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As far as the world stretches

Book 1

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Albertus P. Holtes & **Wopkje Sietsma**

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

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Wopkje Sietsma

Cover design: APH

Online Dutch debuted on 04-26-2018

1st print 2019

Book version BUP1.EN.I.H&S.2019.01

Publisher free e-book: Holtes & Sietsma

Publisher paperback: Holtes & Sietsma

International distribution through www.amazon.com

Dutch, Belgian and German version through www.amazon.de

Self-publishing author

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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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*This novel could be based on true facts.
Still, any resemblance to real events, existing places
and people, living or deceased, is merely coincidence.
Other than that, we leave it to the reader's imagination.*

FOREWORD

Thank you for being interested in our book.

We are Bert Holtes and Wop Sietsma, two Dutch authors debuting with this book.

A book we have developed entirely under our own management.

Our story is spread over three books and packed as a thriller with some extras.

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

Have fun reading!

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.

THE BEGINNING ...

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 (*also known as the Cour Pénale Internationale, abbr. ICC/CPI*), 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 wandered 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 Saundra 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 Saundra, 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.

Saundra 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, the 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 PSO (*Problem Solving Officer*) 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.

<02.15

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.

<02.16

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.

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