than her fingers, it knew what actions she wanted to take.

Now, after six months of experience, her speed had risen to unprecedented levels and the system was able to translate her movements flawlessly.

The long line of code had come to a standstill on the wall screen and Sandra reported that the new software was ready to be tested.

Marilyn took off the glasses.

The time had come. With her eyes closed and her fingers crossed, she ordered Sandra to start the process.

She breathed in deeply, put away her glasses and walked back to the Creator. Expectantly she watched as the glass barrels filled with different liquids were put under pressure.

For a moment nothing seemed to happen, but after a few deathly silent seconds the device suddenly came to life and started manufacturing her first design. A goose feather. It would take some time before she knew if it had worked.

This was to be a gift for Joost, who drew his family chronicle and family tree with an authentic quill. It would be a surprise for him, because although the goose feather would be indistinguishable from the real thing, it would be equipped with a reservoir that filled itself as soon as the tip was held in an inkwell. Without any problem he would be able to write several pages in a row. Old-fashioned soundness with a piece of nanotechnology. She smiled. With the feather she would do him a great favor and he would also appreciate the fresh scent that came with it.

Not easily disturbed, Lémarc was somewhat overwhelmed by Dr. Winter's abrupt departure and almost felt sorry for his colleague when he saw how unhappy Sytsema looked. His colleague might have been able to express himself more diplomatically, but his warning had been justified and certainly not so offensive that Dr. Winter had the right to leave them on their own in such a state.

But in any case, there was no doubt about her expertise and he had no choice but to be happy now that she had confirmed Holyester's suspicion. In good spirits he took the remaining evidence and said laconically: "Well, Sytsema. I have the impression that we can just go. Didn't you think so?" He grabbed the two remaining evidence bags. "Come on. We're going back to the hall."

While he was walking with Sytsema, one question after another flashed through his head.

An incredible amount of effort had been made to make everyone believe that Hakon had died. To achieve something of this magnitude, one had to have both a small fortune and the right connections.

Such an attack could only be organized by professionals. Several seasoned, experienced specialists, such as Casanova and the newcomer, Stiletto.

He could safely assume that the two of them hadn't done this together. How many others would have been involved and who could they have been? It had to be related to Spiderweb. But why? For them, Hakon's death would not be a bad thing. Without Hakon, the process would have bled to death before it even started. Another organization? In any case, the perpetrators must have known in advance that it wouldn't be long before it was clear that no one had been in the limousine. So ... Distraction. To save time. They had caught Hakon and while everyone's nose was pointing in the other direction, they had put their victim somewhere in peace and quiet.

All this had been prepared down to the last detail and carried out with great precision.

It would not be easy to find Hakon. The only ray of hope was that no effort had been spared to get their hands on Hakon alive ... In the meantime they had reached the hall, where Holger was already waiting

for them. As soon as he had joined them, he asked, in a tense tone, if anything had been found that could help them move forward. His face brightened when Lémarc informed him of Dr. Winter's conclusion, only to become more grim immediately afterwards, when Lémarc made him and Sytsema part of his thinking. Like him, neither of them could think of any other reason. Sytsema recommended that this knowledge should not be made public. The longer the kidnapers thought their plan had been successful, the less danger Hakon was in. Lémarc agreed with him and suggested that Sytsema should

remain involved in the investigation.

He couldn't have made him a better proposal, Lémarc knew. He continued: "The research has now taken on a different dimension and we will need all the help we can get. If you call your boss for me later, I'll arrange everything with him. We will now go directly to the UNBI building. We have put together a special team that you can join. We can make good use of your local knowledge and connections. I think it's likely that Hakon is still in The Hague."

< 05.18

From the outside Russ still seemed to be his stoic self, but Barbara knew him well enough to see that her story had hit him like a bomb. Without interrupting her at all, he had been listening, seemingly unmoved, to everything she had told him. But from the look in his eyes she could clearly see how surprised he was.

Again he put his hand over hers and, bowing to her, he whispered: "So Hakon ..." Glad that Hakon was alive and relieved that she had entrusted her secret to Russ, she nodded. "Until I can prove it, we cannot..." "Say a word about this," Russ finished her sentence, and he laughed. "What a stunt, Barbara. You know how to choose your friends, don't you?" "Yes, don't I? And guess what. You're at the top of my list. Doesn't that make you think?"

Before he let go of her, Russ squeezed her hand for a moment and, smiling, he answered with a heavy suburban accent: "Look out, girl, you have no idea what this young man has in store for you."

With a chuckle she stood up. "Come on, you idiot. We have to get to work." Chatting in a friendly manner, they went back to the editorial staff, where Hans frantically gestured them to come closer as soon as they came in.

"Where were you? I've been waiting for you forever, Barbara. I've called you a hundred times, but you were always busy." He lowered his voice and looked at them excitedly. "Grab a chair, sit down and hold on tight. You can't imagine what I heard." As she and Russ each grabbed a chair, he told them that Ewin's smartphone had ended up in the forensic lab and that, although the images weren't that good, he had been able to hear everything clearly. Excitedly, he opened a folder at the bottom of the screen, which appeared to contain two files. "Of course I made a summary." He pointed to the second file. "I made a separate copy of the conversation between the pathologist, inspector Sytsema and Lémarc Tasker, because ...", he kept quiet theatrically for a moment, before he continued with an exciting sounding voice: "... listen and shudder." The image was indeed flawed, Barbara saw. The recording was blurred and crooked, and more than a bunch of crossed legs she could not distinguish in the ever darker background. The woman's voice she heard, however, sounded clear and unambiguous. "The forensic examination of the car did not reveal any DNA traces.

I didn't find anything of organic origin at all. The silhouettes were caused by dummies, dolls that had to pass for people. Both the car and the dummies must have been operated remotely, after which the whole thing exploded. The way in which this is done still has to be investigated, but the intense heat has reduced a lot to ashes.

However, my preliminary research shows that where I should have found human tissue, there was nothing else to be found but remnants of wood, metal and plastic.

You don't seem very surprised, Mr. Tasker."

It was quiet for a moment, before Barbara heard the female voice again. "At the moment my team is working on everything under the bonnet. You understand that all parts have to be examined and you can assume that the investigation will not be completed within a day." Stunned, Barbara looked to the side, where Hans was looking at her in a tense way. "Well?

Am I right? Admit it, you didn't expect this, did you?" She shook her head in denial. No, she hadn't expected this. Here she had her proof. With this she could prove that Hakon had not been murdered. She absolutely hadn't expected to find it so soon.

Hans pushed her. "There's more, but I haven't had time to get over it yet. According to Tasker, Hakon Eriksson was kidnapped and the attack was a distraction to save time. Do you want to look?" Barbara hesitated. With the recorded conversation she had enough in her hands to make a beautiful Breaking News item. But before she could do this, she first had to call Holyester back. "No, no time. This is important news, but before I start working on it, I'd like to talk to the chief." She looked at Hans in a flattering way. "Will you please stay a while and take care of the incoming material? Russ and I will be right back." Judging by Hans' repulsive face, he didn't like it very much. He lasted a second and a half, before he laughingly answered: "Just try to get me out of here."

Relieved, she grabbed her notebook, looked for Russ's eyes and silently asked if he would come along. Together they walked out of the department. "Canteen?" asked Russ. "Mm, mm. Yep. Canteen."

< 05.19

Dick wanted to keep his speech short and concise, and he did. His statement to the press was ready. He had carefully chosen the words and formulated the text in such a way that he could use it in various contexts. No details. He would refer to the ongoing investigation and leave it at that.

Satisfied he stretched out and took a sip of water. He liked his new ultra-slim computer very much. Super-light and, despite its clumsy two-finger system, easy to use. He re-read what he had written, couldn't find any mistakes and mailed it to John's assistant, asking for enough copies to be printed to be distributed to the press.

He was still sitting with his laptop on his lap when his smartphone rang. He could tell from the number that it was Barbara.

As soon as he had accepted the call, she immediately went straight to the point by saying that she was now 100% convinced that no one, including Hakon, had been in the car.

Proudly she told him how she had overheard a conversation between the forensic expert and Lémarc.

She couldn't have gotten a better confirmation and as soon as their conversation was over, she would turn it into a sensational Breaking News item, so that INN could bring it out immediately after the broadcast of the press conference.

Dick was patiently letting her waterfall of words cascade over him, when on his laptop screen a window suddenly appeared, which opened very quickly and showed a picture of Hakon. Beneath it a bright red button blinked with the text 'PRESS HERE'.

With great difficulty he managed to interrupt Barbara's flow of words, asked her to wait a while and curiously clicked on it.

Immediately there was movement in the picture and he heard Hakon's clear, warm voice coming through the speakers of his laptop and his smartphone at the same time. "Hi, Dick and Barbara ... Yes, you can now both hear my voice at the same time. It's a previously recorded message, so you can't interrupt me and ask questions. Please listen carefully.

The reason you are receiving this message now is because Barbara has discovered that I survived the attack. My compliments, Barbara. I knew you wouldn't give up. I am so sorry that I had to do this to you and I know that many will be shocked, disappointed or angry. Later I will explain to you why this had to happen, there is no time for that now. At the moment I am asking you one thing, and that is that Barbara has to reveal the revelation and that UNBI has to keep all research results to itself for the time being. Immediately after the report, the second part of my undercover operation will start. I can't say anything about that now, except that I'm on my way to the US. I expect to be back in a few days and hope that we can talk to each other live by then. End of message." At the same time Hakon finished speaking, his face disappeared.

"I don't know what to say," said Barbara. "How could he ..."

Like Barbara, Hakon had also surprised Dick.

Just the timing alone.

How on earth could he have known that he and Barbara were on the phone?

As he was trying to sort out his thoughts, he began: "Well, uhh, this gives a lot more clarification about things we haven't heard the last word about yet, but, uh, I suggest we follow his advice. You were planning on publishing the news anyway." Barbara agreed with him and the call ended with the agreement that they would keep each other informed if new developments were to occur.

He ended the conversation and wanted to close his laptop, but didn't get a chance to, because as soon as he broke off contact with Barbara, Hakon's face appeared on his screen again.

This time too he was told that it was a recording, after which Hakon fully informed him about what he had in mind and about which nobody, not even Barbara, should know. Ten minutes later Hakon had disappeared again and Dick, deep in thought, paced around the room. Hakon had told him exactly what he could tell Lémarc, which unfortunately was not much. As soon as the situation allowed it, Hakon would contact Lémarc himself. For the time being, Dick was the only one who knew what Hakon was doing and where he would be in the coming days.

This knowledge should have made him feel better, but nothing could be further from the truth. His joy that Hakon was alive was heavily overshadowed by the concerns he was now having, for his trick with the limousine seemed like a piece of cake compared to what he was planning to do this time.

He admired its audacity, but knew with gloomy certainty that it would never succeed and that Hakon would perish. In order to destroy evil, he would need an army of guardian angels and tons of luck. Only in this unlikely case would he have a small chance of uncovering the true extent of Spiderweb and shaking the world to its foundations.

Via the landing Kingsize Bob had descended the beautifully carved marble staircase, to the immense hall. He had opened the first door on the left, where his official office was located. The room had two entrances. This one through the hall, for family and housekeeping, and another one, which ended up in the champion's room where his foreman had his office.

Above both doors there was a light burning red or green.

Red meant: don't you dare disturb, something that was well known to everyone by now.

If the light in the hall was green, people were allowed to come in. If the light in the champion's room was green, employees would first have to report via the intercom and wait for his permission. It had only happened twice that someone had made the mistake of ignoring the red light, which he had punished without pardon. Nowadays, even if the light above both entrances was green all day, there was hardly anyone who dared to bother him. He walked into his office, slammed the door behind him and made the outside world disappear.

This was his place. Here he felt completely at home. His office was literally his castle.

Years ago he had bought the entire inventory, including the monumental staircase that now stood in the hall, from a noble family that had financial problems. He had the ranch adjusted so that everything would fit in perfectly.

And he still enjoyed the abundant and rich atmosphere every day, as soon as he was inside. From the dark wooden paneling, the dark deeply green pile carpet, the chesterfield seating area, the matt glossy armor in the corner, the long walnut conference table and the marble chimney to the huge bookcase that filled an entire wall. Prominently present in the middle of the room was his enormous antique, mahogany desk. The only thing that did not do justice to the atmosphere of days gone by was the modern equipment on the desk. Nowadays one could not do without it.

When a business associate once said he was suffering from Anglophilia, he had just nodded, not knowing what it meant. As soon as the guy had left, he had looked it up and could have given his hobby a name. He was an Anglophile.

In his youth he had once seen a film about the life of an English Duke and had immediately known that, as soon as possible, he wanted to live exactly that way. He had made every effort to achieve his goal and had been more than successful. Soon he was able to realize his wish, so that he had been able to enjoy it every day for the past 20 years. As he walked to his desk, he let his gaze drift over the paintings. He was never bored with the state portraits of the noble family and the hunting scenes.

Hungry he looked at the pendulum on the mantelpiece and although it was an antique piece, the clock indicated exactly the right time. Breakfast would be three minutes away. He ignored the hollow feeling, took his smartphone out of his pocket and pulled off the back. With the manicured nail of his right forefinger, he flipped out the SIM card and threw it into the grinder. Krrrrt, and away was any evidence. He sat down, opened his laptop and via a secure line sought contact with a server exclusively set up for him.

A little later the text message from Stiletto was picked up and copied to his desktop as a text file, after which the connection was automatically disconnected. An untraceable way of communicating. He opened it with an expectant chuckle, but contrary to what he had expected, it said: 'Colleague stricken by heart attack and taken to hospital. Will visit him there.' He had to read it twice before he understood what Stiletto meant. With appreciation he reread the sentence. That little Mexican promised to be a good employee. Instead of assuming that his mission had probably already ended, he had taken the precaution and had started to check it out. The ugly bastard had no chance anyway. He would give his new fixer a bonus, as far as he was concerned the man had been very successful. A little goodwill could never hurt. He opened his to-do list, made a note and read it. Not much, except for the investigation into that Kronkite. The file of that curious investigative journalist had yet to come in. Behind him there were two knocks on the door and while a trolley with a quite traditional English breakfast was pushed inside, he closed his laptop mouthwateringly.

“Come on, Barb. Don’t keep me in suspense any longer.” For the second time she and Russ were sitting at the same table in the canteen. She put away her canary-yellow smartphone, looked at Russ with big eyes and finally said softly: “I heard Hakon. It was a recording and I couldn’t say anything back, but it was wonderful to hear his voice.” Russ looked at her lovingly. “Ah, sweetheart. I’m pleased for you. What did he say?”

Barbara was surprised. Russ had never wanted to know anything from her so openly. Apparently he was aware of it too, because he continued, “Uhh, at least, uhh, that is ...”

She leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially: “Hakon told me and Holyester that he staged the attack to provoke a reaction from Spiderweb.”

After this she told him everything, including the fact that she had agreed with Dick Holyester to support Hakon in this. “And, I hope you want to support me in that,” she ended quietly.

“I get it, Barb,” replied Russ. “Of course I will support you. You know that.” He whistled with admiration for a moment and continued: “Hats off, you know.

But you have to agree with me that it’s also a shitty trick he played on his friends. As soon as I get the chance, I’ll tell him so.” She nodded and said seriously: “I hope with all my heart that you will be able to do that very soon.” She looked at her watch and stood up. “I have to be quick if I want to get it ready in time. Are you coming with me?” As they went back, she asked Russ: “Do you want to keep Hans busy? We have to make sure that nothing leaks to Red/Tec yet. We have to coordinate it so that it is broadcast right after Holyester’s press statement.” Russ reached out in front of her and courteously held the door open for her. With a tap against an imaginary cap, he answered obediently: “Yes, ma’am,” after which he gave her a quick kiss. He shamelessly grinned, stepping back and letting her through. Suddenly so many butterflies were playing tag in her belly, that it surprised her that she still felt the floor under her feet and didn’t float up.

She hoped that no one had seen anything, hurried to her place and quickly moved behind her desk. Almost imperceptibly she turned her head a little, so she could just see how Russ, relaxed and ignoring her

completely, strolled towards Hans. Grrr, arrogant prick. What was he thinking? To make her ... make her ... men ... With a deep sigh she sorted her things and activated her computer. She tried to concentrate and started typing slowly. Soon, rapidly tapping, she became totally absorbed in her work.

< 05.22

Carelessly, Kingsize Bob aimed the toothpick with which he had picked the remnants of the excessive breakfast from between his teeth, at the now almost empty trolley. He snapped his fingers. The servant who had positioned himself motionless at the door after serving breakfast and setting the table, sprang into action right away. The impeccably dressed man quickly stacked everything on the trolley, carefully folded the damask sheet together and put it on top of the empty plates. Within a minute he had pushed out the gently rattling cart and closed the door.

Very satisfied he stood up, bellowed loudly and walked to his desk, where he pressed the red lights on the control panel. Today he did not want to be disturbed at all.

He grabbed his smartphone, walked to the fireplace, which still contained some half charred logs from Sunday, and stood in front of the wide fireplace. Lorre, the red-tailed grey parrot that had adorned the chimney from the start, looked straight at his face with shiny dead eyes. Because this bird, which he had previously kept in his room for twelve years, had been his first successful independent preparation of an animal, he had given her this place of honor.

He stepped on the hearth, stretched his left finger and pressed briefly on the right eye.

Promptly the whole chimney silently rotated 180 degrees around its axis, so that he ended up on the other side of the wall, where there was a wide corridor that gradually sloped down.

The lighting was switched on automatically and in the distance, precisely 728 feet away from the chimney, he could see the entrance door to the bunker.

The dark figure standing next to it was cowboy Pete, who, in full dress with his .45 Colt revolvers on his hips, was on guard.

To make it easy for himself and to cover the distance quickly, he had bought himself a Segway.

He stepped on and pleasantly drifting, reached the little hall where Pete was guarding the entrance to his sanctuary.

The only other door was on the right.

This emergency door gave access to a system of corridors, through which he could unseen, among other things, reach the water source and the stables.

He stopped the Segway, walked on to Pete and, without holding back, gave him a merciless kick in his crotch.

Entertained, he listened to Pete's howling. It had been a good kick, he heard. Pete reacted in the same way as the high striker at the fair. The harder the blow, the more successful the result.

The entrance door, which in terms of size and thickness could just as well have served as a safe door for a bank, slowly rotated open, causing the characteristic smells and sounds of a jungle to ripple into the hallway.

He gave Pete a pat on the back and expressed his appreciation with a smile. "Thank you, dude. You made a great start to my day."

He rubbed his hands as he walked in. Expressionless, Pete stood by and watched as the door slowly turned back and closed with a barely audible dull click.

< 05.23

Once again, one of Holgers' teammates had been driving his Jaguar and they had followed one of the sinisterly dark SUVs of EUAT92. While they were being piloted through the traffic in The Hague without any problems, Lémarc had, as he had promised Sytsema, spoken to his chief and told him that the inspector had been deployed at UNBI as of now until further notice. He had promised the man that, as soon as he was there, he would order his assistant to arrange the necessary paperwork. After

returning Sytsema's mobile phone, he had taken his own smartphone and called Holyester.

He had informed him of Dr. Winter's findings, which confirmed their earlier suspicions. Holyester probably hadn't had much time, for he hadn't allowed the conversation to last long and had sounded rather snappy. Nevertheless, he had quietly listened to Lémarc's motives, which convinced him that Hakon must have been kidnapped. Without objections he agreed with him and had given Lémarc carte blanche, which meant that he could use all the capacity of UNBI and had free access to all the investigative services of the UN. Carte blanche! He was perplexed. He thought it was unique. Something that even Hakon had never been given.

Finding Hakon was therefore considered even more important than his investigation into Spiderweb. Holger, who sat to the left next to him, poked him out of his thoughts and reported that they were there. With Sytsema and Holger on his heels, Lémarc barged into the UNBI building and immediately walked on to the Security Center to leave Sytsema there, so that he could be registered as an additional detective with UNBI.

Holger informed him that he would go through the security procedures with the head of the Security Center. As soon as he was ready and Sytsema was accredited, he would report to him. Lémarc gestured that he had heard him and hurried on to register the confiscated items, so that the technical experts could start working on them immediately.

As soon as he had signed the last form, he grabbed the bags from the counter.

He wanted to get them out as soon as possible. However, he didn't get any further than the hall, where the site manager intercepted him. Contrary to his name, Jean La Grande, who was born in Marseille, was small in size, but nevertheless he was not easily overlooked. He was perfectly suited for his function. He had intensely dark eyes, which seemed to look piercingly straight through you.

He did not tolerate any excuses and, during each investigation, checked that the law and generally applicable norms and values were respected. Nothing escaped his attention and with a sharp tongue he let you know where a border had been crossed or where the case was shaky. Jean did

an excellent job, but his intransigent attitude made him unpopular and often led to heated discussions. Lémarc had already had to arbitrate countless times between him and Hakon, who adopted a much looser approach.

Although Lémarc was in a hurry and Jean didn't block his path, it didn't even occur to him to walk past the site manager. "It's a good thing I meet you, Lémarque," Jean began, as always, bending his name in French. He looked at the bags that Lémarc had with him. "Registered, I presume?" Lémarc nodded in the affirmative. "Stuff from De Jong and those INN people. It has to be examined immediately." "Of course, but you are on the wrong track. Everyone is in the CINEMA. The technical guys too. Everyone is waiting for you." That's why the corridors seemed deserted and it was so quiet everywhere, Lémarc thought. Everyone, as far as their work allowed, was in the nerve center, where all investigations were coordinated and where the central briefing took place. Because the windowless walls were covered with screens, information and overview boards, the large hall was soon christened 'The CINEMA'.

Jean walked with Lémarc and informed him that Jens had put the journalist and the INN cameraman separately in the small interrogation rooms, but that until now they hadn't let go of anything special. He subtly reminded him that they were suspected of terrorist involvement.

In other words, Lémarc knew that evidence had to be found, otherwise Jean had no choice but to release them after 24 hours. Then UNBI could expect an indictment from INN immediately afterwards, which would not exactly put UNBI in a favorable light. Lémarc had to admit that, frankly, he had no idea. At the moment, he could only rely on the information provided by crisis manager Lam.

However, he did have other, remarkable news. He told Jean the surprising outcome of Dr. Winter's DNA research. "The limo was empty? C'est pas possible!" (*Impossible!*). Overwhelmed, he remained silent. Lémarc nodded his head metronomically.

He agreed with Lémarc's theory and, like him, saw the need to keep this information within the walls of UNBI. Together they entered the glorious CINEMA.

< 05.24

Barbara was satisfied that, given the short time span, it didn't look bad at all. She corrected a few typographical errors, saved the article and stretched her back. Leaning back, she put her hands behind her neck and started massaging her shoulder muscles with her tired fingers. "Hey, Barbara. Need some help?"

The offer came from Mike, who showed up next to her and put three pictures next to each other on her desk. In the first photo she recognized Hakon and Marilyn, who were in the company of a distinguished looking gentleman. The second and third photos showed only Marilyn and the same man. "But, uh, what am I supposed to do with these?" Mike looked at her with an uncertain look and said: "Well, you asked if I wanted to see if there was a link between Hakon and MacMarkland?" Oh yes, she did. It had completely escaped her. "Sorry, Mike. You're right. Take a seat with it. I have a deadline.

I'll be right back."

She did her best to ignore Russ, which frankly wasn't easy, and asked Hans if he wanted to include the footage in her article. Then she walked back as naturally as possible, uncomfortably aware of Russ' eyes, which she felt burning on her back.

"Alright. That's settled. Now us, Mike." She grabbed the three pictures and tiredly asked him for an explanation. "Well ...", he began, "... in this picture ...", and he pointed to the unknown, well-dressed man, "... you see MacMarkland. This guy is very rich and owns a lot of companies. Although he is one of the richest people on earth, little has been known about him over the last ten years. Maybe that's because of what happened to him ten years ago. He was kidnapped by Casanova for a couple of weeks and finally freed by Hakon, who was still working for Interpol at the time. Except for this picture, which was taken during the party after his liberation, I haven't found a connection between Hakon and that MacMarkland anywhere.

This is the only picture I have been able to find where he and Hakon are together." Mike moved the picture a little to the side and pointing at the

other two, he continued: "Those two were taken during the launch of a satellite. I added them because they are the only indirect link I could find. All three pictures show the same gorgeous blonde." Mike shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry, Barbara. That's all I have for you." She thanked Mike, spread out the pictures and looked at them thoughtfully. The lesbian Marilyn appeared in all three. She was a friend of Hakon's, Barbara knew.

But what the hell could she have to do with MacMarkland? Maybe it didn't mean anything, but she couldn't let go of the idea that Hakon had given them cameras and smartphones from that company.

< 05.25

Although Onawa had taken the time to scrutinize all the rooms in detail, discovering nothing special at all, Lord MacMarkland had not been bored for a moment and continued to look at her achievements with uninterrupted and great interest.

Even when Sandra was present, he kept his eye on the GRID, on which he watched Onawa, who was busy systematically investigating the bedrooms.

While he was following her progress, Sandra let him know that the new smartphones were working very well and that Barbara Kronkite, through Ewin LeFours, was now sure that Hakon hadn't been in the limousine. The 'Hakon' intervention protocol would start as soon as Barbara called Dick Holyester. He was extremely pleased with this good news. It had taken a lot of headaches and time to find a way to achieve this.

The possibilities were endless and all of them had to be tested on their probability. Eventually a ranking had been created, after which a script was prepared for each possibility. Without Sandra it would have been impossible to have everything ready on time. It was truly magnificent that it had been done in the most favorable way. Meanwhile he saw that Onawa had reached the living room. Unlike the other doors, this one was closed and he watched as she carefully operated the little camera.

As soon as it was inside, he was on the edge of his chair and with eyes that seemed to be glued to the GRID, he tried to understand what he saw.

That half-transparent sphere had to be something very special, because Sandra didn't give any sign for minutes. Finally she came forward and said that GUARD hadn't been able to detect any sign of danger and that she had given Onawa permission to enter the living room. Meanwhile, she activated an additional image area on the GRID in which a row of documents was shown. At the same time he heard Sandra's voice. "The register check shows that this house has been empty for about thirty years. The building isn't known to the energy companies. I was able to find a newspaper clipping from the local newspaper of Broetsthal, in which it says that the last resident, a certain Pete Philpedoe, locally known as cowboy Pete, is missing. After this, no new info can be found about the house or this man.

With regard to the hemisphere in the living room, there is not much I can say at the moment. Inside there is some kind of activity. I have picked up a slight humming noise and four different light signals, each of which has its own frequency. For a proper analysis I need more input." Sandra was silent.

The GRID showed Onawa, who opened the door and stepped inside.

With her hand she tapped on her hairband and immediately the room was illuminated by a bright white light. With his eyes wide open, he stared at the screen. He had expected something completely different.

< 05.26

Behind the counter, on the control panel that was invisible to guests, Joost had seen that Marilyn came down on time. Although she was dressed very simply in pale jeans with a terribly worn sweater, he thought she looked like she was ready to be devoured.

With her inseparable tablet pc under one arm and an elongated, flat packet under the other, he saw her nonchalantly wandering through the double entrance doors to the front part of the guest house. She strolled to the large table that was used for regulars, which stood in the middle of the room, and moved to her regular seat.

She didn't seem to notice at all that she was pulling everyone's gaze towards her.

Shaking his head - he really couldn't understand that the incredibly intelligent Marilyn could be so ignorant in some areas - he put soup and bread on a tray and filled her mug with coffee, which he had made especially for her from his hand milled blend of six different kinds of beans.

Balancing the tray on his right hand, he brought her lunch, which she seemed to desperately need. In the light from her tablet pc, which she had placed open in front of her, the skin of her face seemed translucent. He wondered when she had slept really well for the last time. He elegantly placed the tray in front of her. "Madam, your lunch." He wanted to address her severely and tell her to close her tablet pc, so she knew what she was eating, but Marilyn was too quick. She pushed her tablet pc aside, looked at it with a radiant, pearl-white smile and gestured that she had something to tell him.

As he bowed to her, she pulled his head closer and whispered: "I've got something for you, but before you unwrap it, I'd like to ask you if those four creeps at the bar really got through the screening. The way they look at me gives me the creeps. I wouldn't think Sandra would overlook these types of people."

Darn! Marilyn had seen them looking at her. He had hired the four that she meant for the next few days and he hadn't thought about telling them not to pay attention to her. Especially Juan, 'The Nose', couldn't keep his eyes off Marilyn, he saw. As if he didn't know what she was talking about, he looked at the bar, after which he declared: "Oh, those guys. No, they're not sweethearts, but they're old buddies of mine from my time at the Foreign Legion. I guarantee that they don't mean any harm. They will stay for two or three days at the most." He told the four veterans with a hand command that they had to sit somewhere else and saw with relief that Marilyn believed him. Her suspicious look disappeared and with an exuberant sparkle in her eyes she gave him the flat package. "Here you go, Joost. For you." She made it look as if it was just a small thing. She picked up the remote control of the TV that was hanging in the corner, turned on INN and started to eat stoically.

However, he knew better and instinctively knew that it had something to do with her last experiment. He sat down next to her, curiously unpacked it and read the short card, written in scribbles. He admirably looked at the indistinguishable quill from all sides. Undoubtedly it would work flawlessly, as stated on the card. His heart swelled with pride. Their blonde had done it again and the first thing she had made had been for him.

With affection he pulled her close to him, kissed her gently on her cheek and whispered that her gift was a direct hit.

In the meantime, INN announced on TV that it was switching to The Hague live.

< 05.27

Lémarc knew that Hakon was loved, but he hadn't expected that so many people would be present.

The 'CINEMA' was really jam-packed. All the chairs, except the three at the head of the large conference table, were taken.

Everyone was talking to everyone, which made it look like a chicken coop in here, though it sounded like a civilized murmur outside. In the back the heads of department, meanwhile regularly pointing to the organization chart, were discussing the matter heatedly.

The cackling was deafening, but as soon as one realized that he and Jean had entered the CINEMA, the volume gradually decreased and as soon as they took up their regular positions, there was not a sound to be heard anywhere.

In deathly silence, everyone stared at Hakon's unoccupied place at the head end with rigid faces of sorrow and anger, and at the red framed question mark on the back wall, which was now clearly visible because of the empty chair.

It seemed to mock them, to challenge them. Lémarc took a moment to organize his thoughts and his eyes wandered over the rest of the wall, almost the entire surface of which was taken up by nine screens that together formed a colossal display on which the entire organization of

Spiderweb was visually and clearly portrayed. It looked like a web, with the red question mark in the middle. The most important link, the actual leader, had not been identified to date. Furthermore, the web consisted of four main threads, which indicated Spiderwebs' influence. A main thread ran from the heart to each corner screen.

In the left upper screen the oil industry was shown, with the branches to all the companies where Spiderweb turned the oil tap.

The right upper screen was assigned to the banking industry and showed all the banking institutions of which Spiderweb possessed the safe key.

The lower screen on the right hand side was used to indicate in which weapon companies Spiderweb had their finger on the trigger.

Finally, in the lower left corner of the screen, with name and photo, were shown the politicians who were depending on the Spiderweb cash infusion. For each part a separate team of specialists was appointed, who all had the most modern means at their disposal and because their respective departments were set up around 'CINEMA', the lines of communication were short.

Hakon's intensive detection method and a constant stream of information from whistleblowers had caused an overwhelming amount of evidence, which, after being bundled and archived, was kept conveniently arranged on the screens between the corner screens.

Hakon's idea had made it a lot easier to expose the underlying connections and everyone involved could quickly read how the developments were progressing.

This efficient way of working had ensured that the net around Spiderweb could be closed relatively quickly, as a result of which two months ago Hakon had ordered the management of the infiltrated companies to be dismantled in one go. It was possible that Hakon's kidnapping was an act of revenge, but Lémarc could not possibly come up with a sensible explanation as to how this could be to Spiderweb's advantage.

He stood up - the shrill scraping of the chair legs sounded painfully loud - and opened the meeting, after which he asked Pierre, the neurotic IT specialist, to come to him. He handed him the two evidence bags and

said: "I have here the stuff from the INN team and that old man. I want all the data as soon as possible. The smartphones have to be first."

Pierre's pale hands with the broken nails grabbed the bags firmly and nervously nodding, he replied: "Piece of cake, chief. Give me five minutes and you'll have everything." While Pierre walked back with the bags clutched to his chest, Lémarc saw that the TV screen on the left wall was tuned to INN. After the advertisement they would come up with a summary of the events in The Hague. Afterwards, the press conferences of Interpol commissioner James Taylor and the UN chief Dick Holyster would be broadcast live. If he hurried, he had just enough time to inform everyone. "All right, ladies and gentlemen. It has been a terrifying and hectic morning for all of us, but before I inform you, I want everyone to keep everything I tell you ab-so-lute-ly indoors."

He stopped for a moment, to let his words get through, and after gazing around the seriously nodding faces, he continued. "DNA testing has shown that there was no one in Hakon's limousine. The car was empty."

As he expected, the news struck like a bomb and it wouldn't be long before the disbelieving silence turned into a cacophony of questions and comments.

To be ahead of them, he raised his hand, in a conjuring way. "Wait. The good news is that Hakon did not die in the attack, but his whereabouts are unknown. Soon there will be enough time for questions.

We are about to watch INN's broadcast, so that everyone will be aware of the same news facts. Then I want to discuss all the possibilities, theories and ideas with you, after which we will start a structured search to find Hakon. Apart from this, two journalists from INN were arrested.

According to the crisis manager, they turned out to be at the scene of the attack and at the hospital sooner than is normally possible. It seems very likely that they were informed prematurely. Pierre is already working on their smartphones. After the broadcast, he can tell us what is on them." Satisfied that he had managed to maintain order, Lémarc turned his chair a quarter of a turn and sat down. He was just in time. On TV, INN's whirling news logo appeared and the murmur around him ebbed away, to stop at the same time as the logo. As they waited for the broadcast to

begin, Pierre's frustrated, pinch-hard "MERDE!" suddenly tore the peace in half.

< 05.28

If the large hall in which Kingsize Bob was currently located were a museum, the curator would describe the reason for the construction, the size of the space and the layout as follows:

"This impressive space is connected to the ranch from the office by a slightly sloping corridor. The hall itself is part of a complex that is referred to in its entirety as 'The Bunker'. The Bunker is two foot underground and the three-foot thick walls are made of reinforced concrete. The internal dimensions of length and width are 750 by 450 feet at a height of 30 feet.

It was built at the time by the father of Robert J. VanderBeek IV and was originally intended as a shelter against a possible nuclear attack by the Russians. VanderBeek III fought in the Second World War, after which he became extremely anti-communist. At the time of the Cuban crisis, he was convinced that the world would perish due to an atomic war, which led him to start building this shelter at the end of 1962. This hall was originally intended to accommodate all the livestock that had to provide him with sufficient meat, milk and eggs. The other rooms offer more than enough space to survive in relative luxury. Next to the living area are a kitchen, a workshop and storage rooms. The Bunker is completely self-sufficient.

An underground well provides crystal-clear water, there is an air renewal system and a sophisticated placement of mirrors even, albeit indirectly, provides daylight below. In the central boiler room is a machine that converts human and animal waste into heat and electricity. The man was of course obviously paranoid, but his genius cannot be denied. Unfortunately, as a husband and father, he did not fare as well.

In the same year that The Bunker was finished, his wife died. Her death came suddenly and although it has never been proven, there were rumors that VanderBeek III had given her an all too loving caress.

After her funeral he sent his nine-year-old son to his family in New York, where he lived until his graduation. It took him 17 years to get back. One day after his graduation, Robert J. VanderBeek IV was informed that his father had died in an ordinary pub fight. He was the only son to inherit the ranch and has been running the business with great success ever since.”

After giving his former tormentor Pete a well-deserved punch in the groin, Kingsize Bob walked towards the office in an excellent mood. To get there, he could choose between several routes, all of which were equally interesting. He remembered very well the vision he had had when he first entered the immense, at that time still empty hall. There was room here. Here he could do a great job.

At a young age he had already become involved in the work of his uncle, who was a taxidermist, in New York. By coincidence, at the age of ten, he had secretly witnessed how his uncle had been dealing with a cat. He had been so fascinated, that he regularly sneaked up to his hiding place and watched.

Of course he was caught and punished, but that didn't stop him from talking and whining until his uncle gave in. It soon became clear that he had a natural talent for it.

Under the guidance of his uncle, he had managed, at the age of 15, to independently prepare and set up his parrot, who was lying dead in his cage one day.

In the years that followed he assisted his uncle as often as he could and when he returned to the ranch, he mastered the craft down to the last detail.

Even as a rancher, he turned out to be no joke and with each year that passed, he almost doubled his capital, so that his vision soon took shape.

He prepared all the game he caught on his safaris himself, after which it was given a place in the hall. He had divided the hall into six continents, each depicting a part of the world, including sounds and smells. Now, after years of hunting and poaching, the segments finally began to look like he had imagined and he could take a trip around the world whenever he wished. Not in 80 days, but in 80 minutes. Having walked through the

jungle earlier this week and visited the polar bear on his ice floe yesterday, he decided to walk across the savannah to the office today.

Despite the three antelopes and the lions that were well hidden in the grass under the acacia, the plain was still rather empty. Thank God that prick of an Eriksson was dead. As soon as peace had returned, he had to go hunting again. He still had some nice open spaces, where a giraffe and a couple of elephants would fit perfectly. With the future scene in mind, he had meanwhile reached his office and energetically walked upstairs.

The simple and functional office inside was built on a platform. The front wall was made entirely of glass, so that he could see his entire empire at all times. This was his world. This is where he preferred to be. Here he could be himself without being in danger. Excitedly, he sat down behind the robust original dining table of his great-great-grandfather, which he used as a desk. It didn't bother him at all that the solid oak furniture clearly showed that it had been in use for decades. He groped under the table top, flipped the main switch and opened his laptop.

The widescreen display that was connected to it lit up at the same time and reflected the status of his ranch. In addition to his company's accounting information, the program provided him with detailed information about his staff and security.

Mechanization and automation, as well as software developed especially for him, had cost him a lot of money, but it had been worth every penny. For example, all animals were provided with a chip, so that he could see exactly where they were located and how many there were.

The counter of the number of cattle at this moment was 1,020,987, a small growth compared to yesterday.

Scrolling through the overview he had gone through all the statuses of breeding, buying and selling beef and horse within a few minutes and he knew exactly how the stocks were doing. He then checked the workforce.

Of the 231 men and women, 198 stayed on the prairie with the cattle. The remaining 33 were in and around the ranch.

Everything was as it should be, but judging by the list of activities of his 10-man army of bodyguards, it was high time that these people were

given something extra to do. Apart from staying in shape, they hadn't been doing much in the last few weeks, he saw. His foreman soon had to organize another hunt for a few illegal immigrants from Mexico or for lost Indians.

That would keep them on their toes. Now that he knew that nothing special was happening at his ranch, he could devote himself entirely to his other business.

Actually, he first had to give his legal executive the order to get his officers released as soon as possible, but he couldn't help but click on the INN shortcut. He had no doubt that they would keep repeating the sensational images of the attack on Eriksson until noon and he was eager to take another look at them. A quarter of an hour more or less did not matter much anymore. It was exactly as he thought.

With pleasure he looked at the burning wreckage and listened to the nagging clichéd commentary, after which the commentary switched to a kind of battlefield at the local hospital.

After the commercial clip, the presenter promised, exclusive recordings would be broadcast. Curiously he kept watching, only to be surprised to see a running Stiletto, who to his horror was shot shortly afterwards. He stared at the screen incredulously, heard that INN was now switching live to The Hague and saw that from a heavily damaged hall a man in a wheelchair was pushed outside.

< 05.29

After his wife woke him up from that strange dream - James could only remember being tied up in a grey, foggy environment - he had no idea at first where he was, until he tried to sit up straight. His stiff, painful body had immediately brought him back to reality. Lémarc was gone. Apparently, he had been deeply asleep, for he had not even heard him leave. With difficulty he had climbed out of bed and with the help of his wife he had washed himself as well as he could.

There wasn't a single spot he hadn't felt. Even his jaws had hurt when he brushed his teeth. His wife had brought his Sunday Harris Tweed with

matching tie, shirt and shiny brushed shoes. He had had a hard time hoisting himself into it, to admit with great disappointment that he could barely move normally.

Now, forced to sit in a wheelchair, he was taken through the hall to the exit. Somewhat embarrassed he remembered his unfortunate entry, and he saw that in the meantime a path had been wiped clean between the colorful and glistening grains of glass.

The nurse quickly pushed him outside. He was awaited by the press in large numbers and as soon as he reached the platform, he was blinded by the repeated flashing of many cameras.

A glowing sense of satisfaction and pride engulfed him. For ten years he had searched. He had not given up, but persevered.

The laborious work, the many hours he had spent searching in archives. It didn't matter anymore. Casanova was dead. The hunt for him was over.

In the stroboscopic flickering light, a bouquet of microphones loomed up in front of his face and nearby someone asked loudly: "Commissioner Taylor! You are now on the air live and we would like to know what you have to say to the world after this impressive action." In his mind, he had imagined this moment and what he would say so many times, that he did not have to think long.

Triumphantly straightening his back, he said with a powerful voice:

"Ladies and gentlemen. I am pleased to inform you that I arrested Andrei Zlatar, a.k.a. Casanova, at around half past eight this morning. In close cooperation with all the police forces around the world, Interpol has invested 10 years of effort to ensure that justice is done."

The way he had imagined it, however, was different, but during his stay at the hospital he had had enough time to rehearse his statement. He continued with confidence:

"As you now know, the arrest of this extremely dangerous criminal unfortunately did not go without a hitch, because..." A barrage of questions made it impossible for him to speak further.

Calmly he raised a hand and only after the noise subsided, did he speak further.

“Because while the arrest was in full swing, the team had to deal with an assassin, who killed Casanova before he could be taken into custody.

In the ensuing gunfight, the leader of the arrest team, after this killer attacked and injured him, had to shoot the man in self-defense. The shooter, whose name I cannot give you for security reasons, has been treated for his wounds and is doing well under the circumstances.” Somewhere in the crowd, several journalists shouted almost simultaneously: “Was Casanova involved in the attack?” “Who was this assassin?” “Is Spiderweb responsible?” Raising his hand again, James waited until things calmed down.

“I regret that I do not have any definite answers for you, but I am sure that your questions will be answered in due course.” It was clear to everyone that the conversation was over, but as the nurse turned his wheelchair, a loud-sounding female voice right next to him drew his attention.

“Uh, Commissioner Taylor. Are you assuming that, after you have recovered, you will be involved in the investigation into the death of Hakon Eriksson?” It was a good question. One that he had already asked himself. The nurse avoided the need to answer. In a snappy way, she told the journalist that the show was over and that her patient needed rest, and then she pushed him in straight away. Even if he wanted to answer, he didn’t even know himself what he would do. Because of his work this wasn’t the first time he got hit, but his wife had pointed out to him that this time he had crawled through the eye of the needle. She had looked at him worriedly and said that this climax to his career was a perfect time to take early retirement. He had rejected her proposal offendedly, but he was not getting any younger. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

< 05.30

It was still very early in the chilly, wet morning of the first of June and in the port of New York pier six was lying desolate in the humid, grey morning light.

A long way from the rust-covered, crumbly quay, the weather-influenced shed stood, unkempt and unused. Inside it looked even more neglected,

if that were possible.

Apart from a free space in the middle of the spotty, partly cracked concrete floor, the space seemed to be mainly used for the storage of superfluous rubbish. Along all the walls, peeling racks - almost sinking through their joints - carried tins, bags and boxes. In between were towers of haphazardly crookedly stacked crates.

Although there were several fluorescent tubes covered with fly poo, only one was burning. In its mercilessly bright light, Enzo took a step back, breathing heavily, and looked with satisfaction at the result of his efforts. God damn it, he hadn't done this in such a long time that he had forgotten what it felt like to be strong and virile.

Looking down on the blond young man, he saw with satisfaction that his handsome face now looked a lot less attractive. From the torn eyebrows a dripping red trail ran down the jawline over his victim's sweaty upper body. His right eye was closed and some of his teeth were spread over the dirty concrete floor. The snot ran out of his nose, his mouth gaped open, and from it hung a thick, red mixed salivary strand.

The moaning scumbag, someone who obviously visited a gym on a regular basis, had just graduated as a lawyer and because of his family connections, nothing had stood in his way. He would have had a glorious career waiting for him, which might well have ended up in the White House, if it hadn't been for the wretch making a very stupid mistake. At 2:30 a.m. he, Salvatore Enzo Bonabino, had been awakened by his lieutenant Eberto, who had urged him to come with him.

With his eyes full of sleep, he had followed him to the living room, where he found his youngest daughter, the apple of his eye, crying and pretty badly hurt.

He knew she would be going to the graduation party at her university that night. Eberto had brought her and would keep an eye on her from a distance. His lieutenant had been nervous, rightly so, when Enzo sat next to Julia and comfortingly took her hands in his. With a finger under her chin, he had carefully lifted her head and looked closely at the injuries. With a thick lip, a black eye and a broken front tooth, Julia's sweet face had looked terrible.

It was only after a long time of insistence that she finally turned her eyes to him.

Her desperate, miserable look had pierced his heart like a knife and immediately he had seen the far too big pupils in those beautiful eyes, which were drowned by thick tears.

Choking and stumbling she had confirmed his suspicion and told him who it had been.

Furiously he had rocked her in his arms and had sworn to her that the guy would never hurt her again.

He could not remember how long he had comforted his daughter, but after a while he had calmed her down to such an extent that she could be taken to her bedroom.

As soon as she had left the room, he had sharply looked at Eberto and barked at him that he had to fetch Carlo and Gino in order to pick up that son of a bitch who had dared to molest his daughter and deliver him undamaged because he wanted to take care of it in person. His lieutenant had been very nervous when he had barked to him that he expected to hear his explanation for his failure tomorrow.

Less than three quarters of an hour later he had come face to face with the clown who had had the filthy courage to attack his youngest daughter with his filthy hands. In the meantime Eberto, Carlo and Gino had taken up their positions at an appropriate distance, after which he, out of anger, had brutally informed the fearful and seemingly innocent student that he, Don Salvatore Enzo Bonabino, who in his capacity as Capo di tutti capi (*boss of all bosses*) of New York managed the affairs of this metropolis, was not to be mocked.

He had caught his breath again and it had felt good to teach this piece of shit a lesson or two, the image of Julia's desperate eyes caused him to get into a raging state again.

It was time for the second round. He fiercely raised his gloves and shifted the boxing bracket into the perfect position. After accurately estimating the distance, he took a step forward and struck hard.

< 05.31

Internally glowing with joy that she had done Joost such a favor with the quill, she checked her surroundings and found that INN kept everyone chained to the television.

Luckily, she couldn't find anyone who was still paying any attention to her. She pushed her tablet pc behind her plate and as she took an occasional bite of her lunch, she started looking at the images of the last hour at double speed. She wasn't worried that Onawa was in danger, because she knew Sandra was watching over her.

Lovingly she watched as her lover entered the house and searched all the rooms like a silent shadow.

Knowing what Onawa was looking for, Marilyn was astonished that nothing in the house was locked up and no alarm was sounded anywhere.

She was just beginning to doubt the accuracy of the location, when it turned out that a door had been locked and after Onawa had sent in a cockroach, she held her breath.

Hoping that this shiny hemisphere would finally confirm extraterrestrial intelligence, she eagerly let the recording run at normal speed as soon as Onawa opened the door. In the now bright light, she was rather disappointed to see that the mysterious sphere turned out to be nothing more than an ordinary, transparent plastic tent, containing only a chair and a small table. To her surprise, the table contained two devices: a white, square box and a flattened pyramid of yellow plastic.

Both, computer and router respectively, came from Markland Communications and were identical to the ones she had in her lab upstairs. Onawa had entered the tent and was now so close by that it could be clearly seen that the computer was connected to the router by means of a cable and that the fiberglass wire and power cables were bundled into a cabinet on the wall under the window.

While Sandra reported that the router was working, but the computer was switched off, Onawa took a box out of her waist bag. Her slim fingers, which Marilyn knew were so great at massaging and caressing, carefully picked up a spider and held it against one of the USB ports. The

insect developed by Marilyn was activated by contact with the metal, after which it, following its programming, would crawl into the opening to make a connection with its legs in the right places. Once the computer was started, the spider would open the door wide for SPY and CRYPTO.

After Sandra's advice not to turn on the computer itself, but to wait and see what would happen, Onawa was instructed to follow the wiring and go in search of the source.

Marilyn wondered where it could be, because there were no buildings in the surrounding area.

< 05.32

She must have stood there like an idiot, Barbara thought, but she simply couldn't stop smiling. She had managed to deliver the report to Red/Tec just in time, so that the content could not become public too soon. Only then had she informed her boss, who had taken immediate action, so that the news, as Hakon had asked, was broadcast at exactly the right time.

Shortly after that their chief had entered the department and after a short speech in which he thanked everyone and Barbara in particular for their efforts, he had opened the first bottle of champagne with a loud pop.

Meanwhile, everyone was in a festive mood and the congratulations of their advertisers reached them in large numbers.

She was laughing widely with her colleagues, when she suddenly noticed that Hans was staring into his glass with a face like an earwig. She poked him and asked: "Hey, what's wrong with you? If you don't like it, you'll get something else, won't you?"

He looked up grumpily. "No, I hate that Ewin's smartphone doesn't transmit data anymore and..." She shrugged her shoulders and interrupted him. "Well, that was to be expected. That's not so bad, is it? What we did get, helped us to get some great news. So cheer up, man." He shook his head and said, sighing: "I know, but after the image turned black, I wanted to gather all the information. In one clear file, you know? But I couldn't find anything at all."

She looked at him in astonishment. "Huh, what do you mean?" Looking sadly, Hans said: "Well, everything is gone. The icons, the program you had installed and even the log files. Except for the files I made of the images myself, everything disappeared like snow before the sun, without leaving a single bit behind. I worked with the system administrator to save what could be saved, but nothing at all, no data. I think I'm going crazy. The system administrator is desperate, because according to him it's impossible that all this just disappears without leaving a trace."

She looked compassionately at his unhappy face. If only she could... Hold on ... She looked at him cheerfully and said: "Wait a minute. If you could hold my glass for a moment ..."

She took her wallet out of her bag, pulled the card out and gave it to Hans. "Here. If you call this number, that friendly woman from Markland Communications will want to help you as well." Hans' face immediately brightened up. "I hadn't thought of that. That will save us. You are an angel."

He grabbed the card gratefully, pushed his glass into her hands and sprinted away. She looked at him with a little pity. Men ... He must have leaned on a button with his big thumb and accidentally wiped out the whole thing ... She put her glass to her lips, to discover that she must have unconsciously emptied it.

Well, she also had Hans' full glass. She took a few sips, then turned around and dumped the other, empty glass somewhere on a desk nearby.

She had a little chat here and there, wandering around the department in a cheerful way. Although she was actually looking for Russ, halfway through her third glass of champagne she met her chief. In a very good mood, he raised his glass to her. "Ha. There we have our star. What a great scoop you gave us! To your health!" With a big smile he emptied his glass in one gulp.

She wanted to join him wholeheartedly, but suddenly everything around her seemed to revolve. Wavering, she grabbed a chair. Blimey, she was so tired. Her eyes hurt and her legs seemed to be made of lead. "Christ, Barbara. Are you all right? I don't want to meddle, but it looks like you'd better go home. Nothing important is happening here for the time being.

Ewin and Charles will be released sometime today, but that will be taken care of by the day shift. So ...” He pointed to Russ and continued: “There’s your assistant. Let him take you home, yes?” He was right, she thought. She was exhausted. “Okay, I will. Thank you, chief.” Tired but luckily not dizzy anymore, she shuffled off to Russ. Before she could get to him, however, Hans stopped her and by the look on his face, his problems were not over yet. She remained calm and hoping that he would understand the hint, she looked strikingly at her watch. He didn’t seem to notice and in a sad mood he told her that the number she had given him didn’t work. All the other companies he had called thought they were dealing with a prankster, because no one had such a technique at their disposal. After he had been called a half-assed nitwit for the umpteenth time, he had given up.

When he asked her if she could think of anything else, she shook her head no, too tired to talk. “Well, then I’m out of options as well. I don’t understand it at all.” Disheartened, he walked away from her, mumbling to himself.

Another unexplainable thing where the name of Markland appeared, Barbara thought as she walked on. She suppressed a yawn and saw that Russ had already seen her.

He separated himself from the group of colleagues with whom he had been chatting and strolled towards her. “Hey, Barb,” he started laughing, but he kept quiet abruptly when she suddenly had to yawn openly. “O ... kay ... I see.” He put his glass away and grabbed her by her arm. “First breakfast and then sleep.”

He conveniently guided her away from the department and as soon as they were out of sight, he put an arm around her waist. She leaned against him as they took the elevator down, only to leave the INN building a little later, walking close to each other.

< 05.33

Kingsize Bob had been impatient to watch the guy in the wheelchair, who according to the information bar was called James Taylor and was a commissioner at Interpol, being pushed to the platform, after which it had

taken a fucking long time before the hyenas of the press had given him the floor. Tense, he had listened to his story, until he understood that Casanova had been killed by Stiletto and that shortly afterwards Stiletto himself had been killed in a gunfight with the police. His rising anger and astonishment soon turned to joy.

With a sigh of relief, he automatically grabbed the bottle in front of him, poured himself a glass of whiskey and took a big sip. Bingo. Both of them gone. It was a pity about the Mexican, because he seemed promising, but he wasn't the only one on earth.

There was plenty of talent. Chuckling, he thought it would at least save him quite a bit of money.

He leaned back and relaxed while listening to that quack from the UN, who had nothing new to say and who certainly did not impress him. The old man's speech was mainly cliché after cliché and when he concluded with the insistent message that UNBI would do everything in its power to find and punish the culprit, he laughed so loudly that he got the hiccups.

Did that bastard really think they could trace him, Robert J. VanderBeek IV, a large industrial and multi-billionaire?

He had made them all look like shit by clearing out that nail on his coffin under their noses, so that all their beautiful plans had gone up in smoke - in the form of a thick, smelly, swirling, black column.

Hiccupping and with tears of laughter, he wanted to turn off the TV, but before he could put his money where his mouth was, the logo of the fucking station INN suddenly reappeared on the screen, with the well-known loud announcement that they again had a sensational Breaking News item.

No longer interested, his thumb was already hovering over the remote control's power button, when he noticed that it had something to do with the attack.

As he withdrew his thumb, the bitch of a Kronkite also came back into the picture. Looking as if she was presenting the eighth wonder of the world, she announced that INN had managed to obtain information that proved that UNBI-official Hakon Eriksson had survived the attack.

He stared at the screen where Kronkite came up with all kinds of facts, with the highlight being a recording of a conversation between Tasker and a pathologist-anatomist.

For a moment he sat rigid, until the news sank in. Like a volcano that spontaneously erupted, a glowing red rage shot up in him. Roaring like a lion, he jumped up and with a firm throw he smashed the screen with the remote control. With a crackling sound and a miniature firework of colorful sparks, the broadcast was abruptly interrupted. Cured of the hiccups at once, he stood stiffened and boiling with anger, staring at the remnants of the screen.

Slowly he came to his senses again. As he walked back and forth in front of the destroyed TV, he considered his options. It was annoying that Eriksson was still alive, but that could still be dealt with. Apparently, nobody knew where he was, so there were plenty of possibilities.

Inwardly growling and cursing over the incompetence of Casanova and Stiletto, he made his way to his desk and pulled out the drawer. He took out a new prepaid phone and activated it. It was time to call his family. He fiercely dialed his cousin's number in New York.

ONWARDS TO THE PAST

< 06.01

Approximately 2,500 miles southeast of the hectic city of The Hague, in the only room of a small pyramid, a slender woman sat on her knees in front of the eastern wall. She was busy scraping a groove and despite the almost constant temperature of 20°C her blouse was stained with sweat.

However, she did not allow herself a break and continued to work hard. This was her last chance, because today her license expired.

The pyramid she was examining looked exactly like all the others that could be found in the valley.

It was one of the oldest and also the smallest. It was only 1337 PI long and wide and had a modest height of 85,70 PI. (*Pyramid Inch*). Converted that is about 100 x 100 ft. and about 65 ft. high.

But unlike its many times larger brothers, it contained a hieroglyphic wall.

Like many others, the main room was empty, except for one object.

In the middle of the room was a table made entirely of marble on a base 3 ft. high.

The diameter of the perfectly round top was 28 inches.

From the initial research, everyone had assumed that it was a sacrificial table, until recent scientific evidence had shown that this could not be the case.

What it had served for remained a mystery for the time being. Like the objects in other pyramids, this table was of a degree of perfection that today could only be equaled mechanically.

The hieroglyphs on the eastern wall described that gods had visited the earth and had appointed Pharaoh as their representative.

A text that appeared everywhere in similar terms.

What intrigued her was the fact that so much effort had been made to put such a simple text in such hard-to-build pyramids.

For ten years she had been looking for something that could explain this mystery, but to date she had not found a single clue.

Here, too, she had searched in vain for a month, until this morning, when she got up, she got an idea which might still give her research a positive turn. Because the text stopped so abruptly at the ground, she had figured out that the rest of the text might go under the floor.

With that in mind, she had gone to Ravic at the beginning of the day in the company of her assistant.

Ravic, who she didn't trust one bit and who was constantly watching her as a supervisor on behalf of the Egyptian Supreme Court for Antiquities, had, of course, raised many objections again. He hadn't been enthusiastic at all.

At first, he had arrogantly waved away her request to accompany her as soon as possible with that condescending smile that she had already wanted to knock off his face after two days. She knew she had to be tactical and had shown no sign of her disgust. Humbly she had continued to beg, until that lame man had finally, after long discussions and, of course, after collecting the necessary pecunia, been prepared to go with them after the morning prayers.

That's why, much too late for her liking, she was working herself into a sweat. All her hopes had been shattered when she saw the solid floor and, hesitantly, she had knelt down in front of the east wall. She had grabbed a joint nail and with the courage of despair she had tried to scrape a groove.

To her great amazement this had been very easy and in no time, she had scratched out a groove three feet long and about two inches wide. Apparently over the course of the centuries so much sand and dust had entered the room, that a hardened top layer had formed. She quickly replaced the joint nail with a small trowel, so that she could move faster. As she rushed on, she heard behind her the evil voice of Ravic, who was wound up about the sacrilege she was committing. To her relief, her assistant managed to appease the man by offering him extra money, and with every note rustlingly passing from one hand to the other, Ravic's objections diminished.

While he was slipping away, she heard him murmur that a damaged floor could be repaired later. She continued to work as quickly as possible,

sweating, until she had cleared the entire strip under the lower hieroglyphic line.

Without even giving herself a moment's rest, she grabbed a thick horsehair brush and carefully began to dust the underside of the exposed wall.

After only a few minutes she saw the first notches appear and as she continued to brush, they took shape.

Excitedly, she dusted the 18 ft. long trench as fast as she could and beckoned her assistant.

Before Miquel could respond to the find, she whispered that he shouldn't let anything be noticed and asked him to keep the small fluorescent lamp at about two feet above the groove. Unhindered by the swirling dust, two rows of hieroglyphics immediately revealed themselves.

In the white light the signs were clearly visible and they seemed completely intact, as if the writer had put them there yesterday. Miquel handed her the compact camera and, illuminated by his assistance, she filmed the two hieroglyphic lines. As soon as she was ready, she pushed out the MicroSD card, turned away from Miquel and put it in a secret compartment in her bra strap as fast as she could. She quickly placed a new card, after which she hurriedly made a new recording.

After ten years of experience, she knew that it happened all too often that local authorities suddenly confiscated everything for their own benefit. Based on Ravic's so-called integrity, she assumed that this would also be the case now. She didn't want to think about not getting a chance to translate these two sentences, which had been hidden from the human eye for centuries, herself. Shaking with tension, she dug her notebook out of her dusty backpack, made by her grandmother, and after translating half of the first line, she knew that this find would mean a breakthrough. These two lines would enable her to unravel the mystery of the pyramids and the objects they contained. However, she was not given any more time.

Without her and Miquel noticing, Ravic had returned. He unexpectedly turned up like a ghost behind them. Immediately he saw the exposed signs and pushed her aside so roughly that she almost fell backwards. In

a shrill tone he told her that The Council was responsible for this find and that her investigation ended here.

Suddenly he jumped forward and pulled the camera, the strap of which she had put around her shoulder. His speed surprised her and before she could stop him, the strap snapped, causing her to lose her balance and fall to the ground on her back. Miquel rushed towards her and helped her up. "Did you get hurt?" As she touched the sensitive spot on the back of her head, she whispered: "Bruises and a very big bump on the head, but that's what I'm willing to pay for it. I now know that the old legend my grandmother told me is true. She has always been right, there has been contact."

Her gaze went to Ravic, who stood arrogantly next to her find with his arms crossed.

With her camera nonchalantly in one of his hands, he was haughtily watching them. His challenging gaze made it abundantly clear that they shouldn't try anything.

"Come," she whispered. "We have to get out of here before we are stopped."

In a few steps they had disappeared from Ravic's sight and via the claustrophobic corridor they easily reached the stairs up to the present.

< 06.02

Torstein listened to the vague kitchen sounds that floated towards him on the lazy breeze. The thick, pink painkiller he had secretly taken began to work, and by the time Marit was done, his back would be ready for it again. He wouldn't give in to it, but he was really getting old now. Since the last winter, his joints seemed to be rusted. He had to talk to Marit. They didn't have eternal life and Hakon had to know his origins. Concern and pride fought for priority when he thought of their determined, courageous grandson, who was currently in the news. Together with Eric they had seen the press conferences, as well as the remarkable item that INN had subsequently broadcast. Reassured, they had lunch, after which Eric had gone home to inform Sven. Tonight, there would be a lot to

discuss, but would Hakon come back from this mission in one piece? He didn't doubt his ingenuity, but ... The languid summer sound of rustling trees, rippling waves and the soft creaking of the gently bobbing boat faded away. He had almost fallen asleep, but on hearing Marit's footsteps, he opened his eyes, blinking.

His wife, smiling, put two large glasses of iced tea on the table and sat next to him. She took his right hand in her hands and followed with one finger the dark pattern, which was identical to that of Hakon.

She looked at him lovingly and said quietly: "Torstein, I've thought about it for a long time, and I think it's about time our grandson found out about your family secret. Since he told us what he was up to, I've been thinking about it. We're not getting any younger. He's entitled to it and I think the circumstances are better than when we told his father.

As soon as he knows why his father disappeared, I'm afraid he's going to do exactly the same thing, but I think his chances are much better with that group of friends he has.

When you see what he has accomplished and how he has organized today's stunt, I think he's ready to do it." As so often, Marit had foreseen his worries. "That's certainly true, but if Hakon won't get a woman in his life, then what? If he doesn't provide for offspring soon, who should he leave it to?"

Still holding his hand in hers, she quietly replied: "I'm sure he'll take on his responsibility as soon as he hears about the burden we're carrying."

TRUST IS GOOD ...

< 07.01

After he had handed out a series of well-focused blows, in which the Don could have felt the satisfactory cracking of broken bones right through his gloved fingers, the figure before him had now lost consciousness. Like a piece of tenderly beaten meat, the young man, who was no longer recognizable as such, hung limp in the ropes with which he was tied to the chair.

He had taken his time with this, so that the piece of shit had felt every blow to the maximum as long as he had been able to stretch it, and had shouted out his screams of pain. And you can count on it that he had let him know why this was done to him. With pleasure he remembered the pure desperation, the drooling supplications and empty promises ... But this disgusting son of a bitch deserved no mercy and he had been very harsh in shutting him up and hitting him until he no longer moved.

His daughter's honor was suitably defended and as he stepped away from the bloody body, he informed Eberto that he now needed his [lupara](#) (*sawn-off double-barreled shotgun*), the weapon that had been smuggled in 1862 by his great-grandfather from Corleone, during his emigration from Sicily. For many an opponent or traitor of the Bonabino's, the two holes of the sawn-off double barrels had been the last thing they had seen.

He took up the lupara and, feeling the ridges, remembered the first time his father gave it to him. He had been eight years old and he had not been able to grasp the butt with his tiny hands, but nevertheless the carvings in it had given him enough grip, so that he had not dropped it. Since that day, every night before going to bed, his father had told him the story that belonged to each carving.

After 81 days he knew them all and knew the hardships his family had suffered in order to reach the summit in New York from the deep poverty they had experienced in Sicily.

He himself had added 6 carvings and soon, with the knife belonging to the weapon, after baptizing it in his opponent's blood, he would cut the traditional seventh carving into the butt. The sacred moment was roughly interrupted by the shaking smartphone in his pocket.

He had forgotten to turn off that damn thing he couldn't get used to. At this early hour it would be Maria.

Annoyed, he pulled it out of his pocket, threw it at Eberto and snarled: "Tell my wife I don't want to be disturbed."

< 07.02

Startled by the sudden cry, everyone in the CINEMA had turned around as if on command, to look around curiously and find the culprit. Soon all eyes rested on Pierre, who had jumped up with a loud curse like he had been stung by a bee and was now nervously staring at something on his table. Lémarc exchanged a look of understanding with Jean and got up.

He gestured to everyone that they could continue watching INN's broadcast as he walked towards Pierre, who was desperately looking at a pile of sludge on his desk. Like everyone else, Lémarc had been surprised by the sudden 'MERDE!', but the sharp remark that had been on the tip of his tongue disappeared as soon as he saw the unhappy Pierre standing there. To be honest, he had never before heard the skinny, shy boy raise his voice. Let alone that he had ever heard him swear.

Meanwhile, worried rather than angry, he wondered what on earth could have brought him this far.

Carefully he tapped on Pierre's shoulder and asked what was going on. Startled, Pierre turned around and his wide open, pale blue eyes looked at him from behind the glasses in utter confusion. Lémarc listened with half an ear to James Taylor, who was telling his story behind him on TV, while Pierre said: "I've never seen this before." He pointed to the gunk in front of him. His voice trembled nervously as he continued: "I, uh, I thought I kn-kn-knew everything about, uh, what there is for sale in the field of electronics, uh, but this? This is u-u-unbelievable." In an attempt to calm the miserable looking young man, Lémarc put his hand on Pierre's shoulder and said in a soothing voice: "Just tell me what happened."

Struggling, Pierre took a breath and with a reproachful look at Lémarc, as if it was his fault, he suddenly rattled: “I was working on that journalist’s smartphone. I had removed the battery and wanted to remove the SIM card, but I couldn’t find it anywhere. Just two contacts for the battery and nothing else. Sealed completely seamlessly. Nowhere to open the thing. I then drilled a hole on the side with a drill to see if I could pry it open.

As soon as I had drilled, I heard a hissing sound, as you would hear when you pull open a vacuum coffee pack. Before I could do anything, the smartphone turned into this colorful heap. What it is, I don’t know. It’s not aggressive, because it doesn’t affect the desk. In terms of substance, it looks a bit like mercury. You can’t grab it and it doesn’t stick either. I looked at that second smartphone and INN’s tablet pc and they’re just the same.”

Pierre took a breath and continued: “By the way, Jan de Jong’s smartphone is an ordinary one, with only music on it and no more than two phone numbers. I checked the telephone numbers and judging by the names, I think they belong to his children.”

Lémarc nodded that he had understood. “Okay, Pierre. Just put that shit in a bag and keep it separate. Soon we’ll be able to discuss everything and possibly find out what we’re dealing with.” Lémarc seemed calm as always, but was as frustrated inside as Pierre, now that the smartphone wouldn’t provide any information. He went back to his seat.

On TV, Holyester assured everyone that UNBI would do everything in its power to find the perpetrators of Hakon Eriksson’s cowardly murder. Approving mutterings could be heard everywhere, until INN again announced Breaking News. While everyone’s gaze was on the TV, it became quiet again. But that didn’t take long.

During the story of the journalist, who thought that Hakon hadn’t been in the limousine, there was a whispering speculation going through the room, but by the time INN had broadcast the evidence behind it, there was a deafening discussion.

Those damn press folk!

Angry, Lémarc turned off the television. How on earth could INN have access to this recording? Although the sound had been somewhat

muted, the quality had been good enough to recognize Dr. Winter's voice as well as his own.

His visit to the laboratory was for the most part broadcast. Even his conversation with Sytsema and Holger, in which they came to the conclusion that it had to be a kidnapping, was broadcast verbatim. He wanted to strangle them. They hadn't heard the last of this, for broadcasting this recording, which was undoubtedly illegally obtained, caused serious damage to their research.

The only advantage they had had, had been killed in one blow just for eagerness to get a scoop.

He wanted to rant, but as he walked back to his seat, he didn't show any of his frustrations.

He gestured for silence, sat down seemingly unmoved and waited until he had everyone's attention.

"Well, listen up, all of you. This has..." Frowning, he grabbed his smartphone, which interrupted him with its ringing sound.

Damn thing. Always bothered you in the worst moments.

The display showed that it was Helga from reception. He answered. Fortunately, almost everyone kept their mouths shut, because he had to strain to hear her.

Hardly audible she whispered: "There is a lady at the desk with an official UNBI file and she demands to see you immediately. She says she has information about Hakon. What should I do?"

Although he was surprised, he didn't have to think long. He told Helga that she should tell the woman that he was coming.

He hung up and called for Pierre. UNBI's IT genius jumped up in shock and looked at him questioningly. "Right now there is someone at the reception desk who has information about Hakon. Show the images from the cameras directly on the central screen now, will you?"

In one move, Pierre fell back into his chair, turned around and quickly gave his computer the necessary instructions. Within a few seconds, he conjured up the requested images.

From four different angles, the screen showed a tall, slender woman. She was dressed in a black motorcycle jacket, black leather pants and red, high-heeled boots. Her long, red hair hung like a veil around her head, partly hiding her face.

While around him some less than respectful remarks and admiring whistling sounds could be heard, Lémarc studied the redheaded woman.

This could not be a coincidence. Height and posture corresponded ...

He called out to Jens. "Call the guard at the gate. Find out how she got in here and order them to let her leave again unhindered." He quickly walked to Pierre. "Run her through the facial recognition software. I want her details as soon as possible."

He rushed on, and with the doorknob already in his hand, he shouted: "Jean, make sure there's a team outside ready to follow this woman. Maybe she'll lead us to Hakon."

< 07.03

While the Don behind him heard his capo talking softly on the phone, he looked with horror at the motionless show boy, a mockery of evolution who had touched his daughter. The punishment had largely removed his terrible anger and suddenly he was disgusted by the battered body. This blemish on the Bonabino's blazon had to be obliterated for good. He put himself in position and brought up the lupara. He spread his legs slightly for a good balance and sucked in a big gulp of oxygen. With his breath held, he stood still for a moment, after which he slowly pointed the double barrels at the blood-stained crown of the broken figure in front of him.

He peered along the barrel, groped for the trigger and carefully stretched his finger.

Just before he made to pull the trigger, however, he was disturbed by his capo. Submissive and nervous, Eberto said: "A thousand apologies, Don Enzo, but it's not your wife who's looking for you."

Feeling angry that he was interrupted again, he turned around furiously, aiming the double-barreled gun at his capo. He gazed piercingly into his eyes and saw in them the battle between the fear of interrupting him now

and of the consequences if he did not do so. Although his capo knew very well that any mistake would be heavily charged on him, Eberto had decided that the phone call was important enough to dare to disturb him.

Curious as to who the hell could be on the line, he lowered the weapon. Eberto's relief was unmistakable, and while he respectfully handed over the smartphone, he continued with a hoarse relief: "Don, it's your cousin ... from Texas ..." He hadn't expected that in a hundred years. The rest of his anger disappeared like snow before the sun, and as he answered the phone and brought it to his ear, his mood had turned 180 degrees.

Smiling broadly, he said warmly: "Also a good morning to you, Bob. It's an hour earlier for you, so I guess you are not calling to order a pizza. I guess you're stuck with a problem, aren't you? Tell your cousin, dude." After listening for a while, he interrupted him. "Wait a minute, Bobby. I'm in the middle of a cleanup. Stay on the line. I'll be right back with you." He handed over the phone to Eberto and turned around.

He held up the lupara again, sought his balance and pulled the trigger carelessly. From the double-barrel burst a short, fiery flash, immediately followed by a great bang.

The deadly charge hit so hard that the chair and body tilted backwards. As the bang echoed and died away, he calmly walked towards the body and dipped the knife in the predominantly red mire that slowly ran out of the head that had been shot to pieces. Not much later there was a fresh, his seventh, notch in the pommel. Without paying any more attention to the dead man, he got rid of the protective apron, the punch bracket and gloves. He gave the gun to his capo, took his phone back and said benevolently: "So, here I am again. Where were we?"

< 07.04

He had used the three hours that Hakon was supposed to spend at the airport to mimic Mario as best he could. It went without saying that Mario would never resist a beautiful woman traveling alone, and as soon as the train arrived at Schiphol Station, he had been standing ready.

He had graciously helped the woman with her luggage and then escorted her to the right check-in desk. 'Mario' had found it terribly regrettable that they had different destinations. He had dismissed her thanks - after all, no self-respecting man would let a lady with heavy suitcases carry them by herself - and had blatantly flirted and wished her a pleasant holiday. He had lingered as he said goodbye, as if he was reluctant to let her go.

In the meantime, unnoticed, he had watched the faces of the bystanders. Other than amused, compassionate and bored reactions, he had not been able to discover a trace of suspicion. It had been a good exercise and while he was feeling increasingly at home in Mario's skin, he had himself checked in, after which he had passed through customs and control without any problems. He knew Mario's preference for expensive, luxury gadgets and had been strolling past the shops and kiosks with interest.

To kill the last hour, he had visited the lounge for business class passengers, where he had seen the afternoon broadcast of INN. As he had expected, Barbara had not abandoned him and had done an excellent job.

The news that UNBI's investigator had not been killed, had hit like a bomb. With a sense of admiration for her unstoppable sense of investigation, he had walked out the room, amidst his excitedly talking fellow travelers, when their flight was called.

Without any significant delay, he had been one of the first to board.

A friendly smiling stewardess had appointed him chair 1A. While he was clutching the pillow behind his neck and shuffling back and forth to find the most pleasant position possible, a slender Asian took his place next to him.

The man, his friend Tony, gave him a brief look of understanding, in which he tacitly let him know that everything was under control.

With a short nod Hakon indicated that he had understood and gave a little arrogant glance the other way.

'Mario' was not interested in the man next to him, who was dressed in a very simple way, despite the skillful, heavily decorated vest he was wearing. There couldn't have been a greater difference between him and

his neighbor. Although ... Smiling internally, he thought of Tony and his two older brothers. If you didn't know them, you'd never believe they were related.

Tim, Tjan and Tony, or the three T's, as they were called by everyone at GAIAS, couldn't be more different from each other. Tim, the eldest, had the most features from his father and with his 6 foot 3, he was also the tallest of the three.

Because of his clothing style, affected speech, white skin and physique he came across as a British aristocrat. Which, by the way, he actually was. Apart from GAIAS nobody knew that he was the first in line of a totally impoverished branch of the English royal family. In addition to a thorough education at the best universities in England, Tim had an intuitive feeling for machines, which enabled him to control everything that drove or flew almost in a playful manner. 'Mario' took a look at his watch.

No, Tim was still in the Netherlands and was waiting for Arda. Together they would follow after him in Tim's new toy and if everything went well, they would land even sooner than them. He was curious about it!

Tim's 2 years younger twin brothers were on this plane. For Tjan, Sandra had booked two seats in the front of the tourist department, by the aisle that gave access to the business class. Amused, Hakon thought that Tjan really needed those two seats, if only to spread his weight.

If Tjan plunged into one seat, just like on the train, there was a good chance that it would collapse like a house of cards, because his 5 foot 7 tall friend was remarkably broad and solidly built.

He was the only one who had the characteristics of both parents.

In terms of height he was right in the middle and while he had inherited the white skin and steel blue eyes from his father, he had inherited the Korean face and sleek black hair from his mother.

Everything about him was reminiscent of an overweight, unhealthy thirty-something year old who ate too much and didn't exercise. But that was an illusion. Tjan was indeed able to walk like a heavily obese patient, but in reality his body was one lump of muscle and despite his girth and weight he was anything but slow. He was incredibly strong and, as no

one would suspect if you saw his clumsy fingers, incredibly handy with electronics.

His 1 minute younger twin brother Tony had more of their mother. At 5 foot 3 he was the smallest and seemed to be 100% Korean. Unlike Tjan, he was a little slender and weighed at least 2/3 less than his heavily built brother. Tony was extremely agile, master of subak (*ancient Korean martial arts*) and the group's explosives expert. It was hard to believe that they had the same parents. Their father was British and their mother was Korean. They had gotten to know each other during the Korean War, were married and, despite a sudden financial setback, had raised their three sons neatly.

Years ago, Hakon had been able to save the family from a difficult situation, after which the boys had sworn him more or less eternal allegiance.

He hadn't realized how serious they were, but all three of them had been working at GAIAS from the beginning and the group would be terribly upset if the three T's ever decided to get out.

From far away he heard a voice and the friendly face of the stewardess bowed to him. "Would you like a drink?" She held a tray with drinks in front of him.

< 07.05

Although he had not really expected it - after all, they were looking for something completely different - Lord MacMarkland was deeply disappointed that the mysterious lights did not turn out to be of extraterrestrial origin.

As soon as Onawa had opened the door and the room was well lit, it was clear that the strange shiny sphere was nothing more than a transparent plastic tent that had been placed over a computer with peripherals to keep the place dust-free.

The weak humming tone and flashing lights appeared to come from the SatRouter that was turned on.

Saundra had informed him that it was a well-known model produced by his own company, Markland Communications, and that this router, which was located here in the cottage, had been delivered to a company in Africa two years ago as part of a UN-sponsored program. According to Saundra, the subscription for satellite internet access was in the name of a Pete Philpedoe, who had a postal address in the Cayman Islands and who paid the costs through a secret account.

They did have a lead here, he thought. Even a mindless zombie could count these facts on his insensitive fingers and come to the conclusion that Mr. Philpedoe probably turned out to be more than a simple cowboy and almost certainly dealt with unsavory matters. As Saundra informed him orally, the information simultaneously appeared on the GRID. The newly created avatar 'cowboy Pete' was written in red next to it.

How lucky that Onawa happened to be in Texas. The ultrathin trail that SPY had picked up could be investigated almost immediately. What she had found may not have seemed like much, but still. This was the first tangible trace they had found after a long search.

On the GRID he had looked with interest at Onawa, who had examined the hardware and cabling and then carefully placed a number of spiders. Around twelve o'clock she had left the house to follow the fiberglass cable, as Saundra had told her to. Because it was unlikely that Onawa would report within the foreseeable future, he had ordered a lunch via Saundra and at the same time asked her to show him the afternoon news from INN.

As he enjoyed his lunch, he saw the explanations of Holyester and Taylor, feeling great satisfaction that the scenario was almost executed to the letter. Halfway through the broadcast Saundra had informed him that Arda had arrived at UNBI and had activated monitors three and four, allowing him to follow the events in the CINEMA. From two angles he saw Lémarc, with the Spiderweb organization chart behind him. The entire network was clearly mapped out, including the names of companies and individuals.

Of course, Saundra, through SPY and CRYPTO, had been collecting and processing all the information from the start, so over the past two months he had witnessed the gradual unravelling of the entire Spiderweb.

Nevertheless, seeing the whole thing on the wall in the CINEMA, he was quite impressed by the work of Hakon and his employees. Unfortunately, the heart of the scheme, where there was now a big question mark, still could not be filled in.

But when he thought about Hakon's mission and Onawa's find in the house, he had no doubt that this person, or possibly persons, would eventually be found.

He only hoped that it wouldn't take too long before this name or names could also be filled in. While listening with half an ear to Taylor's statement on INN, he saw Lémarc standing with a slouching young man. He couldn't suppress a smile when he saw them looking at the remains of the smartphone together.

Only because he had seen with his own eyes what would happen if someone tried to open such a specially made device, did he know that the pile of sludge had once been a smartphone. He could well imagine how that slouching young man must have been shocked when the solid object turned into a soft substance in no time at all. While telling himself it wasn't very neat to chuckle about it, he heard Saundra's civilized voice say: "Arda is about to enter the UNBI reception."

< 07.06

Tense, Lémarc took the first part of the route to the reception in a hurry. Just before he arrived there, he stopped for a moment. He took a few deep breaths and walked around the corner, seemingly relaxed. He was relieved to see that the woman was still there. She admired with interest the reproduction of 'De Schutterij van Amsterdam', immortalized by Rembrandt van Rijn, one of the many whose works hung in the hall.

She hadn't noticed him yet, which gave him the opportunity to have a good look at her. Although she now wore different clothes and he had only seen her profile briefly under the red hair, he could swear that this was the woman who had kicked the knife artist at the hospital. This beautiful redhead could very well be the woman they were looking for.

Hopefully she wasn't aware of the latest news and could lead him to Hakon's whereabouts. She had apparently heard him, because all of a sudden she turned towards him and looked at him slightly mockingly. In her hand she was indeed holding an official UNBI file. An A4 size rectangular package, a bit over an inch thick, with the sealed logo with 'TOP SECRET' in big letters on it on the front of the flap.

On his guard - if she actually turned out to be the woman he was looking for, she was not harmless - he walked up to her and stopped about three feet in front of her. "I am Lémarc Tasker. If I understand correctly, you insisted on speaking to me? You have information about Hakon Eriksson?" With long, slender fingers, the woman conjured up a smartphone from behind the thick envelope and held it up to him. "Listen." He took it and held it to his ear. He heard nothing.

He kept watching the woman, who was still looking at him in a somewhat mocking way, and said, actually more out of habit than because he had really thought about it: "Yes?" The familiar, warm voice scared him so much that the phone slipped out of his hand. The woman reacted incredibly quickly. Before the device could fall to the ground, she caught it and gave it back to him with a softly muttered 'fool'. Stoically he brought it back to his ear and listened. He had missed the beginning, but he just caught that this was a recorded message.

He could not respond and only had to listen. What Hakon told him struck him like a thunderbolt in the clear sky. This information hit him hard, but still he didn't show anything. While he was engraving the instructions of his boss in his head, he continued to look at the woman attentively. She was tall and slim, and her tight-fitting motorcycle clothing did not reveal a single ounce of fat.

On her heels, at least 4 inches high, she was almost as tall as himself. She wasn't as young as he first thought, as he saw the fine lines around her mouth and eyes now that she was so close by. By today's standards she wasn't pretty, but her sculpted features and outspoken green eyes gave her an irresistibly provocative charm. With those feline green eyes and in the outfit that embraced her like a second skin, she looked like a black panther, with a long red mane ... And those eyes ...

With one click the connection was disconnected and unconsciously he lowered the phone.

The woman, who had been looking at him imperturbably all along, grabbed the smartphone out of his hand and pushed the large envelope into it, after which she immediately turned around and ran to the exit. Without slowing down, she jumped on a motorcycle parked just in front of the revolving doors, grabbed the helmet from the seat and swung it up on to her head, after which she drove off at full throttle.

With the envelope in his hand he was looking at the revolving doors, which were slowly turning around and around. Christ, she was so fast. For a moment he had thought that her high heels would collapse underneath her, but he had probably just imagined that, for within the blink of an eye she had disappeared through the doors and out of sight. Jean's voice brought him back to the present.

"Lucky you managed to keep her here for so long, Lémarque. The team was just in time to follow her." He pointed at his walkie-talkie and said with satisfaction: "She's a smooth one, but the boys are on her heels."

"Fine, Jean. Fine. Hopefully she will lead us straight to Hakon." He was in a hurry.

He wanted to know who she was and sprinted back to the CINEMA ahead of Jean.

He went to see Pierre and excitedly asked him if he had already found the woman's identity. Pierre turned around halfway, looked up and gave the screen a pissed tap. "Nothing! She doesn't appear in any of the important databases. I'm searching the smaller ones now, but it might take a while. Maybe she's just not in it." "Someone like her? I don't believe any of that!" He looked around, beckoned Jens to him and gave him the envelope.

"Have it checked quickly for fingerprints, DNA or anything else and then bring it back to me as soon as possible." Before he let his assistant go, he asked him if he had already figured out how the woman had managed to get into UNBI. Jens nodded. "The guards at the gate had received orders from Lam to let her through." Without paying attention to the boisterous sound of the chattering attendees, Lémarc thoughtfully walked back to his place. If this woman was the same as this morning's, how did

she fit into the picture? Because she had an official UNBI file, she had to be involved with his boss. But how? On the one hand she had brought him a message from Hakon, but on the other hand she had almost kicked Casanova's killer to death a few hours earlier. Revenge? Was she part of Casanova's gang? Was she one of those who had kidnapped Hakon?

Was she perhaps a freelancer? She had to have very good contacts if she could manipulate someone like Lam. Lémarc had no idea who she was and couldn't possibly place her in the picture. At the same time - there was no point in lying to himself - he found her extremely attractive. The chaotic chattering suddenly disturbed him immensely. He spread his fingers and gave the tabletop a vicious blow, with which he abruptly cut off all the noise.

As soon as he saw all eyes on him, he stood up. "Listen, the situation is as follows." He gestured to the screen and continued: "I have just received information from this woman. As soon as this has been checked for traces, we will look at the content. Until then, everyone, except Jens of course, has to stay here." He ignored the questioning looks and looked at his assistant, who was about to go out the door. Hearing his name, Jens turned halfway around and let the envelope wave briefly above his head. By a hair's breadth he had missed being walked over by Jean, who rushed in furiously. Shouting curses into the walkie-talkie, he walked straight to Lémarc and hissed, annoyed: "Those idiots have lost the woman."

Can you imagine that? What amateurs. Damn it. Now what?"

< 07.07

Sal's capo had been wise enough to get his boss on the phone and after Sal informed him that he was in the middle of a cleanup, Kingsize Bob immediately knew what his cousin was doing and where he was. It was logical that Sal's capo had not been easy to persuade.

He had waited patiently and knowing what was to come, he had kept the phone a long way from his ear as a precaution. Smiling he had envisaged the scene in his mind. How his cousin would kneel, how he would dip the knife in the blood and how he would add a carving to the lupara.

Just as he had expected, Sal reported shortly after the blast had died away, after which he had told his cousin what he wanted from him. Without any objection, Sal had listened and as soon as he had finished speaking, he had heard his cousin give orders. It was a good time, Sal had said. Some waste had to be disposed of in an environmentally friendly way anyway.

He could form a clear picture of the waste that his cousin meant and how it would be dumped in the Gravesand Bay.

A long time ago he had often taken part in this and five times he had witnessed the characteristic sound of the lupara.

Sal and he had practically grown up together and were sworn blood brothers. Sal was the only one whom he trusted 100% and who was partly aware of his activities. He was the one who took care of the transport of all the animals he collected worldwide and he was not afraid to transport some weapons for him from time to time.

He had shown him the bunker once and that had been a good move. Sal started to give him more and more tips about where to get his hands on special animals. His cousin had an extensive worldwide network, which was very useful on occasion. And, he knew this as surely as grass was green, Sal would never, ever, ever tell anyone about it.

< 07.08

Arda had immediately given full throttle and, as soon as she could, had made her way out of the UNBI building. Almost without slowing down, she entered the nearby park. The map was in her head in detail and she had effortlessly followed the winding, narrow paths. Twisting, turning and doubling back she had already shaken off her pursuers after a few hundred yards, which was somewhat disappointing for her. Despite the narrow paths, which were not really suitable for their heavy vehicles, she had expected a little more resistance. This way there wasn't much fun to it.

Calmly she had left the park and, using shortcuts and backstreets, had easily reached the ring road. While taking the entrance to the highway,

she had informed Sandra that she had left The Hague and was on her way to Schiphol Airport. She had nothing to fear from the police who were looking for her. She knew that Sandra was keeping an eye on her and would protect her from traffic cameras, radar checks and lurking policemen. Nevertheless, she kept to the speed limit. She needed time to think. Why in God's name had she behaved so stupidly?

She had been determined to give Lémarc Tasker her special treatment. In the marinade, as she mockingly called it.

He would be her hundredth conquest, so that she would win her bet with Marilyn gloriously.

With untold pleasure she had already sent Marilyn 99 teasing e-mails with attached evidence consisting of funny, often spicy photos. She had printed them all and made a beautiful collage of them. She had reserved the place of honor in the middle for photo 100, which she wanted to insert in the near future, after which she could wrap the thing up. Equipped with a big pink bow she would give it to Marilyn as a gift, to rub her nose in it again that love didn't exist at first sight. The fact that Marilyn accidentally got her true love thrown in her lap, was nothing more than a windfall.

After all, everyone was lucky once in a while. By the way, her lover was a woman, not a man. If Marilyn had just been straight, she would have long since discovered that the man of your dreams did not exist.

At least, not if your name was Arda.

Men only thought of one thing, always wanted more and in the end they tied you up in a marriage and you could say goodbye to your freedom. Very sweetly offered, but no, thanks. The way it was now, she was perfectly happy. When she felt like having sex, which was the most normal thing in the world, she always found a suitable solution. And although she preferred a man of flesh and blood - a vibrator simply couldn't compete with that - she never left room for doubt that it was just one or two nights at the most. As she watched the traffic behind her in the side mirror, she drove along a string of slow-moving cars. Further along was a small enclosed trailer, tilted on its side, behind which a dozen cars had already stopped. She accelerated and passed it. As soon as she could, she merged to the right and brought the motorcycle back to its original speed.

She continued at a slow pace, frowning.

The meeting with Lémarc Tasker, the man she wanted to have in her bed soon, had certainly gone strangely. She remembered the anticipation after her promise to Marilyn that she would honor Mr. Tasker with a visit and ... would do her very best. Sandra had made sure that she was let through without difficulty and as soon as the barrier went up, she had driven on to the entrance. She had already gloated in advance, when she had gotten off her motorcycle and reported at the reception.

It didn't matter that her target hadn't been in a nightclub this time. If she turned her eye to a man, she would get him. It was that simple.

So why wouldn't it have gone the way she had planned? From the first moment that Lémarc had addressed her, she seemed paralyzed and, she'd be damned if it wasn't true, she had found it difficult to control her nerves. His serious, quiet appearance had confused her and before she knew it, she had pushed the smartphone into his hands. Apparently so uncontrolled that he didn't even get a good grip on it and let the thing slip. Thank God she trained every day, so she had just been able to catch it. She didn't want to think about the smartphone falling apart, preventing him from hearing Hakon's message. Because of the short adrenaline rush, she had reacted instinctively, she realized to her displeasure.

She had insulted him, which hopefully he hadn't heard, after which she had stood as stiff as Tim usually stood. At ease, Lémarc had been listening, looking at her inquisitively. His penetrating, dark eyes had touched her deeply, beyond her soul, which had made her feel terribly uncomfortable.

This imperturbable, tough, black man had undermined her self-confidence, and what was much worse, she had allowed him to do it! Unforgivable! She would have preferred to turn around and straighten things out right now, but unfortunately that was not possible. Duty called. Throwing caution to the wind, she opened the throttle and raced to Schiphol, passing other traffic left and right.

By now they were flying at almost 550 miles per hour high above the Atlantic Ocean, but it seemed as if the Airbus, caught between an intense blue sky above and gigantic white cloud formations glistening like icebergs below, was not moving a single inch. 'Mario' pushed the table out of the way and placed his tablet pc on his lap. It recognized his fingers and made contact. Because he had all the time in the world for the time being, he wanted to see everything from the start in chronological order.

While 'Mario' sat down somewhat lazily and relaxed, Hakon's eyes looked carefully through the colored contacts at what was happening on the display. Despite the fact that he knew everything about it, he was impressed. The 'attack' had been a great success. The explosion had indeed been powerful, but had, exactly as they had intended, only destroyed the middle part of the limousine and caused little collateral damage.

Of the dummies that had replaced him and his driver, nothing would have remained. A shame actually, because his had resembled him perfectly. The whole thing looked so terribly realistic that he could have sworn he was looking at himself from behind the newspaper. Although his grandfather might know by the eyes and by the hand that it couldn't be his grandson - something that Barbara had to discover - he was all too happy that he had informed his grandparents in advance. He had only told his boss, Dick Holyester, what was needed. Nothing about the attack itself, because he would never have approved it. Barbara's distraught face and, a little later, Lémarc's grief touched him deeply.

Everyone would be convinced that he had actually been killed. He swallowed a lump in his throat in a spirit of guilt. He realized that if he survived this adventure, he would have a lot to explain. Although there had been no other way, he had knowingly deceived everyone and many would be devastated by grief. He could only hope that they wouldn't be so angry and upset that they couldn't forgive him. He didn't want to think about losing their friendship and trust. Unfortunately, the action at the Elisabeth Hospital had been much less smooth.

He frowned at the chaotic scenes and two deep grooves appeared between his eyebrows when he found out that Jan de Jong, at the time

one of his colleagues at Interpol, was also one of the victims. Although he had picked up fragments of news at Schiphol and already knew that James Taylor was in reasonable health, he grabbed the tablet pc more firmly when he read the true facts. The assassin 'Stiletto', who had appeared out of nowhere, had ensured that this mission, which had turned into chaos, had ended completely differently than planned. The scenario for arresting Casanova had been the simplest of all and he thought they should be glad that only two people had died. James and Holger, who had only reacted out of self-preservation, had both been extremely lucky.

Just like him by the way, because despite the successful unravelling of Spiderweb, the spider in the middle had remained stubbornly untraceable, until Lady Fortuna had apparently decided in person to take matters into her own hands by throwing a huge windfall in his lap. Almost literally, if you really thought about it. A shiver ran down his spine when the shock of two weeks ago unwittingly entered his head.

Shuddering, his gaze slid aside. On the thick plastic of the window, Mario's face reflected faintly against the brilliant white on the intense blue background. Involuntarily his thoughts went back to the drama that afterwards turned out to be a gigantic stroke of luck. After a joint reception by UNBI and Interpol, he had accidentally driven after Mario when the latter was killed in an accident.

He had seen that Mario had been on the phone while driving and, as he assumed at the time, hadn't correctly estimated the sharp turn as a result. He had landed in the verge, had applied his brakes very hard and had apparently given a jolt to the steering wheel, so that the car shot across the road and hit a tree.

Luckily there had been no other traffic and he himself had been able to stop just in time. Shocked, he had jumped out of his car. While he sprinted across the road, he had asked Sandra to call the emergency services. Mario's car was so concertinaed that the doors were stuck. On the passenger side he had squeezed himself part way in through the broken side window, after which he unfortunately had to conclude that, despite the airbag, Mario had not survived.

Later it became clear that he had had a fatal heart attack and had therefore steered off the road. Even before his car crashed into the tree, he had already died. While waiting for the police and ambulance, he had seen Mario's smartphone lying on the floor, between Mario's legs. Because he hadn't worn a seatbelt,

Mario had slipped half out of his seat, until he was stopped by the airbag. Stretching as far as possible, he had scoured through all kinds of loose and broken parts of the dashboard and managed to get hold of the device.

Quickly he had searched his clothes and secured Mario's wallet, weapon, notebook and briefcase.

With the intention of informing his family, he had opened the smartphone and seen that the last person he had phoned was a certain 'Boss'. Because he didn't want to intrude on Mario's privacy and to inform the last person Mario had spoken to why the connection was so suddenly disconnected, he called this 'Boss', who had to live somewhere in South America by the look of the number. Instead of getting someone on the phone, he was connected to an answering machine that asked him to enter a code.

It had not been because of the drying sweat, that he had gotten goose bumps everywhere and that the hairs on his neck suddenly stood upright.

While in the distance he heard the sirens coming, he had informed Sandra and asked her to examine the phone. The data soon showed that they had drilled into gold. In chair 1A, 'Mario's' lips curled up in half a smile when Hakon realized that this had been the moment when he had first played with the thought of whether he might be able to take advantage of Mario's sudden death.

He hadn't exactly known how, but that same night, after Mario's possessions had been examined, this idea had taken shape. His earlier suspicions proved to be well-founded, as Sandra's research had shown that Mario had been unscrupulously selling confidential information from Interpol files to the highest bidder for years.

However, this turned out to be only the tip of the iceberg. To his horror, Sandra had also discovered that Mario had worked for Spiderweb for

the past two months and had regularly provided someone with information.

Saundra had traced the person in question, but instead of finding 'the spider' he had hoped for, it turned out to be Casanova, surprisingly enough.

On the sly, they had examined his things, which led them to the terrible discovery that Casanova was giving orders to someone at UNBI.

He and Saundra had left no stone unturned in their efforts to find out who it was, but without success.

The fact that there was also a mole in UNBI had shocked him worse than the discovery that an attack on himself was in preparation. Without Mario's sudden death, it would never have been discovered.

The idea he had played with had grown into a daring plan to both lure the spider in the Spiderweb out and to discover the identity of the mole within his own organization. Although he completely trusted each of his colleagues at UNBI, he had no choice. Under no circumstances was the plan to leak out and therefore it had to remain secret from both Interpol and UNBI.

He had been forced to appeal to his friends at GAIAS.

In order not to wake up sleeping dogs - and certainly not moles and spiders - Saundra had made sure that Mario's remains would get 'lost' in the official process for the time being, so that Mario's smartphone would continue to function as a conduit and they could keep a grip on the flow of information.

In addition, Casanova was being watched by GAIAS from the moment they located him. This approach had paid off, because the following week it became clear that the central organizer of the Spiderweb had to be somewhere in Texas.

He had explained his plan to take Mario's place to his friends and after two weeks of almost inhumanly tireless effort, the script had been prepared. The operation, codenamed 'Non quod videtur', consisted of several parts. First of all, it was necessary to stage his own death, which should allow him to fly to America as Mario. At the same time, this would distract attention from the second part, the arrest of Casanova. After all,

finding Casanova through Mario was a great opportunity to catch this dangerous criminal.

It hadn't been easy to fake the attack right under the nose of Interpol and UNBI, but it worked. Early this morning Marilyn had attended to him in his hotel room in the Hilton and put Mario's face on him. She had darkened his skin by two shades and turned his eyes to honey brown. Because it was based on his own DNA - he didn't understand much of Marilyn's explanation - it felt natural. He hardly felt it and it fitted perfectly. Even the seams around his mouth, nose, eyes and ears were not visible. The result was astonishing, and he had fully agreed with Marilyn that this invention might be a solution for people with scars, and that the patent could best be made available to medical science in the long run. Carefully he had taken the mask off again and put it next to the wig, after which Marilyn skillfully turned him into an older, slightly worn gentleman. She had hugged him and, concerned, wished him luck.

Yet she had to laugh when he helped her out of the room, bending forwards and slightly limping. Within five minutes he had packed the large suitcase.

Because it would take almost an hour before his taxi would arrive, he had grabbed his tablet pc, so as not to miss a thing that still had to be done in the parking garage. In the few minutes Marilyn needed to descend towards it, Tony and Tjan had overpowered Casanova's men, who were busy applying the explosives. It had simply been a pleasure to see the slender Tony in action.

In no time at all, he had knocked them down one by one and, with the help of his very strong brother, the criminal foursome was ready to be taken away. While Tjan was transporting the packages to the luxurious suite Sandra had booked for the whole day, he saw Tony defuse the explosives.

However, they had to remain seated for proof, so Marilyn had already gone to the spare limousine. He counted on the fact that Barbara would certainly notice the fact that it was not Hakon's usual car that would be blown up.

As soon as Tony was ready, he helped Marilyn to place the sophisticated explosive, after which they went through everything - the dummies,

remote control and explosives - again together. It had been tight for time, as when the reception gave him a call that his taxi was ready, he could just see that Tony and Marilyn were hastily saying goodbye to each other. Tony would see him back at Central Station, while Marilyn and Tjan would be arranging the attack from the hotel.

He could still feel the sweat on his palms from when he had seen the motorcycle escort pass by from the back of the taxi while he had sent the three text messages. It was only halfway through the ride that he had known that he had succeeded and that his beating heartbeat had slowly calmed down. Marilyn and Tjan had started the operation to the exact second. His entire diaphragm had stiffened in the knowledge that there was no way back. When he remembered, his stomach contracted again, which made him aware of his surroundings.

His tablet pc had slipped out of his fingers unnoticed and was lying inactive on his lap. He picked it up, re-activating it. He flipped through the material, found the shot of the pigeon and looked at it again. No, there was absolutely no way to see that Sandra had quickly edited this fragment into Casanova's recording. Technically it couldn't have been done any better.

She had also manipulated all the agencies and made sure that INN had been present everywhere on time. She had even shown, although under the watchful eye of Lord MacMarkland, she was able to improvise. By deploying Tim and Arda, she had managed to get the runaway action at the Elisabeth Hospital back on track. Nevertheless, an extensive evaluation had to follow, because despite her super intelligent planning, Jan de Jong was in the cardiac department and the INN journalists had been arrested.

No one had foreseen this and it should not have happened. With his index finger he tapped the keyboard icon and he typed a memo. With a few quick finger movements he made the images flash by, until the INN news broadcast was shown.

Thank God Dick and Barbara had trusted him enough to comply with his request, so that the fact that he was still alive was made public at noon. Of course, Sandra had enough scenarios to ensure that this would have

happened in the first place, but an unsophisticated and natural state of affairs was by far preferred.

It wouldn't be long before the sensational news would also reach 'the spider' in Texas and he would know that his - or their - plan hadn't had the intended result.

'The spider' would undoubtedly come into action and, now that Casanova was gone, would have to instruct his mole at UNBI directly via his smartphone. What 'the spider' would also not know, was that he would leave a digital trail, which would be immediately picked up by Sandra.

For a change, Arda had delivered her message to Lémarc without any problems, he saw. Unlike Dick and Barbara, he knew for sure that Lémarc would do what was asked of him and would fully focus on finding the mole. Somehow, he still couldn't believe that a mole had managed to get into UNBI. While he was wondering who the hell it could be, his eyes slowly closed.

< 07.10

Of course he would help him out, Sal had said laconically. What else would you have family for? Sal's calm, competent voice had put him in a good position and he could be sure that everything would be all right. Kingsize Bob disabled the cell phone and swept the bits and pieces into the garbage bin.

Controlled, but still furious that Casanova and Stiletto had screwed up so badly, he opened his laptop and activated 'advertisement', a small, but extremely ingenious program, in which he kept track of and instructed his contacts.

These soldiers from his secret army, as he called it, received his orders disguised as advertising messages on their smartphones. He had been using it for years and didn't think for a second about the student who had made this ingenious piece of software for him and who, by coincidence, had died in a gas explosion just after she had finished it. The database now contained 5,871 names of people who were in some way part of his network, from voluntary wage slave to blackmailed business partner.

In the overview he saw that 452 of them were detained and 102 were thanked for their services with a black frame around them. After a few mouse clicks he had updated the data of Casanova and Stiletto, after which the counter of the no longer active persons indicated 104. Quickly scrolling through the data, he sought his contact at UNBI. A little later he had found the man. Grindingly he read his data. Because Casanova was no longer available to forward his orders, he was forced to instruct the man directly this time. He gave him two orders. The latter would activate his secret weapon, which would give him back absolute control over The Hague. The city would shake to its foundations ... An old song from Status Quo popped into his head. Not exactly the music he loved, but very appropriate. While his lips curled sarcastically, he gave the code word 'Rockin' all over the world' to the advertising message in which his orders were hidden.

Grinning he checked everything again, after which he inserted the plug of the fiber-optic cable into the opening provided for that purpose and activated 'Bull'. 'Bull' ensured that contact was made with a pc that was located elsewhere. This computer made it possible to access the world wide web, so that he could have access to his entire digital network, which he had built up over the years.

He sent the message via 'Bull'.

A few seconds later, a little ping sound indicated that it had been sent and that 'Bull' had destroyed all traces of it. He immediately disconnected the fiber optic cable, so that the physical connection was also removed.

< 07.11

Immediately after Sandra told him that Arda had entered the UNBI building, monitor five on the GRID had sprung to life and he was no longer sniggering.

His hands had unintentionally grasped the seat rests more firmly. He had watched tensely, because he still wasn't entirely convinced that their enfant terrible wouldn't pull any weird stunts. Ignoring the rest of the GRID, he had only focused on the bright reception hall, where he had

seen Arda's black and red combined figure coming in through the revolving doors.

Walking proudly upright, she had reported to the reception, after which she went to look at the reproductions on the wall opposite, until Lémarc had appeared. Gradually it had become clear to him that there was nothing to worry about, because Arda had kept her word. She had really behaved properly.

Even the incident with the smartphone had provoked no other reaction than a pair of lips squeezing together in annoyance. He knew her well enough to see that she did not like the situation at all, but nevertheless she had been waiting patiently for Lémarc to finish listening. Admiringly he had looked at him. Hakon's right hand would have been a great poker player, as no hint of surprise was to be seen on his face. The man had to have iron self-control. It had been a strange scene, Lord MacMarkland thought. For minutes Lémarc and Arda, like a couple of mannequins, had been standing stiffly opposite each other. Movement had only reappeared on the screen when Lémarc had lowered the smartphone and Arda had pressed the envelope into his hands. Immediately after that, without any form of farewell, she had run away.

Shaking his head, he had watched her wild retreat. He didn't understand her at all. That she wouldn't dawdle was logical. But to run off so recklessly was, to say the least, rather rude. Apparently Arda's quick disappearance had taken Lémarc by surprise, for with a dazzling expression on his previously unprovoked face, he had been staring at her for a while. Well, so be it. The main thing was that Lémarc had received Hakon's message and the heart could rest assured. In the meantime, Sandra had let him know that Arda had gotten rid of her pursuers and would soon be out of The Hague.

He leaned back and kept an eye on the GRID, on which he now saw Lémarc walking into the CINEMA. In the tower room Sandra's civilized voice was audible again. "The computer in the house has just been activated and with a program on it, a message has been sent via the router. The content is encrypted, so it is very likely that this is the signal we have been waiting for. We managed to copy both the software and the message just before the connection was lost. CRYPTO is busy and I'm taking care of the trace. If this turns out to be the message to the

mole at UNBI, you can assume that Spiderweb's leadership is on the other end of the line."

< 07.12

Yeah, what now, Lémarc thought disappointed. The fact that the woman had shaken off her chasers was a big disappointment. Anything but happy, Lémarc put his hand through his hair and tried to find a solution.

Pierre still hadn't reported anything and everything they knew about the woman consisted of a few minutes of video from the cameras in the hall... He got an impulse. "Pierre!" As usual, their gifted IT man, as if stung by a bee, ducked before turning around. However, Lémarc did not have time to spare him. "Is it possible to find the woman through the traffic cameras?" Pierre looked at him owlishly and quickly moved his head up and down a few times. "Good. Find her, find her and let me know where she is going."

Next to him stood Jean, still not cooled off, hissing into the walkie-talkie. In colorful terms, he promised those who had failed a load of French misery. That wouldn't make things any better, Lémarc thought, and he touched Jean's arm for a moment. "Jean. Jean! Never mind. What is done is done. Please sit down, so I can tell everyone what that woman..."

Without finishing his sentence, he looked at the door, which was swung open and a little later slammed shut again. Holding the envelope straight in front of him, as if it were a relay baton, Jens came rushing towards him. He put the package down in front of Lémarc and panted: "Only your fingerprints are on it. Other than that, the exterior is completely clean." Lémarc thanked his assistant, who seemed to have put all his efforts into it.

His blond hair was tangled and sweaty spikes stuck to his forehead.

While Jens moved towards his seat, he broke the seal. He was curious about the contents, for Hakon had not said what was inside. The envelope contained a single black plastic bag and he gently shook it out. In the meantime, it had become so quiet that he could have heard a pin drop. Everyone held his breath as he pulled the contents out of the gently

creaking plastic even more carefully. When the bag was empty, there were four objects on the table in front of him.

- a cream-colored card similar to a credit card;
- a key card of the Hilton Hotel;
- a DVD;
- a typed memo with a photo printed on it, showing a room where four men were lying on the beds.

He was surprised to read what was in the memo, after which he looked closely at the photo for a moment. Without noticing it, he relaxed and the big rock in his stomach dissolved. Relieved that he now knew what he was dealing with, the search for the redheaded woman could be stopped.

However, she intrigued him immensely and he would love to meet her again ... No, for the time being he had to let Pierre have his way. “What about it, Lémarque?”, asked Jean, who sat next to him and looked at him with curiosity. A little sarcastically he continued: “The other people here would like to know what you have in front of you. Would you like to share your knowledge with us?” There was suppressed laughter here and there. Without being disturbed by it, Lémarc was about to start, when in the back of the room someone’s mobile phone started to play a tune. Annoyed, he looked at the corner where the sound was coming from and saw Jens pick up his smartphone from the cart next to him.

After looking at the display, Jens turned the device off. Lémarc’s assistant shrugged his shoulders, mimicked a silent apologetic message in his direction and put the device in his pocket.

Lémarc’s patience was gone and what Jens was silently trying to tell him, was of absolutely no interest to him at the moment. What was in front of him was a lot more important and could no longer wait. By now enough time had been wasted, it was already half past twelve, for God’s sake. Ignoring Jens further, he stated: “Just now, at the reception, as you all saw clearly, two things happened.

First of all, the woman gave me a smartphone and I listened to a message recorded by Hakon, in which he informed me of the most important facts concerning the attack.” He held up the UNBI file for a

moment and continued: "Then she gave me this. The contents make it clear that Casanova, as we assumed earlier, was indeed working with a team on behalf of Spiderweb to prepare an attack on our boss. Hakon managed to prevent that.

He set a trap and waited. As soon as the explosives were put in place, these criminals were eliminated. They are tied up in a room at the Hilton, waiting to be arrested. Hakon then made sure that the blowing up of his limousine actually took place, in order to create a smokescreen to make the leader of Spiderweb think that his mission had been carried out successfully.

We all know that Hakon did a great job, because we were all shocked.

Like you, I didn't know any better either. The reason he did it this way has to do with the fact that he, apparently together with someone from Interpol, is engaged in an undercover operation, which is taking place entirely outside of us and the rest of Interpol."

Lémarc had barely finished speaking before a tidal wave of surprised screams, disbelieving whistles and shouted questions broke out.

He urged his colleagues to remain silent and as soon as most of the peace had been restored, he continued his talk. "Listen, I will explain this in detail in a moment. Let's start with the most important thing. Casanova's gang members must be arrested and brought here from the Hilton. Also, those two from INN have to be released. Wait a minute." Lémarc bent forward and shouted: "Pierre! Put all INN's stuff back in the plastic bag, will you?" Lémarc straightened up. "At the moment inspector Sytsema of The Hague Criminal Investigation is being accredited. He will be added to our staff temporarily and will act as a liaison between us and the local police."

He called out to Jens. "Go to the Security Center, pick up Sytsema and take him to the Hilton. At the Security Center you will find Holger with two teams. Let him arrange which team will go with you. Communication has to be by walkie-talkie. So don't forget to bring one." He pointed to the memo. "It describes exactly where you have to be and how you can enter that room."

In the meantime, Pierre, silent as a ghost, had put the plastic bag with INN's stuff on the table in front of Lémarc. Lémarc handed over the bag

to Jens and further instructed: "First order that the journalists be released and make sure that they get their belongings back. Tell them that we will pay for the broken equipment. Don't let them stay in the building any longer than necessary. They can take a taxi. The cost of that is also on us."

In the meantime, Lémarc had collected the objects that had come from the UNBI file. With the exception of the DVD, he put them back in the black plastic bag, after which he also handed them over to Jens. "Take it easy and try to keep it low-profile." Jens nodded that he understood and moved the black plastic bag to his left hand. With his left hand he carried the two bags as he walked towards the door. Meanwhile, from the right pocket of his pants, he was pulling up the smartphone. A colleague who had rushed towards them, opened the door helpfully. Laughing, she said: "And don't make a mess of it like Holger did at the hospital!"

With a grinning look backwards, Jens walked out of the CINEMA. He would never come in again.

< 07.13

With a self-righteous grin, Kingsize Bob leaned back comfortably. He let his gaze drift over his underground empire. Now that he had sent the necessary assignments to The Hague, he was absolutely certain that in the foreseeable future he had nothing to fear from the so-called Spiderweb process.

Sal had also given him his word, so that he could consider those few other difficult obstacles as solved. He wondered why he had been so terribly excited. How big of a deal was that Europe anyway? Not to mention a small fucking country like the Netherlands. You needed a goddamn magnifying glass to find it on the globe. His wandering eyes rested in a remarkably empty place. Just like his underground Garden of Eden, his above-ground empire would be back on its foundations in a matter of days, so he could continue with his plans to fill this place. He saw the paradisiacal scene crystal clear before him. It would be beautiful. His eyes began to glisten.

Excitedly he got up and walked to the intercom. His finger slowly moved over the middle row of keys. Hmm ... what did he feel like?

Something else, or the most delicious one again ... Suddenly resolute, he pressed the 'N', with which he sent a call to the internal residence where the cleaners stayed during their entire period of service. They had two simple tasks.

The first was to keep the hall and his quarters clean when he was away.

The other task was now assigned to Nina. Every six months he had three new, beautiful, dedicated and one hundred percent healthy women put up, all of whom had been well instructed beforehand. He brought them in via a business friend from Mexico, who brought them blindfolded and, after use, took them back again blindfolded in the back of a van. This way the ladies couldn't possibly know where they had stayed. They would never find out who the man they served was, because he never talked to them and in his presence, they had to be blindfolded and quiet. He simply wouldn't let them show up for a cozy chat.

With firm steps he walked longingly through the hall, in a straight line and without paying attention to the colorful splendor of his surroundings.

He reached the simple two-part door, the upper half of which was already invitingly open and through which dimmed light came out. These were the original doors of the horse stall where Duke, his favorite stallion, who he himself had captured and tamed, had his quarters.

After Duke's death, he had rebuilt his stable down here and had given him his final resting place in a stuffed form on the spot.

In a routine manner, he opened the lower part of the door and while he was loosening his belt, his eyes slid lustfully over the naked girl who was quietly waiting upright next to the chestnut-brown, fully harnessed horse.

In the muted warm light, her creamy white skin and long, white-blond curly hair contrasted beautifully with Duke's shiny chestnut brown skin and his harness's leather, which was covered in rich silver. Because of the mask she was wearing, she couldn't see him, but he saw in Nina's subtle head movement that she had heard him come in. As always, he quickly got rid of his clothes and hung them neatly on one of the free rein hooks on the wall.

Freed from clothing and underwear, his companion proudly turned up and, without a moment's hesitation, he grabbed Nina's wrist and led her hand to his blood-hot crotch. He looked down on her with appreciation.

As far as he could remember, Nina was the smallest of them all so far, but despite her slender, slim body, she was one of the few who could fully grasp his penis without any problem and cooperated nicely. God, what a difference with his wife, who on their wedding night was shocked to death, but who, though under heavy protest and a flood of tears, had given birth to two sons.

After that she escaped him as much as possible and kept her legs tightly closed, at least for him. He did not care. The woman had given him two healthy boys, and as long as she played his loving wife in public, he was fine with it. Full of pleasure he felt Nina's skillful fingers, which worked his balls. Not too rough and not too careful. Just right. The little girl was really good at it. Maybe he should keep her here for a while longer. His hand slid under her ass and as Nina spread her legs - she knew exactly what was expected of her - he pushed off. In one flowing movement he jumped into the saddle with Nina, put her on his lap and slid all the way inside her with a powerful punch. A blissful feeling rose up from his loins. With his hands around her hips, he slowly began to move her up and down, gradually accelerating the pace. Faster and faster and faster, until he reached his climax with a deep growl.

< 07.14

So as not to waste any time, Jens ran with the two bags and the mobile phone pressed against his chest to the mailroom, which was located on the ground floor, just like the reception, but in the back of the building, next to the company kitchen. On the way there he quickly looked at his watch. Not much time, but it should just be enough. In a hurry, he opened the door of the mailroom and rushed into Poko's domain.

< 07.15

At the same time, quite a bit northwest of Jens and separated from the mainland by the North Sea, a heap of data was swiftly being disgorged onto the GRID. With his arms folded behind his back, Lord MacMarkland was looking at the information with interest.

He recognized some of the terms, but honestly, he didn't understand anything about the rest. "Saundra? Summary, please." Almost immediately Saundra's voice was heard. "In front of you, you can see how SPY and CRYPTO have traced and decoded the message.

Two computers were used.

From one, which I will call the source unit, a message is sent to the second unit, in the house that Onawa investigated. This unit is programmed in a very advanced way and only serves as a conduit. It switches itself on only when it receives a signal, and once the message has been forwarded, it switches itself off again, which also disconnects it from the source unit. This entire procedure takes less than two seconds." That's why it took them so long to find the evidence, he thought. If Onawa hadn't found and examined the house, it would never have been discovered. So cunningly conceived. But no matter how clever this construction was, their Saundra was just that little bit smarter.

He stood upright proudly and continued listening. "The trace back to the source unit succeeded, but the contact was too short to break in. The probe indicates that this unit, provided the cable is laid in a straight line, should be at a maximum distance of about 7 miles. In the meantime, a map is being made of what lies within this radius. Onawa has already been instructed to follow the fiber-optic cable." For a moment it seemed that Saundra was done speaking, but after a short silence she continued. "CRYPTO cracked and analyzed the second unit's software. It concerns a communication program that sends text messages as an advertising message. At the bottom of the GRID I will show you my findings. Lémarc will be informed." His eyes immediately slid to the lower part of the immense screen, where he read how the message, after having traveled half way across the globe, had found its destination in the CINEMA on the first floor of the UNBI building in The Hague.

< 07.16

Lémarc looked at Jens and as soon as the door closed behind him, he gestured that his colleagues should listen.

He continued: "As we now know, our boss is not dead, thank God. I will certainly tell him what I think about the way in which he has so drastically deceived everyone. The after-effects of this will also be felt for some time to come.

Although he has given us quite a shock, we all know him well enough to assume that he has seen absolutely no other possibility to bring this about.

From Hakon's information, which I got from that redheaded woman, I understood that he accidentally stumbled upon a mole at Interpol and that he, together with a group of acquaintances, people who by the way have nothing to do with UNBI and Interpol, has started an investigation in secret. As a result of what they discovered, Hakon came up with a plan to use the situation to his advantage and to go undercover. Given the results, he did a great job, I would say. At the same time, Hakon and his people urged INN to deceive Spiderweb's leadership and to make him, or them, think that the attack had been successful, until the 12 o'clock news.

I don't know whether Hakon had a hand in this, or whether INN had figured out on its own that Hakon didn't die, but the intention is that this latest Breaking News item will lure the Spiderweb leadership out. Although Hakon has organized all this outside of UNBI, now is the time to support him.

Hakon has asked me to stay here in the CINEMA, together with you, and to do nothing for the time being."

Next to him, Jean let himself fall backwards in amazement. "What? Doing nothing? Just go..." "Yes, Jean," Lémarc interrupted him. "That's what Hakon wants from us." He looked at Jean closely for a moment. "Hear me out, will you?" Jean squeezed his lips together and nodded unwillingly. Lémarc again addressed the group of people around him and continued his speech. "It turns out that the mole at Interpol has been selling secret information to the highest bidder for years. Among other things, via Casanova, to Spiderweb." "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait a minute." Jean bent forward and pointing at their colleagues, he asked:

“Why all the secrecy? Who is this mole anyway? Do we know this guy?” Lémarc sighed internally. So much had already happened today and the bad news that he had to tell his people would hit like a bomb. He said in a controlled manner: “I can’t answer that, because Hakon didn’t tell me that.” Before Jean could interrupt him again, he continued: “I do have to tell you something else. We have a huge problem of our own.

Hakon is convinced that there is also a mole in UNBI.” As Lémarc had anticipated, suddenly, after a short, frightened silence, a true pandemonium broke out.

He let everyone let off steam for a while, until he saw the first suspicious glances appearing here and there.

Helped by Jean, who had looked at him silently and understandingly during the noise, Lémarc managed to restore most of the peace and quiet, after which he spoke again. “Hakon expects, now that Casanova is no longer available, that the management of Spiderweb will contact our mole directly, so that he can find out the identity of this person. At the same time he wants to trace this message back, because on the other end of the line has to be someone from the Spiderweb leadership. Hakon suspects that this person or persons must be somewhere in America. He’s on his way there by now and we’ll all wait here together until we receive a message from him.”

Lémarc cast his gaze around the now very quiet CINEMA. He thought he knew everyone here very well and could not really imagine that he had been fooled by one of them so terribly.

Now that he was looking at their faces again, he couldn’t find any trace of guilt or restlessness at all. Either this mole was really chillingly cold-blooded, or Hakon was completely wrong this time. However, he couldn’t ignore this either, as there was no evidence to the contrary. With a calm voice he continued: “Although I can hardly believe it, unfortunately I have to agree with Hakon. Casanova would never have been able to prepare an attack if he hadn’t received essential information. There was a clear leak about his escort, what time Hakon would leave and from where. The details were only known to a few people and were only discussed within the CINEMA. No matter how frustrating, the facts speak for themselves and so we stay here until I get a call.”

Max, a Russian guy as big as a bear, stood up protesting.

“With the exception of Jens anyway. You did let him go.” Lémarc looked at him quietly. “You know there was no other way and, with all due respect, from all those present here, I know him best. Jens has been my right hand for more than four years. That he could be the mole goes against all my feelings.” “Hmpf. Feelings ...”, moaned Max. “Everyone knows what Lenin once said about that.” He sat down again in anger. Lémarc nodded. “I know what you mean and your comment is justified. To be honest, I can’t even imagine that any of us could have sunk so low.” Once again, Jean bowed to him. “As long as we don’t know anything and sit here, we might as well see what’s on that DVD you received, Lémarque.”

Yes, Lémarc thought to himself. They had that too. Hakon’s umpteenth surprise ... Hopefully not another lousy one. He nodded in agreement. “Pierre! Time to play that DVD!”

A little later, the large digital screen switched on and a car was seen entering the parking garage. Four men wearing balaclavas got out of the car and went straight to Hakon’s limousine. During the next five minutes the images showed how they skillfully and quickly placed three explosives under the car.

After this the screen turned black for a while, after which a hotel room came into view. The camera moved along the four beds. On each bed there was a man in cuffs, who seemed to be asleep. Next to each man was a balaclava. Each person’s face was filmed for a few seconds. The intention was clear.

Without having to instruct him to do so, Lémarc saw that Pierre’s thin, pale fingers were already dancing over his keyboard. Shortly after the DVD was finished, Pierre already had two matches and made the data appear on the big screen. They turned out to be two known, dangerous criminals. The same applied to the other two, who were found by the recognition software not much later. A beautiful quartet, thought Lémarc, who looked at the four rough heads. While Pierre had all had the photos and file information of the filmed guys appear on the big screen, Lémarc had watched everyone closely.

He hadn't been able to detect an anomalous reaction from anyone. The only thing that stood out was that many people looked around in an inconspicuous and attentive manner. Although he didn't show any sign of it, he was deeply upset that there was now clearly a suspicious atmosphere. "Bon," called Jean. "In spite of everything, it was a good result today. In one day, in addition to Casanova and that Stiletto, four more shitbags got taken out of circulation." Here and there, smothered chuckles sounded. The whole of UNBI knew that Jean La Grande didn't mince his words. "All in all, the top of the international investigative list has been considerably reduced. That's good news!" Of course, Lémarc was in complete agreement, but in the meantime they still had a snitch in their midst and he had no idea how long it would take for Hakon to report. No, doing nothing at all was out of the question. "Make sure that the files of these people are ready when they arrive here," he ordered Pierre. "And ...", he turned to Jean, "... in the meantime you will arrange the interrogation teams. We have to find out the name of their contact at UNBI.

I want to know as soon as possible who is..." To his surprise, Sytsema suddenly entered the CINEMA. Before he could ask him why the inspector was alone, his smartphone rang. What the hell? Hakon.

He answered quickly, but instead of Hakon's voice, he heard a woman's voice. In accentless English she told him where the mole was now, after which the connection was disconnected. A cold hand seemed to squeeze his heart when he realized why Sytsema had come in on his own.

< 07.17

Not really aware of the coming and going of the people around her, Marilyn looked at the images on her tablet pc. She absent-mindedly put the last piece of bread in her mouth and while chewing, she watched Onawa, who had left behind some spiders and cockroaches, before leaving the lonely house silent like a ghost. In the pale light of the moon and stars she saw her girlfriend slowly walking through the grounds in front of the veranda, until she suddenly stopped, bent over and studied the place just in front of her attentively. Her girlfriend got up a little later

and stood still for a moment. Like a signpost she stretched one arm straight ahead towards the road and with the other she pointed to the left. She turned halfway around and with a crooked grimace, looking up at an angle, she gestured that she didn't understand anything about it.

Chuckling silently, Marilyn understood that Onawa was letting her know that the track was splitting there.

With loving eyes, Marilyn watched as Onawa crouched down smoothly, took some tools out of her backpack, and meticulously started to cut out a whimsically shaped piece of grass. Not much later she put the thick slice aside and took a plastic bag.

She opened it, took a shovel and carefully started digging out the exposed piece.

Every scoop of earth she took out, she dropped into the bag.

"Is everything okay, Marilyn?", she heard Joost ask, who at the same time took away her plate and skillfully wiped the crumbs with a damp cloth. Marilyn looked up. 'The Harlequin' was well attended, but all those present were watching the large television, on which images from The Hague were still being shown. She looked at Joost and nodded in the affirmative. "So far everything is going according to plan and ...", she turned her tablet pc a little towards him, "... look. Onawa has found a trail."

Joost sat down next to her and together with him she looked at her sweetheart, who plunged all the excavated soil back into the hole and pressed the loose earth firmly into place. Onawa moistened the place with water from her hip flask, after which she pushed the cut-out piece back on top of it in exactly the right way.

After moving the vial along the winding cutting edge once more, Onawa put all her stuff away, hung her backpack on her back and got up. Marilyn saw the bright stars reflected in her big, dark eyes as Onawa looked up. Over the palm of her hand, her sweetheart blew a kiss into the night sky, after which she walked into the prairie, searching the terrain in front of her, with her head bent.

< 07.18

Yesterday Russ could not have believed that his most fervent wish would suddenly come true today and that he would sit here and have breakfast with Barbara in such a relaxed way. He still had to convince himself regularly that he wasn't dreaming. It was unimaginable, because until today he had honestly thought that Barbara was only interested in Hakon and that she, although the friendship between the two had so far not gotten any further than that, still loved him and still kept hoping. It had broken his heart to see how the generally cheerful Barbara gradually turned into a disillusioned business machine. He had wanted to strangle Hakon and on more than one occasion he would have liked to shake Barbara and tell her to wake up. Tell her she had to open her eyes so she could see him standing. It was incomprehensible that Barbara, who was always so sharp, could be so blind at the same time.

But today, somewhere halfway through this unforgettable absurd and insane day, a downright miracle had taken place. Despite, or maybe because of, all the ups and downs - the how and why didn't really interest him - the former Barbara had returned, the way he knew her. His heart had almost burst out of his chest when he caught that glimpse in her eyes. From that moment on, his was strong enough to handle everything. Especially after seeing the look in her eyes when he proposed to take her home. Despite her visible fatigue, her eyes had glistened. Happier than ever, he had, in keeping with tradition, taken her to Lorenzo's, a place where the editors often met for a quick bite or a drink. During the day it was buzzing with ringing smartphones and chatter, but at this early hour it was a lot quieter.

The short walk in the fresh air - Lorenzo's was almost right in front of the INN building - had noticeably done Barbara good. She had some color on her cheeks again and while they were waiting for their breakfast, she had been busy speculating. Looking at him in confidence, she had been wondering about everything. Where Hakon could be at this moment and whether he was healthy or not. If their colleagues Ewin and Charles would soon be released, because after all nobody had been in the blown up limo, right? She hoped that they would be able to contact them today. It was only when their order was delivered that her flow of words came to an end.

As if she hadn't eaten anything decent in three days, which wouldn't surprise him, knowing her, she attacked the double-thick panini. He himself had only devoured half of it when she scraped the last scraps together and put them in her mouth.

"Oh, delicious. I was really ready for that!" She grabbed the coffee, leaned back comfortably with the wide cup between her hands and took small sips of her cappuccino.

"The day could not have ended better, don't you think, Russ?" Her eyes twinkled mischievously. Unbelievable, he thought. Where the hell did she get the energy from to flirt after such a tiring day? Well, she could get what she was angling for. He laughed at her blatantly provocatively. "Dear lady. Better is fine, but I will only give you the best. You know very well that's yet to come." Barbara laughed, but by her pinched white nostrils he saw that at the same time she had to suppress a yawn with all her might.

The foam of the cappuccino had left a white kiss on her nose and lips. He would like to lick it off on the spot and continue licking to explore every spot of her body, but that pleasure had to be postponed. What Barbara needed most now was sleep. Everything else was possible tomorrow.

Resolutely he pushed his plate aside and grabbed his wallet.

"Come on, drink your coffee. Then I can take you home." Barbara nodded, put her cup on her empty plate and stood up. "If you pay, I'll quickly go to the restroom. Okay?"

< 07.19

What he had just been told had struck him like a sledgehammer. Lémarc's thoughts were wildly swirling and he was glad he was sitting down.

One memory after another flashed before his mind's eye and slowly but surely, he became convinced that it should indeed be the case. Always busy talking on the phone, just hanging up or about to call. It was logical that none of the people present here had become nervous. The mole wasn't even in the CINEMA, he had sent him away himself. Damn it!

He beckoned Sytsema to himself. "Where did Jens go? Quickly. It's important." Sytsema shook his head again and told him that after his registration at the Security Center he had only spoken to the chief there, who had then sent him here. He hadn't seen Jens anywhere. No, Lémarc thought sadly. He had actually already known that.

He furiously grabbed his smartphone and called the head of the Security Center. "Theo. Listen. Lock the building. No one is allowed out for the time being. I'll be right with you to explain." He did his best not to let his hands shake while he lay down the smartphone in front of him.

He had to tell his colleagues the horrible truth first. In the oppressive silence, he felt the heavy weight of the dozens of eyes staring at him.

Slowly he got up.

He raised his head, looked at them briefly and started speaking again. "The message of a moment ago came on behalf of Hakon and it's not good. His support group has determined that the leadership of Spiderweb sent a text message to a smartphone here in the CINEMA at 12:23 hours. To be exact, in that corner." He pointed to the place where Jens had been.

All eyes followed his finger. His colleagues were not stupid. Almost immediately, the charged silence burst into cries of amazement and violent terms of force.

Above it all, Lémarc heard Max's deep humming voice. His eyes pierced him in accusation. "Well," he shouted loudly. "See? Didn't I say it?" In the noise, Lémarc instructed Pierre to locate Jens' smartphone as quickly as possible, after which he beckoned Max to him. He understood that Max was angry, but at the same time knew that it was more a reaction to Jens' betrayal than an accusation against him personally.

Ignoring Max's angry looks, he introduced him to Inspector Sytsema. "You two should release those INN journalists.

They will get their belongings back, and you are to emphasize to them that all damage will be compensated.

Then you have to pick up the four bombers that are still in the Hilton. I will arrange with Holger that some of his men will go with you."

... BUT CONTROL IS BETTER!

< 08.01

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Poko tried to clean the floor with frantic sweeps. Nobody had ever seen him move so fast, because normally the handyman shuffled through the corridors and offices as slowly as a snail.

He had carefully maintained his role and answered almost all questions with 'poko' (*Papiamentu for easy*), which had soon earned him the nickname Poko.

Within a week everyone had mistaken him for a slow, not too bright fool and within a month no one had paid any attention to him anymore. Exactly the way he wanted it. Sighing, he wiped the hair out of his eyes and grabbed another cloth. Furiously polishing he cursed himself for having panicked instead of quietly listening to Jens first, when he had come rushing in with his smartphone in his hand, shouting "Hey, Poko! Busted!" He had been shocked to death. Jens had been talking without breathing.

"You received a text message. Man, man, you always leave that thing lying around. This is the third and last time I've been kind enough to bring it back to you. I don't have time for that anymore. I'm not your errand boy. I'm going to continue right now. Must carry out an assignment."

But Jens' words hadn't immediately penetrated his brain. When he picked up his smartphone, he had seen who the message had come from, which made him think he had really been caught, and before he knew it, he had knocked Jens out with one of the heavy coffee pots. Jens had been smashed to the floor like a rock.

As he stared at Jens's silent figure, the sweat had suddenly broken out all over.

Luckily they had been alone, but that could change at any moment. Still shaking, he had checked Jens, but the small streams of blood running out of his nose and right ear were not a good sign. He had tried to feel whether he could detect a pulse in Jens's neck, but had not felt any movement at all. He was really sorry, because Jens was one of the few

people at UNBI that he liked. Puffing and groaning, he had managed to lift Jens' body into the garbage room and, growling with effort, had pushed it over the edge of the garbage container.

Like a sandbag, Jens had fallen down. He had immediately thrown Jens's belongings after him. He was gagging while walking back as fast as he could, to almost slip into a puddle of coffee. It was a mess. The coffee pot had not survived the blow and shards were lying all over the place. Quickly he had raked the remnants together and cleaned up the dripping rubbish, after which he had tried to remove the coffee stains with all his might.

By now about four dirty tea towels were lying next to him. The floor seemed pretty clean to him, but now that he was looking around, he realized that it was an impossible task. The coffee spatters were really everywhere. He would never get this cleaned in time. He picked up the dirty cloths and dumped the bundle with Jens in the garbage container. In a hurry he walked back to his desk, fell down on his knees and crawled underneath.

There were two computers. The left one was part of UNBI's network, with which he only had access to a program in which he processed the received mail and a program in which the kitchen inventory was logged. He did not care about this one. He was interested in the other one, which was in the corner next to it. Last week he had received it from Casanova, simply via the container service, with the order to place it inconspicuously in his office and to wait. So he had put it under the desk next to the other one and waited until he got the order telling him what to do with it. Now the time had come. The advertisement had ordered him to send the latest information, to activate the computer and to leave.

He pulled the computer towards himself, clicked open the rear panel and saw, as he had been told, the little smartphone. From there, all sorts of wires ran to other parts, which obviously didn't belong in a computer.

He turned the device on. The display lit up, showing the message that he had to enter a code. The viciously blinking line demanded so much attention that it made him nervous, so that his own smartphone almost slipped out of his fingers when he pulled it out of his back pocket.

The code that Casanova had given him, with the absolute prohibition of writing it down, had been impossible to remember. Well, there was indeed nothing on paper. However, he had sent himself a text message in which he had put the code. He didn't want to think about making a mistake, because then he wouldn't be safe anywhere.

The boss wasn't very lenient with people who screwed up, as had been shown in the last two months, with those mysterious deaths around him. He saw that seven minutes had already passed since he had eliminated Jens. He had to hurry. His fingers didn't really want to cooperate and only after the third attempt had he finally entered the ten characters correctly. In a hurry he closed the rear panel again, slid the computer back into place and crawled away from under the desk. It was time to get out.

Casanova had advised him to keep a distance of at least half a mile. He quickly changed his work jacket for his denim jacket, grabbed his bag and walked through the garbage room to the back door, which led straight to the parking lot. The alarm was no problem. He had disabled it long before. Once outside, he immediately got into his car, which he always parked close to the back entrance. Only one more hurdle to go. More nervous than he wanted to admit, he drove to the exit of the parking lot at a normal pace.

He was lucky, he saw. Carlo was on duty. He never wanted to chat. With a bit of luck, he could drive on. However, things didn't work out as he had hoped. Just now Carlo approached him, gesturing that he had to lower his window. As if nothing was wrong, he lazily sank back and let his arm dangle outside the window. At the same time, he waited tensely and kept his foot above the gas pedal ready to rush off quickly right through the barrier if things should go wrong. "Gee, Poko, how early you are. We're not used to that from you." As sluggish and slow as he could, he replied: "Nah, no. That's right. My mom is in the hospital. Gotta go there." Carlo made a compassionate face. "Ah, no. Then I won't hold you up. Go quickly." He walked to the barrier and raised it manually for him. While the phone was ringing loudly in the guardhouse, Poko quietly drove with a short, slow farewell past the friendly Carlo, and left the UNBI area.

< 08.02

While Sytsema and Max were still nodding that they understood him, Lémarc saw Pierre's hand go up. "Ha. Nice. You've found him." Pierre looked at him apologetically. "Yes, but ... The signal only indicates that he must still be in the building. It doesn't get any more precise. Sorry." That was no problem, Lémarc thought. Where his smartphone was located, there they would find Jens... Before he could finish his thought, Pierre, fiddling nervously with his fingers, continued.

"Uh, about that redheaded woman ... Strange. I caught her once on a traffic camera. She drove out of the park. After that she never showed up again. As if she had gone up in smoke. Really weird." Pierre might well be the personification of a limp string of dough, with his long, slouching posture, pale white skin, sleek blonde hair and long skinny fingers with short nails chewed to rags, but his brain proved the opposite. According to Lémarc, few could match that. If Pierre still hadn't found this woman, he probably wouldn't ever do so. As unfortunate as he thought it was - he was much more disappointed than he wanted to admit - it was not a priority at the moment. "Never mind, Pierre. We'll find out later." He nodded to Pierre reassuringly and ordered him to block all normal lines of communication immediately.

He had not yet finished speaking, when an all-pervading siren began to sound. Throughout the building, Theo's voice echoed: "Security protocol Alpha 1, THIS IS NOT A DRILL." As if on command, everyone stood up. As the message was repeated, everyone gathered their belongings, after which they headed towards their own work space to stay there, as the protocol dictated. Lémarc joined Jean, Sytsema and Max.

"Come on. We'll go to the Security Center. From there, we'll find out where Jens is hiding." Sytsema looked at him questioningly. "Why move? Shouldn't we stay here?" He gestured to the high-tech equipment around him and concluded: "Here you have everything at hand, right?"

While he was the last to leave the CINEMA, he heard Jean explain to Sytsema that all normal connections, both landlines and mobile phone traffic, including the intra- and internet were blocked, and that the entire UNBI building, with the exception of the double-secured lines within the Security Center, was completely incommunicado. Well, there was nothing

wrong with the protocol, Lémarc thought miserably. It was people who betrayed you. Sympathetic guys like Jens. Never before had he been so terribly mistaken about someone. Even now, he couldn't imagine that Jens - diligent, helpful, blond Jens - had sold his soul.

< 08.03

Ewin had no idea that his colleagues in New York were having a great time.

Many had already had one drink too many and the mood became more and more exuberant. Ewin himself was in a much less pleasant situation. He felt as if it had been hours since four big AT'ers had pulled Charles and him off the couch without a fuss. Held tightly by them, they had been taken out of the Elisabeth Hospital,

after which they had been pushed hard into the back of a blacked out black SUV.

They hadn't driven long before the car stopped and the doors were opened with a jolt.

Before he could have caught even the slightest glimpse of the surroundings, they had pulled a dark hood over Charles and him. He hadn't seen Charles since then, but he had no doubt that his cameraman had been treated in a similar way to himself. As if he were no more than an oversized piece of meat, they had pushed him down on a chair, attached him to something with ice-cold handcuffs, cut off the plastic straps and pulled the hood off his head. Blinking because of the sudden bright light of the naked fluorescent tube on the ceiling, he had seen the door slam shut.

The dull bang had sounded awfully definitive. Since then he had heard nothing at all and had sat alone between these boring, grey-white walls. He couldn't get up and walk around for a bit, because he had been fastened to the steel table with one arm. As far as he could tell, the thing was solid and, like the chair by the way, riveted to the floor with thick bolts and nuts.

Unless he could change himself into the Hulk, it was almost impossible to get rid of it. He could move the other arm freely, so that he could drink from the plastic water bottle that they had left for him. The only thing that interrupted the monotony was the dark, shiny, rectangular shape on the wall opposite him. Transparent from the other side, of course. The whole time he had been sitting at the table as quietly as possible and had taken a sip of water every now and then. But as the silence continued and he felt he had been left to his own devices for hours, he began to worry more and more. If Charles and he were actually held under the Patriot Act, they could hold them in custody for years, maybe even for life, and do God knows what to them.

The marks from the cuffs on his wrists and ankles, which were getting worse and worse, were just a trifle compared to that, he knew. He was still thirsty, but the bottle had been empty for quite some time and now he had to pee awfully badly. There had been no reaction whatsoever to his cry for help.

If this was part of a Nazi type trick to put him in an uncomfortable situation and to break his spirit with it, then they were definitely on the right track. His bladder was really about to explode. He could only hold it for five more minutes at the most. He had to come up with something so that he wouldn't pollute himself.

He wouldn't grant them that fun.

Grimly he grabbed the bottle, clasped it between his legs and zipped open his fly. He held the bottle neck in position between two fingers and emptied his bladder. God, what a relief. Carefully maneuvering, with the almost three-quarter-filled bottle held firmly upright between his legs, he closed his fly. With pleasure, he noted that he had not spilled a single drop. Of course it wasn't much, but at this moment it felt like a huge victory.

He proudly reached for the bottle, when without any warning suddenly a shockingly loud voice came thundering out of the walls. Shocked, he ducked, immediately remembering the bottle, but it was already too late. As an announcement boomed out, he felt the wet heat seeping through his pants.

< 08.04

After Sandra's confirmation about where the mole should be and her announcement that Lémarc had been informed, her pleasant voice had let him know a little later that the entire UNBI building had been placed under SEC1 by security and that, immediately after Onawa had established a connection, she had retrieved the data from the Markland router in the cottage in Texas. The device contained the entire history of the last month. As soon as she had finished analyzing it, she would report back.

Lord MacMarkland rubbed his hands, because now it finally seemed that they were making progress.

He went to his seat and sat down, so that he could see the entire GRID more easily. His gaze was on the quadrant at the top right, which contained the individual screens. The first screen was tuned to the INN news channel and at this moment was only showing repeats and advertisements.

On the second screen he saw Onawa, sometimes bending over to study the ground in front of her, making her way through the deserted plain. The third screen showed him the events at UNBI, where currently Hakon's people were leaving the CINEMA.

It was the fourth screen that caught his attention, because in an irregular rhythm several lines, question marks and one name appeared. "Sandra? What does..." At the same time, Sandra said: "On screen four, you can see a schematic representation of the content on the router. I've incorporated all the messages that were sent and received into this communication structure.

First, the number of Casanova's smartphone showed up. Several messages were sent to it. The last one is from two days before we got him in our sights. All the other numbers found are prepaid as well, but these have only been used once. It will be difficult to find the names and addresses connected to these numbers. If I want to be able to achieve further results, I need to be able to contact various agencies. For that I need your permission." He didn't have to think long. The people with

whom Casanova had worked, would certainly be just as monstrous and had to be arrested as soon as possible. "Permission granted, Sandra." "Thank you."

Sandra was silent as on the fourth screen one of the question marks began to blink. Behind the scenes there was a lot of work going on, he noted with satisfaction. It would take a while before Sandra would report back, he assumed.

On the GRID there wasn't much change. He leaned back, relaxed and closed his eyes. But he didn't even get to doze off. Sandra called in. After she had cleared her throat in an absurdly civilized way, she sounded even more civilized, if that were possible. "After finding the mole's smartphone within UNBI, I tried to find out who owns it. That hasn't worked out yet, because it also contains a prepaid card. I did find out that Jens took it with him to the storage room at the back of the building. I have looked at the UNBI personnel data and the person who has an office there, is Stanley Dapper. This person was appointed as a janitor four months ago. The smartphone in question remained there for exactly eight minutes and 43 seconds, before it started moving again. The device left UNBI at the same time as Mr. Dapper. Satellite images and surrounding cameras confirm this man's departure. He left the premises by car at 12.41 hours.

The trail was followed to a parking lot nearby, where the car is now parked. A security camera opposite this parking lot just barely shows the car. SPY has noticed that he is currently working with a laptop there. According to our estimation we can assume that he is trying to make contact with Spiderweb as a result of the message he received.

A musical song was sent along with the text message, which was disguised as an advertising message. CRYPTO still has no results regarding both contents. Therefore, I suggest to actively direct Lémarc Tasker and Holger Bersal, so that this man can be arrested. It is necessary that Dapper's smartphone and laptop are examined. Undoubtedly, the information on it will lead to a faster decryption of the cryptic advertising message. For this, too, I need your permission to do this." Without thinking twice, he agreed again and asked where Jens was. "According to the last analysis, he is located in the area where the waste containers are located. What he is doing there is unknown."

< 08.05

With Sytsema, Max and Jean in his wake, Lémarc entered the Security Center, where Theo and Holger were busy. Holger eagerly watched the row of monitors showing the corridors and communal areas, while he was commanding his men by walkie-talkie. Behind him, he saw Theo walking back and forth, busy giving directions to his staff with gestures.

Both looked up and signaled that they were coming. Theo tapped Holger on his shoulder and pointed to his desk. As soon as they all sat down, Lémarc updated Holger and Theo, and despite Jens' treacherous actions, he was amused against his will. The rather arrogant and distant Holger turned out to be human today. On his face one emotion after another alternated as he briefly summarized Hakon's plan. Disbelief, relief, joy ... But now, after the bad news about Jens, his face was like thunder. "You will agree with me that finding Jens is now the top priority," concluded Lémarc. Five stark heads nodded in agreement. "Theo, what's the current state of affairs?" With his arms confidently crossed, Theo replied: "According to my boys, no one has left the building.

Only Poko left earlier. So, it will simply be search..." He didn't get time to finish his sentence, because Jean interrupted him by asking in surprise: "Poko?" Not very interested, Theo repeated: "Yes, only Poko. You know, that lazy one." "Hmm, that's weird," Jean said thoughtfully. "That man wouldn't run if he was on fire, but he always stays until his work is done. He is often one of the last to leave." "According to the security guard who spoke to him ...", continued Theo, "... he had to leave earlier today because his mother is seriously ill at the hospital." "What?" Lémarc jumped up. "That's not possible. Poko's mother died two weeks ago." Quickly – despite everything hoping they had been misled as far as Jens was concerned - he explained that the man had told him that himself.

His mother lived on the other side of the world and despite Hakon's permission to go to the funeral, he had continued to work hard. When asked why, Poko had only shrugged his shoulders, muttered something unclear, and continued on his way with a vague look in his eyes. Lémarc got halfway up and said: "Besides, now that I remember the moment of

that disturbing phone call in the CINEMA, it's striking that Jens took that smartphone from the coffee cart. Jens always keeps his phone with him. I've never seen him put that thing anywhere. It may well be that it's not even his..." Theo's walkie-talkie creaked. He held the thing to his ear and a deep groove appeared between his eyebrows. Shortly after that Theo said fiercely: "The container room alarm has been disabled and the outside door there is not locked."

< 08.06

Although he had gotten away easily, it hadn't been that easy to keep on driving at a calm pace. To be arrested at the last minute would have been disastrous. In the liberal Netherlands the prison sentence would not be so bad, but the money ... He would lose a small fortune. He was constantly peering around while quietly making his way through the streets, but within five minutes he had managed to reach the parking lot of a nearby shopping mall.

It was the same place he used to meet with Casanova on a regular basis. A somewhat older neighborhood, where around the parking lot of the small supermarket the bushes had grown into a dense hedge. Just perfect.

He had parked the car in a corner at the back, next to a van and was well sheltered with tall bushes on the right side and at the back of the car. On the left side he was hidden from view by the van.

In a hurry he had grabbed his laptop, connected his smartphone to it and started copying the last file.

Only now did he dare to relax a bit and let it sink in that he had done it. Unbelievable, but true.

He had to be a better actor than he had thought, because everyone had definitely believed that he was very slow and absent-minded and therefore always left his smartphone lying around everywhere. Nobody had had the slightest suspicion that the thing, wherever he had left it, had been recording everything that was being discussed for hours.

By order of Casanova, during the last few weeks he had left his smartphone exactly where most of the information was discussed, pretending it was because of his apparent forgetfulness. The last file he now copied to his laptop contained most of what had been discussed in the CINEMA that morning. Not everything, unfortunately, because Jens had been kind enough to bring the thing back.

Tears shot into his eyes when he remembered Jens' limp body. He sincerely regretted that Jens had to pay for his good deed with his death, because thanks to him he had managed to get away in time. The fact that he hadn't been caught before was astonishing anyway. Thank God. He was rid of it. In a moment, the job would be done and he would be a rich man.

He already knew exactly what he was going to do with the money. Back to Curaçao. Open a nice little restaurant, so that both of his sisters could get a respectable job. And maybe a boat for fishing. Because of this job, he hadn't even been able to attend his mother's funeral. With the back of his hand he wiped the tears out of his eyes. For her, he would buy the most beautiful stone there was. That was the least he could do.

He changed his position impatiently. The file was large and copying seemed to take forever. The blue progress bar, almost as azure as the sea at home, slowly crawled on. He looked at it and suddenly a smile appeared on his face. Stanley, boy. Poko, poko.

< 08.07

Followed closely by Jean and Holger, Lémarc rushed through the corridors and almost slipped onto the slippery floor as he rushed into Poko's office. "Oops, look out. It's very slippery here," warned the guard, who had discovered the defective alarm and who, by grabbing his arm just in time, barely managed to save him from an ugly fall. Behind him, Holger and Jean stepped in more cautiously. "Mon Dieu," Jean exclaimed. With a face that expressed pure disgust, he stood there, looking around.

"What the hell happened here? Look at this, everything is full of dirty splashes and splatters. Damn it!" Lémarc also cast his gaze around the

space. Jean was right. It wasn't exactly clean here.

He moved his gaze to the floor. At first glance it seemed rather clean, but when he looked better, he noticed the spotty smears. Someone had spilled a lot of something here and hadn't cleaned up very well. However, there was nothing to indicate that Jens had been here.

In the meantime, Jean had gone with the guard to investigate the defective alarm and Holger was busy with a quick examination of the cabinets. "Nothing special, Lémarc. Just all kinds of ordinary household stuff. I can't imagine what business Jens would have here." With a light shrug, Lémarc indicated that he didn't know either and activated his walkie-talkie. "Theo, send a couple of men outside and let them see if they can find Jens. Let them also search his car." Then he walked to the container room and beckoned Holger to come with him. "Summon some extra manpower and, just to be on the safe side, have both this room and Poko's office meticulously checked, as well as the archives behind it and the scullery next to it. Let them examine every nook and cranny. Have them report any minor discrepancies. Jens either drove along with Poko, or he's hiding out here somewhere."

The big blond German nodded, grabbed his walkie-talkie and started passing on orders in a staccato-like manner. "Jean ...", continued Lémarc, pointing to the container area, "... if you start here, I'll check the archives."

On his way there, he contacted the head of the Security Center again. "Theo ...", asked Lémarc, "... what do you know about this Poko?" While checking the cabinets and drawers one by one, he listened to what Theo had to say, which was actually sadly little.

As part of a subsidized social project, Poko had been appointed as a sort of handyman. At the request of the Dutch government, Hakon had created such positions for him and four others. All five people had passed the screening process with flying colors. Well, Lémarc thought to himself. Apparently, that didn't mean much. Jens had also looked perfectly trustworthy.

While all kinds of questions were haunting his mind, he asked Theo to have Pierre collect all the information about Poko and Jens. Then he began to examine the huge row of cabinets on the next wall. Halfway

through the second one his walkie-talkie creaked. It was Jean. “Lémarque! Come here. I found Jens!” He slammed the closet shut and ran back to the container area. From the front of the three containers standing next to each other, the sliding valve was pushed all the way to the back.

Jean stood halfway over it and seemed to be cautiously groping around in it. While Jean pulled up a black plastic bag, Lémarc looked inside and saw Jens lying there. He lay half on his side, with his right arm half over his head. His blond hair was full of clotted, bloody crusts.

“He is not dead, Lémarque. I felt a pulse, but I don’t dare to move him, because blood is dripping out of his ear and I remember from my first aid training that indicates there is probably a fracture of the skull. Theo has been informed and has already arranged an ambulance.” He pointed to the two bags at his feet and continued: “The things he brought with him are here too. And, look.” He held out to Lémarc a smartphone wrapped in a handkerchief. “This one was there too.” Lémarc stared sadly at Jens’s limp figure. Guilty? Innocent? With all his heart he wished that the latter would be proven. It was clear as daylight that Poko had struck Jens down. They had to track him down as soon as possible to find out exactly what the two had had to do with each other.

He beckoned Holger towards him and quickly said to Jean: “Check if it’s Jens’ smartphone and check its history. Make sure you don’t accidentally brush off the fingerprints.” He picked up the plastic bags and turned to Holger. As he gestured to the container behind him, he quickly continued: “We found Jens. You can cancel the search.” Holger immediately grabbed his walkie-talkie, but Lémarc indicated with one hand that he hadn’t finished speaking. “Listen carefully. We have to be quick.” He gave Holger the transparent plastic bag.

“This is the stuff of the journalists of INN. You have to give it to Theo and let him arrange for their belongings to be returned to them and have them released. This bag ...”, he held the black plastic bag towards Holger, “... you have to give to Sytsema. He knows what’s inside. He and Max have to go to the Hilton to arrest four criminals. Arrange an AT to go with them. Then I want you and your people to be fully available within a few minutes to arrest the one who assaulted Jens. Give me a call as soon as you are ready.”

Without interrupting him, Holger had listened to him with a serious look. "I'll be fine, Lémarc. I'll have the command car come as well, okay? We'll be ready in five minutes." He nodded resolutely, skillfully retrieved his walkie-talkie with his one usable hand and walked off giving hasty orders. Jean leaned against the container and was working on the smartphone with a handkerchief and ballpoint pen. Blaming himself, Lémarc looked at Jens, who was lying between the rubbish like old garbage. In an attempt to imagine what might have happened, he closed his eyes and tried to remember exactly what he had seen. In the middle of his speech, a mobile phone had been ringing and he had seen Jens take the thing. While he turned it off and put it in his pocket, Jens had tried to make something clear to him by gesticulating. But with the best will in the world he couldn't remember what his assistant might have meant. Hell, he should have paid attention.

Convinced of Jens' loyalty, he had sent him on his way a little later. Surely he couldn't be the mole? Had he misjudged his assistant all these years? Could Jens have so easily fooled him? The longer he thought about it, the more unlikely it seemed. Suppose that Jens had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time ... He looked gloomily at the remains of a coffee pot, which were half under Jens' ankle. Poko's workspace had been covered in splashes and smudges. Maybe Jens had witnessed something and Poko had knocked him down. A lot of maybes ... Jean's voice interrupted his train of thought. "Well, Lémarque. This is indeed Jens' own smartphone." Carefully, Jean wrapped the handkerchief all around it. "I checked everything. There are no suspicious messages on it and he hasn't received any text messages in the past hour." Lémarc looked surprised and at the same time a huge weight seemed to be lifted off his shoulders.

He was now almost certain about the situation. "We can now say that it must have been Poko's, which he took from the coffee cart." "Which he may have brought back," Jean added approvingly. "But that doesn't prove anything else, Lémarque." Very much against his will, he had to admit that Jean was right.

Nevertheless, Lémarc continued to believe that Jens had nothing to do with Poko. "No, not at the moment, Jean. But as soon as we find Poko, we'll get to know the truth." And then we will know that Jens is not to

blame, he added in his mind. He looked at his watch. Pierre would have to report in the meantime, so that they knew where to find Poko. Hardly had the thought crossed his mind, but his smartphone was already ringing. Assuming that Theo had partially cleared the alarm and that he would get Pierre on the phone, he answered without looking at the display.

A well-known woman's voice said softly: "We understand that you are looking for a certain Poko." "That's right," he replied in surprise. "What..." The woman continued to speak, undisturbed. "We were able to trace the smartphone on which the incriminating text message was received. The device has been in the parking lot of a shopping mall called Babylon, close to you, for five minutes now. The signal comes from a blue Toyota Camry parked there and the occupant is a dark-colored man, who is currently working on a laptop. According to our specialists it is the man you are looking for. We ourselves can only signal and inform, not intervene. We will send the location to Holger Bersal's smartphone. In addition, we will also send the command vehicle of both the Regional AT and an extra local AT. These teams are on their way back from the deployment at the Elisabeth Hospital and are located nearby. They can be on site within three minutes. You do not need to worry about coordination, as we will take care of it on behalf of the crisis manager. Hakon will be informed as soon as possible. He will contact you as soon as he has the opportunity. Like you, he will be extremely shocked when he hears what has happened to Jens. But that shouldn't affect the scenario any further."

"Hey, what? Scenario?", Lémarc cried out in amazement. "You don't mean to say that everything is planned, do you?" "A lot of things are planned in our lives, Mr. Tasker. Despite this, we still have to deal with unexpected twists and turns from time to time."

In our risk analysis, Poko had not been noticed to any great extent, and Hakon will be very sorry about that. On his behalf, we would ask you to do everything you can to get hold of the man alive. We also urge you to wait until Poko has finished what he is doing now. We suspect that he will send a message via his laptop. We want to intercept this message. As soon as he starts the car and wants to drive away, you can intervene."

Lémarc heard a click and the connection was severed. Surprised, he stared at his smartphone. Coordination? Planning? Scenario? On behalf of Hakon? What the hell was going on here? What the hell was his boss doing? In a fierce polka, one question after another was spinning through his head. How on earth could he keep a grip on such an absurd situation?

He stared blankly and, thinking about the whole situation, he put away his smartphone. “Well? Lémarque!” Jean was looking at him impatiently, asking questions. He hadn’t heard Jean’s question at all, but didn’t need to guess what it was. How was he supposed to answer it? How could he explain something he didn’t understand?

Thinking everything through as quickly as a bolt of lightning, he decided to suspend all questions. The woman had claimed to call on behalf of Hakon and wanted them to arrest Poko. That was enough for the time being.

He didn’t say who had called, but quietly replied: “Poko’s location has been established. By the time Jens is hospitalized, we’ll have him.” Jean smiled for a moment and then looked at him stubbornly. “I’ll stay with Jens. Sorry, Lémarque. It’s nothing personal, but I’m going with him.” Lémarc knew what he meant. This way there would be someone with Jens who would look at the situation in a neutral way. He nodded as a sign that he understood. “Listen.” The whining sound of an ambulance siren quickly came closer. “They are coming. I’m going now. Keep me informed.”

< 08.08

He had already experienced a lot in his role as crisis manager, but what had happened today, Johan thought, grinding his teeth, was absolutely the worst. Not at all happy with the way things were going, he stood with his jaws clamped together and watched the operations of his IT man, who was swinging back and forth in his office chair between the various screens.

Regularly typing incomprehensible texts here and there, he tirelessly swept from one terminal to another. To his untrained eyes it all looked

very professional, but all the while he seriously wondered whether this guy was worth his more than generous salary.

He still hadn't found the fucking hacker. While he was watching critically, he twisted the cap off the water bottle and took a swig. The cold water only had a temporary narcotic effect, for soon the stomachache returned in all its intensity. The tablets he had taken half an hour ago did not help. Just as effective as the IT specialist, he thought sourly.

He'd better order that the system be shut down and restarted. After all, the new access codes were already ready for everyone.

The difficulties in The Hague were also over. All the rubbish in his city had been cleaned up now and everything was back to normal.

The damage was less than expected and mainly concerned the new hall of the Elisabeth Hospital. The insurance companies would deal with that, and as far as UNBI was concerned, well, that wasn't his problem.

That was a good thing, as he didn't have time for that. In the coming weeks he would have to work long days to process the gigantic amount of paperwork that would result from this day. The thought of that didn't exactly cheer him up.

In a grumpy mood, he took another sip, screwed on the cap again and was about to give the order, when the IT man looked back briefly with an enthusiastic face. "Got it!"

His fingers danced swiftly over the keyboard. "We have another infringement. Look, look and look," he excitedly shouted, pointing at three different screens. "Here he sends a message on your behalf to the commander of EUAT92, Holger Bersal. And here is another one, in which AT2 and the command truck receive new instructions. And on this screen ...", he pointed out the last screen, "... you can see the progress of the tracking and we'll find the hacker. This could happen at any time now. The program now follows the trace to the IP address of the computer from which the message was sent.

Look at it." His face was shining. "We're approaching the source." Hardly had the words left his mouth, when the screens fluttered to black.

< 08.09

Surprised by his sudden release, Ewin stood with Charles in front of the main gate of the UNBI building, where they had both been left behind less than a minute ago. Next to him there was a soft rustling noise, followed by a smothered curse. Ewin looked aside and saw Charles looking at his destroyed camera with sad eyes. “What was the point of that?”, said Charles. “Why does everything always have to be destroyed? Do you understand that?”

“I don’t know, Charles,” he replied, tired. “All I know is that we are standing here in the sunshine and are free again. I hadn’t expected that. I was absolutely convinced that we were miles deep in shit.”

Only when he heard his own voice say it, did he realize that it was true. The bewilderment ebbed away and he took a closer look at Charles. Their clothes were pretty disheveled, but apart from a pretty big scratch on his face, Charles didn’t seem to be hurt that much. He did see that his colleague was doing his best to ignore the dark spot on his thigh. “That’s not what you think,” he defended himself a bit gruffly. “I had to use the water bottle, but that didn’t go quite well at the last moment. Don’t you have to go?”

“Didn’t they give you anything to drink?” Charles chuckled briefly. “Certainly so. And I drank that too. But you know, they treated us like animals. So I thought I’d behave like one.” He remained silent for a moment, chuckled again and continued: “The walls were so terribly boring, you see. And so I left some abstract modern art on it.” Ewin laughed. Typical Charles. Stubborn and direct.

By now they had been discovered and a horde of interested fellow reporters appeared. Ewin quickly took off his jacket and hung it over his arm, thus concealing the stain on his pants from everyone’s eye. He had enough experience to know that the media was very hard. He was just in time. Surrounded by cameras and microphones, they were overwhelmed by a multitude of intrusive people who wanted to know what had happened to them and whether they knew why a few SUVs from various arrest teams had driven away with howling sirens just before their release.

From all sides there were shrill voices that wanted to know the ins and outs of it all. The cacophony made him mad. Desperately he tried to find a way out and saw to his relief an INN-car arriving, which was slowly penetrating through the masses, honking loudly.

The door swung open and as the man emerged Ewin recognized their INN location manager. Shouting loudly that they shouldn't say anything, he walked around the car, kept the rear door open and gestured to them to hurry on. Ewin poked Charles and together they sprinted towards it.

Ewin dived in and just in time pulled the bag that Charles threw in onto his lap. His colleague let himself down next to him, pulled the door closed and pressed the lock. Their location manager fended the media off with a briefcase, walked around the car and as soon as he sat down, the driver rushed off firmly, almost hitting two cameramen. Their location manager turned to them with a broad grin. "Welcome back, guys! What a day. Good work. New York is very pleased with your reports. They have already been informed that you are free again and can't wait for your story." He rubbed his hands with pleasure. "That too will be a great story, not to mention a big claim. There's already a whole bunch of lawyers waiting for you." Absent-mindedly, Ewin rubbed his wrists and stared outside. Deadly tired, he let himself fall backwards. Next week his family would come over and he would take at least a month off. Nothing else was important at the moment.

< 08.10

In the time it had taken Holger to explain to Theo what Lémarc wanted, his teams had prepared themselves. When he came downstairs, they were standing quietly talking to each other and waiting by the cars.

After a final check and after they had received the last instructions, they all got in to drive away as soon as he gave the signal. He had thought it would take some time, but it was not as bad as he expected. Within less than a minute he had received all the information he needed from Lam. Not only was he impressed by the speed with which they had tracked down the target, but the quality of the images supplied from the surveillance cameras and satellite photos was also exceptionally good.

He had immediately passed on the coordinates and the photo of the fugitive, after which he conscientiously memorized everything that had been sent to him. The person they had to arrest was an Antillean named Stanley Dapper. The man worked as a handyman at UNBI. No criminal record, no complaints, no details. Holger took in the face.

Dark skin, dark hair, brown eyes. From the cheeks and the beginning of the lower chin, you could see he was a pound or thirty too heavy. The broad face with the thick, folded eyelids gave the man a sulky appearance.

The man didn't seem dangerous at all. Yet he had knocked Jens unconscious and left him badly wounded. He had looked closely at the images and established that the terrain would not involve any significant risks. A complicated strategy was not necessary. He had informed his new second in command, who was in command of the team in the support car, after which he had given the signal to leave. By now they were on their way to the location at top speed. Holger had every confidence in the driving skills of his colleague. At EAUT92 they didn't employ Mad Harries, so he sat quietly next to him, with his gaze on his left wrist.

On the small display he could see everything very well and with the help of his right hand, which was sticking out of the sling, he flipped through all the data again slowly to make sure that he wouldn't overlook anything. He didn't want to take any chances.

This time no one should be allowed to even get a scratch.

A fiasco like the one in the Elisabeth Hospital would not happen to him a second time.

< 08.11

Although the light on her headband gave enough light, Onawa was happy that the moon and stars put the sparsely overgrown terrain in a diffuse light, so that she could oversee a large part of her surroundings and therefore moved forward easily. She had set off less than half an hour ago and had already progressed more than one and a half miles. It was a

pity that the other end of the fiber-optic cable didn't seem to be attached to anything. That would have saved her a nice little walk. The other cable she found in the hole, disappeared in the direction of the street and was connected to the electricity grid. She had put wasps on both cables and activated them. Their stings had easily protruded through the insulation, after which they had made contact and immediately started transmitting.

The signals were received by SPY and shortly afterwards the entire network of the cabling was exposed. In no time Sandra had let her know that everything was standard, except for the fiber-optic cable. The end of it was not attached to anything, so it was not possible to estimate where it went.

The only thing she could do was to follow this cable on foot. A white ghost swirled into the light beam of her lamp in front of her eyes. A moth. Without breaking her stride, she caught the animal and - in order not to damage the delicate wings - made a bowl around it with her hands. She brought her hand close to her mouth, whispering: "Dummy, my lamp is not the moon, is it? Be careful," and gave it back its freedom.

The wings flashed brightly white when it flapped away from her. She was alone again. The plain seemed to stretch out endlessly in front of her. In more than fifty shades of grey, grass, rocks, a few scattered bushes and a few solitary trees, shone silvery in the moonlight. Silently progressing, she kept her ears focused in order to be able to catch all the sounds that did not belong here. While behind her the horizon shyly began to light up, she walked further and further into the prairie.

< 08.12

Ping. The copying was done. Immediately Poko opened the more than three quarters of an hour long recording and started listening. He heard sliding chairs, rustling and a lot of different people talking at the same time. Not interesting.

He fast-forwarded for a while and jumped right into the middle of a speech by Lémarc, who was talking about the attack. Old news that didn't interest him very much either. Again, he fast-forwarded a long way. Lémarc had been away, because he came in for the second time. He

wanted to fast-forward again, when it dawned on him what Lémarc was talking about. He withdrew his hand. Surprised he heard Lémarc say that the big boss, whom he himself always stayed as far away from as possible because the guy seemed to look right through you, had survived the attack.

He already knew that Casanova was dead. That didn't exactly keep him awake, because every time he had met him, it had been a torment. That creep was an honorary member of what he himself called the IST club. A sadist, Nazist, fascist and racist in one. That son of a bitch had made it clear on several occasions that he belonged to an inferior race because of his dark tinted skin color, good for the dirty work and barely worthy to talk to. But Casanova was the one who was now dead, while Poko, alive and well, would have a big reward in his bank account today.

He laughed half-heartedly.

Who was the smartest one now? Listening quietly, he heard a little later that Casanova's gang members had also been arrested. There you go. So, the proud son of a bitch was just a stupid prick. He had warned him not to underestimate that Hakon. Arrogant as he was, Casanova had carelessly dismissed his warning and said very nicely that thinking was something that Poko had better leave to him. Poko hoped revengefully that his death had been particularly painful, and thought it was a good thing that the scary son of a bitch was dead. Casanova had been his only contact, so there was no one left who could get in touch with him. Nevertheless, he was not reassured. That Hakon was still alive and was apparently working on something super secret. That knowledge wasn't comforting to him at all. Would they have him in sight as well?

Carefully he peeked outside and looked around. There was nothing special to see. Normal people shopping, walking in and out of the supermarket and very ordinary looking customers, pushing full and empty shopping trolleys to and from the parking lot. Yet he suddenly had the creeps. He closed the file and opened the text message on his smartphone. The link he needed was hidden in there. He quickly typed the link into the search bar of his browser.

The upload would take at least five minutes. Five terribly long minutes. He bit his lips restlessly and peeked out suspiciously.

< 08.13

Hardly a minute had passed, but for Russ it seemed as if it were hours. For the umpteenth time he looked at his watch.

More than twenty minutes ago he had already paid the waiter, who had given him a meaningful wink. Now, walking back and forth to serve the other guests, the same man had already given him a pitying look, shrugging his shoulders a few times. He thought, of course, that Barbara had let him down.

The man was completely wrong, for Russ was absolutely certain that she would never do such a thing. She was far too straightforward for that. His gaze remained on the door of the ladies' room, while his restless fingers tapped continuously on his thigh. She could come out at any moment. Again, he looked at his watch. What was taking her so long? He remembered exactly what she had said: "If you pay, I'll quickly go to the toilet. Okay?"

Just a quick one. Sure. It's not inconceivable that she had gotten into a conversation with someone. For Barbara, time was a flexible concept and when she was absorbed in something, she never paid much attention to the clock. A quick look at his watch told him that a few minutes had already passed and by now he was downright worried. He could no longer control himself. He stood up and walked briskly towards the toilets. To his relief, someone just came from the ladies' room. He stopped her and asked her if she would take a look and see if Barbara was still there. Moments later the woman came back. Her big, round eyes looked at him incomprehensibly and he already knew what she would tell him. That no one had been inside.

< 08.14

Via the Security Center, where he and Theo quickly reviewed the latest developments and arranged for a forensic team, Lémarc reached the back of the mall after a short drive.

Accompanied by two of Holger's men - even though he knew that Hakon had orchestrated the attack himself, Holger did not want to lift the security - he went straight to the large command car where Holger himself was already waiting for him. "It's good to have you here, Lémarc," he began.

As he entered the car after Lémarc, Holger looked over his shoulder and continued speaking. "Indeed, our man is not the fastest. He's still in his car, which is fine by the way. That gives us every opportunity to organize things quietly." Holger closed the door behind him, pointed to the screens, where a blue Toyota could be seen from four different angles, and introduced him to the commander of AT2.

A big, bulky man with a seasoned face. The hefty, Roman nose gave him a somewhat domineering appearance. He was a bit older and could only last another three or four years or so in active service, Lémarc thought. Judging by his name, he was a Dutchman and, like so many he had met, he could only partially understand him. Something about oi's and gr's. Impossible to pronounce and difficult to remember. 'The Roman' let go of his hand and informed him.

"Under the guise of a problem with the automatic doors, my people closed the mall from the inside out, so that no more shoppers could go outside.

Only the manager is aware of this and will ensure that the people who are trapped are entertained. All entrances to the mall are closed. The customers who were still present in the parking lot, have meanwhile driven away."

His smile caused little wrinkles to appear around his eyes. "To give the parking lot a not too deserted impression, most of my people are walking around in civilian clothing. While pretending to be customers, they are keeping the car in their sight."

He went on to say: "The suspect is positioned in such a way that he only has a partial view of the parking lot, which is to our advantage. Since we've been surveying him, he hasn't done much more than sit there with a laptop on his lap. Although it's impossible for him to see anything, he suddenly seems to have become very restless." 'The Roman' gave the order to zoom in and Lémarc saw Poko sitting there, who indeed shifted his gaze from his laptop to the outside world in an uneasy way. He

nodded, complimented 'the Roman' on his excellent work and asked Holger about his strategy.

The German took a sheet of paper. He quickly sketched the situation and indicated with crosses where the AT'ers and his own men were located. "As soon as I get a GO ...", Holger pointed out a cross, "... one of my snipers will shoot the side window to smithereens and this AT'er will throw...", he pointed to the cross he had placed diagonally behind the car, "... a thud grenade inside. Then my people will finish the job." He now pointed to the crosses that had been drawn in three layers around the car. "Easy-peasy, I'd say."

'The Roman' nodded in agreement and pointed to the image, which showed the restless Poko. "As far as I'm concerned, we can get on with it." Considering the words of the woman who had called him, Lémarc shook his head. "Not yet. First let him finish what he is doing. Then it's more likely that we will be able to find out with whom he is communicating. As soon as he is about to leave, we'll get him." He looked at Holger. "As soon as he starts the car, you have a GO."

< 08.15

While Lord MacMarkland had watched Onawa with half an eye and tried to fathom the information on the fourth screen, a fifth window was opened, in which Sandra showed a detailed map of the surroundings.

If the fiber-optic cable followed by Onawa ran in a straight line, she would end up at a ranch. At the bottom right Sandra had put everything she could find on the GRID and in the meantime the lord had gone through the bulky file.

It was amazing how much was written about the owner and his ranch and out of nothing, really nothing, it could be concluded that this man could be involved in Spiderweb. Just like him, this man was one of the richest people in the world and was, just like him, high on the Forbes list. The ranch owner was known as one of the greatest benefactors. He regularly appeared in the magazines and on television. He had been interviewed countless times and many a journalist lacked superlatives to

thank this man for his commitment to mankind. The man donated millions to all kinds of charities and supported many an initiative for a cleaner environment. 'In all respects a great man,' a well-known journalist had recently written. Could someone like that be involved in an organization like Spiderweb?

Although they belonged to the same circuits, he had never met the man in person and had no way of getting a grip on him. Pensively he looked at a photo in which the man said goodbye to his favorite horse with a sad look. A week later, in the name of the animal, he had donated a large sum of money to a foundation that worked to enable disabled children to ride ponies, he read.

"I have several messages for you." Sandra's voice abruptly broke his concentration.

He stopped gazing and leaned back. "I'm listening."

Her voice continued to speak softly. "Jens has been found. He is badly wounded and is being rushed to the Elisabeth Hospital." Sadly thinking about Lémarc, who had always been so fond of his assistant, he continued to listen, shaking his head. "It is almost certain that Stanley Dapper is to blame. The reason for the conflict is unknown. Nor is it clear to what extent Jens is involved with his attacker. No clues were found on his smartphone.

Meanwhile, the location where Mr. Dapper is located is surrounded. He will be arrested soon." There was silence for a moment, after which Sandra's pleasant voice sounded through the tower room again. "As far as the SAT router in Texas is concerned, we are one step further. The router in question was produced by Markland Communications.

You know that these devices keep track of what other equipment is being communicated with. The date, time and location of each contact are stored in a log file in the core. All data can be read on screen six. You will see that only outgoing messages have been sent via this router. Responses, most likely sent from a prepaid device, therefore come in via a different router.

It is not guaranteed, but it is very likely that Mr. Dapper is currently sending a message back to his client. It is therefore necessary that we

are given the opportunity to examine his laptop and smartphone, so that we can trace it more quickly.”

< 08.16

Trying her best to keep him from bursting into anger, the woman put a hand on Russ’s arm. “I’m sorry, sir. There is no one there.” He stared blankly at the woman. That was impossible. Surely he had seen Barbara walking to the toilet with his own eyes ...

He remembered her teasing eyes and mischievous smile, and wondered if she might have wanted to surprise him by sneaking home and waiting for him there. The idea wasn’t bad, and he certainly thought it would be something she would do, but still he couldn’t believe she had actually done it. Not now. Certainly not after a day like this.

“Excuse me, madam. Is this man bothering you?” The waiter had followed him and looked at him suspiciously and disdainfully.

The woman shook her head, gave his arm a compassionate squeeze and left him with the waiter.

“What do you want?”, he wanted to know. “The lady who was with you has left, and I think it’s best that you go too.”

Russ didn’t even hear the waiter coming after him. He stepped into the ladies’ room. None of the four doors were locked and all four were unoccupied.

The room was completely deserted and very quiet. The plop, plop, plop ... of an irregularly dripping tap had something spooky. Slowly he walked past the sinks. Nothing to see. There was nothing to indicate that Barbara had been here. The waiter grabbed his arm. “Be reasonable, man. Just accept that she has let you down. It’s more common than you think, you know. You’re not the only one.” With every drop that fell down with a plop, Russ became more worried. Wildly he pulled his arm loose.

“Did you see her go away, then?”, he asked furiously. “I want to talk to your colleagues!” The waiter sighed pityingly. “Come on, then.” He went before him. Without paying attention to the meaningful looks among themselves, he questioned the bartender and the kitchen staff. However,

it did not help him. They had all just been at work and no one had seen anything special.

“Satisfied?”, the waiter wanted to know. He kept the door open. “Now you leave quietly, or I’ll call the police.” Russ stepped past him and tried Barbara’s mobile number for the umpteenth time.

He got her voice mail, also for the umpteenth time. Damn, damn, damn! At the same time, anxious and angry, he called the chief of editorial staff, who immediately answered the phone in the best possible mood. When asked if he had asked Barbara to come back, he was surprised. “Why should I? I sent her home centuries ago because she had done more than enough today. The release of Ewin and Charles can be reported by others. Just let her sleep, will you?” In the background the murmur and laughter were clearly audible. Apparently, the party was still in full swing.

He let his smartphone slip into his pocket. His own mood was far from cheerful. Something was terribly wrong. Barbara lived five blocks away. Worried to death, he hurried on his way.

< 08.17

When he finally heard the ping-ping that indicated that the file had been uploaded, he gave a quivering sigh of relief. He would never do this again.

If it hadn’t been for the fact that he was going to get a lot of money out of it, he wouldn’t have gotten involved at all. Now he could, instead of working hard for many years, return to his beloved island tomorrow. No more being on the lookout or delivering dubious packages in the middle of nowhere. No more cold, no more loneliness, no more ‘Poko’ ...

Smiling, he shut the laptop, unplugged the cable and grabbed his smartphone to open the text message again. As fast as his fingers could type, he tapped a confirmation that the computer was on standby and that he was handing in his contract.

His eyes flew over the text. Good. Flawless. He pressed send, turned off the device and removed the SIM card.

Without worrying about how it would end up in it, he threw the laptop in his bag and threw the rest after it. Done. Ready. He could run away.

Oh, island in the sun, dushi, dushi here I come ...' While humming, he looked around again, squeezed his eyes together and slowly let his gaze go back and forth over the parking lot. Everything looked perfectly normal.

Convinced that no one paid special attention to him, he bent over, turned the ignition key and started the car. Dzhiing! Bam! He was startled to death and thinking that somewhere under the bonnet a string must have suddenly broken, he saw the side window on the passenger side shattering at the same time. Something that was grey and glistening fell in and hissed ... KABOOM!!!

The bang was deafening and knocked the air out of his lungs. He couldn't hear a thing anymore and, gasping for air, he stared paralyzed at the string of smoke that was circling up from the seat next to him. Time seemed to slow down and as if he was under water, the world tilted aside in slow motion. Surprised, he opened his eyes wide as he slowly sank away, wallowing in a hazy vortex of gurgling colors.

< 08.18

If only I had a camera at hand, Johan thought sarcastically. That face of the IT guy! Indescribable. Costly! No matter how much he had been messing around and tinkering, all the screens were off and stayed off. The guy had brought in his friends, but they had no way of getting the screens to work again either.

After watching the fumbling for half an hour, he had had enough of it and had sent them away with the instruction to restart the system.

He had had his assistant fetch a new bottle of water, because his stomach didn't seem to be ready for food at all. Even when he was just thinking about food, his insides already protested fiercely. For lunch he had taken another antacid and drank the water, after which the second pill finally did what the advertisement promised. Now that the sharpest pain had disappeared, he could at least think clearly again. He reviewed

everything that had happened today. On the whole, his department, even though the system had been hacked, had done just fine.

The hacker had been more of a support than an annoyance.

Partly as a result of his actions, the emergency services had arrived at the scene in no time at all. Who? Why? Did it still matter? In just a few minutes, the system would be back on the air with brand-new passwords and that figure would have made a fool of himself. Suddenly, a bright idea came to him. He was going to order the investigation into the hacker to be halted, and he was going to say loud and clear that, with his own approval, it was a general test of their system and working method. Of course, the person who performed the test had to remain secret.

After all, it had to be possible to carry out future tests just as unexpectedly, right? It went without saying that the IT department had to ensure that the system was fully sealed off on all sides and that hackers were not given any chance at all. The longer he thought about it, the better he liked it and when his assistant came in after a brief knock, he was in a much better mood. "The system is working again. These are your codes." He picked up the envelope and activated his computer, after which the company logo was displayed. Johan broke the seal, read his codes and entered them. After a quick check, he found that everything was working fine. In The Hague, too, peace had returned, he saw. It had finally started to look like a normal day.

For the fire brigade, ambulance and police, only the usual calls had been received at the central control room: a fire, three collisions and an affray in the city center. The only exception was an accident at a supermarket, but there too peace and quiet had begun to return. He leaned back with great satisfaction.

< 08.19

Because of the old injury to his knee, Russ could not run as fast as he wanted, but he was at Barbara's door in just a few minutes.

Between his repeated ringing and knocking, he kept his ear as close as possible to the crack of the door. He listened tensely with his breath

restrained, but he didn't catch a single sound. With each knock the pounding in his chest increased. This was not possible. This was simply impossible. Even if Barbara had been deeply asleep, she would have woken up by now.

Filled with anxiety - maybe she was lying somewhere unconscious - he was ready to kick in the door, when the door of the apartment next to him opened.

Grey curls appeared through a small crack. A pair of curious eyes looked at him from underneath, after which the safety chain was removed and an older, tall woman stepped outside.

"I know you. You're an acquaintance of Barbara, huh?" After an affirmative nod on his part, she continued speaking. "You can stop that noise, you know. She is not at home. She has flexible working hours, huh?" Yes, he knew that like no other. Involuntarily, his head moved up and down in agreement.

"Well, don't stand there like a lemon. Come on in, huh?" She left him no choice, because she had already turned around and walked stately in front of him. He closed the door and followed her to the living room. "Sit down. Iced tea?"

Without waiting for his answer, she poured a glass in front of him and sat opposite him in the armchair by the window. She gestured to the easy chair she had designated for him. "My husband always sat there. He hasn't been there for eight years. Since then I sleep badly. Today it was the same story and I'd rather sit here than in front of the TV, because what wanders through the streets of New York at night is a hundred times more interesting, huh?" Only half listening to her chatter, he looked outside. Barbara's neighbor was indeed right, he saw. From here she could not only see a large part of the street, but she also had a good view of the entrance. "... pass by, huh?" "Uh, sorry. I was just distracted. What did you say?" The woman looked at him with an amused twinkle in her eyes. "I already thought you weren't quite present, huh? So, I said that I've been here since midnight and I'm sure Barbara hasn't come home, so ... If you want, you can wait here for her, you know. I haven't seen her since yesterday. She will show up soon, huh?"

Russ opened his mouth to tell her that Barbara had disappeared at Lorenzo's when his smartphone started ringing.

< 08.20

Lémarc folded the schedule that Holger had sketched for him, put it in his chest pocket and stood behind the technician. Over the latter's head he looked at the row of screens. The images showed the parking lot, where only a handful of cars were parked and where only a few customers were walking around. The shopping mall seemed to be a textbook example of a summer's day on which only a few people had to do one last bit of shopping.

Holger and 'the Roman' had arranged that very well, he thought. The scene couldn't be any more ordinary. The leftmost screen, however, depicted something completely different. It showed Poko, who was busy with his laptop and smartphone. It almost looked like another person, Lémarc thought. This skillful man was nothing like the Poko he had seen shuffling through the corridors so often. Slow, a bit stupid, little speech and incredibly absent-minded. Suddenly he didn't seem to be like that anymore.

He saw him disconnect the hardware with quick, steady movements and put it in a laptop bag. The bag was thrown aside and for a moment Lémarc saw the satisfied expression on Poko's face, before he bent forward to start the car. Not a moment later he saw his face again, but this time in utter confusion. The eyes, always half-opened, were wide open and his mouth had fallen open limply. While the blue Toyota was still shaking on its springs and Poko slowly slid sideways, the door was yanked open. Holger's healthy arm reached inside and caught Poko's sliding body, after which he pulled the man out of the car. In his mind, Lémarc complimented Holger on the fast, successful action, and he tapped the technician on his shoulder. "Tell the commander that they shouldn't touch anything and that I'm coming."

He jumped out of the command car and with of Holger's two colleagues on his heels, he ran over to them. He forced himself between the men who had gathered in a circle around the arrest. He saw that Poko was

lying on the ground and at first he thought that Holger was abusing him until he realized that he was busy practicing resuscitation.

As he alternately blew air into Poko's mouth and pushed his healthy arm firmly on his chest, the giant German tried to bring him round by force.

In Lémarc's head an image appeared of Poko's back with pointy ribs sticking through it. "Holger," he shouted in horror.

"What happened?" Without looking up from his work, Holger replied succinctly: "I don't know. As I pulled him out of the car, he suddenly started to scream and became limp. He is unconscious. It could be anything." The medic put down his opened kit, pushed him aside and took over. Holger got up and gestured to his number two. "And?"

The man listened for a moment, lowered his walkie-talkie and said in a rushed manner: "There is a spike in the alarms. It will take at least 15 minutes before an ambulance can arrive."

"Scheiße," Holger cried out in frustration. "That's taking way too long." He thought for a moment and pointed out two colleagues. "Quickly. The hospital is nearby. Come on, pick this guy up and put him in the SUV. Within five minutes we'll have him on a drip." Holger's orders were promptly executed and before Lémarc had a chance to interfere, the SUV raced off with screaming sirens.

< 08.21

After the very satisfying morning session, he had walked through his paradise for an hour. Through the rainforest, where he had sniffed out the delicious, sultry humidity, he had turned at the waterfall to walk back to his bunker office, accompanied by the sound of the water crashing on the rocks and the rippling of the brook. The walk had cleared his head and he felt reborn. He looked out over his empire through the large window and reflected on the surprising developments surrounding the attack, which had forced him to make new plans.

His brain was spinning at full speed when a ping made him reach for his smartphone. Damn, a text alert from Casanova's guy in The Hague. Could he really have done it? The safety net he had instructed Casanova

to arrange had been the riskiest part of his whole plan. To be honest, he had not thought it would be possible. He hastily contacted his text server and his eyes glanced over the message. Unbelievable. This time a little slower, he read with an ever widening smile the confirmation that his secret weapon had been activated and that the last sound file had been sent.

Not bad. Not bad at all. Those bureaucrats there at UNBI wouldn't know what happened to them. His eyes glinted revengefully when he activated his advertising program 'Bull' to forward the file from the link. The data would be stored somewhere on a server of a large burger chain.

A company with countless offices around the world, which he owned himself through his money mule cowboy Pete. The chain had over 15,000 servers in operation, which he used for his secret contacts. 'Bull' chose a random server that had never before been used for that purpose and encrypted the data twice with a unique code of which only he had the key.

Nobody, not even himself, could know on which server the information was stored. Or had been, he thought cheerfully. As soon as the last bit was on his own computer, the link was disconnected and the file would have disappeared from the server in question. This ingenious detour ensured that no one would track him down, but as careful as he was, he also used two different servers as an extra guarantee. One for incoming and one for outgoing messages. Despite the redirection, it wasn't long before 'Bull' indicated that the file was ready. He connected the fiber-optic cable and searched for the connection using 'Bull', after which it downloaded fast. Barely half a minute later he was able to disconnect the cable again. A few minutes later the mp4-file was decoded on his desktop. He sat back relaxed and started listening to the recording.

< 08.22

With a sigh, Swart closed Jens' file. All the signs indicated serious brain damage and he didn't hold out much hope for him. Because there was nothing else he could have done for him here in the ED, he had sent him and his companion to neurology. There was no need to call in the police,

the man with the French accent had assured him. The perpetrator was known and was already being searched for. He shook his head gloomily. What people did to each other. Terrible. Luckily no wife or children. But still. Such a young man. A shame. No matter how sorry he was, his stomach didn't care. He had been on the move all morning and he was very hungry. He looked at the clock. No wonder, it was already a quarter to two. Time to take a break for half an hour. He shut down his computer and looked up disturbed when the door was thrown open forcefully. "Hey, take it eas..." "THEY'RE RETURNING," shouted his resident excitedly. "Huh, who do y...", he started out perplexed, but his resident wouldn't let him finish. Speaking less loudly and more calmly, he pointed to the corridor. "That bundle of muscles. That Holger. They have another patient with them." "What do you mean, with them? What exactly do you mean?" His assistant came further into the room and put his hands on the desk. "We got a message that they are on their way with an SUV with an unconscious man. Their medic is doing everything on the way to resuscitate him." Oh, no, he thought to himself. Not another one.

With a sigh of resignation, he realized that a break was not an option for the time being. He quickly took another sip of coffee and got up. "I wonder what awaits us now." He looked at the red cheeks of his sensationalist resident. "Knowing those people, I advise you to stay alert and keep a cool head. Come with me." Together they hurried to the entrance of the ED.

< 08.23

"One moment." Under the interested gaze of Barbara's neighbor, Russ pulled his smartphone out of his pocket. At once he forgot all his troubles, because on the display Barbara stared at him with a sweet smile. Thank God. A sigh of relief escaped him and while relief, anger and pure joy fought for priority, he answered. "Christ, Barbara. What took you so long? Where are you? Don't you understand that I..." Not understanding, he looked again, just to be sure, at the display, which showed Barbara's photo unchanged.

It was definitely connected to her device. But whoever it was that called him, it wasn't Barbara herself. He urged the neighbor, who asked him what was going on, with a hand gesture to silence and listened further to the arguing voices of two men.

One of the voices asked loudly how the other could be so stupid as not to switch that smartphone off sooner. The accusatory and protesting shouting continued for a while, after which he heard a blow, as if a tailgate of a truck had been closed. After this it remained silent.

Trying to understand exactly what he had heard, Russ was staring at the device in his hands, when he saw moving images on the display, as if someone was holding a camera in their hand while walking. For a moment he had a view on a lot of water, grass and a part of a blue Ford Transit.

The one who was holding the device apparently got in, because after a few grey stripes the display only showed the dashboard. He heard an engine start and one of the voices say loud and clear that they had to leave quickly so they could deliver the package. He looked at the image of the dashboard and suddenly saw Barbara's number appear at the top, with a blinking red star next to it.

Immediately something dawned on him. Barbara's new device of course had the same security as Ewin's smartphone. Her phone had been stolen and they had tried to turn it off.

It was clear what must have happened, but where the hell had Barbara gone?

If she had been robbed in the toilets, how could he not have found her there? He had just figured out that the best thing to do was to go back and search from there, when he saw on the display that Barbara's smartphone suddenly started to move again. The recording briefly showed the lower part of the car window, passed over the wipers and flashed over the driver down to his knees. He was wearing light grey pants, which were smeared with all kinds of dark red streaks and splashes. They looked like blood stains. Russ heard a nasal voice. "I've finally opened the damn thing. I don't see a SIM card, but I do see a battery. I'll get it..." The voice suddenly stopped. The display on Russ's smartphone turned black. The line was dead.

< 08.24

Although at 45 minutes the mp4-file was a lot shorter than usual, he wasn't sad about it this time. Listening to the information that Casanova's guy had been sending him for weeks, had already taken up a lot of his precious time. Yet it had been more than worth it. Necessary even, in order to limit the damage that UNBI could cause him. Without this ultra-secret information, he would never have been able to organize the attack on their leader.

Sitting back relaxed with his eyes closed, he hadn't even been listening for two minutes when his smartphone started making a second sound. He paused the recording and picked up his mobile phone. He read his cousin's text alert and stopped the recording. That last bit of information probably wouldn't matter much and could wait until later. For The Hague and UNBI everything was already in preparation. The information Sal had for him was much more important. Curiously he quickly contacted his SMS server and read that his cousin had already fulfilled part of his promise.

Barbara Kronkite's file was ready for him on the link that was sent along. He clicked with his tongue appreciatively. Sal's service had been very quick this time. His cousin had been using a highly specialized agency for years that was able to uncover all kinds of secrets, whether or not they were fabricated.

With the information obtained, people from all walks of life were persuaded to provide certain services. With Sal's permission, he could have used the same agency.

Not only to create his own network, but also to be able to maintain it. Yet this time, although the agency had never given any reason to complain, he had preferred to call on Sal for help. And rightly so. The speed with which his cousin got things done was impressive to say the least. He deserved something to thank him. But what? What could he really surprise him with?

While thinking up and rejecting various gifts, he downloaded the file in the usual way. He was very curious to see what Sal had found for him and

watched impatiently until the file had been unpacked, decoded and made readable. After a few minutes the image of a folder appeared on his desktop. On the front of the cover, Barbara Kronkite's face looked at him seriously. He eagerly opened it and quickly flipped through it. As usual, the structure was very orderly and he found that the file really covered everything. From her social security number to where and what kind of purchases she did in general. Only the remark about her telephone details made him frown. Recently she had received a new smartphone and it had not yet been possible to retrieve its data.

However, they would not give up and the relevant information would be sent later on. Despite the diplomatic note there was a lack of information and he wondered if he should inform Sal about it. Surely such a thing should not be a problem for such specialists?

He read on despondently. What he was most interested in, he soon found. His extra request to find out what Kronkite's involvement was with UNBI, Interpol and Casanova had unfortunately not yielded much of a result. Other than the fact that she had called Eriksson regularly and a reference to the appendix of a newspaper article nothing else was mentioned.

He snorted unbelievably. It was almost impossible to find so little of such a well-known journalist in the media. Yet it was certain that the agency had not been lax. This had to be everything the agency had been able to dig up. All the more so because Sal himself had given the order.

He took out the appendix and saw that it was a copy of an article from a well-known gossip magazine. It was about the opening of the new UNBI building in The Hague, a few years ago.

In the picture Barbara and Hakon Eriksson were smiling into the camera, arm in arm. For a long time, he peered at the photo.

A top journalist and that rotten jackal who was the only one who had ever come so close to him. That was all very coincidental.

Lémarc was sitting in the back on his own when he was driven to UNBI. Just before that he had complimented 'the Roman' on his efficient organizational skills. The operation had gone very smoothly and had lasted only half an hour in total. As soon as Holger and Poko had cleared the field, all cars and personnel were gone in no time and a few minutes later the shopping mall was open to the public again. He had also enjoyed the summery city of The Hague. However, he now had a much less cheerful temper, because the messages that Jean had just given him by telephone, were anything but positive. Jens was in a coma and Poko had died without recovering.

Another, literally, dead end.

That's how it went every time, he thought bitterly. Again and again he stood empty-handed. Sadly, he stared at the hardware that was lying next to him in the backseat. Pierre had given him a box and a cable and explained to him what to do with it. Immediately after Poko's laptop and smartphone had been handed over to him, he had taken the SIM card out of the phone and put it in the box. Using the cable he had also connected the laptop to it. Judging by the flashing lights, Pierre was already busy.

He wondered if they were better off with all these new techniques, because despite the almost limitless possibilities they had not learned much. If it was at all possible to find new clues regarding Spiderweb. In passing he had been told that he was part of a 'scenario' that Hakon had thought up in advance and was run by his acquaintances.

It was because of their accurate information that Poko had been found so quickly.

Apparently, Hakon's club was capable of a lot more than the whole of UNBI put together. He had met one of them this morning ... Concerned, he looked at his light summer pants, which had many coffee splashes on them. He didn't look as lousy as James, but he probably wouldn't have made the best impression. Nevertheless, he would do anything to find out her name and address. Now that he could think a little more quietly about it, he realized that he didn't have to track her down. Of course, he could just ask Hakon.

He still had a bone to pick with him anyway. He had always had a high regard for his boss and had always trusted him unconditionally. He was

disappointed that Hakon had crushed everyone's feelings. But what hit him hardest was that Hakon had kept him out of everything. That he hadn't trusted him.

Rather bitter and disappointed, Lémarc noticed that the car had stopped in front of the UNBI building. He would of course continue to support Hakon, but he didn't like the way things were going. He got out, bent down and grabbed Poko's belongings. Once Hakon was back, he'd better prepare for fireworks.

< 08.26

As if detached from his body, Hakon hovered on the edge of a rippled, rocky abyss. Everything around him was foggy and he could barely see the other side of the gorge.

Although he knew he was at the foot of an old suspension bridge, he couldn't feel the deck. The suspension bridge - once made of long strings of braided red stems - looked battered. Only one of the ropes was still partially intact and connected to the other side.

He didn't know how he got here. That he wanted to sleep for a while was the last thing he remembered before he became aware that he was standing here. No, he floated. He peered to the other side of the abyss.

There was also someone standing there. His first thought was that it was his reflection. But no, because, peering more sharply into the nebula, he saw that the figure resembled him, but was older. The feeling that he had to find out who it was, became more and more pressing.

He desperately tried to walk forward, but his feet couldn't grip and he couldn't move an inch forward. Grandpa then?

No, it couldn't be. He would be at home, because his grandfather only went out these days when Hakon was there himself. Panicking, he tried to see the image more clearly, but no matter how hard he tried, it just didn't work out. The fog, in which all the colors of the rainbow swirled and which gave off a warm glow, lingered persistently.

What was he doing here? Who was this man? Was he seeing his future? Will he look like this in 20 years' time?

Looking through the fog as well as possible, he saw that the man was beckoning him.

He heard him shout softly: “Haaakon ... Hakon ... Time is running out. Ask...”

Suddenly the bridge began to swing wildly. Chunks of stone and earth fell with him when he tumbled into the abyss.

From far above him, the same voice seemed to chant “graaandpaaa”. As he fell faster and faster, he tried to grab the passing rock face.

Ask grandpa? What?

Twisting and tumbling he fell, fell, fell... Horrified his eyes opened when he was roughly grabbed by the arm.

Behind the face of Tony, who looked down anxiously on him, he discerned the ceiling of an airplane.

Dazed, he realized where he was.

“Hakon,” Tony whispered. “Are you all right? You were pretty restless. As if you were having a nightmare.”

Only half awake, Hakon repeated the words from his dream, whispering. “Ask Grandpa.”

“What do you mean?”, Tony asked. “What should you ask your grandfather?”

Hakon wasn't quite awake yet and shrugged his shoulders. He thought he was dreaming again when he heard someone repeatedly and insistently calling his name in his left ear, until he realized it was Sandra's voice. She had activated his WORM.

Something she would only do when there was no other way. Since a stewardess had come to ask helpfully if everything was alright, he couldn't immediately talk to Sandra openly.

He quickly grabbed his tablet pc, giving Tony the agreed sign that Sandra was seeking contact. Without hesitation Tony immediately positioned his body in such a way that it blocked the stewardess' gaze and managed to persuade her that everything was fine.

In the meantime, Hakon had sat up straight and had already studied the latest developments concerning the detection of the mole at UNBI, only

to read to his great surprise that it had turned out to be Poko. One of the five employees that he himself, after they had been carefully screened, had taken under his wing.

He read on shaking his head. The bad news concerning Jens and Poko hit him and in a sad mood he quickly tapped some questions for Sandra. He concluded by asking that he be informed as soon as she had examined the information on Poko's equipment.

He laid down his tablet pc and leaned back thoughtfully.

Meanwhile he listened to Sandra, who via the WORM gave him a short summary of what had been achieved in the last hours regarding the unravelling of Spiderweb's communication network.

< 08.27

Since her role had been played out according to the scenario, the level of Barbara Kronkite's safety protocol had been lowered to SEC4 after her latest news report.

This meant that only the information from her smartphone, conversations, text messages and e-mails were checked to see if they contained information that could still be relevant to the rest of the scenario. As a result, it was not immediately obvious that the distance between Russ's smartphone and Barbara was rapidly increasing. Only when someone other than Barbara had wanted to turn off her smartphone, was the alarm triggered.

The security software on Barbara's device had automatically sent a signal, which arrived at the Special Projects department of Markland Communications, where they were testing this new software. In order to obtain independent results, a few samples had been handed out and the specialists were very pleased with the fact that a second alarm arrived within a short time.

One could already conclude that it was very plausible that the software, apart from their own very extensive tests, also proved to work very well in practice.

However, no one was aware that the signal was being picked up elsewhere. It only took Sandra a few nanoseconds to take action. GUARD was tasked with making a SEC1 report from Barbara's smartphone over the past hour. Meanwhile Russ was called and kept busy. While keeping the conversation with Russ going, she made a detailed analysis of GUARD's report. The location, trajectory, local time and environmental factors as well as the images recorded after the unauthorized release were thoroughly studied. The outcome of the overall investigation made Sandra contact Lord MacMarkland directly.

< 08.28

Because of the clear night, the trail of the buried cable was clearly visible and the fairly flat terrain was easy to walk on. So easy, in fact, that she had increased her pace.

Onawa followed the track in a continuous downhill march. She was in good condition and was used to running long distances like this. After about two hours she was so close to the lights that she could clearly see that the enormous structure was indeed the ranch. Although the rising sun already made the sky behind her pale, the white building with its shiny roof still stood out sharply against the black night sky dotted with stars.

Meanwhile, much more carefully, she snuck forward with her ears pricked, until she was only about 300 yards away. A nice distance to stop. It was not difficult to find a hiding place, because although the green prairie looked as smooth as a billiard sheet from a distance, in reality this was not the case. Because of the many herds that had travelled over the plains for decades, there were slight slopes, narrow pits and tracks that offered enough possibilities.

In one of the many shallow tracks she made herself comfortable and pulled her poncho around her.

The canvas was handmade and painted by her grandmother. Both sides had different shades of color, so it blended in with almost any background. She wrapped it around herself and knew that she was almost invisible and that the mini glasses she had in front of her eyes

wouldn't stand out unless someone was specifically looking for them. Slowly looking from right to left, she extensively scanned the surroundings. The images were immediately forwarded to the satellite and when she heard from Sandra that her surroundings were safe, she grabbed the box of insects. Carefully she picked out a moth, folded out the wings, activating it, and placed it on her open palm. As soon as it had made contact with the satellite, Sandra took over control. The moth took off and flew away at considerable speed. Everything it recorded on the way with its small eyes was transmitted. In the meantime, Sandra had ordered her to stay where she was for the time being, until it was clear who and what they were dealing with.

Onawa crawled under her poncho and considered the situation.

Ever since she was born she had been reminded that a rich cattle baron lived there.

This farmer and his staff didn't want to have much to do with Indians. They had never been able to find evidence, but inexplicably, from the moment that ranch was built on their old hunting grounds, members of her tribe regularly disappeared without a trace. For as long as she could remember, her parents had told her to avoid this area.

And yet, all of a sudden, she was in the middle of it. Things could get weird. Only a few days ago she had been present at the ritual funeral of an uncle and the same subject had been raised.

At that time, she had no idea that she would soon be in the heart of their old hunting grounds, on the land of the descendant of the farmer who had driven out her tribe.

She remembered the conversations of a few days ago and the names of the disappeared tribe members. Sandra could probably do very well from now on without human help and it would be wiser to withdraw. Yet she felt little fear, for unlike the others, she had excellent back up.

She couldn't miss such a great opportunity to discover exactly what was going on at that ranch, could she? Who knows, maybe she could find out what had happened in the past and where her tribe members had gone. After all, she was well prepared and was in little danger.

She weighed opportunity and risk against each other and decided to stay. Dressed in her poncho, she crawled out of the trough. A little further on she saw a suitable spot and after she had quickly relieved herself, she quietly returned to her post. She made herself comfortable again and would first get some food and drink before she would lie down.

< 08.29

Bloodstains. Russ looked at the dark screen and remembered the image again. The spots on the pants looked very much like blood splashes ... “Hey. Hey! Russ!” In front of his face, someone snapped his fingers. “Russ! Are you feeling alright? Is there something bothering you? Do you have any medication? Should I call a doctor?” Shaken awake by a panicky voice, he looked up, right into the wrinkled face of Barbara’s neighbor, who stood with her hands on the armrests of his chair, bent over in front of him. “No. No, that’s not necessary. I’m all right. I just think ... I think ...”

He looked at the woman, who had sat down again and stared at him questioningly.

“I’m not sure, but I’m terribly afraid someone did something to Barbara. She would never voluntarily give up that yellow thing.”

Barbara’s neighbor may be quite old, but her mind was still working fine. “Ah yes,” she nodded. “You mean her cell phone, huh? What about it?” Trying to remember exactly what he had seen, Russ closed his eyes for a moment and told her everything. From the moment he thought Barbara was calling him until the last image of the spotted pants.

“She never gives that thing away. Even I’ve only had it in my hands once. The fact that a stranger tried to turn it off, proves that the thing was stolen. But Barbara seems to have disappeared into thin air and when I saw those splashes ... There is more to it. That’s for sure.” He didn’t have to think about it any longer.

The conclusion was obvious and he knew what to do. He put away his fear of Barbara in a separate corner of his mind and called INN. In a calm tone he let the editor know what had happened to him. He told him what he had seen on his smartphone and what he now suspected. After nodding a few times, he disconnected.

In a hurry he emptied his glass, briefly nodded at Barbara's neighbor and got up. "Too bad we got to know each other under these circumstances. I would have liked to have stayed a bit longer, but I have to investigate." The old lady, who had risen with him, grabbed his hands and looked at him with concern. "Will you let me know as soon as you find Barbara?" Russ nodded. "Of course. As soon as..."

The ringing of his smartphone interrupted him. Hoping that it was Barbara, his eyes flashed to the display, but to his regret it was an anonymous caller. Not many people knew his phone number. He answered suspiciously.

Even before he could say his name, an accentless female voice began to speak in a civilized manner. What she said, made him listen more and more attentively and it gradually became clear to him that her story would last for some time to come. Listening attentively, Russ let himself slowly sink back into his chair.

< 08.30

After a last look at Hakon and Barbara, who stood there with a smile on their faces, Kingsize Bob minimized the file. That picture proved once again that there was nothing wrong with his instincts. The two were very close and it was now clear that he had done well to call in his cousin. He gave himself a pat on the back because this time he was one step ahead of everyone, and summoned the sound file again. For the time being he had enough time to listen in peace, because everything that had to be done was already in preparation. All he had to do was wait until he got the message.

The plan he had in mind for The Hague was also ready to go. As soon as it was time, all he had to do was make a phone call.

Considering that he was the only one who knew that this meeting would be the last for UNBI for a long time, he smiled sarcastically. He let the recording continue and soon realized that those people from UNBI, just like him, were watching the INN broadcast. He fast forwarded it to the end of the twelve o'clock Breaking News item. Interested in the rest of the story, he resumed listening, but the pleasant mood which he was in soon

changed when he heard that Casanova's team had been intercepted. That son of a bitch Eriksson hadn't been sitting still. He listened doggedly and learned a little later that his enemy had not been kidnapped, as Tasker had claimed, but that he had gone undercover. On the hunt for him. What guts that guy had. He could almost admire him for it, were it not for the fact that he had made a mistake.

While various ideas and possibilities shot through his head, he saw plenty of opportunities to deal with Hakon Eriksson for good.

Pensively he had listened to the rest and when the recording was over, he knew that he had made a very good decision by calling in his cousin and bringing his secret weapon into action. Now that this guy had gone underground without informing UNBI, it was not difficult to think of the next step. Besides Casanova, he had enough irons in the fire to be well prepared.

He opened his secret staff list and soon found the Italian, his cousin's showpiece. Sal had pointed him out to him and that turned out to be an excellent advice from his cousin. Sal had been able to place the guy at Interpol years ago with an extremely well falsified identity and had him completely in his pocket. The guy really knew how to get all the secrets there and also had good access to UNBI. The last two months his cousin had lent this Mario to him.

Through him Casanova had managed to gather a wealth of information. No one would be able to connect the two, so he could call in Mario without any risk.

After he disguised the message with the simple line 'find out what Eriksson is up to' in an advertising message, he prepared another message for his cousin. He neatly connected the hardware, sent both messages and pulled the cables out again.

He trusted that he would receive a message from one of them today. After that he would decide what to do for the best. Now that this was also done, he wanted to look again at the file of that Kronkite.

He highlighted it and clicked on the icon representing a spider in a web. It said 'Spiderweb Research'. Although he already had all the information from UNBI, he wanted to know what the press had to say about it.

Curious, he started reading.

BEASTLY!

< 09.01

The mole had been unmasked and Sandra was busy unravelling the digital maze. She would report immediately if something special were to be discovered. In the tower room it had become quiet and it hadn't changed much on the GRID either. Because no significant events were to be expected for the time being, Lord MacMarkland had gone to his library with peace of mind. When he got there he immediately walked over to the large bookcase.

The panel next to it hid a secret door that gave access to the vaults under the castle. There were several entrances there, but he preferred to use this one, since it was the shortest way to the part where the storerooms were located and because it had a direct connection to the natural harbor which was in a cave under the castle.

The inconspicuous panel, which appeared to be a solid part of the wall, had once been installed by one of his ancestors in order to open up an escape route in the event of the English or other miscreants standing at the door.

However, for unclear reasons, his family was spared during all the turbulent times and the age-old walls and underground escape routes had never been tested for their reliability.

Only insiders knew about this door, which was unrecognizable as such, and despite its age, the panel still opened silently.

A warm sky, lightly scented with citrus blossom, greeted him. For as long as he could remember, the air in the vaults had been unpleasantly dank, but since Marilyn had installed the new supercomputer, that had changed.

As the panel slid closed behind him, wall lights were switched on at the place where torches had previously hung.

As he carefully descended the unevenly carved steps, he thought about the material that had improved the atmosphere below so remarkably.

This gelatinous substance was the residue of one of Marilyn's other inventions. Since reading that the success of those well-known yellow notes was due to a failed experiment, Marilyn had insisted on testing

every residual product of an invention to see if it could be used for anything else.

Although he had reacted rather conservatively - after all, Marilyn already used a great part of a huge budget - he was glad afterwards that she had held her ground, because the results were amazing. Her list of inventions had grown by several percent and the most recent trash, which he now walked towards, was an outright miracle.

This peculiar stuff, that Marilyn had named JELLIE, after a pudding that many a child and many adults were still fond of, had by now become the main ingredient of almost everything she created today.

The stuff seemed to be endlessly applicable and by playing with things like temperature and light, the JELLIE could be given any shape, color and density.

From harder than diamonds to malleable as soft clay.

He had reached the cellar and went straight to the square shape that loomed up before him with a matt sheen in the clear light of the lamp. The JELLIE on which he now placed his hand, a pale yellow block of 1m^3 , currently functioned as a shadow system of all equipment used by or on behalf of GAIAS and was being tested one hundred percent under the supervision of Sandra during the operation 'Non Quod Videtur'.

It contained all the functionalities of today's traditional systems and peripherals. If the test turned out to be successful, something he did not doubt for a moment, this supercomputer would soon become the new heart of GAIAS.

All the equipment with innumerable lights flashing their colors at breakneck speed throughout the entire cave, would have disappeared.

Only this block of JELLIE would fill the space and slowly multiply in the course of time.

Actually one could not really speak of a computer anymore, he thought. The JELLIE was not only extremely suitable to house an artificial intelligence, but had so many extras that you could almost say that a new life form had been created. An individual entity with Sandra as its brain. His hand automatically stroked the matt glossy surface of the JELLIE block. Every time, again and again, he thought with admiration of their

blond miracle child. How she seemed to be pull one invention after another out of her sleeve and how she had discovered that the JELLIE could also be used for the conventional components of a computer. The stuff could hold information and you could transport anything through the material without it getting hot or cold.

Even the speed of the transport was manipulable. From slow as a snail to fast as lightning. Regardless of what you did with it: using it as a football, splitting it or chopping it up like wood, at the nano level the JELLIE remembered which particles were its neighbors and as soon as all obstacles were removed, it automatically restored itself to its original form.

Normally one would expect that every blob of JELLIE would stick together, but by shifting something during the manufacturing process, with something that Marilyn called nanocoherence, independent JELLIE products could be made without this happening. Marilyn's explanation of how to imagine the JELLIE particles as pixels, each of which knew exactly what its properties were and where it belonged, would have been enlightening enough, but precisely how it all functioned was completely beyond his comprehension.

Marilyn's almost casual discovery turned out to be a super product that could be used for many purposes. However, it would certainly take many years to explore all the possibilities.

As he stood there and the JELLIE tingled his hand slightly, as if Sandra, who now had control of the JELLIE, wanted to show that she was happy with his presence, he realized that the time had come to appoint someone who would be able to fully immerse themselves in the further development of Sandra and her new, light-yellow, intelligent extensions. Someone who was used to working with complex systems, had a flexible mind, was always looking for answers and also wanted to be crazy enough to live here.

He'd better put this to Hakon and Marilyn, because finding such a person wouldn't be easy.

He knocked lightly on the block. "What's the situation now, Sandra?" "Nice of you to come and see me, sir." Sandra's pleasant voice sounded somewhat hollow in this subterranean environment. "Everything is going

according to plan and the test results of my new parts are so successful that I have been running operation 'Non Quod Videtur' from here for half an hour. Of course I keep all the conventional hardware on standby and only use the existing routers, out of necessity.

The communication speed with the outside world will be faster if I can communicate directly with our satellites via the JELLIE.”

“I know, Sandra. As soon as the operation is over, Marilyn will be the first to make the necessary connections with her new 3dSCreator.

Yesterday I heard from the IT department that everything on the new satellite is working well and that the new communication protocol is ready for you.”

The lord gave the block a reassuring pat. “So you have to be patient for a while. This doesn't prevent you from carrying out your tasks, I hope?” “Not at all, sir. Exactly 15 minutes ago Onawa activated a butterfly and the images are still coming in. The first thing that strikes me is that at the entrance of the ranch there are men with automatic rifles.” Startled, his hand remained still.

“And Onawa? Where is she? Is she safe?” Only after Sandra's answer that Marilyn's partner had dug herself in almost invisible to the naked eye, did his hand resume the slow tour over the block of JELLIE.

Sandra apparently felt that the lord had calmed down, and she continued to speak calmly and confidently. “All of the rancher's possessions and businesses have been examined, and I have mapped out their cash flows in detail.

Most of this is legitimate, but through various accounts in the Cayman Islands, CRYPTO has uncovered all kinds of hidden companies, apparently in the name of cowboy Pete, the owner of the house that Onawa searched. Given the fact that the computer system in his house is probably operated from the ranch, we can assume that he must be an accomplice of cowboy Pete or vice versa. How it works exactly, is now being investigated further.”

“Good work, Sandra. Slowly but surely we are approaching the spider in his web. I won't bother you any further. You know where to find me.” As a

way of saying goodbye, Lord MacMarkland gave a tap on the JELLIE, turned around and went to his library.

As he walked up the stairs, he noticed that his hands felt nice and dry and fresh.

They smelled vaguely of lemon. Another effect of that stuff. It absorbed the ambient air, filtered out the dust particles, converted it and emitted that delicious citrus scent into the air. On top of that, the JELLIE also used very little energy.

Three months after the block had been placed, the air in the vaults had already been purified and this was clearly noticeable in the rooms that were connected to it. There, too, it smelled much fresher. What stuff, he thought again, as he stepped into his library. He decided to go back to the tower room, as it was almost three o'clock and he wanted to see what the scenario was like now.

< 09.02

As soon as Tim had put the aircraft in the air and they were at the right altitude, he had activated the autopilot. They flew to New York at top speed and he had calculated that, despite the later departure, they would land in New York a quarter of an hour earlier than the others. In the meantime, he had first loaded and firmly anchored the wooden crate that Marilyn had delivered. After that he had gone through all the pre-flight checks and procedures and was ready to start when Arda had come racing onto the platform at top speed.

Hardly having come to a halt, she had taken off her helmet, parked the motorcycle and lashed it down, only to walk straight into the cockpit without saying a word.

Typical Arda. He had expected that she would be in a good mood after a fast motorcycle ride. Not necessarily sociable, but also not like she was now. On his guard - you never knew how she would react - he saw from the corner of his eye how she was staring forward with an unfathomable face. Whether she actually looked at the images that were being played on the console for them by Sandra, he had no way of knowing. If she

hadn't occasionally blinked her eyes, he might as well have been sitting next to a mannequin.

Not wanting to show anything, he mentally shrugged his shoulders and thought that the flight would at least be nice and quiet. On the tablet pc he saw the UNBI hall appear. Next to him Arda's hand suddenly shot forward and grabbed the tablet pc from the console. Before he could react, Arda had jumped out of her chair and had run back with it. He looked at her in astonishment.

He had no idea what to think of this. One thing was certain: that woman really wasn't predictable in any way.

< 09.03

Despite the sad news regarding Jens and Poko, Hakon followed the latest news with interest. Although her behavior seemed remarkably strange, even for her, Arda had done her job well. Without further ado she and Tim had taken off and, like him, were on their way to New York. While next to him Tony seemed to be asleep, Hakon listened to Sandra via the WORM and looked at the corresponding images of the ranch and surroundings on his tablet pc.

He sincerely hoped that Sandra was right in her preliminary conclusion that this ranch might be the end station of their search. However, like the lord, he found the clues wafer-thin and they needed a lot more information. Once they had landed, a second piece of bait would be thrown out. With a bit of luck that would turn out to be as good as the first one, which had been broadcast by INN without their being aware of it. Yet he doubted that Spiderweb's headquarters would be here, in the middle of this farmland. That this wealthy rancher - well known, generous and respected everywhere - would be involved at the top of one of the largest criminal organizations, seemed very unlikely to him. The man ran a tremendously successful business and was wealthy enough to make large donations. This farmer had to be able to perform insanely well and keep it up for years and years. He shook his head. Someone like that? No, that was very unlikely.

On the other hand, he had to admit that it was not impossible. After all, he was also deceptively mistaken about Poko. He never could have imagined that such a seemingly simple slob turned out to be a cunning viper. And then there was Jens. Had he also managed to fool everyone for years? Could he have created all the opportunities for Poko? Although it went directly against his feelings, so far all the facts seemed to indicate this. After looking at the case from all sides, he typed a message for Sandra. He gave her two assignments that had to be carried out as soon as all of Poko's data were available. First of all, Lémarc had to be asked on his behalf to wait and secondly, she had to ensure that UNBI was completely excluded. He had just tapped the last words when his tablet pc began to vibrate. At the same time he heard Sandra, who informed him of her conversation with Russ via the worm in his ear. The GRID appeared on his tablet pc, together with Sandra's analysis, conclusion and proposal. He quickly looked at the recordings that Barbara's smartphone had sent and had to agree with her conclusion.

This was not normal and required attention. Concerned, he poked Tony and showed him the video. Together they briefly discussed how best to act. Tony's proposal to use Lémarc - he had to wait anyway - made sense.

He knew his right hand at UNBI well enough to know that Lémarc wouldn't sit quietly on his ass waiting for his next orders. It would at least give him enough to keep him busy for the time being. The biggest advantage, however, was that with his knowledge and contacts and all the expertise of UNBI, he had the best chance of tracing Barbara. Quickly, because the stewardess who was distributing bottles of water was getting closer, Hakon typed a short message for Sandra to inform Lémarc about this and let him start an investigation. The stewardess had almost reached them. Hakon turned off his tablet pc and 'Mario' smiled brightly as he leaned back lazily. On the inside of his head, however, it was a lot cloudier. Concerned, he thought of Barbara. The only thing they knew so far was that her smartphone on the banks of the Gravesand Bay in New York had been switched off for good. Since then she had disappeared and there was no trace of her.

< 09.04

In anticipation of all the information Pierre could get from Poko's stuff, Lémarc had taken a quick shower, put on a clean set of clothes and picked up a sandwich from the canteen. He was expecting a long day, which he felt had lasted 24 hours already, and had just put the last piece of bread in his mouth when he stepped into Pierre's workplace.

Although he knew full well that the young man was already 26 and bore some impressive titles, Lémarc felt that Pierre still looked like someone who had only received his high school diploma yesterday. The kid was now sitting amidst all kinds of equipment. One of the laptops was apparently best used as a coaster for a coffee mug that didn't look too clean. Pierre had clearly found something important, for his attitude spoke volumes. He was sitting firmly upright for a change and listened, with his head slightly tilted, concentrated on what was coming in through his earpiece. Every now and then he entered data with fanatically moving fingers. His eyes shot back and forth over the three screens that were set up in a semicircle in front of him.

It was only when Lémarc's smartphone produced a shrill sound that Pierre noticed that his chief had come in. Meanwhile, to his surprise, Lémarc saw the image of Hakon on the screen. He gestured to Pierre that he had to wait, and answered.

Immediately he heard that civilized woman's voice again. "Mr. Tasker, at Hakon's request I am sending you a short recording. These are the last images recorded by Barbara Kronkite's smartphone before it was forcibly turned off. Since then, there has been no trace of her. Hakon requests your cooperation. Perhaps you can use your knowledge and your contacts at the NYPD to find out what is going on.

As soon as you know more, you can give the information to Pierre, then it will come to me automatically. In addition, Hakon asks you to stop investigating the whereabouts of the head of Spiderweb. The data Pierre has found will be further processed by us and as soon as we get results, you will be informed. The images from Barbara's smartphone will now appear on your display."

The voice was silent.

On his display, Lémarc carefully watched the video until the image turned black. Pierre, who had turned around a quarter of a turn, looked at him with an owlish look. “Uh, I heard what Sandra said, and... Can I help?” Lémarc was too surprised to notice that Pierre must have very good ears. Before he realized, he asked: “Sandra? Is her name Sandra? How do you know that?”

Pierre forgot to be shy. He laughed and said enthusiastically: “I’ve been in close contact with her for half an hour now and we’ve found out how that Poko operated.

His smartphone had been adapted so that it could record at least 10 hours of sound. We now know that he regularly left his smartphone in the CINEMA. By ‘we’ I mean Sandra, of course. She works for Hakon. I don’t know how she does it, but she can locate a smartphone down to the square inch and also follow the digital traces, so you can see where such a device has been.

It seems that Poko’s smartphone and the prepaid cards he used have something extra in terms of information, which makes this link possible. She seems to have just discovered that. A for me still unknown technique, which I unfortunately have not yet managed to extract from her.” Pierre’s voice died away and his eyes stared blankly into the distance. Lémarc took a step forward.

“And? Anything else?” Pierre, startled out of his trance, looked at him, apparently suddenly realized where he was and continued: “ Each time Poko picked up his smartphone again, he sent a sound file to a so far untraced address.

The last file is still there. It’s a recording from this morning, when we were in the CINEMA.

From the moment everyone came in, the INN broadcast and everything that was discussed, until the moment Jens walked out the door with it, everything is on it.” Lémarc was speechless. “Was it that simple?” Pierre nodded. “Yes, right under our noses. Sandra has taken it upon herself to find the location where the file was sent to. At Hakon’s request, she says.”

Suddenly his nervous self again, Pierre shyly waited for comments from his chief. “It’s all right, Pierre. We can assume that Hakon knows exactly

what he's doing." Visibly relieved by Lémarc's approval, Pierre nodded in agreement. "Well, certainly in the IT field. I can't believe what that woman can do. I thought I knew a lot, but that Sandra showed me some tricks that could prove very useful to us. Shall I get straight to work on that video you just received?"

Lémarc shook his head. "No, you don't have to. I don't need your expertise in this. In this case, my own brain is enough for me. I know the two we saw and heard very well. They are two notorious mafia guys from New York. I've had to deal with those two guys several times. The driver with that pock-marked face is Giovanni Billotalli, also called 'the pimple' and the other guy with that strange voice is Eberto Mesoluti. The latter is the capo of the infamous mafia boss Don Enzo.

Although we haven't been able to prove it yet, this Don Enzo is the Capo di tutti capi of New York. I've been investigating these guys for years and each time they managed to get away with it. Witnesses suddenly disappeared, evidence was missing all of a sudden and even entire files were disposed of behind our backs by corrupt cops. To the outside world he's a decent businessman, but I know better. If this guy is behind Barbara's disappearance, we have to fear the worst."

"Thank you very much for this information, Mr. Tasker," sounded a civilized voice from the speaker of Pierre's laptop. "We'll get right on it. Hakon's request is to wait until you hear from us again."

With a click the loudspeaker was switched off. Stunned, Pierre and Lémarc looked at each other. "Well I'll be damned, she just overheard us via my own laptop," Pierre murmured in amazement.

< 09.05

As Lord MacMarkland reentered his domain just after three o'clock, he immediately saw that new developments were taking place. Almost all the screens were filled with images that he was unable to fathom right away. Wondering what they meant, he asked Sandra for a status report. He sat down and heard Sandra's pleasant voice say: "Welcome back, sir. I cannot yet fully inform you, because we are still in the process of checking a number of elements relating to two matters." He sat down in

his seat and told her that he was listening. Her civilized voice continued to speak.

“The first case is unexpected and, as far as we can tell, has nothing to do with Spiderweb, but with Barbara Kronkite, who inexplicably disappeared. After a security report that came from her smartphone, we were able to deduce that it was not a simple theft. I then took over the direction. She was under limited surveillance, so we now have to make more effort to find out exactly what happened.

On the basis of the information we have collected so far, partly due to the details provided to us by Mr. Tasker, we believe she is being held by the New York mafia.

We do not yet know why. I have checked all of Barbara’s work, but nowhere has a link been found with the mafia.

At the moment, the entire network of this organization is being mapped out. Screens 1 to 3 show you the locations of the two men who we know are involved in Barbara’s disappearance. They are now being continuously followed by SPY. Given the documents, facts and suspicious events found, as well as the reputation of the police, it makes no sense to call in the latter.

Hakon has been informed in the meantime. All means at our disposal will be used to find her. Because her assistant is the only one already present on the spot, I have taken the liberty of including him in this search. You can read all the information on the first three monitors.”

As if by magic, four new avatars appeared, with a whole chain of data linked to them.

As if she knew that he needed some time to process things, Sandra was silent for a moment before she discreetly cleared her throat and continued speaking.

“The second development concerns the advertising messages sent. CRYPTO was able to decipher their code. While you were downstairs, a similar message was sent to Mario’s smartphone. According to the data, this is the first time that Mario’s device has received a message directly from this source.

The text of this message is: 'Can you track down Hakon Eriksson and if so, can you find out what he's up to?' You can find all the details on monitor 4." Enthusiastically, the lord slapped his left fist in his right hand. "That's great," he exclaimed. "We've lured them out and they're starting to get nervous. Proposal, Sandra?" Simultaneously with her words, the text 'That's going to work. I'll report to you as soon as I get to New York' appeared on the fourth screen. "Excellent, Sandra. That's something we can work with." "Thank you, sir. The reply has been sent and Hakon has been informed."

With his thoughts on the five GAIAS members that were flying somewhere over the North Atlantic, the lord looked at the GRID. The estimated time of arrival was 14.00 hours, local time. If Sandra and her subroutines SPY and CRYPTO were to uncover the leadership of Spiderweb today, it would give them more than enough time to do research on the spot and pick up Onawa.

Because of the need to sleep and eat, any confrontation would not take place until early the next morning anyway.

In the meantime Sandra continued to speak. "Then there is that message to Poko. That's a bit more odd and reads: 'Send the last soundtrack today, activate the smartphone and get the hell out.' The first and last part of the message is clear, but what is meant by 'activate the smartphone' is not. Together with Pierre from UNBI, I researched the smartphone he had with him, but apart from the fact that it had been adapted to record long-term audio, we couldn't find anything unusual. CRYPTO is still trying to find out if the message contains a double meaning. As soon as we know more, I'll inform you." His eyes wandered on and watched the footage of Barbara's kidnapping.

He shivered and sympathized with her. He knew exactly how confused and unhappy she must feel now. He absent-mindedly thanked Sandra, while at the same time wondering why this journalist, of all people, had been taken. One of Hakon's best friends. Coincidence? Could be, but believing that was another matter. He stood up hesitantly, walked to the GRID and stood in front of Don Enzo's avatar. Worried, he started to read as quickly as he could what was known about this Capo di tutti capi.

< 09.06

Kingsize Bob had been sitting in his office chair for 15 minutes enjoying his view of the six continents in the hall below him, while his cousin from New York was rattling in his left ear.

Because that was something Sal was very good at when he was excited.

It was as if his words were fired at you from a machine gun. Very tiring, especially when he fell back on the flat Sicilian accent that had survived the emigration of his family.

He himself spoke and understood Italian fluently, but he had never fully mastered this regional language.

Although he loved his cousin like a brother, there were times when he preferred not to speak to him. Like now.

There were plenty of things he had to give his attention to, including preparing for Barbara's arrival, but he didn't want to upset Sal, so he had his cousin tell the whole story of Kronkite's kidnapping, including all the little details.

How the woman had been skillfully snatched from Lorenzo's toilet - a restaurant he conveniently had had in his pocket since time immemorial - by his team. Within twenty minutes of Bob's call, she had already been traced by his informants, and according to Sal it had been a piece of cake to make her disappear completely silently half an hour later.

When the woman had gone to the bathroom, one of his guys, who was inside and watching Barbara and her companion, had given the owner a signal. The owner had walked straight to the back and had instructed the staff to go to his office immediately.

As everyone gathered there, the owner himself had quickly opened the back door, then joined his staff and made them happy with the announcement that everyone was receiving a \$500 bonus for their good work, which was topped off with a glass of champagne.

A nice diversion, so no one could know what was happening in the meantime.

While the staff congratulated each other enthusiastically, an inconspicuous van had been parked at the back of the restaurant and his capo Eberto had walked to the toilet together with an expert in anesthetics. Without any problem they had been able to take the woman by surprise and drug her.

They had easily carried her through the empty kitchen and unnoticed had placed her in the van through the supplier's entrance. The transport box was already there. On the way to the warehouse where the box was to be delivered, the expert had given her a dose of sedative such that she would stay asleep for at least 10 hours. So Bobby didn't have to worry about a thing. The woman would be delivered to him as Sleeping Beauty in her coffin in the usual way, as was done with all other transports.

Bob breathed loudly, which enabled him to interrupt his blood brother. He thanked him very much and asked if they had found that woman's smartphone. "Yep," he sounded cheerful. "It was found immediately and, as instructed, the battery was removed.

The device and all the other things she had with her were put in the box with her."

Reassured, he listened with half an ear to Sal's detailed description, in which he, in a routine manner, made a yes, no or concurring sound to keep Sal going, because the more he interrupted him, the longer and the more exaggerated the story would become. Yet he allowed his cousin to recount everything to the last detail. As a result of Sal's intervention, this Kronkite would be lost forever. He smiled in a good mood. Sal knew better than anyone what to do with these kinds of jobs.

For the outside world her trail would end in the toilet of the restaurant and for Sal's people the trail would end in the warehouse of the expedition company, of which he was the biggest shareholder. He used this one hundred percent clean, lawful expedition company as a cover for everything he had transported all over the world. To the untrained eye it was a perfectly normal business, only things from and for him were stored in a separate area. And just as with the transport of the animals, the crates were transported by different people, without them knowing about each other.

The sleeping beauty's transport would not cause any problems.

An unknowing employee of the expedition company would have taken the crate to the airport by now and delivered the cargo to the pilot. This carrier regularly flew for him. He never knew what he was carrying or where it came from. The box would have been loaded onto the plane by the expedition worker and once the box arrived here, his foreman would put it in a stable that he could reach directly from the hall, unseen by anyone on the ranch.

This method had been proven to work so many times that he had nothing to fear from anyone. As soon as the cargo arrived here, he could do whatever he wanted with her. Nobody would come knocking on his door and ask: "Have you seen ...?" A sinister smile slid over his face when he thought how wonderful it was to have a like-minded family, and suddenly he was happy to hear that old, familiar Sal.

In the meantime he had closed Barbara's file, which was still open. He hadn't been able to find anything special, except that apparently she had been dealing with Hakon Eriksson for a while and that she had been the first to publish new developments concerning the unraveling of his network. The latter could only mean that she must have gotten her information from Eriksson.

And who knows, she might also know what the guy was up to. He was sure she must know something that would help him and he would be able to squeeze it out of her. He already had in mind what special treatment she would get.

In the meantime Sal proudly told him that the whole operation, from his phone call up to and including the delivery of the box, had taken less than two hours. While Sal was talking, he looked at his watch and saw that it was almost half past eight. He quickly calculated Barbara Kronkite's time of arrival, taking into account the transportation of the crate to the airport, the airport procedures and the one hour time difference with New York. He concluded that it would arrive around half past four in the afternoon. Well, that gave him enough time to prepare everything and to work out his further strategy.

With the rhythmic sound of Sal's voice in the background, which worked as a kind of therapeutic massage, he was able to continue contemplating. Now that he knew the link between the journalist and the annoying

Eriksson, he would add her to his collection. He had actually been lucky, he thought amused.

Maybe he would manage to trace his enemy in time, so he could have him kidnapped as well.

Then the trio of poltergeists would be complete. While sniffing, he took another sip of his whiskey, saying goodbye to his cousin Sal. As if his smartphone had the courtesy to wait until he had hung up, it now asked for attention with a penetrating sound. It turned out to be another text alert. Curiously he clicked on it and saw that there was a message ready from Mario in The Hague. Quickly he made a connection and with increasing joy he read exactly what he expected. Everything was turning in the right direction again, namely his. He had started to get his hands on the reins again. He quickly sent a text message for his foreman via the internal messaging system, with the order that his men had to be ready within ten minutes. In a good mood he closed the program and energetically made his way to the stables to kick the lazy bastards in their asses. There was work to be done.

< 09.07

They had done it! Without any major problems, she and Miquel had left the research area. They had undergone all the checks as calmly as possible. At least that's how it seemed from the outside, because inside she was jubilant with joy.

It was understandable that the security checks were so strict. Every find could be of great significance and of course belonged to Egypt's cultural heritage. The search by a female guard had made her a bit nervous, but her bra had withstood the check. Sticky with sweat and still covered in white dust, they had returned to their hotel. They had immediately started to prepare for their departure. They didn't have a lot of luggage and in the meantime her companion was already busy arranging airline tickets out of here.

Through the dusty window she stared at the courtyard, which was littered with rubbish. Thank God they could finally get out of here, now that she had found what she had been looking for for so long. With those last two

sentences she had found, her research was complete. The fact that that arrogant Ravic was going to take credit for it didn't matter to her. It was about the meaning of it, which only she understood. After all the wanderings from pyramid to pyramid she finally had the complete text together.

Before she went home, she would go through everything with her friend in the Netherlands once more. She was the only one, apart from her grandmother, who knew how far she had progressed.

That she had discovered a piece of text that proved that there had been a form of communication between the builders of all the pyramids on earth. Now it was a matter of finding out how they had done it. For that she needed the help of her friend. Together they had previously done an insane amount of fieldwork and it was an eternal shame that her girlfriend had to stop because of back problems. It had taken some time, but now she had, according to her own words, a very interesting job. She worked for the UN in the department that supervised the import and export of art treasures. On her way back to Mexico, she was able to make a nice stopover in the Netherlands. Hopefully she could meet her friend in the Peace Palace. It would be nice to see each other again and if she was there, she could immediately see the inside of that beautiful building.

Unnoticed, her hands turned the tablet pc she was holding in front of her.

A few minutes ago she had called her friend, thinking she would surprise her with this important find, but it hadn't happened as she had expected at all. Of course, her friend had been happy to hear from her, but otherwise the conversation had been largely about a colleague of hers.

A certain Hakon Eriksson, who had been blown up at first, but later had not been blown up, and had now disappeared without a trace. She had never seen her girlfriend so upset and her find had just barely been taken notice of.

A bit perplexed she had finally hung up.

It was a strange story and since she had become curious, she had looked up the news pages. They turned out to report about almost nothing else. It was like a movie when she saw the pictures of the shooting and ended up with a picture of this Hakon. The man had a

charming face and seemed very sympathetic. Definitely the kind of man her friend would fall for.

That's why she was so upset.

She looked up in surprise when Miquel poked her.

"Is everything arranged? Can we leave?" Miquel shook his head. "Unfortunately not. I don't know why, but I just got a message from Ravic. We have been summoned to the High Council of Antiquities."

She made a dirty face. "Well, I know what that means. Problems with that arrogant rascal. Mark my words."

< 09.08

The condition of Onawa's body resembled that of a dead person. Totally relaxed she lay quietly breathing half on her side. Yet she picked up every sound, ready to react immediately as soon as her ears noticed something unusual.

This form of body control, which her father called 'vigilant rest', she had quickly mastered in her youth, and it ensured that she could rest anywhere, but would never be unpleasantly surprised.

Her hearing recorded hoofbeats, so she opened her eyes and peeked over the edge of the ridge.

She grabbed her binoculars and saw a group of cowboys riding away from the stables.

At least, they looked like cowboys. She had dealt with cowboys often enough in the past to see from their missing packs and weapons that these men were definitely not going to a cattle pasture. This was not right at all. She decided to follow the group.

< 09.09

After Sandra had disconnected, Pierre had dived towards his laptop like a predator to sit down tapping on his keyboard like a madman.

To his displeasure, Lémarc had had to conclude that they had once again been overtaken by events, but at the same time had to admit that Hakon's people, apparently under the direction of this Sandra, had been able to discover information which made UNBI look like a bunch of rookies in comparison.

After shaking his head while looking at Pierre's frantic attempts to find out how this Sandra could have gotten into his computer, Lémarc had quickly walked to the CINEMA.

On his way there he had sent Jean a text message that he had to come back for consultation. Immediately afterwards he had sent a text message to all department managers with the request to report on the latest state of affairs and to stop the investigation into Spiderweb until further notice.

As soon as he entered the CINEMA, the silence had fallen over him like a warm blanket and he had finally had the opportunity to get his thoughts straight again.

Over time, one report after another had appeared on the big screen and as he read through them, the papers were brought in one by one. The stack on his desk had grown steadily.

By now he had read them all and with a half full cup of lukewarm coffee in his hand he was staring at the wall, thinking. He had worked hard and without pausing, and by now it was already past five o'clock. The New York and Tokyo clocks indicated 11.10 hours and 02.10 hours respectively.

His gaze slid back to the pile of folders that had been read. On top was the thickest one. It was the investigation report about Jens, which had been compiled by several departments in a very short time.

The final conclusion was that his assistant had probably been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing had been found that indicated that Jens had been in contact with someone from Spiderweb before. An appendix with information like he had never seen before had been added to the report. It was a brilliantly indexed report, recording almost every minute of the last three months of Jens' life. A timeline documentary had been put on paper, as it were, which was supported by all kinds of visual and photographic material.

This clearly showed where and with whom Jens had had contact and what he had done. Many videos and photos had been made in places of which he wondered how on earth this could have been done, because he knew for sure that there were no cameras at those locations. Apart from that, this report also proved that Jens had not misstepped.

In fact, his assistant turned out to be an exemplary citizen. The final conclusion was unequivocal with UNBI's own findings. Jens had only politely returned Poko's smartphone to the janitor. He knew that he had had no influence on the developments surrounding Jens, but he didn't like the fact that he had pointed to him as the mole so quickly. He had known Jens long enough to know that the boy was honest. Yet, based on a single clue, he had condemned him without question. That was the disadvantage of this profession, Lémarc thought sadly. Always assuming that you were being lied to and deceived, so that in the end you started to distrust everyone. And as always, good, honest people were the victims.

The door of the CINEMA swung open with a bang. In a shock, Lémarc almost dropped his coffee for the second time that day. He put his clattering cup and saucer back on his desk.

Barking loudly into his smartphone, Jean came at him. With wild gestures he swung his closed cell phone back and forth like a club. He started "What is this about? Has the whole operation been put on 'HOLD'? What does that mean?"

I've just come from Sytsema, who skillfully removed the four people from the Hilton and incarcerated them at the local cop shop in record time.

Under his leadership, they were immediately and firmly interrogated, which provided enough leads for further investigation. Now that we know where these guys were staying, there will also be enough evidence there. The reports in which these things have been recorded me-ti-cu-lous-ly, are on your desk." Viciously jabbing, Jean pointed to Lémarc's desk. Lémarc raised both hands.

"Calm down, Jean, calm down. I know. I read it all, but the order came directly from Hakon. There are things going on, and I don't know everything about them either. I have only been told that it is necessary for us to stop our investigation and that we must wait until we receive another message from Sandra." "SAUNDRA?", Jean cried out

frustrated. “Who the hell is that?” Lémarc kept looking calmly at Jean’s face, which was reflecting a thunderstorm. “I don’t know her personally, Jean,” he said calmly. “But she is the contact person appointed by Hakon. She is the one who gives us Hakon’s orders. She even talks about a kind of scenario in which we appear...”

Lémarc’s smartphone went off with the familiar shrill sound. “Speaking of the devil. It’s her. Wait. I’ll let you listen in.”

He turned on his speaker and immediately they heard her pleasant voice say: “Hello, Mr. Tasker and good afternoon, Mr. LaGrande. On behalf of Hakon, I will update you on our findings so far.

First of all, Mr. Tasker, your knowledge of the New York mafia has been very useful to us. We have traced the two kidnappers, including their boss Don Enzo, and the scenario for finding out Barbara’s whereabouts is ready.

Secondly, we have analyzed the results of the interrogations of Casanova’s team, which were carried out this afternoon by Detective Sytsema, and this has again yielded a great deal of data, including the names of his accomplices who carried out services for him. Not the most serious crimes, but we have enough evidence to have these petty criminals arrested as well.

In the meantime, all arrest warrants have been issued, the heads of service involved have been informed and the necessary AT’s are on their way. Detective Sytsema has been ordered to coordinate these arrests.” Lémarc had seen that the longer Sandra spoke, the redder his colleague’s face became, until it was almost purple in anger. Jean, who was insulted to the core of his soul for having been kept out of all this, was about to explode.

Without saying a word, Lémarc, with a threatening look and a short hand gesture, told him to calm down and listen. Jean, who was wise enough not to ignore him, fell back into his seat with a thud, and Sandra continued to speak undisturbed. “... which led to the next point. Our investigation has also shown that Poko and everyone else involved used prepaid cards that were all purchased at the same time, two months before the attack. We have been able to link these prepaid cards to each other and have been able to map out exactly where the mobile phones in

question have been located in the past two months. After that it didn't take us much effort to link the identity of the user to almost every device. It was a piece of cake to determine the exact location of all persons at any given time. I will now send you ...", and immediately the large screen in the CINEMA switched on, "... a list of all the devices traced. In the overview map, you can see the locations where they are currently situated."

Like a pair of wheelchair users in a dance contest, Lémarc and Jean, perfectly synchronized, turned their chairs towards the screen, on which a map of The Hague had appeared. Scattered across the city, one red and several green icons lit up.

Saundra continued to speak decisively. "As I have just told you, the green signs indicate their current location. It's after five and there's not much going on. It will be easy to arrest the owners. You can ignore them. As you probably guessed, it's the red one that worries us. Although the device is switched on, we have not yet been able to connect a person to it.

Our request is now whether your department can trace this cell phone, because it is remarkable ...", the screen was zoomed in until the UNBI building was enlarged, "... that it should be present at your location." "WHAT?", Lémarc and Jean cried out in amazement at the same time. "Do you mean ...", Lémarc said, looking around, "... that there's another one here that's recording somewhere?"

"We don't know exactly", Saundra responded immediately. "All we know is that this cell phone is on standby. The location has been checked and the device is located in the room that was used by Poko. There are two options. You can see what kind of device it is and what information it contains, or leave the situation as it is and wait to see if someone will pick it up. We don't know if Poko had one or more accomplices. We'll leave the choice to you."

And the connection was gone.

"What is all this about, Lémarque?", Jean cried out frustrated with his face turned red. "I have the unpleasant feeling that we, UNBI, are as good as useless. Since when do we walk on the lead of a stranger? Méerde! We're not stupid, are we?"

“Calm down, Jean, calm down a bit will you? Listen to me. We can’t do anything else, because a: these are Hakon’s own instructions and b: everything is going very smoothly with their help.”

“Hakon, Hakon,” Jean snorted, still highly agitated.

“Then let him tell us that himself. You’ve only heard a tape. Who says it’s authentic? These guys seem to have a lot on their plate and I’d feel much more comfortable if you’d spoken to him in person.”

He had barely finished speaking when they heard a loud click, after which Hakon’s voice filled the CINEMA through all the speakers.

“Yes, Jean, I would have my reservations in similar circumstances, but as you hear, you are attended to in a wink. Only now do I have time to talk to you.

First of all, I would like to apologize for making you think that I was killed in the attack this morning. If it could have been done any other way, I would certainly have done so.

But this was the only way to lure the Spiderweb leaders out with minimum risk, which by the way worked out very well and...” “Yes,” Lémarc interrupted sourly. “Everyone is scared to death and I can tell you that...” To Lémarc’s annoyance, Hakon didn’t let him finish. “You’re right, Lémarc, but it was absolutely necessary. I’m on a plane and I can’t meet you in person, so I have to do it this way. You are now alone in the CINEMA and Sandra is making sure that we are not disturbed. If you agree, I’ll bring you up to date, but only if you promise that this information will stay between us forever, as I want to keep Sandra and the others who are helping me out of the publicity.”

Lémarc and Jean consulted briefly and after Hakon’s solemn promise that they would not be involved in any criminal action, both gave their word of honor that they would never pass on anything they would hear to anybody else. Hakon thanked the gentlemen, after which he enlightened them from start to finish through the loudspeakers for half an hour.

At the same time as Hakon was talking, a huge variety of documentation appeared on the large screen, which supported his story in detail.

< 09.10

Still not sure about the whole thing, Russ was in the subway on his way to JFK airport. While staring at the walls that were flashing by, he was gnawing bitterly at one of Barbara's neighbor's biscuits. The fact that quite a few crumbs fell on his lap and on the ground, completely escaped him. He could only think of Barbara and the incredible things the unknown female caller had told him. After that strange phone call he had struggled to say goodbye to Barbara's neighbor. Very unwillingly, he had had to leave the woman in suspense. With the demand to keep her informed and an enforced promise from him to take good care of himself and Barbara, she had quickly given him all kinds of sweets.

From there he had first gone to the editorial staff. The celebration had been coming to an end and had ended with an outright hangover when he had told his story. Like him, his colleagues had gradually become more worried.

While telling his story, he had been sitting at Barbara's desk, making him feel a little bit as if she was still with him.

Her last coffee cup had been half full on her desk and he had emptied it taking small sips, imagining that he could still taste the taste of her soft lips. He would have preferred to stay there for a while, but after his colleagues had assured him that they would get to the bottom of it, he had hurried to the nearest station and taken the subway to the airport.

While the car carried him on, Russ thought of the woman who had called him. According to her, she was a kind of contact between him and UNBI, Interpol and NYPD. She had tried to reassure him with the words 'that it would only be a matter of time before they would have traced Barbara'.

Yet, like a small child in the dentist's waiting room, he was nervously sliding back and forth on his chair. The woman had told him that after the alarm from her smartphone, Barbara's movements had been carefully investigated and that it was believed that two men from the local mafia were involved in her disappearance.

He had been dumbfounded and his anxiety had instantly turned into outright fear.

There was no one on the editorial staff who had been able to think of a reason. Rigorous research by everyone who was still present, hadn't yielded any results.

There was no connection between her and the mafia. The only thing that Barbara had investigated was everything to do with international arms smuggling and warfare. If she had already gotten in the way of the mafia, it must have happened by accident. After discussing all the pros and cons with the chief editor, who, despite the situation, saw sensational news in the offing, it was decided that the best way for him to respond to the request of the unknown caller was to do as she had asked. The closer to the fire, the better it was, wasn't it? He had wanted to strangle the man, who was only after sensational news items. Yet his realistic attitude had helped him. Although he still feared the worst, he had been able to put aside his fears about Barbara, so that he could function as well as possible.

At JFK he would meet Hakon himself, as well as the team that would take care of the search for Barbara. His own participation had been at Hakon's special request. After the unknown woman had told him that she would keep him informed of all developments, she had hung up. The whole conversation repeated itself endlessly in his head and he was firmly convinced that there had to be more to it.

But what?

< 09.11

Despite the fantastic opportunities offered by Sandra - the capital of Lord MacMarkland and all the facilities available to the Markland Group - there was no guarantee that the carefully crafted Spiderweb scenario could be completed without interruption.

Hakon was all too aware of this as he was continuously being kept up to date by Sandra after the news about Poko.

He hadn't been able to sleep anymore and thought intensively about the path to follow.

Now that they knew how the Spiderweb organization was communicating, he understood that they were dealing with an extremely intelligent opponent, who, despite all the security measures, had apparently been able to infiltrate UNBI very easily. It was simply embarrassing to discover how easily Poko had gathered his information.

Not only embarrassing, but also quite worrying. However, the most worrying development concerned Barbara. Her kidnapping came as a bolt from the blue, but when Lémarc had managed to cough up the identity of the kidnappers immediately after seeing the images, he had been shocked. The perpetrators were not just a bunch of mentally disturbed people, but members of the New York mafia. Serious criminals.

Feverishly, he had tormented his brain, but with the best will in the world he couldn't remember that Barbara had ever had anything to do with the mafia. Even Sandra had not been able to find any connection between her and the mafia.

So he could definitely assume that there was no such connection at all. The only thing that was certain at this time was that Barbara was in terrible trouble and there was no doubt that finding her was being given the highest priority.

And although it was a mystery why the mafia had targeted Barbara, there was still a glimmer of light. They already knew the identity of the kidnappers. An important point of departure, so that no valuable time was wasted. As inconspicuously as possible he had discussed various options with Tony.

In the meantime he had constantly kept in touch with Sandra, who had simultaneously developed a second scenario. After merging it with the original plan, it turned out that they had more than ten hours to trace Barbara and, if necessary, to free her before they had to go on to Texas.

Like Lémarc, he knew how the New York Police Department worked and he refrained from engaging them. They themselves would have landed a long time before all procedures were completed and the people were briefed and able to take action.

What they had already discovered was enough to take action. The targets had already been marked by Sandra and were continuously monitored. The eyes of Tony, with whom he whispered about the

upcoming action, seemed more black than brown, as he rehearsed with him the preparations and the timeline Sandra had drawn up in detail.

They both agreed that they had brought plenty of material with them, but the special content of the two crates that had been filled by Marilyn and brought by Tim and Arda, might well come in handy now. The new composite scenario would come into effect as soon as Tim, who was to land at least fifteen minutes earlier, had picked them up together with Tjan.

Half an hour left before they would land.

Tony would be stretching his legs and, walking back and forth through the aisle in a relaxed way, would briefly inform Tjan.

Hakon fell back and closed his eyes to think about his strange dream. He put all the problems on hold and relaxed. Slowly the dream took shape again and all of a sudden he knew who that man on the other side had to be.

As he remembered his grandfather's living room and concentrated on the face of the portrait hanging over the fireplace, he knew it for sure. He had seen his father. But why would he suddenly dream about his father, he wondered in amazement.

He had already given up the courage to find him. From the first day he worked for the police, he had made use of all possibilities to find him. Without success. Even the extensive search functions that were available to him during his work at Interpol had not yielded anything. Even Sandra could not have discovered any trace of him. It was as if his father had disappeared from the face of the earth from one day to the next.

This train of thought would come to Hakon's mind later, when he would actually find out how his father had disappeared. Since he was still in the dark about it now, he was frowning, pondering why the dream seemed so important to him. He had the strong feeling that he had really heard his father, as if he had been physically present.

He couldn't think of anything to ask his grandfather, but as soon as he spoke to him, he would certainly tell him about the dream. Something he had done in his childhood as well, on more than one occasion when he had dreamed very vividly. Hakon wondered what his father's fate must

have been and rubbed his right hand unconsciously with his left, but before he could realize that his right hand was slightly tingling, his thoughts were interrupted by Sandra, who whispered to him via the WORM in his ear that Tim had landed.

She also let him know that all means of transport were ready and then informed him of what Onawa had discovered. While the stewardess kindly asked everyone to fasten their seatbelts and put the backrests upright, Sandra started with a summary of the developments in the Netherlands and New York.

< 09.12

In the large, very well maintained stable, Onawa had found an excellent hiding place.

In the darkest corner she could possibly find, she sat deep under her poncho behind a horse, almost invisible to the naked eye.

She waited to see what was to come. With her ultralight tablet pc on her lap, it was relatively comfortable here. She enjoyed the coolness after walking around in the burning afternoon heat for hours. After a very risky quarter of an hour she had entered this place, where she had discovered a handful of little-used boxes in the back of the stable that offered a good hiding place.

Thirstily she took a few large swallows of water, closed her eyes and calmed her body. Chasing the riders hadn't even taken very long. Already after about one mile they had dismounted near a group of trees, after which they positioned themselves around a big man, who by his posture and commanding gestures, apparently was their captain. Invisible to the men and unnoticed by their horses, she had snuck around the group, until she could watch their operations from downwind. While she had sneaked even closer, the silent prairie was suddenly startled by a salvo of hard shots. Immediately she had fallen flat on the ground, but the fear that she had been discovered turned out to be unfounded. The irregular gunfire continued and she had realized that she herself was not the target. She had dared to raise herself a bit and, making sure that the

sunlight could not reflect in the lenses, she had looked at the scene in detail.

Under the shelter of the trees, the group held a shooting exercise. They shot at beer bottles arranged in rows. The horses appeared to be excellently trained, for although they turned their ears in all directions, they remained extremely calm. She could almost see them shrug their shoulders while the shots were thundering over the prairie and the glass, flashing in the sunlight, was flying around. In order not to be in danger herself and also because the shooters seemed to be rather sinister types, she had retreated a bit further.

At a safer distance she had informed Sandra and launched a second butterfly, which would continue to make detailed recordings of these people.

There had been nothing left for her to do here and she had returned to the ranch without difficulty. Again she had released a few butterflies. After that she had been able to make a fairly easy tour around the ranch, because with the help of the extra pairs of eyes of the butterflies she was warned of others in her vicinity in good time. Seen by no one, she had found the room where the telephone exchange was located. She had slipped in quietly, had quickly put in a whole bunch of spiders and slipped out just as easily. At that moment it had been well after three. The siesta was over and it had become increasingly difficult to remain undiscovered. While she had carefully sneaked around to find a suitable hiding place, her attention had been drawn to the roaring sound of an airplane. A small runway had been constructed parallel to a shed about two miles south of the main building.

During her tour, for her assurance, she had left a butterfly there, from which she now benefited, because from the changing sound she could hear that the plane must indeed have landed there.

Quickly she had activated her tablet pc and with only a few sweeps of her finger on the display she had found the current images from the butterfly. She had been just in time to see that a small cargo plane had landed, apparently ready to take off immediately, with rotating propellers. The men she had watched earlier during their shooting exercises were encircling it. Under the leadership of the same big guy they had pulled a

big wooden crate that looked like a coffin out of the cargo hold. At marching pace they had carried the load to the shed, where the door opened as soon as they were seven feet away from it. Without holding back their pace, the group had marched in with their cargo.

In the meantime, the aircraft had made good progress on the runway. It had barely taken off as the door of the shed opened again. The big man had come out and walked in the direction of the outbuilding where the cowboys were staying. From her concealed position, she had seen on the display that there was no possibility of entering the shed unnoticed.

The building had no windows and the steel door, which had no lock on the outside, fitted seamlessly into its rebate. The only source of information now was the butterfly, which would continue to record everything and stream it tirelessly to Sandra. Because there were many more people walking around, the chance of getting away from the ranch unseen was nil and it was almost a miracle that she had found this beautiful spot without bumping into anyone. She opened her eyes, put her tablet pc on her lap and activated it. Now that there was nothing for her to do, she wanted to know how Marilyn, Hakon and the others were doing. Outside, the butterflies, faithfully fluttering back and forth, kept making their recordings.

< 09.13

After the simple meal he had eaten with his wife and children,

Lord MacMarkland had returned to his tower room as soon as possible. While attentively taking in all that Sandra had been able to find about Don Enzo, the indirect illumination had adapted seamlessly to the ever darkening day.

He hadn't noticed a thing. Only when the incoming night had chased the last orange-pink sunlight across the horizon, had he realized that it was already so late and that Hakon and his family were about to land in New York. And indeed less than five minutes later Sandra had confirmed this and since then he had been sitting on the edge of his seat watching the images on the GRID. Right from the start it looked like Sandra had started an action movie. Tim, who had landed a quarter of an hour earlier,

had picked up Hakon, Tony and Tjan with a fast van, after which they drove straight to the bar where the two mafiosi were staying.

As soon as Tim had turned into the alley behind it, Sandra had informed the bartender that the police were coming to arrest the two. As expected, they had both stormed out through the back door, where they were welcomed by Tjan and Tony. Within a few minutes, the couple were firmly tied up in the back of the van.

After that it all happened very quickly. Tjan's oppressive interrogation technique was, as always, highly effective and it didn't take long for the two of them to spit out their whole life with the mafia. Sandra processed the facts and then showed them clearly on the GRID.

The two men, together with all the evidence and an extremely detailed report of their confessions, would later be handed over to the NYPD. But for now, the most important thing was to hear that, after their boss had received a phone call, 'the two of them had to take that chick off the street without damaging her'.

The order had come straight from Don Enzo himself, so Hakon and Tjan had to understand 'that they really had not had a choice'.

The two had ensured that the woman would be knocked out for at least ten hours and had put her in a specially prepared box. There were air holes in it, so she got enough oxygen. An hour later they had delivered the crate to a warehouse of a well-known parcel service. They did not know what had happened to it afterwards. Now that they had learned exactly what had happened to Barbara and where she had been taken, the GAIAS members had worked out a plan in no time to lure the Don to the shed in question.

Once again, Lady Fortuna seemed to be on their hand, because it fitted in exactly with the new scenario. If luck continued to smile on them, they in turn could snatch the Don himself, find out why Barbara had been kidnapped and free her. In a hopeful mood, the lord leaned back. At the moment there wasn't much more for him to do than to watch the new images that appeared in the middle of the GRID. They turned out to come from Onawa, whose avatar was blinking cheerfully.

< 09.14

The High Council of Antiquities in Cairo was housed in the former embassy of England, a huge colonial building from the 18th century in which all kinds of marble from all over the world were incorporated in the floors, stairs, walls and pillars. The 12-sided entrance hall was colossal, but despite the fact that all the floors and corridors ended at it, it was an oasis of peace. Even though it was busier than usual, as everyone had to work longer because of the new discovery, it continued to radiate the stately tranquility of the Victorian era.

But, after about a century and a half, the serene atmosphere was suddenly rudely disturbed by a loud crack that echoed through the entire building like a rumbling thunderclap. Like puppets on a string, all heads turned, with their eyes wide open and unbelieving, to the place from where this unprecedented noise had come.

In the terrible dead silence that followed and under dozens of disapproving glances that she felt fired at herself, Nakawe Chihuahatl sat frightened and ashamed among the remains of her fallen chair, on which for decades many dignitaries had taken their seats.

Still dazed by the sudden fall, it slowly and painfully - because of a thick splinter that stuck in her left buttock - dawned on her what had happened. She and Miquel had been forced to attend the press conference that Ravic had hastily organized. A long, tedious gathering, in which that incompetent bastard had proudly revealed 'his' discovery in every detail. He could not have concealed the international cooperation and, in order not to spoil the skillfully put together play, she had dutifully pronounced the text that had been forced upon her by Ravic's minions.

She had not protested. She had found what she was looking for and wanted to leave the country as soon as possible. She had been very disappointed that she and Miquel were dropped on two old antique chairs after the official event with the instruction to wait. Of course there was no mention of how long.

That waiting had taken so long that she had tilted the chair diagonally against the wall and in this relaxed position had closed her eyes for a while. Thinking about the consequences of her discovery, her thoughts had strayed and she had gone to sleep unwittingly. A restless sleep,

which was abruptly interrupted, because the chair that had finally given up the fight against years of neglect had collapsed under her.

While she was trying to spare her left buttock, shifting her weight to the right as much as possible, she strove mightily to hold on to her dream. It had been a peculiar one, from which she could not and would not easily break free.

Strangely enough, she hadn't dreamt of her discovery, but of the man who had been attacked. That Hakon. The last thing she remembered was his outstretched hand, in which she had noticed something, something familiar. The annoying thing was that her dream had been interrupted too soon, so that she could no longer remember that 'something familiar'. She could almost grasp it, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't retrieve it. While she was still thinking about it, frowning with effort, she became aware that Miquel was standing over her.

Startled, he shook her shoulder anxiously and asked if she was all right. After a last unsuccessful attempt to recall that final image, she gave up and quickly checked her body. With the exception of her painful buttock, everything was still functioning fine. She held on to Miquel's helpfully extended hand, pulled herself up and comforted him. "It looks worse than it is. A bit startled, a painful behind, but otherwise everything is okay." Miquel looked at her inquisitively.

"Are you sure? Isn't your right hand bothering you? You are massaging it so intensely."

Sincerely surprised, she looked at her right hand, which she was in fact massaging without noticing, while only now did she become aware of the fact that it tingled as if a column of ants were marching through her veins. Quickly she inspected her hand on all sides, but couldn't find anything strange. Except that, now that she was concentrating on it, she noticed that the itching followed exactly the dark-colored line that ran over her hand.

The line that looked so much like a scar, but wasn't, and that had been there since she was born. The tickle was not painful. Merely disturbing, and it was only limited to that line.

"Hmm, strange," she murmured. "I've never experienced that before." "What?", Miquel asked. "Oh, I honestly didn't hurt myself. But something

is itching on my hand, right here.” With her left index finger she followed the line that started at her right thumb and ran a bit across her knuckles, to end in her palm at the beginning of the so-called lifeline.

“What kind of scar is that?”, Miquel asked. “Did you cut yourself or something?” She shook her head.

“No, I’ve had that since I was born. I think it’s something genetic, because my grandmother has one too. I remember her sometimes saying that her hand was itchy as well. She said it indicated she was called by her ancestors, but I don’t know what she meant by that. Normally it doesn’t bother me, only now. Strange, isn’t it?”

< 09.15

Don Enzo drove in his sports car to the same warehouse where, eleven hours earlier, he had defended the honor of his family to his full satisfaction. Although he usually made it a challenge to get from A to B as quickly as possible, he now had to take into account his followers, who drove after him in an off-road vehicle.

With casual ease he navigated through the perpetually busy New York traffic. He had plenty of time to review the events of the day, while regularly flexing and stretching his hands, which held the leather steering wheel loosely.

Remembering the beating he had given early this morning, he again felt strong and powerful. Yet he could feel from his hands that he was not that young anymore. Life was good and, unlike in the past, he rarely had to make a physical effort anymore. His body had become lazy. Maybe he should do some sports after all. Well, he would see. For the time being, things were going very well. Since that slippery Italian, that Mario, had been employed by him, his business had never been so well-oiled. That was clear from the smooth operation to remove that journalist from daily life.

He moved his fingers with great satisfaction, stretching them to the rhythm of the music that softly came out of the loudspeakers. It was nice that he had been able to do his cousin a favor so promptly and it was

great to have him on the phone again. Extensive conversations with his blood brother, especially the last one, in which he had given him all the details of this morning's actions, were rare. The penultimate time was already two months ago, when his cousin had asked him to lend Mario to him. He knew more or less why and of course he couldn't have refused. In fact, it did him good to help Bobby, because he would never forget his help during their teenage years. If back then his cousin hadn't... No. Frowning, he shook the thought away from himself. Without this debt he would have helped him as well, because he was family and you had to take care of family. The frown made way for a tender smile when he thought of his daughter. In the course of the morning he had received a message that she would fully recover and that his beautiful Julia had not, thank God, been disgraced.

The rest of the day couldn't have been better. Thanks to Mario's invaluable information, he had been able to get hold of two aspiring politicians. Another two important pawns that would make his job easier.

In the evening, he had searched for the file with the takeover plans of a small company trading in flower bulbs and he had to conclude that his right hand had not yet had it delivered.

All Eberto had to do was deliver the box, do a few other small jobs and pick up the damn file.

Frustratedly wondering why he hadn't come back yet, Eberto had called him and asked him to come to the warehouse. The message had been short and very strange. Come to the finishing hall. There's someone here you must meet. Then his capo had disconnected. He was often asked to go somewhere.

There was nothing strange about that, but the fact that Eberto had immediately hung up on him and had used the one word 'must' was alarming. He was never treated this way. The fact that there was something wrong was confirmed by the fact that he did not respond to his calls, something that his capo would not dare to do in a hundred years.

In the meantime he had left most of the traffic behind and was now whizzing through the harbor area. He had better concentrate on the here and now.

In his rear-view mirror he saw that the enlarged and souped-up SUV was right behind him and with this canister full of bodyguards in his wake, he drove into the warehouse grounds a little later. The large sliding doors were invitingly open, but he took no chances and gave the SUV the opportunity to pass him on the left and to be the first to drive in. Driving slowly, he followed and with the engine running idle he stayed behind at an angle.

A wave of heavily armed men flowed out of the SUV. They positioned themselves quickly between him and a group of people standing in the middle of the hall. Surprised he stared at the group, when he saw Eberto standing between them.

He also recognized someone he never expected to meet here. Enraged that the slick guy dared to do this uninvited and somewhat worried about what the reason might be, he threw open the door, stepped out, made his way through his men to the group and annoyed, shouted: "Mario! What the hell are you doing here?"

Stunned, he looked at the little white pigeon Mario threw in the air. The bird spread its wings and flapped about three feet in front of him. That was the last thing the Don would see in freedom.

< 09.16

In Kongsberg it was almost eleven o'clock when Torstein, frightened, opened his eyes and looked straight into the face of his wife, who was shaking his arm lightly but stubbornly.

"Wha ... Wha ... What's the matter?" he asked blurredly.

He raised himself with difficulty, leaning on the wide arms of his old, worn out, favorite armchair, until he sat fairly upright. Marit sat on the footstool. "You were shaking terribly."

She pulled his feet on her lap and continued: "I thought you were having a nightmare."

Still somewhat disoriented, he pushed his glasses, which threatened to slide off the tip of his nose, back up out of habit. "What time is it anyway?" "In less than an hour it's time for bed, sweetheart."

You've been snoozing behind your newspaper for half an hour and if I hadn't woken you up, we both know that it would be hard to get to sleep tonight. Are you sure you're all right?", she asked, still worried. "You were really going on." Lovingly he looked at Marit's trusted hands, which had begun to massage his cold feet. "Hmm yes, I think so," he answered thoughtfully.

"Once again I had that dream ... Only now it was different."

"Different, how?"

"Well, you know that I always have the same dream, in which I see our missing son trying to tell me something, which never works. Well, this time there was more to it. I saw not only our son, but also Hakon."

Marit asked: "Hakon?", and she looked surprised.

"Yes, it was so intense, I could swear I could touch him. But that's not all. There was also a very handsome woman who tried to reach Hakon, which just didn't work." As his feet began to glow, he thought about how best to describe it. It looked like ... Yes, that was the closest thing to it. He continued: "You know, what you sometimes see on TV these days. A hologram. That's what it looked like. That woman tried to take Hakon's hand, but she couldn't get a grip on it. She tried again and again and seemed to call out his name, but there was no sound coming out of her mouth. And just before you woke me up, something else struck me. On her hand was a familiar spot."

Without being aware of it, Torstein had been massaging his right hand while talking. "That spot, that sign, was exactly the same as this one." He held up his hand and kept quiet for a moment, for he didn't really want to tell his wife the rest, although he knew he had to. He sighed deeply and said softly: "It tickles again now, just like forty years ago, when our son disappeared."

"Oh, no!" Marit was shocked. Her hands fell still. "Not again."

She looked at him sadly and quietly repeated: "Not again." "I don't know," said Torstein, "but this does convince me that we should inform Hakon.

You remember the dreams he used to have and that they also included a woman who called him and always tried to grab his hand. The fact that I have exactly the same dream means something. There is no other way.

We have to leave the decision to Hakon and hope that his choice will be better than his father's back then.”

< 09.17

Regularly waking up halfway, only to let herself be blissfully drifted away on fluffy clouds again, Barbara finally regained consciousness. Her eyes felt as if they had been glued closed, her head was throbbing and she had a gruesomely filthy taste in her mouth. Her tongue was dry and seemed to have attached itself permanently to her palate. Smacking her lips and swallowing she managed to loosen the thing a little.

What on earth had she done last night? Although she liked a drink or two, she had never in her entire life been so drunk that she couldn't remember anything at all. She was groaning with misery. Luckily she had been able to find her bed, which gave her the hope that she hadn't misbehaved too much. God, she was so thirsty. She needed a glass of water, or even better, a bucket. And a handful of aspirins. Jeez, her head hurt like crazy. She wanted to get up, but realized that she couldn't move her arms. Terrified, her eyes opened and stared straight into the face of an elephant that was towering above her. Her heart missed a beat and in panic she gave a loud scream, which ended trembling when she realized that the animal was not moving. Spears of pain shot through her skull and confused she was forced to lie down. Good, finally the fog in her head cleared a bit. One by one her memories came back until after a while the picture was complete.

She remembered that it had been a long, insane day, which nevertheless ended with a party.

After that she had walked with Russ to Lorenzo's, where they had eaten something and had been flirting. Russ had been waiting for the bill and she had gone to the toilet ... The very last thing she remembered was an Italian man who had smelled of garlic like a gas factory.

He had kept her talking until she was suddenly grabbed firmly from behind and a cloth was held in front of her nose and mouth. Gasping for breath, she had inhaled a pungent substance, after which she had become completely limp.

As everything around her began to spin around, she had felt a painful sting in her left arm. And now she was lying here, wherever it may be, under a deadly silent giant guard who rose high above her. The headache had diminished and she dared to lift her head in such a way that she could look over the edge of the coffin. Her mouth fell open. She was somewhere in the wilderness of Africa. As far as she could see, she saw animals everywhere. On the ground, in the air and hanging between the trees.

Suddenly she became aware of the smell and background noises, something that had escaped her until now. Where the hell was she? It looked like some kind of museum. What was she doing here? And who had brought her here? In panic she checked all the functions of her body, but apart from the headache and the filthy taste in her mouth she seemed to be fine. She breathed out shakily. As far as she could tell, she was fine, but the straps were so tight that she could hardly move.

And what's worse, she had to go to the bathroom urgently. When she stared up at the elephant, she noticed that there was a small device hanging from the trunk. She narrowed her eyes and saw a red blinking light above a matt-gloss half ball. A mini-camera. So she was being watched.

"Hey, if you can hear me, show yourself. I..." She was abruptly silent. She thought she heard something. She listened closely. Yes, she was right. She heard footsteps. They got closer and closer, until they stopped and a tall man showed up next to her. He was a cowboy. She couldn't determine his skin color, because he was wearing gloves and his face was hidden by a lifelike mask of ... An owl?

How the hell did all this fit together? She didn't understand it anymore.

The man kept looking down on her for a while and then said: " Hello, Mrs. Kronkite. Welcome to my paradise."

He pointed around with a sweeping motion.

"You will undoubtedly know why you are here. I am very curious about your answers to a few simple questions." Barbara immediately heard that the man was American and she was able to distinguish a Texan accent. Other than that, she had no idea what he meant, which she told him.

She was willing to answer all the questions, provided he untied her, so she could go to the toilet first. "That can wait a while," he answered. "My questions are more important than your discomfort.

First of all, tell me how you got the data to be able to broadcast that recording of the attack so quickly." Because of the question Barbara immediately knew what this was about. The shivers ran down her spine when she realized that she was in a much more dangerous position than she had thought. He wouldn't settle for the little she knew herself. She had to come up with something to satisfy him, so that he would untie her.

As long as she was helplessly tied up here, she didn't stand a chance. She was right, because the longer she tried to convince him that that information came from an anonymous source, the angrier the man became. In the end, he fiercely told her that if she didn't answer, he would take off his mask. In that case she wouldn't leave this bunker alive, and she only had herself to thank for it. He gave her one more chance to confess where she got that information. Terrified, Barbara's thoughts flew in all directions. She had to find a way out, and quickly. Suddenly it occurred to her. She could prove to him that the source was really anonymous!

She looked straight at him, into those creepy big owl eyes and begged to be allowed her smartphone. There was a text on it that could prove that she had told the truth. If he untied her, she could show it to him. The man remained silent. After what seemed to be the longest minute of her life, he suddenly leaned over her and began to loosen the straps.

< 09.18

Relaxed, Lord MacMarkland was watching the information that Onawa's butterflies sent from Texas, but apart from the images that came from a small runway where a cargo plane was unloaded, not much happened. What could be seen on the monitor was more like a documentary of a large farm where the daily activities were filmed. It was nice to see, but it wasn't very interesting. On the monitor next to it the course of the arrests of ten petty criminals in The Hague was shown, which didn't interest him that much.

The monitor also informed him that the unknown smartphone had not yet been found. The irritatingly blinking telephone icon now glowed in a faint red color, after he had asked Sandra to fix it.

He didn't have any trouble shifting his attention to the center of the GRID, where the recordings of the white pigeon appeared.

Another of Marilyn's inventions that she had Tim and Arda bring with them from Amsterdam.

The moment the bird had been released, it had produced a flash of light and a terribly penetrating beep, so that everyone who wasn't equipped with special protection, was knocked to the ground. It was quite funny to see the arrogant Mafia boss and his entourage fall to their knees at the same time. Like puppets on a string that had all their threads cut at the same time. Like shapeless sacks of potatoes, they lay on the floor.

Hakon, who was disguised as Mario and therefore was unrecognizable as himself, knew who was looking and had put up a thumb with a big smile. Shaking his head for Hakon's incorrigible optimism, he watched as the Don and his men were handcuffed and neatly lined up. Tony was still busy handcuffing the last man, when the first woke up and tried to wriggle himself loose.

"Pointless, boys. Absolutely useless," the lord mumbled to himself. Even Houdini himself would not be able to get out of those cuffs in less than a hundred years, he knew.

One by one, the mafiosi were questioned in the presence of Tjan. The combination of his impregnable appearance, which seemed to be carved out of a single massive chunk of granite, and his unfathomable dark gaze did not bode well. Most of them quickly realized which side their bread was buttered. The few who initially refused to answer, changed their minds quickly after Tjan squeezed his broad, strong fingers a little tighter.

The only one who didn't give in was the Don. The mafia boss continued to resist stoically and clamped his jaws tightly together. Tjan did not manage to squeeze out more than a tidal wave of curses that would be a rich addition to the handbook of curses and obscene language.

Sandra, who in the meantime had examined all the seized cell phones, came forward. "Sir, we supposedly have a breakthrough." Supposedly? A

chunk of matter filled with zeros and ones had a 'supposition'? He was close to bursting into laughter. She seemed to become more bloody human every day. Grinning, he asked for further specifications in as businesslike a manner as he could.

"As you wish, sir. I am 96.43% certain that the box unloaded at the Texas ranch is the one in which Barbara Kronkite was abducted. I made a compilation of the clearest images and sent it to Hakon, who in turn showed it to Don Enzo's capo. The man has just admitted that it is the same box.

Under these circumstances, however, I cannot determine whether he is telling the truth. We have not learnt anything from his boss.

However, I have found several indications that he is involved with the rancher. Although I don't know who called him, because this is also a prepaid phone, I was able to follow the digital trail, which ended at the ranch. As soon as the location was known, I could adjust my search parameters and..."

Lord MacMarkland snapped his fingers impatiently. "Come on, Sandra, can't you go any faster?" "Of course, sir."

In telegram style she informed him that Don Enzo had been called by his cousin, so she had examined his family tree, which showed that the Don and the rancher were full cousins. Lord MacMarkland cried out in surprise. "Huh? An Italian and a Texan cowboy? That's special." "No, not really, sir. Their mothers are sisters. Even though the Don looks just like his father, he's only 50% Italian. His cousin is the famous Robert J. VanderBeek IV, alias Kingsize Bob, KSB for short. He is married into a very wealthy and influential family. He has an extraordinarily good reputation and has, among other things, developed his father's cattle farm into a multinational. You can find this expansion of his profile on the GRID."

Beneath the face of the cattle farmer, Lord MacMarkland saw an extensive genealogical overview and a large amount of new reading material. For the time being he had enough to read, he saw. Sandra's voice continued: "... it didn't seem very likely that he would be involved in Spiderweb, but I had to conclude otherwise because of the many traces that lead to this ranch. Together with all the other clues, and I stress

clues, sir, I have calculated with 96.43% certainty that this rancher had Barbara kidnapped. The reason for this must have to do with her research on Spiderweb, her relationship with Hakon or both.” That was not a very good prognosis, the lord thought, worried. As he worriedly walked through the tower room, he let his thoughts run wild.

He would have thought that the leadership of Spiderweb should be a place where people of stature could be found. In order to dig yourself in so well, you needed at least a lot of power. But someone like VanderBeek? That was something completely different. In comparison, he himself was just a little boy. GAIAS was only a small group. Could they, like David, slay such a giant? Gloomy, he stayed in front of the GRID.

His eyes wandered over it absently, until the avatar of cowboy Pete suddenly drew his gaze. He kept looking at it thoughtfully. It could well be that people like Don Enzo and this mysterious cowboy had used their connections with VanderBeek without the good man knowing about it. After all, Sandra’s calculation was only based on clues, not facts.

Also, the information they had received from the mafiosi had only provided new clues and it didn’t look like the Don would make them any wiser. At the moment they couldn’t be sure of anything. A situation he really didn’t appreciate. He turned his back on the GRID and asked Sandra to check all the information. He wanted to know what possibilities there were to determine for sure that Barbara had been taken to Texas.

< 09.19

After she climbed out of the box, stiff as she was, the man had directed her to a toilet room under the threat of a stock prod (*electric shock weapon used in abattoirs and by farmers to herd cattle*). Barbara had just felt like cattle when he had pushed her inside without saying a word. With his big body he had blocked the door, so she had had no privacy. She hadn’t cared. She had to go so badly that she had overcome the shame.

After she had felt as if she had peed out the whole Hudson, she had been allowed to wash her hands and face and he had made her drink

water from a plastic cup. Apparently he was more human than she had thought. Hopefully he was able to reason so she could convince him of her innocence. She had been taken meekly to this room, to the middle, where there was a large stainless steel table. He ordered her to sit on the also stainless steel chair, after which he chained her left arm with a handcuff on one of the table legs. He had left her on that cold chair and went away.

Immediately she let her left hand slide down, but it was impossible for her to free herself. The leg was fixed to the floor. Without any tools she could forget it. Disappointed, she looked around. The completely white-tiled room looked like a butcher's shop. She saw several racks on which all kinds of knives and hooks of different sizes were hanging. Underneath a worktop was mounted, with white cabinets on both sides. Along the right wall was a collection of stainless steel bowls on wheels.

The smallest was no bigger than a soup bowl, the largest was the size of a bathtub. All surfaces were polished and shiny. It smelled of disinfectant, but with a rancid undertone. Filthy. She didn't get long to look around, because within a few minutes the man came back. Her canary-yellow mobile phone, which he had picked up, was barely visible in his big gloved hand. He grabbed a chair, sat down and brusquely gave her the device and the battery. "Here. Put in the battery, turn it on and show me the text messages." Quickly she did what he asked. She typed in her code, looked up the first text message and gave him the smartphone back.

He read the message, turned off the device and looked at her with wise eyes. "Well," he said laconically. "You received a message. That's very special, isn't it?"

Suddenly he bent over so fast that Barbara was convinced that the crooked beak would drill into her nose. She flinched, frightened. The head of the owl growled threateningly: "That message is the same as mine, including the extra code that I personally came up with. You received this message exactly ten seconds after me, so it must have come from the same source. It seems to me to be very unlikely that someone would just send you this 'out of the blue'. That someone has deceived me and was probably paid a big sum of money for that. They had to be. So..." He hissed with anger and the feathers on his head

danced enthusiastically up and down when he leaned over her with a threatening and wild movement.

“Who’s your source? And don’t bring that nonsense about source protection and whatever kind of half-hearted rights you think you have. There is only one right here: My right!” The feathers tickled her neck when he shouted those last words right next to her ear. As if they were close friends, he put his arm around her shoulder and growled threateningly: “The choice is yours, dear. You tell it now, or I’ll make you tell it, and you can count on me succeeding. So just confess that this information came from Eriksson. I know that you’re certainly not strangers to each other, so it’s pretty certain you didn’t happen to get a scoop thrown in your lap by chance. Save yourself a lot of trouble and confess where that friend of yours is.

And if you...” Terrified of the creep that had become more and more like a psychopath, Barbara’s brain was working at top speed. She knew that her smartphone must have sent out a distress signal and that they were looking for her.

For the time being, there was only one thing she could do and that was to delay. Appearing much more confident than she felt, she interrupted him and said calmly: “You are aware that INN reported my disappearance to the FBI, aren’t you? In addition, my colleagues will not sit still. We regularly track down people. That’s what all the news organizations do.

You’ve just turned off my smartphone and because it’s protected with my fingerprint, it’s now sending out a distress signal that will have been traced by now. You have treated me well and I will be easy on you. I don’t know who you are and if you let me go now, I won’t tell the FBI anything. Be sensible.

Accept my offer and prevent your arrest.”

The man sitting in front of her had realized his defeat, Barbara saw. He let his head hang and stood up in shock. She heard sobbing noises coming from under the mask as he stood still with his head shaking in front of her.

Infinitely relieved that she would soon be freed from this horror, she looked at him. She realized how wrong she had been when he abruptly took off the mask and she saw the face of her kidnapper. A world-famous

face, not exactly crying... His laughter echoed loudly through the sterile space, reflected from the white tiles and echoed against the mirror-smooth bowls.

“That won’t have any effect here, bitch!”, he shouted. “You’re deep underground, with three foot thick lead-covered concrete above your head. Nothing, nothing at all, comes through. It’s time you realized that you are completely dependent on me. I’ll show you what will happen to you if you keep refusing to cooperate. I’m going to introduce you to...”

A penetrating horn sounded within the room from the hall. Without giving her another look, he walked out the door with a fierce look on his famous face.

The door slammed shut and with that, all Barbara’s hopes sank into the slippery floor.

< 09.20

As thoughtful as the calm strokes of the church bell that reported the midnight hour ten minutes ago, Lord MacMarkland stood wide legged in front of the window looking at the fairy-tale carpet of colorful gems far below him. Vaguely their glow illuminated the thin streaks of mist that dreamily moved over the sea behind them.

Yet the peaceful scene brought him no solace. He thought of Barbara. Nothing had been heard from Sandra for almost three quarters of an hour, which made him very worried about the journalist. It was possible that she had been taken to Texas, but that was not certain and apparently Sandra was at a dead end as well. All in all, it didn’t look very promising, he thought sadly. As far as he could ascertain, there was only one possibility left. Onawa was there on the spot and however much it bothered him to send her on such a risky mission, she was currently the only one who could possibly give a definite answer.

He was about to give Sandra the order, when she already started speaking. “Sir. I have some very good news. Barbara is alive. She personally turned on her smartphone and as soon as the signal came in, the device was traced. Her location has been found. The bio-scan

indicates that she is in good health. Her smartphone has been on long enough to retrieve all the log data, but was then switched off by an unauthorized person, which activated the security software. As long as the battery is not removed, you can follow the images it records on the GRID. I am doing everything I can to improve the quality, but the recording is still poor. In addition to Barbara's own voice, you can also hear the voice of a man who is putting a lot of pressure on her to tell him about Hakon's whereabouts, among other things. The voice has been passed through the comparison filter, which indicates with a percentage of 99.9 it is that of Mr. VanderBeek." So it was the big rancher after all, Lord MacMarkland thought miserably. An opponent of this magnitude would entail huge risks.

He looked at the images that Barbara's smartphone broadcast. Slaughterhouse. Looks like Barbara was somewhere in a slaughterhouse or a big butcher's shop.

In the background he heard VanderBeek proclaim with a loud voice that Barbara had no reason to be under any illusions, because they were in a bunker far below the ground. The lord thought the location's security would be correspondingly good. However, the die had been cast and they couldn't go back. Resolutely he asked Sandra to make a scenario in which everyone was as risk free as possible. "Already done, sir," she replied immediately. "There is a scenario ready to make contact with VanderBeek in such a way that he leaves Barbara alone and awaits the arrival of Hakon, alias Mario. I just let the nearest phone ring.

As soon as VanderBeek answers, he will receive a message that Hakon, with Tim's help, has left for him." While looking at the footage on the GRID, Lord MacMarkland couldn't determine if Sandra's action was effective or if there was an earthquake at that very moment. A horn blared somewhere and the recordings jerked uncontrollably in all directions.

There was a loud bang and the image became grey, but fortunately a bit later it came back reasonably stable. What he saw, however, presented him with a riddle. Suddenly Barbara's smartphone seemed to be somewhere else. Even on another continent. "Huh ... How ..." He didn't have to finish his questions, as Sandra was already responding. "I'm

already on it, sir. VanderBeek will answer it in a moment. You can follow the conversation live on the GRID.”

< 09.21

While he was growlingly cursing that stubborn bitch, Kingsize Bob walked back to his office with Barbara’s smartphone in his hand. Did that wench really think she could have frightened him with that bullshit about tracing that yellow thing? If she hadn’t still kept her mouth shut, he could have even laughed about it.

He walked through the hall in the diffuse light and looked up at the holes, where daylight entered through extremely narrow tubes using a special SLR technique. No signal came through. He knew that for sure. Only in his office was there just enough coverage, because he had built an amplifier there. Besides, he had switched off the device himself, so what was he really worried about? He hurried on, for when the horn went off, it meant trouble.

He would have walked through the hall a lot less self-confidently if he had known that the ultra-slim device not only continued to record unperturbed, but that it also continued to effortlessly send the images into the sky. He certainly couldn’t know that the device contained several extras and that Barbara’s phone number was managed through a secret protocol within Markland’s networks. All Markland satellites, in turn, were equipped with highly advanced hardware and software. The distress signal was therefore received without any problems and passed on to Scotland at a speed of almost 200,000 miles per second, where it triggered a special scenario. Kingsize Bob had no idea about all this and hurried to his office. The fact that he had been called via the landline could only mean an emergency.

Something that had not happened since his son’s accident eight years ago. Out of humor because he had been disturbed now of all times, he answered, snarling, and stiffened.

The person he was talking to was not his foreman, the only one who was allowed to call him on this phone.

The strange voice spoke with an Italian accent: "Good afternoon, Mr. VanderBeek. Listen carefully. My name is Mario DiStefano. You know who I am. I will land tomorrow morning, the 2nd of June, at 08.00 hrs exactly in my own helicopter at your ranch. I bring confidential information from Interpol and UNBI. Now that that asshole of a Casanova has ruined everything, I am no longer sure of my cover and I have to make sure that I have enough resources to stay out of the picture. I'm going to give you the deal of your life. Hakon Eriksson has proof that you are the leader of Spiderweb. He is working on an undercover operation to confront you with that and is currently preparing your arrest. He is doing this outside UNBI and Interpol. I am the only one he has confided in. So he and I are the only ones who have this information. I'll sell you the evidence for \$10,000,000 ... Cash. Eriksson, I will give you for free.

By the way, I know you have Barbara Kronkite. Make sure she doesn't get hurt, not a single scratch. She is the key to the information and it is crucial that she is present at the exchange. I am bringing a couple of bodyguards with me. So don't joke, or I'll make the information public. See you tomorrow."

A short click and the connection was gone.

Completely overwhelmed, he stared at the telephone handset as if he had the newest wonder of the world in his hands.

Was he dreaming now, or had he really just been threatened in his own house by that son of a bitch? He shook off the apathy and smacked the horn on the phone so hard that it cracked. His brain was working overtime and he soon came to the conclusion that this development would solve all the problems at once. He had to grin when he thought of the little guy who thought he had all the aces in his hand. He had to be bluffing, because there was no link to him. But he wouldn't take any chances, he was too careful for that. He would give that Italian a warm welcome. Too bad for his cousin, but he didn't let anyone order him around.

The only thing that bothered him was that the bitch of a Kronkite had fooled him badly with her big eyes.

Well, he wouldn't hurt her, but it would cost her dearly. But Mrs. Kronkite could wait. He first had to prepare Mario's reception down to the last

detail.

< 09.22

They had picked up Russ in a luxurious Markland Communications van and were now all on their way to the next stop. While Russ was being updated by Tony on the latest developments around Barbara and why he had been invited to come along, Hakon put everything together again to prepare himself mentally.

Sat comfortably in a big seat, he stared at the passing skyline of New York and realized that for the first time in his life he was quite nervous. Not for the imminent dismantling of Spiderweb, but for the state in which they would find Barbara. Like the unexpected presence of Jan de Jong, her abduction had not been foreseen and therefore not taken into account either. Again a surprising side-effect that could have killed their operation just like that.

After Sandra had informed him of Barbara's disappearance, he too had not linked this to Spiderweb right away. Especially not when she turned out to have been kidnapped by the mafia. They should thank God on their bare knees that Lémarc had put them on the trail of Don Enzo so quickly, so that immediately after they had landed in New York, they had been able to carry out the first part of the adapted scenario without any loss of time.

His gaze fell on Tjan, who was sitting diagonally in front of him.

In spite of everything, he had to chuckle at the sight of his shape, which seemed to have fused rock-solidly with his seat. He hadn't even taken off his sacred backpack and his weight had pushed it into his neck, making him look more like a hunchbacked Buddha. Yet the same man, who was now so imperturbably looking ahead, had ensured with a minimum of violence that the mafiosi, who usually weren't ones to mess with, had confessed to a maximum of criminal offences. All the confessions together formed a thumb-thick file and together they covered almost all the crimes from the Penal Code. Enough to put them away for a long time. The Justice Department could be more than satisfied.

For them, the result had been less satisfactory, because none of the men had known anything more about Barbara. The Don himself hadn't given away anything at all.

They were more than relieved when Sandra told them that she had picked up the signal from Barbara's smartphone.

A little later she had found the location and had let the group know who was leading Spiderweb. He could hardly have believed it, but the evidence was indisputable. Fortunately, Lady Fortuna still appeared to be on their side, because the scenario didn't need to be changed much in the end.

The first priority was to free Barbara from the clutches of VanderBeek, after which the operation could still be carried out as planned.

That's why he had called in Russ. A trusted person who could take care of her, so that he could keep his hands free for other things. As far as he could see, everything had been thought of.

Nevertheless, his nerves were as taut as a bow. Sandra's probability calculation indicated with almost 100% certainty that Barbara would not be at risk for the time being, but still ... Spiderweb was responsible for a lot of suffering and no matter how you turned it around, people were unpredictable. Certainly a monster like VanderBeek. He had to do everything he could to make sure that he would see Barbara first, before the so-called deal could be concluded. Sandra's soft voice brought him back to the here and now by whispering in his ear that the target was on its way.

Tim had found the address in the meantime and while he instructed Russ to wait for them in the van, they got out.

< 09.23

Meanwhile, she had lost her sense of time. Barbara felt like she had been sitting on that cold chair for hours and everything was starting to hurt. Her wrists were hurting from the handcuffs, the dried sweat itched on her, she had cramps from sitting and she was incredibly hungry. Her watch said it was five past six in the evening, more than twelve hours after the cozy

breakfast with Russ. She moaned. She would do anything to be able to go back in time half a day. The necklace shifted, jangling, as she swept tears from her eyes. She was sure she was being watched and did not want to show how terribly frightened she was.

She bravely straightened her back and clung to Russ's strong, calm face to suppress the panic attack that emerged. It helped. Sort of. Sharp teeth of fear tried to nibble a hole in her stomach, because she had recognized the owl cowboy as soon as he had torn off his mask. She could hardly believe her eyes. VanderBeek! Several times, also at INN, he had appeared on TV. A wise and generous benefactor. That he was dealing with Spiderweb was simply incomprehensible. Even though she didn't understand anything about it, she realized all too well that the man was dangerous and had to have a lot of influence. That was a proven fact if you could just pick someone from the toilet, put them in a box and lock them up here.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard a horrible squeaking sound. It slowly came closer and as VanderBeek pushed a trolley through the doorway, she saw what was causing it. There was a cowboy on the trolley. "Now," he said. He parked the cargo about 6 feet in front of her, pushing the cowboy slightly forward and pulling the trolley away from under the man's dusty boots. "Meet cowboy Pete. Also someone who was bothering me, like you are! Take a good look at what has become of him." He turned around and walked out again with the squeaking trolley.

Surprised she looked at the sturdy figure, who seemed to have walked straight out of an old western movie. The longer she looked, the more uncomfortable she started to feel. The cowboy stood stiff, without even blinking his eyes, and it didn't take long for the horrible truth to dawn on her. She felt cold sweat breaking out. Just like the animals, he was stuffed ... His eerie real eyes, staring at her from the tormented face, seemed to warn her quietly.

They showed an expression of fear, pain and regret. Barbara estimated him at around sixty and his grooved face looked really lifelike. A bit white, but other than that you'd think he could scream out from misery at any moment.

The person who had done this to him not only had a very sick mind, but had to be the devil himself.

Shivering with horror, she heard footsteps approaching. With a satisfied smile her tormentor came in, walked straight to the cowboy and gave him a hard kick in the crotch. The whining that followed went right through Barbara's inner being. "This ...", said VanderBeek, "... is my friend Pete. He used to work here as a handyman. Great worker, with only one hobby ..." VanderBeek's voice stopped for a moment before he continued. "... which unfortunately became fatal to him. Dirty child molester." Furiously, he kicked the sad figure a second time. Terrified, Barbara looked at VanderBeek's frightening face and remained seated, stiff like a mannequin.

While the torturous howling died away into gurgling and groaning, he sat down in front of her on the table. As if he were a popular uncle who was going to make a few jokes, he told her what cowboy Pete had done to him.

Barbara didn't know what she thought was creepier. VanderBeek's expressionless face, his flat voice, or the carelessness with which he explained the most intimate details without any hesitation. He didn't even seem to see her while he talked about the nightmares that had spoiled his childhood. What he seemed to find worst was the fear of snakes that cowboy Pete had caused him, because it prevented him from making his animal kingdom complete. As if the thought of this had taken him out of his strange, confidential mood, VanderBeek suddenly jumped up. Barbara blinked her eyes in surprise and saw his face become angry. "Every time I see a snake, that filthy pole with that wrinkled bag under it floats before my eyes again, damn it! Lucky for me that I had to move to New York at a young age, so that I could get rid of him. When I came back after years, I was definitely not a chubby nine-year-old boy anymore and the roles were reversed. That son of a bitch was still working here and thought I'd forgotten about him. Not really. The threat that he would kill my parents if I told them what he did to me had long since lost its value.

I pretended to have forgotten him and made him sweat here to get the bunker back in order. As soon as everything was ready here, I invited him to celebrate. And you bet it was a party ..." The scary smile that

accompanied his words gave Barbara's the shivers. Instantly, myriads of insects marched over her spine with ice-cold legs as he continued, smiling: "You've just heard how Pete enjoyed himself. I recorded his joy when I broke his back without anesthesia. A similar party awaits you if you don't do what I want."

He brought his head close to hers, forcing her to look into his hateful eyes. "I just got an interesting call from one of my informants at Interpol. I now know that Hakon was not kidnapped, as you showed in your report, but started an undercover operation to arrest me." He laughed so roaringly that Barbara felt little drops of saliva splashing on her cheek. His snow-white teeth abruptly bit off the smile and his voice sounded low and threatening as he looked at her from awfully close by, with a calculating look. "The same informant will entrap our little friend Eriksson and hand him over to me. I'm only surprised that he needs you to do that. Why?"

The wise owl eyes were definitely a thing of the past, Barbara realized when her eyes met VanderBeek's intensely cold, snakelike gaze.

< 09.24

It was eight o'clock in the evening of the first of June. In New York, Special FBI agent Jerry Decker came home tired, hungry, frustrated and wet through from the rain. Bumbling with the slippery keys that were about to slip through his soggy fingers, he thought it was, as always, typical New York. According to him, it only happened here that the weather was beautiful all day, until you went home. Then the heavens opened their floodgates and it poured buckets. He gloomily entered the hall and peeled the wet coat from his body. He noticed that it was remarkably quiet.

The copper weights of the grandfather clock hung all the way down and on the dresser next to it was a folded sheet of paper. A short message from his wife, who let him know that she had not been able to reach him, as usual. So she let him know this way that she wanted to spend a few days at her parents' place with the children.

He put it back.

He would have loved to follow them, but the events surrounding Hakon inexorably drew a thick line through that thought. As head of the team that supported UNBI in the US, he could not just take time off. Especially since they had been working on the Spiderweb case for two months, which until today had been inspiring and successful. He didn't have to fear for his career, but he wondered if he would be willing to pay the price for it. The work was intensive and had swallowed up all his energy and time like a black hole, so that little was left for his family. He didn't want to lose them for anything, but he couldn't just quit, could he? No. That just couldn't happen. Not after a day like this, which had been so stressful since he had been called out of bed around two o'clock last night. Meetings, numerous telephone calls and every now and then ad hoc meetings to find out exactly what had happened. The lack of solid information had been frustrating enough, but what bothered him most was that the media had apparently done a better job. He would like to know how Barbara Kronkite had managed to get hold of such information. The evidence that INN had come up with, turned out to be authentic after research, but at the same time it had raised a whole bunch of new questions.

In the meantime, there was still no trace of Hakon himself.

And on top of that, INN's investigative journalist Barbara Kronkite also seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth. He couldn't prove it, but it was only logical that both disappearances had to be related. The icing on the cake, however, had been The Hague's order, when UNBI's acting director Lémarc Tasker had sent a stack of arrest warrants for dozens of Spiderweb accomplices. Although he had never before had to organize such a huge logistics job, he had succeeded with a great deal of shenanigans. However, questioning the suspects had not provided Lémarc with the information he would have liked so much. Like oysters glued with superglue, all of them, no one excepted, had kept their mouths firmly shut. The parquet under his feet creaked softly when he retired in an unhappy mood and hung away his soggy coat. However they had threatened, flattered and promised, none of the detainees had said anything.

Useless. In The Hague they had not made much progress either and although he had every confidence in the capacity of his colleagues on the

other side of the ocean, he had the strong impression that they had fallen asleep there.

Since they had exposed a mole there, no action had been taken from their side. Incomprehensible. The last telephone conversation with Lémarc hadn't made him any wiser either. In fact, as energetic and fanatic as Lémarc normally was when working on a case, as passive was he now. He had been unusually silent.

In the corridors there were rumors that the investigation had been set to 'HOLD', but when he asked Lémarc about it, he had only received a superficial answer. So completely meaningless that any politician would be jealous of it. He didn't understand a word of it and if he didn't get a satisfactory answer in the morning, he and his team would cross the pond themselves. It couldn't be true that because of Hakon's disappearance the Spiderweb file was just closed? Two months of work gone to the dogs. He didn't want to think about it. Sunk in thought, he stood in front of the clock and in the meantime had turned the hands to the right time. He pulled up the weights and the clock came back to life.

He immediately regretted it, because the calm, regular ticking seemed to emphasize the silence in the house even more.

Sighing, he took his briefcase and shuffled to the kitchen, which was just as desolate. He put his briefcase on the table, went to the fridge and opened it without much enthusiasm.

The light came on, giving him a clear view of the excessive contents of one jar of olives and a half empty bottle of white wine. The wine smelled of vinegar and the olives had long since passed their sell-by date. He hopefully opened the freezer. Ice-cold vapor struck his face. Except for a bag of frozen peas, it was empty as well.

With a sigh, he slammed the fridge shut and then rummaged in the cupboards, to find a packet of dry toast as the only loot. He shrugged his shoulders and threw the find in the dustbin.

He would have to call Lombardini's and have a big pizza delivered. His rumbling belly thought that was a good idea and while he was hungrily thinking about what he wanted on it, the water was already pouring into his mouth.

He could swear that he already smelled it. He marveled at the way your brain could fool your senses in such a way and walked into the living room.

He saw movement in the corner of his eye, but before he could react, he was firmly grasped and squeezed as if he were in a life-size vice. His heart was racing and at the back of his throat the stomach acid that had risen was burning. The awareness shot through him in a flash. This was a reckoning ...

< 09.25

At exactly two o'clock in the morning, Lémarc finally saw Holger, for whom he had been waiting for more than an hour, enter the CINEMA. The blond giant looked around in amazement, pointed with a wide gesture at the camp beds and the stacked provisions on the table, and looked at him with his eyebrows raised.

Lémarc nodded to him briefly.

“Good to see you, Holger,” he greeted him. “Sit down. We have a lot to discuss. As you can see, we had to adjust the CINEMA a bit, so that we can stay here for a while.” He pointed his thumb behind him to Jean and Pierre. “The four of us will sit here until at least half past two tomorrow afternoon.” “Yes, but ...”, Holger started, “... I have other...” “Wait a second, Holger,” Lémarc interrupted him. “Listen. After my tale, you’ll understand that your plans for tomorrow have to be postponed.”

Lémarc thought for a moment and continued: “While you and Sytsema were busy arresting and interrogating, we found a second mole. We now know that there is still a smartphone in Poko’s room and we have proof that it has to do with Spiderweb.

The exact location is known, namely in a computer under Poko’s former desk. The machine is switched off and is not connected to our network, so it is probably only used for storage. We deliberately did not disassemble the computer in order to prevent it from activating a security device that is invisible to us. We can’t take any chances, so we set a trap.

Pierre furnished the room with cameras and microphones and then placed several motion detectors.

As soon as someone goes in there, we get a signal and we will know with whom Poko did business. Tomorrow, well actually later today, all the staff will gather here for consultation, after which the door will be locked and remain closed until the second mole has been exposed. Until then, we'll keep watch here."

< 09.26

Yeah, Jerry thought despondent. This was the mafia that had come to deal with him. With all his might he tried to get out of the squeezing grip, but the arms that almost crushed his chest didn't give an inch.

He feverishly tried to figure out what he could do to turn the tide, for it was certain that nothing good could come of it.

He had to watch powerlessly as a fashionably dressed Italian stood up, walked towards him confidently and stood still in front of him. A golden spark flashed for a moment when the man opened his mouth and greeted him amicably.

That voice ... Damn it. He knew that voice. He couldn't, because that was the voice of ... "Jerry!" The loud sound of the snapping finger held in front of him made him look up. The Italian looked at him inquisitively. "Are you back with us, Jerry? Sorry for the inconvenience, but it was the only way I could meet you. My friend Tjan was kind enough to keep you in check, so you wouldn't shoot around. Just to be on the safe side, we'll keep your weapon for you for a while." Jerry felt someone pull his gun out of the holster, after which Tjan lifted him up almost off his feet and pushed him into the TV chair without so much as a 'by your leave'. The encircling arms disappeared, but Tjan's clumsy fingers remained vigilant on his shoulders. The smooth Italian - Hakon? - took a seat on the footstool opposite him and nodded in the affirmative. "Yes, Jerry. It's me. Undercover. I suggest we eat something first.

Then I'll tell you why I'm here. Okay?" The Mediterranean face, whose features did not resemble those of Hakon at all, looked at him

inquisitively.

Yet the voice was absolutely his and also because he hadn't been hurt, Jerry decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. "Sounds like a good plan to me. To be honest, I'm quite hungry." That his senses hadn't deceived him was clear from the stack of pizza boxes that was put on the coffee table by a tall, serious looking man. He was followed by a beautiful woman, who put a tray of coffee cups next to it. The hands disappeared from his shoulders. They appeared to belong to a powerhouse, which, without saying a word, sank down into one of the armchairs. The furniture creaked ominously and it was a miracle that he didn't fall through it on the spot. While 'Hakon' briefly introduced his company, Jerry's nose recorded the delightful scent coming from the boxes and cups.

His belly let itself be heard, rumbling loudly. The strange group of people laughed. "Take this, Jer." 'Hakon' gave him an open box. He took a huge slice, unashamedly folded it in half and eagerly bit into it. Chewing and swallowing, he took a good look at the quartet that was eating around him, left and right.

The monstrously square-shaped Asian was called Tjan, if that was his real name. You'd better not get into trouble with him, because the guy had kept him under control effortlessly, despite his own weight of 250 pounds. Except to slide in one pizza slice after the other, he didn't open his mouth. His face seemed to be sculpted and what was going on in that head, was impossible to fathom.

The other Asian of the company, one Tony, was the absolute opposite. His skin was much darker. He was certainly a head smaller and looked petite. His weight was probably not much more than a quarter of that of Tjan. Apart from the beautiful vest he was wearing, he was the least conspicuous of the four. You couldn't say that about the handsome redhead sitting next to him. Her glistening, green eyes had radiated pure energy when 'Hakon' had introduced her as Arda. As he was seemingly eating quietly, he could simply feel how she was constantly keeping an eye on him. Even though she was so handsome, she gave him the creeps. He had better avoid her attention. In the armchair opposite him, the tall guy who had brought the pizzas had settled down. Tim. The man seemed to have come straight from an ironing board and reminded him most of a stiff English butler.

At first glance they were all eating in a relaxed manner, but something in their attitude made Jerry suspect that they were constantly on their toes. He had never seen a more peculiar group of people before.

Red Arda had stood up silently with feline movements and started collecting the empty boxes and napkins.

In the meantime 'Hakon' gave him one of the cups. "So, Jerry. Now that the growling beast has been fed, I'll tell you why I ambushed you in this way." Arda went around with the tray and 'Hakon' started his story. With a nicely filled belly, Jerry listened to their experiences of that day while enjoying his coffee.

Gradually he became more and more convinced that the Italian indeed had to be Hakon. His mouth almost fell open with amazement when Hakon told him who the leader of Spiderweb was and how he wanted to lure him out. That he simultaneously wanted to liberate INN journalist Kronkite, who had been kidnapped by VanderBeek, made him frown. Hakon explained to him what they were up to, but he doubted whether he could agree to his working method.

Kidnapping was at the top of the FBI's list of priorities and he could expect a tough discussion with the director when he found out that he was aware of it and hadn't reported it. UNBI may operate under the UN flag, but the FBI was responsible when it came to abductions. Of all the crimes in the US, kidnapping was in the top three. On the other hand, he had to agree with Hakon. A large part of Spiderweb had been dismantled, but it was obvious that there were still many informants out there who wouldn't hesitate to signal VanderBeek as soon as they got wind of Hakon's operation. He had to admit that Hakon's plan looked damn good and that, not unimportantly, it offered a good chance to put an end to Spiderweb in short order. An attractive idea. The operation would be risky, but certainly not impossible. Convinced that they could make it, he nodded in agreement. "Okay, I'm in. I will organize the necessary SWAT teams and keep them on standby. As soon as you are successful, I will deploy them."

The greasy smell of fried meat, potatoes, mushrooms and onions, mixed with the sour smell of dried vomit on her trousers, made Barbara gag. She kept her free arm as tightly as possible against her stomach, to prevent her from spitting out her intestines for a second time. Nauseous and dizzy she tried to stay upright as much as possible, so that VanderBeek wouldn't see how miserable she was. He would kill her. Just like cowboy Pete and the innocent animal the monster had brought in an hour ago.

Inside her, the screaming fear that couldn't escape her clenched lips and a sea of tears threatened to suffocate her. But no matter how desperate and worn to the core she felt, she wouldn't give in. Stubbornly she clasped her teeth together, closed her eyes and tried to banish all thoughts from her head. Which didn't work out ... VanderBeek's expressionless snake eyes kept popping up, staring at her, intensely cold.

Cowboy Pete's painful wailing also continued to echo around her skull uninterruptedly. At the same time, the horror show of the past hour continued to take place incessantly before her eyes. At first she had been relieved when the rancher had transported cowboy Pete outside and she had heard his footsteps die away.

Suddenly it had been as quiet as in a tomb, causing her to fall half asleep. A frantically tapping hoof-triple that was coming closer had awakened her. The sound turned out to be that of a small calf that the monster had pulled into the room with a collar. Presumably sensing what was about to happen, the animal had pulled wildly on the leash. The panicky, wide eyes had reflected her own fear and despair perfectly. Apparently she had looked at it with pity. "Do you have trouble with those innocent eyes, sweetheart?", VanderBeek had asked her nicely. Without any transition he had taken a knife, grabbed the mouth and popped both eyes out of their sockets. The speed and carelessness with which he did it had overwhelmed her. Crouching and feeling how her own eyes threatened to jump out of their sockets, she had puked up everything she had in her.

Stomach acid and bile had set her throat on fire, but she hadn't noticed until much later. She would never forget the heartbreaking wailing sound.

Exhausted from vomiting, she had sat up shivering and as she wiped the dirty hair off her clammy forehead, she had seen VanderBeek's face. With his arms crossed, he had laughed at her and watched the shaking, blind calf. His face ... Blunt euphoria. The monster had been enjoying himself, laughing. Excitedly he had explained that this exceptional day deserved a good, healthy meal. He had grabbed a bucket and had pulled the animal roughly towards him. With his left hand he had grabbed its head again, while at the same time he had put his colossal right hand around its neck. He had carelessly pulled up the struggling animal and made a quick twist, so that the neck was broken with an eerie, creaking sound. The calf had suddenly hung like a rag on VanderBeek's hand.

Effortlessly he had cut the throat open and held it up at the hind legs, so that the blood could run into the bucket. The metallic, cloying smell that was released had struck her like a lightning bolt. Breathing through her mouth to avoid vomiting, she had witnessed the slaughter.

Without hesitation, VanderBeek had cut the animal's belly open and dropped the intestines and organs in a steaming heap in the bowl in front of her feet. He had skillfully stripped it of its skin and cut off a few pieces of meat. The rest he had wrapped in plastic and put away in a large fridge. While repeatedly humming a song that Barbara recognized as being by Status Quo, barely fifteen minutes later he had cleaned up all the garbage and tidied up the table, and the pieces of meat lay roasting on the grill.

He had worked fast, confident and seasoned. It was clear that he hadn't done this for the first time. This totally insane psychopath was an old hand. An extremely dangerous predator that had no sympathy for any creature. At that moment Barbara had realized that she had no chance at all. Hakon would fall into his trap and then the creep would kill them both. As painfully as possible ... While humming, VanderBeek put a large, well-filled plate on the table and sat opposite her. He smiled and looked at her with cold eyes at the same time. He cut off a large chunk of meat and put it in his mouth. He chewed. Juice seeped down the corners of his mouth. He didn't seem to notice.

Silently he sat there, eating, staring at her in a cold and calculating way. Caught in his hypnotic gaze, she stared back. She felt hollowed out. Her head was empty. As empty as the Sahara ... The clattering sound of the

cutlery that VanderBeek dropped on his empty plate startled Barbara out of her trance. She expected the worst when he came to her and unfastened her handcuff from the table. She couldn't believe her ears when she heard him say in a fairly normal tone that she could go to the toilet. "Then I'll take you to my office, where you'll stay until I need you again."

The hope that flared up was immediately extinguished when he continued: "And that's tomorrow, as soon as Hakon arrives here." He rubbed his hands with pleasure and nodded at her in a cheerful way. "Our tête-à-tête will soon be a party for three. You and Eriksson will be the showpiece of my collection. I will entertain you to the best of my ability. Word of honor."

He raised her roughly by her arm, but the double meaning in his words did not escape Barbara at all.

With the help of the stock prod VanderBeek drove her into the hall with stuffed animals. She felt a great affinity with the calf, stumbling stiff and wooden in front of him. She was a dead person walking, she thought despondently.

< 09.28

With his legs stretched out, arms crossed and chin on his chest, Russ was perfectly balanced to reflect on the series of events of the past 24 hours. If someone had told him that morning that Barbara would be snatched from under his nose and he would have been involved in an undercover operation less than 24 hours later, he would have laughed heartily. However, it had turned out to be all too true, so that now, in the middle of the night, he was flying to Texas in very special company.

They were going after the leader of Spiderweb and in passing they would save Barbara. Insane. Something like that only occurred in books and films. And then those with whom he was traveling ... He had never seen such outlandish figures before. Just like the very fast helicopter he was in.

A type unknown to him, that despite its high speed produced very little sound. Seen from the outside, it seemed as if the machine had been cast in one piece, and the material it consisted of also felt remarkable. All in all, the whole situation seemed to him to be a strange, surrealistic dream. However, it was a bitter reality. With the support of a number of FBI SWAT teams on the ground, the impending operation would initially be carried out by only five people: Hakon, that redhead and the three brothers. He didn't count himself. Until a few hours ago he had thought that he was good, but after he had read and heard what the quartet was capable of, he knew that he was only an amateur, just good enough to be allowed to go along as a spectator. Even that would have taken some time, because that FBI agent Decker hadn't been eager to involve a civilian in such a risky operation. Because of the fact that the kidnapping had taken place on American soil, the FBI had the last word.

Decker had only agreed after it appeared that he had served as a sergeant in the Marine Corps and Hakon had sworn that he personally was responsible for Russ's safety. Things had gone very smoothly when it turned out that someone from Decker's own department turned out to be an ex-marine of the same class.

After he had signed the necessary papers, including a risk and confidentiality agreement, he was immediately informed of the ongoing operation. He was allowed to see all the files and could hardly believe what he read. During the extensive session afterwards he had listened, speechless.

He had been very impressed by the speed with which Barbara's whereabouts had been traced and the ease with which her liberation was fitted into the existing plan of action to arrest the leader of Spiderweb. That Decker had the most modern equipment at his disposal was clear from the information he presented. An extensive map and razor-sharp satellite and 3D video footage of VanderBeek's ranch, where he had his headquarters.

Everything was mapped out in detail, from a complete list of staff and an overview of all the services used by the cattle farmer, to all the registration information of these companies. There were even secret files from the CIA.

It had been such an overwhelming mountain of information, that his head was still spinning with it.

A certain Sandra had collected and analyzed all the data and filtered out eight staff members who, according to her, were VanderBeek's bodyguards. The files of these men were thick as your thumb. A diverse group of serious criminals and mercenaries, who considered violence a pastime.

There was even film footage of these cowboys doing shooting exercises and showing how they were taught in man-to-man combat. Despite this bodyguard of eight hard guys plus a foreman who turned out not to be a sweetheart either, Hakon felt that he and his team could make it. Russ could only hope that Hakon, who appeared to be such a slippery, Italian soap opera character rather than the director of UNBI, was right. The way he walked now, he didn't exactly inspire much confidence. The facial expressions and body language were so different from those of Hakon himself that he had to do his best to remember that Mario was actually Hakon.

The act was perfect and Russ had the deepest respect for it. Until today he had always been jealous of the friendship between Hakon and Barbara, but now he was more than grateful that she had such a good friend. Not only capable, but also influential. Without him he wouldn't be here now. As soon as they were in the air, Hakon had updated him on what he expected as soon as they had landed.

They would undoubtedly be taken care of and searched by VanderBeek's bodyguard. That's why they had all been well equipped with various weapons, which were meant to be found. That would give them the feeling that they were in control.

The real weapons were Tony, Tjan and Arda, Hakon had said. Because he had read their files, Russ had immediately believed him. No one would expect that someone like Tjan, who in his slothful pajamas seemed to be a very obese patient, was in fact a great powerhouse. One lump of muscles, hard as steel, fast and lethal if he had to be. His thin brother Tony, on the other hand, was hardly noticeable.

The most remarkable thing about him was the intricately knotted leather vest that he wore over a simple cotton shirt. It was skillfully decorated

with a variety of matt-gloss metal plates.

Nothing about this eccentrically dressed figure suggested that he was a master of an ancient Korean martial art.

He had read in Tony's file that his grandfather had breathed new life into this almost extinct sport and had added new attack and defense techniques to it. This new variant was only taught to the very talented, upon invitation. Tony, who had achieved the highest grade, was perhaps even faster and more deadly than his massive brother.

In contrast to those two, Tim, the tallest of the trio, regularly made him laugh. With that comical British attitude, that sticky accent and his dry humor, you'd more likely consider him a stand-up comedian than the technically gifted virtuoso he was in reality.

He possessed a list of licenses for machines with which you could drive, sail and fly. On a social level the man was a stiff rake, but everything that had any kind of mechanism or engine, he handled effortlessly.

The only woman in the group was called Arda. Judging by her figure, she must spend many hours in the gym every day. Graceful and agile, she reminded him most of a cougar who kept an eye on everything with her glistening green cat's eyes. He wasn't afraid of her at first, but he didn't want to get too close to her.

He had the strong feeling that she was able to attack without any warning. Hakon hadn't said much about her, but "when it came down to it, she stood her ground," he had said. He had emphatically added that, once they had landed, Russ had to stay behind the foursome at all times, so that they had their hands free. Hakon expected that only he could get close to VanderBeek.

If they were separated, Tony would take the lead. Although everything looked good on paper and he trusted the capable company in which he found himself, Russ continued to worry. What would happen if a choice had to be made between arresting VanderBeek or saving Barbara?

While he was dozing away to the rhythmically humming sound of the helicopter, he knew one thing for sure: he was going to liberate Barbara and as soon as he had her in his arms, he would never let go of her again. He would kiss her until she saw blue.

< 09.29

“Good morning, sir. Have you had enough of your short night’s rest?”
“Good morning too, Sandra,” replied Lord MacMarkland, who entered the tower room with a cup of tea in his hand.

On the GRID the clock indicated 07.37 AM and on the monitors he saw that Sandra was watching several places. “After spending more than twenty hours here yesterday, I fell asleep like a baby, but those few hours were enough. We are ready for it.

Start with an oral status report.” He went to his seat and put the cup next to him on the console. “As you wish, sir.

Point 1.

The helicopter left on time and they will land at the ranch in exactly 5 hours and 23 minutes at 08.00 hours local time.

Point 2.

FBI agent Decker has kept his word and with our help there is a column of SWAT teams on their way to the designated location. They will reach their base just before Hakon’s arrival. As expected, the local sheriff is on Spiderweb’s payroll.

As soon as he entered the command vehicle, his smartphone was scanned. The information thereon gave enough clarity. I prevented him from informing VanderBeek about the heavy police effort so close to the ranch.

Agent Decker convinced him that a violent motorcycle gang would be arrested and told him that he would receive full recognition for it. It comes down to the fact that without realizing it, he is actually a prisoner of agent Decker. He will no longer pose a threat to us.

Point 3(a).

The spiders that Onawa has placed in the switchboard of the ranches telecommunications center are doing a fine job.

We have taken full advantage of the fact that it is a device supplied by your company Markland. We can follow every form of communication

effortlessly. At the ranch, contact is maintained with smartphones of which the traffic is routed via a local wireless network.

As predicted, VanderBeek will welcome Hakon. Apparently he doesn't want unnecessary witnesses, because he has sent all the regular staff away. The only ones left are VanderBeek's bodyguard, foreman and a handful of other security guards, including two men at the main gate. The domestic workers were transported by bus to a hotel in the town of Broetstheel.

The other cowboys have been ordered to stay with the herds on the prairie until further notice. Because of a large cattle market in the area, most of them are located near the ranch.

Point 3(b).

Onawa once again examined the ranch and outbuildings, but there was no way to enter the part where VanderBeek and his foreman have their offices. Since Onawa has not been able to find a trace of Barbara anywhere, she must be there or underground.

Based on what Onawa discovered in the extension of the office on the south side of the main building, we can assume the latter. She has discovered a lot of tubes in the grass that protrude just above it in a square pattern. Unfortunately these tubes are constructed in such a way that we can't use them. To make sure that one of the animals can crawl through them, special tools are needed and Onawa doesn't have them with her. Although the tubes are much narrower than usual, it is clearly a construction to let light through. So there is a space under the ground.

It's also the location where we picked up the distress signal from Barbara's smartphone. The device then disappeared from our radar. Hakon has been informed and it is up to him to ensure that VanderBeek takes him to this underground space.

Point 4,(a).

In The Hague, Lémarc has everything under control. An extensive report has been made for UNBI from all the information provided by Casanova's accomplices. I will actively supervise the detection and arrest of a possible second mole.

Point 4(b).

Having arrived at this point, I must inform you that I still do not have an answer to ...'

Accustomed to the fact that Sandra was able to solve the most complex problems in no time at all, the lord almost choked on his tea. "You, Sandra?", he asked unbelievably. "How does it exist? What exactly is the problem you're struggling with?"

Sandra's voice, which had been silenced as soon as the lord interrupted her, continued: "I haven't been able to figure out the exact meaning of that short message with the instruction to activate the computer that was sent to Poko. It's a fact that the contacted smartphone is switched on, and in the computer under Poko's desk, but that's all.

The computer in question, a desktop, is not turned on, which will be difficult, as it is not connected to the mains. This type also has no extra space for its own power supply. The battery of the mobile phone it contains is too weak and cannot be used as a power source either. Lémarc's conclusion that it is probably being used as a storage device is the only logical one for the time being. As soon as I know more, you will hear about it.

Point 5.

Russ. You were not very enthusiastic about involving him, but further analysis shows that it is the best option. It is not possible to predict what will happen when VanderBeek is eliminated. Although her bio-profile looked good during the brief activation of her smartphone, we don't know what condition Barbara is in at the moment. The fact that a good friend like Russ is taking care of her, so that Hakon doesn't have to worry about it, is a good choice."

Sandra's voice was silent as Lord MacMarkland stood up. "Thank you, Sandra. It's good that everything is firmly in place. It will stay calm for a while, I think. A good opportunity to have breakfast with my family. If nothing special happens, I'll be back around one o'clock."

With the empty cup dangling from his little finger, the lord turned his back on the GRID and walked towards the door. "Enjoy your meal, sir."

< 09.30

Russ thought he had just closed his eyes when a familiar voice pulled him out of his restless sleep.

In his headphones he heard Sandra say that the bird could be launched. He must have slept longer than he thought, because he was as stiff as a plank.

He slapped the joint of his bad knee with a firm hand and was about to ask what Sandra had meant when he saw Tjan opening the lid of the wooden crate, which had been standing between their feet the entire journey. He looked into it and saw to his amazement that it contained a large bird. A beautiful golden eagle.

While Tjan was lifting the bird out of the crate, Russ felt the helicopter slow down. Moments later the machine remained still in the air, buzzing softly. With a click, the remotely controlled door next to Russ

opened up and fresh air flowed into the helicopter.

Tjan pushed the crate out of the way with one foot and in amazement Russ saw him throw out the dead bird. The poor animal fell down like a brick.

He looked at Tjan and wanted to ask what the hell was the point of this, when he saw the bird majestically unfold its broad wings, gain height with a few mighty flaps and soar out in front of them.

Hakon poked him, winked and said: "Beautiful, isn't it? Just like the real thing." Russ had to admit that this was indeed the case, but did not understand anything about it. However, before he could ask Hakon for clarification, he heard through his headphones that the SWAT teams had taken up their position and were waiting for instructions. Immediately alert, Hakon asked Sandra what the situation was like on the spot. Through the headphones Russ heard her say: "The reception committee, consisting of VanderBeek's bodyguard and his foreman, is ready. It is unclear where the rancher himself is staying. Onawa is hiding in the large stable and is ready to help if necessary. Visibility is excellent."

Everyone around him burst out laughing, but what exactly was the joke, Russ completely missed. The feeling of being a strange duck in this special company was just as strongly present.

While he heard Tjan's knuckles cracking and he saw Arda doing stretching exercises, Hakon's voice sounded: "Just a quarter of an hour and then we'll be there."

Whatever happens, don't forget to address me as Mario!" The door whizzed shut and the helicopter flew on.

< 09.31

While the helicopter continued the last part of the flight over the endless prairie with its huge herds of cows, Hakon was going through the final details on his tablet pc.

He watched the live stream the eagle made of the ranch and saw the reception committee standing by between the main building and the stable. Satisfied he noted that there was more than enough room for Tim to land. As he leafed through the photos of their adversaries and made sure to remember their faces well, Sandra's voice entered his right ear.

"As you requested, I checked your bio-profile through your implant. The tingling itching in your right hand does not indicate a possible heart condition, as then you would have to have this feeling in your entire right arm, with pain radiating from your chest. You have said that the color and contour of the sign on your hand has not changed and that this itching only follows the line. Nowhere in the world is this particular symptom described.

The only article I found dates from the beginning of the 19th century and is about the Mayans. People with such a sign on their right hand, could communicate with their ancestors. This phenomenon has apparently never been investigated further, for I can't find any other publication about it. I do advise you to visit a dermatologist, because it might also indicate skin cancer."

He thanked Sandra, tapped the overview screen and saw that she was watching several places. In The Hague, the CINEMA had already been flooded with staff and he saw Lémarc and Jean looking around like birds of prey, looking for signs of the mole. In the window that showed the

information from Amsterdam, he saw Marilyn and Joost sitting next to each other.

Saundra had apparently informed them that he was looking at them, because Joost looked straight into the camera and put both thumbs up. Marilyn, who was concentrating on operating the joystick used to control the eagle, only smiled for a moment.

Chuckling he left them alone, to see how things were in Scotland. The window opened and Hakon immediately heard Lord MacMarkland's voice in his right ear.

"Well, Hakon. The last mile. As far as we know, everyone has been informed and there are no signs that VanderBeek and the rest of Spiderweb suspect anything. As soon as you set foot on the ground, the worldwide arrest warrants go out to detain the remaining group of Spiderweb followers. After Saundra discovered how VanderBeek communicated with his people, our digital miracle has traced hundreds of accomplices. The counter is now at 731.

If Spiderweb has an emergency protocol, this will not work, as Saundra will make sure that no member can contact anyone else. Our scenario is going according to plan. It only remains for me to wish you every success." As they said goodbye to each other, Hakon heard Saundra's voice in the background. "Sir, I've discovered something that requires immediate action." However, Tim had already started the landing, so Hakon had no time to pursue it.

Knowing that he would be informed immediately if it was essential to their operation, he turned off his tablet pc and mentally braced himself for the challenge that lay ahead. Tim approached, as they had planned, flying diagonally, causing a huge cloud of sand to be blown into the air during the landing. In his mind, Hakon complimented Tim on the barely perceptible bump with which he landed the helicopter. Hakon knew that the sand cloud made them temporarily invisible to the reception committee. It was a tactical advantage that they absolutely needed. It would also irritate the other party, which could be an advantage.

Before Tim opened the door, he let everyone know that as soon as they got out, they should keep their eyes closed and hold each other. He himself would lead the way. Because of the special lenses Marilyn had

made for him, he wouldn't be bothered by the swirling sand and dust. He took a case out of his inner pocket, took out the glasses, and put them on.

“Tim. The time has come. Open up.”

COWBOYS AND INDIANS

< 10.01

In the CINEMA, Lémarc saw that the clock on the large screen indicated two more minutes. Almost time for the show. Around him the murmur slowly became louder.

Jean came to stand with him. “There you go, except for the two sick people, everyone is inside. All the smartphones have been checked and no phones are lying around anywhere. To date, no one has been near the smartphone in Poko’s computer. Looks like it’s a false alarm. What do you think, Lémarc?” Lémarc shrugged his shoulders. “I can’t say anything meaningful about it, Jean. We simply don’t take any chances. No one goes in or out.”

He looked around the room with a searching look. “Where is Pierre anyway? We need him for the buttons.”

Jean pulled down the corners of his mouth disdainfully. “Huh? He had to do something for his girlfriend. You know, that Sandra. That kid is driving me crazy. It’s Sandra this and Sandra that. The boy is totally obsessed with her.”

He shook his head and continued: “But I don’t know what she asked him. We had just finished the check when he stared blankly ahead for a moment. Two seconds later he turns around, says to himself: ‘I will, Sandra,’ and runs away.” “What the...” With difficulty Lémarc swallowed the rest. “By ‘everyone in the CINEMA’ I mean e-ve-ry-one. Since when does that not include Pierre?” Pissed off, he asked Jean to go and look for him immediately.

With a raised voice, to be audible above all the talking, annoyed, he called for silence. As if he had flicked a switch, it was suddenly dead quiet.

“It must have surprised everyone that yesterday we put the investigation into Spiderweb on HOLD, that I spent the night here in the CINEMA together with Jean, Pierre and Holger and that we only opened the door half an hour ago. After Hakon had informed us of the complexity and the major risks of his work in the final phase, this method was decided with my and Jean’s agreement.

The purpose of the undercover operation is to detect and arrest the leader of Spiderweb and at the same time rescue Barbara Kronkite from his hands.

On the main screen you can see the clock counting down.

This indicates when the action is about to start. We will be able to watch the entire operation live, as the images will be sent directly to us.” Lémarc saw the clock indicating two more seconds and sat down.

“Pay attention, people. The time has come.”

The clock jumped to zero and the sound of a helicopter filled the CINEMA through the speakers with increasing volume. The screen showed an image of a building that was slowly zoomed in to from a great height.

At the bottom of the screen a text bar started to run, giving a summary of the operation ‘Non quod videtur’.

< 10.02

To her own major surprise, Marilyn had slept better and longer than she had expected. She had been working with Sandra until late at night, worried about Onawa, who was in the middle of the lion’s den. Around two o’clock Joost had brought her a cup of tea and implacably sent her to bed.

There must have been something in the tea, because she had fallen asleep like a log and slept until late. Cursing everything and everyone for having lost so much precious time, she had jumped into the shower. Together with the last remnants of sleep, the warm water had washed away all the annoyance. Once she had had breakfast, or rather brunch, she had felt remarkably fit and well rested. After going through all the developments with Sandra, she was now looking at the two central monitors above her workplace. On the left she saw the images that Hakon’s glasses broadcast, while on the other one the images from the bird’s camera were shown. On this one she slowly saw the helicopter and the two groups of men looming out of the dust cloud. The bird hovered about 150 feet above them. At top speed, Sandra and her helpers

processed all incoming data in order to be able to provide their group with all important information immediately.

Everything that took place outside the ranch was already known by now. As soon as the eagle had reached the ranch, she had sent the bird around the building twice.

The recordings were used in addition to the images provided by Onawa earlier. A perfect

3D animation of the entire ranch was made by Sandra and her subroutines. Inside the house itself all rooms were mapped.

Except for the southern part, because the data was missing, the presumed office of Spiderweb's leader and who knows what else.

What Hakon had thought, was in line with practice. They were awaited by the mercenaries, led by Joe, the foreman. If things went as they expected, Hakon would be taken to KSB's office. Hopefully they would soon find out something about Barbara, since they still didn't know exactly where she was. Not in the stables, because Onawa had already combed them thoroughly, so she still had to be somewhere underground.

The short signal from her smartphone indicated that it had to be a large bunker, because they knew from the device that the rancher had travelled a distance of 140 yards before the connection was lost. The bunker had to be not only long, but also deep, because there was also a signal that indicated he had walked up about 11 feet. The bunker probably consisted of two or more floors.

While the bird above the group flew its circles, she adjusted the bird camera a bit and saw the foreman walking to Hakon. Immediately she shifted her gaze to the other monitor and, through Hakon's glasses, looked the man straight in the face.

The shots were shown in razor-sharp detail and she saw every fold of skin on the tawny face, from which the contempt was clearly radiating. Behind her she heard Joost come in, but since Hakon cast his gaze over the so-called cowboys, she couldn't look back.

She stared at the faces that passed by her clearly. Joost said out loud what she was thinking.

“What a nasty face. Exceptionally ugly. The mean cruelty emanates from it. I hope Hakon knows what he’s doing...”

< 10.03

As soon as the helicopter landed and was stable, the doors opened. Tjan was the first to be outside, after which Hakon and the others followed his example. As the dust began to dissipate, Hakon led his group towards the reception committee.

At a distance of 30 feet he had them stop, after which everyone took up his position in a triangular formation.

He himself was in front, with Russ behind him, who was surrounded by the three brothers and Arda.

As the dust continued to dissipate, he heard the doors of the helicopter locking automatically behind them and the blades slowly coming to a standstill.

As he waited quietly in the dissipating dust cloud, he saw the group of cowboys standing in front of them in a semicircle become more and more visible. Some of them were coughing like asthmatics, but all of them had red irritated eyes.

Hakon, who wished them nothing less, took a step forward and shouted: “I’m Mario DiStefano and I’m expected by your boss. I want to see him as soon as possible.”

A big man with a damaged face, who Hakon recognized as the foreman, stepped out of the semi-circle and came to him. He stood in front of Hakon, brought his face right in front of him and looked at him as if he was looking at a cockroach. “Wait a second, slick one,” he said softly. The foreman probably didn’t have the best teeth in the world, Hakon thought. His breath was like a cesspool. He did his best not to show any disgust and kept looking at the man arrogantly.

“I’ll decide when you’re going to meet him, kid. First some checks. You stand quietly and are searched one by one. If anyone moves even an inch, then...” At the same time, two dull thuds sounded.

One of the cowboys had fired his guns, to underline the words of the foreman even more. Hakon felt both bullets skirting along his head and automatically ducked.

From the corner of his eye he saw the shooter and immediately knew who he was. New Billy. The most dangerous of the whole bunch, who got his nickname from the illustrious Billy the Kid because of his shooting skills.

A wanted mass murderer from one of the Balkan wars. Someone who had a lot of blood on his hands. The murder of an entire village, in which many women and children had also died, was only one part of his long list of horrible crimes.

“You see ...”, the foreman continued, “... we are able to take you out before you know it. Do I make myself clear?” He poked Hakon’s chest with a dirty finger a few times.

Hakon, who forced himself to breathe through his mouth, pretended to be quite impressed. He nodded and said, shaking a little: “The message is clear. I’m only here to meet your boss and then we leave immediately.”

Satisfied that the visitor seemed to be impressed, the foreman gave a sign to the smallest of the couple. An Irishman with such bandy legs that two horses could easily fit in between, Hakon thought to himself. He had to do his very best not to laugh.

The troll waddled towards him and began to search him from top to bottom, without skipping a single spot on his body. His friends were treated in the same way, although the man took much more time with Arda. As he knew Arda, Hakon crossed his fingers that she wouldn’t explode. Relieved, he let his breath escape when the man finally left her alone.

Grinning, the guy dropped his gaze on the not inconsiderable heap of confiscated weapons. “Well,” the foreman barked. “Now follow.” He turned around and the group started to move. Surrounded by the mercenaries, they followed the foreman to the main building.

Although the atmosphere was not really grim, not a word was exchanged. The only sound that could be heard was caused by the spurs, which were clinking softly at the ‘cowboys’ every step. The closer they got to the main

building, the more impressed Hakon became by the ranch. It was truly colossal and incredibly well maintained. The striking main building was built of red stones, finished with white woodwork. Around it, a deep veranda kept the walls in the shade.

He could just see that the long driveway split into two about 200 yards in front of the buildings. One part curved and ended up at the various stables, the other continued to the front of the ranch and ended in a roundabout in front of the imposing main entrance.

However, the group was led to the side, where they stopped at a door. Above it there was a sign indicating that this was the champion's room. From Sandra, Hakon knew it was a kind of staff waiting room, with the foreman's office behind it. Although she had not been able to verify this, it could be assumed that his office was connected to the office of Spiderweb's leader.

The foreman opened the wide door and entered the room first. The others followed and Hakon saw that it was a large room, about 25 feet long and 20 feet wide.

Numerous stuffed heads of cattle and horses hung from the walls. Beneath them was a row of chairs. It was indeed a waiting room. On the other side of the room, opposite the outside door, he saw a door and above it a sign with the inscription 'foreman'. So far they had ended up in the right place. He quickly walked to the center of the room. Behind him the other five immediately went to the right and set themselves up in the agreed formation.

Somewhat scattered, they stood with the wall behind them. "Okay," said the foreman.

"The rest of you stay here and you ...", he intimidatingly tapped Hakon on the chest again, "You follow me." As before, the group of cowboys had set themselves up in a semi-circle on the left side of the room. With irritated, red-rimmed eyes, they kept staring at Hakon's friends in a chilly and haughty way.

Surrounded by his noble artifacts, Kingsize Bob had followed the helicopter's landing from behind his immense desk. On the screen of his laptop he had watched the confrontation between Mario and Joe and he had had to laugh at the reaction of that pompous Italian when New Billy had fired those shots. Really a beautiful greeting. He immediately knew that his men wouldn't have any problems with that scum. In other words, nothing to worry about.

Satisfied he leaned back and was now 100% confident that he was dominating again. From now on he would be the puppeteer. Not only here on the spot, but all over the world. He was ready for it. Laptop in front of him, a good glass of cognac next to it and his secret weapon at hand, in other words his smartphone, with which he had activated his extra security even before the helicopter landed.

To the outside world, the ranch was no longer accessible and if necessary, he could always play his trump card in The Hague.

Waiting for Joe to bring the Italian to him, he calmly looked at the magnificent paintings that once belonged to the English family from whom he had taken over the interior.

All noblemen who, just like him, in their time had made the world their own. In contrast to him they were all without exception tall, slender and horribly pale figures. No wonder that the Indians had cursed them as white men, he thought, amused. He himself was also tall, but that was the end of any comparison. He was broad, well-muscled and had a healthy color because of the many outdoor activities. He remained standing in front of the painting of the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

It occurred to him that the tall guy that had come along with Mario, looked a lot like the man in the painting: a Duke who proudly posed with a couple of dead Frenchmen.

The pompous sucker stood there as if he had personally shot a lion, rhino or elephant. With his pale head and weird, long chin. All inbred, he thought. All those British look alike.

Do you find it strange that their empire has been torn down? He looked at the antique pendulum and saw that it was just after eight o'clock. Musing about the British nobility who had so stupidly squandered their heritage, he drank his cognac in one gulp.

< 10.05

The foreman courteously kept the door open for Hakon, but as soon as he passed him, he gave him a powerful push in the back, which almost caused him to stumble. Behind him he heard the door locking mechanism drop into place. A steel door, he registered automatically. He said: "Are you so afraid of your staff that you have to hide yourself behind a steel door?"

Joe's reaction was more intense than Hakon had anticipated and before he knew it, the foreman punched him hard in the stomach. The pain coursed through his body. He bent and gasped for breath. As he slowly tried to stand up, the foreman kept his rancid mouth close to his for the second time. Small splashes of saliva hit his face as Joe barked at him with a grim face: "From now on you don't open your mouth until you're asked something. Capice?" Hakon nodded, quickly took a few deep breaths and almost threw up from the stench that the foreman breathed straight into his face.

He flinched backwards and saw that the room in which he had ended up was about the same size as the champion's room. It did indeed look like the office of a foreman of a large ranch. A desk, a couple of chairs in front of it, 3 filing cabinets on the left side of the wall and next to them a large planning board on the wall on which was indicated with all kinds of colors where the staff were located and what their shifts were.

On the right wall was a huge map of the site, on which all the buildings and fences were clearly drawn. The empty spaces in between were filled with heads of all kinds of small game.

Joe left him standing and walked to the other door in the room.

He pressed the button of an intercom with a screen.

"I've got that slick guy here." Hakon heard a tinny voice answering. An electric lock clicked and the door opened.

Joe grabbed him by his right arm, squeezed as if he expected Hakon to flee and pushed him not exactly gently forward. Joe opened the door

wide. As Joe pushed him through the opening, Hakon saw that it was a thick, double-padded steel door.

Joe gave him another big push, so that Hakon almost tripped over the edge of the deep pile carpet. While he was doing his best to keep his balance, he heard Joe say: "I'm with the boys and have my smartphone with me." His voice was cut off as behind Hakon the door was locked with a double click.

Surprised, he looked at the ground and now knew why his knee felt like it had ended up on a pillow. The deep pile carpet, into which a kind of weapon design was woven, had absorbed the blow very well. Hakon looked around and got up as slowly as he could. Everything he saw was being viewed and analyzed at the same time at different locations.

From the foreman's brightly lit office he had ended up in a room with muted light. For a moment Hakon was confused, because he knew this room. He could swear that he was in the library of his friend Alasdair. For a moment he thought he had been teleported and that the lord would stand up at his desk to offer him one of his famous whiskies. The moment didn't last long, because behind an immense desk a man like a giant stood up from his chair.

In a dark, growling voice, he said: "So, you're Mario DiStefano. You think you can do business with me." He grabbed a file, opened it and beckoned Hakon closer.

The gesture was impatient and impersonal, as if Hakon was too slow a servant. Hakon walked on until he stood in front of the desk and looked straight at VanderBeek. He knew that his glasses transmitted beautiful images to everyone who was watching at the moment.

< 10.06

"Damn," called Jean in The Hague. "I know this guy!" "You're not the only one, Jean," replied Lémarc, who heard the many cries of disbelief echoing through the CINEMA. "So that's the surprise Hakon mentioned yesterday. Well, it's certainly a surprise. No one would have ever

suspected that. Neither did I, when I met him once.” “What?”, squealed Jean, who almost choked on the cake he ate.

He coughed, breathed and ordered: “Tell me.” Lémarc thought for a moment. “It must have been about six years since I was there. At the time, VanderBeek organized a dinner for the local sheriff. I was there because of an investigation and was taken there by the same sheriff, a disgustingly fat guy by the way, and as corrupt as I don’t know what, if you ask me.

The house is as big as a palace. Everything there is huge. VanderBeek himself, the house, the stables and even the horses. I think he breeds a special breed and the motto there is ‘the bigger, the better’. I got a steak on my plate that was as big as...” “Shush,” Jean interrupted the story. “I want to hear what is being said. The best cinema movie can’t compete with this.”

< 10.07

After observing Hakon from head to toe, VanderBeek growled satisfied: “Hmm, yes. You are indeed Casanova’s man. Those glasses are new and you look a little taller because of the elevated shoes you’re wearing.”

He chuckled. “So you eat too much pasta, which has ruined your eyes and because you want to look taller, I know that deep down you’re an insecure man.”

He chuckled again, looked straight at Hakon and suddenly laughed openly. “Now that you’ve been exposed, I can also drop my own disguise. No, I am not the leader of the so-called Spiderweb ...” He paused for a moment and suddenly shouted: “I AM Spiderweb!” VanderBeek gestured that his guest should sit down, sat down at his desk himself and continued: “And yes, I have taken care of Barbara Kronkite.” Hakon sat down opposite VanderBeek and pretended to be extremely surprised.

Of course he wanted to know more, but before he had a chance to open his mouth, VanderBeek continued. “But don’t worry. I can assure you that there will be no trace of her or anything else that can be traced back to me.

Even the press doesn't know that you landed here with your flashy helicopter and your friends. Be assured that you are safer here than in Fort Knox. So let's have your information. It better be good, because if you're just wasting my time, I'll leave you to my men. They know what to do with types like you."

Hakon put his left leg over his right knee, seemed to be tinkering with the heel of his shoe and pulled out a USB stick. "It contains all the information that shows that you are the Spiderweb boss."

He kept quiet and looked at VanderBeek triumphantly. Behind his desk, VanderBeek seemed to be stifling and a watchful look appeared in his eyes.

"And how did you get a hold of it?", VanderBeek asked him coldly.

Hakon shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "Well, quite simple, actually. Because Casanova had worked a little too carelessly, he came to Hakon's attention and the latter found out that an attack would be made on him. He used Casanova's plan to discover and trace your way of communicating.

With the help of a friendly whizzkid, he was able to find out from where you were directing your people.

So he knew the source, but couldn't find out who sent the messages. That's why he came up with the plan to let the attack go ahead and make everyone think that he died in the attack. In reality, he chartered me to go to Texas with him and then to investigate at the place where the messages came from. We would then try to find out where the computer was located by means of a look-through operation. Then we would remove all information that could serve as evidence." Hakon didn't know if it was his imagination, but it seemed that VanderBeek was getting a bit worried now.

"Why you?", he barked briefly. Hakon shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. "I've worked with him undercover before and he wanted someone from outside UNBI." VanderBeek crossed his arms and looked at him in a calculating way. "So both UNBI and Interpol are not aware of this so called look-in operation and Hakon is somewhere around here now."

Hakon nodded. "Yes, that's right. Based on my job I can start an investigation myself and travel freely for it. It was not difficult to make Interpol think that I was in Africa for an investigation, when I actually flew here and at the same time smuggled Hakon into the country on a false passport without any problems. He is in a motel waiting for my signal. He thinks that I am arranging a helicopter and extra people for our operation through the FBI. Yesterday he fully informed me and showed me the evidence he has collected so far. He talked about a fast food chain that is used as a cover and about a small house that is used as a communication hub.

That house must be near here and according to him there is a computer that is operated by someone from here.

It all looked very convincing. He said that there was no data left on the computer in the house, so he wants to look for the computer here at the ranch. He is sure that when he finds this device, he can prove a direct link between you and Spiderweb. While Hakon was showering, I made a copy of the USB stick he showed me.

With this stick he can check if he has found the right computer. Of course he doesn't know that I ...", Hakon pulled a face that expressed both contempt and arrogance, "... have been working for myself for years." He laughed and said confidentially: "Interpol is a lucrative source of information and I have always done good business. Also with Casanova. The last two months I have been collecting information about UNBI and Hakon for him. About two weeks ago Hakon contacted me, informed me about the attack and asked me to help him with his plan. While browsing through his Casanova file, I also came across a schedule of all cash flows between Casanova and his intermediaries, with details of what amounts he received.

I immediately saw that for the information I provided he received much more than I was paid.

That son of a bitch cheated on me in front of me. So I decided to take that greedy dick down. Hakon's plan couldn't have been better. An ideal opportunity to take advantage of.

An additional advantage was that I would be able to deliver my goods directly to the big boss." Hakon made Mario's golden tooth shine with a

big smile on his face. "Hakon wanted to come here anyway. The combination could not have been better.

It seems to me that I have a lot to offer you. Valuable information and Hakon himself on a silver platter."

VanderBeek's chilly eyes stared continuously at the stick that Hakon held up. Without saying a word, he gestured to him to hand over the thing immediately. Hakon bent over and put the stick on VanderBeek's outstretched palm, internally very relieved that the shark had eagerly bitten the bait.

< 10.08

After spending a pleasant, normal and - now that Casanova was no longer a threat - very relaxed morning with his family, Lord MacMarkland had returned cheerfully to his tower room. As Sandra updated him on the ongoing operation, he followed the developments at the GRID. He was extremely pleased to see that the new scenario was going without a hitch.

Especially when Sandra reported that VanderBeek had connected the USB stick. The specially developed software on the stick had ensured that SPY had taken over the laptop in no time at all.

A few microseconds later, a copy of the hard disk was transmitted to Sandra, after which CRYPTO immediately started to search through the digital goo, looking for everything Sandra could use. As long as this process lasted, the laptop would remain blocked and VanderBeek would only see a window with enigmatic content.

As he watched all the developments, he saw that the FBI support forces had received the greenlight and were on their way to the specified location in a cloud of dust.

At the same time, he heard Sandra say: "Sir, I haven't detected any evidence that we've found the right computer, but two very surprising discoveries have surfaced during the analysis of the interior."

< 10.09

While he suppressed the eagerness to shoot the slick spaghetti guy with all his might, Kingsize Bob stuck the stick in a port on his laptop. He was shocked that that slippery son of a bitch possessed information about his communication structure. Worse still, that the jammer of an Eriksson had found out. That should never have happened. How could that have happened at all, he wondered with concern. As long as he didn't have an answer to that question, he was forced to work with the Italian prick. First make sure that Eriksson was lured here. Then he would have every opportunity to persuade both men to share their information with him, to put it neatly. After that, he would activate the secret weapon in The Hague, so that any remains of evidence would be gone for good.

Do not forget to take measures against the retarded IT man, he noted down mentally. The guy had made the mistake of his life. The light on the stick flickered furiously and on the screen he saw something appear. Not what he expected to see. Only a mash of letters, numbers and unreadable signs, which flowed over the display like a waterfall. Was he being fooled? He was furious. "What the hell is this? I can't read anything, I just see a tangle of all kinds of signs."

That rotten Italian sat down as if nothing was going on, he thought angrily. "Ah, that means that your laptop is not the computer from which the messages were sent. I told you that the stick was secure, didn't I? According to Hakon, the files can only be viewed when the IP address of the computer matches the one from which the messages were sent. If this is the case, a window should appear asking for a password.

With all due respect, you claim to be Spiderweb, but I need to see proof of that first. I want to make sure that you are telling the truth, and you can only prove it by putting the stick in the right computer, in the presence of Barbara. Only then will I tell you how to read that information. It goes without saying that this is not free of charge. My fee is \$10,000,000. I have checked your details and this amount should not be a problem for you.

As soon as it is credited to my account, I will tell you how we can get Hakon Eriksson into this office. If you don't want to do business, I'd be happy to leave and let Eriksson do it."

Kingsize Bob was speechless with anger. That dandy, that slick guy, that COCK with his shiny golden tooth was sitting there as if he was king of the world. The fact that the son of a bitch was not being very respectful had by no means escaped him. Oh, man. You bet this little man would regret that.

With his jaws tightly clamped and gripping his desk so tightly that his knuckles went white, he asked calmly: "So I was right that that bitch of a Kronkite was involved with Eriksson. But what the hell did YOU have to do with her?" "Oh, nothing at all, except that Hakon gave her that secret password to unlock those files."

< 10.10

The two groups that had been left behind in the champion's room stood silently opposite each other. The foreman, who had returned without Hakon, had joined his men, after which the semicircle was neatly closed again.

Seemingly quietly waiting, Tony had carefully observed the group that was looking at them threateningly, assessed the risks and devised a plan of attack. First of all, he had carefully examined the double-handed shooter standing to the right of the foreman.

He knew he was a first-class killer who wouldn't hesitate for a second if he was ordered to shoot them. Yet he had already made a mistake by showing his marksmanship prematurely. If he had been the only opponent, Tony would have eliminated him with two of his Kurumaks (*metal plate like a star, used by ninjas and samurai*). Admittedly, the man was fast, but would he be faster than his Kurumaks, which would cut off both his thumbs? Not likely. And without thumbs it would be impossible for the man to shoot. However, the shooter was not alone. He couldn't take the risk, especially with Russ and Tim standing so close.

On top of that, to the left of the foreman was another dangerous subject. A small Italian scoundrel who had been working for a mafia family in New York, until he became too anxious. He had completely disappeared from the radar and had turned up here. A scraggy but unscrupulous villain, who could simultaneously shoot with his right hand and throw a knife with

his left one. These two men were the most dangerous and unfortunately he saw no other solution. He would have to kill them.

On the left side of them were three others. A Chinese, a Spaniard and a Russian. As they were closest to Tjan, his brother should take care of these three. Arda could deal with the remaining two on the other side of the circle. Hopefully their attack would be fast enough to briefly distract the foreman, so that he or Tjan would have the opportunity to take him out as well.

While he unobtrusively checked that everyone was in place, he saw Tjan, who was watching the three mercenaries closely with a bored expression. Although it seemed as if he was half asleep and could almost fall over, Tjan had moved his weight and was in the starting position.

With a beautifully played evil look on her face, Arda stood looking at the ground in a seemingly vacuous way. Tim, in between himself and Arda, was the weakest of the three brothers when it came to fighting. From an early age the guy had had very long limbs, very impractical in man-to-man fighting. He had taught him one kicking technique that, if he could keep enough distance, could take someone out for quite a while.

As far as Russ was concerned, he was not sure.

He had been ordered to stay behind himself and Tjan at all times, but falling in love could make a man do strange things. Understandable, but risky. It looked for all the world as though he was simply moving his fingers nervously as he passed on his plan of attack to Tjan and Arda.

< 10.11

After Mario's careless answer, Kingsize Bob was speechless for a moment. He was furious. So furious that he wanted to jump over his desk and squeeze the throat of that Italian jerk.

That bitch! That bitch of a journalist had been screwing him, him. So she had been working with that Eriksson asshole all along.

His brain was spinning at top speed and he soon saw a way out. The red haze of anger ebbed away.

He took a breath and asked again, calmly: “So you’re sure that this information is only known to you and Hakon and that it’s only on his laptop and this stick?” “Right. In The Hague they also discovered some things, but they didn’t find this explicit link between Spiderweb and you.”

Mario’s golden tooth flashed cheerfully at him.

He growled. “And Barbara has that password.” “Exactly. I tried to steal it from Hakon, but every time I aimed for it, something came up and I didn’t dare to ask openly, so as not to create suspicion. You say she’s here on your ranch, so it doesn’t matter anymore. That lady will cough it up soon enough. I have some tricks for that.”

Kingsize Bob smiled. Not because of what Mario said, but because the man had no idea about his own way of working. “Good. That’s not a problem. I’ll take care of the dollars and you’ll get Hakon and that laptop here. How soon can you arrange that?”

“If you want, today. Once you’ve paid me, I can make sure he’ll be here at your desk within two hours.”

“And you’re also sure that, except for you two, no one knows that Barbara Kronkite is on my ranch?”

The slick guy looked at him as if he had asked him a very stupid question this time.

“Of course not. Before you know it, it would have been published in the newspapers, or even sooner, it would have been sent out into the world via a Breaking News item. It goes without saying that this would have destroyed our operation.”

Yes, thought Kingsize Bob. The man was right. He didn’t have to think long to realize that the situation looked extremely good for him. The money was no problem. He even had it ready for unforeseen emergencies in cash, although that scumbag wouldn’t see a dollar of it. The fact that he had to take him to his bunker was another matter. He didn’t like the idea at all.

Not that Mario would be able to tell anyone, but it would infringe his privacy. The bunker belonged to him. His own private paradise, which no one except his cousin had anything to do with.

Unlike Barbara, who had no idea where she was, he had to play a host for this ass.

However, he had no choice but to take him with him, have Barbara reveal the password and check the stick.

If Mario's story was true, he would have him lure Hakon this way, after which he would put all three of them permanently deep underground. Barbara and her boyfriend would become Adam and Eve and cowboy Pete would be joined by an Italian friend. Perfect. "Okay," he said, resolute. "I need to take you to another part of my ranch. I'll inform my foreman and then we'll go to my computer. You can meet Barbara right away, because she's right next to it." While they were getting up, he said: "But before we go out, I'd like to remind you of my rights." With pleasure, he looked at Mario's dumb-ass head. At lightning speed, he pulled out his Colt from under the desktop, pointed it at Mario's astonished face and, without any hesitation, fired it with a thunderous bang.

< 10.12

In Amsterdam, Marilyn was sitting on the edge of her office chair looking at the images that were coming in through Hakon's glasses. She carefully studied VanderBeek's face.

The rancher, who was now showing a completely different side of himself, had to be a fantastic actor to be able to play such a nice man in public. He looked just as ordinary as she knew him from the TV. Except for his eyes, she thought. They seemed completely expressionless. Wondering where he would take Hakon, she saw that VanderBeek suddenly conjured up a gun and fired it right at Hakon.

The blast thundered through her laboratory.

Because of the shock, the cup of scalding hot tea that Joost had just given her slipped out of her hand, onto her pants.

She jolted out of her chair, which shot backwards like a cannonball over the slippery floor and bumped into something, hard.

Although Joost was just able to grab her and save her from a nasty fall, she bumped her head painfully against the edge of the table and fell to

the floor on her knees.

Joost, who was shocked and worried about her, asked if she could hear him. "Yeah...", she heard herself say in a tiny voice. "Oh, how my head hurts." She rubbed her forehead, moaning. "Hakon? How is Hakon?" Joost pulled her up and while she was trying to use her desk as a means of support, she saw with relief that Hakon was still standing and seemed to be alright.

Joost had returned her chair and willingly she had him put her on it.

While she was wondering what was hissing behind her, she heard Sandra say that she shut down the Creator, because a connection on the pressure boiler had malfunctioned. "As if we didn't have enough problems already," Marilyn mumbled, rubbing her head dejectedly.

< 10.13

After the foreman had positioned himself among his men, Arda had moved her weight unnoticed in order to be able to strike in a flash. And strike she would.

She had to get rid of the aggression she had built up. She was furious and impatient. Furious because of that redheaded Irishman who stood on the far left and irritatingly tapped his fingers on the holster of his revolver while he was looking at her in a tempted way.

The sneaky bastard couldn't know, but she had an old bill to settle with him, because while reading the files she had discovered an extremely important detail in his.

This was the guy who had attacked a friend of hers. This was the bastard who had murdered several women after he had first brutally raped them. Her girlfriend had only survived because she was lucky that the perpetrator was disturbed halfway through his work. Her girlfriend had been saved, but the perpetrator had disappeared without a trace. And now he was standing right in front of her. She was one hundred percent sure it was him, because he had cut his mark in all his victims' bellies... The same as the one he used to mutilate her girlfriend's belly. When she

came across this particular piece of information in his file, a tidal wave of adrenaline had shot through her body.

From the moment she had seen him in person, her anger had increased to such an extent that when it erupted, the 'Steamboat Geyser' (*a geyser in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, USA*) would pale in comparison. The ice-cold rage made her tingle from head to toe and it was high time she let it go.

But that was not the only reason why she was waiting impatiently. To control herself, she thought of meeting Lémarc. The thought of him wouldn't let go of her. Why had this man made such an impression on her, she kept asking herself again and again. And still nothing was happening here. They didn't seem to be getting even a step further. As far as she was concerned, they should immediately disarm that bunch of scum, arrest the rancher and end it.

Then they could all go home, so she could spend the night with Lémarc as soon as possible.

Once that was over, she could forget about him and at the same time win her bet with Marilyn.

In the meantime the minutes seemed to last for hours and the Irishman stood there continually staring at her with pure lust in his eyes. In order to prepare herself spiritually as well as possible for the upcoming action and to let the Irishman notice nothing of her murderousness, she stared sullenly at her toes.

She felt as if it was years later that Tony's fingers began to move next to her. She kept staring down, but followed his finger code, which passed on the strategy, through the corner of her eye.

< 10.14

Hakon had known in advance that he would have to deal with a very dangerous man, but he hadn't expected that VanderBeek would do such a thing. The madman had suddenly grabbed a gun and fired so fast that he had stood stiff with fear.

In hindsight that was a good thing, because with a whistling sound the bullet had flown close to his head and it wouldn't surprise him if he had a second parting in his hair now.

While the bang was still reverberating and the irritating powder vapor was spreading, he realized that VanderBeek could shoot almost as fast as New Billy. With one difference though. Before he had fired the gun, he had briefly shrugged his shoulders. Still recovering from the shock, he made a mental note of this.

"Now," said VanderBeek, keeping the weapon pointed at Hakon.

"The rights I was talking about is the law that has applied since my great-great-grandfather first entered this country and is based on the most famous law of the Wild West, namely the law of the fittest.

And that law still applies here, because I am the one who owns this Colt. With this revolver, a Colt Walker Model 1847 caliber .44, the largest and most powerful black powder revolver ever made, the foundation for my dynasty was laid in 1850.

My great-great-grandfather claimed his right to this piece of land at the time. A nice piece of land, which was assigned to him for his services as an officer.

His claim was legitimate, yet the Indians who had set up their camps there would not acknowledge it.

They continued to obstruct, resist and do a lot of damage, until my great-great-grandfather shot the chief right through his heart with this weapon. Then the misery was over."

Hakon, who was still thinking about how to deal with this dangerous madman, had no choice but to listen half-deafened to VanderBeek shouting about his ancestry. The fact that the rancher wasn't completely sane, was obvious when the man continued to speak with an attitude that showed pure egomania. "Look, here you see my great-grandfather standing."

VanderBeek pointed to a painting that hung behind him. It represented a group of Indians with a big man standing between them, with his head and shoulders towering above the group. "This painting was based on one of the first photographs taken in the Wild West. The photo and even

the camera with which it was made are in my possession and are part of the world that I have created. I look just like him and, according to tradition, I am as much a pusher as he is. That's in our genes."

VanderBeek looked at Hakon so coldly it gave him goose bumps.

"We are about to do business. If you keep your promises, you will receive your money. If not, you will regret it."

VanderBeek grabbed the cell phone that was on his desk, pressed a button and was immediately connected.

Because Hakon was close by, he could easily listen in. He heard the foreman report in a raw voice. VanderBeek asked if everything was under control, nodded at the affirmative answer and ordered: "Nice. You can clean up the trash, put the helicopter in stable 'G' and disassemble the thing."

< 10.15

Because of his slim build, Tony knew, he was generally underestimated by everyone.

That was also the case this time. None of VanderBeek's bodyguards paid any attention to him. He didn't make them any wiser than they were and unobtrusively checked that Arda, Russ and his brothers had not fallen out of their roles.

Just like him, before they had flown to Texas, Hakon had given them a tiny tick-like device in their ear. They had had to lie on their side for 10 minutes to allow the thing, which had tickled its way down, to nestle against the eardrum.

Through this 'tick' Sandra could provide them with vital information and they could all follow the conversation between Hakon and VanderBeek live. The shot came as a surprise. Sandra had adjusted the sound of it, but nevertheless Tony wanted to know Russ and Tim in particular had not betrayed him. He could rest assured.

Russ stood stubbornly in front of him and Tim was still standing calmly in place with a smug expression on his face. He moved his fingers to let

them know that the attack was about to start. And he was right, because a few minutes after they had heard the shot, the foreman was called. Their advantage was that he had no idea that the conversation was passed on, crystal clear, to the five pairs of ears opposite him.

By the time his boss disconnected, Tony had already picked a Kurumak from his shirt with each hand and thrown it at the double-handed shooter.

Before anyone could react, the man lost his left thumb, while the second Kurumak cut his carotid artery, causing a fountain of blood to suddenly spurt right into the foreman's face.

In the meantime, Tony had thrown two more Kurumaks, which hit the Italian, who was on the other side of the foreman, in exactly the same way. While the front man was sprayed with powerful, warm blood from both sides, Tony threw Kurumaks five and six, cutting off the remaining thumbs of the two men, who were immediately and conclusively eliminated.

As his victims fell to their knees screaming, Tony saw that next to him Tjan had disarmed the Chinese and the Spaniard with the same speed.

Both guys were lying unconscious on the ground with their wrists shattered.

The third target, the Russian, did not get a chance to defend himself.

The man literally had no way out, because Tjan was holding his feet pinned with his elephantine weight, while at the same time he almost squeezed the poor guy in half with his free arm.

A moment later, this one too lay next to his colleagues, with several broken bones.

He turned towards Arda, but a pistol was already being fired in that direction. Arda!

Relieved he saw that she was fighting with that reddish Irishman. Her second opponent, however, was staggering, looking down with his mouth open. Tony instantly understood what must have happened. The man had wanted to shoot, but hindered by the couple fighting next to him, he had shot himself in the foot. Tony, who wondered why Arda, with an almost demonic face, hadn't already neutralized her target, went for it.

While Arda almost carelessly gave the man a kick in the stomach in between, he tapped him briefly, but hard against his neck. Like a sack of potatoes, the man fell on the floor. The Irishman, who had lost his mainstay, collapsed as a result. Tony was horrified to see how Arda mercilessly kicked him in the nuts, after which she deliberately gave him another series of destructive kicks. Tony had never seen her like this before.

However, there was no time to think about it, for at the same time he saw that the foreman was grabbing his weapons. Tjan stormed at him. And then things went wrong. When his brother stepped into the bloody mess, he went down. Instead of grabbing the foreman's wrist, he now slid in front of him and floored Tony himself in passing. Red-stained, they both slid a little further. The foreman, who had come after them, pointed his gun at Tjan. Fired up, he shouted, "This will teach you! Filthy chink!"

< 10.16

While leaning against the wall, Russ moved his weight every now and then to keep the blood circulation going. He wondered how on earth he could have agreed to Hakon's plan.

The guys facing them looked really life-threatening. And they were also very much in the majority. Did Hakon really know what they had started?

Would that gadget in their ears really be such a big advantage? Listening to the voices of Hakon and VanderBeek, even the beautiful eyes of the stuffed horse's head next to him seemed to mock at their insane venture. Hakon may have assured him that Arda, Tjan and Tony would be fine, but now that he was looking at the superiority against him again, he had his doubts.

He was shocked when suddenly a gunshot sounded in his ear. Relieved that Hakon had not been murdered, he looked at the foreman, who was called by VanderBeek a little later.

Suddenly all kinds of things happened at once. He saw the two guys who had been standing next to the foreman go down, bleeding heavily. Before he could blink his disbelieving eyes, three more fell.

A range of filthy smells penetrated his nose and if that wasn't enough to make him sick, he heard the unpleasant sound of breaking bones. Cries of pain drew his attention and with one hand in front of his mouth he saw Arda dishing out one kick after another. She fought so fast that the two guys with whom she had a problem would certainly be defeated by her.

With Tony's help, these two also lay motionless on the floor in no time at all. Russ's brain could barely grasp what his eyes were seeing.

After the attack, which had taken place at lightning speed and lasted one minute at the most, Tony, Tjan and Arda had eliminated eight opponents.

The only one left standing was the foreman. The blood dripped out of his hair and given the huge red puddle in the middle of which he stood, the men who had stood next to him were dead. The man shook his head, looked around and grabbed his weapons. Russ opened his mouth to warn the others, but saw that Tjan had already seen the danger.

The massive Asian moved faster than Russ ever suspected and raced towards the man. Russ, who had played at top level for several seasons, saw it immediately.

His brain automatically registered Tjan's footwear. No studs. The fat one went down. No doubt. He didn't even have to look to know he was right, although Tjan slipped so fast that he also tackled his brother Tony. The foreman followed them with a drawn pistol.

Without thinking, Russ gathered all his strength, took off and took a huge pike dive.

With all his weight behind him, he struck the foreman, who was thrown against the wall like a rag doll.

The foreman had all the bad luck in the world. It was precisely the stuffed head of a Texas Longhorn, the champion bull of 1999, that became his downfall.

The animal's enormous right horn had just the right angle to pierce his shirt and cut through the back muscles without encountering any significant resistance, eventually ending up with the rock-hard point in a fat heart valve.

< 10.17

Sitting alone high in his tower room, Lord MacMarkland looked at the images that came in through Hakon's glasses on the GRID.

His admiration for Hakon's courage increased by the minute, because now that he was listening to their conversation, he understood very well that KSB did not have any good intentions.

The man had finally showed his true nature and turned out to have a dangerous, narcissistic lust for power.

Although it was more than clear to the lord that the rancher was mentally ill, he was still taken by surprise when the man suddenly pulled out a gun and shot at Hakon.

He fell out of his chair in terror. Heavily panting, he clapped on to the armrests and, to his great relief, noticed that Hakon had not been hit. KSB wasn't just crazy, he must have completely lost his mind. Worried to death he heard him threaten Hakon.

Of course they hadn't been so naive as to assume that everything would go smoothly, but no one could have foreseen that they would have to deal with such a completely frenzied psychopath.

He bit his lip with frustration. His people were all alone. He could do nothing but stand by and watch. How Hakon managed to stay so calm was beyond his comprehension.

Through Hakon's glasses he saw that KSB was picking up a mobile phone and he then heard him order his foreman to take care of Mario's company.

Then the rancher walked back to his desk with a face as if he had made the best deal of the day. He sat down calmly, didn't even seem to see his visitor anymore, and ... did nothing? On the screen, KSB seemed to stare straight at him in silence. With an uncomfortable feeling, Lord MacMarkland looked at his face, which did not show any expression. It was downright creepy.

He also had no idea what would happen to their friends, and sick with anxiety he heard Sandra's voice penetrate his thoughts. What exactly had she said? Had he heard correctly? He must have misunderstood and

asked: "Hold on, Sandra. Do you want to repeat the last two remarks about that weapon and that painting? I think I misunderstood you."

< 10.18

Apart from the steady ticking of time, it was dead quiet in VanderBeek's office. Hakon was facing a riddle. After the rancher had given his short disgusting order, he had walked right past him. Without further ado, he had sat down at his desk.

VanderBeek didn't even seem to see him anymore. Because Hakon had absolutely no idea what was going on in the man's head, he had remained standing just in case. For the time being, he thought it best not to attract attention.

Although he studied him attentively, he had absolutely no idea what state of mind VanderBeek was in.

However, if the man knew that his bodyguard was being disarmed right now, he wouldn't be sitting so stoically, Hakon thought confidently. He was confident that Tony, Tjan and Arda would make short work of VanderBeek's mercenaries. Luckily the sound insulation was perfect. Of what was happening next to this room, nothing could be heard at all.

Minute after minute VanderBeek stayed in his strange trance, until abruptly he got up. Apparently he had made a decision and grunted: "Okay. That's it." He pointed to the foot of the chimney. "Stand on that plate and spread both hands against the top."

Hakon nodded that he had understood and obediently stood against it with his face forward. VanderBeek stood right behind him and painfully prodded his back with the barrel of the gun. He felt that the man was bowing slightly towards him. A very good opportunity to disarm him, he thought. Too bad it came too soon. He could only take action if he knew where Barbara was.

On the left-hand side of the moulding was a stuffed parrot and from the corner of his eye he saw VanderBeek do something with it. He felt a slight jolt, after which the chimney started to move.

For a moment he had the feeling that the room was spinning, but he soon realized that it was the chimney itself that revolved around its center. It became pitch black for a moment, after which they suddenly stood in a brightly lit corridor.

< 10.19

Tired but satisfied, FBI Special Agent Jerry Decker was waiting in the command car. It had taken some effort, but he had succeeded. Except for himself, the purpose of the hastily set up mission was kept secret from everyone, which nobody had appreciated.

His lieutenant had walked around with a head like a thundercloud and had told him that the local sheriff had arrived. After having helped the corpulent man into the car, he hadn't exactly quietly slammed the door behind him.

Jerry understood him and knew full well that this total secrecy did not help morale. Nothing could be done about it however, as for safety reasons he had little choice.

He had graciously offered the sheriff a seat and a bottle of water. The man had looked like he needed both urgently. Puffing and panting the man sat down.

He had pulled a huge, once white handkerchief out of his pocket, with which he had extensively wiped his sweaty red head. Jerry had therefore had plenty of time to observe the man. According to Hakon's contact, that Saundra, the fat man was as corrupt as it could be. From the first day he held the position, he would have swept all kinds of excesses and obscure business of VanderBeek's staff under the carpet. Jerry, who at first didn't know if he could believe everything, wouldn't have taken any chances anyway. If the man was innocent, he would be safe enough here. If he was indeed corrupt, he wouldn't have a chance to betray anything.

Amused and a somewhat pitying he had watched the sheriff as his eyes, sunk in thick layers of fat, inspected the interior of the command car suspiciously.

His big belly had vibrated enthusiastically when he demanded to know in a high-pitched voice what all this meant. Jerry had faked confiding in him and told him a wonderful story about a biker gang they wanted to arrest today.

Some employees of VanderBeek worked with them, so they would also be arrested. The sheriff was sweating heavily when Jerry had told him all this.

In a penetrating tone he had explained to Jerry that Mr. VanderBeek should be informed immediately, because as their employer he was closely involved. A

nother course of action seemed unthinkable to him. Turning his corpulent body in all directions, the sheriff had pulled off the weirdest antics to pick up a signal with his mobile phone. This had been enough confirmation for Jerry.

Sandra was right. This man was indeed corrupt. Without revealing any of his thoughts, he had agreed with the man that it was very annoying that he couldn't connect. That was hopeless anyway, Jerry thought a little entertained, because with the cooperation of Hakon's people all communication had been taken over by the higher authorities.

He had told the sheriff to keep trying. While the sheriff was working tirelessly on it, the liaison officer had come in with the message that the starting signal had been given. Together they sat in the front, where Jerry had shown him the route to follow.

Not much later the column had started to move. It was only when they were on their way that Jerry had informed his colleagues about the purpose of the mission.

< 10.20

Shaking from the adrenaline release, Russ was lying right up against the foreman's body. Slowly his heart calmed down and he became aware that the other was dying. He felt him weakening and saw the light in his open eyes extinguish. Oh, God. He had not wanted this, he thought over and over again.

He shuffled away from him on all fours, so that the body was no longer supported. It collapsed, with the last breath leaving the half-open mouth in an elongated, ruthless burp. The air that was released was worse than that in a crypt, and in the already terribly smelly room it became too much for Russ.

Suddenly he threw up all the contents of his stomach. At once he felt a lot better, although the guilt continued to tease him. He crawled away from the dead foreman and the sour puddle of vomit and gratefully grabbed Arda's extended hand. Her emerald green eyes glistened as she pulled him up. "Come," she simply said.

He followed her elegant figure and thought about how misplaced she seemed here. On the floor of the champion's room was a large pool of blood.

The two cowboys lying in the middle of it didn't move. A long, streaky slide ran like a red carpet away from it. He could simply taste the coppery taste that hung in the faint air.

In fact, it was so overwhelming that his fillings hurt. None of their opponents were standing anymore.

Just like Arda, Tim in his three-piece suit didn't seem to belong here at all. Tjan, on the other hand, looked as if he had taken a dip in an abattoir.

Tony, who had been knocked over by his brother, looked a little better. From the front, at least.

From behind it was a different story. Thick, bloody strands ran from his waist to his heels. Both of them seemed not to care.

The two of them walked quietly between the cowboys. Because Tjan's massive stature kept getting in the way, Russ couldn't see exactly what Tony was doing, but he knelt down by every groaning figure. Then he did something with his hand, only to get up again a little later. All the cowboys they went by, stayed still. Russ was horrified. Were they calmly trying to kill them?

Before he could go for him, he was grabbed by Arda, who had apparently read his mind. "Calm down. He is only making them unconscious. No pain. No worse." She held him loosely, until Tony and Tjan were ready and came to stand with them. "Wait a minute," said Tony, tapping open

his belt buckle. Surprised Russ saw him take out a small rectangular stick. "I'll be right back," shouted Tony, as he hastily walked into the foreman's office.

Moments later he appeared again with an opened laptop. With the thing held up, he walked around the entire champion's room. Russ followed him curiously as Tony returned to the foreman's office. "Um, can I know what you're doing?" Tony smiled.

"Look." He pointed at the little stick that was sticking out of the side of the laptop. "That little thing there has made contact with Sandra. Through the camera of this laptop I just showed her the whole champion's room." Tony put down the laptop. "Soon we will be able to see the images that Hakon is transmitting."

While Tony's brothers and Arda joined them, the first recordings appeared. It was kind of weird to see yourself in a completely different perspective, Russ thought. Somewhere in his head these images seemed to collide with his own memories. Strange.

Behind him, Tim pushed past in front of him and pointed to the foreman's office. "Hakon seems to emphasize that door. I think he wants to make us aware of it." While Russ was looking for something special about it, Tony replied: "Exactly. That's what I thought. The door to VanderBeek's office must be of the same kind, I guess." Focused they continued to watch, until they saw how Hakon was pushed into VanderBeek's office.

"Stop, Sandra," said Tony quickly. "I want to take a closer look. Let's go back a bit. Yes. Stop. Tjan, what do you see? What kind of lock is that? Do you think you can unlock it?" Tjan pushed Russ aside as if he were no more than a table standing in the way and for a moment he stared at the screen with concentration. "Yes, looks the same as the other one, double armored. But look carefully.

This one has the hinges in the frame. So there is nothing I can do. It's up to you, little brother." While Russ was wondering what that meant, Tony said: "Okay. You guys keep looking. I'm going to make preparations."

Lord MacMarkland had left KSB's staring face for what it was and listened to Sandra with concentration. So he had understood correctly the first time. It was only thanks to his good upbringing that his jaw hadn't dropped in amazement.

The weapon that was woven into the pile carpet of KSB's office turned out to be the weapon of the noble Blackstuart family, i.e. the ancestors of Tjan, Tony and Tim.

The second surprising discovery was that the Indian chief in the painting that KSB had shown so proudly to Hakon turned out to be a direct ancestor of Onawa. "This is, to say the least, an extremely peculiar coincidence. What are the chances that such a thing exists..." Sandra reacted immediately. "If you wish, I can calculate this for you. I can also tell you that Tony has made contact. SPY and CRYPTO have already started to examine the hard drive there. The images now appear on the GR..." To interrupt her, Lord MacMarkland automatically raised his hand, although he immediately realized that this wasn't very useful. "Wait a minute, Sandra. The probability calculation is not necessary.

However, I would like an analysis of the recent discoveries.

I need to know to what extent this may affect the current operation and whether it makes sense for Hakon to be informed about this."

In the meantime Tony's face had appeared on the GRID for a short while, after which it shifted sideways to make room for the recordings that the webcam made. "Damn", he mumbled softly as he watched the battlefield. In a hurry he counted at least eight bodies that were scattered around like broken rag dolls. "Jeez," he murmured unwittingly, as the image moved along the wall. There was even one on the wall. Wasn't that ... Yes, that was the foreman. How the hell did they manage to throw that big guy against the wall like that? Right against a bull's head, which didn't seem to be willing to let go of the poor devil. He was deeply impressed to see that Tony, Tjan and Russ's clothes were covered in blood, while Tim and Arda were standing there as if they were ready to go to an important business lunch.

How that worked was a mystery to him. Judging by the havoc, he thought it would have been damn hard to believe that it had only taken three men to knock down nine tough guys. Curious as to how that must have taken

place, he saw the wall make way for a door, a piece of wall and a short, gray line, after which Tony's face came back into the picture.

As the lord saw Russ appear next to Tony, he heard Tony ask Sandra to show him the footage of the moment Hakon was taken by the foreman. The monitor next to the one he was looking at turned on. Interested, he wanted to watch, but just then the screen that showed the stable where Onawa was hiding turned black.

Lord MacMarkland was shocked. This was not okay. He already opened his mouth to ask Sandra for clarification, when the screen flickered and Onawa could be seen again. Apart from being filmed from another angle, he couldn't find any difference.

Although he had not asked for it, Sandra had already given him an explanation. "You know that the script takes into account that the ranch is located on the old hunting grounds of Onawa's tribe. The risk of mental pressure has therefore been carefully considered. However, through her tablet pc, Onawa has followed all the developments, so she now knows who almost exterminated her tribe. As soon as she saw this information, she went into a trance.

Apparently so deep that she let go of her tablet pc, causing the connection to be lost. Marilyn is worried and is trying to find a solution.

< 10.22

After Tony had run off to prepare the door leading to VanderBeek's quarters, Tim, Arda, Tjan and Russ stayed together in front of the laptop. Completely forgetting that he wanted to stay away from Arda for a long time, Russ was watching from behind her, tensely. Hakon's glasses contained four cameras and now that he was fully absorbed in the images, it almost seemed as if he was walking next to VanderBeek himself.

The man had taken Hakon through a long corridor, until they stood next to a cowboy, who was guarding a huge door of a kind of safe.

At least, so it seemed.

That cowboy must have been an ice-cold one, Tim thought. He didn't move once and didn't say a word.

To his utter amazement he saw VanderBeek kick the man in the crotch, after which a terrible cry was heard. Almost immediately the safe door opened. "I've never seen such a special way to open a safe before," Tjan sighed. No, Tim thought to himself. Who put up a mannequin with such a lock? Monstrous and inimitably strange. The vault door was only half open when the image froze and the face of Lord MacMarkland replaced it. "Just a small interruption, youngsters. Tim, I'll show you an earlier shot of VanderBeek's office.

Tell me what you think it means." Without knowing what to expect, Tim looked at the carpet that appeared on the screen, after which the entire room was portrayed.

Lord MacMarkland appeared again. "Well?" "Uh, well...", he started carefully. "It seems to me that this interior is very similar to the library in our castle. It dates from the beginning of the 20th century. Does it really look like this on the other side of the door?" Lord MacMarkland smiled. "Absolutely. According to Saundra, the weapon that is woven into the carpet is your family crest." Tim could hardly control his excitement, but didn't want to make any premature assumptions.

"That weapon is indeed ours. I am very surprised that it suddenly appears here. For years I've been looking for the entire inventory of the castle and I've never been able to find any trace of it. Now we find everything has been preserved here completely intact? With all due respect, milord, that seems almost too good to be true." In his mind he saw the old photographs and film fragments that he had studied for so long and would have liked to break through the wall immediately. "Whether this is what you've been looking for for so long, I don't know, Tim.

Still, I thought you should know this before Tony goes to work." The lord disappeared from the screen. "Did you hear that, Tony?", he cried out to his brother, who was standing bent at the connecting door. "Yes, yes. And?" "What happens on the other side when you open that door?" "Oh, nothing special," Tony answered casually. "You'll have enough firewood for the fireplace." "That's not something to laugh about, Tjan," he said

seriously, but his other brother laughed. In his mind, he saw things go up in smoke, until he realized that he was being fooled again. “Can’t you ever be serious?”, he said, annoyed. Tjan grinned widely. “You are always so easily fooled. Probably because of your height.”

Tjan now laughed fully. “You, you ...” Just in time, he managed to hold back. “You’re just jealous,” he ended up lame. As always, it was Tony who soothed the argument. “Tjan, stop it. Just save your energy for later. You’ll need it. And Tim, you have to listen. I have a new kind of explosive that I can target to the exact inch.” He showed a number of laces, which were knotted on his jacket and pants.

“Hey, hey,” shouted Russ. “Are those explosives? And you’re just walking around with them?”

“Can’t hurt,” Tony said calmly. “Look. First I have to put together a lace-up of my vest and a lace-up of my pants and then when I press a button ...”, he pointed to his vest, which was amply decorated with them, “... on it, only then does that combination give a chemical reaction. After that it takes another 10 seconds before the charge goes off. By stretching the laces to a certain thickness, I can determine exactly how deep the reaction in the concrete wall around the door will be.

The door itself will remain in place, but the concrete around it will be eaten away. So nothing will explode at all. As soon as we get approval from Sandra, Tjan can open it for us.”

< 10.23

Absent-mindedly, Marilyn gently rubbed the sensitive lump with one hand. She was very worried about Onawa. She knew exactly what her girlfriend’s attitude meant and had to try to get her out of that trance somehow, before she did anything that would not only endanger the operation, but also herself.

A while ago, Onawa had told her frankly all about her origins, family history and the outstanding blood vengeance towards the murderers of her ancestors.

Although there had been strong suspicions, no one had ever been arrested for it. And now, suddenly, more than a hundred years later, the perpetrator was offered on a silver platter by a descendant of the first rancher. Onawa must have been shocked to her core when she heard VanderBeek tell the story.

Marilyn was not surprised that Onawa had withdrawn into this deep trance. This was her own way of looking for a solution to fulfill her oath of blood vengeance. Because the direct connection had been lost, she had to think of another way to get in touch with Onawa. And as soon as possible.

She ignored Joost, who poked her and reported that the finale was about to start, for she saw a possibility.

She took over the control of the bird, maneuvered it at top speed to the large open barn doors and let it dive into the barn in gliding flight. In front of the horse stall where Onawa was sitting, she let it hang in the air with a flapping motion.

Disturbed by the flapping sound, the horse started to trample back and forth nervously. Concerned, Marilyn saw her sweetheart sitting stiffly upright in the straw with her legs crossed. Her hands clasped the little axe that her grandfather had given her. But what worried Marilyn most was Onawa's rigid face while she was mumbling in front of her. It was too soft to understand. Marilyn didn't know how to attract her attention right now.

The bird had no speech unit. While she was trying to zoom in on Onawa - which was quite difficult as she could not keep the camera completely still because of the flapping - Joost tapped her shoulder. "Look at this." She hid her irritation about being disturbed and quickly looked up. Just now she saw on the screen where Hakon's footage was shown, the images of a huge hall full of animals. For a moment she thought of the story of Noah, then the image became blurred, after which it disappeared completely.

Immediately she realized that an additional problem had arisen. Her brain sorted the priorities.

She unwillingly pulled herself away from Onawa, maneuvered the bird to the stable doors, parked it on top of them and immediately afterwards

asked Sandra why Hakon's glasses were no longer working. "The end of the corridor through which VanderBeek and Hakon walked is 60 foot lower.

Hakon's signal was getting weaker and weaker and from the moment he was piloted into the hall by VanderBeek, it suddenly fell away completely. The most logical conclusion is that the roof of that hall is too thick, or made of a material that interferes with the signal." The cogs in Marilyn's head spun at full speed for a moment before she saw a pattern. She laughed. "I know a solution to that, Sandra."

< 10.24

"Alright," Tony said. "Ready. What about Hakon?" He turned around and looked in amazement at the mesmerized faces of the others, who were staring at the laptop. T

im was apparently the only one who had heard him. "Unbelievable. They have just entered another room, a huge hall. Tony, you have to see this, otherwise you won't believe it. That hall is full of animals." He immediately rejected the idea that Tim might in turn be playing a joke with him - something that would never happen in a million years - and quickly walked towards them.

The others remained standing solidly, so that he could not see the screen properly.

Curiously he grabbed the laptop and turned it a quarter turn, after which the screen flickered, went out, and the speakers only reflected noise.

"What are you doing?", the other four shouted simultaneously. Stupidly Tony stared at the blackened display when he heard Sandra's voice say: "Please be patient. They are now in a room that has extremely thick walls, through which images and sound do not sufficiently penetrate. A solution is being sought. Tony, you can get on with it. They are far enough away from the library. But don't make too much noise. I can't judge how far the sound carries there."

The others, who had heard exactly the same thing through their own tick, followed him closely.

Tony picked a button from his vest and struck it with force on one of the laces he had stuck around the door frame. Because Russ was the only one of the company who hadn't seen this yet, and because he knew for sure that this method was very different from the way Russ must have been used to from his time in the army, he beckoned him closer.

Together they watched how with a lot of hissing and crackling the laces started to glow and grains of concrete started to fall out of the wall.

A little later a neat line about an inch wide became visible along the door frame and it seemed as if someone with a sharp knife had neatly cut the door out of the wall, jamb and all. Tony poked Russ briefly. "Look at that. That's done.

Tjan, your turn." He made way for his brother, who squeezed his massive hands into the gap on both sides. Tjan took a few deep breaths, tightened his muscles, which were bulging enormously, and pulled out the door, frame and all. A sharp smell of gunpowder drifted towards Tony as they all rushed towards Tjan and helped him have the massive colossus hit the ground.

Once he had caught his breath again, Tony was able to stop Tim, who was already heading for the opening, just in time. "Wait a minute, brother. We stay together for the time being. Russ, you bring the laptop with you and warn us when the images are restored." He was the first to step into VanderBeek's library through the gaping hole.

< 10.25

Since the foreman had tripped him into VanderBeek's office, Hakon had gone from one surprise to the next. At first, he had only thought that the rancher, with his antique library, had a peculiar hobby. VanderBeek had soon shot that simple representation out of his head. After declaring his 'rights' he knew that he was not only dealing with a dangerous man, but with an unpredictable psychopath. While he was still thinking about the best course of action to follow, the man had surprised him again.

The chimney turned out to be a secret passageway, which led to a long tunnel. Harshly, VanderBeek had guided him through a long passageway,

regularly poking the gun in his back. There had not been much to see, but he noticed that their path was going down a long way. The corridor had ended at a cowboy who stood on guard. Here VanderBeek turned out to have another surprise in store. A very nasty one. The screaming lamentation echoed in his skull when the psychopath poked him sullenly into the hall.

What he saw after that, you couldn't call a surprise anymore. It was really overwhelming.

He completely forgot for a moment that he had to be Mario, and kept looking with an open mouth. With his antique gun, VanderBeek poked him painfully in the back.

"Walk on, lazy", he growled impatiently. Hakon got another poke. "Pronto." The Italian word conjured Hakon back to earth and into Mario's skin immediately. As they walked on, he didn't know where to look. What VanderBeek had created here was unsurpassingly beautiful. That's what the world must have looked like in the beginning.

He didn't understand how someone who had managed to build something so beautiful, could cause death and destruction everywhere at the same time by means of a simple computer connection.

As Mario, Hakon expressed his admiration. He gesticulated and eloquently gave his host one compliment after another.

He must have unintentionally hit the right note, because the man appeared to have reacted positively to his sycophantry. And that was good. Very good.

Much less good was the fact that, as soon as he had entered the hall with VanderBeek, Sandra's voice had been cut off. The last thing he got was that his friends were busy opening the door to the office. Without Sandra's support, however, he was left to his own devices for the time being, and there was only one thing to do. He had to keep VanderBeek busy at all costs until the communication system was restored. Without a connection, the USB stick was useless and he didn't want to think about what the consequences would be.

< 10.26

Concerned, Lord MacMarkland had been looking at Onawa for a while, who was imitating a statue with conviction. Because she was also filmed via a second butterfly camera, he was able to oversee almost the entire barn. He had sympathized intensely with Marilyn while watching her attempt to wake up Onawa. The flapping of the wings, however, had done nothing and he knew how disappointed their blond genius must have been when she gave up and made the bird fly away. Lord MacMarkland kept thinking about the problem while watching the whole GRID.

He looked with more and more interest at the monitor on which he followed Hakon's movements. Horrified by KSB's disproportionate action, he saw an armored, massive door swing open. Hakon was pushed through the opening, after which, to his great dismay, the monitor turned black. Did VanderBeek attack Hakon? Had Hakon lost his glasses? What on earth could have happened? "Saundra! Report!" Immediately, he was served at his beck and call with an explanation why the signal had been lost.

Her pleasant, civilized voice remained silent for a moment, only to continue a little later: "Good news. Marilyn has found a solution. She's going to maneuver the bird with which she's trying to get Onawa out of her trance above a lightwell, so that we can use its transmission and reception unit as an amplifier."

With great relief, his gaze returned to the GRID, to the monitor on which Onawa was being followed, to see that the bird was accelerating, making a height and soaring towards a piece of grass in a gliding flight.

Confident that Saundra would soon have re-established contact with Hakon through the bird, he looked at Onawa. This could not continue like this. If he was worried, Marilyn would certainly be as well. That was something they absolutely could not use right now. He saw no other possibility than the decision he made now. "Saundra. I'm changing the script. Let Tony know that someone has to check on Onawa. The way she behaves doesn't suit me at all."

< 10.27

Tony, who - unlike Tim - didn't have time to sentimentally admire the painting of their father in his boyhood, went straight to the other door. Although closed, it was not locked. Carefully he opened it, peeked through the crack and saw an immense hall with a marble floor that seemed to have a crystal structure. The room seemed to be deserted and the only sound he heard came from his company, which admired the library behind him. He quietly walked on and opened the doors on the other side.

Behind them was a sumptuously furnished living room the size of a ballroom. Another door was ajar. He carefully snooped through it and saw a kitchen that was clean, shiny, fully furnished and in terms of size not much smaller than the living room.

A dream for every chef. A graceful, double marble staircase led to the floor above, where he saw closed doors between all the old masters. "Unbelievable, even the stairs are here! How is it possible?", Tim exclaimed with joy as he stepped into the hall. "Yeah, well, that's nice, but we've got work to do. Come on, stay close to me, because we don't know yet who else is sneaking around," Tony warned his brother. "Saundra?" he asked. "Which way did they go?" "To the fireplace," he promptly heard her say in his ear. Fireplace?

He carefully examined the chimney and everything around it, but couldn't find anything special about it.

"Saundra, can you show me the images after the shot was fired?" His eyes discovered Russ, with the laptop in one hand and a glass of liquor in the other, staring dreamily in front of him. He had to snap his fingers twice loudly before Russ heard him and handed him the device. While opening the laptop, he cautioned: "Watch out with that alcohol, will you? That may well go wrong on an empty stomach." Russ looked at him candidly. "Nothing wrong, Tony. I had to wash away that filthy, sour taste.

I'm completely fit and can take a beating. Look, the images are coming through." Tony shifted his attention and kept looking at the screen until he saw the chimney move. "Stop. Saundra, rewind two seconds and then stop." To Tjan he shouted: "Tjan! Work to be done!" As soon as his brother stood next to him, he asked Saundra to continue the recording.

“That chimney can rotate around its axis. Both sides are the same, you see?”

“Hmm, there must be a mechanism somewhere,” mumbled Tjan, and he asked Sandra to rewind the images a bit more. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Stop. Look there,” he said. “VanderBeek is doing something to that parrot.” Tony nodded. “You’re right. I see it too. But what exactly does he do?”

Tim, who had returned from his tour, had apparently overheard their conversation. “I know there must be some kind of button to turn the chimney. Dad once told me that. He had discovered that when he was a child himself. I think he managed to escape because of this at the time.” After which he disappeared forever, Tony thought. He sighed. “Do you know where that button should be, Tim?”

With Russ on their heels, they walked to the chimney, where Tim immediately took a close look at the left corner.

“Look,” Tim said a little later. He squeezed his index finger in a place that, as far as Tony was concerned, looked just like the rest, when it disappeared into the stone in front of him, like a hot knife through butter. A clearly audible click followed.

“Look,” Tim said again. “Here you can very faintly see a flower engraved into the marble. The same flower is also in our family crest and exactly in the middle of it, that circle, is the button.” “All well and good, beautiful and all that, but ... How does the stove open?”, Tjan wanted to know. “Apart from that click, not much has happened, has there?” Tony laughed. “Maybe you should just push it, little brother.”

“Ah, only a genius like you could have thought of that,” chuckled Tjan. Tony took a step back to give his brother some space.

Tjan loosened his shoulders for a moment, set himself against the side and pushed. Except for some clicking sounds coming from the inside, not much seemed to happen. They had to get through it anyway, Tony thought. He gestured to Tjan to try again. Tjan put his massive body against it again, gave a strong push and almost fell on his butt when the chimney opened unexpectedly smoothly, to get stuck halfway round.

“Elegantly solved, brother,” Tony couldn’t resist saying. “But let’s be serious now,” he said when they were done laughing. After asking Russ if the images were back and seeing him shake his head in denial, he continued: “Okay. It is what it is. We’re going anyway.” As they shuffled one by one through the chimney into the corridor, Sandra’s voice entered their right ears.

< 10.28

Encouraged by the Colt, Hakon was piloted through part of the animal kingdom, with VanderBeek, as proud as a peacock, telling him why and how he had made it. He was particularly satisfied with the scene that he had copied exactly from the painting that he had shown Mario in his library, the man told him cheerfully. Hakon saw that the picture had indeed been copied precisely.

They stayed there longer than he liked, and just like he had from that cowboy at the entrance of the hall, he got the creeps. Especially when VanderBeek told him in detail, that the Indians on display, who were reenacting the painted scene, had really lived. Scumbags whom he had caught on his lands in the past. For their brutal crimes they now served as sheaths for his creations.

The anatomical explanation in particular turned Hakon’s stomach. He needed all his willpower to show nothing and keep his head clear. With each step it became clear to him that he was dealing with a genius, narcissistic lunatic. At the end of the walk, which he would remember for a long time, they reached a steel staircase which, halfway through the hall, gave access to a sort of panoramic office that was located at a height of about 15 feet. Under pressure from the barrel in his back, Hakon was pushed up. The higher he got, the more he could look inside through the glass front.

To his great delight he saw Barbara sitting there and although she looked finished, a huge burden fell from his shoulders.

Alarmed by the loud clatter caused by the two pairs of feet on the iron steps, Barbara turned towards the door. Hakon was a little shocked by her white face, in which the frightened eyes were far too big.

When she saw him, Hakon saw her tighten and a hunch of disappointment and despair slid over her face.

Of course she had hoped that the salvation was near and although that was true, she couldn't tell from him. He wasn't at all comfortable with the fact that he had to leave her in suspense for a while.

He wanted to get this job done as quickly as possible, in order to put an end to her fear and insecurity. Caring for her and letting her know that she was safe would probably not be so easy, he thought, worried. Luckily they had brought Russ with them.

Once he had reached the top of the stairs, VanderBeek roughly pushed him aside, unlocked the door and directed him inside with the help of his antique revolver.

While he looked unobtrusively at the interior with his spectacled face, Hakon saw that this office was nothing like the one in the old library. However, VanderBeek was also fully equipped here, he quickly concluded. The only thing that felt out of tune was a destroyed screen that was only half hanging on the wall. While wondering what might have happened to it, he walked to the massive, commonly used table to which Barbara was chained.

He turned around a quarter of a turn, so that he stood directly in front of the table, opposite the office chair. What he hoped for happened. VanderBeek walked to his office chair, sat down and, holding him at gunpoint, pushed the USB stick into the side of the laptop that was standing in front of him on the table.

< 10.29

After Tony had decided to send Tim and Arda to Onawa at Sandra's request, he, Tjan and Russ had quickly moved on to the cowboy. Tjan, who was looking at the statue from top to bottom, said: "It looks damn real, Tony. It looks like the guy is stuffed." "That wouldn't surprise me," replied Russ. "I think we can expect anything here." A true word, Tony thought to himself. They should be extra vigilant, especially now that their

team had been halved. “Tjan, any idea how we can get that door open without that scream?”

It’s not just a bad sound, but I would like to let sleeping dogs lie. If you can think of a way, please.”

“Hmm, I’ll have a look,” mumbled Tjan. “The mechanism must be somewhere in his crotch.” He unfastened the cowboy’s belt, unbuttoned the fly and rolled the pants down. He fell to his knees in front of the cowboy and looked up.

“I warn you in advance, Tony. You don’t have to make any jokes. I know what it looks like. Applies to you too, Russ. No jokes!”

Tjan had barely found what he was looking for, when he looked up again with a disgusted look.

“Yuck! Tony! This guy is real. Dead, but real. That prick is not a fake, you know. There’s even a snake tattooed on it. Gross. I think the mechanism is in there.”

Tony sighed. “Well, don’t complain, Tjan. As long as we don’t know how Hakon is doing, we have no time to lose.” Reassuringly, Tjan reached out his hand. “Give me a Kurumak, then.”

With the side of it he zipped open the penis lengthwise, after which he followed the exposed wires into the scrotum with his fingers, where he found a switch mechanism. “I’ve got it. There is a kind of balloon here. If you squeeze or kick it, pressure is built up, activating a circuit that opens the door. In the penis there is a similar mechanism for the sound. From there, a wire runs upwards. To the mouth, I think. There must be a tape or something like that in there.” “If you say so, it will definitely be that way,” Tony said patiently. “The question is whether you can turn off that nasty scream.”

Tjan looked at him as if he was not well. “The pin of your belt buckle, please.” Because of the razor-sharp point, Tony laid the requested item extremely carefully in Tjan’s outstretched hand. Handling it just as carefully, Tjan cut a few wires. “There you go. The sound is switched off. I only have to squeeze and the door will open. Satisfied?”

< 10.30

After seeing Barbara give up on his way in, Hakon didn't have an easy time at all playing Mario's unscrupulous person convincingly. Chained to the table, not even that far from him, she sat huddled like a little bird, staring at her lap.

Regretting inwardly that there was nothing he could do for her for the time being, he had taken a semi-nonchalant and self-assured seat at the table opposite the cattle farmer.

In a position that he hoped would give VanderBeek the impression that his guest relied one hundred percent on the solid content of the stick, Hakon unobtrusively kept a close eye on him.

Though he had previously been able to make VanderBeek's mood a little milder with a lot of flattery, the man was now staring at his laptop with an angry frown.

His voice sounded freezing cold when,

in the meantime, without looking at Barbara for a second, he whispered harshly: "Barbara, Barbara. How you fooled me.

I need you for a while, sweetheart.

But later ... Soon I'll let you know what a huge mistake you've made. God damn it!" Furious, he hit the table with his fist. "Stupid jerk! That rotten stick doesn't do anything again." VanderBeek looked at him fiercely over the laptop.

Hakon saw that he was about to get up. He absolutely shouldn't provoke him now and said a lot more calmly than he felt: "What USB port did you put that stick into? Sometimes it happens that a USB port is blocked by another program."

"Hmpf," VanderBeek sniffed with disdain. He lifted the laptop and looked at the back. Hakon had already seen three other ports and hoped wholeheartedly that this would distract the man long enough. While VanderBeek was busy, Hakon stealthily looked through his eyelashes over his shoulder.

Sunk in her own world, Barbara sat there limply. Her whole attitude expressed the resignation of someone who knew death was near. Come

on, Sandra, he prayed quietly. Please, say something. This had to end as soon as possible. As he watched VanderBeek's attempts and became increasingly worried that the connection was still not working, he decided to try and buy some more time. If Sandra hadn't done it by then, he would have to switch to plan B.

Pretending to admire him, but sincerely interested, he asked somewhat brutally: "Tell me, VanderBeek. Why?"

Frowning, VanderBeek looked up. "Why? What, why?" Hakon was pleased to see that the man left the laptop alone.

"Well, Spiderweb. This. Everything, actually. How did you manage all that on your own and for what? Not for the money, I think." It seemed as if he had waved a magic wand around at the same time, as the question changed VanderBeek's mood quickly.

His anger and frustration about a stick that didn't want to work, seemed to have been completely forgotten.

As if Hakon was the stupidest boy in the class, VanderBeek looked at him pityingly, before he sat up proudly and told him arrogantly: "Power. Not many will understand. And of those who do understand, there are very few who are able to obtain it. And of those few, dear Mario, I'm the only one who's acquired omnipotence. I'm the puppeteer. I can lead presidents. With a snap of my finger, I can make a war break out or stop the oil supply somewhere." Hakon was very impressed. Not because of a man's so-called achievements, but because of his unbridled, power-hungry narcissism.

"The dead, the wounded and the material damage that come with it? Doesn't that bother you?", he dared to ask. VanderBeek seemed genuinely surprised. "No, why? People just die. Whether I am the cause, someone else or mother nature. After all, life is no more than a game."

< 10.31

At first Barbara had been relieved that VanderBeek had left her alone in his office. New hope had flared up and as soon as she had seen his head disappear through the glass wall, she had set to work.

Again chained to a table with handcuffs and chains, she had carefully examined them.

The first attempt to find a way out had been unsuccessful. Recognizing that she had perhaps overlooked something, she had again meticulously looked and felt everything as far as she could reach. She also couldn't get the handcuff itself over the broad part of the base of her hand. Twisting her wrist and hand to the maximum, she had tried it a million times, until she realized that she could only succeed if she cut off her own hand. But even if she had the courage to do so, that would not be possible.

There was nothing she could do it with, let alone a sharp knife. After a dozen unsuccessful attempts, she had had to face up to the hard truth. Without help she would never be able to get out of here. And who would know that she was sitting here? Disillusioned and desperate, she had given up.

More hanging than sitting, she had fallen asleep, woken up, and dozed off again, until suddenly she had heard a voice. A different voice than VanderBeek's!

Listening intently, she had heard two people stumbling up the stairs, and praying with her whole being that the salvation was near, she had looked expectantly at the door.

For a moment she had dared to hope when she saw the stranger, but as soon as VanderBeek showed up next to him, she knew she was lost. As if she were invisible, VanderBeek and his friend had totally ignored her. Not that she had cared about it anymore, by the way. Now that psychopath was back, she was as good as dead anyway. While she licked despondently over her crusty, dehydrated lips, she had let herself sink back into her chair. How happy she would be with a sip of water ... She was no longer hungry and the headache had also left her. Her head was more like a helium-filled balloon. Russ's face was floating in front of her eyes. Their first kiss and his happy smile. Sadly she told him that she was so sorry. That she had not been able to say goodbye, that she ... Somewhere in the background she suddenly heard a loud bang. Huh? What?

She was startled out of her lethargy and heard VanderBeek scream about some stick. His loud voice irritated her immensely. Why couldn't they just leave her alone? As she fiddled away again, Barbara heard her tormentor speak. But what he said didn't really make sense to her. Her boss would demand a report, she thought dutifully, but no matter how hard she tried, the words continued to swim through her head in a disjointed way. They rippled on and on ... and on ...

< 10.32

Nodding enthusiastically, Hakon made it known that he was in complete agreement with VanderBeek's statement. He laughed broadly. Sandra's familiar voice was back. The game, their game, could continue. To supposedly clean the glasses, he carelessly took off his spectacles and pointed to the laptop. He asked innocently: "Has it worked yet?"

As expected, VanderBeek concentrated on the laptop, which gave him the opportunity to quickly click off the top glasses, which had been mounted over the first pair. He handed them to VanderBeek. "Here. This is necessary to read the information. Some kind of 3D glasses, but the other way around."

Frowning, VanderBeek took the glasses. "What is that? I've never heard of it. And why do you only give them now?" He looked at Hakon suspiciously.

Hakon decided to use VanderBeek's suspicion against him, and replied brutally: "Would you immediately play all your trump cards? I don't think so, right?" In order not to give him the opportunity to think about it further, he quickly said: "Just put them on and see for yourself." His cheeky bluff turned out to have convinced him. Without further comment VanderBeek put the glasses on his nose, completely unsuspecting that there were cameras in the frame and that everything he was looking at was broadcast live in several places around the world. While VanderBeek was watching the screen, Hakon listened to Sandra, who told him that this was the computer they were looking for.

Then she told him the location of the others and informed him that the FBI could reach the main gate of the ranch at any moment.

< 10.33

“Yes!”, Lord MacMarkland shouted pleasantly surprised, when at the same time four monitors became active on the GRID. Sandra also called in immediately. “You can see that contact with Hakon has been restored. On the top monitor you can see what KSB is observing. On the three below you can see the reactions of the FBI, UNBI and GAIAS. We will soon know if these will be in accordance with the script.”

Very relieved that Hakon had indeed found Barbara Kronkite alive and well, he answered good-naturedly: “I have every confidence in it, dear Sandra.”

In the meantime, he didn't have enough eyes and ears to follow all the screens at the same time. On the FBI's monitor, he followed Jerry Decker, who called his SWAT teams by walkie-talkie from the command car. “Listen up.

The goal of the action is A: to arrest the rancher VanderBeek and B: to save Miss Kronkite, who has been kidnapped by him.

Both are underground, in the company of UNBI director Eriksson. The latter is undercover there, with the support of a number of specialists. On the spot, he has the absolute leadership.

And now ... go, go, GO!”

While Jerry was giving his instructions, a fat guy had gotten up behind him. Lord MacMarkland quickly flashed his eyes aside to read that this was the local sheriff. His eyes flashed back immediately. Sweating buckets, the fat guy turned around, flung open the door and scrambled out of the car like an old woman, waddling out of sight with his belly swaying. He ignored the corpulent fugitive and saw Jean on the monitor underneath, who shot upright in disbelief.

“Damn it! That's the Italian, that Mario. You know, Lémarque ... That guy from Interpol. How, how...” Lémarc pulled him back on his chair by his sleeve. “Calm down now. That's Hakon, disguised as Mario. Which he did well, by the way,” Lémarc continued admiringly. On the lower screen the lord saw that Marilyn and Joost in Amsterdam were sitting just like

Lémarc, Jean and everyone else in the CINEMA, all with their gaze continuously on the screen.

With compassion he heard Marilyn say: “Oh, girl, what you have had to endure. In a moment, you will see your beloved again.”

Lord MacMarkland was really hoping that she was telling the truth and heard Joost express his own fear out loud. “I hope Hakon’s got that rancher, because I think the guy’s out of his mind.”

< 10.34

“Hey, it’s working. I do see a window now asking for a password. Okay. Now it’s getting exciting, lady.” Hakon’s heart was filled with fear when he saw the look in VanderBeek’s eyes. Gesturing heedlessly at him, the man continued impatiently: “Wake her up, will you?” Hakon gladly obeyed and stood up. He made sure that his body largely obstructed VanderBeek’s vision and hit the backrest a few times behind Barbara’s shoulder.

“Hey! Kronkite. Wake up.” He pretended to shake her hard on her shoulder again and whispered her name sharply. Barbara ducked and turned her eyes to him. The supplication he saw in them was almost unbearable. Hang in there, sweetheart, he thought to himself. We’re working as fast as we can. It took him an awful lot of effort to look away from her and see VanderBeek sitting behind his desk like a despot.

“Ma’am is awake,” he said. “What now?” With a sweet voice from which the devil dripped, VanderBeek said: “Well. Just maybe the lady is willing to give us the password?” Suddenly he continued, cold and poisonous: “And quickly, please.” Hakon, who saw the fear flaring up in Barbara’s eyes, stood in VanderBeek’s sight line again. With his hands on the arms of the chair, he bent half over Barbara and looked straight at her. “You hear the man. Tell us the password. It’s for your own good.” Silently he stood in front of Barbara until he saw her gaze become clearer.

Assessing the right moment, he gave Barbara a double wink and ordered with his own voice: “Give that Latin password ... Now!”

He counted on VanderBeek not to notice that Mario had suddenly changed his voice, because at the same time he roared impatiently over

it: "Come on, bitch! Give it to me now, or I'll shoot your writing hand to shreds."

< 10.35

In a panic Barbara thought that there was such a sudden storm that the boat she was in was in danger of sinking. Somewhere nearby she heard someone calling out her name and shuddered awake. Disorientated she looked up. She had no idea who the stranger was who was shaking her shoulder so hard.

That Italian ... VanderBeek ... The realization came like a thunderbolt and, terrified, she collapsed.

The scary voice of her tormentor frightened her when he asked her for a password.

His Italian friend brought his face right in front of hers. Behind the lenses his brown eyes seemed to shine when he asked her to tell him. Password? She was supposed to know a password? From somewhere very deep something started to dawn. Spiderweb, attack, Hakon, Peace Palace ... Oh, God. She didn't know.

Out of pure desperation she just wanted to say something, when the Italian gave her a wink and briefly instructed her to pronounce the Latin words.

In a split second the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. Hakon's voice, the one eye that suddenly changed from brown to blue, and his command.

She was sure that Hakon was hiding in the Italian's skin, and as if a switch had been flipped, she saw the phrase flashing in neon letters in front of her eyes.

VanderBeek's revolver and threatening language suddenly seemed a lot less dangerous. Nevertheless, involuntarily tucking her right hand away, she shouted hoarsely: "Non quod videtur!"

< 10.36

As soon as Tjan was on his knees in front of the cowboy, Russ had come up with a great joke. "A pilot, a priest and a...", he had already started, when Tjan asked him and Tony not to joke.

Although Tony grinned at him, gesturing to shut up, it was Tjan's grim look that had thrown the joke thoroughly. He bit his tongue thinking of the punch line that was really hilarious.

The laughter, however, was soon gone when he saw Tjan cut open the young gentleman, size 8+.

He had literally gotten the shivers from it. Glad that he wasn't the victim, he wouldn't want to think about doing the job himself. The cowboy's chimes looked so lifelike that you would expect a new scream at any moment.

He couldn't watch it any longer and leaned back against the wall. Gazing at the black display of the laptop resting on his arm, his thoughts had automatically wandered to Barbara.

He had no idea how long he had stood like this when some colorful stripes flashed across the screen, after which part of the image became clear and he saw VanderBeek, who was wearing glasses.

A second window appeared next to it.

'Left side of Hakon's glasses' was above it. Through a glass wall he could see an immense space filled with animals. At the very end of it was a large, steel safe door. "Hey, Tony, Tjan. Hakon's glasses are working again!"

Almost at the same time, a third window appeared in which he saw Mario standing. With a jolt, the image shifted to the side and slightly downwards. His heart leapt for joy when he saw Barbara sitting. He didn't have to read the text to know that this image came from VanderBeek's glasses.

Awfully relieved, Russ knew that Barbara's salvation was imminent. Hakon himself had explained to him that as soon as VanderBeek put those second glasses on his nose, the end of the operation would be in sight. "Hey, guys! I have an image. You have to hurry!"

Waiting impatiently, his eyes remained fixed on Barbara. In his mind, he fervently promised her that they would see each other again very soon. While frantically grinding his jaws, he could only watch Barbara, his dear Barbara, sit there sad and miserable. Like a frightened creature, she seemed to want to disappear into her chair. He cursed inwardly and wished with all his heart that he could pull the farmer out of the screen, so that he could throttle him on the spot. And at the sight of Hakon, who frightened her even more by bending over her, he could no longer control himself.

Roaring with frustration, he threw the laptop away so ferociously that it flew through the neck of the cowboy like a Frisbee, to thunder through the wall and land on the floor with a bang.

He couldn't see that the head landed right next to it, hat and all.

Like a mad bull, Russ rushed towards the decapitated cowboy and gave him a well-targeted kick between his legs to clear the way to his beloved one. With one click the door slowly opened. Although the opening was barely wide enough, he tried to squeeze himself through it. It didn't work out.

With a lot of effort he forced his body forward, but it seemed as if he was nailed to the ground. His arms were held so tightly against his body that he thought he had ended up in a printing press. Grunting, he tried to get loose, until he realized that he was being held in place by Tjan. "Russ. Take it easy, kid.

I understand that you want to do everything you can for Barbara, but believe me when I say that Hakon will protect her until we get a signal that we can intervene. Until then, just to be on the safe side, I'll hold you for a while." Russ, who unfortunately could not go anywhere, heard Tony's voice coming closer behind him. "...in a state of ruin, Tjan. No more images. Hopefully the stick still works."

Repentant, Russ wanted to apologize when Tony put a hand on his neck. Although he feared the worst, Tony's voice sounded unexpectedly friendly. "Barbara knows that Hakon is here. The last thing he asked her, he said with his own voice. She knows him far too well not to have noticed. Believe me, Russ. Barbara is safe. To go there now in a frantic rush will put her in danger."

Russ felt a slight pressure in his neck and as if a valve was loosened from a tightly inflated bicycle tire, the anger quickly disappeared. His chin fell on his chest and if Tjan hadn't kept him upright, he would have collapsed like a souffle. His legs suddenly seemed to have turned into JELLIE.

< 10.37

VanderBeek stared expectantly at the screen where, after entering the password, a progress bar had appeared with the message that the files were being processed, never noticing that the door in the hall was opening. What he also didn't realize, was that this meant that the entire contents of the hard drive were being pulled away by SPY and sent to Scotland at high speed.

As he waited impatiently for the encryption to be ready - Mario had told him it could take a moment - he entertained himself thinking about what to do with the Italian and the other two. That Kronkite had known more than he had expected.

The bitch had to have nerves of steel. He had really been convinced that he had broken her and that she had told him everything. Not so. That bitch had lied right to his face, damn it. She wouldn't do that to him a second time. As soon as he had Hakon in his grasp, he would teach that bitch a few things.

She and that meddling Eriksson would be allowed to watch while he skinned that slick guy called Mario first. Then, as a reward for her cooperation, that journalist missy would be allowed to sit in the front row and watch him fillet her boyfriend Eriksson piece by piece, agonizingly slowly.

With the great prospect that he had everything back in order in a very pleasant way, he saw the progress bar disappear, after which the logo of UNBI came into view.

While he was looking forward to the secret information that would never see the light of day, the logo faded to make way for the face of Hakon Eriksson, who spoke to him immediately. "Your recent confession to me

personally and all other evidence, also confirmed by the data on your computer, are now safely stored in the UNBI databases in The Hague. This data has been added to your extensive UNBI file, which concludes the evidence.

Now that the Spiderweb organization has been unraveled, the file can be closed. On this basis, I would like to inform you that you have been arrested on behalf of the Public Prosecutor of the ICC as the person ultimately responsible for the Spiderweb organization. Know that anything you do or say from now on can be used against you. There is no point in resisting your arrest.

In front of your gate there are a number of FBI units who would also like to talk to you about the abduction of Barbara Kronkite. There are specialists in your ranch house who are actively supporting me on behalf of UNBI.

Your arrest will now be carried out by me personally.”

Eriksson’s face disappeared and the UNBI logo came back.

Completely overwhelmed, he had listened to it and did not know how to react right now. When he looked up angrily from his screen to demand clarification from Mario, to his bewilderment, he looked straight into Eriksson’s face again. Disconcerted, he saw that the man was holding Mario’s head, or what was left of it, in his hand. Damn it! A mask! His blood began to boil.

To his disbelief, Hakon said: “You heard. You’ve been arrested. Don’t resist, and put your weapon on the desk. It’s over.” Where did that prick get the impertinence from, he thought angry. Did that son of a bitch really think he would just let himself be lectured? That could be a nasty disappointment to him.

He looked straight at Hakon with an arrogant face and said with contempt: “Over? I decide when something is over. And believe me, little man, it’s not by a long shot. You may have had the guts to pull the wool over my eyes, but that’s all, sucker. You’re not dealing with a retarded farmer! I happen to know what that Latin sentence means. ‘Nothing is what it seems.’”

You shouldn't have done that, dude. That's why I know you're bluffing and talking shit. Be assured that this mistake will cost you dearly. I hereby tell you that my revenge will be imbued with blood. You will curse the day you first read my name. Nothing, absolutely nothing can prevent me from shooting you like a mad dog on the spot right now. But that would be too easy. I still see a very long agony before you, after which you will beg me to save you from your gloomy, miserable life."

< 10.38

By making use of the natural undulations in the landscape, the FBI column led by Jerry Decker had managed to reach the main gate - where the procession was forced to come to a standstill - unnoticed.

Jerry immediately saw that they wouldn't be able to reach the ranch quickly via the driveway, because the road was blocked by steel poles, which had risen from the ground as they approached. The three gatekeepers in front of them, with automatic weapons at the ready, did not give the impression that they would step aside. Not intending to be stopped by this, he gave the order via walkie-talkie to ram the fence next to the driveway and drive to the ranch through the meadow.

The wooden fence looked solid, but the heavy bull bars on the front of the cars could easily handle that. The driver of the command vehicle made a sudden steering correction to let the SWAT teams pass and Decker cursed inside the car. He had not counted on this unexpected setback. However, he was not completely dissatisfied.

He was pleased to see the first SWAT-SUVs break through the fences, after which he was so surprised that it took a while before what he observed was registered by his brain.

< 10.39

While glancing aslant at the gun, which VanderBeek held carelessly in his hand, Hakon had tacitly listened to his rant. Prepared for all possible reactions, he could hardly believe how the man had interpreted their Latin

proverb and therefore simply regarded his arrest as a bluff. It was unimaginable, but VanderBeek was apparently still firmly convinced that he was in control. Beware now, Hakon, he warned himself. At all costs he had to get Barbara, and if at all possible himself, out of here unharmed.

He had to keep VanderBeek talking and not provoke him until Tony and the others were around. "Threatening me is pointless, Mr. VanderBeek. You've heard that the FBI is at the gate." Meanwhile, Hakon heard Saundra quietly say in his right ear that he had back cover and that the door to the hall was open.

Relieved, he continued: "In addition, you will find that your foreman and his men cannot help you either.

It was not without reason that I brought my own bodyguard."

As if he had heard a great, smooth joke, VanderBeek laughed. "That bunch of scumbags? A little guy, the fat and the thin, a stupid farmer and a red whore ... Ha, ha, ha. You joker. You think that handful of losers have a chance against my elite group?" VanderBeek laughed so hard that the Colt moved wildly in his right hand.

< 10.40

Damn. He hadn't laughed like that in ages. His eyes full of tears, Kingsize Bob slowly got his breath back. He looked at Hakon cheerfully. What was Eriksson thinking?

Was this guy that stupid, or ...?

But still. Trust was good, but control was better, wasn't it?

It would be wise to contact his foreman just to be sure. With his Colt aimed at Hakon, he grabbed his smartphone and pressed the hotkey for Joe.

He was connected immediately, but before he could say anything, he heard a woman's voice say: "Look at your screen.

You'll see a recording appear of your elite group and the state they're in since you ordered your foreman to take out Hakon's bodyguards. In the images that follow, you can see the FBI's SWAT units busy, currently

clearing the entrance to your driveway. Stop resisting and surrender.” Click.

Stunned, Kingsize Bob looked at the phone. Where the hell was Joe and how did that woman get his cell phone, he wondered in amazement. Keeping a close eye on Hakon, he pulled the laptop towards him and looked.

Sharp points of panic seemed to want to bite at his belly when he saw his champion’s room.

It looked like a bloody battlefield, and at the sight of the foreman, his trusted, indestructible right hand, who hung lifeless from the horns of what was once his best breeding bull, fear clutched at his heart.

The images of the gate and the driveway that then passed by his eyes simply could not exist. His elite unit eliminated, the chaos on his driveway ... That just did not exist.

That never could have happened. No, no, no. ‘Nothing is what it seems,’ he suddenly remembered. Hissing, he sucked his breath in.

Of course. A computer simulation ... Damn well made, just like Eriksson’s disguise.

He had almost fallen for it, damn it.

Almost. Besides, if the FBI wanted to visit him, the sheriff would have informed him.

That’s what the cowardly fat asshole had been doing for over thirty years, after all.

Mr. Eriksson and Mrs. Kronkite wanted to play. Those two had guts, he had to give them that.

The role of Adam and Eve that he had already assigned to them was a role they really earned, he thought grimly. Determined to take back the initiative, he headed for Hakon.

“Everything I’ve just seen, in your opinion, is true and known to UNBI in The Hague?” Eriksson could make a fortune playing poker, Kingsize Bob thought to himself. The man didn’t budge an inch and kept looking at him imperturbably. “Yes. Everything you said, all your computer files and everything I’ve seen here, is neatly stored in their computer.

So just give it up. You can't win anymore." Studying his formidable poker face, he stared at Eriksson calculatingly for a moment. It was about time to let the guy know that the computer game was over.

"Give up? I never give up. Never! I've made it clear to you before. I decide what happens. And I won't be fooled by your game."

He held his smartphone in front of Eriksson's face.

"See this button, Mr. Eriksson? As soon as I press it, a bomb goes off somewhere.

Three guesses where. Soon ...", he looked at Barbara viciously, "... INN will send another Breaking News item about The Hague into the world." He looked at Hakon coldly and pressed the button.

"And this is not a simulation, sir. This is totally, 100% real!"

< 10.41

Shaking his head because of KSB, who refused to believe that his Spiderweb no longer existed, Lord MacMarkland looked at the FBI column, which was moving through the prairie like a mini-train.

Very pleased that the script was running exactly as planned, he asked Sandra to let the kitchen know that he would like tea and scones.

Not very surprised that the FBI was stopped at the gate, he nodded approvingly when he saw the front SUV maneuvering around the command car, and then ramming at full speed through the fence next to it.

The chrome bull bar at the front of the heavy SUV caused the thick wooden poles to break off like matchsticks.

Without having to ask for it, Sandra had already zoomed in on the footage and with pleasure he saw the shattered wood flying in pieces and chunks in all directions.

Without having lost any noticeable speed, the SUV rushed straight forward, to suddenly burrow itself into the ground with tires torn to shreds. Immediately he heard Sandra's voice say: "At half a mile distance from the buildings, mines have been buried in an irregular, wide strip along the

fences. Given the limited damage, it is very likely that these are foot mines. Intended to stop unauthorized persons, but not deadly.”

Hence no one had walked there, Lord MacMarkland thought. He should have noticed. Someone like KSB would normally have had a battery of guards patrolling there.

Stupid ... With sad eyes he saw the hood pop open. Parts of the engine flew out and spun down to the ground. Several mines exploded. In a rain of stones and mud, the second SUV came to a standstill, sliding behind the first one. A still unexploded mine blew the left front wheel to shreds.

< 10.42

As if it were nothing more than an ordinary commercial transaction, Kingsize Bob held his smartphone in front of Hakon’s face in a business-like manner. “Before INN gets the scoop, I’ll tell you in advance that UNBI is in ruins at the moment. Together with their computer and half of the city around it. There’s nothing left of it.” He was greatly enjoying Eriksson’s flat face. The loser apparently couldn’t grasp what he had just told him. It didn’t matter.

Soon he wouldn’t need his brain anyway.

He smiled. “Problem one is no longer there. Now problem two. You. That will just as well...” The same voice he had heard on the phone came from the loudspeaker of his laptop.

“Uh, if I may interrupt ... That first problem still exists, you know. If the bomb hadn’t been discovered, your plan would have worked, but your mole at UNBI was exposed and your bomb was dismantled in time. Check your computer.” Convinced that Hakon’s computer simulation had continued automatically while he had already taken his steps, he walked to his laptop without worrying.

A video began to run on the screen, showing a computer with a smartphone next to it. The easily recognizable explosives were connected to the mobile phone with just one wire. All other wires were disconnected. This was no longer a joke, he knew immediately. This had to be real.

Telling himself otherwise made no sense. Apart from Poko, no one could have known anything about this. That asshole had obviously screwed up. Damn it. Not that he believed that UNBI had evidence against him, but he would have liked to have blown up the whole UNBI organization.

While he thought vengefully that there would definitely be new opportunities, the image zoomed out, to make way for a large space. On one of the walls were diagrams in which he immediately recognized his organizational structure, with many names of his staff, of which a large part was detained or eliminated on his instructions. In the same room, several people were looking at an enormous screen, on which he saw himself staring pompously at his own laptop. It all seemed so unreal to him that he thought he was dreaming. He pinched himself viciously in the leg and looked behind him, at Hakon, and back at the display. On the large screen in that room, his figure did exactly the same thing.

He couldn't believe this. He didn't want to believe this.

Only when he saw Lémarc Tasker sitting among the people watching and felt the sharp pain where he had pinched himself, did he realize that all this could not be a fake. No simulation. He was being fucking filmed by his own webcam. That stick ... hacked ... Everything that had happened here, everything he had said ... Everything sent to The Hague ... While he was gasping for breath, he looked away from the screen, in order to take a look at his creation once more through the large panorama window. An ice-cold hand seemed to grab him by his throat when it finally got through to him. His paradise. His beautiful animal kingdom. Lost forever. He could never come back here. Flaming rage swept through him like lightning.

He would make them pay for this. None of them would survive this. He was furious. He was cursing everyone and everything when he caught a glimpse of the thick, indestructible door in his hall opening. When he saw that little Asian stepping through it in his flashy coat, he could no longer keep his composure. Savagely, he swept the laptop aside so powerfully that it flew through the room in an arc and slammed against the wall. Right against the remnants of the screen, which were still hanging desperately.

The thing dragged large pieces with it and smashed apart on the ground. He didn't care. At this moment only one thing was important: getting out

of here. The only one who could stop him was that son of a bitch Eriksson. Quickly he made a decision which he wasn't mourning about. Filled with hatred, he brought up his Colt and aimed. He jolted his shoulder for a moment, before he pulled the trigger. With a thunderous bang that sounded like music to his ears, the bullet hit Hakon's heart.

Very satisfied, he saw a rapidly growing, bright, red spot appear on his immaculate, light shirt.

< 10.43

In the command car Jerry was shocked when the SUV's unexpectedly stopped in front of him with a loud bang. As a result, because of the powerful braking of his driver, who wanted to avoid the same fate, he was launched from the back to the front of the car, before he fell painfully on his knees between two seats. Meanwhile, the guards at the main gate had started firing and the bullets hit the armored side of the car.

As he got up, Jerry heard the SWAT-leader give all the necessary commands via the intercom. A few more shots were heard, before it became silent and he got the message from the intercom that the three guards had been eliminated with targeted shots. Immediately afterwards the SWAT-leader reported that everyone had remained unharmed, apart from some bruises and scratches, but that the SUV's had to be considered as lost.

As he stretched his back, a possibility came to him. Quickly he picked up the microphone. "Listen up! Everyone leave the SUV's. Use the roofs as a bridge. Everyone, come to the road behind the command car, where we will regroup. Then we go to the ranch on foot as soon as possible.

If all goes well, we will be welcomed by one of the specialists who are supporting Hakon." Jerry himself flung open the back doors and as he got out, despite the headwind, he smelled the penetrating smell of a large herd of cattle.

He looked around and finally located them a little further on, where the animals, moved in a long stream in the back of a hill, only occasionally visible because of the slope. The slope was quite high and the wind was

favorable. No, it seemed unlikely to him that the herd would cause them any trouble. And at the sight of the FBI, the cowboys who accompanied the animals would be wise enough not to interfere.

< 10.44

Beautiful. Bull's eye. Full of satisfaction, Kingsize Bob looked down at Hakon, who had fallen backwards and was now lying back on Kronkite's lap. The false bitch was deathly pale and stared at him rigidly with big, watery eyes. He was on the verge of silencing her quickly and efficiently as well, when an idea came to him. Wouldn't it be nicer to let her enjoy the loss of her boyfriend for a while? Later on, get her back and punish her properly?

He liked the idea. "You're lucky, girl. You'll get your 15 minutes in the spotlight when you tell your experiences on TV, with the testimony that it was I who killed Eriksson. Enjoy it." He bent close to her and smelled the rancid air she was breathing out. Nevertheless, he didn't stop. He brought his head even closer to her face and licked the salty tears off her cheek. "I mean it," he whispered coldly. "It won't be long before I have you plucked from the street again, because ..." Her nose bumped into the lenses. Damn it. He still had those rotten glasses on.

He took the things off his head and continued threateningly: "... no matter how well you let yourself be guarded, I'll get you." He got up, dropped the glasses on the body of the giver and at the same time saw that stupid hillbilly Eriksson had brought with him rushing through his jungle, followed closely by that little guy and that fat one. Judging by their faces, the three of them hadn't come to have a cup of tea. It was time to disappear.

He quickly ran back, grabbed the two saddlebags from the stand and threw them over his shoulder.

Without looking back, he walked to the cupboard on the long side of the wall, opened it and was swallowed by it.

< 10.45

Only when she saw that VanderBeek had disappeared, did Barbara dare to let her grief run free. She held Hakon's limp figure close to her and stroked his quiet face. There was no doubt this time that Hakon was dead.

As she licked the burning salty tears off her cracked lips, she suddenly felt a warm sigh on her neck. Breathlessly, she heard Hakon's voice whisper softly: "Fear ... not ... Everything ... okay ... with me." For a moment, her heart jumped for joy, only to sink down immediately when she looked at his shirt, which had turned red. Even if medical help came immediately, Hakon would not survive this injury.

Whispering softly, she tried to make it as easy as possible for him.

A few minutes at the most, she knew.

Then ... In a cloud of splinters of wood and glass, the door burst open. Scared, she looked up and saw - no, she was dreaming this, wasn't she? - Russ rushing towards her. Although it should not be possible, she felt Hakon stand up from her lap. With eyes wide from disbelief she watched Russ smack aside a chair that stood in the way. Before she could come to her senses, Russ had also pushed Hakon aside, to hold her in his arms, chair and all.

< 10.46

Tony had previously seen that the ex-soccer player was pretty fast, but despite that, Russ had still surprised him and Tjan. After he had calmed him down at the door, Russ had followed them calmly. Until that shot rang out.

Again something had snapped in Russ's mind and before he and Tjan noticed it, Russ had been rushing by them like a mad bull. Not even Tjan could have caught up with him. Tony walked behind Tjan through the shattered door into VanderBeek's office and saw Russ rushing at Barbara at full speed. There was no way he could prevent Russ from pushing everything, including Hakon, out of the way. The man had no self-discipline at all, he thought, when he saw Hakon fall to the ground. His

brother came to the rescue, raised Hakon up and put him on the big table.

Concerned, he asked Hakon how things were going. “Whew,” Hakon groaned. “It’s a good thing that I had already tried Marilyn’s air vest. I knew that the impact would be heavy, although that Colt from VanderBeek was more like a cannon.

Luckily I saw, because he was shaking his shoulders, that he was going to shoot and I could prepare for the blow, but still I lost my breath for a while and I was unable to do anything. Thank God he shot at me and not at Barbara.” Tony nodded and let his hands glide over Hakon’s body, investigating.

“Okay. Ribs not broken,” he observed with satisfaction. “I’m sure you’ll feel this for a week, Hakon. No further damage.” That he was right, he could see from Hakon’s face, which looked pained as he lowered himself from the table. Tony pointed out the wall to his brother and said: “According to Sandra, VanderBeek disappeared through that cupboard there.” “Tjan?” As his brother examined the cupboard, Tony turned to Russ and Barbara. That unguided projectile wouldn’t be easy for Barbara to let go, he saw. Sighing slightly, he walked towards the couple and squeezed Russ’s neck gently, causing him to slacken immediately and collapse in front of Barbara’s feet. Quickly he pulled the double hook off his vest, with which he swiftly opened Barbara’s hand and leg cuffs.

< 10.47

Hakon soon felt good enough again and ignored his sensitive ribs as much as possible. Marilyn’s new invention had saved his life.

The ‘air-shirt’, as she called it, as a replacement for the usual, uncomfortable bulletproof vests, had been a godsend. The shirt, which looked perfectly normal, was made of a fabric that absorbed the impact force of a bullet and distributed its energy directly over the entire shirt.

Marilyn had tried to explain the process to him, but all he had understood was that it had something to do with manipulating the molecular structure. In a fraction of a millisecond, the molecules rearranged

themselves so that the shirt expanded like a balloon and you felt as if your rib cage was enclosed. From the point of impact, the molecules turned red. The whole effect made it look really lifelike. The fact that VanderBeek had shot him at close range with a gigantic caliber gun had literally taken his breath away.

That had turned out to be a good thing, though, for the totally derailed rancher had no doubt that he was dead. Like Barbara, he thought guiltily. Hopefully she could forgive him.

He walked to Barbara, who was on her knees with Russ, and briefly put his hand on her shoulder.

“I’m more sorry than I can say, Barbara. I didn’t expect this. We’ll talk later and then you can call me names, beat me or whatever, but not right now. Time is running out. I have to get VanderBeek.” Immediately turning around, he said: “Tjan. You go back with Russ and Barbara following the same way we came. Leave them in the library. They have to wait there for the FBI. You then go to the helicopter and help Tim, if necessary.” As he walked to the cupboard, he asked Tony: “Collect our stuff, will you?” With one leg already in the cupboard, he shouted over his shoulder: “And then come after me immediately.”

< 10.48

This time very happy that his father had built this tunnel in the past, Kingsize Bob hurried through it. On the way he left the identity of VanderBeek behind like an old coat. That pathetic mess that made up the judicial system did whatever they had to do, he thought laconically.

On his hacienda in Mexico was everything he needed, including a new name. There he could pick up business again in no time. He regarded his life in Texas as nothing more than a book that he could easily close. In Mexico he would just add a new chapter to his personal saga.

He didn’t mind leaving the ranch, his company and his wife and children behind. In fact, that cold icicle that called itself his wife could drop dead as far as he was concerned. His sons would be all right and the company

...

Well, without him at the helm, it wouldn't be long before he could take over the whole business from Mexico. His paradise however ... To have to leave behind his life's work ... That was what struck him the most. You bet he would make them pay for that.

In the meantime he had come out behind his private tack room. Nobody was ever allowed to go there, so he could come and go unnoticed, as he had done several times.

And on a day like this that came in very handy. Because of Mario's visit, for which he couldn't have anyone eavesdropping, he had Joe send all the cowboys into the prairie, under the guise of extra security of the herds.

Apart from a few horses, the stables would also have been abandoned, so no one would see him leave. Quickly he pulled his saddle off the rack and walked into the indeed deserted stables.

The only sound he heard was the restless snorting and scraping of the handful of horses that realized he was there. His own horse was waiting in the nearest box with impatience, in the prospect of stretching his legs. The enormous, deep brown shiny animal, the showpiece of his stable, showed his joy, whinnying and whiffling softly. To his own surprise, Kingsize Bob noticed that he himself suddenly had a great desire to gallop across the prairie at full speed without restraint.

While he was already busy saddling up, an idea bubbled up of how he could give that Eriksson guys and those FBI assholes a nice surprise. He put the saddle on his horse and in the meantime pictured the map of his ranch and the surrounding area. He knew where all the herds were, how many cowboys there were, and he also knew that the nearest herd was close to the ranch.

While fastening the saddle belt, he grabbed his smartphone and called all the team leaders for a conference call. As soon as he got them all, he gave them new assignments.

When he heard some annoyed voices that were confusingly questioning his orders, he barked: "Don't bullshit. Do as I say. Whoever disobeys my orders, I know where to find them. DO IT NOW!" Immediately he broke the connection and jumped into the saddle.

After checking that the girth and saddlebags were in place, he spurred his horse on, and sped out of the stables through the central aisle.

< 10.49

“Okay,” said Tony. “You heard it.” He looked down at Barbara and Russ with understanding, as they sat close together on the ground and in turn drank the water that Tjan had found somewhere. Barbara looked at him with a little suspicion.

“What happened to Russ? After he ran in here, you came to him and suddenly he collapsed.

He’s covered in blood, but I can’t find any wound to explain it.” She pointed to Russ and continued: “The blood isn’t even fresh, by the way. It’s already dried up.”

Tony had no choice but to feel admiration for her that she had noticed this, despite her own hardships. That lady had a good eye for detail. No wonder Hakon had chosen her. “This is related to the fact that your Russ was in a hurry to find you. It’s quite a story, which he should tell you himself on the right occasion.

Now, however, it is important that you go to the library with Tjan. Don’t worry about Russ. He’s okay.” More worried about her well-being, he asked, “What about you? Do you think you can walk? If not, that’s not a problem, you know. Tjan and Russ can take you between them. It’s not very far.”

Together with Tjan he helped the couple up. Well enough, Tony thought when he saw that both of them, looking for support from each other, could at least stay upright.

“Wait. Tjan. You do her left leg.” Tony himself knelt down in front of Barbara and quickly massaged the muscles in her right leg, until he felt that they felt somewhat relaxed. It wasn’t even that bad to have to walk for a while. Movement stimulated the body and it would soon improve.

He gave Tjan a signal that it should suffice for now.

“Tjan. You take Russ and Barbara to VanderBeek’s library and then go straight to the chopper.”

He looked seriously at the other two and continued: “You wait together for the FBI and tell them your story. Whatever they ask, Russ, just say that you and Hakon have carried out this liberation action together on behalf of UNBI. If they want to know more, they have to ask Hakon. Say absolutely nothing about Arda and the three of us.” Barbara and Russ nodded that they understood, and he took Barbara’s hand in his hand and put two energy bars in it. “Eat one in small bites on the way. The second one you take after two hours. Don’t cram everything in at once, because then you’ll spit it out just as quickly. Also applies to the water. This way you will soon feel better.”

He left them to Tjan’s care and walked to the remains of the laptop. After he pulled out the USB stick, he searched the rest of the room. Soon he had found the camera glasses and Mario’s mask.

On the desk he found a yellow smartphone, with the loose parts next to it. That could only be Barbara’s device.

While he was stashing all of GAIAS’ stuff in his coat pockets, he asked Sandra for an update. “Hakon is in the tunnel and sees a door. Tim and Arda are with Onawa, in the last horse stall.” Although Tony knew that this was totally unnecessary - Sandra knew where he was at all times - he replied: “Okay. I’ll go there immediately.”

< 10.50

It just had to happen to her again, Arda thought grumpily.

After giving that filthy Irish rapist/killer his deserved reward, she was looking forward to giving VanderBeek a taste of his own medicine. But no. She was teamed up with Tim again, who was his own, rigid self, without having his motorized toys at his disposal. Nothing fun about that. And Onawa also played on her nerves. Since she and Tim had found her in the stable, she hadn’t been able to elicit any reaction from Onawa. She sat there on the ground with her legs crossed barely breathing, deep in trance, with a pale, expressionless face. While Tim kept the horse calm,

she had tried everything to wake up Onawa. But talking, snapping her fingers, clapping her hands hard near Onawa's face, nothing had worked. Even Marilyn's voice, which had spoken to her via the tablet pc, had not been successful. Meanwhile she felt a strong tendency to heavily shake the Indian. Which, as Marilyn had already said, was not a good idea, she knew.

While she looked down on Onawa worriedly, she suddenly heard the sound of a galloping horse approaching quickly. Prepared for anything, she rushed at the half open stable door. Carefully she looked around the corner and, to her great surprise, saw VanderBeek passing by. They all knew that he had escaped, but she didn't expect him here so soon. "Saundra! VanderBeek is here! He has a horse and has just passed me by at a rapid pace!"

Saundra hadn't finished answering that she knew and that Hakon was right behind him, before a white Schimmel shot by like a comet, frantically encouraged by Hakon, who in passing shouted something she couldn't understand. At the same time she heard Saundra say in her ear: "Tony is also on his way and will reach you at any moment. It doesn't matter how, carry Onawa if necessary, but make sure you get to the helicopter as soon as possible. Top priority! More information will come as soon as possible."

She was wondering what the reason for this could be and how she and Tim could manage to take Onawa with them, her being in trance and all, as she was about to walk back into the stable.

However, she had to step aside quickly to avoid being trampled underfoot by the horse that had been pulled out by Onawa.

Before Arda could react, Onawa had already placed herself on his back. With a shrill cry, she encouraged the horse, which jumped up and immediately ran off in a fast gallop, following VanderBeek and Hakon.

Arda looked around in amazement and saw Tim lying stretched out in the straw on the floor. He looked at her in a nerdy way. "Sorry, Arda. Before I knew it, Onawa jumped up and gave the horse a few taps. It reared, pushing me over."

She pulled him up. "Are you okay?" Tim nodded and made a dirty face. "Yes, but my clothes don't look good. Look at that. Gross..." His lamentation was interrupted by Tony who came running into the stable.

"Come on. Let's get out of here. We have to get to the chopper as soon as possible. There is danger."

< 10.51

The silver platter containing cold tea and a half-eaten scone stood forgotten on the table next to the lord's chair.

After seeing Hakon, who had collapsed on Barbara's lap like a weak mannequin, he had been watching the GRID stiffly. Although he knew about the precautions, he was nevertheless convinced that the air-shirt hadn't saved Hakon.

Following the arrival of Russ and the others, who moved through the zoo to the office as fast as they could, he looked sadly at Hakon's white face. After making a strange move, the image had been dead still for a long time, which meant that the glasses lying on Hakon's chest were not moving from his breathing.

While the aristocrat was staring at the GRID, Sandra was busy in the background processing all the messages about Onawa, the denouement in the bunker and the FBI activities in chronological order. Her subroutines SPY, CRYPTO and ANALYSE worked together in full harmony to process all the information. Scenarios were quickly recalculated, assessed and based on the position of the GAIAS members, she concluded that this information should be treated with the highest priority.

While the lord, after seeing the developments in KSB's bunker, wiped the sweat off his forehead with an immaculate white handkerchief, Sandra had calculated the danger that would soon arise. Lord MacMarkland, watching Tim, Arda and Onawa, jumped with horror when Onawa jumped up like a jack-in-a-box, pulled the rearing horse and galloped off with a cry.

At the same time he heard Sandra's voice, which informed him of the imminent danger.

< 10.52

Kingsize Bob, unaware of the fact that he was being chased, loved being in the saddle again. He could feel that his horse was in the mood for it and as soon as he had left the stable, he had let the animal continue at a relaxed gallop. Partly because of the precisely tailored saddle, he could let himself be swayed to the rhythm in a comfortable way. In the meantime he thought it all over.

If he wanted to disappear completely, he could not take any more risks. As soon as he was on the plane, all he had to do was give his lawyer a signal to make sure that his wife and sons would receive the sealed envelopes.

After that, R.J. VanderBeek IV would cease to exist, to seamlessly adopt the new identity that was waiting for him in Mexico. Curious as to whether he could see anything of the action he had ordered his foremen to take, he looked back. Apart from the expected result, the enormous herd of cattle, he clearly saw two horsemen chasing him. That was unbelievable, he thought, amused. Those shitheads just didn't know when to stop. He knew that his eyes were trying to deceive him, otherwise he would think that it was Hakon himself who was chasing after him. Oh, well, he'd show them something. His horse could easily stay ahead of all the others. At least that should be the case, he thought grimly.

It was not his intention to walk into his self-set trap. With his eyes narrowed, he paid out the reins a little and spurred his horse on.

< 10.53

Hakon could ride pretty well, but without a saddle it was a lot more difficult and he had quite some difficulty maintaining his pace. He had only allowed himself the time to put a bit in the horse's mouth and saw VanderBeek slowly drawing away.

Before he could think of an alternative, Sandra updated him on Onawa's imminent danger and escapade, while at the same time he saw that he was being overtaken by her. Onawa, who hung deep over her horse's neck, her face drawn, didn't even look at him as she passed him at high speed. He saw that even without saddle and reins Onawa had full control over the animal, which made him realize that he would never overtake either her or VanderBeek. He held back his horse and let it walk gently. "Sandra, what are the alternatives? What could Onawa be up to?"

"Well, I know what Onawa is up to," Marilyn replied. "She's on the hunt for VanderBeek's scalp. I'm already in pursuit and will see what I can do, but I think the help of our three brothers is needed soon, otherwise I'm afraid Onawa will get hold of him, with all the consequences that entails."

< 10.54

At the same time that KSB gave his horse the spurs, it was as if hell had burst loose in the command truck near his ranch. As soon as Sandra had informed Lord MacMarkland of the danger of the runaway cattle, she had immediately taken the initiative to minimize the damage on all fronts.

She had informed her GAIAS men and had also warned all FBI agents. She had explained to the men who were heading to the ranch on foot where they could best hide.

The remaining SUV-drivers were ordered to place their cars in front of the command vehicle, to create the best possible buffer. Although two of them, seeing the upcoming herd, were panicking and wanted to speed off in an SUV, she managed to convince all the drivers.

They managed it just in time.

As the last driver jumped into the command vehicle and slammed the door behind him, the approaching rumble turned into a huge thunder, only to turn into an insane pandemonium of shaking, crunching and shrieking of metal to metal a few seconds later, when the first animals crashed into the SUV-barrier.

At the same time, many animals had broken through the fence and the runaway cattle ran en masse into the minefield. Although some managed

to avoid the explosives, the others lost one or more legs when they activated the foot mines.

However, the pressure from behind was so great that the tidal wave of flesh and bones persisted without significant delay, with animals even trying to climb over the SUVs, falling over them, slipping and ending up with swinging legs on and next to the command vehicle. As they were shaken violently back and forth, dents appeared everywhere and all the windows were shattered.

In addition to the terrible stench of torn flesh, blood, shit and dust, which drifted unhindered into the command vehicle, the men in hiding were bombarded with the distressed bellows of the cattle in agony and pain.

< 10.55

After Sandra's warning, Tim quickly grabbed all of Onawa's belongings and ran with Tony and Arda through the stable to the east exit, where they had left the helicopter.

Together they raced out of the stable. Tim saw that Sandra had already activated the helicopter and as soon as he was in his seat, the rotors started to move fast.

Meanwhile, Tjan, Russ and Barbara came out of the champion's room as if the devil was on their heels. While Tjan helped Barbara get in a little later, Tim shouted: "Tjan, you did close the doors inside, didn't you? Because we really can't lose that library." "You and your old junk," his brother responded abruptly. "Now take off quickly, otherwise we'll run out of time. Be careful, man. I don't trust that storming mass at all." "Okay, easy, easy," Tim answered soothingly. "I have everything under control." In the distance he saw a group of men running towards them, with a growing dust cloud behind them. A threatening rumble rolled ahead of them.

"Sandra! A group of men is coming our way. We can't take them all with us! What now?"

"Don't worry, Tim," he heard her say in his ear. "I have already instructed them to hide in the champion's room. You, on the other hand, must now

fly to the main gate as soon as possible. Halfway there is special FBI agent Decker. We can't reach him, and given his speed, he won't make it in time. Before you fly on to Hakon, you have to pick him up. You have 2 minutes to get him and 5 minutes before Hakon is in danger."

The rotors had reached the right speed and Tim took off quickly. On the screen next to the control stick he had a good view on what was happening in the passenger cabin.

It appeared Sandra had also instructed his brother and he had to chuckle when he saw Tjan struggling to get himself into the hoist harness. The straps barely fitted to his enormous chest.

"Tim, I'm about to winch down. I need 50 feet of cable. Is that possible?" Tim gave his brother an affirmative answer and operated the winch. At the same time, he had the right sliding door click out of its safety mechanism, causing the door to slide open slowly.

While flying in a straight line to the FBI man, he was watching Tjan, who clicked the steel hook of his vest on the guide mechanism of the cable motor and dropped himself out of the helicopter.

As he flew as quietly as possible, he saw the FBI man approaching quickly. It was apparent that the man had given up. He was puny and helpless in the face of the inevitably approaching dark bovine tsunami, which caused a huge cloud of dust.

This is going to be a tricky job, Tim mumbled to himself. Through the intercom he warned his passengers to fasten their seatbelts and lash them securely.

They had to be prepared for the fact that he had to make a few sharp turns and that a lot of dust would blow into the cabin. It would be tight and if he could pick up Decker in time, he would have to fly somewhat blind through the thick cloud of dust. Through the external cameras he saw Tjan hanging from the cable on his screen. His brother had lowered himself and now floated about two feet above the ground. With great concentration Tim succeeded in directing Tjan precisely towards Decker's location.

Through his earpiece he heard Tjan say: "We have only one shot at this, Tim. It's going to be tight in terms of time, so stay focused. If this guy

suddenly runs away, I'm dependent on your steering skills.”

< 10.56

FBI Special Agent Decker had made it halfway down the driveway and was forced to stop. Years of desk work and excessive pizza consumption had taken its toll.

He was barely able to gasp for air, had a stabbing pain in his side and a heart that made a rumbling sound and felt as if it wanted to jump out of his chest. His whole body seemed to be trembling.

As he panted trying to catch his breath, he began to realize that the vibration was not self-inflicted, but came from the ground on which he stood, and that the rumbling sound of his heart came from behind.

Alarmed he looked back.

All physical discomfort was immediately overshadowed by an emerging panic, when he saw what was causing that trembling and rumbling. He did not know that his walkie-talkie had died, but even if Sandra had been able to inform him, he would still have known that it was a hopeless affair.

The herd was too close and the ranch too far away. His panic turned to resignation when he realized it was a hopeless situation, from which he had no chance to escape. He could only watch helplessly, desperately and motionlessly as that swelling mob thundered towards him like a train. He could already look the front row of completely twisted, drooling beasts in the eye. An overwhelming feeling of sadness struck him. This was it, he thought, sadly. A few more seconds at the most, it would be over for him. Sadly, he closed his eyes, remembered the faces of his family, and was thinking of saying goodbye, when he was hit in the back. All the air was squeezed out of his lungs. Immediately thereafter it seemed as if a firm band was tightened around his chest and he got the feeling that he had ended up in a nutcracker. He experienced a feeling of déjà vu when a familiar voice shouted “GO” in his ear and he was pulled up. In Tjan’s arms he suddenly flew right over the herd and was surrounded by an enormous sound of roaring, mooing cattle, with a rain of dust hitting his

face. He had the feeling that he had ended up in a runaway vehicle of a roller coaster.

With every squeaky breath a filthy sludge seemed to crawl into his mouth and his skin seemed to be being rubbed with sandpaper. It seemed an eternity before it came to an end and he could see that he and Tjan were hanging on a helicopter. As they drifted west, they were hoisted up.

< 10.57

To give the horse a chance, Hakon had jumped off and had removed the bit. A firm slap on the grey-white rump would have been enough to chase the Schimmel into the prairie. The animal would be able to avoid the loose cattle with ease. As if a sandstorm was imminent, he saw a broad, dark spot looming in the distance. Just above it hung a dot which quickly grew in size and which he recognized a little later as their helicopter.

Waiting patiently, he listened to Sandra, who kept him informed. He sighed with relief when he heard that Jerry Decker had been rescued just in time. However, the news about Onawa, who had managed to close up to VanderBeek, who in turn repeatedly tried to shoot her, was of great concern to him. Frustrated that there was nothing he could do now, and certainly not at all confident about the outcome, he said: "Sandra, this is taking too long. Can you get Tim to fly directly to VanderBeek, so that Tony and Tjan can assist Onawa?"

"No!", Marilyn shouted immediately. "That won't work. That herd is too close to you, they'll never make it in time. I already know a way to help Onawa. Make sure you're picked up and then fly to her as soon as possible."

< 10.58

Once hoisted into the helicopter, FBI Special Agent Jerry Decker sat strapped in his seat, recovering from the collision with Tjan. Everything hurt and with a taste in his mouth as if he had eaten cow dung, he looked wonderingly at Russ and Barbara, who didn't look much better. Through

the headphones Russ had put on Jerry's head, he heard an ultra-short summary of what those two had been through.

He now understood that they were on their way to pick up Hakon. This was immediately executed, as suddenly the helicopter tacked and they hung at an angle of 45 degrees.

It made his breakfast come up. In fact, he had the feeling that he was puking the contents of his whole stomach ... right on Russ's shoes. Despite his miserable condition, he saw how Tjan, hanging beneath him, picked up Hakon in a flowing movement, after which the helicopter immediately ascended, tilting. The other half of his stomach ended up on his own feet.

< 10.59

In Amsterdam, Marilyn had immediately realized what Onawa was up to. For sure, she wanted to settle an account. The trance she was in was meant to mentally prepare her for it. As soon as she had seen that Onawa was taking action, she had let the golden eagle take off from the grass and had sent him on full power behind the riders. The bird was a lot faster than a horse and it didn't take long for the eagle to pass Hakon and reach the other two riders shortly afterwards. On the display she saw Onawa hanging deep over the neck of her steed and continuously whispering something in its ear.

Slowly but surely she saw her lover catching up with VanderBeek. Tense as a bow and with a knot of tension in her stomach she focused on operating the joystick. In the back of her mind, an idea arose as to how she might end the chase.

However, she wanted to wait as long as possible, until Tony and Tjan were around, so that they could help Onawa, or rather, save her from performing a horrible act. If

Onawa had the chance to carry out the honor killing, she too would get blood on her hands. As far as she was concerned, the rancher deserved a gruesome punishment, but she had to try to prevent Onawa from being the executor.

The eagle now flew about 30 feet behind Onawa, and Marilyn had a good view of VanderBeek, who was now beginning to show signs of despair. Frightened and powerless, she could only watch while he tried to shoot Onawa.

Although the agile Indian managed to withstand his attack, Marilyn was afraid that a stray bullet would do its job, or that this guy would hit the horse.

Hoping that Tony and Tjan would get there in time - by now she had seen on the other screen that they had already picked up Hakon - she decided not to wait any longer. As she shouted to Sandra, "I know how to end the chase," she put the eagle in top gear. The bird shot past the horses like a comet.

Marilyn looked sideways at the screen where the camera images of the helicopter were shown.

The eagle now flew at a height of 300 feet and was about 100 feet in front of the riders. She kept a close eye on VanderBeek and yes, he turned around to Onawa again.

This was her chance. She had the bird do half a somersault, gave a few firm strokes with the wings, then pulled them in and sent the eagle down at almost 200 miles per hour, straight towards the approaching VanderBeek. Keeping the focus on his horse, she saw its head fill the entire display at lightning speed. NOW!

She skillfully operated the joystick and had the eagle make an emergency stop by simultaneously pointing the tail downwards and spreading both wings and tail widely.

She let the eagle hang in the air with its claws outstretched and open mouth right in front of the horse's head, with frantically flapping wings. As she stared at the display, she felt sorry for the innocent animal, which was startled to death, and jumped away sideways from full gallop with fearfully rolling eyes, its left front leg buckling underneath it as it went.

Onawa had only one goal in mind, and that was to make sure that she could catch the enemy at all costs.

Something had, as it were, snapped within her when, while waiting in the stable, she followed the group's progress through her tablet pc and was suddenly confronted by that rancher's story of shooting the chief. When he triumphantly pointed to that painting on which she had immediately recognized her great-grandfather, VanderBeek had opened a deep black page of her family history. She knew that image all too well.

The murder of the chief had caused the tribe to be driven out of the valley, a beautiful, fertile area, where they had lived since time immemorial.

Half of the tribe disappeared and the rest had since led a languid existence in a dry in an infertile part of Texas.

That black day was commemorated every year during the pipe ceremony. In a closed teepee (*a cone-shaped Indian tent, made of bison skins or canvas on a wooden tripod*) the pipe tomahawk was smoked, which was filled with certain mind-altering herbs.

This allowed them to come into contact with the spirits of their ancestors.

In the middle of the teepee was the medicine man, who, while telling the story, held up a rawhide with exactly the same image as the one on VanderBeek's painting.

During this ceremony, each member of the tribe again took the sacred oath to avenge the murder.

As soon as - after seeing the painting - she realized who the man was descended from, she knew that she was the right person. A kind of veil had fallen over her mind that had sent her into a trance.

The same trance she had experienced every year for the last 21 years.

Again and again she had solemnly repeated the oath of blood and begged her ancestors to assist her in this sacred task.

That she had been chosen to avenge the tribe was obvious when VanderBeek galloped out of the stable right past her. In a flash her trance was broken.

This was her moment!

The horse must have sensed her furious will, because it ran as fast as the wind, so she was now right on his heels.

She used all her skills to avoid the bullets that her enemy fired at her and was sure that her ancestors were protecting her.

She wasn't hit once.

Sharply focused, she encouraged the horse, to push it to its full potential, while at the same time shifting from left to right on the back of her steed and leaning close to the flanks to make herself as small as possible. As soon as she saw that the man was looking forward again, she sat up.

Having avoided a salvo twice already, she knew she had to come up with a plan of attack quickly, before her prey would get lucky.

While riding she had already seen the golden eagle flying by and knew that Marilyn was watching her. However, she also knew that she was completely on her own, because everyone was too far away to actually be able to do anything.

But there she had underestimated Marilyn's inventiveness, and to her great joy she soon understood what her sweetheart was up to with the bird. She held back her horse and a little later saw her enemy crash, horse and all. Triumphant she galloped to the scene, stopped her rearing steed and jumped from the horse with a terrifying cry to land close to the vast body of her enemy.

< 10.61

Just like in the helicopter, in The Hague, Scotland and Amsterdam they witnessed the events in the Texas prairie on the screens. The helicopter camera, operated from Scotland by Sandra, had perfectly captured the last part of Onawa's catch-up race.

Full of admiration for Onawa's horsemanship, Lémarc wondered where Hakon had conjured such friends from. Just as this woman risked her life, they apparently went through fire for him. Where on earth did you get such people? The large bird of prey that appeared behind the two horsemen immediately attracted his attention.

A golden eagle! You didn't see those very often. So he thought it was a pity when the bird, like an arrow from a bow, disappeared from the picture diagonally upwards, only to reappear a moment later. Unbelievably he stared at the screen, on which the bird scared the horse so much that it misstepped and rolled over.

As a horse lover Lémarc feared the worst and he was terribly relieved when the animal got up and galloped towards its freedom. For VanderBeek, who was shot out of the saddle like an unguided projectile and smashed to the ground with a terrible smack, he didn't feel sorry.

The arch criminal had nowhere to go. He could now be easily arrested. Relieved that the battle was over, he saw how Onawa's horse came to a rearing standstill, and the Indian jumped flexibly from its back.

He leaned back relaxed, but immediately sat forward, alarmed, when he saw her land next to VanderBeek with her axe raised.

< 10.62

On the GRID, Lord MacMarkland had a full view of the entire situation from every angle via all screens. So he knew that the SWAT teams had reached the champion's room and that both Jerry Decker and Hakon had been picked up.

The damage a frantic herd could do was shown in razor-sharp detail, but on seeing Onawa's fanatical chase, it was more than clear to the lord that the nerve-racking action was not over yet.

Very troubled, he had come to know a completely different Onawa in the past few minutes.

A belligerent woman, who had a bloody account to settle. Again, something that hadn't been indicated in the scenario at all.

Another unexpected turn that made him hold on to his heart. Especially when KSB suddenly turned around and started shooting at her. Now he knew for sure that this could never end well. The earlier pride in the awesome performance of his GAIAS-people was completely overshadowed by the danger in which Onawa found herself. He didn't

have to give up, Sandra let him know, as Marilyn had already taken action.

He couldn't imagine what their blond wonder woman wanted to do with the golden eagle, until he saw the bird diving down and KSB biting the dust over his horse's head.

The broad smile on his face disappeared immediately at the sight of Onawa, who knelt down next to KSB with her tomahawk raised. "Sandra! What is she going to do?", he cried out, desperately concerned. The answer came immediately.

"Marilyn says that Onawa, according to old custom, is going to disgrace an enemy of her tribe by taking his scalp. That scalping is the removal of the skull skin with a tuft of hair and a..." "Yes, stop it," Lord MacMarkland suddenly said, tired. "It has been bloody enough already. We have to prevent more bloodshed." For a moment there was silence. "Unfortunately, milord, there is nothing we can do," Sandra said quietly.

< 10.63

... Scalping ... Her enemy was down and wouldn't escape her anymore. Thanking her ancestors for their support and the fact that they had given her the honor, she jumped resolutely from her horse. As soon as she had solid ground under her feet, Onawa knelt down beside her enemy, in accordance with the ritual, grabbed the rogue's full bunch of hair with her left hand and pulled his head upwards to use her great-great-grandfather's tomahawk to cut the scalp loose.

To her amazement she pulled the hair off his head, instead of pulling the head itself. She was only a hair's breadth away, or she would have tumbled backwards.

Dazed, she looked down on the shiny, bald head. A wig!

That big cattle farmer wore a wig. He was as bald as a billiard ball!

In the hairless face the eyes stared at her blankly, and a quick check revealed to Onawa that her enemy was no longer alive.

Apparently he had broken his neck, because the bald head was just dangling.

Her enemy was already dead and a hairless scalp was worthless. The ritual no longer had any value, she realized disappointed. In one fell swoop she felt all the anger and all the energy drain out of her.

With a mix of sadness and disgust on her face, she threw the wig away. Intensely tired she stood up and became aware of her surroundings.

She knew she had ridden like a madman, but where was her horse? Her eyes searched the area and she saw the animal running across the plain. She also immediately saw why it had fled and why she could stand still without being trampled.

Their helicopter was already landing. Moments later she saw Hakon and Tjan jumping out. As soon as she could, she ran towards her friends.

< 10.64

“Whew,” Lémarc heard next to him. He felt a gust of wind along his cheek when Jean sighed tremendously. “Man, man. What a sensation. Compared to the CINEMA here in The Hague, Hollywood looks like a small studio. Such an operation as this ... Man!

Hollywood could learn from that.

If I hadn't seen it myself, I wouldn't bel...”

“Shh, Jean,” hissed Lémarc somewhat annoyed.

“Hakon is still busy.”

On the big screen he saw Tjan and Onawa get into the chopper and Hakon run to VanderBeek. Lémarc held his breath. The trembling mass of cattle that grew rapidly behind his boss, seemed dangerously close by.

He saw Hakon kneel down and turn VanderBeek's body, with the man's head moving along at a strange angle. Hakon's hands slid over the body and held still by the neck. “Lémarc, Operation ‘Non quod videtur’ ends here. The leader has been eliminated. I don't feel a heartbeat, his eyes are dull and his head is at a strange angle. I think he broke his neck.”

As the sound of Hakon's voice was increasingly drowned out by the thunder of the approaching herd, Hakon rushed on: "I can't take the body with me. There is not enough time. We have to leave right now."

Hakon's running figure seemed insignificant against the broad front of the incoming herd.

The cloud of dust that had been thrown up soon obscured any view and the screen became increasingly grey, until it turned black a little later.

< 10.65

In the castle room Lord MacMarkland followed the last images on the GRID. Their operation 'Non quod videtur' had come to an end, as Hakon had already said. Not as planned, it would have been better if they could have brought VanderBeek IV to justice, but it had come to an end nonetheless.

Concerned he saw Hakon get up and quickly pick up KSB's saddlebags and the fallen eagle, to run to the chopper. He saw him dive in, while the aircraft was already lifting off the ground. Hakon's legs were not even on board when the chopper ascended and flew away just over KSB's lifeless body.

The last images came in through the rear camera, showing the huge herd in flight. Without any regard for the person it trampled over their former owner.

Thank God the dust that had been thrown up obscured the sight. The GRID didn't show any more images, only a wall of informative text. By now he had square eyes. Tired he poured a glass of one of his best whiskies. He didn't want to read anymore.

Slowly sipping, he said: "Saundra. My eyes have no more to give. Can you give me an overview of the last loose ends?"

"Yes, sir," came the answer immediately. "First of all, a quick inventory showed that all SWAT members were able to avoid the runaway herd. The remaining drivers had a hard time in the command car, but are, apart from an exciting experience richer, otherwise unharmed."

Second ...”, three screens were now also reactivated, “... the FBI has fully picked up Don Enzo and his men from the warehouse according to the scenario.

On the basis of the information provided, some people have already been arrested and the others are being searched for. It will take months of work to dismantle the entire Don organization.” “A painful blow to organized crime there,” the lord agreed. “Indeed, sir,” Sandra responded politely.

“Finally, I am sorry to have to tell you that the local sheriff could not stay ahead of the herd. He didn’t make it.” “Well, that’s sad,” he agreed. Rather he than one of us, he thought guiltily. “I assume that his body and that of KSB will still be retrieved?” “Of course, sir.”

“Good. I’ll leave it up to you to take care of everything and to provide everyone with the right information. I’m going to have something to eat now.” “Excellent, sir. All the necessary departments have been involved and all the relevant information is being distributed at the moment. Enjoy your meal.” “Thank you, Sandra. Oh yes, before I forget. Would you also like to compile an overview of all the circumstances in which the developments differed from the scenario? I also want to have your opinion on this, so we can discuss this in the group next time.” He heard Sandra’s confirmation and took a last sip. Stiff from sitting for a long time, he stood up, after which he left the castle room, tired but satisfied.

< 10.66

With her eyes wide open, Marilyn stared at the terrible consequences of her action. Her thoughts seemed to revolve around just one point like a vortex.

She had killed a man ... She had murdered a human being ... She had... Joost’s warm hand, which rubbed her back comfortingly, slowly brought her back to herself. “Oh, Joost ... I only wanted to protect Onawa ... And now, now it’s me who ...” “Shhh. Be quiet now. I know what you’re thinking and you’re wrong. Look at me.” Will-less she did what he said. “That the rancher was a lousy rider who couldn’t even fall off a horse properly, ab-so-lu-te-ly can’t be blamed on you.

By the way, a criminal of that magnitude would have gotten life anyway, which for such a person is equal to the death penalty. You are not to blame. There is no doubt about that.” He pulled her along and pushed her into her favorite armchair.

“I know what you need now. Just sit here for a while, I’ll be right back.” “Well, I’m not an invalid,” she said grumpily to his back, which already disappeared downstairs.

As she thought about Joost’s words, she had to admit that he was right. But no matter how she turned it around, she was definitely the one who had set VanderBeek’s death in motion. She. No one else. As she began to get her thoughts straight, she realized that her action at that moment had been the only available option to protect Onawa. The thought that this had at least succeeded gave her comfort.

In the meantime, Joost had returned with two steaming mugs. “Here, drink this and watch out, for it is hot. An old family recipe of coffee, cognac, herbs and some cream.

After this you will feel like you have been reborn.”

The drink did indeed work wonders. They drank together in silence and a glowing heat spread throughout her body.

Relaxed, she nestled deeper into the armchair. She smiled when she remembered Joost’s words.

As usual, he hadn’t beat around the bush, and in his own way he had hit the nail on the head.

Completely absorbed in her own thoughts, she hadn’t noticed that Joost walked away with a smile on his face and told deaf ears that he would pick her up in two hours for dinner.

< 10.67

At UNBI in The Hague it remained dead quiet for a while as the big screen remained black.

Lémarc had already risen to speak when Jean raised his voice and shouted: “Well, that will be some report, to describe all this. Yours truly is

looking for volunteers. Who?" As the murmur increased, Lémarc saw him looking around in a belligerent manner.

He was just about to calm Jean down, when Pierre's laser printer started to squeak and the first sheets of paper were printed. Lémarc changed course and walked towards it.

Pierre, however, was ahead of him and already grabbed the papers out of the box.

He looked at the first sheet and shouted: "Jean! You have your answer immediately. Sandra tells us that she is now sending us a report of the entire undercover operation, from the moment that Hakon had gotten Casanova in his sights. The documents will fully comply with UNBI and Interpol standards."

Lémarc quietly held up his hand and silently took over Pierre's sheets. Quickly he let his eyes glide over the papers and he had to admit that Pierre's claim was true. Hakon's friends turned out to be quite capable, he thought admiringly. "Excellent," nodded Lémarc, keeping his face straight.

"But tell me, Pierre," he said kindly. "You've been in contact with this Sandra almost all day.

Can you tell me who she really is?" "She?", Pierre answered enthusiastically. "She is the woman I want to marry! I can discuss any subject with her. She knows how to surprise me time and again with her knowledge. She's even too fast for me with the computer, and then that wonderful voice ... Oh, yes. Yes, she is the woman of my dreams..."

< 10.68

They had passed the herd and Hakon saw the gate of VanderBeek's ranch looming out of the thinning dust cloud. Well, the remains of it anyway. The dust whirled up again when they landed in front of the two SUV's that had taken the first hit for the command vehicle. And you could tell.

Both vehicles were completely destroyed and out of the windshield of one of them came the hind legs of a longhorn, which had landed there and

was still trying to free itself with kicking legs.

“Saundra ...”, began Hakon. “Already arranged, Hakon. Emergency services, including a veterinarian, are already on their way.”

Stupid question, Hakon thought immediately.

After all, nothing escaped their Saundra.

Of the main gate only the foundations were left and the previously impenetrable barrier was also almost gone. Only the concrete obstacles that had been part of it were still standing. Everywhere he looked, there were dozens of carcasses of which one or more legs were missing, which had been haphazardly dropped somewhere. Torn muscles, exposed bones, masses of blood and smelly dirt ... The cruel harvest of landmines.

It was a gruesome scene that he would not easily forget. The enormous pressure of the runaway herd had caused the command vehicle to move several feet, which had made it hit a landmine. The front wheel was nowhere to be seen. It might have been under the mountain of raw meat, in which he could hardly recognize a cow. The others came out of the vehicle and Hakon was only now aware of what his companions looked like.

In their wake was a filthy smell, which was difficult to describe. A mixture of sweet, sour, bitter and rancid came closest. Even the always impeccable Tim stood there like a tramp. And what about Jerry? The man smelled and looked as if he had participated in a rodeo. His eyes were still wild in his spotty face.

He took him aside for a moment. “Are you all right, Jerry?”

“Everything still intact and in place?” Jerry nodded. “Really, Hakon. I was convinced that my last hour had come. I saw my life pass by in a flash and had completely given up hope.” Hakon saw his face brighten up when Jerry continued: “But at the same time my eyes were opened. I’m going to live healthier, play sports, spend more time with my family. In a year’s time, you won’t recognize me.”

“As soon as we have completed this operation, I’ll take twelve full months of unpaid leave. I’m sure the FBI will be fine without me.” Hakon was pleased to see the resilience return to Jerry’s face.

“Say, Jerry, about Barbara ...”

Together, they discussed the necessary arrangements to protect Barbara from the ruthless press, especially which parts of Barbara’s adventure could be made public.

After having also reminded Russ and Barbara of what they could and couldn’t say, he said goodbye to them.

Together with Tim he made a round of the ranch. Both the main building and the stables had been damaged, but - he saw Tim’s sour face brighten up when Sandra told them about it - the champion’s room and library turned out to be undamaged and completely intact.

FINALLY ... ?

< 11.01

It was a week after the operation 'Non quod videtur' and the room was full of noise, caused by the presence of protagonists from all official institutions that had been involved in the unraveling of Spiderweb.

The spacious Japanese hall of the Peace Palace, a fairy-tale like space named after the wall coverings of six large silk tapestries, which had been donated by the Japanese government when the palace was inaugurated, had been cleared especially for this afternoon.

After a short speech by Dick Holyester, in which he congratulated everyone on their success and in which he stressed the importance of collaborating organizations.

It was James Taylor who could not fail to make his contribution on behalf of Interpol as well. In his new Harris Tweed he stood proud as a peacock, full of dedication, relating what had happened to him since that memorable morning in the hospital.

He shamelessly used the opportunity to emphasize his acquired fame as a crimefighter. With great pride he let it be known that after he was elevated to the peerage for his services, his experiences would also be expressed in a book, of which it was already said that all the ingredients were present to make a bestseller of it.

But the best part was, he said with a smile from ear to ear, that it would also be filmed and a lot of top actors were already fighting about who would play his character for this blockbuster.

Hakon, Lémarc, Jean and Holger were enjoying themselves. Holger had to laugh. "That's James in a nutshell. Man, what an ego."

"Tell me about it," Lémarc sighed. "I had to listen to that preening for two months. It's slowly making me sick."

"But nevertheless, he did deserve it," replied Jean. "Because whatever you say about him, he's an enthusiastic policeman.

Only on the last day of his career he wasn't very lucky."

"Yes, you can say that again," Holger added. "That day is engraved in my memory forever. It's unbelievable how in a couple of hours, everything,

but really everything, can go wrong. Two very simple jobs completely screwed up.

If I didn't always sleep like a baby, I would have nightmares."

"Talking about nightmares," Lémarc said, nodding in the direction of Barbara and Russ.

"She had to endure most of us all. She has earned this nomination for 'the Pulitzer' twice over.

It was as if I was there when I read her story. That's how vividly it was described."

< 11.02

Outside the Peace Palace, the doorman at the top of the entrance stairs was enjoying the sunshine, when a rental car drove along the driveway and stopped in front of the palace.

A slender, dark-haired woman stepped out.

Although she was dressed modestly, she radiated such authority that he unconsciously smoothed the jacket of his uniform, pulled in his belly and stood up straight.

He saw her say goodbye to the driver, after which the car drove away.

The woman did not go straight on, but continued to look closely at the neo-Renaissance facade for a while, which gave him the opportunity to observe her in detail. The sunlight made copper sparks flash in the dark hair and seemed to change the color of her skin into gold. As soon as she looked aside, he saw her profile.

Nice jawline, nice chin and a small but powerful nose. He searched his memory, but couldn't imagine in which part of the world this woman could have been born.

The woman walked - strode, he would almost say - with the natural elegance of a queen to the entrance, where he had been in charge for thirty years.

In all these years, he had seen many beautiful and famous women passing by during receptions and gatherings.

Although those ladies were dressed in the most beautiful creations, from their artfully cut hair to their expensive designer shoes, this woman, in her modest clothes, overshadowed them with ease.

In the meantime, the lady had reached the Andvik granite staircase and in the same elegant way she ascended the ten steps until she stood in front of him.

The most sparkling eyes he had ever seen looked at him enchantingly. In fluent English, with a barely noticeable Spanish accent, she asked where she could sign up for an appointment with a childhood friend of hers who worked in the palace.

Although he was used to speaking to and guiding visitors, this time he was only able to tell her with a nod and an arm gesture where she should be.

He hit himself mentally over the head as he saw her walking to the reception.

< 11.03

“Well, Holger?”, asked Barbara, who had been running towards him. “What have I heard? Did you say farewell to your guns and have you left EUAT92?”

He nodded cheerfully. “Yes, it was time for something else. That day I had literally and figuratively reached my limit. I’m ready for a new challenge. I got a nice offer as head of security at Markland Communications.”

He put the half-empty glass of beer to his lips and drank it in one go. Barbara congratulated him warmly. “But aren’t you afraid that such a job will soon bore you?”

Holger grinned widely. “I hope so, because for the time being I’m done with it. I could use some rest.” He was still in blissful ignorance of everything that would await him soon.

“Well,” Jean interfered in the conversation. “The man got a hole in his arm and immediately thinks he’s elderly. Such an office job is, of course,

a godsend. Right, Holger?”

All three of them laughed. Holger, who held up his empty glass, said: “Come on, guys. We’re going to get another drink, yes?”

Lémarc, who, to his surprise, saw Dr. Swart standing in a corner of the room, graciously declined and curiously walked over to the doctor.

“Hello, Doctor. You also here?” “Ha, Lémarc. Yes. I was somewhat surprised by the invitation and despite the fact that I am very busy, I could not resist.

I always wanted to see the Peace Palace from the inside and this is an opportunity not to be missed.

I don’t know where to look, so much beauty and splendor. It’s a pity that the name of such a beautiful building doesn’t cover the contents of the organization that’s based in it.

Unfortunately, peace on earth is still a long way off.

The fact that you have dismantled this Spiderweb organization is in any case a good start. Congratulations. Nice work.” Lémarc shook the hand that Swart had given him. “Yes, we can be satisfied.

We managed to eliminate the entire organization within two days, and the eventual elimination of the leader caused a lot of controversy.” The horrible scene was still clear in his mind. He didn’t want to go into it any further and quickly changed the subject.

“So, what’s it like in the hospital?”

“There everything is slowly returning to normal, at least, if you can describe the work of an ED as normal. Because of this anonymous donation, we have plenty of resources to repair everything.

It was such a generous donation that those directly involved could also be compensated, such as one of our main nurses, not to mention her husband.”

Lémarc, who by now knew who had taken care of this, carefully kept his face straight. “Oh yes, those poor people. How are they doing now?”, he asked with interest. “They’re doing good, considering the circumstances. It will take some time, but financially they don’t have to worry.

They are currently enjoying a rest cure in Switzerland. As soon as they are back, they can start enjoying their retirement if they want to. That's all well taken care of."

The doctor remained silent for a moment. "How's that Jens, by the way?", he asked with concern.

"I heard that he has been transferred to a clinic in Scotland? Lémarc nodded. "That's right, but unfortunately there is no improvement yet. I know that a specialist from Canada will be examining him soon. At the moment we can only hope that there will be an improvement in Jens' condition."

The doctor nodded compassionately, but his face immediately brightened when Lémarc asked him about the elderly ex-Interpol inspector. "Fortunately, Jan de Jong is moving in the right direction. As soon as I informed him of Hakon's er ... resurrection, as it were, he recovered visibly. He's going to be alright. A strong old man, you know!" "Beautiful, beautiful," Lémarc reacted with joy. "That will do Hakon good, because he's quite worried that things had gotten so out of hand." In the meantime,

Dick Holyester had come to stand with them, and he had politely waited for them to finish speaking.

"Lémarc, if you have some time in a minute, I'd like to talk to you in John's room with Hakon." "All right, Dick. I'll find Hakon and come as soon as possible."

He said goodbye to Swart and walked to the other side of the room, where Hakon was talking to Barbara and Russ. Hakon had already seen him, understood Lémarcs' gesture and said goodbye to the other two. "Dick wants to see us," Lémarc told Hakon, whereupon the two of them left the room.

< 11.04

After she had checked in at the reception, she sat down in one of the comfortable chairs in the hall. She stretched her legs. She was half an hour early for her appointment and could use the time to relax.

The past period had been quite hectic. What a contrast, she thought when she looked around.

Less than twelve hours ago she was in a dilapidated hotel in Egypt, while now she could imagine that she was in a fairy tale country. She could hardly believe it, but she finally managed to fool Ravic and his mates and after a grueling week of waiting, waiting and waiting again, she had finally left Egypt, still with the SIM card in the secret compartment of her bra.

When she arrived in Amsterdam, she had taken off her wrinkled, dirty clothes and sweaty bra as soon as she could and had blissfully taken a long luxurious shower. It would have been a real pleasure to have been able to put on something clean.

Immediately after that she had made a copy and put the images on three different cloud servers, so that she could always access them later. After a quick sleep of barely two hours, she had already set out again, so as not to miss the appointment with her friend.

Miquel had rented a car and driven her here. He would also pick her up later and bring her to Schiphol Airport, because tonight she would fly to her grandmother, who had urged her to come as soon as possible. Her grandmother had not wanted to say what it was all about. She wondered

...

“Hey, how annoying ...” Frowning, she looked at her right hand, which she was unconsciously rubbing with her left hand.

She looked closely at her right hand but, except for the birthmark, there was nothing special to be seen. She bent and stretched her fingers.

Everything functioned exactly as it always did, except for the tickle. It wasn't really itchy, rather as if a small electric wire was running through it.

It was disturbing and although it seemed to get worse by the minute, she didn't find it so disturbing that she had to see the doctor immediately.

Maybe something with a nerve, or a vein.

As soon as she got home, she could always make an appointment with the doctor, if grandma didn't know a solution.

Because her grandmother had exactly the same stain in exactly the same place and she too, she knew, had complained about the itchy feeling

once in a while.

Her grandmother probably had a remedy for it. She smiled. How surprised she would be, just like her friend later, by her discovery.

She was very curious how the two of them would react to it and how they would interpret it. She could hardly wait.

She curbed her impatience, tried to ignore the tickle and got up.

She smoothed out her blouse and looked at the imposing hall and the marble staircase, which stood conspicuously in the center of the hall and gave access to all the floors.

During the flight from Egypt, she had read extensively about the Peace Palace and viewed the interior through a [virtual 360° tour on the Peace Palace website](#).

But words and pictures did not do justice to reality. In real life, it was almost indescribable how sublimely everything fit together. She was ecstatic.

Her second specialization was architecture and here she could indulge in the architectural masterpieces.

The arches, the pilasters, the Italian marble floor and the inlaid work of art 'Sol justitiae illustra nos'.

The whole thing made an overwhelming impression on her. She looked admiringly at the stairs, the golden candelabras and the marble statue.

According to the brochure she received from the clumsy receptionist, it was an allegorical representation of 'Peace through Justice' by the American sculptor O'Connor.

Walking further, she read that this work of art was a gift from the United States.

Slowly she walked up to the stairs with the exceptionally beautiful background, which consisted of a series of vaulted niches, containing seven large stained-glass windows, each of which represented a female figure.

She read with interest that this beautiful background was a Dutch work of art by Jan Schouten, from the Delft studio Prinsenhof.

< 11.05

On his way to John's room, Hakon could no longer control his curiosity. "Now confess, Lémarc. What's going on? You can fool everyone with that straight face of yours, but I've known you longer than today. I can understand that you're super satisfied with the outcome of Spiderweb, but that's not all, is it?"

There is more to it than that. Anyone would think you'd won the state lottery." Lémarc sighed once and gave in. "Not that it's any of your business, but okay. After a stressful operation, I always visit a pub, to come to my senses while enjoying a good glass.

I've been doing it since my NYPD days. I like that very much and I can recommend it to everyone. To my surprise I was disturbed there yesterday by a redheaded lady. The same one I tried to track down earlier." Hakon nodded. "Arda." Lémarc smiled.

"Exactly. Your Arda." He kept quiet for a moment and laughed. "The rest I leave to your imagination. All I can say is that she's lost a certain bet." Hakon laughed in a thunderous smile.

"You won't get bored with her, my friend. Know what you're getting into." "Said he, who rubs his hands continuously," Lémarc replied. "Do you secretly have a date of your own?"

Hakon's smile disappeared instantly. "I wish, but no. Since we got back from Texas, I have a strange, itchy feeling in my hand. I don't know what it is. It's not painful, it's rather annoying. I can't find anything on my hand and I've already asked the company doctor to examine it, but he couldn't find anything either.

The strange thing is that the tingling or itchiness only runs over my scar." He stopped Lémarc and showed his right hand. "The doctor could not give a definite answer. He thinks it might be a kind of allergic reaction that I suffered during the operation. Blood has been taken and hopefully something will come from it. I'll just have to wait and see."

They walked on. "Hmm", Lémarc said thoughtfully. "And you're the only one suffering from something?" Hakon nodded. "Yes, the others are, as

far as I know, fully fit.” Lémarc chuckled. “When it comes to Arda, I’m sure about that.”

When they were done laughing, Lémarc continued: “By the way, I’ve been wondering for a long time how you got that weird scar.” “Well, Hakon started. “Actually, it’s not a scar, but rather a birthmark, as my grandfather called it.

A family trait. Every male Eriksson has one.

I know about him and my father and it seems that his father had one too. Something genetic, I guess.”

By now they had reached John’s office.

After knocking, Hakon and Lémarc walked in, where Dick and John were waiting with a cup of coffee in their hands.

“Gentlemen, welcome,” Dick greeted them.

He pointed to the coffee table. “Serve yourselves.” Hakon only poured himself a cup, after Lémarc had indicated with a shake of his head that he did not want coffee.

“It’s good to have you here,” Dick started when all four of them were seated. “Due to a lack of time, I’ll start right away.

I thought quietly about our last conversation, in which we talked about the unknown organization that helped us unraveling Spiderweb.

I have to say that I am very happy with how it ended and that partly thanks to their help the number of dead and injured remained limited. But I am also very shocked at how deeply the Spiderweb organization was able to establish itself in all levels of politics and business.

Corruption occurs everywhere, but on this scale ...”

Dick’s face assumed a stern expression. “This is absolutely unacceptable. John and I have talked about it at length and all the evidence provided is sufficient to be able to convict all Spiderweb members who are still alive without the need to reveal the existence of the unknown organization in question.

Given the fact that Spiderweb could not be dismantled without their interference and that many lives have been saved thanks to their help, John and I see no need to do so.”

He looked at John, who nodded back briefly. “We both believe that mankind in general is better served by maintaining the current status quo. Needless to say that you two ...”, he looked at Hakon and Lémarc intently, “... will maintain sufficient influence to ensure that this organization adheres to the objectives, as previously described by Hakon. I am not in favor of a hidden agenda, but given the circumstances, I have no choice.

Outside the four of us, there is no one in the UN, including UNBI, who is aware of this arrangement. I suggest we keep it that way.”

Decisively, he put down his cup and saucer, nodded at Hakon and Lémarc and stepped out of the room together with John.

And again Sandra was right, Hakon thought. If Spiderweb-size crime was to be combated effectively, it was necessary to keep a group like GAIAS secret.

“Thank God,” sighed Lémarc, not knowing that he would have to change his image of ‘God’ in the foreseeable future.

“What you say, Lémarc,” Hakon agreed.

“By the way, we have to go. It’s a little late in the day. I promised my grandmother to be on time and I don’t want to disappoint her. Would you please pick up the others? Then we’ll see each other in the hall. See you in a minute.”

Hakon hurried to the stairs. He knew he wouldn’t regret having confided in Lémarc.

He, as well as Holger, Barbara and Russ, would meet the entire GAIAS group and would be invited to join; an idea of Lord MacMarkland, who wanted to make the group a bit bigger in composition.

In the meantime he had reached the stairs and as he walked down the stairs, he felt his smartphone vibrate.

On the display he saw that Marilyn had called him and that Tim had sent him a message that he stood ready with the Jaguar.

Busy answering, he hadn’t noticed that an oncoming visitor bent down in the curve of the stairs to pick up the brochure she had dropped. Although

the stairs were over 10 feet wide, coincidentally they were both on the same side and both were so distracted that they didn't notice each other.

The warning of the receptionist who shouted down: "Watch out!", came just too late. The woman shot upright in a shock and although Hakon reacted very quickly, he could not prevent himself from bumping into her. As he sought support, he let go of his smartphone and grabbed the banister.

With half an eye he followed his cell phone, which sailed down in an arc, then realized that he was too late. He fell forward and looked straight into the woman's face. Right into a pair of deep chestnut brown eyes, in which he thought he was drowning ...

The woman staggered backwards and instinctively he put his left arm around her waist. However, the collision was too violent and Hakon immediately realized that together they would lose their balance and roll down.

Without thinking, he grabbed her hand with his right hand. Immediately a tremor coursed through his whole body.

Every nerve in his body seemed to contract and in the back of his head he felt the same tickly feeling as in his hand. Nevertheless, he quickly pulled her close to him and, as if it were the best love scene ever, held her tightly against him. Like a spider who wrapped his prey, he folded his body around her and held her firmly.

In this way he protected the woman as much as possible while rolling down the stairs.

The thick carpet protected them from most of the harm, yet Hakon kept her head pressed against his chest.

He smelled the exotic scent of her hair, but could not place it. Nevertheless, it seemed very familiar to him in a strange way. At the same time all kinds of images flashed through his head. As if he was watching TV and zapping like crazy.

He lost all sense of time and reality, and his fall seemed to last forever. He didn't even feel the steps his body was bumping over.

Eventually they landed together on the marble floor, slid on for a while and remained intertwined exactly on the inlaid work of art. Not that Hakon

noticed this, because remarkable images still flashed past his mind's eye. As if he was watching a movie that was being fast-forwarded. Until that suddenly stopped and his earlier dream came into view, in which he saw his father standing on the other side of a ravine. However, this time it seemed more realistic and he had the feeling that he was physically experiencing it.

The other anomaly was that there was now a woman standing next to his father. She looked familiar to him and as he tried to concentrate on her, he heard his father's voice very clearly saying the same message.

The woman he was holding in his arms tried to free himself from him and pulled away.

The images disappeared like snow in the sun and he no longer felt that strange, itchy feeling in the back of his head. His head was instantly clear and suddenly he knew what had happened. As he repeated his father's message to himself, he checked his limbs. He didn't seem to have broken anything, but he'd be surprised if he didn't walk around in black spots and bruises for the coming week, because of that unfortunate tumble. As terrified voices came at them from all sides, he gently let go of the woman. Her shiny eyes looked at him inquisitively and immediately he felt that strange feeling shoot through his body again. They looked at each other, he stood up and knelt down by her, to make sure she was all right.

In Spanish she whispered: "¿Quién eres tu?" (*Who are you?*). Before he could answer, however, he saw her eyes turning away and she slackened. Frightened, he was pushed aside by someone and heard a voice asking if he needed help.

It did not really get through to him.

What the hell had happened, he wondered. Who was this woman? And who could that woman be who had stood next to his father? He was firmly convinced that these things had to do with each other and that his father might still be alive. Somehow he had made contact and passed on an important message. He had to ask his grandfather something. He had to ask his grandfather about the ship.

But what kind of ship?

That was the only thing he had not clearly understood.

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Prologue

A few light years from the sun, glittering dots of light danced towards each other.

The guards had received a signal.

Weak, but unmistakable ...

THE CONTINUATION

We hope you found the book fun and exciting and you'll let us know.

One of the nice things about writing a book is to know someone somewhere in the world owns it.

And what's even more fun... when the reader gives his appreciation with a (short) reaction.

We invite you to do so via our website.

Of course you can also do this at the website of the company where you bought the book.

But ... the story is **not** finished yet. In part two, Back-UP 'Bridge in time' we will continue on this path. If you think it can be even more fun, exciting, terrifying, mysterious or spectacular, then you won't be disappointed.

Curious?

Check out the website for the sequel.

We would love to see your reaction!

<https://everywhereconnected.com/>

See you then!

Bert & Wop

Why do we publish the book under our own management and why is the eBook free?

Dozens of English-language books are being published every day.

This is a very small part of the number of manuscripts that publishers receive. It is understandable that publishers therefore need a lot of time to separate the chaff from the wheat.

That is why we have decided to skip this long and uncertain process and to develop and sell the book entirely independently. Not to earn extra money, we are already satisfied if the sales of the paper version cover our costs, but to have control of it ourselves.

We want as many people as possible to be able to read the story.

For the best distribution you need satisfied readers, as well as a publishing house.

For international distribution we publish on Amazon.com, a self-publishing system that enables us to use this online publishing house to distribute and sell our eBook and paper book around the world.

But as a novice writer that's not all. You have to let the world know that you have written a book and advertising is essential for this.

That's why we decided to offer the eBook as a free promotion. In this way you can easily obtain it and give it away as a gift.

For this promotion we depend on word of mouth.

Would you like to help us with that?

You can do so by forwarding the link to our website, or giving away the free eBook.

Because ... after all, what is more fun than giving someone a gift?

Afterword

Of course, this book did not come about without help.

We would like to thank everyone who contributed in any way to our book. Of course our manuscript readers from the very beginning:

Greet Meesters, Marie-Pierre Havinga and Sietske Akster. We also thank Kitty Veerhuis and Bianca Rijdsdijk for their input during the follow-up inspection.

The cover of the book was designed by Qiao-Mei from graphical design agency Mei Visuals. She managed to translate our wishes to a catching design splendidly. Thank you Qiao-Mei for the pleasant cooperation.

And last but not least, we would like to thank [Martin Meijer](#) for the editorial adaptation of the current version. This editing was done at the same time he translated our book to English.

< BACK-UP > is the umbrella name of three books.

The title of book 1: 'As far as the world stretches'.

In Latin: 'Qua Patet Orbis' is also the motto of the [Dutch Marine Corps](#).

We chose this title, not only because Bert was a conscript marine and the story takes place on several continents, but also out of respect for the marines, who we call on for peace and security all over the world.

The picture of us was taken by Greet Meesters.

We have obtained the description of the Peace Palace via the public website of the Peace Palace.

For more info on the Marine Corps and the Peace Palace, please visit:

<https://everywhereconnected.com/enHOME/en.links.html>

For all other information we have drawn from our imagination and public resources over the Internet, such as Wikipedia.