

HOLTES & SIETSMA

BACK UP BRIDGE IN TIME

HOW AN ENCOUNTER PUT EVERYTHING IN MOTION
PART 2

< BACK-UP >

Bridge in Time

Book 2

<

Holtes & Sietsma

**For all those who love us,
without you life would be boring!**

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Foreword

Hello ... and welcome back for the continuation of the story!

You probably know who we are by now, but if you don't ...

We are Bert Holtes and Wop Sietsma, two Dutch authors who, with this second book, continue the story of our first book, BACK-UP As far as the world stretches.

We developed this book entirely under our own management as well.

Glad to see you are still interested in our story, we are delighted!

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

If you still want to read the paperback version, you can find all the information about where to buy it on our website.

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

Don't forget, you can still download, read and give away the eBook of volume 1 to everyone you know for free via Kobo or via our website.

Have fun reading it!

Bert & Wop

The beginning of the sequel ...

This story is the sequel to the first book of the fictional thriller series 'BACK-UP' and continues as if there was no interruption.

In the Peace Palace in The Hague, the meeting between Hakon Torstein Eriksson and Nakawe will result in an unexpected turn in the history books.

While the population of the blue planet is still ignorant of the upcoming changes, Hakon, with Nakawe in his arms, tumbles down the stairs of the Peace Palace, after which ...

Prologue

A few light years away from the sun, shimmering glittering lights were rapidly moving towards each other.

After centuries of inertia, the sentries had received a signal. Weak indeed, but unmistakable!

When they found each other, they merged into one and bundled the received energy for transport.

For a moment they radiated as brightly as the star of Bethlehem, until they separated from each other and brightly flashed to their previous position in anticipation of ...

How an encounter put everything in motion ...

His mission he had successfully accomplished.

Not knowing that a next one was on the way.

A mission that would change his and many lives.

But before that, he had to go into the fight again.

Still knowing nothing, he looked up in total bewilderment.

He now knew what kind of ship his father meant.

He had expected everything ... but not this!

Two global minutes

< 01.01

After the elderly nun had briefly knocked on the door, she quickly walked into the room, put down the tray and opened the shutters in a routine manner. She stood for a short moment enjoying the sweet aroma of blossoming flowers and herbs that flowed in. In thought she thanked God for this beautiful morning, as she let her eyes wander over her convent, the gardens, and the afforestation behind it. As always, apart from the sounds of nature all around, there was nothing that disturbed the serene tranquility.

Since its construction in 1591, during the Spanish domination of Mexico, all the work in and around the monastery of the monastic Dominicans had been done by hand.

To herself she murmured the words of a former pope, engraved in her memory.

Grateful that she too was allowed to serve, she devoutly struck a cross, walked back into the room and carefully picked up the tray to devote herself to the extra task.

A task that because of circumstances had been forgotten by the outside world, but which had been carried out outside of normal work since time immemorial. The care for 'The Lady'. A daily ritual that was lovingly performed by specially appointed and trained sisters.

As she walked toward The Lady, she suddenly stopped and stood motionless. She could hardly believe it.

However, it did not take long before she started moving again, for through her training she knew immediately how to act when the moment presented itself. Calmly she put the tray down again, hurried to the open window and gave a firm jolt to the rope that hung next to it. For the first time in the monastery's long history, a special bell began to peal. As loud and clear as she could, she shouted: "The Lady has spoken, the Lady has spoken!"

< 01.02

At the same moment in Norway, in Kongsberg, in the old-fashioned cozy farmhouse kitchen of the Eriksson family, the grandfather clock announced the third hour after noon with thick, bronze beats. Marit, who was quietly cleaning the silverware in her rocking chair next to the fireplace, looked up for a moment. Her hands stopped when she saw Torstein working in the kitchen through the connecting door. As if he was taking part in a cleaning competition, her husband was fanatically cleaning the long dining table. The robust furniture had become somewhat weathered over the years, but the sunlight falling through the open terrace doors still conjured up the beautiful, deep sheen.

Smiling, she watched Torstein, armed with a spray can and cleaning rag, attack the table with flamboyant movements. She understood. He was, like herself, excited for tomorrow. Because then their grandson would arrive here with his group of friends. They would arrive late, but on the other hand they would all stay for a few days. Like Torstein, she could hardly wait.

She remembered Hakon's previous visit as if it were yesterday. She and Torstein had both been delighted with Hakon's remarkable group of friends. A very peculiar collection of personalities, who got along great. One close family. From the very first moment, these extraordinary people had made them feel like they had been part of the group for years. It was obvious that they were all fond of Hakon and he was fond of them. That's why she couldn't understand why their grandson still didn't have a real girlfriend. There were several very attractive ladies in that group of friends.

As she stared anxiously into the distance, she thought it was about time Hakon chose a woman. She and Torstein didn't have eternal life and she would love to hold another Eriksson in her arms. But maybe the miracles of the world weren't over yet, she thought hopefully. You never knew ... Things were very different today than they were when she was young. Time went by so fast.

"Indeed, silly," she reprimanded herself. If she wanted everything ready for tomorrow, she should hurry up a bit. She continued polishing and thought about how nice it was that Torstein was finally ready to share with

Hakon the burden they had been carrying together for years. It really was about time they sat down with him. Certainly after Torstein's last experience and those terrible developments of the last few days, it had become absolutely necessary. And now that she and Torstein knew about Hakon's possibilities through his Scottish friend, that lord, the burden had become much more bearable.

The fear that Hakon would go missing, just like his father, had also diminished a lot. His friends would not abandon him. That was for sure, Torstein had told her. Unconsciously, she nodded in agreement. However, her husband's well-meant, soothing arguments, with his eternal optimism, couldn't completely dispel her concerns.

Again she looked into the kitchen and laughed at his half-assed antics. After shaking her head for a while, she thought it was time to put an end to it. That old fool tried to tap dance while polishing. And that with his bad back! She was just about to...

In the middle of a dance movement, he suddenly stopped. With his eyes wide open he stood staring at his right hand, while he massaged it firmly with his left.

Frightened, she stood up, walked quickly towards him and carefully put one hand on his shoulder. Surely it wasn't happening again ...

< 01.03

A few minutes before that, Missy Mobile, as her nickname would have it, stood, as usual, at the front in the smallest pyramid of Egypt, so as not to miss anything of the show that was to be staged. She wanted to use this to make a nice ending to the report of her pyramid trip.

As a seasoned cruise traveller she had already made many excursions. From the beginning she had shared her experiences with the world via her smartphone, so that her friends back home in Hollywood could witness her adventurous life almost live on their screens. They would definitely like this show. Something like this gave at least a little color to their everyday activities. In addition, she had thousands of followers who

she only knew by name, but of whom she knew they would be thrilled again.

In any case, the scene in which she pretended to have discovered the new hieroglyphs herself had already turned out extremely well. She looked good in her safari outfit and that alone was worth the \$300 she had to cough up, she thought. Anyway, she did it with love, because even though she loved to be in the center of attention, she was very socially conscious. Not everyone could afford such trips and she felt it was her duty to let the less fortunate enjoy her experiences as well. Especially now, because this discovery was absolutely something special. The events here would certainly get at least a whole page in the history books and that was something one didn't experience every day. It went without saying that she had paid the \$1000,- that it cost to be allowed to film, without having to think twice. After all, that was not a very big expense for her, as she had had plenty of money since the death of her husband. After eating the cake she had baked, he had prematurely exchanged the present for the afterlife. No, not by poisoning. The poor man had simply choked on the cake that had been a little too dry.

After barely three years of marriage, she was suddenly all alone. Thank God he hadn't left her destitute. On the contrary. Thanks to him, she had since been able to sail across all the seas of the world with just about all the well-known cruise companies. But of all the voyages so far, this one was at the top of the list!

Expectantly she looked at the display and made sure that the man dressed up as a pharaoh came fully into view. She followed him routinely while he climbed onto a table to tell all about his discovery. This recording would definitely be a nice conclusion to her report and once again her extremely interesting report would find its way to the hungry social media addicts. She had set up her smartphone in such a way that she only had to film. When she left the pyramid and as soon as a connection to the internet was made, her recording would immediately be shared over the internet. It just couldn't get any easier.

At the same time that Missy Mobile was shooting in Egypt, an old lady with beautiful long, grey hair found herself in the middle of the Mexican jungle. Sitting on the bottom step of an ancient pyramid, she was busy caring for the wound on her foster child's arm.

Kiniawe, clumsy as ever, had hurt herself for the umpteenth time. Despite the fact that she had been retired for twenty years, she would be able to suture the wound blindly. Skilled by her long experience as a surgeon, her hands moved by themselves. In light of Nakawe's message that she would come home to discuss the discovery in Egypt with her Granny, her thoughts wandered to the manuscripts she had studied yesterday. Not from recent centuries about the explorers, the Spaniards and other fortune hunters who had almost destroyed their earlier rich, proud and intelligent civilization. No, the ancient writings from before, that told of their unique flora and fauna and rich Mayan cities. In the centuries before, the Mayans had built up a very highly developed culture, at a time when no one on the other side of the ocean had any idea of their existence. So much had been lost, she thought, sadly. And all because of the expansionism and outright greed of people and nations seeking power.

Meanwhile, she conveniently filled a syringe to administer a local anesthetic to Kiniawe's arm. Her foster child was unusually agitated and much more sternly than she actually wanted to, she ordered Kiniawe to sit still. "I know that since you came into our house as a toddler, you've regarded each other as sisters and you've missed Nakawe for far too long." She sighed for a moment. "It's your own fault, girl. Just be more careful and don't break your leg. Then you could have accompanied Nakawe on her expedition." She grabbed Kiniawe's arm firmly, brought the needle to the wound and stiffened.

< 01.05

At exactly the same moment a nun entered the monastery room of 'The Lady' in Mexico, Prof. Dr. Oskar Mirnat, professor of astronomy, was in Florida recovering from a lively exchange of words with his adolescent daughter. In the hypermodern upper floor of his stylish mansion, he sat

grunting in front of his private telescope. How on earth did a 15-year-old get it into her head to go to school almost naked, he thought angrily. She was the eldest of his four daughters and had to lead by example, damn it. The quartet was his most precious possession and he didn't want to think about them being abused. Beautiful, young girls, like his eldest, dressed like that in the streets ... No, that was simply asking for trouble.

He sighed deeply. What was he supposed to do with her? Lately she'd been so terribly recalcitrant that he would rather lock her up in her room. And leave her there until she was 26 or so. That would give a lot of rest, he thought chuckling.

He shrugged off the domestic problems and in a routine manner checked if the dome was open. With concentration he looked at a number of fixed benchmarks and was just about to start checking the next one when he noticed something. Surprised, he suddenly saw several stars flickering, shooting towards each other and coming together at one point to light up brightly. However, before he could react, the miraculous spectacle was already over and the galaxy looked like it had always had.

< 01.06

While Missy Mobile was looking for a way forward, Ravic, supervisor of the Egyptian High Council of Antiquities, was enjoying himself. In the pyramid it was all hustle and bustle and he looked with satisfaction at his business partner. It was truly magnificent how he skillfully knocked the dollars out of their fat wallets. After such a special discovery it was self-evident that one could only take pictures for a hefty fee. For a full week they had already succeeded in attracting crowds of curious tourists and every day they made a lot of money out of those spoiled rich guys. The folks got to wear a tropical helmet, were allowed to put on a khaki shirt and with a brush and trowel in their hands they could pretend to be real explorers who had supposedly discovered the hieroglyphs in person. And of course they had to pay a lot extra for that scene. More than half of every dollar earned flowed into his purse.

He happily rubbed his hands. With a bit of luck the tourists would keep on coming in for a while, so that he could fulfill his desire much quicker than

he ever could have imagined.

He scratched his wrist inconspicuously. The authentic clothes of a pharaoh, which he had been able to borrow from someone, were beautiful, yet heavy and they itched terribly.

While he endured the rubbing and itching as well as he could, he carefully walked to the table. He leaned against it and mentally prepared to report on his miraculous discovery.

In the meantime, the group had gathered and looked up to him expectantly when he stepped majestically onto the table. He stood up proudly and let his eyes wander over the colorful, staring crowd. Not for the first time he felt as powerful as a real pharaoh when looking down on the crowd below him. He might not really be a ruler of Egypt, he thought amused, but he did have power. Power over their purse. And he'd try to plunder them a bit more.

He smiled for a moment at the woman standing right in front of him. Another one from whom prosperity radiated, he thought arrogantly. The blonde woman was engaged with a bright pink, glittery smartphone. Quickly his gaze slipped over her clothes. Reassured he saw the button on her blouse, the sign that she had paid. His eyes found more buttons. Today he would return home with a thick envelope as well. While estimating the amount he had earned, he gestured to the crowd looking up at him for silence. Here and there he heard some people coughing. He was ready for it. With a clear voice, somewhat reflected by the shape of the pyramid, he asked the crowd to be dead silent. Nobody wanted to miss anything of his sensational adventures that had led to the discovery of the new hieroglyphs. He sucked the air into his lungs.

< 01.07

In Scotland, Lord MacMarkland and Marilyn had been watching the GRID for half an hour, watching the live images Sandra sent them. Early in the morning the brand-new Markland weather satellite had been successfully launched and after lunch Sandra had informed them that the extra module that had been sent along had arrived at the right location. While a watery sun peeked in through the high windows, Marilyn had tried to

explain to him how she had developed this new module using her 3dSCreator. Of the part she had told him about enthusiastically, he had, with difficulty, understood at most half of it. The new functions for Sandra's main routines, including SPY, SCOUT, SCOPE, COMMS, FACE and CRYPTO, were the most important. He would never understand exactly how this had come about. What really mattered was the result. This upgrade would allow Sandra to operate much faster and more efficiently.

The diagram Marilyn had shown him on her laptop was a different story. He had recognized that easily. It indicated the routes of the module itself and the routes of the submodules that would each look up 'their' satellite separately. With Sandra's help, the routes were chosen in such a way that the module itself and its components could not be seen from Earth at any time. Fortunately, he thought, because otherwise he would have a lot of explaining to do and, even worse, GAIAS would cease to exist.

In the meantime he looked with interest at the landings of the modules and saw that they were almost simultaneously seeking the right position. Perfect. Any moment now they would have found their place and tests could be carried out. Not much later, the time had come. "So far, so good", he heard Marilyn say. "I have every confidence in it," he answered cheerfully. "And I..."

Sandra's voice interrupted him with the message that she was in contact with all modules and that she had started the test procedure. The results quickly appeared on the GRID. Sharp images of the earth shot past. The lord and Marilyn looked at each other in amazement when Sandra's voice suddenly broke off and the whole GRID fell out at once.

< 01.08

While in Scotland a global recording of the Mexican Yucatán briefly appeared on one of the screens, it was not detailed enough at this time to be able to see a centuries old hacienda, seemingly rather neglected, under the dense green foliage of the pristine jungle.

In one of the many rooms, surrounded by artifacts from the Inca and Mayan times, as well as piles of books, manuscripts and papers, a dark-

haired man sat mumbling to himself, bent over. Despite the reading glasses, he held a magnifying glass in his hand and tried to decipher the miniscule inscription on a sacrificial knife, noting his findings in a small but very regular handwriting on the notepad beside him.

Concentrating one hundred percent, he shot upright in an uncontrolled manner when an antique morse telegraph suddenly started rattling on his desk for the first time. He completely ignored the broken magnifying glass and the line he had drawn right through his notes in terror. All his attention was focused on the old device. He did not yet know the contents of the message, but he knew that his reclusive existence was over and that he could finally begin. As soon as the device had spat out the strip of paper, he excitedly snatched it away. His eyes eagerly devoured the text. "The game can begin," he murmured inside. He remembered the step-by-step plan and went through it from beginning to end. He was not allowed to skip a single step to victory. Moments later he grabbed the signal key and started tapping a controlled message in Morse code to his Chosen Ones.

< 01.09

Not much later in Italy, not far from the Vatican, no one witnessed something special that took place in one of the few remaining Roman temples, the [Pantheon](#). In its lower vaults, the centuries of peace and quiet were suddenly disturbed. In a long forgotten room, where dusty webs decorated the crucifix on the bare wall, the grey stone statue of Mary next to it and the simple lamp set in the corner, stood a dusty table.

On its right-hand corner, under thick dust and webs, stood an antique telephone. As the square outside teemed with tourists, for the first time since its connection in 1888, the device began to ring penetratingly.

< 01.10

Fully focused on the display of her smartphone and the costumed man standing proudly on the table ready to start his speech, Missy's brain

didn't initially record what her eyes observed.

Completely unexpectedly a tremendous burst of energy shot through the man's body and in a split second his brain was boiled. The steaming mush searched for an exit through his nose and ears and because of the accumulated pressure his eyes shot out of the eye sockets and squashed on the ground like ripe tomatoes, right in front of the feet of the totally bewildered audience. Like a rag doll he collapsed and tumbled after his eyes.

Like the people around her, Missy stood staring at the tragedy with her mouth and eyes open, unaware that her body was acting automatically. Like a robot, she continued to use her smartphone to record the tragedy in detail. In silence the image zoomed in on the smoking head of the fallen man.

A horrible smell reached her nose and at that moment it dawned on her what had happened. As if a switch was flipped, all instincts of self-preservation took over and turned Missy Mobile from a seasoned hobby blogger into a crazed slum-dweller. Screaming, she made a run for it, with only one overriding wish: to leave this coffin as soon as possible.

In the small room of the pyramid her cries echoed in all directions and pulled everyone out of their lethargy. The crowds began to move as in their panic everyone sought for the exit as quickly as possible.

Screaming, pushing and punching, Missy fought her way through the wild crowd and managed to reach the stairs. In a chaotic tangle of bodies, she was one of the first to reach the exit. She didn't care about her torn skirt, stained blouse and lost right pump, and panting, she raised a manicured hand containing the bright pink smartphone, which was glistening in the daylight. Within two seconds, the device had connected to the internet and Missy's recording was retransmitted into the World Wide Web via Markland's satellites. In no time at all, the video was included in all major social media applications. It wasn't long before Missy Mobile was joined by millions of followers, who eagerly watched the sensational '*Curse of the Pharaoh*'.

Thoughtfully Professor Mirnat continued to study the universe meticulously for some time. Astonished, he leaned back, rubbed his eyes and looked through the telescope once more. Nothing had changed at all. Surely, he couldn't have imagined those shifting stars, he wondered hesitantly. Had he been so worried about his daughter that the stress had affected him? Some sort of eye migraine, perhaps? That seemed most likely to him. There's no way that what he thought he'd seen could have been a natural phenomenon. He'd have to check the backup later.

He pulled his head away from the scope and turned around. To his fright he saw the backup's light flicker red. While looking at the mean red blinking light, he realized that he hadn't thought of turning on the system. No copy had been made. Bloody hell. Of course.

Angry with himself, he activated the backup system, waited for the light to reassuringly blink green and repeated his earlier work. In the back of his head, however, what he thought he had seen was constantly gnawing at him. Perhaps he had seen something special after all. There was nothing else for it. He had to check it. He wouldn't be able to rest until he did.

He went to his computer and opened the encyclopedia of the universe.

< 01.12

Feeling guilty that she had to bother her Granny again, Kiniawe looked confidently at the needle that Granny stuck in her arm. To her astonishment, it suddenly slipped deep into her arm and painfully touched the bone. Tears shot into her eyes. "Ouch! Granny!" Through a haze of tears she looked up and saw Granny mumbling silently as if in a trance, rubbing her right hand with her left over the dark sign. Kiniawe held her sore arm and came halfway up to shake Granny awake, but suddenly she got very dizzy and almost fell off the stone step. The world around her lost all color and in total greyness she felt her chair move more and more violently.

She hadn't experienced this before in the cinema. At least, she thought she was in the cinema, because all kinds of loose pieces of film shot past her before her eyes. She recognized many, but at the same time didn't recognize many others. She saw a smiling Nakawe passing by again and

again and a tall man with blue eyes, whose blond hair was flapping against his face and who tried to say something to her.

The images followed each other faster and faster, as if she was on a roller coaster cart plunging down at an eerie speed. Strange helmets, Nakawe, swords, ships, that blond man holding Nakawe in an embrace, a marble table, pyramids, a starry sky, Nakawe shouting something unintelligible. She couldn't keep up. The images flew by at a maddening pace and the shaking became more and more intense. She heard her own name called, saw that same blond man standing on the bow of a sailing ship, heard her name again and... Suddenly she became aware that she was lying on the ground, looking straight into the worried eyes of Granny, who was holding her by the shoulders. "Kiniawe, Kiniáwe!"

"What ... what happened?" Confused, she tried to get up, which didn't work, because Granny pinned her firmly to the ground. "Stay down, child. Don't get up now, or you'll have a huge headache later, I'm afraid."

"What ... um ... then what happened? I don't get it," she stammered.

"One moment you're holding my arm, and the next moment you're stinging me and I see you in some kind of trance. After that it went black."

She frowned. "No, that's not quite true." The frown got deeper. "I had a dream. At least it seemed like a dream, but it felt terribly real. I saw all kinds of weird images. A lot of them included Nakawe, a blonde man, and then ... I'm not sure. I think I saw Spaniards attacking us and, and..."

"Calm down. Just relax, Kiniawe. You've been through something that needs explaining. I promise you'll get it from me, but I have to talk to Nakawe first. Something important has happened."

Her Granny looked thoughtfully away from her. "What? How? Nakawe! Did something happen to her?" Panicked, her voice shot up a whole octave. Granny looked at her reassuringly. "No, Nakawe's fine, but I need to talk to her first. One thing's for sure: she's had contact."

Kiniawe didn't understand a word Granny was saying. "Contact? How do you mean? With what, then? Nakawe's not even home yet. How would you know?" Her Granny smiled. "Honey, haven't you ever wondered why you have a brown and a blue eye?" The question caught her by surprise. What did that have to do with anything? "Um, no. Actually, no. Why? Do you know?"

Her Granny nodded thoughtfully. "I suspect I do, but I can't be sure until I know who Nakawe made contact with."

Her Granny kept silent for a moment and got a strange look in her eyes. "Listen, Kiniawe. You said you recognized Nakawe amidst all sorts of images?" "Yes, Granny. At first, I kept seeing the same blonde guy passing by. First a few times with long, blond hair. Then on a boat and at the end, all of a sudden, he had short hair and Nakawe was facing him. Really, Granny, it was really crazy. I felt like I was looking through Nakawe's eyes at that man and at the same time I was looking through his eyes at Nakawe. We were standing on a flight of stairs, no, we were rolling down a flight of stairs, and I got a tingling sensation in my head and right hand. Right here."

She showed Granny her hand, on which a capriciously shaped scar stood out darkly against her light brown skin. "Weird, isn't it, Granny?" Just like that crazy question from just a moment ago, Granny's answer surprised her again. "Oh, Kiniawe. You make me so happy. It looks like the stories are true. We're suddenly dealing with humanity's greatest secret, and what I thought of you might be true."

The ship

< 02.01

While wind and sun chased each other tirelessly outside, Hakon sat at the end of the large table in his grandparents' cozy kitchen. Although he was normally asleep within a few minutes, this time sleep eluded him. After a few hours of useless trying, he had given up and got up. In a deserted kitchen he had made a pot of coffee from the deliciously fragrant blend Joost had given him. With two hands around the cup, he had sat at the end of the breakfast table and reviewed the events of the past few days.

The images of the horrific ravage in Texas, the runaway cattle, the death of VanderBeek and the precarious moments he had experienced in the company of that twisted psychopath would stay with him forever. But what had happened to him two days ago in The Hague in the [Peace Palace](#), he could not possibly banish from his thoughts. The fact that his body was covered with bruises and that his ribs rather annoyingly hindered certain movements was a secondary matter. What had happened during the tumbling down the stairs, however, was constantly haunting his mind. He could not forget the woman he had saved from a nasty fall. It seemed as if she had infected him with some kind of virus. Her eyes wouldn't let go of him. He also experienced over and over again that strange vision in which his father had given him that enigmatic assignment. That vision and the woman he had to think about over and over again had brought him very much out of balance.

While he carefully drank his coffee - he didn't want to also burn his tongue - that woman's face popped up before his eyes again. Immediately after the tumble, she had been pulled out of his arms and the professionals had taken care of her. Unfortunately, partly due to the tight schedule of that day, he had not had a chance to speak to her after that. Tim had picked him up and, together with Lémarc, Arda, Holger, Barbara and Russ, had driven him to Schiphol Airport, after which they had flown the helicopter to Scotland.

At Castle MacMarkland's helicopter platform , transport had already been arranged, so they arrived at the castle in a jiffy. With a big smile Lord MacMarkland had received them, in the company of Marilyn, Onawa, Tjan and Tony. With the ease of a ruling scion from an old family, the castle lord had welcomed the new GAIAS members, after which he had formally opened the meeting. In short, the lord had outlined the operation '*Non quod videtur*' and proudly said that their goal had been achieved despite the many unexpected twists and turns. He had gravely added that they should be thankful that they had all come out more or less intact and that GAIAS had not perished. In order not to have to face such nasty surprises again in the future, Sandra's abilities had been further extended. Despite a short-term failure of some hardware, all modifications had been successfully implemented. At the same time a number of Marilyn's inventions, which she had built with the help of her 3dSCreator, would improve the effectiveness and safety of the group. In addition, Sandra had increased the security protocol for each member of GAIAS and any potential threat anywhere in the world would be included in her probability calculations. "To conclude," the lord had said in a serious tone of voice. "Sandra? Will you join us for a moment?"

Hakon would never forget the expression on the faces of the four newcomers when Sandra came on the air right away. "I never left, sir. Let me introduce myself to the new members first. I'm Sandra. Marilyn is my creator and together we are responsible for the safety and welfare of GAIAS. I'd like to welcome you."

Again grinning at the memory, Hakon poured himself a second cup of coffee. After the successful introduction he had flown with the whole group to Kongsberg. Arriving home, it had immediately been all hustle and bustle. His grandmother had directly claimed Lémarc and Arda, Marilyn and Onawa and Barbara and Russ, to give them the three bedrooms upstairs. After initially protesting that it was not necessary for him to have Hakon's room and that he did not want to banish Hakon to the sofa, Lord MacMarkland had wisely kept his mouth shut at the sight of grandma's stubborn face.

Meanwhile, his grandfather had shown Holger, Tim, Tjan and Tony their sleeping places on the two-master. Suitcases and bags had been carried upstairs and to the '*Stormbryter*', after which everyone had gathered in

the kitchen. In the midst of all the fuss, his grandfather had still had a chance to take him aside. His light blue eyes had stared at Hakon for a moment before he had said: "I think I know what you want to discuss with us. Your grandmother and I have some things to tell you too. I'll raise it with you one of these days."

He hadn't even had time to react, because Grandma had pressed a pile of bedding into his hands. "Hakon, for you. For the sofa. Your grandfather and I are going to bed now, or we're gonna get up all wrinkled tomorrow."

Her smiling face had caused the hundreds of thousands of fine lines and folds to move in all directions. Just like yesterday, Hakon thought. His grandparents had enjoyed the sailing trip, the picnic on one of the deserted unnamed islands and the swimming in the lovely fresh water. The stress and tiredness of the past weeks had fallen off everyone like drops of water and the many jokes and antics had put everyone in a good mood. He had seldom seen his grandparents so carefree and cheerful. He was lucky to still have them.

The kiss that was pressed into his neck instantly hauled him out of his musings. Surprised he saw that it was already ten past ten. He hadn't even heard the clock that reported the time every half hour. "God morgen, Hakon. Jet overslept," his grandmother said a little contrite. "Jet lager frokost raskt." Arda, who entered the kitchen right after his grandmother, grabbed Grandma's hand. "I don't understand any Norwegian, but I can guess you want to make breakfast. For fourteen people too. Well, I don't think so. You're going to sit down with Hakon." More feet came down the stairs. "Ha, you brought everything," she greeted Marilyn and Onawa, who each put a box on the counter. Barbara and Russ, who came strolling in a little later, were ordered to make coffee and tea. Forgetting everything for a moment, Hakon watched everyone. It wasn't long before Holger, the three brothers and Lord MacMarkland joined the company. Just like yesterday, the table was set in a jiffy and packed with bread, coffee, tea and a variety of goodies. While he enjoyed watching everyone greedily chewing, he noticed how relaxed the atmosphere was. Apparently they had all needed yesterday's sailing trip. Even Tim was pretty thawed out and had exchanged his three-piece suit for loose-fitting leisure wear.

While they were eating and chatting, the mood became more and more cheerful. Amused, Hakon listened to the stories that were told, the jokes that were pulled and the conversation between Arda and Onawa, who were fanatically debating love at first sight. Next to him, Marilyn was in conversation with Tim, passionately explaining to him why she felt that her latest invention could not yet be released. Halfway across the table he saw by Tony's gestures that he was trying to teach Holger a few combat moves. The only one who didn't participate in the talks was Tjan. Without worrying about anything, he sank his teeth into yet another sandwich. It all seemed to taste just as good as his favorite snack.

Smiling, Hakon looked at Barbara, who, with Russ' arm around her shoulders, was listening to the story of the lord about the history of Castle MacMarkland. Hakon loved how quickly Barbara seemed to have recovered from her abduction. In his opinion she had suffered the most.

Satisfied, he continued chewing and let his gaze drift across the animated group of people. All of them were great friends. He took another sandwich and reached for the butter, to immediately withdraw his hand. The tingling was not imaginary and crossed over into that familiar irritating tickle. He rubbed it and decided to contact Sandra first thing after breakfast. Her research into this symptom must have progressed by now.

Not much was left of his pleasant mood. Concerned, Hakon looked at his hand and he hardly noticed that Lémarc shoved a chair next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Hakon. Man. What's wrong with you?"

< 02.02

Far below her, Nakawe saw the vague contours of Yucatán emerge. At last! Now it wouldn't be long before she, at last, would set foot on native soil again and be able to go home. Although the pilot had already announced it, she could feel for herself that the plane had started the descent to Manuel Crescencio Rejón airport. Longingly she kept looking outside. In the darkness beneath her, between the widespread points of light, she saw a colorful cluster sparkle like a mountain of jewels. Mérida! After months of searching, plodding and biting sand, she would finally

see Granny and Kiniawe again. Just before she had checked in, she had quickly called Granny to pass on her flight number and told her that she would be bringing a present with her. She hadn't said what it consisted of. It had to remain a surprise that her discovery would confirm Granny's conviction in no uncertain terms.

Smiling, she imagined how those two would be waiting impatiently for her down there. An elbow touching her drew Nakawe out of her pleasant contemplations. The muttered excuse went entirely past her when she looked sideways, at the newspaper her neighbor was reading at length. As if struck by lightning, she stared motionlessly at the face that looked at her from the page. Strange feelings shot through her whole body like short bursts of electricity. The now black-and-white eyes did not let go of her. Eyes that were actually blue. Azure blue like the ocean. Eyes in which you would like to take a cooling dip without thinking. The eyes of the same man who had so chivalrously saved her.

She couldn't remember exactly what had happened after that tumble. She had been lying on the floor and although they had wanted to take her to the hospital, she had politely declined all their well-intentioned concerns. She was fine and had no time for it. She would not have missed the appointment with her friend or the flight home for anything. It was therefore a huge disappointment to hear at the reception that her friend had called in sick. Until Miquel had come to pick her up, she had walked around, hoping to bump into the man, so that she could thank him personally. In vain. She hadn't seen him anywhere. Only at Schiphol had she seen his face in the news and discovered his name. Hakon. Hakon Eriksson.

On a whim, she had bought a postcard, found out his address and sent him a thank-you note. After that she had read everything she could find on the internet about him. And every time, again and again, she had the strong feeling that she had known him all her life. Somehow she felt a strong connection with him. Very different and much more intense than with the man she had had a relationship with before.

The disappearance of the newspaper with a lot of rustling broke the spell. The older woman sitting next to her - too dressed up to her taste and with a haircut that definitely had to be a wig - energetically folded the newspaper in four. "Here. Take it, dear," she said kindly, and handed her

the rolled up, still warm towel that had been given to them earlier. "Go ahead, dear. I haven't used it yet." Surprised, Nakawe looked at her neighbor's outstretched hand and politely declined the offer. "I've already cleaned my face and hands with mine," she concluded, a little estranged. "Well, dear," her neighbor replied, a little less friendly. "You still have a dirty stain on your right hand." Now Nakawe understood why the woman had offered her the towel. "Oh, that's what you mean. That's not dirt. I've had those black stripes all my life. Take a look." She rotated her right hand to show the back and palm. "Those two stripes run all the way through, until they come together near my thumb. I always call that flat-lying 'V'. I see it as the sign of my freedom, and my grandmother says it's a sign from God." Pityingly, the woman shook her head. "Too bad it marred your hand, dear. You have such beautiful hands." She opened her handbag, secured the towel in it and fastened her belt. Somewhat bewildered Nakawe followed her example.

Before she sat up straight, she looked back for a moment. Miquel saw her and with his mobile phone in his hand he gestured that everything was okay. Satisfied she let her head rest against the support and while the sound of the engines was increasing, she closed her eyes. With the faces of Kiniawe, Granny and Hakon in her thoughts, she waited calmly for the plane to land.

< 02.03

His annoyance that he had been called away for what seemed like an insignificant affair soon turned into rising amazement. A mystery! In his own house, in fact. At least, that's how he considered the 'Pantheon', which had come into the possession of Pope Boniface IV after the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the year 609. Under his direction, the building became a Roman Catholic Church, which nowadays also housed the headquarters of the Inquisition, the society that protected and defended the Church from the outset. For centuries the Inquisition had been allowed to do its work normally, until corrupt, pernicious outside influences had stipulated its dissolution.

To the outside world it might seem so, but the Inquisition would never, ever leave the Roman Catholic Church and went, literally, underground. In secret, the Inquisition continued the most important work in the world, perhaps even more passionately than before.

He himself, Esteban Bolvani, had worked with conviction since the first day he was inducted into the Inquisition, and soon he had made a name for himself. He had risen smoothly through the ranks until the Pope had appointed him head of the Inquisition. He carried out this highest function with heart and soul and, in his humble opinion, his brotherhood had never functioned so efficiently. By nature, he had a healthy interest - which his dear but naive mother had once called extreme curiosity - in everything that had to do with the Church and anything that could influence it. The very first task he had had some confidants carry out was to have bugging devices installed invisibly. Both in public rooms and private rooms, including confession booths. And that was a good thing, he thought. What he had heard in the meantime, what people all had on their conscience ... It had truly shocked him and had given him the conviction that God Himself had given him this high position, so that he would be able to protect the Pope, his Church and the ordinary, benevolent people as best he could. Well before irreparable damage could be done, the Inquisition was able to intervene to direct everything in the right direction.

Obviously, he could not present himself in public as its leader. The outside guard knew no better than that he was the head of the regular Roman Catholic Security Service as a Commissario. However, under his inspiring leadership the intelligence unit, well hidden in the vaults of the Pantheon, had grown into a department of stature. Equipped with the most modern equipment and the best hardware and software, all information was continuously processed by motivated and highly skilled inquisitors 24 hours a day. Only insiders knew that the Inquisition, now headed by himself, was the most important power within the Roman Catholic Church. That is why he was assigned this function, because anyone else would certainly abuse this power.

His unit was so well oiled that he had more than enough time to devote himself to his hobby: studying ancient myths and mysteries and trying to unravel them. Especially the ancient, now unused spaces in the vaults of the Pantheon itself. The space down there that interested him the most

was the so-called Pillar Room, a circular space that in itself could pass for a cathedral.

This round, carved room was 180 feet below ground level. The dome-shaped ceiling was supported by 11 pillars that surrounded the space. For years he had been studying the high ceiling on which the starry sky was depicted. He had also studied the dark niches between the pillars. He had not become any wiser. Not from the space itself, nor from the books and writings he had carefully read. Nowhere had he found even a piece of paper or a fragment of parchment in which there was a clue as to what this room had been used for. And this room must once have been very important, because there was only one door that gave access and it could only be accessed with a key from the Inquisition itself. So, the Pillar Room was once only used by the Inquisition.

What intrigued him even more was the floor. It was covered with pieces of colored marble and depicted an old map of the world. The entire room was empty, except for one object. In the ocean between the two continents of Central America and Africa, right in the middle, stood a table carved entirely out of marble, on a marble column of 44 inches high. The diameter of the perfectly round top was 27 inches. What was special about it was that the table was not only in one piece, but that the column was also part of a round piece of marble with a diameter of 132 inches that served as a base plate. He had not been able to detect a single seam between the top, column and base plate. The 4 inch thick base plate had a gold rim with a thickness of exactly half an inch. The whole had a perfection that today could only be achieved by machine. But what it had served for remained a mystery.

During his years of research, he had only uncovered two facts. The dating of the painting of the starry sky on the dome was one of them.

During a coincidental meeting with a professor from Florida, it had been explained to him how the movement of stars enabled one to calculate their position at different times. With the help of an assistant of the same professor, he had been told that the painted starry sky must have been painted around 988 AD.

The second fact was that, according to that same assistant, the applied image was remarkably precise. As if one had worked from a sharp

photograph, every detail had been meticulously applied.

However, neither fact had made him much wiser. He had not made any progress, for he had not been able to find any reference to the ceiling painting or to any particular incident or event that might have led to it.

In fact, about a month ago, the riddle had only gotten bigger. Like all the previous times, he had descended to the Pillar Room and sat down on the table to be able to think in absolute silence, when the light had suddenly gone out and it had become pitch dark. He had remained quietly seated to orient himself, so that he could find the exit by touch, when an unexpected phenomenon had occurred. Very slowly he had seen the painted ceiling come to life. With his mouth open he had been looking at it in supreme wonder for a long time. He had really imagined himself among the stars and planets. It turned out that the table emitted an almost imperceptible diffuse light, just enough to illuminate the dome painting in the dark. He felt he had sat on the table for hours before he had been able to pull himself away from this miraculous phenomenon. In spite of what he had discovered, the mystery had only increased.

He had therefore been very surprised that their torchbearer had reported to him today, insecure and nervous. The man, actually more like a caretaker, still bore the same title as his predecessors, who had the task of keeping the torches burning in the vaults. These had long since been replaced by ordinary lamps. Other than replacing one now and then and periodically checking the pipes and the fuse box, this inquisitor had not much to do. With half an ear Esteban listened to the man telling that on his round, as always, he checked the Pillar Room last. Suddenly his interest was piqued, when the man reported that he had heard a ringing sound. He had taken a good look around, but unfortunately had not been able to find the cause of it. How could this simple soul have discovered something he had never noticed? Unthinkable! He had calmed the man down and assured him that he would launch an investigation into where exactly the sound had come from. After that he had dropped everything and descended straight to the vaults. Excitedly he had tiptoed around until he caught a muffled tinkling. It came from somewhere near one of the alcoves! In the back corner he held his ear against the wall and listened tensely ...

Yes! Yes, indeed! Straight through the wall he heard a clear ringing. Ringing of a phone? In the bright light of the LED lantern he had taken with him, he examined the stone wall inch by inch, until he saw a dark spot in the right corner of the alcove. He brought his lantern closer to it and saw what had apparently eluded everyone for decades. At about three feet high he saw a hole in the shape of a crucifix. He was delighted! It looked like an old Inquisition lock. Could it be ...

< 02.04

At no more than a few minutes past four in the sultry night of Florida it was still relatively quiet in and around the complex of NASA's Kennedy Space Center. But although only the necessary crew was present to keep the systems running, monitor the ongoing missions and provide the necessary security, he was held up immediately. Only after he had handed over his credentials, and after a careful check, was he allowed through.

Given the quiet time, he had no difficulty whatsoever in finding a parking spot. With a double beep he heard his car lock behind him and rushed through the glass door. "Good morning, Professor Mirnat," the security man greeted him. Nevertheless, the man did reach out his hand. Calmly, the professor handed over his identification again, put his left thumb on the scanner and waited. "All right, Professor. Walk on." Unhurried, but just as stiffly, he went to the open elevator. He put his identification in the slot, upon which the doors closed and he was silently, quickly transported down to his deep underground workspace. No more than a handful of people knew that that was where the CSA, or Cosmos Security Agency, was based.

In addition to his regular work of mapping the universe for NASA, he also monitored all movements in the deep universe. Every minute change, extraterrestrial or otherwise, that could pose a possible threat to humanity was examined very seriously here. The elevator doors swung open. He quickly withdrew his pass, walked down the corridor and entered the observation room.

As always, it was pleasantly cool. The enormous screens that hung around the walls each showed part of the universe and on the dome-shaped ceiling an overview of their own galaxy was projected. In the middle was the control panel of the telescope, surrounded by various high-tech pieces of equipment to process all the information. Apart from a very distant humming noise which came from the climate system that kept the temperature at a constant 70°F and the room dust-free, it was quiet in the 'cockpit'. In his mind he also called it the 'rock pit', because rock was almost always to be found here. Just like now.

His friend and colleague Rock Veerhooes greeted him in amazement. "Mirnat, what are you doing here so early? Surely not because of that idiotic report that is now the number one craziest report ever?" "Um, what do you mean?", he reacted surprised. "Well, that report of a half-assed conspiracy thinker spying on satellites with his scope. Spy satellites, according to him. He was convinced he saw something very strange." Thinking of his own supposed perception, he tipped his ears with interest. "What did this guy see?" Rock chuckled. "Listen. That weirdo saw a bird landing on a Markland Communications satellite, which isn't a spy satellite, by the way. It was our own national symbol, the Bald Eagle. The kid was sure and said he'd taken a picture of it." Rock chuckled again. "The owner of that satellite's sure gonna like it. A bird shitting on his satellite!"

Relieved and disappointed at one and the same time, he laughed and asked if the report had already been checked. "Yes, of course. I didn't have much to do here anyway, so I went straight to him. As so often, this again turned out to be a storm in a teacup. In fact, in a schnapps glass. The room was filled with the smell of weed, the boy could hardly find the words and the so called picture turned out to have disappeared. I immediately took the opportunity and copied all the data I could find. After all, you never know. Waste of energy, but hey." He shrugged his shoulders. "It broke the routine for once. But now I still don't know what you're doing here so early." He gave Rock a piece of paper. "Before I too am declared a fool, I'd like to ask you to look up the image plane of these coordinates. First I want to check if I've actually seen what I think I've seen."

Rock looked at him curiously. "What is it about, then?" "No, no. I want to see it first, and I don't want to risk breaking the record of crazy reports. I think I've seen something, but I don't know exactly what and I've been so stupid as not to copy it," he confessed. "What? You? You, breaking protocol? Oh, boy! The miracles aren't over yet."

With a sour face, he sat in the chair next to Rock. "Miracle, miracle ... No miracle at all, but frustration at yet another collision with my eldest daughter. That kid will give me a peptic ulcer some day, damn it."

Next to him, Rock had entered the coordinates. As their chairs moved backwards, the part of the universe he wanted to check became visible on the ceiling, right down to the smallest detail. The observation chairs came to rest and lying next to each other, they looked tensely at the most wondrous thing that was outside the earth.

He had let Rock enter the starting time a bit earlier on purpose and concentratedly looked at the image for three minutes, in which nothing out of the ordinary could be discovered. "Say, eh, Oskar?", Rock started curious and somewhat impatient. "What am I supposed to see now? Because frankly, I don't see much in particular... What?"

His heavy voice echoed through the 'cockpit', when on the ceiling suddenly several stars started to flicker and moved rapidly towards each other. They seemed to merge into one ball, only to flicker brightly for a short moment. In no time at all, the miraculous spectacle was over and the universe looked as it had always done.

"Ha! I did see it right!" "What, what, what was that? Oskar! Say you saw that too!" In a state of supreme excitement Rock set the chairs upright and grabbed the red phone. "Wait!", he cried out loud. As if he had been stung, Rock withdrew his hand. "Take it easy, my friend. Don't be so premature. Let's think before we act. What we just saw, we must first investigate. You know. Protocol."

His words had taken effect. "Sorry, Oskar. You're right. I got carried away, but ... Have you ever seen anything like this before? I haven't, anyway. Do you have any idea what this might be?" "I really don't have a clue. After I thought I saw this, I looked to see if it was ever mentioned before, but I couldn't find anything about it. I began to doubt myself, but I'm now glad I came here, despite the risk of ruining my reputation."

Rock's huge eyebrows frowned. "Ruining? You don't know me very well, buddy. Everything stays here in the cockpit. Even any blunders." Luckily his friend continued immediately, because he had nothing to say in return, he thought embarrassed. "Whichever way you look at it, Oskar, you've discovered something. What are you going to call this phenomenon? Do you have a name in mind?"

He shook his head. "I have no idea what this could be, let alone a name for it. I suggest we start by looking at it fragment by fragment. Maybe that'll give us some answers."

"Okay, good plan," Rock agreed, and he reclined their seats again. His fingers moved with practiced ease over the control panel, whereupon the ceiling seemed to be shooting towards them. Because of the specially adapted glasses they had put on, they could see every detail greatly enlarged in 3D.

< 02.05

She'd been waiting for hours and it seemed to be a hopeless mission. But she didn't want to hear anything about quitting. The secret holy task, passed on century after century from sister to sister, now had to be accomplished by her.

Cut off from the hectic outside world, she had done her duty for years with a number of faithful people. Besides the daily routine of working, praying, eating, and meditating, she had lovingly cared for the Lady with God in her heart. Month after month, year after year, she had watched over their guests with the other confidants, so that, should the moment arise, immediate action could be taken.

She knew that she did not have long to live, and was already preparing to pass on her holy commission to her successor when a miracle had happened. The moment, exactly as it was described in the ancient scriptures, had occurred. In her presence! After she had sounded the alarm, the remaining instructions had to be carried out immediately.

As fast as her old legs could carry her, she had gone down the stairs to retreat into the communication cell. Like all other cells, this one was

simply furnished with a bed, table, chair, toilet and washing facilities. The only anomaly consisted of the two devices she sat close to.

For the time being, she didn't have to do anything more than wait. She was no longer allowed to leave this cell and was provided by her sisters with everything she needed, and although they did not ask for anything, their eyes shone expectantly, hoping that she would be able to make contact.

She was no longer hungry for food, and drank only what was necessary, knowing that she was living on borrowed time. She would not recover. Her body was almost wrecked by that terrible disease. Her biological clock was counting down, she felt it in every fiber of her body. She hoped only to have enough time to accomplish her task. It would be an honor. But she still hadn't been able to report anything to her sisters.

Reading the bible that lay in her lap, she patiently waited. Suddenly she heard a click. Her old heart leapt and pounded in her chest. The time had come! It was finally going to happen! She concentrated, passed on her message as clearly as possible, then carefully put the handset back on the hook and rang the bell to warn her sisters. With a deep sigh of relief she stumbled to the bed and lay down with difficulty. She folded her hands and began to pray softly, awaiting his arrival.

< 02.06

With a jolt, Hakon's head shot up and he conjured up a smile. "Ha, Lémarc. How's it going? Having a good time?"

If he had not known Lémarc as well as he did, his face, as expressionless as ever, would have worried him.

It remained silent for a moment before Lémarc looked straight at him. "You know, Hakon? I'm the happiest man on earth right now. Arda and I ... I never thought I'd meet anyone like her. Independent, proud, athletic, and more importantly, honest." An embarrassing remark, Hakon thought guiltily. Yet he couldn't discover a trace of sarcasm in Lémarc's voice. His friend only confessed, in an uncharacteristically open manner, what he and Arda had together.

“I suspect someone hurt her a lot somewhere in the past, Hakon. I can only hope she hasn't lost all faith in mankind and wants to give me a chance. Because, you know? I guess I can't live without her anymore. She's not easy, but she can be so spontaneous and crazy that I won't be bored for a minute.” The corners of Lémarc's mouth attracted suspicion. “And I'm only talking about afternoons. What goes on at night ...” What he rarely did happened now. Lémarc laughed, his white teeth showing. “I'll leave that to your imagination,” he concluded grinning. Hakon laughed. “Lémarc, I bet you find the days pretty long nowadays.” Hakon took a look at his watch. “It's not even a quarter past ten. But, speaking of women ... How did Pierre fare, anyway? Have you spoken to him yet?” Lémarc's broad smile shrank a little.

“In the castle with Sandra, in that subterranean space there, our lanky is enjoying himself tremendously. He was terribly disappointed at first, after arriving after that marathon trip.” “Yes, of course,” Hakon said. “If you're afraid to fly and you don't have a driver's license, a trip from The Hague to Scotland isn't exactly going to be a pleasure journey. Not to mention the time you're on the road. But what do you mean, ‘disappointed’? How can Pierre be disappointed?” “Well, here's the story ...” Lémarc's smile got a little wider. “When he finally arrived after three days, Marilyn was waiting for him at the station. That poor boy assumed she was Sandra. He immediately shut up and during the journey to the lord's castle he didn't say a single word, Marilyn said. Only when she had shown him that block of JELLIE and explained it to him, did he understand exactly what Sandra was, and crawled out of his shell. And from what I understood, there was no stopping him when he could communicate one on one with ‘his Sandra’ through that new WORM. He told Marilyn that a new world had opened up for him and that a relationship with Sandra was a thousand times preferable to one with a flesh-and-blood woman. Much too much stress and not that interesting by a long shot.”

Hakon chuckled, looked briefly at Marilyn, and thought of how there was an ideal partner for everyone, but preferred to keep his mouth shut, although with some difficulty. “It's a pity UNBI has to do without him,” he heard Lémarc say. “But according to Marilyn and Sandra, Pierre is a godsend. He is well informed about the current technology and extremely intelligent.” Hakon nodded. “For Sandra, a fine sparring partner. Quite a

relief for the lord and Marilyn. That'll take a lot of work off their hands.”

“Yes, very nice for them,” Lémarc replied. His smile disappeared and his dark eyes looked at Hakon with concern. “But now you, Hakon. How are you doing? You’ve stirred things up quite a bit and I can hardly imagine what you’ve been going through, but just like everyone else you need time to process all that. I’ve been watching you for a while and sometimes it’s like you’re not quite there. Also, ever since you rolled down those stairs, you regularly rub your right hand. What’s wrong? Should I be worried?” Hakon shook his head. Apart from Sandra, he didn’t want to bother anyone. “I’m covered in bruises, but that’ll pass. Everything else is okay. You really don’t have to worry.”

But Lémarc didn’t leave him alone. “You won’t fool me. I’ll sit here until you tell me what’s going on.” Lémarc continued to look belligerently at him. “Sorry, I’m not saying it right. I demand that you confide in me this time. You owe me that, I’d say.”

“I caught what Lémarc was asking and he’s right, Hakon,” replied Lord MacMarkland, who came to sit with them. “You’ve got something on your mind, which Sandra inadvertently confirms by not wanting to say what she’s trying to find out for you. I respect everyone’s privacy and would leave it at that, but you’re obviously not yourself and that combination worries me a lot.” Like Lémarc, the lord kept a close eye on him while he continued: “If we establish GAIAS, we must not keep secrets from each other. Together we solve everything. Together we are strong! Your own words, Hakon. Remember?”

Painfully surprised, Hakon realized the two of them were right. He was so self-absorbed that he hadn’t thought for a second to confide in his best friends. He should have known better, he thought guilty.

Suddenly it seemed like a millstone was lifted from his shoulders. He took a deep breath and in one breath he told them about the encounter with the woman in the Peace Palace, his dreams that came back more frequently lately, the tickling scar and the indefinable feeling he had, as if he was missing something. “What could you be missing?”, Lord MacMarkland asked. “Describe to us everything you remember so that we can think along with you.”

Tormented by his own ignorance, Hakon stared ahead. "That's the problem. I don't know. All the information I have, I've passed on to Sandra. She was going to investigate and analyze it for me, although I wonder why it's taking so long. If she can't find answers, I don't know. All I know is I can't get that woman's face out of my mind. It's even making me sleep badly and that is quite something for a person who can fall asleep anytime, anywhere! Although I've never seen her before, I know that somehow we have a connection. That feeling has stayed with me ever since I fell down the stairs with her. Here." He took his smartphone out of his inside pocket, looked for her picture and gave it to Lémarc.

"Wow!" Lémarc whistled softly between his teeth and read the information Sandra had put under the photo. "Jeez, dude!", Hakon heard him murmur softly as Lémarc read who it was and what she had done, from primary school to the recent discovery in Egypt.

Lémarc gave the smartphone to Lord MacMarkland and looked at Hakon calmly. "Man, I think you're in love. You got it right. You have to go after her or the world will end."

The lord returned Hakon's smartphone. "So this is what Sandra had to figure out for you privately. I don't see why you insisted on keeping it a secret. Anybody can fall in love, boy. Honestly, I admire your choice. That lady's obviously got a lot of potential, and she ain't looking too bad." Hakon shook his head. "That's not the point. "Except that she's a very beautiful woman," he grinned crookedly, "who I literally fell for, I can't say I'm in love with her. Ever since I met her, I've felt strongly that there's more. Like I've known her all my life and we're very connected." He kept silent and thought for a moment before he went on pondering. "During that fall, the world ceased to exist and it seemed as if we were looking into each other's souls." Lémarc nodded understandingly. "I know, Hakon. That's how it feels when you meet your soul mate. That's how it felt when I first saw Arda. You have to find her and look her up. Believe me, it's the most beautiful thing there is."

Lord MacMarkland said nothing. Through his WORM he heard Sandra say she wanted to discuss something urgent with his lordship. About Hakon!

< 02.07

Of course, Esteban thought, excited. It was an ancient Inquisition lock! Such locks could only be opened with the most important key that existed. The key that had been carried and passed on for centuries by his predecessors. When he accepted his function, the master key had been solemnly handed over to him, after which he had worn it permanently on his body.

Excitedly, he unhooked the narrow pouch from the inside of his belt, opened it and pulled out the cast iron key. The key fitted precisely and slipped smoothly into the lock. He vigorously turned it three times to the right, followed by once to the left. The door silently clicked open outwards.

From the threshold on which he stood, he noticed a dark passageway. The dry air that hung there smelled lightly of minerals.

He locked away his key, took a deep breath and with the lantern in front of him he stepped inside. He placed his feet carefully as he walked on over the irregularly shaped stones. In the lantern's bright LED light he saw several doors on either side familiar to him from the monastery. Here, monks must have lived, who had had their cells here.

Without paying particular attention to the first five cells, he walked straight on to the sixth and last cell, as the telephone sound clearly came from there. This door, too, could only be opened with the master key and he also managed to open this door without any problems. Tense, he pushed the door further open and put the lantern as far inside as possible.

In the center of the narrow, dark room stood an old, dusty table on which an antique telephone had been placed. A telephone that looked familiar to him. As a memento of times long gone there was a similar one on his own desk. Although that one was polished shiny instead of being grey from the dust. But his one had never produced a sound, let alone as incessantly and annoyingly as this one.

He quickly walked to the table, took the receiver off the hook, blew the coat of dust off and listened tensely. Moments later he heard a woman's

voice coming through, sounding like metal. With a Spanish accent he was told in clear Italian: "The Lady has spoken about the encounter. We await your arrival," after which the connection was cut off with a click. Stunned, he lowered the horn and only now saw who was sitting at the table opposite him.

< 02.08

What was this, Lord MacMarkland thought astonished.

Did Sandra withhold information? Especially now? Now that he had lectured Hakon less than a minute ago? Didn't Sandra get that?

"Gentlemen, you keep talking about Hakon's future girlfriend. I'm gonna go outside and get some air." He got up and walked to the double terrace doors, behind the people who were having breakfast and talking with each other in a relaxed way. As he passed by, he tapped Marilyn on her shoulder. Marilyn gestured to Tim that they should pause their conversation and looked back at Alasdair with questioning eyes. So softly that only she could understand him, he said that he was worried about Hakon and that she - after all, she was Hakon's oldest and best friend - should be the one to subject him to a rigorous examination. A confidential conversation would certainly do their friend good.

Marilyn understood immediately what he meant, he saw. Good. Quasi relaxed, he walked on, opened the terrace doors and stepped outside. Nice. No one to be seen. As he walked down the path to the terrace, he asked Sandra what on earth was going on. "Quite a story, sir. As soon as Hakon has spoken to his grandfather, I'll tell you everything." "His grandfather?", he asked, surprised and suddenly worried. "What about Torstein? Is he..." "No, sir. Don't worry. Except for the normal signs of wear and tear at such an age, he's actually in very good shape. It's about Hakon's family history. I will inform you and the others later, after which we will have to decide together whether this situation falls within the scope of GAIAS." Annoyed, he strode up and down the terrace.

"Sandra, you speak in riddles. What do you expect me to do? If you can't tell me anything else..." "I can do that, sir. It's concerning that interference during the completion of the installation of the new modules

on the satellites. It looked like a momentary surge in the power grid had caused the failure. Apart from any damage to the GRID, the JELLIE - my brain - was completely unaffected. After investigation I concluded that the energy surge had had nothing to do with the electricity, but that the pulse had come from Hakon."

Hakon? "You must be mistaken, Sandra. Hakon was in The Hague at that reception at the Peace Palace." "That's right, sir. I'm guessing Hakon isn't even aware that he was the source of that disturbance."

Astonished, he dropped onto one of the patio chairs and continued to listen. "You are all equipped with the new WORM (*Wireless Observant Recovery Manager*) with which I can now, provided the wearer does not explicitly forbid me to do so, also monitor bodily functions and have access to what the senses perceive. Well, the moment Hakon fell down the stairs in the Peace Palace, he sent an energy surge that entered our system via the WORM. Exactly what this pulse is and how Hakon was able to do it, I don't know yet. I'll have more data in the course of the day, after Hakon and his grandfather met. A lot will depend on Hakon's reaction, and it's best if you and the others see for yourselves first. My explanations as to how things are connected will then be easier to understand."

Sandra's last sentence seemed very cryptic to him. Had that interference destroyed something in the JELLIE? Mentally ill people often had no idea ... "Sandra, are you sure...", he started, but her voice interrupted him again. "After Hakon leaves with his grandfather, will you gather everyone in the kitchen? I'll give you the necessary instructions to prepare the group, after which I'll lead you and the others to the meeting place."

With a head full of questions, he stood up and, doubting Sandra's 'mental health', he thoughtfully walked back to the house. "Oh, sir?" The subject of his thoughts reappeared. "I've just received new data. May I ask how your personal relationship with Professor Oskar Mirnat is?"

Stunned, he stopped in the middle of the path. Half convinced that Sandra was really losing it, he gently asked her why she suddenly wanted to know something so trivial. "Well, at NASA in Florida, your

name was mentioned. My information regarding your mutual relationship is insufficient.”

After thinking for a moment, he answered sympathetically: “I know Mirnat was a classmate of one of my uncles. Nothing more. He visited us once, but other than that, as far as I can remember, there has been no contact since.”

“Excellent, sir. That’s all I wanted to know. I’ll keep you informed.”

Her pleasant voice had disappeared. While he wondered anxiously whether Saundra might have had some kind of stroke and how on earth he could check that, he resumed his walk.

< 02.09

After carefully hanging away his glasses, Oskar looked aside at Rock. With the imprint of his glasses still on his face, Rock stared at him disbelievingly. “What er... What exactly is this? I can see from your face that you remember something. Did I miss something? Has something eluded me, perhaps?” “Absolutely not,” he assured his assistant. “I just remembered something. But tell me, Rock. How would you describe our perception?”

Rock stared at him silently for a moment before answering in his deep voice. “The only thing I can make of it for now is that they seem to be kind of gaseous concentrations, floating towards each other while glowing and then causing an explosion of light for a very short time. If you look at the recording of the moment immediately after it went out, you see something that I think can only be a gas concentration. It is not solid matter, because you can see the stars behind it shining through it very softly. The strangest thing is that this mass emits such light that it looks like a group of stars. Very unusual. I count a total of eleven clouds of gas that together form a sort of ‘<’. Two legs with five masses of gas each; at the tip of the legs is the eleventh. If you look closely,” he very slowly let the recording go back, “you see that that point, that eleventh cloud of gas, stays in place. It also glows the longest. It only takes a fraction of a second, but with our equipment it’s clearly visible.”

Oskar nodded in agreement. "Excellently described. There's nothing I can add, except that I noticed that we've looked up this particular segment before. Do you remember that man, that monk we met at a congress years ago? He dressed like a banker, and at first we thought he was a businessman. The card he gave us said he was the Commissario of the Roman Catholic Church Security Service. He then showed us a picture of a painting and asked if we could find out in what era it might have been made."

A light went on in Rock's head, he saw. "Yeah ... a long time ago. It had something to do with the Early Middle Ages. Was that a picture of this segment?" "I'm pretty sure of that and in light of what we've just observed, I think it's quite a coincidence, don't you?", Oskar replied cautiously. "Well," Rock said laconically. "I always keep everything safe and I'll dig up that picture."

After a few sweeping movements, followed by a closing tap on the control panel, the image appeared on the ceiling, razor-sharp as if it had been made by themselves.

"All right, Rock. Now let's zoom in on the segment where those gas clouds should be." "Well, I'll be damned! You're right!" Rock's fingers restlessly pulled his dark beard. "Damn it, Oskar. How did you know this? How could we ever have overlooked this?" So, his suspicion turned out to be well-founded. He calmly replied: "First of all, I did not know. I only had a suspicion. Secondly, we took seven known constellations, determined the vectors and used them to calculate the time period in which that painting was made. We didn't look any further. We had no reason to, after all. But now," he pointed to the year, "I'm starting to wonder a bit.

Apparently this phenomenon was also visible in 988 A.D.", "...and those papists have kept it a secret for over a thousand years," Rock added. "At least back then. Whether that's still the case, I doubt it. A thousand years is a long time. Somewhere something must have been lost, or the Commissario wouldn't have come to us."

He pointed upwards. "What surprises me even more now than when we got that picture from him, is the quality of that painting. If you forget the position of the constellations for a moment, I'd swear that picture was

taken by ourselves. That is to say, Rock, with the use of a very advanced deep-stellar telescope!”

Rock’s beard bounced enthusiastically up and down at his ever faster approving nod. “And they didn’t exist then. Ergo, how on earth were they able to perceive that constellation and paint it so precisely?” “Exactly,” he agreed with Rock. “Although we don’t know how, we may find that over a thousand years ago this phenomenon was observed, maybe even more often. But apparently, as far as we know, it has had no impact on earthly life. Why the Roman Catholic Church had that painting made at the time and why that Commissario wanted to know the year in which it came into being is of secondary importance. The primary question is why those gas stars, as I’ll call them for the time being, have now suddenly started to move. The cause of that, and whether it will have consequences for our planet, we must first find out.”

He took a serious look at his assistant before speaking further. “In short, it is my belief that this synchronous displacement of those gas stars and that flash of light were unnatural events. There’s only one conclusion possible.”

Rock nodded resignedly and complemented: “According to Article 1(2)(3) of the CSA Protocol, this situation meets the ‘extraterrestrial threat’ definition.” “Sit up straight, Rock, and grab the red phone. You do the honors.”

< 02.10

Still thinking about the enigmatic message that had just been given to him, Esteban had hung the receiver back. Only then did he notice a strange, lumpy figure on the other side of the table. Instinctively he flinched backwards, until it dawned on him that the dusty form was human. He aimed the lantern a little better. It was a monk. Or rather, the remains of what had once been a monk. The bright LED light did not hide anything and it became clear to him that the poor man must have sat dead in his chair for decades.

He had probably fallen forward on the table at the last moment and as his arms were crossed under his head, it looked exactly as if he had wanted

to take a nap. A sleep from which he had never awakened again.

Esteban carefully examined the remains. When he touched them, the cowl fell apart, leaving no more than a few frayed fragments. The corpse itself, however, turned out to be a lot firmer. The atmosphere in this small cell was apparently ideal for preserving the body so perfectly.

With some effort he lifted the head up a bit, and although the face was heavily sunken in, there was clear resignation in the leathery features of the face. Fearing that this monk had never been allowed to receive the last sacraments, he carefully put the head back and let his gaze wander through the cell. It was a small, bare room that, like any other cell, was extremely soberly furnished. Only the door through which he had entered was different. There were bars in front of the peephole and there was a hatch through which food could be slid. This was not a standard monk's cell. This was a real cell, meant to lock someone up. This monk had been a prisoner who had died of hunger and thirst for some reason. In a highly secure cell of the Inquisition, in fact.

He shook his head in disbelief. Someone, a brother even, deliberately let him die of starvation. That could never have been the intention.

Convinced that there had to be a clue here somewhere, he lifted the corpse carefully. To his surprise, a piece of paper fluttered onto the ground.

He put the body back, bent over and picked up the paper. Excitedly he felt it was a piece of torn parchment and as soon as the light fell on it, he saw the Inquisition seal. Expectantly, he held it in the full light and was immediately disappointed. In graceful letters it contained only a few words. 'After recei', 'pass on', 'call'.

Despite the little he had found, it was not difficult to imagine that this was an instruction: after the telephone rang, the message had to be passed on to someone who had to be called. It was a good thing that the instruction was clear and straightforward, otherwise he would have had a problem, he thought sourly.

He looked at the ancient telephone in a grumpy way. It was definitely one of the first devices ever made and therefore did not have a dial, let alone buttons. To make contact with a telephone exchange, the receiver had to be taken off, after which the hook contact had to be pressed three times

in a row. The receiver was then held to the ear and speaking was done into the device itself. Why not just try it, actually? It could never hurt to try. Curious if anything would happen at all, he grabbed the receiver and quickly pushed the hook down three times. Tense, he put the receiver against his ear and waited.

< 02.11

“Soulmate”, Hakon repeated in his mind. That sounded beautiful, but deep inside he knew that this was not the case either. Yes, after that vision in The Hague he felt an enormously strong bond with that woman, but that had nothing to do with love or infatuation.

He sighed. He couldn't figure out how to explain this to Alasdair and Lémarc. But he was spared the trouble. Alasdair stood up to get some air and Arda, who was standing behind Lémarc, seized Lémarc by wrapping her arms around his neck. Smiling, Hakon watched the couple who were so clearly in love and he thought about how Arda had changed. Except for the fact that she wasn't wearing a long-haired red wig now, which made her look very different now with her own dark blond, short-cut haircut, she almost looked like another woman. The vice still sparkled in her green eyes, but her behavior seemed a lot less unstable to him. He saw her teasingly pulling Lémarc's ear while she 'invited' him to help her with the dishes. “Then I can immediately judge your household qualities.”

Her white teeth flashed shortly before she softly conspiratorially added: “And for Torstein's surprise party tonight we have to arrange a few things with the whole team.”

Under no circumstances would the group have allowed grandpa's eightieth birthday to pass by unnoticed. In silence they had made a plan, made the necessary preparations and invited the friends of his grandfather and grandmother. Tjan and Tony had put together a special fireworks show that the whole of Kongsberg would talk about for years to come, according to Tony. A special kind of fireworks that even on a cloudy day would make for a spectacular show, he had confidently added. Knowing the brothers, it would certainly be special, Hakon thought. He hoped that the house would still be standing afterwards.

While refilling his coffee mug he thought he should call Sandra. She must have found out something more by now. A calloused hand was laid softly on his shoulder. Grandpa's hand. He looked back and saw from his grandfather's eyes that he wanted to speak to him now. Behind him, he walked through the kitchen and the corridor to the living room, where his grandmother was already waiting on the sofa with her hands in her lap. From the way she sat and her restless finger movements, he saw that she was nervous. Hakon was startled. "Grandma. What's going on?" She shook her gray head. "All is well, Hakon." She patted on the seat next to her. "Come. Come and sit next to me."

Certainly not reassured, he sat down next to her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. His grandmother grabbed his hand and said, "Hakon, your grandfather and I have something to tell you. We can't wait any longer. We doubted for a long time whether we wanted to tell you. But since you rolled down those stairs, we're convinced you need to know everything. It's about time. We're just afraid that when you've heard everything, the same thing that happened to your father will happen to you. We've already lost our son and we don't want to even think about losing you too."

Not understanding, he looked at his grandparents in turn. "My dad? Lose me too? What do you mean?"

"Your grandfather will show you something later and tell you a story, after which you'll understand everything. But first this. Take a good look at the painting." His eyes immediately turned to his father's painting, which had hung above the chimney for over thirty years. He knew it by heart. "Yes, what about it?" he asked hesitantly. "Take a good look. Don't you notice anything in particular?"

In the quiet living room, the clock tapped the seconds away while he looked at the painting again. "No, Grandma. It looks like it has always done. I look very much like him, and he looks like Grandpa when he was younger. And he's got the same stain on his right hand as Grandpa and I have."

His grandmother squeezed him hard in his hand. Realizing that it was his father he saw over and over again in his dreams, he looked aside and was startled by the tears that rose in his grandma's eyes.

“Grandma! What’s the matter now? Just tell me!” Silently, his grandmother took a yellowed envelope from the pocket of her jacket and gave it to him.

“Hakon, darling. Before grandpa tells you what happened to one of your ancestors centuries ago - something that your grandfather, your father and you, too, literally bear the stamp of - you must first read this letter.”

New tears were falling from his grandmother’s eyes. “Your father wrote this letter to you before he left and gave it to us for safekeeping. He never came home after that.” The tears were pouring down on her wrinkled, sweet face. He could hardly bear to look at it and pressed her against himself, comforting her for a moment. Bewildered, he silently sought help from his grandfather, who was also visibly struggling. In spite of that, he grabbed the letter opener made of whale’s rib from the coffee table and handed it to Hakon. Hesitantly he grabbed it and cut open the envelope. There was only a single folded sheet of paper in it. He unfolded it and while comforting his grandmother, he read:

Son, 12-10-1985

Now that you’re reading this, you know I’m dead. I hope you got this letter, because it means your grandfather’s still there. If he, too, were no longer alive, you would have received a similar letter through our notary in Kongsberg. Now that you are reading this letter, my father is able to tell you about the remarkable event that happened to our ancestor Hakon Torstein Eriksson in 988 AD. When your grandfather informed me about it, it was a reason for me to explore this history further. At the moment I’m writing this, I don’t know what’s in store for me. But since you are reading this letter, it means that my search has ended without me being able to tell you about it in person. Probably because of my arrogance and adventurous disposition I ended up in something that was too big for me, or I simply crashed. I explicitly asked your grandfather, in case I didn’t come back, not to inform you until he deemed it necessary. As I review the scope of this letter, I ask you to think carefully about what you will do after you know the whole story. Apparently, it didn’t do me any good. I expect you to make an informed decision. I’d like to end this letter by saying that I love you and am very proud of you, my son. Give your grandmother and grandfather a kiss and apologize to them on my behalf.

Your loving father

Erik Hakon Eriksson

While wondering what in heaven's name his grandpa had told his father that caused him to leave so unexpectedly, he pulled out his handkerchief and gently dabbed the tears from his grandmother's face. He beckoned his grandfather to the sofa and as soon as he sat next to him, he read the letter to them. Then he pressed them both close to him and kissed them both fervently on the cheek. "Don't be afraid. I will never let you down," he said sincerely.

His grandmother nodded resignedly. "We know that, Hakon. But perhaps..." His grandfather interrupted her and looked at her. "Marit, it's time." He stood up and said: "Come, Hakon. I have something to show you and then I'll tell you everything I know."

< 02.12

Esteban held the receiver against his ear with one hand and examined the table further. He noticed that it had a drawer. He put the lantern down and opened it with a creaking sound. To his joy he saw a thick book in it.

It took him some effort to get the heavy, black, leather book out with just one hand. With a thud he dropped it on the table, causing a cloud of dust to rise. In the light of the lantern it caused a golden snow shower of tumbling dust. He sneezed and saw that the book, although old, was still in good condition. The front was inlaid with an artfully crafted silver crucifix and despite its age it still shone beautifully.

He burned with curiosity, couldn't wait to open it and his hand was already moving towards it when the receiver gave a distinct click. Instead of the book, he excitedly grabbed the antique device and listened with concentration. Immediately after the click, he heard the panting voice of his personal adjutant, who asked with a puzzled voice: "Yes, who's calling?" In surprise, he almost dropped the receiver. "What? Where are you?" He could hear the astonishment in his adjutant's voice. "In your room, Commissario. It's very strange, but that old phone on your desk

started ringing with an unmissable noise that went to the bone. To make it stop, I picked up the receiver.”

Perplexed, he remained silent for a moment to reflect on the situation. He expected everything, but this? How was it possible that his own antique device was connected to the ancient one down here? In a cell that had been undiscovered for who knows how long? A mystery! He had to do everything he could to find out how the hell that was possible. He had to get to the bottom of it.

First he had to get more information. An idea of how best to proceed appeared in his head. All right. So let’s get started right away.

Determinedly, he said: “Gideon, listen carefully. You’re relieved of all your duties immediately. You will now be given a single task with all the necessary authority. Assemble an investigation team of the most intelligent Inquisitors we have, with knowledge of all fields. Come to the Pillar Room with the entire team in fifteen minutes. Wait...”

Something else came to mind. “Bring me the latest report on the state of digitization of all church documents, and that box with the new tablets.”

After his adjutant had promised him to go straight to work, he hung the receiver back on the hook.

< 02.13

Yawning unabashedly, Kiniawe saw the first dark pink signs of the rising sun in the east. She kept staring closely at the sky and shivered. Not of cold, but of fear. The two things she feared most, she now experienced in succession, she thought unhappily. First that rotten syringe that still made her arm throb painfully, and now Granny’s driving skills. Her Granny, who was one of the sweetest and most intelligent people on earth and who could hold a scalpel completely under control during an operation, was a downright clumsy person when it came to driving a car. Having to perform several operations at once to keep a car moving, she had, to put it mildly, never got the hang of it. When Granny was behind the wheel, she looked most like a toddler driving a bumper car at the fair. Unfortunately, she had already experienced that more often than she cared for. By now Granny’s small all-terrain vehicle had been dented on all sides and a big star was

shining in the front windscreen. A memento of a launched cyclist, which made the lighter sky seem to have a peculiar purple striped pattern. Despite her begging, Granny had stubbornly refused to hand over the steering wheel and annoyed, she stared through it. The distance to Mérida was not even that great and she could hardly wait to see Nakawe again.

If Granny had let her drive, they would have been a lot further by now, she thought rebelliously. Her patience was pretty much put to the test, as Granny chugged along the road like a crippled snail. On top of that, Granny didn't want to say anything about what happened at the pyramid two days ago. She suppressed a new yawn. Since then she had been sleeping badly and wasn't feeling well. Both at night and during the day the images she had seen wouldn't leave her alone. Images that meant nothing to her, except the open-mouthed eyes of Nakawe that looked fearfully at that blond man.

Fearing that she might have been possessed by a hellish demon, she folded her hands. In thought she silently asked God for help and promised Him with heart and soul that she would confess more often. On her lap her thumb rubbed her right hand, which had been itching more or less continuously for two days now. She took another good look at her hand. In the dark she did not see the scar, but she felt it all the more. A family sign, Granny had once said. Which was quite strange, because Granny and Nakawe were not directly related to her. Yet she had had exactly the same mark on her hand as those two. Until a few years ago, when she had fallen into a piece of glass, changing it to the strange, twisted shape it was now. She had never felt it before, but after that weird thing at the pyramid it itched like crazy.

"Oh, Granny, watch out! There's a car is coming from the ri..." With a loud bang, a car coming out of a parking space knocked their right wing mirror off. Granny hit the brake, forgot to shift gears and had their car turn off with a hiccup. Kiniawe got out quickly, but was just too late. She couldn't read the license plate of the car that was tearing away with squeaking tires. Slowly she turned around. The outside mirror was a bit of a mess and was dangling gently back and forth on a couple of wires.

"Get in, Kiniawe", Granny called. "Far too dangerous out there on the street. I don't really need that mirror. I rarely use it." That was obvious,

Kiniawe thought miserably as she got back into the car with her knees wobbling.

< 02.14

Although he had no idea what Grandpa was going to tell him, Hakon already knew that he would never, ever follow his father's quest and disappear. He put the short letter his father had left him in his pocket, got up and decided to let whatever happened, happen. If Grandpa wanted to show him something, that was fine. In any case, he would be out of the way, so he wouldn't accidentally find out about the surprise party his friends were preparing. Hakon smiled for a moment. Hopefully the party would ensure that his grandparents wouldn't think about his father's death all the time.

Without understanding why Grandpa insisted on showing him something first, he resignedly accepted his outstretched hand. While Grandma walked behind them, he let Grandpa take him with him like a little boy. The three of them walked down the corridor, where they met Marilyn. Hakon had not expected her here at all, but heard his grandfather say that it was alright that Marilyn had come here. As if his grandfather had forgotten that he was standing right next to him, he said: "I am ready to inform Hakon. You, too?"

Marilyn nodded and his grandfather continued: "It's very good that you are there too. Hakon could use a good friend after he's heard everything. It will be a big shock for him." "Oh, Grandpa. Hakon can take a beating. Besides," she casually shrugged her shoulders, "I'm not alone." Speechless, Hakon saw how she put her arm through his grandmother's. "Shall we?", she asked excitedly, and his grandfather took him through the kitchen and pantry into the garage.

The 30-year-old Land Rover, just like the '*Stormbryter*' outside, stood there well-maintained and shining. Grandpa probably wanted to show him something that was in the trunk. Hakon already wanted to stop walking, but grandpa pulled him along. It was only in the lefthand corner that his grandfather let him come to a halt, in front of the large cupboard where, as long as Hakon could remember, the tools were stored.

Silently his grandmother and Marilyn came to stand with them. His grandfather let go of his hand and opened both doors. Hakon quickly let his gaze drift over the inside, but couldn't really discover anything out of the ordinary. Patiently, he asked what he should see here. His grandfather answered extraordinarily seriously: "Just a little more patience, boy. In a few minutes you'll know why I brought you here."

< 02.15

On the edge of the wild sea, high on a cliff stood a house that was difficult to reach. Its ivy-covered walls were made of coarse stones and the roof was as pointed as a magician's hat. This impression was reinforced by the three skylights that looked like two stars and a crescent moon. Behind their thick window glass was a nasty pink-orange light that cast creepy shadows on the tiles next to them. From the tip, a thin wisp of poisonous looking green smoke curled upwards. The ground around the whole house was full of prickly shrubs between which a few bare, dead trees protruded. The only entrance consisted of a rusty fence on which a weathered, iron cat with a high back kept a stiff guard. At the foot of the cliff stood a few dilapidated houses and huts that apparently had not been inhabited for hundreds of years. If one had the courage to look around here at night, one would hear the scariest noises coming from the magic house. Noises which hung around the whole place like a misty blanket. The sounds screeched spookily through cracks and crevices, and one would instinctively know that something was fishy here. Possibly even cursed.

As empty and deserted as it was here, by contrast the magic house was equally bustling. Inside, it was warm. Very warm, even. Above a big fire hung a big iron cauldron in which a purple-green brew was bubbling. The walls next to it were packed with boxes, bottles, glass jars and bags. While a poorly dressed boy was on his knees using the bellows to stoke the fire as high as possible, the magician was mumbling along the walls. His silver-trimmed shiny black cape rustled against his long, thin legs and his star-studded black pointed hat made the shabby figure seem even longer. His long, bony hand searched the shelves. Occasionally he grabbed something and thoughtfully put it in his pouch. After he had

found everything, he went to the cauldron, put his things on the shelf above and grabbed a long spoon. With one hand he held his thin, long beard away from the fire, while stirring through the strangely colored, bubbling soup.

“Boy”, he growled hoarsely, “the secret to a good spell is that you always...” Loud and shrieking, the ringtone of his mobile phone cut off the sentence. Damn it! He had forgotten to turn that bloody thing off again.

Angry, he pulled the persistently jangling thing out of his chest pocket, opened it up and killed the noise with a quick swipe. He quickly clicked on the message and as he read the message, he heard a loud and clear “CUT!” in the background. The same voice shouted madly: “Jeez, man! Can’t you just focus for once? It’s goddamn half past four in the morning. Don’t you know what it costs to repeat that scene over and over again? We’re here with twenty people to serve you in any way we can. We’re a day behind and your bullshit puts us even further behind. You bastard! The episode has to be ready the day after tomorrow, so now you’re gonna fucking...”

Without paying any attention to the director of the longest-running children’s series ‘Mexican Magic Story’, he calmly placed his mobile phone on the big magic book. He took off his cape and pointed hat and pulled the beard off his chin. With a dexterous swing he threw the whole bunch into the soup kettle with a splash. As he passed by, he raised a middle finger and rushed off the set. Nothing else was important now that he had received this message. It was only two words and they floated in large neon letters before his eyes: ‘*CHOSEN ONE!*’

< 02.16

After his grandfather had opened the doors as wide as possible, he asked him to take out the compressor. Without asking any questions, Hakon firmly grabbed the heavy device and rolled it outside, after which his grandfather entered the free space. Hakon couldn’t see exactly what his grandfather was doing next, but a moment later a metallic click sounded and the back wall of the cabinet jumped forward a bit. This time it was Marilyn who grabbed his hand and squeezed it firmly. His

grandmother had come to stand next to him on the other side and he lovingly wrapped his arm around her. With the two women close to him, he watched curiously as his grandfather pulled the back wall, which turned out to have hinges on one side, further forward. To his surprise he saw that there was a door in the wall behind it. It looked like a thick, sturdy wooden door with large, iron hinges and a metal lock plate with a keyhole in which only a giant key would fit. As if it were the most normal thing in the world, his grandfather groped under his own shirt and pulled out a leather strap with a large iron key hanging from it. He untied it and put the key in the hole. Then he turned it all the way around twice, with the sign that Hakon himself had as well, now clearly visible on his fragile, veined right hand. His grandfather pulled the key and opened the door, which made a moaning sound, before stepping through it.

As he looked over his shoulder, he gently said: "Hakon, Marit, Marilyn. Come." As soon as they crossed the threshold behind him, his grandfather stepped aside. Filled with disbelief, he thought he was dreaming, but Marilyn's nails pressing painfully deep into the palms of his hands made him realize that what he saw was all too true. Speechless, he heard Marilyn's cry. "Oh, how beautiful this is in real life!" Like a fish on dry land he tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come out. His grandmother grabbed his right hand and said softly: "Hakon, what you see now is a thousand-year-old legacy of the Erikssons that your grandfather has to pass on to you. This here is why our son, your father, disappeared without a trace over thirty years ago."

< 02.17

Still worrying about Sandra's strange remarks, Lord MacMarkland stopped in front of the double doors. He wanted to find Marilyn, to share with her his concerns for Sandra. Perhaps she could come up with a solution to check Sandra's mental health unnoticed. Through the windows he watched the GAIAS members, who were busy cleaning up the kitchen under Arda's direction. Against his will, he laughed at the sight of Lémarc, who was standing in front of the counter with grandmother's floral apron around his waist. With a sweaty forehead, he was washing dishes with his arms buried up to the elbows in the soapy

water. Each with a checkered cloth in their hands, the three brothers were drying up next to him. Holger, with one arm in a sling, did nothing but walk back and forth between the brothers and the table to put all the clean stuff on it. Russ sat at the table sorting cutlery, glasses, plates, cups and jugs, which Barbara and Onawa then put in the right cupboards and drawers. The one he was looking for, however, was nowhere to be found. To find Marilyn elsewhere without being noticed, he tried to enter quietly and unseen. Unfortunately there was nothing wrong with Arda's sharp eyes and even before he had taken a step, she shouted cheerfully: "Staff! Lord MacMarkland entered the work floor. Beware!"

While everyone was laughing loudly, he sat at the table, next to Russ. Now that he had lost his chance, he could only do his best to act normal and comply with Saundra's request. In order to get through to the laughing and chattering people, he raised his voice and asked loudly for attention. All the laughter and chatter abruptly silenced. Nine pairs of hands fell silent, nine heads turned and nine pairs of eyes looked at him politely, yet curiously.

"It's good to see you all here. Would you please suspend your activities and come and sit down at the table? We probably have a GAIAS scenario." He got everyone's attention right away. "That's very interesting," Arda said. "But we have plans for Hakon's grandfather. The party for him, I mean. Can't you wait a day?" "I honestly don't know, Arda. Saundra ambushed me with it. She hasn't told me any details, but ...", he paused until everyone was seated, and continued: "I just know it has something to do with Hakon."

Immediately he was bombarded with anxious questions. Questions to which he himself did not know the answers. Appearing much calmer than he felt, he exhorted them to silence. "I really have no idea, but Saundra told me that she'll inform us all at once later." Apparently Saundra had politely allowed him to speak, because immediately afterwards he heard her familiar voice coming through. Quickly he looked over the table and saw that all of them heard her. In silence they listened to what Saundra had to say.

"Good morning, everybody. It's somewhat unusual to leave you in the dark for so long, but there's a reason for that. First of all, I want you to know that Hakon is healthy. And you also know that during surgery in

Texas, he tested the beta version of our new WORM and asked me for information regarding the itchy scar on his hand.” Unconsciously, ten heads nodded at the same time, confirming that they knew about this. “In the meantime, both he and all of you have been given the very latest WORM. The data sent to me afterwards revealed very intriguing facts in the Eriksson family’s bloodline. It seems that Hakon’s physical condition is not life-threatening, but nonetheless it seems that he definitely needs the support of GAIAS.”

Beautifully worded, but if you’d thought about it, she hadn’t actually said that much, the lord thought. He would almost think that by now Sandra had developed telepathic abilities, when he heard her say: “I know this hasn’t made you much wiser. I apologize for that. In order to explain everything, I’d like to ask you all to follow his lordship. I will show him the way.”

< 02.18

Right after he hung up, Esteban opened the thick black leather book. Given the silver crucifix on the front, he was not surprised that it turned out to be an old bible. What he didn’t expect, however, were the notes written in small writing in every free space. Interested, he flipped through it slowly, but did not immediately find any eye-catching peculiarities. He closed the book again. He could spend his time better and decided to commission someone from the new team to dissect the book and digitize the information in it.

Illuminated by his lantern, he searched the other cells on his way back. Unfortunately he didn’t find much of interest here either. Cells five through two had been inhabited as well, but were now completely empty and these too seemed to have housed involuntary guests. These four cells were identical to the sixth, except for the fact that there was a smaller desk, without a telephone. What remained was the first cell. He expected just as little of it, opened the door and stepped inside. Yet again he was surprised to see that this cell was quite luxuriously furnished for monastic conceptions. Above the antique desk hung a golden crucifix. There was also a chair, its seat covered with gold striped damask, and a

wider bed with a thick mattress, on which the occupant of number one was still lying ...

Esteban's attention was immediately drawn to the gigantic book lying on the man's belly, with his hands clasped protectively over it. Esteban rushed to the bed, focused the lantern on the book and immediately leaned forward to see better. With his eyes narrowed, he could just see a tiny part of an Inquisition seal. He was excited, but admonished himself to calm down. In order to avoid the risk that he would overlook any details, he should not rush.

He looked carefully at the remains of what must have been a monk of high rank. This body, too, seemed to have remained completely intact. Respectfully he asked God for forgiveness and made a cross. Then he clamped the lantern under his arm and carefully pulled the book from between the dead hands.

Before he knew it, he heard a crackling sound and the left arm and the book fell to the ground with a dull thud in front of his feet. "Da..." He just managed to keep the curse inside and turn it into "...rnit." He bent down in disbelief to pick up the book, including the arm. Even after the fall the fingers hadn't let go of the book.

Slowly he laid the book and the arm on the table next to the bed. He was convinced that this book would help him on his way and tried to pull the hand away from it. Even in death it refused to let go. There was no alternative to open the book, so he was forced to break the fingers. After the necessary cracking sounds, as if he was breaking dry twigs, the fingers finally gave up the book.

< 02.19

Totally knocked sideways, with an increased heartbeat and chills running down his back like waves at sea, Hakon tried to grasp what his eyes saw. Normally quick-minded and well-balanced, he was now dumbstruck. Stunned, he looked up at the hull of the ship and tried with all his might to formulate a question, a remark, or an exclamation. However, his tongue seemed frozen and he could not get much more out of his mouth than some incoherent mumbling. Fascinated, he stared at the ship, which was

proudly flaunting itself right before his eyes. He slowly walked towards it and carefully laid one hand against the hull. At once he got the strong sensation that this ship had been waiting for him. It was as if it emitted a soothing vibration that seemed to recognize and accept every fibre in his body. Although he had not known about this ship for more than a few minutes, it immediately felt familiar. Like an old family home that, after years of absence, gave you a warm feeling of security as soon as you entered.

While his brain was working overtime to sort out a comment or question, he suspected - no, he knew - that this ship was the source for finding answers. This was the key in his long search for his father. He could now dissect the mystery of his father's disappearance to the bone, scrape it off and wring it out until he knew the truth. Finally everything in his head was back in the right place and he turned around determinedly. With a voice of awe, love, and reproach at the same time, he asked, as he turned on his axis to encompass everything in the cave: "Grandpa? This ship looks exactly like the one depicted in Father's painting in our living room. Why did you hide all this from me?"

His grandfather looked straight at him. "I had to, Hakon. Your father specifically asked me to. I hope you can forgive us for being silent for so long. But given the developments of the last week, your grandmother and I thought my birthday was a good time to open the door to the past for you. A past that weighs heavily on us and which has caused your father to disappear from the face of the earth."

His grandfather put an arm around his grandma's waist and pulled her close. As he looked down on her lovingly, he continued: "You mustn't blame us too much, boy. We kept putting it off because we were afraid of losing you too. You didn't get that adventurous spirit from a stranger, you know. And I suspect that, given your origins, you are at least as fearless as our ancestor Torstein Hakon Eriksson, who made an incredible voyage of discovery with this ship ten centuries ago. And yes, Hakon. You're right. This is indeed the ship depicted in the painting. It's been in our family's possession since 975 A.D. and it's been in this cave since 988 for a reason."

His grandfather was silent, seemed to listen to something for a moment, and then said: "But before I go any further, we'll wait for your friends. I

just heard from Sandra that they're on their way."

Again, he didn't know what to say. "Huh? Sandra? Our Sandra?" His grandfather nodded. "Your grandmother and I don't really know her. Only through the phone. And recently through something that you guys call a WORM..." Hakon interrupted him. "Hold on, Grandpa." He turned to Marilyn and asked: "You gave my grandparents a WORM?" "Yes, Hakon. I confess. I've been made a part of your family secret."

She walked up to him, grabbed his hand and looked at him openly and honestly. "After you ordered Sandra to conduct a private investigation into that weird, itchy feeling and gave her ample authority to do so, Sandra got me involved. Together we discovered some surprising and intriguing facts that, given your family ties, made it seem best to involve Marit and Torstein in the investigation. We informed them of our findings, then they gave us their permission. So we gave them both the latest model of the WORM."

Marilyn followed the line that partly ran over the back of his hand with her index finger and now looked at him seriously. "Then we first investigated the genetic similarities and abnormalities between you and compared the results with those of mankind in general. You will hear the details later. For now I can only tell you that the results were very surprising, if not spectacular. "Because of the modified properties that this WO..."

Marilyn was interrupted by his grandfather, who was enthusiastically nodding, his head bouncing up and down. "Spectacular, she says. Spectacular. Hakon, boy. She's invented a downright miracle."

His grandfather raised both arms, stretched his body far to the left and to the right, bent forward and touched the ground with his fingers. Slightly panting, he stood up again. "Did you see that, Hakon? I can move again just as well as I did twenty years ago. Without pain. Honestly. That WORM fixed me. It really is a miracle!" "Fixed?", he asked with a penetrating look at Marilyn. "What the hell have you guys done?"

With her hands up, she answered imploringly: "Ho, wait. Fixed is a very big word. It's true that the new WORM can do a lot of things, but it can't fix more than a few small things, you know."

Amazed by her nonchalance, he asked: "So, if I understand correctly, you and Sandra have managed to adapt the WORM in such a way that it is

now able to perform something physical?" Marilyn nodded enthusiastically. "That's right. The WORM is going to replace the 'ears' forever. In addition to its ordinary communicative function, it will also watch over your health."

She proudly straightened her back and continued: "The new WORM is much more advanced than anything in the world."

He stared at her speechlessly for the third time, incredulous. He could not understand why she and Sandra had concealed this development from him. "Why was I not informed about this? Everything that concerns my grandparents..."

He left the sentence unfinished, because Sandra intervened in his head. "Hakon! Hakon, please. Just be patient for a moment. The other GAIAS members will be here soon and then your grandfather and Marilyn will tell you and the others everything we discovered. We have gathered so much information that it makes sense to involve everyone from GAIAS. You will probably need all the support you can get."

Sandra hadn't even finished speaking when he heard murmurs and footsteps approaching rapidly from behind him. He turned his head and saw Alasdair stepping in. The others also came into the cave after the lord, one by one. All ten grouped around him, Marilyn and his grandparents. For a long time it remained dead silent as they stood there stunned, looking at the giant Viking ship that occupied such a dominant position in the middle of the cave.

< 02.20

After carefully placing the huge book on the antique writing desk, he first examined the Inquisition seal. Because of the year and the initials **APH** stamped in the seal, he knew it belonged to the Inquisitor who was sworn in as head of the Inquisition in 1918. One of the most notorious who had ever performed this function. During his studies he had studied everything about all the Inquisitors, but this man had always remained a mystery. This monk had not been Chief Inquisitor for long, but he couldn't recall why that was. Well, that wasn't so important either, he thought,

shrugging his shoulders. The book in front of him was much more interesting.

Impatiently, he opened it and the first thing he saw was a loose sheet of paper. He picked it up and immediately the title of the book jumped out at him. It was written in large, colorful, graceful letters:

INRI

“Lá Signora”

Underneath, written in smaller letters, was:

‘Lá guardia sul messaggio’

(The guardian of the message).

This text, in combination with the metallic sounding phone message, immediately made the cogs in his head spin at full speed.

In spite of himself he exclaimed: “Shall I finally find the answer in this book?”

Hoping for clues to unravel the mystery, he closed the book and placed it on top of the thick black and silver bible. With both books firmly clasped under his arm, he excitedly left the cell and went to the Pillar Room.

< 02.21

At the same moment Esteban Bolvani left the monk’s cell, a man in Scotland was checking the taxi that had brought him here. The man was sportily dressed in dark jeans, checkered shirt and sturdy shoes. He hoisted the once new canvas backpack on his back and slung a large, worn-out bag over his shoulder. He turned around and looked eagerly at the main gate, the driveway and the impressive castle that rose against the sky at the end. He hoisted his shoulder bag up further, after which he walked to the weathered columns from where the two sinister lions looked down threateningly on him. On the front of both pillars was the coat of arms of the castle lord: a thick oak tree flanked by a sword and an axe. The copper plates below had ‘MacMarkland’ engraved on them.

So he had arrived at the right address on time, he noted laconically. Despite the grim-looking giant cats, the gates were invitingly open and he walked confidently between the pillars, up the driveway. Once past the thick, green hedges, he got a view of the beautifully cultivated landscape that loomed up in front of him. Interrupted by trees, shrubs and artfully shaped flowerbeds, the lawn was neatly mowed and green everywhere. He didn't know much about flora and fauna, but he thought he recognized the English style of the whole. As he strolled along the slightly ascending avenue at his leisure, he let his gaze pass over the castle itself. He counted seven towers, reaching up to the sky like fingers. The battlements around them resembled straight chequered giant teeth.

The castle, built like a fortress, standing high above everything else, was situated on the edge of a cliff and it almost seemed as if it could collapse into the sea at any moment. That must just be an illusion, he thought. Through the internet he had of course read everything he had managed to find about this beautiful castle and he knew that it had withstood all weather gods for centuries. He even read that in the past it hadn't suffered too much from the various wars and skirmishes between the Scottish clans.

For a moment he stood still to let his whole being enjoy the eye-catching panorama, but soon he walked on again. He was eager to see what it looked like from the inside. Unlike most others, this castle had never been opened for guided tours and so nothing was known about the interior. How fortunate that he had been asked to come and work here. He had been promised a guided tour by the castle lord himself. His assignment would probably take several days. Time enough to admire the furniture, paintings and antiques at leisure.

In the meantime he had arrived at the forecourt, where an antique carriage - how could it be otherwise - and an old-fashioned Rolls Royce were parked. It was remarkably quiet and apart from the sound of a variety of twittering and singing birds, he would almost think this place was deserted.

He shoved up his sunglasses and took in the rugged facade. Although the thick stones looked well maintained, the traces of hundreds of years of erosion could not be missed. He thought it didn't harm the looks of the building at all. It gave the castle an even more impenetrable and

authentic look. Unfortunately, he lacked the time to check the entire exterior, because punctual as he was, he wanted to be at the front door in time.

Searching for a bell, he let his gaze go over the massive copper fittings at the front door, but before he could see what he was looking for, the door was already opened. In the opening stood a stiff butler, standing upright, looking at him haughtily.

“Ah, the new gardener,” he began, affectedly. “Dear fellow, the staff entrance is around the corner.” He pointed to the left. “You should go there.”

Briefly upset that he was mistaken for a gardener, his sense of humor prevailed. Laughing heartily at the mistake of this arrogant brat, he made himself known and said he was expected. Like a leaf on a tree, the attitude of the immaculately dressed servant changed. He suddenly turned out to be human and apologized sincerely. “Have a very good morning, Dr Beaumont. Welcome to MacMarkland Castle. Your presence is greatly appreciated.” The butler stepped aside and made an inviting gesture inside.

Analogue connection

< 03.01

Far below the earth's surface Mirnat adjusted the ultra-sensitive camera, which he had mounted firmly on the tripod, a fraction more, until he had Rock perfectly in view. He nodded contentedly. His assistant - hair and beard combed, teeth brushed and dressed in a neat black blazer - looked reliable and competent. Not unimportant, if you're the first in the world to pass on a possible alien threat to the highest authority. With phrases like 'The truth is out there' and 'We are not alone' in his head, he unwound the cable and put the microphone close to the red phone.

<https://everywhereconnected.com/red.phone.html>

It had to be done this way because the old-fashioned device did not have a speaker function.

Not only to - perhaps - document a piece of history down to the last detail, but also to give CSA back coverage. That was important for himself and certainly for Rock, who was working as an astronomer / chief system operator at CSA. In case of extraterrestrial contact, his function became that of Commander in Chief of the CSA and according to the protocol book Rock then had the last word in the action to be taken. He didn't envy him, Oskar thought to himself as he positioned himself behind the camera.

Rock looked at him questioningly. He nodded that he was ready, at which his assistant, as the protocol prescribed, picked up the red phone and dialed a '6' three times. A joke from the installer at the time, probably. Rock's hand clasped the receiver tightly, and Oskar saw from his knuckles that he was waiting in anticipation for the person who would answer. It took at least a minute for the phone to be answered, after which a heavy voice shouted furiously through the 'cockpit', demanding to know who had the guts to call this number. "Um...", Rock reacted perplexed, before answering in a decisive tone: "You're talking to Rock Veerhodes from the CSA and I want to..."

He was briskly interrupted. The same loud voice asked who he thought he was, using a variety of power terms with a threatening undertone.

Rock, by now pretty upset, didn't get a chance to interrupt. Oskar kept on recording with his camera, walked up to Rock and took the phone out of his trembling hand. Subconsciously, he wiped the sweat off the receiver with his sleeve before holding it to his ear. As calmly as possible he introduced himself, made the announcement and concluded with the question: "And who am I talking to, actually?"

Possibly even more fiercely, the voice echoed through the room. "That's none of your goddamn business. Anyone can just say anything and then that message ... ha, ha, how do you make it up? You fucking hackers with your retarded voice distortions are trying to make fun of me, aren't you? Well, you ain't kidding me, asshole. You will clear this line right now, or I'll have the FBI, CIA, NSA and a handful of other secret agencies hunting you down. And you bet they'll find you, grab you and strip you until you run out of nails to scratch your ass. You'll be a lot less full of yourself then, kid. And yes, I'm the most powerful man in the most powerful country, and yes, I have something else on my mind. RETARD!"

Stunned, Oskar stared at the receiver in his hand, from which nothing more came other than the beeping sound because the connection was abruptly broken.

< 03.02

As soon as he entered the pillar room, he saw Gideon and some other people standing in a semi-circle around the marble table. The group that had been quietly talking to his adjutant was silent as soon as they saw him. He looked at them and saw that the team consisted of nine men and three women, ranging in age from about twenty to fifty. On his approach, they all raised their heads and waited silently and respectfully. For the whole team, it was the first time they had been informed about the Pillar Room and taken there by Gideon. Before that time they had only known that there had to be something special behind the ever closed door, but until now none of them had ever been allowed to enter this room.

Now within the past fifteen minutes, they had taken the oath of secrecy, without any idea of exactly what was expected of them. He could tell from

their uplifted faces how nervous they were. The tension seemed to drip almost palpably from them.

He impatiently accelerated his pace. He didn't want to leave them in limbo for long, because if this team of highly talented brothers and sisters couldn't find answers for him, he would probably never be able to solve the mystery. With a nod, he told Gideon that he was extremely pleased with his quick action and he swiftly cleared his throat. The team opposite him visibly held their breath as he began to speak:

“Inquisitors ... You have been called together by my adjutant for a mission that I believe is vital to the survival of our Sancta Sedes (*Holy See*). There have been a number of special, mysterious events that need to be thoroughly investigated. At the moment it is impossible to say how long this mission will take, but you will continue to work with each other, until the end of time if necessary. A great responsibility lies on your shoulders and I demand your unconditional commitment. From now on you will operate under the name ‘The Devote Dozen’. Before I inform you of what I have discovered myself and what I desire from you, I want everyone to stand in a circle around this table. Join me, form a circle and then please extinguish all the lights.”

Even as they stared at each other, all of them did as he had commanded. Gideon stood beside him, after which he himself, as the last one, extinguished his lantern.

< 03.03

In the previously so deathly quiet cave where the Viking ship had been on dry land for more than a thousand years, Hakon thought of how much time he had lost discovering clues about what had happened to his father. He had searched just about the entire globe while all that time the source of his father's disappearance was hidden near his parental home. Although frustrated that his grandparents had kept him in limbo for so long, he could well imagine their fear of losing him as well. What he did not understand, however, was their lack of trust. They should have known that he would never let them down, shouldn't they? He could never forgive himself if he did that. And what did Sandra actually mean when

she said there was a GAIAS project in the pipeline? Could what Grandpa still had to tell him be that important?

Around him the cries of disbelief and amazement resounded louder and louder. In small groups of two or three, his friends slowly strolled around the ship, touched it and walked on again. Hand in hand Russ and Barbara walked towards him. "Boy, Hakon. What a ship," said Russ admiringly. "When I checked your file with the FBI, I read that you're a star in fencing." He made a few moves as if trying to dodge a sword. "Now I know why that is." "How so?" Barbara asked curiously. "Well, my dear. Fighting with all kinds of bludgeoning and stabbing weapons is in his genes, of course." Russ grinned and continued: "The Vikings used to grow up with that. That was necessary for their raids."

"Hey, hey," Hakon responded defensively. "There's a difference between Vikings and Norsemen. The Norsemen were simple peasants and the Vikings were explorers. As explorers, sometimes you bump into a strange civilization that doesn't want to welcome you too kindly. By the way, it is not at all certain that I descended from the Vikings, because..."

"Oh, no", Arda interrupted him, stopping next to them with Lémarc in her wake. "What are you imagining? You are literally and figuratively standing in front of your origin: an ancient, tough Viking ship with the stains, I think blood, still on the hull. Although ..." Arda thoughtfully put a finger on her lip. "Maybe you're not quite a thoroughbred Viking, given your full head of hair. Now that I see that blond mane of yours, I'm starting to have some doubts. History teaches us that those Vikings wore helmets day and night throughout the ages. Because of this, their male descendants are genetically determined to bald prematurely." "Sort of like a hayfire," Russ laughed.

Hakon had already opened his mouth to answer something like farmers who knew everything about grass and hay, but didn't get the chance to do so. Alasdair abruptly cut off their conversation. Arrogantly, as only a nobleman could speak, he said harshly: "Ladies and gentlemen. Though I have been enjoying your witty conversation, I am nevertheless forced to end it here and now."

The group spontaneously laughed. After laughing with them for a moment, the lord continued in a normal tone of voice. "Folks, it's time to

tackle things in a structured way. Sandra is convinced that a GAIAS project is imminent and I would like to hear the details, preferably today. As soon as there's a scenario on the table, I want to know the risks involved. Especially on account of Torstein and Marit."

Hakon fully agreed with him and now really wanted to know what his grandfather had to say. "Alasdair's right. Before we all take root here, we'd better listen. At least we'll know more about the situation. So, please all be quiet now. Sandra, go ahead. The floor is yours."

Right after that, Sandra's voice sounded in everyone's head. "Thank you, Hakon. Before Torstein tells you about the history of the ship, I'd like to give you the details of the new WORM. As you heard during the introduction two days ago, Marilyn managed to make the WORM even smaller than the 'ears' you used before. With the 3dSCreator she managed to reduce the new WORM to pico-level. That's a factor of ten smaller than the nano. In addition, the new WORM has acquired a number of fairly advanced features."

"Like you've seen with me," said Torstein beaming. "Indeed," Sandra continued unruffled. "Hakon's grandfather is a good example. After Marilyn inserted the WORM into him, it explored and mapped his entire body."

"How is that possible?", Russ asked unbelievably. "Isn't that thing just in our ears?" Sandra's pleasant voice didn't hesitate for a second. "A good question, Russ. You're partly right. After the new WORM is inserted, most of it disconnects and a small part remains in the inner ear. The other part mostly falls apart into separate pico particles. Most of these particles settle in the most important places in the body, such as the organs and glands. A handful of other particles let themselves be carried along with the blood stream, collect all the details they encounter along the way and pass them on to the part that is in the ear. Just as with the now old-fashioned 'ears', I can exchange information with them very quickly."

With the exception of Marilyn, all GAIAS members looked at each other in amazement, including Hakon. He knew he probably wouldn't understand, but he wanted to know what Sandra had done with his grandfather.

“Um, what did those picobots do to my grandfather, Sandra?” he asked a little hesitantly. “Well, Hakon, like the submarine in Isaac Asimov’s story, those separate pico’s work too. During their barely two seconds of blood circulation, I discovered a nerve which got stuck in your grandfather’s back. Now imagine that those ‘picobots’, as you call them, have little hands. I directed them to that spot and ordered them to free that nerve and put it back in place.”

In awe Russ snapped with his thumb and index finger. “Just take care of it like that,” he said. Hakon saw him unconsciously put the other hand on his injured knee. Marilyn had seen it too, he saw. She shook her blonde head and said: “No, Russ. It’s not that simple. Sandra may have access to all the medical knowledge digitally stored on this planet, but she’s not a wizard. Through the WORM she can only repair a few things. Unfortunately, it’s not possible to renew or replace things.”

“What’s still important,” Sandra’s voice came through, “is this. With an adapted diet, the health of some of you can be improved. I will inform those affected personally. If there are any further questions regarding the new WORM, you can contact Marilyn or me later. I suggest you give Torstein the floor now.”

Just a little while longer, Hakon thought amused, and we should make Sandra head of GAIAS. At least she seemed to be behaving like it. “Well, Grandpa. You heard. It’s your turn. Go ahead.”

< 03.04

Somewhat tipsy and completely satisfied, the head of security of the President of the United States was half slumped on the calfskin three-seater sofa, still panting after performing the oldest act of mankind.

“Wow, Jimmy,” the president’s personal secretary cooed right by his ear. In tune with her accelerated breathing, her perky pointy breasts danced rhythmically up and down in front of his eyes. “What a man you are! I came all the way, when you picked up the red phone and imitated our boss so perfectly.”

Her panting breath tickled his ear as she giggled: “We should do this more often. Shame we can’t tell anyone ... Oh, really, it’s a shame.”

Grinning, he grabbed her firm buttocks and, with her on his lap, hoisted himself up a bit. "So you thought that was funny?", he groaned, putting his mouth around her left nipple. He bit her softly and felt her get wet again. "Oh, Jimmy," she moaned. "And then that act of yours. Exactly like your boss. If you weren't so handsome, you could easily stand in for him." Swooning from the alcohol and satisfaction she murmured softly: "Only you are much more muscular and have a," her voice stopped for a moment, "bigger ego, so to speak."

With a sucking plop her breast popped out of his mouth when she suddenly moved her upper body backwards. She looked at him curiously. "By the way, who were you talking to? Was it that arrogant Russian you told me about the other day?" "Well, no. These days, we do everything digitally. That red phone dates back to the analogue era and it's only there for show."

He greedily tried to pull her towards him. "But who was it?", she stubbornly asked. Impatient, he shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I think it's one of those work-shy young people who have nothing else to do all day and are bored to death. Out of recalcitrance, such a brat managed to hack into our old telephone exchange, I suppose. First I got a jerk on the line who I think was high and later one of his friends. A nerd who was all nonsense about flashing stars and that the protocol had to be activated."

Despite everything he laughed. "The funniest thing was that madman claiming to speak on behalf of the CSA. When I heard that, I couldn't hold back anymore. That dickhead had the bad fortune to get the wrong guy on the line this time. He never thought the top security advisor would take the call. I know all the security services. All the ins and outs. He made up that CSA nicely, but it really doesn't exist. Our boss probably would've bought it, but I'm not that easy to fool. I hope he tries again while the boss is there. Then I'll put on a show."

His penis stirred forcefully and he firmly pulled her towards him. "Enough philosophizing, now. Care for dessert, madam?"

Approvingly, Esteban concluded that Gideon had put together an excellent team in a short time. The twelve members of the Devote Dozen might belong to the scientific branch, but they were not inferior to the defensive branch of the Inquisition. Excellently trained, none of them showed any sign of surprise. The imprinted principle - Be fearless, trust in God, do not hesitate and follow your leader - was put into practice by each of them to the last detail.

Apart from a single sharp breath after the room had been plunged into darkness, no one else showed any emotion when the ceiling painting revealed its secret. Above them the first glowing dots slowly appeared, growing into shining stars between which mysterious nebulae looking like mother-of-pearl hung. Although the phenomenon was not new to him, he was once again captivated by the magic of the almost fairytale-like splendour.

He looked up in admiration and sought support from the marble table. A strange tingling feeling moved through his arm. Terrified, he withdrew his hand, after which the tingling sensation disappeared immediately.

What was that? At once the spell was broken. Frowning, he carefully touched the table again with an extended index finger. Immediately a tingling sensation crept through his finger to his wrist and further to his forearm. He quickly let go of the table and as before, the tingling ceased abruptly. No, he had not imagined it. But, he wondered, how could it be that he hadn't felt that tingling before? After all, it wasn't the first time he had been here.

God's ways were unfathomable and God could make miracles happen, he knew. Could he have given him, Esteban Bolvani, a sign, like he had given Moses in the desert? A confirmation that he was on the right path?

At the same time God-fearing, excited and curious, he switched his light back on. Gideon and the Devote Dozen were looking up in sheer amazement. It took a while before they realized that there was light again and slowly the group returned to the here and now.

As soon as everyone had returned to reality, he raised his hand. "Listen, everybody. I understand you've been overwhelmed by this spectacle. But you are the best in your field and endowed with sharp intelligence, making you part of the crème de la crème of the Church, the flagship of

the Inquisition. And you are now charged with perhaps the most important research in the entire history of the Roman Catholic Church. A sacred mission. This research is conducted under the strictest secrecy. Should even a snippet of information slip out for whatever reason, I will hold each and every one of you jointly and severally responsible."

His gaze slid across the circle and it did not surprise him that none of them doubted. After all, all the initiates knew exactly what this meant, for the Inquisition still maintained their long tradition. Traitors were always found and imprisoned in a place worse than hell. All knew that the protection of the interests of the Roman Catholic Church was paramount. The Inquisition was the most efficient and, if necessary, the most deadly organization ever.

"Understood?", he insisted. Twelve nodding heads simultaneously informed him his warning had penetrated. "Good," he continued. "Then remember this. I, and only I, decide what information is revealed, and only I decide when the investigation is complete. That will be when I've received a full conclusive report on what just happened here and it's clear what this so-called Pillar Room was used for. However, before you can start the sacred investigation, I want you to make the circle smaller. As small as possible, without touching the table. We're going to run a test first."

Carefully sliding forward, the twelve met his request. "Beautiful. I'll count down and on three, you all put a finger on the tabletop. Then try to keep it on the table as long as you can. After this, I'll ask you about your findings."

Gideon and the Devote Dozen listened meekly to his three count. As if they had trained for years on this joint exercise, they all laid their fingers on the table in one collective movement exactly at the same time. From their faces he immediately saw that they too felt the tingling. Nobody wanted to give up first, of course, and they kept their finger firmly on the table. After a while however, the first one pulled his finger away, and slowly more followed, until only two persistent subjects remained.

Maria Mathilda, a large blonde woman he knew came from the Netherlands, and Thomas, a small but wiry male from Central America whom he had been interested in before. The management information he

received periodically included information about the progress of his guard, and it hadn't taken him long to notice this brother. Compared to the others Thomas seemed to have something extra. Although small, he had taken all the exams and tests in record time and, effortlessly it seemed, climbed up the ranks.

Interested, Esteban watched how both of them kept it up, though with sweaty, red faces. Next to him he heard Gideon ask what this was. "A feeling like touching electric fencing. Do you perhaps know what this means, Commissario?"

Even though his adjutant had held out quite a long time, he did not allow himself to be distracted. Attentively, he continued to observe the two individuals who, though their arms were trembling, refused to let go of the table. He was almost startled when, with a painful scream, they simultaneously withdrew their fingers. Amazement appeared on both their faces. The tingling, which had eventually become too painful, had to have disappeared almost immediately, just like it had done before with himself.

He pointed at Maria Mathilda and asked her exactly what she had felt. After a few seconds of reflection, she answered: "At first it did indeed seem most like the tension of the type of electric fencing used to keep cattle on the land. Its intensity grew stronger and stronger, until it seemed as if a column of fire ants was marching through my veins. I tried to resist it, but had to give up because it felt as though my heart was being set on fire."

He looked at Thomas, who confirmed their sister's story. Now that it had been proved that he had not imagined anything, he suspected that the table was charged with some kind of energy, or passed it on. But what could that be? And where did it come from?

< 03.06

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," Torstein started. "I could never have imagined that if I told Hakon our family secret, it would be on my 80th birthday and in the presence of such a large audience. What you see here is a Viking ship from the early Middle Ages, a special type.

This is, as far as we know, the only ship that is a combination of a warship and a cargo ship, called a *Drakkar* and a *Knarr* respectively. Just like the types mentioned above, this vessel is also fully seaworthy and could reach a high speed, both sailing and rowing. The shallow draught even made it possible to sail up rivers. Because intimidation and charisma were important, this ship is also decorated with carvings on the stem, stern and upper strakes. The fact that it is a warship is evident from the enormous dragon's head on the prow. That's why these ships got the name *Drakkar* or *Drakar*, because in the Norwegian language this means 'Dragon'.

You can see the shields on the outside of the boat. There are two reasons for this. First, it saved space. Second, it kept the oarsmen, who sat on the crates in which they kept their things, out of the wind. Most ships had 16 to 18 rowers on each side, a total of 32 to 36 rowers. Our ship has 20 benches on each side, so there's room for 40 rowers. With the reserve rowers, the headman and the closest members of his clan, there was room for 82 men.

I've already hoisted the sail for this occasion. As some of you may know, most Drakkars were equipped with large red-and-white striped sails. This was not just for no reason. The highly visible sails, combined with the stark carvings on the dragon's head and the bright colors on the shields, were meant to scare everyone. Contrary to this, you can see here that the sail is an even blood red, with two large, white signs in the middle, which we know as a 'smaller than' and a 'larger than' sign."

Under the spell of Grandpa's story, Hakon was almost startled by Barbara's voice. "Hey. That's special. I didn't know people knew these characters back then. Now that I see them here, I suddenly realize that the "smaller than" sign is very similar to the mark on your hand, Hakon. Something I noticed with your grandfather, by the way. Explain..." But she was interrupted by Marilyn. "Of course you always notice such things, Barbara. If you let Torstein finish, you'll hear all about it. Okay?"

Barbara raised her hands apologetically and Torstein continued the story. "Well, um. What I wanted to say is that you'll agree with me that all this looks mighty impressive. And I haven't even mentioned the collection of swords, axes, hammers and other war gear they used to carry around. You've probably seen those lying and hanging around here in various

shapes and sizes. Anyway, that aside. This Viking ship is called [Aegir](#), which means 'god of the sea'. It's been in the possession of our family for over a thousand years now. It's been in this cave since 988, and both its history and its upkeep have been passed down from father to son. I say 'our ship', but the *Aegir* was actually owned by the so-called *ætt*, the most common form within Norwegian society. Unlike a Scottish clan", Torstein nodded briefly to Alasdair, "which is bound to a certain territory owned by the head of the clan, a Norwegian *ætt* was organized differently. An *ætt* consisted of individuals from different clans, each of whom had their own territory and promised each other unconditional allegiance. This obliged them to take care of each other and to avenge each other."

"Some kind of assembled clan," Arda added. "Yes," Torstein replied. "You could see it that way, yeah. The name of such an *ætt* was derived from that of an ancestor, often with the addition of an -ung or -ing at the end. Our *ætt* has always been called Erikssung, of which our ancestor was the chief. After his last trip our name changed to Eriksson. I don't know why. The shields you see on both sides of the ship represent the eleven families who made this ship and sailed the world's seas for 13 years. And I deliberately say 'the world's seas', which I'll come back to later. The *Aegir*, as Arda mentioned earlier, is a Viking ship with a bloody history. During her travels, many clan members were killed in combat. When the cave was closed there were only six male clan members left and they agreed that my family would take care of security and maintenance. That went well for centuries, until I told my son, Hakon's father, about this cave and its history. Erik then spent three months investigating the ship and the cave itself.

You should know that in addition to this ship, there is also an artifact and a mural in this cave. Erik was particularly interested in the latter. It made him decide to try to discover its origin. After his departure..."

Again Torstein was interrupted. This time it was Hakon who curiously asked: "A mural and an artifact? What exactly do you mean, Grandpa?" "All in good time, Hakon. My story, according to tradition, has been told in one way for centuries: from beginning to end."

Suppressed chuckles sounded here and there. Hakon, who wished he had kept his mouth shut, let his grandfather take him to a wooden

gangway. "The beginning, Hakon, consists of visiting the ship first. All of you come with me."

With the others in his wake, Hakon walked up the gangway after his grandfather and entered the ship. Sincerely interested, he looked around and followed his grandfather closely. They walked down the aisle at a steady pace. On the right and left, he saw the rowing benches Grandpa had spoken of. Those boys must have been quite tough, he thought to himself. Rowing, eating, sleeping and regularly fighting against unfriendly strangers.

He didn't get much time to think about it though. Grandpa walked on without looking back to the aft deck, where a kind of cabin had been built across the entire width.

When he followed his grandfather inside, he saw two carved thrones with a stone table in between. While grandpa sat down on the back throne, the others entered, standing in a circle around him. "Good", Torstein began. He pointed to the table in front of him. "This table is the artifact of which I spoke. In the middle, you see a round knob of gold. Erik found out, after he had it examined 30 years ago, that this knob is made of high-grade gold. Why there is a throne on each side, he unfortunately did not discover."

He picked up the booklet from the table, flipped a few pages and read from it: "This table and the two thrones are all carved out of one block of marble. The tabletop is exactly 27 inches wide and rests on a marble column 44 inches high. The special thing is that the table is not only made of one piece, but that the column is also part of a round piece of marble that serves as a base plate. The plate has a diameter of 132 inches. Erik couldn't find a single seam between the top, column and base plate. The 4 inch thick base plate has a gold rim with a thickness of exactly 4 tenths of an inch. The whole has a perfection that today could only be manufactured by machine."

"And that's right," everyone heard Sandra say. "Torstein scanned the table for me and the measurements are exactly right. The two thrones are also seamlessly attached to it. If we hadn't known that this combination is more than a thousand years old, we could safely assume that it was made with Marilyn's 3dSCreator, because the JELLIE can merge in exactly the same way."

“I don’t know how this was done at least ten centuries ago. All I know is that this artifact has been here from the beginning,” Torstein added.

Lémarc raised a hand. “Why was it never sold?” he asked. “It seems to me that something like this is worth a lot of money.”

“You’ll hear the answer to that later, too,” Torstein replied. “Come. Let’s move on.”

They left the cabin the same way they had entered it. They followed Torstein closely again. Torstein turned to the right, to leave the ship via a gangway on the other side. Next to the ship was a long wall of old chests, masts, sails, racks with oars, all kinds of swords, axes and other utensils. Hakon would have liked to take a closer look at everything, but even now his grandfather didn’t give him a chance. He walked behind him around the scaffolding, followed him around the bend and got a view of a long, colorful wall.

< 03.07

Rather impatiently he saw Gideon handing out the tablets to the from the box he brought with him. At last! While his adjutant put the empty box back, he asked for attention and cheerfully said: “Ladies, gentlemen. The tablets you have received are the newest of the newest. After an extensive test of various models, our IT department has judged them to be the best. Particularly because, no matter where you are, they always establish a good connection. Even here, deep underground.

So they make their slogan ‘ everywhereconnected.com ’ come true. Markland Communications is a world leader in the industry, so we can be sure that there will be no problems. Should something still not work properly, they have an excellent helpdesk. We’ve been able to close an excellent deal, which means, among other things, that they’ve set up a complete standalone environment for us in the cloud. All our information, which until recently was only stored down here, is now high up in the sky. Both locations are guaranteed to be inaccessible to unauthorized persons. Due to the new technology with which the tablets work, wifi cannot be used. This has been replaced by SCIF (*Satellite*

Communication & Information Fidelity). This connection is equipped with unique Codex Sinaiticus security, which excludes any hacking”.

Of course it was Thomas who raised his hand. Esteban nodded benevolently to him, as a sign that he could ask his question. Frank and free, yet respectful, Thomas asked: “All this sounds like a miracle, but what about speed? Isn’t everything going to be incredibly slow because of such super security?”

That was a good question. “As far as I can tell from the test results, there’s no difference. The broadband connection via the new tablets is just as fast, maybe even faster, than the current one.”

He immediately continued: “Your tablet has an application developed especially for us. This so-called [R.C.C. app](#) is already pre-installed and makes it quick and easy for us to stay in touch and share our information.

So process everything digitally. Your research results, thoughts, opinions and so on. Anything you consider relevant, you should send to me.”

Once again he let his gaze drift across the Devote Dozen. After all, the twelve were scientists, not pencil pushers. “Then there’s this. It actually goes without saying, but I’d like to emphasize it again. Should external expertise be required, it is of the utmost importance that this person or persons sign a declaration of confidentiality. If a personal visit to our headquarters is necessary, these persons must be blindfolded. As you know, we present ourselves to the outside world as members of the security service of the R.C. Church. Under no circumstances should this be compromised. Don’t forget that! Therefore, please note that the computerized world above is as leaky as a sieve.”

He turned to his sergeant. “Gideon. What about the digitization of church documents?” His adjutant walked up to the box and pulled out a file. Gideon handed it to him and answered: “There you go, Commissario. Yesterday, with the exception of the papal diaries, all documents were digitized and made accessible to search engines.” He quickly browsed through the report.

Again, God Himself must have had a hand in this. The timing was too perfect to be a coincidence. “Very good. Thank you, Gideon. It’s very nice that we now have all the Church’s data at our disposal without having to spend hours in the archives.”

He addressed the Devote Dozen and said: “Well. When you’re ready, I’ll show you what I’ve discovered.”

< 03.08

Talking softly together, his friends followed him and Grandpa around, and once again fell silent. Admiringly, the group stood staring at the long, beautifully painted wall. Hakon estimated the mural to be about 100 feet long and 10 feet high. He wanted to ask his grandfather if this was as old as the Viking ship, but his grandfather was already speaking again.

“This mural represents the last voyage of the ship. According to Erik it shows that our ancestor was the first to discover America, and even Central America”. With his listeners following, he slowly walked past it. Pointing out certain points, he continued: “Erik did a lot of research and discovered that, after many stopovers, including via Iceland, Greenland and the east coast of Canada, they descended south along the east coast of present-day USA. A trip that took them more than two years altogether. According to my son they reached Yucatán last. Something must have happened there that made this the last voyage of the *Aegir* and caused them to take that marble artifact with them. Whether it was a loot, obtained through trade, or a gift, I don’t know. Not everything is equally well documented. I know from my father that a lot was passed on verbally. Unfortunately, before he could tell me everything, he died in World War II during an operation of the Norwegian resistance.

So it is known which route the ship took, but that’s about it. The only thing my father told me is something that I may not have interpreted correctly. If someone from the family were to meet the Lady, the function of the artifact would reveal itself to them.”

“Which Lady, Grandpa?”, Hakon asked. His grandfather shrugged his shoulders in despair. “I have no idea, boy. Your father thought it might be the woman depicted on the wall. Or a descendant of hers.”

“Where?”, Hakon asked curiously. His grandfather pointed to a small part of the painting. “Look, there.” Hakon walked towards it and saw a man and a woman sitting across from each other, with a table between them. The seats and table looked exactly like the artifact they had just seen in

the cabin. He brought his face closer to the wall and examined the scene carefully. "Unbelievable," he shouted in surprise. "Guys, come see this!"

< 03.09

After that totally unexpected banal verbal confrontation with the supreme ruler of the United States of America, Mirnat had stared in amazement at the red telephone receiver, as if someone had conjured something extraterrestrial into his hands. He had thoughtfully put the handset back, picked up the camera and then looked back at the recording for himself. Yes, it was true what they had heard and the voice was clearly that of the president. That characteristic sound was unmistakable because one was confronted with it every day.

He turned to Rock to ask his opinion, but saw that his colleague had nothing to offer. He sat there as if he had lost his last pennies and had just heard that he had been fired because of this disgrace. There was only one solution for the state he was in.

Resolutely, Oskar walked to Rock's desk, pulled open the middle drawer and took out the bottle of bourbon Rock had there. He walked on to the water cooler, pulled two plastic cups out of the tube and poured one three quarters full with the golden brown liquid. He grabbed Rock's lethargic right hand, pressed the cup in and then looked him deep in the eyes. As he squeezed him hard in his shoulder, he commanded: "Rock! Dude! Come to your senses." He forced him to take a big sip.

As if he'd had an amphetamine injection, Rock's eyes opened wide. Coughing, he caught his breath. "What the hell happened?", he exclaimed in frustration. "Oh," he moaned a little later. "My 'moment of fame' has been completely ruined by that jerk. Years of preparation flushed down the drain at once. I don't understand a damn thing about it."

"Rock, listen," he said soothingly. "You've got to let go of it. We can't just give up. We have our responsibility, no matter what happens. According to protocol, we have to stay here until we have normal contact with the highest authority, whether it's about Martians who have fallen from space or the aliens who have taken over our planet undetected."

Rock looked at him in anger. “Hmpf. I think that’s already happened and our earth is doomed. What kind of ruler reacts so stupidly?”

Indeed, that wasn’t quite normal, Oskar thought to himself. But the fact remained that they had not succeeded in delivering their message. And that had to be done.

Resolutely, he straightened his shoulders.

“Rock, this is what’s gonna happen. We’re not going to take any chances and we’ll do everything exactly by the book. You grab the protocol book and figure out what to do in case we can’t get normal contact with the upper world. In the meantime, I will contact that monk and try to persuade him to tell us why the Roman Catholic Church is so interested in this particular part of the universe. I have devised a ruse to see if they know more. As a scientist, I don’t believe in miracles, but I do hope they still exist.”

< 03.10

After showing them the cells behind the pillars, Esteban returned at a swift pace. Gideon and the Devote Dozen followed him closely, like a flock of geese rushing after the mother hen. Once back in the Pillar Room, he walked straight to the marble table and gestured to the others to join him. From their faces he could see that they, like himself, were eager to get to work. As soon as everyone had once again lined up in a semi-circle in front of him, he immediately took the floor. “Impressive, isn’t it? I see that you, like myself, are enormously intrigued and burning with the desire to begin the investigation. So, I’ll keep it brief. We’re going to solve this mystery based on three main areas of investigation, each containing three questions. Questions to which you must find the answers. Take your tablets and write down the following.” He waited until they all had their tablets ready to go and continued:

“The first main area is the two antique phones, the one down here and the one on my desk. When were these connected? Apparently, both are still in operation and I want to know where the bill is going. Who, or which company, is still paying for this? And who called from and to these phones? And what was the reason for this?

The second main area concerns the monks. Were there any more than the two whose bodies we saw? Why were they locked up? And why were they denied food and drink? Also, the notes in the black leather bible should be deciphered as soon as possible.

The third main area concerns the Pillar Room itself. What is the meaning of the mosaic floor and the ceiling painting? Why is this marble table here? Why is it suddenly giving off some kind of energy and what exactly is this energy? How is all this - the hall, the floor, the ceiling and the cells behind it - connected to each other? And what is or was its function?"

He paused for a moment to give everyone the opportunity to take notes, after which he added: "You will have a blank cheque. Search every source again for information, references or anything else that can provide answers. If necessary, hack into all news channels, social media platforms and intelligence services. Check everything. Every snippet of data can be important. In addition, I want every square inch of this room and the cell complex to be searched for more hidden corridors, rooms or other areas. How you divide the tasks among yourselves is up to you."

He pointed at Thomas. "You will be the group representative." Then he pointed at Gideon. "In my absence, you can go to my adjutant. I myself will investigate the book with the Inquisition seal."

He nodded to Thomas, who said he had a question. "What's to be done with those two bodies, Commissario?" Another excellent question. He was starting to like this young man more and more. "For the time being, let's leave them there. We need to know why they were locked up before we can decide where these brothers should be buried." He looked around the circle and saw that no one else had any questions. The Devote Dozen was already starting to argue with each other in order to divide the tasks. A good team, he thought, satisfied. Relying on things running smoothly, he took the big book off the table, beckoned to Gideon and went to his study. He, too, had a lot to do.

< 03.11

Everyone was gathering around Hakon and they all looked curiously at the scene he was pointing out. "Am I crazy or do you guys notice it too?",

Lémarc asked. "It looks like you, Hakon. With that woman whose picture you showed me, that Nakawe. That's not possible, is it?"

"Yes, Lémarc," Torstein replied. "The man you see looks very much like Hakon, but also like my son and myself in our younger years. According to Erik, this man must have been our ancestor, because that same face is also depicted on a family shield. See for yourself."

He went ahead of the group, walked back to the ship and pointed to the first shield that hung on the bow. "Gee, how beautifully done," Marilyn said. "Exactly like you, Hakon. That's exactly what you looked like when we met. Remember when you had that long hair, too?"

Hakon nodded. "Yes. But this is all a little too much. I can barely grasp it. All this can't be a coincidence, can it?" He looked at his grandfather questioningly. "No, Hakon. That's what your father thought, too. He was convinced all this was being kept here for a purpose and he wanted to investigate it. He intended to do so by tracing the Lady, or her descendant, making the same journey at the same time, hoping that he would discover something more at those locations."

He turned to Lémarc. "But, Lémarc, what did you say about that woman?"

Hakon grabbed his grandfather's arm. "Grandpa? You do know I tumbled down the stairs at the Peace Palace, don't you? I bumped into a woman there, and during that collision with her, I had this vision about my father. It was a very strange experience, and since then, at the craziest moments, I see her image floating before my eyes, I'm sleeping badly and my hand keeps itching. That's the woman Lémarc was talking about."

He let go of his grandfather and looked at Marilyn. "By the way, has Sandra found anything yet, Marilyn?" Sandra's voice sounded in everyone's ear. "Yeah. I managed to pull together what at first didn't seem very coherent. But when Lémarc started talking about the resemblance, I was able to put a lot of pieces together."

"Then let's see that picture," Torstein said curiously. Hakon pulled out his smartphone, looked up the picture and held it up to his grandfather.

"Good heavens, you're right. The resemblance is striking! Do you know where she lives, Hakon?"

“Somewhere in Yucatán,” everyone heard Sandra say.

“But by the way, if everyone will listen, I’ll tell you about what Marilyn and I have discovered so far. As you all know by now, Hakon has asked me to investigate a nasty, irritating tickle in his right hand. The hand with the dark spot.

A sign that belongs to the bloodline of the Eriksson family, because according to Torstein every male descendant, at least up to and including Hakon, has had this on his right hand at birth. The sign that they both have on their right hand, however, does not appear in any medical article. In order to try to collect as much data as possible, I used Marilyn’s new WORM. It made a meticulous picoscan of both Hakon and Torstein. The data I received is huge. It’s so big that the subroutine that maps each particle of the picoscan is still working on it. It’s billions of particles of information. Each particle of it is now being compared with all the medical and genetic information available on earth.

As soon as everything has been mapped out, we will have a complete digital image of both Erikssons. The preliminary conclusion is that both Hakon and Torstein are genetically similar, as was to be expected.

Genetically both are Homo sapiens, but they differ slightly from the rest of humanity. During that scan, something abnormal was discovered in the bodies of Hakon and Torstein.”

Several surprised and anxious exclamations echoed through the cave and everyone looked earnestly at Hakon and his grandfather.

Nevertheless Sandra continued speaking.

“As thin as a wire, there’s a connection from the big toe to the back of the brain. Halfway, a side branch splits off and continues to the palm of the right hand, up to the spot where the sign is on the outside. This morning an old college friend of Marilyn came to Scotland to investigate Jens.

This man is a geneticist and specializes in, among other things, brain trauma. Marilyn’s proposal is to involve him in our research, so that we have all the knowledge available on this planet. Even though we’ve only lifted the edge of the veil at the moment, that little anomaly doesn’t seem to be a health hazard. So you, and Hakon and Torstein in particular, have nothing to worry about.”

“Well, lady,” chuckled Torstein. “At my age, you don’t have to worry about that anymore. That’s when you realize your clock is slowly counting

down.”

He put his arm around Marit and looked lovingly at her. “With you beside me, I still enjoy every day. This information won’t change that. What about you, Grandson?”

Hakon looked at his grandparents warmly. “You bet, Grandpa. As far as I’m concerned, nothing’s changed. But now for something different, Sandra. When do you think you will have processed all the data?”

“Provided there’s no interference, I estimate it’ll take at least another couple of hours.”

Hakon nodded. “Okay. In the meantime, I suggest we concentrate on everything in this cave. Maybe we can find something else to add to my grandfather’s story. I assume this cave has been scanned and you’ve processed all the data, Sandra?” “That’s right, Hakon. I started with the ship. Unfortunately, a Viking ship named *Aegir* doesn’t appear in any database. Nor is there any mention of it in the Norse myths. But as far as the artifact is concerned, I did discover something. Together with Marilyn, I conducted an experiment that I would now like to repeat with the entire group.”

< 03.12

Esteban unlocked his study and walked in with Gideon in his wake. He immediately walked up to his desk, put down the big book and picked up the antique phone. He now looked at the former miracle of technology, which he had regarded as decoration until today, with completely different eyes. While Esteban carefully turned the device over to examine the bottom, Gideon asked him if the big boss shouldn’t be informed.

He said that right: Shouldn’t be informed. Esteban pursed his lips and answered: “It seems a bit too early for that. Apart from the Inquisition, nobody needs to know at this moment what is being investigated. Only when we know what we are talking about will we consider how to deal with it and whether it makes any sense at all to burden the Pope with it. His Holiness already has more than enough on his plate and cannot stomach any more, possibly irrelevant, reports. Certainly not now that he

is once more dealing with a priest who may have abused an altar boy, a rampant problem that keeps cropping up.”

Rotten apples I track down and leak the files to make sure they're dismissed, he thought. Gideon looked at him admiringly. “You're right, Commissario. I wasn't thinking straight. Our pope is fortunate to have you to relieve him of such things.”

Esteban listened to his adjutant with half an ear and let his gaze slide over the bottom of the antique object. He brought it a little closer to his eyes and took a closer look. What he had initially considered to be a few scratches could, on closer inspection, have been carved marks. He tried to decipher what they could mean, until he realized that he was holding the device upside down. Quickly he turned the thing 180 degrees and read: III = cell IV = center.

Gideon, who was looking over his shoulder, suggested pressing the hook three times, in order to determine whether the connection could be made from both sides. He nodded. That was a good idea. He brought the receiver to his ear, moved the hook up and down three times and listened curiously. After about five seconds he heard a click and recognized the light panting voice of Maria Mathilda. “Hello?”

He mentioned his name, explained why he called and asked her to take a look at the bottom of the phone. But to his question if there was anything carved on the bottom, she answered negatively. He thanked her, disconnected and immediately afterwards pressed the telephone hook four times.

He waited in excitement. This time it took a very long time. Disappointed, he wanted to give up when he suddenly heard a click. An agitated voice in which there was clear suspicion, wanted to know who was calling. In turn Esteban asked with whom he had the pleasure. “Me? I am il Direttore (*the Director*) Pizzali, of the oldest and largest telecom company in Italy. But who are you and why are you calling this old-fashioned phone?”

He apologized and mentioned his name and rank, after which he explained as succinctly as possible the reason why he had called. “You understand we're investigating the origin of that phone...”

Suddenly he heard Pizzali laughing loudly, after which he exclaimed cheerfully: "Thank God! I am so glad that finally someone from the R.C. Church is calling about that cursed telephone. Sorry for my language, Commissario, but that phone has been like a millstone around my neck for decades and is putting the financial position of our company under increasing pressure because of that old agreement."

Agreement? What agreement? What was Pizzali talking about?

Surprised at the strange turn the conversation had taken, Esteban asked what the man meant exactly.

"That's too much to tell over the phone, Commissario. I suggest we make an appointment right now, then we can close that chapter for good."

They quickly agreed to meet later today and after he had told Pizzali when his adjutant would pick him, the phone and all its documentation up, he carefully put the handset on the hook.

"Well, Gideon. This is quite a surprising development." He told his adjutant what he had agreed with Pizzali and sent him away. As soon as the door was closed behind Gideon, he sat down at his desk and laid the large book with the seal of the Inquisition in front of him. He opened it, took out the loose sheet and tried to decipher what was written on it.

< 03.13

As if on command everyone turned around and stared at Marilyn, who apologetically raised her hands. "I know, I know." She straightened her shoulders and proudly said: "Saundra and I tested everything very carefully before I ... sacrificed myself, so to speak. I can assure you that nothing went wrong." A blissful look appeared in her eyes. "You don't know what you'll experience. Honestly. You absolutely must experience it for yourselves.

Just trust Saundra and me and give your consent. Nothing's going to hurt. Word of honor."

Hakon knew he could entrust his life to those two and immediately gave his consent, directly followed by a firm agreement from Alasdair and several consenting reactions from the others.

“Thank you,” Sandra’s voice sounded in everyone’s ear. “I’d like to show you some video footage. I’m sending the footage to your optic nerve through the WORM, so you can watch it through your right eye. A little warning is in order: the end is a bit nasty. So I suggest we spare Marit and Torstein and...”

“Are you crazy?”, Torstein protested. He looked at Marit, who wordlessly let him know she agreed with him. “Marit and I want to go through everything now, and believe me, we both have pretty strong stomachs.”

He looked fiercely at Hakon. Wishing that at the age of eighty he would still be as fearless as his grandfather, Hakon said: “It’s all right, Sandra. Go ahead and start.”

At that moment Hakon experienced the last moments of Ravic in the Egyptian pyramid in full color and dolby surround. He imagined himself among the horde of screaming people panicking and running in all directions.

“Wow,” Barbara exclaimed. “I could use this invention for my work. It was as if I was physically present and could feel the panic.”

Marilyn grabbed her hand and looked at her earnestly. “I know what you mean, Barbara, but some inventions may never be revealed. History teaches that they are often abused. Especially, and I don’t mean it personally, when they fall into the hands of commerce. GAIAS strives for them to be for the benefit of all mankind. Only when that is certain will they be released.”

“Until then, Marilyn’s inventions will only be used if they support a GAIAS operation,” both women heard Sandra say.

Then she turned to everyone. “I showed you these images because at the same time that Ravic was falling down the stairs in Egypt, Hakon was rolling down the stairs in the Peace Palace in The Hague. The remarkable thing is that Nakawe uncovered new hieroglyphics in the same pyramid two weeks earlier. What makes it so special is the following. At the moment that Hakon grabbed this woman, a powerful signal was sent into the ether by him, which resulted in the burning out of the GRID in Scotland.”

“Huh?”, Hakon exclaimed. He was in utter astonishment. “I had a very strange vision at the time or something, but I’m really not aware of emitting anything like a beam of energy. That’s quite extraordinary.”

“That’s what happened, Hakon,” Sandra assured him. “If you say so, I have to believe it. What’s your conclusion, Sandra?”

Hardly aware of the people around him, he listened to her voice. “I don’t have one yet. Too many parameters are still missing. That’s why I want to expand the investigation. Partly because of another peculiarity. The WORM indicates that the tickle in your hand gets worse when you’re around your grandfather. And it increased dramatically when your grandfather sat on that throne in the cabin. I’d like to do some experiments later, but first I’ll tell you all the rest of the discoveries.”

As they looked at each other, everyone stood still listening. “I showed you that video. Not because of the exact timing, but because of the artifacts. The table on which Ravic was standing is the same as the one in the ship. Nakawe discovered the new hieroglyphs by digging a groove 8 inches deep. It is very likely that the bottom plate of the artifact in the pyramid also seems to have disappeared under the dust. I assume that that table is the same as the one in the cabin, except that there are no thrones attached to the one in the pyramid.

“Wow!”, Barbara exclaimed. “I’m beginning to see the contours of a fantastic new item.” Her hands moved as if she was pulling at a rolled up ribbon in front of her eyes. “With a big headline. Something like ‘The Pharaoh’s Curse’. My chief would be ecstatic.”

Russ spoke to her quasi earnestly. “Dear child. Can’t you ever be serious? This here is the bitter reality, you know.” He chuckled and planted a kiss on her nose.

“Well,” Tjan groaned. “If I’d known in advance we’d have a movie afternoon with death scenes and,” he looked at Russ and Barbara, “sultry romance, I’d have brought a bucket of popcorn.”

He placed his rear on a barrel next to the bow. “Come on, guys. Let Sandra continue,” said Hakon, a little impatient. “Come on, Sandra. Get on with it.”

“Given the sudden way Ravic died, and given the autopsy report, he died as a result of some kind of power surge. As if he’d been struck by

lightning. According to the report, the power surge came from below. So somehow it emitted something or passed something. If I could speculate, I'd say that that energy blast in Egypt is connected to what happened to Hakon. Later, after the experiment, I'll know more. Now, I'd like to show you something else."

From the direction of the barrel, Hakon heard a subdued murmur. "You see, we should have brought popcorn." In his ear, Sandra said: "Look ..."

< 03.14

Satisfied, he admired himself in front of the mirror. The everyday person of El Ermitaño (*the hermit*) had disappeared like snow in the sun. It was not just any random man standing here. This was him! Alejandro Pobretón, a leader who radiated a powerful self-confidence. His dark, cobalt blue eyes were the color of the deep sea. The inspiration behind them made them sparkle mysteriously. His skin was slightly tinted and made him look healthy. His sleek, black hair, thick and shiny like that of an Indian, hung in a loose tail on his back. He had carefully trimmed his sloppy moustache and beard and the now narrow moustache and short trimmed ring beard made his round face pointy and a touch mysterious. He had beautiful, slender hands and now wore on his right hand the two carved gold rings that had been passed on to him.

With intense pleasure he saw that the black trousers and the black pullover with the turtleneck fitted him like a cast. The black boots with raised sole and heel added a few inches to his average height, making him suddenly look a lot taller and well-built. Carefully he took the cape off the stand and put it around his shoulders. He solemnly closed the buckle at the top. The effect was more than extraordinary. The fire-red cloak, into which a V-pattern had been woven with gold thread, seemed to flame and lead a life of its own.

The same was true of the golden buckle. Inlaid with two black V's, it sparkled with every light movement. The shiny V's, black as the night, were identical to the golden V's in the cloak. A standing 'V' and an

inverted one hovering above the right leg, like an arrow pointing to heaven.

Proudly he looked at his reflection. Here stood a true leader. Exactly what he had wanted to achieve as the enlightened guide to Mankind 2.0. His days as a hermit - the lonely loser who spent his days with his nose in old books - were over. Now that he had received confirmation that the last Chosen One had received the call and was on his way to the assembly point, the time had come. A new chapter was about to begin for him and mankind. The commission handed down from father to son was about to be carried out. And he, Alejandro, would take back what had been stolen and not let it slip out of his hands this time.

After a very long wait, the time had finally come.

< 03.15

After everything his grandfather and Sandra had told him, Hakon didn't expect to be surprised again. He was so wrong. He had stood stock still, totally entranced by what he saw, when he was almost frightened by Tjan's exclamation. "Wow! That's odd! What on earth is that?"

Marilyn turned her head in amazement. "What is this, Tjan? Normally you're even more silent than Buddha himself and your mind is somewhere in Faraway Egypt. Since when have you worried about some moving stars?"

"Um, can I have a hobby, too? You don't need to know everything about me. The universe simply fascinates me, and what I just saw was, in my opinion, an unnatural movement."

Russ chimed in now, too. "What do you mean? I think it's quite normal for stars to move. We've all seen a shooting star before, haven't we?"

"Yes, that's true." Arda joined the conversation. "One surprise after another passes by today and of course we're all very curious why you showed us these spectacular images. If it's another test of the WORM, I'd say it was a big success, you know. Just like in that pyramid, I imagined myself surrounded by stars. We should do this kind of thing more often in the future."

“I totally agree,” Barbara reacted enthusiastically. “This is a real breakthrough, Marilyn. We’ll have to talk about it later. There are so many possibilities...” Unusually brusquely for him, Hakon interrupted her. Impatiently, he asked why Sandra had shown this and what it meant. “What you’ve just seen was observed by Professor Oskar Mirnat, a distinguished astronomer. Apparently, he is very interested in this particular part of deep space. He recorded the phenomenon and it’s stored on the CSA’s servers in Florida. The most intriguing thing is that that unnatural star movement, as Tjan said, took place exactly 0.00121057 seconds after Hakon transmitted that powerful signal.”

< 03.16

While his adjutant was on his way to pick up Direttore Pizzali, Esteban had managed to decipher the letter from the great book. Despite the many flourishes and complicated writing, it had not cost him much effort. He had made a summary in his own neat handwriting and now thoughtfully screwed the cap on his fountain pen and considered the message from 1919, which turned out to be addressed to himself. Its author was a specially appointed guardian of the Inquisition and he could hardly imagine how this brother must have suffered. The man had volunteered to be locked up as one of the people to guard the ‘Secret of God’s Hand’ with his life. Alone and lonely in that little cell, he had spent his days on this holy task. Even when the ‘Guardian of the Message’ had died, he had not renounced. Not even when no one had come to replenish the food and water supplies. For more than three weeks, he had kept himself alive on less than a minimum ration. He had felt his end approaching and, contrary to the ‘calling protocol’, he had finally used the ‘messenger phone’ in an attempt to survive. Nobody had answered and there had been no response to the pounding on the door. Trusting in God, he had finally resigned himself. He had fallen asleep and never woke up again.

Esteban was very impressed. He folded his hands, closed his eyes and murmured a prayer for his brother, who had had to wait a century for someone to come. At the end of his prayer, Esteban struck a cross and opened his eyes. He looked at the letter in front of him and thought he

knew why no one had cared about the two detainees anymore. 1919 was the last year of the First World War and the Spanish flu that had struck so terribly. The few who had been entrusted to serve the highest official of the Inquisition had probably died within a few days and with them their secret services. As a result, they had also taken the 'Secret of God's Hand' with them. He had never come across either the name of this secret or the term 'Guardian of the Message' before. He had never heard of it, nor had he read anything about it. Apparently, it was the task of the Chief Inquisitor, as one of the guards, to protect this secret. So, in the end, that was also his task. He just had no idea what it could be. Frowning, he browsed through the great book and understood that it was a logbook. Interested, he began to go through the gracefully written texts. In 1888 the monk Cathameus turned out to be the first obligatory inhabitant of the cell. He had written down all the details of his life in an extremely elaborate style. Esteban could not make out exactly what his task had been. With little desire to read through the boring pages further, he decided to have the book studied by the Devote Dozen and to have them dig up all the background information. He closed the book, got up and was just about to walk away, when he received a message from Gideon on his smartphone. His adjutant reported that he had picked up Pizzali and that they would arrive around 11.26 am. Esteban looked at his watch. Good, that gave him another fifteen minutes to bring the book down. He put it under his arm and excitedly walked out of his office.

< 03.17

"Hakon?", his grandmother asked in a worried tone while pulling him closer to her. "What's the matter with you? From what I heard, it sounds like you're some kind of superhero who can send out signals and set things in motion. Is all this going to be okay? How are you really doing? I'm starting to worry."

"You don't have to, Marit," Sandra reacted immediately. "His bio-profile shows that Hakon is in excellent health. But he will be, like everyone else, madly curious. He probably can't wait to get to the bottom of this."

"Indeed," the subject of the conversation agreed. Around him, everyone was nodding and making assenting noises. "I don't know where to start, but I can't wait to do something. We've learned by now that a good script is the guide to success, so I was hoping you could present us with some kind of scenario, Sandra."

“The contours of the virtual structure are increasingly taking shape. The structure is still growing in response to the information flowing in from all sides. My subroutines are processing everything at maximum power.”

Lord MacMarkland raised his hand. “Saundra, wait a minute. Sorry to interrupt, but can you tell me a little more about Oskar Mirnat? You asked me if I knew him personally, so I’m very curious why you suddenly conjured him out of your hat.”

It remained silent for a fraction of a second. “Excuse me, sir. I don’t understand what a part of a magician’s act has to do with...”

With both his hands apologetically raised, Alasdair interrupted her. “Sorry, Saundra. I’m forgetting you can’t quite interpret references like that. Forget that reference and tell me briefly why you’re suddenly so interested in Professor Mirnat.”

Her pleasant voice answered immediately. “Right, sir. Professor Mirnat is directly and indirectly linked to our project, which I have called ‘The Signal of Hakon’, because of two different events. The first link was due to the transport of the new parts for the GAIAS applications on the Markland satellites. The mode of transport was noticed by a so-called universe spotter.”

“A universe spotter?”, Holger asked in amazement. “I’ve never heard of that. Is that like an airplane spotter?” To Hakon’s surprise, it was Tjan, not Saundra, who answered.

“Well, one-armed,” he began. “A universe spotter is someone who has made it a hobby to follow known and unknown space movements. But a fixed definition of it is difficult to give. Universe spotting is divided into several disciplines. Some spotters see it as their life task to be the first to trace extraterrestrial life. Others keep an eye on the satellites circling around us. But the majority of spotters find relaxation in watching the colorful spectacles and interactions that can be seen in space. A very small proportion of these people form a separate group. In this group there is an extreme distrust of all companies and governments. Fed by all kinds of conspiracy theories, their aim is to identify the peculiarities in order to prove the insidious schemes that companies and governments are hatching over our heads.”

“I couldn’t have explained that better,” sounded Saundra’s voice. “As for the spotter, he’s such an extremist. He saw one of Marilyn’s Eagles flying through space and recorded it on his computer. However, he made the

mistake of reporting this on a forum of like-minded people. A forum that, as it turns out, is being watched by the U.S. government. Because the man mentioned the name Markland in his message, SPY also picked this up and immediately forwarded it to me. An employee of NASA visited this spotter to investigate his report, but in the meantime SPY and CRYPTO had already done their work. On all data carriers the recordings were destroyed and immediately all hardware was put under observation. It turned out that the visitor made a copy of the hard disk of this spotter, causing SPY to end up in a secret underground space under the NASA complex in Florida, which gave us the second link.

Professor Mirnat has been included in our research since 10.10 this morning. Because of the time difference it was 04.10 hours in Florida when he entered the NASA complex. As I said before, a NASA employee, a certain Rock Veerhoes, took SPY to that secret room under the complex. It turns out that that space is where the top secret service 'CSA' is located and Mr. Veerhoes is its operational leader."

"The CSA?", Alasdair asked in surprise. "To be honest, I've never heard of that." "That's not surprising, milord. If SPY hadn't hitchhiked, we'd never have known about it. There's no data on that agency anywhere."

Barbara burst out laughing. "Literally and figuratively a well buried secret," she said promptly. "That there is such a thing in our world is simply a miracle." "Yes, Barbara," Sandra replied. "Why it's so secret will soon become clear to you. But first, let's move on to our professor. As soon as he dropped the name Markland, SPY became active and put the entire complex under SEC1 control. From the following hour, it appears that the professor had gone to investigate his own observation. By chance or coincidence, the professor witnessed that remarkable star movement. The CSA also appears to monitor all movements in space and the professor wanted to check his observation with the CSA's stored images. I will now let you read a summary of what has happened there so far via your EYPU (*Eyenerve Projection Unit*) by means of an adapted GRID.

Afterwards, I will show you a recording of a very remarkable situation. Thankfully, the specially adapted presentation and the faster processing of the data via the optic nerve save time. Without losing any information, I was able to shorten an hour to fifteen minutes. After fifteen minutes I will

report back. My advice is to sit down. In ten seconds the projection will start. If there are any questions, please wait until the end. The recording will be shown continuously. 10, 9, 8, 7... “

< 03.18

You couldn't imagine a better embodiment of a murky little civil servant, Esteban thought when Pizzali sat down in the visitors' chair of his office with a loud sigh. “Welcome, Direttore Pizzali”, he greeted him. He shook hands with the man and saw that his visitor was clearly impressed to meet the head of the R.C. Security Service. He held his briefcase anxiously on his lap with one hand as he plucked imaginary fabrics from his neatly pressed pinstripe trousers with the nervous fingers of his other. Sweat droplets glittered in his wandering hairline. Esteban, however, did not have time to put Pizzali at ease.

“Glad you're here, Direttore. I'm busy, so I'll cut right to the chase. I'd like to know all about that old, analog phone. Coffee? Water?” His guest pointed out the water Gideon had put on a tray. “Thank you, Commissario. I must honestly say I'm a little dizzy because of the speed of things. Less than an hour ago, I was busy with my daily work, and now all of a sudden I'm here in your office. Your security demands could be called extreme and one would almost think that the Roman Catholic Church is dealing with a large and dangerous secret.”

Unconsciously his fingers crossed the guest badge that hung around his neck. “But that hardship is worth it if it helps me to finally get rid of that damn... er, excuse me ... phone.”

Smiling, Esteban indicated that he hadn't taken the slightest offense. He asked his guest to tell him more. “It all began in 1888, when in Italy, for the first time, a telephone call could be received from the other side of the ocean. It was then your predecessor arranged with my board of directors at the time - I don't understand why - that we would maintain the direct connection at all times, free of charge. He probably did not realize that it would take so long and that the technology would develop at the speed of an onrushing train. And the latter brings our company very much into trouble.”

Not at all interested in the problems of the telecom company, Esteban interrupted him abruptly. "Do you know why that connection was built and had to be maintained?" Pizzali shook his head. "No. Sadly, I don't know. Immediately after our phone call, I looked up the documentation and went through it, but it doesn't say why. It says where the line goes, but..."

Esteban interrupted him again. "Can you tell me where the call is coming from?"

The man's face lit up clearly. "Yeah, it's not that hard to tell. That's in the agreement. Wait a minute ..."

In the rush to be of service to such an important person, Pizzali clicked open his briefcase, pulled out a flat file folder and opened it up. The only sheet it contained immediately sought freedom and silently slid towards the floor, where it ended up right in front of Gideon's feet. Without hesitating for a moment, he swiftly picked it up and gave the paper back to il Direttore. Gratefully, Pizzali took it and pushed his glasses a little higher on his nose. After looking at the document for a moment, he spoke in a dry voice: "The analog connection runs from Mexico directly to our central office in Rome, to end at the address Piazza della Rotonda. But it doesn't say to which building exactly. In the description is added that the R.C. Church built the last part independently."

"Thank you, Direttore Pizzali. The insertion isn't that important. What I'd like to know, though, is from where one could call." "I'm glad that's written here. That's Dominican order Dominicus Guzmán." "And the address?", Gideon asked. Pizzali looked regretful. "It doesn't say. Just this."

Esteban smiled kindly at him. He didn't expect it would be a problem to find out the address. "Can we get a copy of this agreement?" Pizzali looked at him with a strange face. "You, at least the R.C. Church, should have one already. It says here that this contract has been drawn up in duplicate and it has been signed by both my predecessor and yours. You can get this one from me, provided that you can then confirm to me in writing on this document that the telephone message has been sent." "Yeah, it has", Esteban let slip. "Great!", Pizzali cried excitedly.

As if he was afraid that the commissario would change his mind, he immediately pushed the document away. Esteban turned it over, took his fountain pen and wrote in the free space that as of today the obligation

was fulfilled. He signed the document with his full name and rank in flamboyant lettering. He handed it to Pizzali, who nodded approvingly, grabbed his smartphone and took a picture of it. It was clear to see that the man was more than happy.

“Now we can finally tear down that old power station. If you only knew what that piece of land is worth. We want to...” That didn’t interest him at all either. “I’m sorry to interrupt you, but I really don’t have much time. Could you tell me if we could call that convent from here?” Apparently, he had insulted il Direttore.

“No. I don’t know why, but it’s a one-way thing. Calls can only be made from Mexico,” was the short answer.

Well, he knew enough. His Inquisition had enough resources to get in touch with that monastery in no time. He thanked direttore Pizzali and while Gideon took the man back, he listened as Pizzali explained enthusiastically how much he would enjoy the sound of the demolition ball when it made short work of the old power station.

Esteban sat on the edge of his desk and read the agreement. The document did not contain the information he was looking for to complete the puzzle, but it did reveal some small pieces of information. Like the starting date of the logbook, this agreement was made in 1888. The fact that the installation of the telephone cable and the provision of that switchboard was offered free of charge clearly indicated the importance of that agreement. Unfortunately, nowhere did it say why the deal had been made in this way. The most important detail was the name of the monastery.

He picked up his landline phone and pressed the hotkey for the number of his own information desk. After getting in touch, he instructed the information manager to find out everything related to that monastery and to make sure that he got the abbess to speak on the phone as soon as possible. He had barely hung up when the telephone started ringing. On the display he saw that he was being called by an international number.

While Sandra told them the details about Professor Oskar Mirnat, NASA and the CSA, Hakon and his friends walked behind his grandparents, entering the Aegir. Within ten seconds, they had all found a seat on the rowing benches, where they had watched and listened to Sandra's information for the past 15 minutes.

"Presenting the GRID in this way is another nice technological advance, Sandra," Lord MacMarkland exclaimed excitedly afterwards. "That will save me a lot of time later on. Of course I have a few questions, as will the others. What actions need to be taken right now, seems to be the most important one to me. So far we have seen and heard three coinciding events, but where they lead to is still unclear to me."

In everyone's ear Sandra replied: "Well, milord, at the moment I can only conclude that the contact between Hakon and Nakawe was the trigger. After searching all the social media, it turned out that Nakawe has a similar sign to Hakon and Torstein."

"What did you say?", Hakon reacted, astonished.

"Yes, there's three different pictures of her showing her right hand. On all three, the sign is clearly visible and it's almost identical in shape. I compared the images from the security camera with Hakon's bio-data, and exactly when Hakon grabs Nakawe's right hand, that energy surge is released. I analyzed the data further and was able to determine that this accumulated energy left Hakon's body through his big toe. As long as Hakon held Nakawe, that energy flowed into the ground through his toe. All in all, that took exactly 10.2678 seconds."

Hakon could hardly believe what Sandra said and stared at his feet as if he had never seen them before. How was it possible that he hadn't felt it? Surely you'd say a power surge of over ten seconds must have warmed his toe unpleasantly.

Without the others knowing, Sandra whispered: "Still, it's true, Hakon."

In thought, Hakon answered: "Stay out of my thoughts, Sandra. I didn't give you permission to do that." Before his eyes a picture of himself appeared, in which he stood staring disbelievingly at his toes. "I didn't hear your thoughts, Hakon," she whispered again. "But through the eyes of GAIAS, I only analyzed your body language. Don't worry and please listen to me again."

Nobody had noticed their conversation, as Sandra continued her monologue almost without interruption. "The only logical explanation is that contact with Hakon may have activated a mechanism, power or sense unknown to Nakawe. Perhaps in the same way as two batteries. Positive and negative come into contact with each other and generate a reaction together. Based on all the natural laws and insights discovered by human civilization, this should not be possible. I think we have to take into account that a new phenomenon has manifested itself. As is generally known, part of the brain is not used. The brain is the body's operating system and control center. Thanks to the brain, we have a memory and can think, make connections and perform complicated actions. At the same time, all processes within our body are controlled and monitored. In addition, the brain shapes our personality. Through the senses they receive information from all directions, day and night. The brain processes this and reacts to it. The brain is made up of 86 billion nerve cells and 1,000 billion glial cells. Each nerve cell can connect to approximately 5,000 other nerve cells. The human brain determines within 13 milliseconds whether someone is attractive or not, or makes a choice between different actions. In other words, the brain is the most mysterious part of the human body. Although one knows a lot about it by now, one has not yet discovered everything. According to a publication by Marilyn's college friend, the brain still contains many undiscovered areas and possibilities. For some reason those areas are not accessible and there is only speculation about their possibilities. One suspects that the basis for paranormal properties is located in those areas, but this is pure theory, without scientific evidence."

"So, Sandra," Hakon commented, "if I understand correctly, you think I have some kind of psychic sense activated by that touch?"

"Yes, that's the only logical conclusion right now. But what its purpose is, will have to be further investigated. That's why I want to involve Marilyn's friend at the university. You said that during your contact with Nakawe, you saw all sorts of images in front of you and could feel the itchy feeling all the way to the back of your head."

Hakon nodded in agreement. "Yes, it was a very special and intense feeling. I had that tickle in my hand for a long time, but it gradually got

worse. I can remember that just before the fall I had quite a problem with it.”

“Yes, I can confirm that,” said Lémarc. “You kept on rubbing your hand when we said goodbye to each other.” “I suspect,” Saundra said, “that the closer you get to a certain source, the more strongly it manifests itself. Like a magnet that gets more and more powerful depending on the closeness. If you’ll allow me, Hakon, I’d like to conduct a little experiment. Would you please sit on one of the artifact’s seats? Then I’ll tell you what to do.”

< 03.20

It was a beautiful, sunny day in Florida, where thousands of guests would very soon witness an event that would be described forever in the history books as ‘the Day of Truth’. The turning point at which humanity had discovered that it was only a tiny part of the entire universe.

The murmur slowly diminished, until the whole room was dead quiet, in the overwhelming awareness of what was about to happen. For this extraordinary occasion, he stood on a stage decorated with the flags of all the nations of the world. Everywhere on the planet, people were glued to their TV or monitor and watching in excitement. Today he was proven right. The evidence could land at any moment.

His research, previously considered science fiction, and his publications, which were usually placed in unimportant corners of trade journals, now turned out to be realistic. He was the first to discover the moving stars and was now allowed to receive the extraterrestrials as a representative of the earth. In spite of the great honor that fell to him, he felt nervous, because nobody knew anything about them yet. The only thing the extraterrestrials had said was that they were coming to talk about cooperation.

The immense spaceship, consisting of eleven shining spheres in a V-formation, slowly descended to the earth’s surface and landed silently. It did not touch the ground, but stayed just four inches above it. From the stage, he had to look diagonally upwards to be able to see the hatch that opened. While the ambassador of the space people appeared in the

opening, an aircraft staircase came into motion, which came to a standstill just before the opening. He noted with pleasure that the height and width had been estimated just right. But that was all. His satisfaction turned into uncertainty. No, into utter terror. He had to swallow, because how was he supposed to shake hands with this man, eh, entity and negotiate with it? What on earth were the rules of conduct here? There was no book of etiquette and no one had instructed him.

He broke out in a sweat as he examined the entity more closely. About as tall as an average human being, but that's all there was to it. What he saw was so overwhelming that he could not even describe it further. The figure was skinny and skimpy and five arms were sticking out, with seven-fingered hands like coal shovels. The hump on top was supposed to represent the head, but had several openings. In between were several trunks, constantly moving in all directions. The whole figure was pinkish red, like someone who had been baking on the beach for far too long. And then the feet. No, those weren't feet at all, those were wheels. He saw it clearly now. Where the feet should be, he saw round hoops with spokes. Oh dear, that would never go well ... The creature drove out of the spaceship, stopped for a moment on the platform, raised its hands and then drove down the stairs. He wanted to warn it, but his mouth persistently refused duty. Not even one letter left his lips. He wanted to wave, but his arms refused to cooperate too. He had to watch with sad eyes as the first encounter with an alien turned into a drama. The staircase, designed for human use, was totally unsuitable for driving vehicles down it. Instead, it became an unusable obstacle and the entity crashed down about a hundred feet. With a heavy thud, the entity collapsed in pieces on the stage, in front of his feet. The head burst open like a ripe watermelon and in the red mash that was probably the brain, he saw a tin puppet. A little robot like he used to have at home. It was an imitation of the first astronaut who had landed on the moon, but with the face of Rock. Before he could do anything, the little robot grabbed him and shook him back and forth. With Rock's voice it shouted: "Oskar ... Oskar ... OSKAR! Wake up, Mirnat!"

After the miraculous telephone conversation he had just had, Esteban was thinking it over once more when his adjutant came back in. "Well, Gideon. You did that quickly. Direttore Pizzali?" His adjutant knew exactly what he meant to ask. "Pff. What a talkative type. Very tiring to listen to politely. Luckily, I didn't have to bring him back, since he insisted on taking a cab."

Gideon put two cappuccinos on the desk and sat down. "I thought these would be welcome, Commissario."

How thoughtful of his sergeant. Because he was right handed, he took the least obvious cup and chose the left one. After all, you could never be too careful, and Gideon hadn't worked his way up to his current position for nothing.

He would remain cautious and trust in God, the Almighty who had the best interests at heart. After all, that had just been proven again. In the meantime, he could very well use an extra person with a sharp mind. He thanked his adjutant for the coffee and said: "Listen, Gideon. It seems a small miracle has happened. While you were taking Pizzali with you, I got a call from someone in Florida. As I told you in the Pillar Room, I had the painting on the ceiling there examined. Now, the person who did that for me back then, Professor Oskar Mirnat, just called me."

Gideon bowed forward, interested. "That's quite a coincidence, Commissario. Why did he call you?"

"That professor claims to have observed something special while looking at the universe. A phenomenon, as he calls it, that also appears on our painted dome. It's about the position of a few stars. He wants to know the reason why they were painted on the dome. The details will be sent to me by e-mail."

Gideon leaned back disappointed. "And? What's so wondrous about that?" Knowing for a certainty that Gideon was about to bend forward again, Esteban remained silent. He deliberately drained the cup slowly, put it back and said calmly: "Well, according to the professor, those stars are not visible to the naked eye. Not even with a regular telescope. He's only been able to observe them with the help of an exceptionally sophisticated satellite telescope."

There you have it, he thought amused. Gideon's interest had been rekindled. His adjutant almost shot forward. "So he wanted to know how the R.C. Church knew about those stars back in 988," Gideon concluded. "Exactly. I've kept the good man on a leash, because to tell him now that we don't know anything about it, seems very amateurish. I don't want to give the outside world the impression that we don't have our own affairs in order."

His adjutant's eyes twinkled eagerly. "That is quite a coincidence, Commissario. With a little luck, this professor can help us. It's quite possible he knows more. After all, it's not for nothing that he's calling, it seems to me."

Indeed, Esteban thought. Again, God Himself must have had a hand in this. The timing was just perfect. It looks more and more like Divine Intervention is on its way, but where will it lead?

"You're right, Gideon. Professor Mirnat is calling for a reason, of course. But I want to rule out coincidence and luck. I've been a proponent of determinism since the beginning of my studies. In a nutshell, it's a philosophical concept that assumes that our free will is subordinate to God and His laws of the universe. If I list what we have discovered today, based on this philosophy, something must have happened somewhere that caused this. Whatever this is, it's caused these things:

- A. I discovered the monastic cells;
- B. I got a call from Mexico;
- C. That table suddenly gives off some kind of energy, and like thunder in clear skies;
- D. Professor Mirnat just called me.

All indications that the forces of determinism are at work here. And not just any forces, I firmly believe that we are dealing with divine interference. It's up to us to find out what event triggered these developments. I'm sure we're on the threshold of something very important. With Direttore Pizzali's document we already have an answer to a few questions and who knows, Professor Mirnat may take us one step further in the right direction."

He had hardly finished speaking, when his phone rang. He saw that the information manager was calling him. Assuming that he would be connected to the abbess of the monastery, he answered expectantly. However, the message he received was something he could never have imagined. Dazed, he sat back. He didn't know what to say.

< 03.22

With great interest from his grandparents and friends, who stood in an untidy circle around the artifact, Hakon sat on the same throne as his grandfather before him. "You can stop, Hakon. If I'm not mistaken, you felt the tingling in your hand increase as you walked up to the table and it also increased in your head as you sat on the throne." "Right, Sandra. It's just not that intense. It's present, but not very annoying." "Fine. A similar reaction to Torstein's, when he sat on it. Now would you get off and stand close to him?"

He wondered what Sandra's intention was, but willingly did what she wanted and joined his grandfather.

"Holger?" Sandra then asked. "Would you hit the table with your fist?" He, too, silently complied with her request and gave a firm blow to the marble table with his left fist. They all stared in amazement at Hakon and Torstein, who together, as if on command, were suddenly staring dreamily. Both started to rub the sign on their right hand at the same time. "Hey? What's going on now?", Alasdair asked in amazement. "Milord," Sandra said directly, "I'm measuring an energy spike in Hakon and Torstein and a much lighter one in all the others. I see that it's decreasing and now it's gone."

Perplexed Hakon looked at his grandfather. The surprised looks of his friends were almost tangible when his grandmother grabbed their hands. "Was it that time again, darling?", she asked her husband. "Yes, but very different now. It was as if Hakon and I were linked. Was it the same with you, Hakon?" He nodded. "Right, Grandpa. It was very similar to the experience when I held Nakawe, only far weaker. I saw my father again and ... it sounds crazy, Grandpa, but I felt you saw exactly the same thing."

Grandpa's gaze shifted from him to his grandmother. "Marit, darling. It felt as if our Erik was still alive ..." His mouth moved with emotion.

"Weakened, but alive. It was as if he wanted to let us know where he is."

Hakon's head moved furiously up and down. "Exactly, Grandma! My dad's alive! I am deeply convinced of it!"

"Saundra?", Alasdair shouted excitedly. "Clarification, please. How can we get this cleared up as soon as possible? Can those feelings of Hakon and Torstein be considered real?"

"I don't think we should rule out that possibility, milord. The test has made it clear that that table contains energy. It was noticeable to everyone. Like when you're under high-voltage cables. Some react more violently to it than others. The effect of that blow was about the same. Not harmful, by the way. Probably just a residue. It's clear that Hakon and Torstein had some kind of contact because of that energy. It is quite possible that this energy activated a latent communication- or sensory organ in both of them. Hopefully we will get more clarity when we can involve the know-how of Marilyn's college friend. In short, my conclusion is that the energy that Hakon generated in The Hague reached the artifact in Egypt through the earth. The pulse was so intense that Ravic's body couldn't process it. There was no sign visible on Ravic's hands and I therefore assume that he does not have a 'conductor' like Hakon and Torstein. I also assume that Nakawe too has a 'conductor' in her. Because Ravic couldn't transmit this pulse, it probably disappeared from Earth into space. Somehow this pulse activated those stars. More accurately, 'clouds of gas', according to Professor Mirnat. For now, this conclusion is based solely on the fact that all four phenomena took place at the same time and may have been caused only by a powerful discharge of energy".

In the cabin everyone started asking questions or making remarks at once. Above it all, Hakon heard Russ's voice. "Well, either way, my knee hurts. I'm gonna sit down." He dragged his leg slightly as he walked with Barbara to the rowing benches. "Good idea, Russ", grunted Torstein as he led Marit after the couple. Hakon and the others followed, all looking for a seat.

Now that everyone was silent for a moment, Sandra continued. "In addition to the aforementioned, the hieroglyphics Nakawe discovered are still there. These have now been translated and the literal message is: *'In order to make contact with the other side, one must take one's seat at the table and operate the sphere together.'* If one compares this text with the image on the wall, the exposure of these hieroglyphs may be the greatest discovery in earthly history.

A thought shot through Hakon's head like an arrow: Nakawe, myself, energy surge ... Almost afraid of her answer, he asked tamely: "Sandra? What does that mean exactly? For me? For Nakawe? For Grandpa? For my father?" "That's unknown. We can only find out by trial and error." "By mimicking this text between me and Nakawe," Hakon resignedly added.

Alasdair stood up and moved beside him. "Should it come to it, Hakon, know that the whole of GAIAS is behind you. We will use everything in our power to help you. Sandra? Do you have a scenario yet?"

All acclaim was silenced when Sandra took the floor again. "The scenario at the moment is just a rough sketch. For the sake of clarity, I suggest we direct the High Council of Antiquities to dig out their artifact and have more research done on it. I need to know if there's any residual energy in this table. In addition, I suggest we monitor the research of Professor Mirnat and the R.C. Church and wait and see what comes out of it. The connection between these two parties is interesting, because I want to know in which church the phenomenon of the moving stars was painted. I can't find a picture or description of it anywhere. Currently SPY is present in Florida and will, according to GAIAS protocol, only transmit information that falls within the parameters. However, there are some places where SPY is not allowed to be actively present for moral reasons. One of those places is the Vatican. In light of these developments, would you consider changing our policy, milord?"

Hakon shook no, but Alasdair already answered. "No, Sandra. I think everyone will agree that we leave the situation as it is for a while. I don't think there's any immediate danger from those alien stars, clouds of gas, or whatever they are. But increased vigilance is called for."

"Excellent, milord. Based on that, I put the Vatican's environment under SEC1 control and leave the Vatican alone."

“Um, Sandra? What other places matter?”, Hakon asked.

“The CSA in Florida, Washington and Yucatán are now under increased surveillance.” “How do you mean Washington? Do you mean the American seat of government?”, Hakon heard Lémarc ask in surprise.

“That’s right. The CSA has a protocol, and according to that protocol, the perceived phenomenon is unnatural and should be considered an alien threat,” Sandra explained. “I share that opinion,” Tim interjected.

“Apparently, such a phenomenon has occurred before, which has remained unknown outside the Roman Catholic Church. History has shown that such secrets have had an untold influence on earthly existence.”

“Yes,” Sandra responded promptly. “If one adds one and one, for which I am perfectly equipped, one cannot conclude otherwise.”

There was laughter here and there. “But,” she continued, “the CSA was probably unsuccessful in their attempt to alert the White House. I’ve received no sign of any unrest. There doesn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary. Although, as in Florida, it’s still night there, I don’t see any abnormal activity in the systems of the various agencies and armed forces. Because the White House is also taboo for me, I can’t find out what exactly happened there.”

Arda’s clear voice sounded across the rowing benches. “Maybe the president just didn’t have time as he was having a little sex. Not unimportant, though.” Again, laughter echoed through the room.

Still, Hakon wanted to know something. “Why did you add Yucatán, Sandra?” Still grinning, everyone kept quiet, listening to Sandra. “Well, Yucatán, like other parts of Mexico, is a hotbed of criminal activity. These regions are in the top three high-risk areas at UNBI. For years there, drug related or not, assassinations and kidnappings have been the order of the day. In addition, there are indications that the new criminal industry FNI (*Fake News Industry*) has also gained a foothold in Yucatán. Now that Nakawe has been included in our scenario, it is imperative that SPY follows her passively.”

“She’s in Yucatán now?”, Hakon asked. “Yes. After she collided with you, she went home after a canceled appointment. Due to several delays, she

didn't arrive in Mérida until today. Her plane has now landed and she will soon go through customs."

Saundra's voice disappeared. "So," Alasdair cheerfully concluded, "I understand we have to wait for Saundra to come up with new information." "Good," Marit answered. "It must almost be noon, and knowing my men, they'll be wanting to eat something by now."

"That's a good idea. I'm starving."

Everyone got up and looked towards the entrance of the cave, where the voice had come from. In the doorway stood a solidly built, blond man, holding up a thick book in his right hand. As he looked around with astonished eyes, he tapped his finger on the front of the book and shouted: "It's the *AEGIR!*".

< 03.23

"Commissario! What's going on?", Gideon asked, worried. Esteban cleared his throat and found his voice. "Um", he started.

Gideon shouldn't have seen him so defeated! Businesslike and decisive, he straightened his back. After all, he already knew what to do.

"That was our information manager. I asked him to look up all the information about that monastery and then connect me to the abbess, but contact with that monastery turned out to be impossible."

His adjutant looked surprised. "What do you mean, impossible? Since when is a monastery not accessible to us?" "Well, Gideon, it's like this. According to our digital archive, in 1592, a predecessor of mine ratified a papal decree stating that it was an independent monastery. Although it is part of the Roman Catholic Church, it operates in complete seclusion. All contact with it is forbidden."

As he had foreseen, his adjutant was disappointed. "That's quite a setback, Commissario. Now what?" "Don't despair, Gideon," he said cheerfully. "There's still a bright spot, because there's a clause attached. When the monastery itself seeks contact, the head of the Inquisition may enter the monastery."

He raised his hand to get ahead of Gideon's question. "It doesn't say why this decree was drawn up this way. We can only guess at the moment. Obviously, I'm going to find out."

This time it was his laptop which, with a ping, prevented his adjutant from responding. Esteban opened the e-mail program and saw that professor Mirnat had kept his word. He quickly read through the text and said not much later: "Gideon, make sure we have equipment with which we can view the painting of the dome in minute detail and make sure you have a digital compass at hand. Or a device that combines both."

He looked at the date and time on his laptop. "And arrange it so that we can have a meeting with the team at exactly noon. We are going to examine the dome carefully, because Mirnat asked some very interesting questions. Make sure sandwiches are arranged. We will continue uninterrupted. I want to leave on time."

Gideon nodded that he understood. "You're going to the convent, I presume?" "Yeah, that's the only option open to us. Please draw up an itinerary, as quickly and comfortably as possible. All resources are at your disposal." Gideon got up. "As you wish, Commissario."

< 03.24

Fake Spielmann sat late at night, or rather, very early in the morning, in his hidden computer room. At his desk, he neatly lined up the four different smartphones that lay in front of him. He thought about how strange life could be. How small was the chance that someone like him, having grown up in a slum, could have built such a successful life? And with such a stupid name as his. A thank you from his Yankee-dad, who had found his mother with the neighbor and who, not long after he was born, had run away.

His mother hadn't been much better. With hardly any money to make ends meet, she had brought one suitor after another into the house. Apart from swearing at and beating him, she and her whoremongers had largely ignored him. The same applied to the neighborhood children he had grown up with. No one had ever had any interest in him. He hadn't

cared. He was a good student, read everything he could get his hands on, and as soon as the law allowed it, he was gone.

Smiling, he moved the devices up a bit and thought of his first job as a shoe salesman, the little room where he lay reading for hours and the first second-hand PC he had bought from his own savings. He had learned to program, made contacts and a world had opened up for him. Step by step he had grabbed his chances, always made the right choices, and thus amassed more and more money.

And now, now, he owned a country house and a company building at an AA1 location of Yucatán. Both very modern and regularly featured in various magazines. Just like himself, as owner of the successful company SPIEL+, which mainly traded in counterfeit branded clothing and jewellery.

But even though his company was doing incredibly well, his real passion was the computer world. It was in this hidden room, to which no one but himself had access, that he really lived. Only a select and anonymous group of people knew him as 'Floppy', one of the best hackers in the world.

Here he ran the not-so-legal leg of his company. Here he traded in a wide variety of fake articles and ran various scam sites. Here, in this office chair, he made tons of money. And recently he had started spreading FAKE NEWS. Anything the buyer wished for. Already the money was pouring in as if a dam had burst. What a joke, he thought cheerfully, that his own rotten first name served as a starting point for his career. Yet a luxury problem threatened to arise. If the money kept coming in at the same speed, he had to find more ways to launder it ...

The first smartphone was vibrating and Fake knew the game was starting now. A wonderful opportunity that would bring him an almighty amount of money.

He was unaware that for the first time in his life he had made the wrong decision.

Hakon had walked to the railing with his grandfather. Torstein bent over it and shouted: "Sven, boy. How did you end up here?" "I've just been informed by my father about our wonderful shared family history, and as soon as I heard the whole story from him, I had to see it with my own eyes."

Sven's eyes sparkled. "Unbelievable! Exactly like the drawing! I always thought it was a fascinating book, but I didn't know it had anything to do with us!" "Wait a minute, Sven. We'll come to you."

With everyone behind him he rushed down the gangway, walked to his childhood friend and embraced him briefly. Both men clapped each other on the back, after which they each took a step backwards. "What were you talking about, Sven? A book about us?", Hakon asked curiously. "Yes!" started Sven. At least as curiously he looked at the bunch of people who had stayed waiting between Hakon and the ship. "We've had that book on the bookshelf at home for years. It's called 'The Fate of the AEGIR' and the cover shows this boat."

He pointed to the Viking ship they were standing in front of. "It's a very exciting story about the voyages of the AEGIR and her crew. Here, see for yourself."

Hakon took the thick book that Sven gave him and saw that Sven was right. On the front was a Viking ship that was identical to the ship that stood here in the cave. Now that he looked at it up close, he couldn't see any difference. Even the shields were exactly the same in detail and hung in exactly the same order.

He opened the book. The text turned out to consist of a neatly written runic script.

"How on earth did you read this, Sven? This language hasn't been used for centuries," Hakon said with awe in his voice.

His friend shrugged his shoulders carelessly. "Oh, that's not so hard. At home we have a translation of Bokmål lying around. That reads a lot easier. If you want, I can translate it into English for you."

"That's not necessary," Hakon heard Sandra say. "If you want to turn the pages slowly, I'll scan the text and transfer it to any language you want. As far as I could see through your eyes, it looked very much like a log or

diary. Maybe here we'll find the answers to the questions Torstein couldn't answer."

"Good idea, Sandra", Torstein said, delighted. "We can do that over lunch, because, as Marit said, I've developed an appetite for something savory."

Hakon laughed at the sight of his childhood friend, who looked at his grandfather without understanding him. Their conversation had to seem very incoherent to him. "Have faith, Sven. I'll explain things to you in a moment." He turned to the others. "Come. Let's go back to the kitchen. Then we can continue our conversa..." Suddenly he stopped still, moved his arms defensively, yelled: "No, no ... Granny, no, no!", and then collapsed.

< 03.26

At exactly twelve o'clock Esteban entered the Pillar Room and was pleased to see that his Devotees had not been sitting still. In the intervening time a real office space had been created, containing a few desks, computers, monitors and various other pieces of equipment. He looked around him with satisfaction. At a large table sat two Inquisitors, with the two books in front of them, earnestly noting their findings. Next to the marble table they were busy building a scaffolding in order to get closer to the painted dome. He had not yet received any new information and was curious to see how far his team had progressed with the research in the meantime.

His adjutant caught his eye, walked up to him and greeted him. He pointed around him. "You see, Commissario. The team has not been idle." " Good, Gideon. I'm very pleased. I see three members are missing? Please bring me up to speed."

His adjutant took a quick look at his tablet. "Thomas is on his way to pick up a specialist. A professor of cartography, who we're bringing in to examine the world map on the floor. This scholar is listed as the expert in the field and we are fortunate that he gave a lecture this morning in Rome. He should be here any minute. We've also approached a radiation expert and a geologist, both highly regarded in their fields. But these two

gentlemen, an Austrian and a Dane, can't get here until tomorrow at the earliest. The person Thomas is picking up is a Briton."

"Good, Gideon. Very good. You'll make sure these outsiders are carefully screened, won't you?" For a moment he saw a spark of impatience flare up in Gideon's eyes before he answered. "Of course, Commissario. There's no need to doubt that for a moment."

He went on to speak, without expression. "The other two Inquisitors are in the hall of the Pantheon. There, behind a painting, the team discovered a second entrance leading down here. A 180-foot-deep shaft that extends behind the niche, here, next to the stairs. In that wall they also discovered a keyhole. Another Inquisition lock in which only your key fits."

"Excellent, Gideon! Let's go see what's back there."

While the nine Devotes present worked undisturbed, he followed his adjutant to the niche. Gideon showed him the hole in the shape of a crucifix. Esteban pulled out his key and opened the lock in the same way as before. After the last click the whole wall moved a few inches forward. Together he and Gideon managed to push the door open and they were immediately greeted by one of the two missing team members. She was sitting with a male colleague in a kind of box hanging on a thick chain.

"Welcome, Commissario," she began cheerfully. "We think we figured out how they got the marble table down here back then. Considering that the door by the stairs is too narrow and there are no traces indicating that it was broken out at some point, we figured that the table ended up in the hall via a different route. Based on the archived floor plan of the Pantheon we first determined the location where another access point could be found. That's how we figured out that there had to be an entrance in the hall leading here. That's how we discovered that there was indeed one, hidden behind 'The Last Supper'. The painting turned out to be made to measure and it concealed a wooden entrance door that we could easily open. Of course, we first made sure that everything was properly fenced off, so no one apart from ourselves knows what is going on here."

Inadvertently Esteban was filled with pride when he saw how his Devote Dozen had started so boldly and energetically. He must not give in to that, he admonished himself.

In silence he sought forgiveness: dear Lord, help me shed these sinful feelings.

He nodded to both Devotees. "Sister, brother. Excellent work. Keep it up."

However, the woman had not yet finished speaking. "This construction we're sitting in, which by the way still works perfectly, was used to lower that table down. We have recorded everything on video and will send you the full report later. In addition, all alcoves, pillars and the floor have been examined. Apart from this shaft, nothing else was found. We haven't found any more hidden rooms in the cells, or interesting writings either. The books in the guard's cell seem to be of a merely philosophical nature."

Okay, so that was clear. A few discoveries, but no obvious, redeeming answers yet. Esteban thanked both Devotees and returned with Gideon at his side to the table where the two books were examined.

"Have we found anything we can go on with yet?", he asked his adjutant. "A preliminary conclusion based on a number of samples of the black bible indicates that it has actually become a book of complaints. In particular, the monk describes how much he regrets his actions and begs forgiveness more than once. To be absolutely sure, it will be further investigated, but that will take some time. The investigator himself thinks that little more will come of it. The other book is much more interesting. First of all an overview has been made of all the names in it. In the archives it is mentioned that all these brothers were sent to South America for missionary work. Including the two brothers whose bodies we found in the cells."

So all these inquisitors had a secret life that they spent in the cells here, Esteban concluded, while listening to Gideon.

"We can therefore say that there's been quite a lot of tampering with the official records. With the exception of the two we found down here, the said brothers would also have died there. The two we found down here should still be in South America. There are no records of their deaths. This could be due to the fact that the Spanish flu hit the entire leadership of the Inquisition in 1919, including the Pope's personal secretary. Only he survived the flu back then. From that time on, there is no longer any reference in the archives.

Whatever their task or sacred mission may have been, it died with the participants.”

Esteban was none the wiser. “That’s unfortunate, Gideon. So the book is a dead end.” With barely disguised impatience his adjutant said: “But it has been discovered who played the leading role in the whole affair.”

At least that was something, Esteban thought. “It was a triumvirate. The head of the Inquisition, the guard in the cell and the secretary to the Pope. The latter was also mentioned in the book. The team concluded that if any data still exists, it could be in the papal diaries of 1919 or later.”

That was a direct hit! The answers had to be found with the Pope or in Mexico.

He gestured Gideon to wait, picked up his tablet, looked up the Pope’s diary and saw that he would be in his own quarters between 14.00 and 15.00 hours. That was very convenient. Quickly he made a note for the Pope’s first secretary with the message that he had to speak to the Pope at all costs. He added his highest personal priority code.

“Well, Gideon,” he said cheerfully. “Has our new search engine yielded anything?”

“Just one thing for now, Commissario. With the new software, first of all, your picture of the starry sky has been compared with all common saved images. Unfortunately, no match was found. Then the marble table was run through the search engine, and a social media site turned up the following.”

Gideon showed him on his tablet a video of a costumed man who was standing on a similar table and fell off, half spinning around his own axis.

“What is this, Gideon? A piece from a movie or something?” “No, Commissario. This video is only two days old and took place in a pyramid in Egypt. As far as one has been able to ascertain, that table there is the same as the one standing here. Only the foot is missing. Unfortunately, it’s the only clip the search engine found.”

The speed with which the Devote Dozen had brought all that was needful to the surface was truly admirable. He did not expect that more would be known yet, but nevertheless asked if they had any recommendations.

“According to the team, the man was hit by a power surge. The two tables show a striking resemblance and because both emit energy, the team advises to investigate that table as well. More similarities may be found.”

That was a logical conclusion, Esteban thought. “All right, Gideon. Take care of it. By the way, what about Professor Mirnat’s request that I forwarded you?” His adjutant nodded. “That, too, is in preparation.”

As they walked together to the scaffolding, which by now was at least 60 feet high, Gideon continued: “I will see to it that Mirnat’s instructions are carried out to the letter. A good friend of mine has a camera specially equipped for the occasion that I daresay he would lend to me. With that it shouldn’t be a problem to fulfill the professor’s wish. As soon as the job is done, I will send you the results immediately.”

Esteban peered up along the scaffolding. “I’m very curious about it, Gideon. What the good man wants to achieve with it is a mystery to me right now. Come,” he ordered resolutely. “I must prepare for my journey. Have you been able to arrange everything?”

His adjutant pursed his lips. “Yes, Commissario. They were initially rather difficult when I made your wishes known, but as soon as I gave them your priority code, they caved in completely. The earliest possible flight that could be organized leaves this afternoon at 4:00 p.m.”

“Excellent, Gideon. Make sure my transport is ready. I want to be at the Domus Sanctae Marthae by 2:00. Have the driver wait there until I’m ready, so I can get straight to the airport.”

“I’ll take care of it, Commissario. Do you have any further wishes?”

“Yeah. While I’m not here, I’m putting you in full charge of the work here. If you run into any problems, you know how to reach me.” He said goodbye to Gideon and rushed to the door.

He stood on the threshold for a moment and looked over his shoulder to watch all the activity behind him. An indefinable feeling crept up on him, as if he feared he would not see the Pillar Room again soon. For a moment he hesitated.

Don’t be silly, he admonished himself. Trust in God. Then everything will be alright.

Determined, he turned around, stepped across the threshold and set off.

< 03.27

After a far too long and exhausting ride they had finally reached the airport. Kiniawe was overjoyed to feel solid ground under her feet again. After that incident with the side mirror, two near misses and a big bang on her head against the side window of the car because Granny had driven through an enormously deep pit, she thanked God that she had survived that rough ride without any significant damage. The ugly bump on her head didn't matter, because Nakawe had just called Granny to tell her that she had come through customs and that she would meet them in the parking lot.

Luckily they had left earlier than necessary, so despite Granny's slow driving style they had been able to find a free spot in the crowded parking lot. Not even that far from the main entrance.

Zigzagging between the many cars parked at a sharp angle on the crowded parking lot, she walked with Granny to the wide, open glass doors. They had almost reached the main entrance when she saw Nakawe. Excitedly she jumped up and down and shouted: "Granny! I see her. It's Nakawe and Miquel. They are already outside the main entrance. See? Over there!" She pointed and waved enthusiastically. Nakawe had seen her too, put down her luggage and waved back at least as exuberantly.

Granny, who remained very calm under any circumstances, continued walking at an exasperatingly slow pace. Kiniawe pulled on her sleeve. "Granny, hurry up! Nakawe and Miquel are waiting for us!" A family of four, rushing past them, almost knocked her over. Granny didn't even seem to notice. "Where?", she asked calmly. "I don't see them."

Almost grunting with impatience, she pointed to Nakawe and Miquel again. "There, Granny. To the right of the main entrance ... Shit! You can't see them now. There's a van just in front of them. Come on, Granny. Keep going. Nakawe must be wondering what's taking us so long."

To her joy the van drove away. Now Granny herself could... "Huh?", she exclaimed surprised. "How is that possible? I don't see them anymore."

She let go of Granny and quickly ran the last few feet to the place where Nakawe and Miquel had been waiting with their luggage. The luggage was still there. A suitcase, a beauty case and a handbag which she immediately recognized as Nakawe's. Dumbfounded, she looked in all directions, but Nakawe and Miquel seemed to have gone up in smoke.

Her gaze slid over the waiting line of taxis. No, not there either. The same driver who was casually waiting with an arm hanging out of the window, was still there and just as bored.

Oh, of course. She had just had another weird dream.

Relieved, she touched the spot on her head where, of course, she didn't have a bump.

"Ow!", she squeaked. Disillusioned, she realized she was awake after all. "Granny? I don't understand any of this. I'm sure I saw them standing here, but now all of a sudden they're nowhere to be seen. I don't understand," she said desperately. Even now Granny wasn't upset. "I think you've made a mistake, child. They'll still be inside." Convinced she was right, she shook her head. "No, really, Granny. I really saw them standing here. See for yourself."

She showed Granny the luggage. "You see? Her name's on the labels and I recognize that handbag out of thousands. I gave it to Nakawe on her last birthday." Granny smiled. "Don't panic, sweetheart. Nakawe might have just gone to the toilet. If you stay here with the luggage, I'll walk over there, okay?"

Before Granny could put her money where her mouth was, Kiniawe grabbed her arm. "But where's Miquel? Nakawe would never leave her luggage on the sidewalk unguarded. And certainly not her purse. Wouldn't she have taken it with her..."

A van came to a standstill with squeaky tires next to them, interrupting her. Before she realized what was happening, she and Granny were grabbed and dragged in through the already open side door. Even before she hit the floor, she heard a squeak and a loud bang as the door was slammed shut. As someone pulled something over her head and

everything became dark, the van pulled away, its tires skidding. Just behind it another van stopped. The back doors burst open and two street urchins climbed out. In no time at all they loaded the remaining luggage and climbed back in behind it. As soon as the doors closed, this van, too, drove away from the curb at high speed.

< 03.28

For a fraction of a second it remained dead silent, until a hurricane of reactions erupted. Everyone, each with their own concerns for Hakon, reacted at the same time, which resulted in a chaotic situation. Amid a cacophony of shocked exclamations, they crowded together in an attempt to do something for their friend. But before anyone could actually get the chance, Sandra stopped them.

“STOP! Don’t touch Hakon. Leave him. He’s all right. Don’t disturb him, because he’s in contact and ... Oh, now it’s gone.”

However, Sven had to do without a WORM, which meant that he did not receive any of Sandra’s intrusive warning. As a former orderly in military service he had automatically done his duty. Quickly he had knelt down at Hakon’s side and had turned him into a stable lateral position. He was examining Hakon when his patient suddenly turned back on his back and pushed his fingers out of the way. Hakon raised his eyes and looked up, into more than a dozen pairs of eyes that looked down on him in horror and concern. He wondered how he got here. The disoriented feeling had already left him. Oh, yes. That’s right. They were going to have lunch.

As if he had laid down on the floor for fun, he calmly asked why his friends were looking so mesmerized. “Hakon!”, Marilyn shouted first. “What happened?” “I can’t give you a meaningful answer to that. One moment I was telling you something and the next it was: poof. As if my will was turned off. I was conscious, but no longer had control over my senses.”

Everyone except Sven heard Sandra’s voice. “Yes, you did. All your bodily functions worked perfectly. It was just, to put it simply, that your sixth sense was activated. This caused a blockage of the other ones. In that previously discussed piece of brain, I measured an increase in

activity the moment an energy flow coursed through your body. A very strongly increased concentration was sent from your big toe to your brain. We heard you say: 'No, no ... Granny, no, no!' The remarkable thing is that as soon as Sven turned you on your side, your foot came off the ground and you immediately regained consciousness."

"How are you feeling now, Hakon?", asked his grandmother, worried. While Lémarc and Holger pulled him to his feet by both arms, he reassured her. "Actually, very good, Grandma. No pain at all. It's like I woke up from a dream. I saw and heard you react as though startled, while at the same time I was somewhere else."

"Where were you?", Barbara asked curiously. "I don't know exactly. Somewhere in a place where it was dark and damp and warm."

He thought for a moment and snapped his fingers. "As in the tropics. It smelled of asphalt and exhaust fumes. For a moment I saw the face of an elderly lady with long, grey hair, then I became aware that a dusty, smelly jute bag was being pulled over my head. I didn't see anything anymore and I experienced a frightened and terrified feeling."

"Do you remember what you said?", Barbara kept asking. "No, not deliberately. I had the impression I was saying something to that old woman, but I don't remember what exactly. But, like I said, I felt it, but had no influence over it. It just happened to me. It was just as if I was hitchhiking and looking through another person's eyes. And for some reason, I'm convinced that this person was a woman."

Hakon saw Sven look from one to the other, more and more confused. He could well imagine what their tacit conversation with Saundra would look like for him. However, before he had a chance to reassure him, Alasdair asked if it could be Nakawe with whom he had had contact.

"I can't explain it, but this connection didn't seem familiar to me. Still, no matter how crazy, it felt very trusting. Sorry, guys. This is all I know. All I can tell you is that this person is shocked and very much afraid."

"Saundra, what do you make of this?", Alasdair asked firmly. "Well, milord. It's obvious Hakon's been pinged somehow. Someone or something contacted him and sent information unilaterally. I've only been able to detect incoming energy to him. It was such that it created a temporary blockage, but during that connection, his body functioned

normally. Even his heart rate remained unchanged. Somehow that part of the brain still has a connection with the other senses. As soon as Hakon's digital pico profile is available, we can see to the smallest detail which parts of the body were affected by that energy surge. I've captured everything. Until then, we'll have to wait and see. Also, from now on, I suggest that someone stay close to Hakon permanently to keep an eye on him. If something like this happens again, it's not inconceivable that Hakon could get hurt, or worse."

Once again Hakon looked at Sven, who almost insidiously shuffled closer and closer to his grandparents. It must have been almost an insane scene for him to see how everyone was listening with their heads tilted to nothing in particular. Especially when Holger suddenly stepped forward and said something that seemed to make no sense to him. "I'll take first watch. I'm head of security for a reason. And Hakon, don't argue with me. We all understand the risks. So for now, don't drive anything, don't climb on high things, and definitely don't go swimming."

With his hands up, Hakon gave in. "Okay, okay, just relax. I can see that for myself. Now let's go to the kitchen for lunch. I want to talk to Sven, and in the meantime, Sandra can scan his book."

< 03.29

"If you please, I will precede you and show you to your room, Dr Beaumont. What would you like? Tea? Coffee? Anything else?", the butler had offered, after the door was closed. He didn't have to think long. The sooner he could see the patient, the sooner he could enjoy the beauty of this place. He had therefore rejected the proposal and had let it be known that he preferred to start his work right away.

"As you wish, Dr Beaumont," the butler had said politely. "Then follow me, if you please."

Chasing the butler he had walked through all kinds of corridors and up and down stairs several times. A walk of about ten minutes. Because it was his hobby, he could clearly see that the castle had been expanded more than once during the past centuries. On the way he had looked around quite a bit. In passing he had seen many immortalized castle

lords and their spouses hanging on the walls. They flaunted their rich, traditional clothing and he had the strong feeling that they had watched him just as inquisitively.

Finally arriving in the patient's room, he had been introduced by the butler and left to the doctor and nurse on duty. A tablet had first been handed to him and a pre-recorded video of Marilyn had been played, in which she informed him of the situation. While listening to her message, his thoughts had flown back to the past. To the university where they had both studied. How young she had been then.

A child prodigy, barely 13 years old, that he had thought he had to protect from day one.

Three years later he knew better, he thought amused. It hadn't been a problem that they had each taken a different course of study. After that they had both spent most of their time in their scientific studies, so they hadn't seen each other personally anymore. However, their friendship was deep and they might have lost sight of each other, but they certainly weren't out of each other's hearts. They still kept digital contact.

In the meantime he had taken note of his assignment. "So I would very much like to hear your opinion, Bertie," Marilyn had said in conclusion. Together with the doctor and nurse, he had then gone through the medical file and the patient's current condition, after which they had left the room so that he could carry out his own examination in peace and quiet.

And now, over two hours later, he had no choice but to sympathize with this patient. He made his last notes and closed the file. Thinking about it, he looked at the cover, which only contained the patient's short name. 'JENS'. The strange thing was that neither the doctor nor the nurse had known whether this was the first name or the last name. But that he had been asked by Marilyn to come and examine this patient surprised him even more. From this he understood that the young man had to be very important to her, but even a blind man could have seen that this 'JENS' was no longer salvageable. Not exactly a complicated situation for which his expertise was needed. For even though the butler had assumed that he was a gardener, Marilyn knew better. As a leading scientist and specialist in the field of neurosurgery, his agenda was full of appointments. All over the world he was asked to treat heads of state,

powerful businessmen and other rich people. Why Marilyn had approached him for this was, frankly, a mystery to him. She knew full well that he was about to take a well-deserved week's vacation. Already with his luggage on the way to the airport he had received her distress call. Without having to think about it, he had called off his friend and the reserved flight to France. At the airport he had bought a ticket for the first plane to Scotland.

Knowing Marilyn, he had expected an extremely complicated situation and certainly not such a hopeless case as this. He could not offer any solution here either. During his investigation he had noticed absolutely nothing that deviated from the status. Nowhere had he found a bright spot. Zero brain activity. No matter how sorry he was to disappoint Marilyn, this patient would never wake up again.

Due to the excellent care of the medical staff, the body was in perfect condition. Unfortunately, it was kept alive by machines alone. Mournfully his eyes wandered over the specialized devices, which gently humming, occasionally clicking and sighing, cared for and guarded their patient.

After a last regretful look at the blond young man, he walked back to the small sitting area. He pressed the bell that stood on the table and went to the large window. Curiously he looked outside. His gaze fell on the small harbour and the bustle there. Many miniature people were busy hoisting the catch from several fishing boats. A magnificent sight. Unfortunately he was not really in the mood to enjoy it freely. And while he thought about JENS never being able to experience anything like that again, he heard the door open behind him.

The nurse on duty entered the room, followed by the attending physician. He had spoken to both before, but he did not yet know the lanky young man who came after them. Probably a medical student who co-assisted the doctor, he thought. He walked up to the three of them and spoke to the doctor.

"Dear colleague, your conclusion is 100% correct. This man," he pointed to JENS, "will unfortunately never wake up again. I hope he has a donor codicil, because then he can save the lives of many others."

Instead of the doctor, the lanky boy took the floor: "Thank you for being so kind as to examine JENS at such short notice, Dr. Beaumont. Let me

introduce myself first. My name is Pierre. Until the castle lord returns, I'm the one to guide you further. Will you follow me? Then I'll take you to another area, where you can speak to Marilyn." Without further explanation, the man turned around, walked to the door and held it open invitingly. Somewhat surprised that the doctor let his resident walk over him so meekly, he nodded to the two in passing for a moment. As there was not much else to do, he decided to follow the lanky Pierre.

Universal connection

< 04.01

It had almost pained Alejandro to hang the cloak back on the stand. After all, it was far too early to go down. He had forced himself to be patient. Quietly he had made tea and spread a few slices of bread. While re-reading the main points of his plan he had eaten his breakfast, slowly chewing and drinking. The excitement that then threatened to take possession of him, he had managed to reduce by first quietly doing the one-person washing up and tidying up the kitchen. His hacienda '*¡No nos olvidamos!*' (*We don't forget!*) might look dilapidated from the outside, but inside it was, although soberly furnished, neat and clean. To pass the time he had also quickly cleaned the window through which he now stood looking out.

Outside it had become day. Yet he left the kitchen lights on, because the dense jungle did not let much sunlight through. He wondered what it must have looked like two thousand years ago. He could hardly imagine it. The clearing of this place, the hundreds of slaves, their dozens of masters and the many years that had passed before everything was ready.

Smiling, he thought how everyone knew what ordinary pyramids looked like and that they all had one thing in common: they were all clearly visible on this globe. His smile widened. Except for one. Nobody knew about this one, which had been carved out here around 100 BC in the solid ground beneath his hacienda.

His watch beeped briefly. 07.50 hours! It was time! He quickly walked to the stand, draped the cloak around his shoulders and fastened the golden buckle. Proudly he walked to the door and unlocked it. Behind it were the carved steps, which seemed to disappear into the dark depths beneath him.

He turned on the light, closed the door and began to descend the long stairs. As he quietly made his way down step by step, he thought it was high time to think about a successor. The house from which he himself descended was not to become abandoned. It had to expand, to grow and to flourish. And he would lay the foundation for it. Soon it would be time.

Then he would triumph, after which there would be a selection of beautiful virgins from which he could choose. Maybe even multiples who would give birth to his sons. Only the best of them would he name as his successor ...

A murmur of voices met him and interrupted his thoughts. Beneath him, in the one great hall that the pyramid contained, he saw a group of men chatting among themselves. He was quietly counting their heads, when his attention was drawn to the side door that opened. Through the opening he could just catch a glimpse of the little train that had stopped there. The other was already out of sight. It had drifted away in the opposite direction. A simple and efficient way to bridge the 1.25 miles between here and the beginning of the mine shaft. Through a double lift system there, one could go up and down in the same way. The man who had entered through the side door rushed towards the others. On the way he quickly closed the buckle of his cloak. Beautiful. The last Chosen One summoned had also arrived neatly on time.

He would have loved to run down the remaining steps and let his plan commence quickly. A mission, with the appropriate name '*¡No nos olvidamos!*' (*We don't forget!*), the core of which consisted of their right to recognition and justice.

Instead, seemingly calm and in control, he continued descending the remaining steps in the same stately manner, while observing the 23 men below him. He looked attentively at each of them, from young to old, and he liked what he saw. They all wore the same outfit as his, but their cloaks were blue with woven silver thread and the clothes underneath were dark grey. The same double 'V'-sign as his was shining jet-black against the silver background of their coat buckles.

It was the first time that any of them had been allowed to set foot on this holy ground, in the room that had traditionally been a hidden temple of their ancestors and that had now been hidden for 20 centuries.

Fortunately this had meant the treasures in it were also undiscovered. Almost everything there was shining due to the gold from which it was made or with which it was decorated. Furniture, chairs, wall racks and cupboards, everything was original and originated from the Mayan and Inca era. The centuries-old tiles with which the floor was laid had a terracotta color. The walls were tiled with a lighter shade of terracotta

against which a wide strip of gold leaf was applied every 44 inches. The wafer-thin craquelure pattern reflected a warm glow in the lamp light. The movement of the cloaks worn by the group of men caused the silver pattern to flare up like a school of fish in the ocean. Combined with the interior, Alejandro found it a feast for the eye.

The group had noticed him and the conversations died away. He descended the last ten steps and walked proudly to the marble table. A replica of one of the oldest and most important artifacts in the history of his people. It was a table entirely carved out of marble on a foot of 44 inches high. The diameter of the perfectly round top was 28 inches. The base of the table stood on a round piece of marble that served as a base plate and had a diameter of 11 feet. Swiftly he jumped on it and like a general inspecting his troops, he looked down on the group of men. The moment had finally come. The script could be opened. Filled with pride he spread his arms wide, took a deep breath and triumphantly shouted: "CHOSEN ONES!"

< 04.02

After he had left the Pillar Room, Esteban had gone back to his office for a while, where he had quickly finished some trifling tasks. While the lunch he had ordered was brought in, he had packed everything for his trip and had the luggage picked up. He had also managed to activate the live streaming from the Pillar Room on his tablet before his departure. It had been Thomas's idea to place a webcam in the Pillar Room so that he could stay informed of the progress along the way. Again proof that this brother had a clear mind. Thomas had everything in him to possibly become Chief Inquisitor one day. Esteban would be happy to keep an eye on his development.

On the way to his appointment with the Pope he had immediately made use of this application. Sitting in the back of the wagon, he had seen that the scaffolding in the Pillar Room was almost ready. Also, between the incoming text messages there was a message from Gideon. He could expect a video from him today.

Satisfied that everything was running smoothly, he had put away his tablet and saw that even the heavy traffic in Rome hadn't kept him from his schedule. He had arrived beautifully on time and at the stroke of two o'clock a clerk led him into the waiting room of the Domus Sanctae Marthae. After having turned down the offered refreshments, he had barely sat down when the Pope's right hand made his appearance. As he had expected, the man was bursting with curiosity. Now that he had used his highest priority code for the first time, of course all the alarm bells had gone off.

The thick lips on the cardinal's full moon face puckered benevolently when he greeted him. With his hands folded in front of his bulky belly, the man looked at him cautiously, with his eyes narrowed.

"Commissario", he began unctuously, "what can I do for you? Given the speed with which you wanted an audience, I have suspended everything and will be at your complete disposal this afternoon. Let us give His Holiness his midday rest."

Good try, Esteban thought amused. But the question he had was not for this nosy guy.

He stood up and looked at the man authoritatively. "Eminence. The fact that I have used my personal priority code means I can speak to His Holiness in private without the interference of others, including you. You know that, as head of the security service, I am aware of the midday break and would never disrupt it without urgent reason. I hereby order you to accompany me directly to the Pope, otherwise I will have to make use of my authority. I don't have to remind you of the consequences, I suppose?"

Although the cardinal did not seem very impressed, Esteban saw the color fade from his face. Nevertheless, the man managed to keep looking at him arrogantly. "I'm afraid I didn't quite understand you correctly, Commissario. If you'd be so kind as to wait a moment, I shall present you to His Holiness at once."

He immediately put his money where his mouth was and disappeared towards the Pope's private residence. Annoyed, Esteban sat down again.

What guts. What insolence. Did the man really think he'd settle for this treatment? He should be reminded of his place soon. Esteban wouldn't

be surprised if His Holiness hadn't even been informed.

While he was making a mental note that this cardinal deserved further investigation, the man came back in.

"His Holiness is expecting you. Please go inside."

Without giving the Cardinal another decent look, Esteban walked past him. He gently pushed the door open and stood for a moment to let his eyes get used to the subdued light. All the curtains were closed and the Holy Father sat in a hastily buttoned dressing gown in one of the seats by the coffee table, his white-chilled, bony feet stuck into a pair of old, worn slippers.

So the Cardinal had indeed not taken him seriously. The Pope had known nothing of his request. He wouldn't forget this!

"Esteban! What's the matter? If you had sent me a message, I would have made sure I was dressed."

"My sincere apologies, Your Holiness. I have, of course, used my personal Inquisition code to speak to you this afternoon. Apparently, something has gone amiss in communications."

"Mmm, odd. Most unlike His Eminence. I will address him directly about it later." "You don't have to, Your Holiness. It's already been arranged. You have more important things to do. I am here because something has happened. Something urgent that requires both my and your attention."

"Yes, I understand. Otherwise you wouldn't be here right now," was the dry answer. "No more scandals, I hope? I've had my fair share of them by now." "No, no, that has nothing to do with it," Esteban quickly reassured him. "Something completely different that could have a great influence on the survival of the R.C. Church as we know it today. I made a mysterious discovery in the Pillar Room."

Shocked, he remained silent after that sentence. The Holy Father had suddenly turned pale and countless drops of sweat had appeared on his forehead. With his eyes open he gasped for air and tried to say something. The heart of the R.C. Church was not suffering a seizure here and now in his presence, was he?

Esteban took no risk and reached for the telephone on the table. Halfway there, however, his arm was firmly grasped, with a force you would not

expect from an old man suffering from an attack.

The Holy Father finally managed to find his tongue. “Esteban, wait ... it’s all right. You scared the life out of me. Your remark about the Pillar Room caught me off balance for a moment. You told me something I didn’t expect and I never wanted to hear. Before you speak further, I want you to take the Papal Key from the top drawer of my bedside table.”

Surprised at the turn his visit had taken, Esteban silently complied with the request. He opened the drawer, took out the key and handed it to the Holy Father. “Thank you, Esteban. I now ask you to listen attentively and not to ask any questions on this subject from now on.”

Anxiously Esteban watched the suddenly very old-looking Holy Father, who rose laboriously from his seat, his knees creaking. With his shoulders bent as if he was carrying the weight of the whole earth, he walked to a large, carved cupboard. Visibly hesitating for a moment, he opened the cupboard door and a large, old-fashioned safe became visible. Esteban saw the Holy Father’s hand shaking slightly when he inserted the key into the lock and turned it left and right a few times. He heard a distinct click when the old-fashioned safe was unlocked. “Please, Esteban,” said His Holiness softly. “Open it.”

Still silent, Esteban firmly grabbed the handle of the safe door and pushed it down forcefully. The steel door sprang forward a little, after which he opened it wide. Surprised he saw that there was only one thing in the large safe. “Go ahead, Esteban,” he heard His Holiness say behind him. “Take it and follow me.”

Curiously he took out the wooden box and saw that it was sealed with a papal seal from 1883. Again something special that was connected to the Pillar Room! Excitedly he followed the Holy Father, who led him through the sumptuously furnished living room to his more utilitarian study. His Holiness lowered himself with a sigh into his padded luxury office chair and gestured to Esteban to sit on the chair opposite the desk. With the box on his lap, Esteban continued to wait until the Holy Father was ready to explain things.

Judging by his frown, it was hard for the Holy Father to enlighten him, but after a moment of reflection, he began cautiously: “Esteban. It must seem very strange to you, but I would have preferred not to experience this

moment. I have no idea what happened in Mexico and here in Rome in the Pillar Room. I and the popes before me have always been deliberately excluded from this knowledge. Why the emissaries of God, of all people, were not allowed to know about it, is a mystery to me.” For a moment he kept silent, before suddenly speaking with determination. “What you hold in your lap is the so-called ‘Secret of God’s Hand’.

What does this mean exactly? I received a verbal message from my predecessor, which I was supposed to pass on to my successor if a certain question was asked. Well, today you, as Chief Inquisitor, asked exactly that question. Therefore I am required to pass on to you:

1. You must travel to Mexico at once;
2. Only when you are on your way may you break the papal seal and open the box;
3. In it you will find the instructions to protect the ‘Secret of God’s Hand’.

In closing, I’m asking you this. Are you, as head of the Inquisition, willing to do everything in your power to fill this position one hundred percent?”

Without having to think about it, Esteban answered with full conviction: “Yes, Holy Father. So truly help me God Almighty.” “Then go with my blessing, my son. We’ll see each other again after you’ve completed your assignment.”

< 04.03

“CHOSEN ONES”, Alejandro repeated euphorically. Slowly he moved his widely spread arms forward, after which he put his hands together under his chin and bowed forward slightly for a moment. “Chosen Ones. Thank you for coming here so quickly and from all corners of the world.”

He proudly stood tall and looked down on the group. “We are the descendants of the leaders of an ancient and proud people,” he began his speech. “We have a mission. We don’t forget!”

As one man, the 23 Chosen Ones each brought their left fist to their chest, bowed briefly and roared: ‘¡NO NOS OLVIDAMOS!’

As soon as everyone was looking at him again, he continued resoundingly: “While other peoples were only just becoming aware of life,

our society had already developed to great heights. It's time to rebuild it!"

To his delight all heads moved up and down with his words. Less loudly, but no less clearly, he continued. "As we have read in the reference works, it is more than a thousand years since our 'High Ladies' were allowed to expand their soul-capacity and keep it under their own control. This ability, or 'PUENZQUE', made it possible to control everyone's senses and even to take over completely. The purpose of this was to lift our civilization to a higher level within established norms and values. An unforgivable error! This was proven when the weaker sex took control of our leadership in this devious way. Not only were our ancestors relegated to ... 'useful helpers', but they also lost the sacred table."

He looked at the marble beneath his feet for a moment. "What I'm standing on now, unfortunately, is no more than a replica."

He pushed his anger away and straightened his shoulders. "Because of the powerlessness of these supposedly High Ladies, nothing of the original assignment was finished. And why not?"

Imperiously, he glanced over the gathered men. They kept staring in silence and did not flinch. Indignantly he answered his own question. "The answer is crystal clear. Such an order can only be carried out by men. Only we are tough enough to make the necessary decisions. Our ancestors came to the same conclusion, which led to a long struggle to regain their squandered rights. Unfortunately, a double Spanish intervention kept them from victory."

He raised a finger demonstratively. "The first interruption was caused by the Spanish Conquistadors who discovered our country. Weakened by our mutual struggle, these uncivilized bandits enslaved us. Everything they could find, they stole or destroyed. Many of our people were murdered, raped or enslaved. After the Spaniards stole everything and disappeared, there was not much left of our nation. There was no more fighting between ourselves. Every effort had to be used to survive. Later generations laboriously managed to build something of a society, but again a few centuries later this was stopped."

Alejandro raised a second finger. "This time due to the outbreak of Spanish flu. Our people have been almost totally exterminated by it."

Passionately he spread out his arms. “We, gathered here today, are the last pure-bred male descendants! After centuries of living in the shadows, being hunted, ignored and despised, now is the time for us to step forward. Today we are making a start on restoring our position, as it was many centuries ago.”

It wasn't easy for him, but he managed to pull a compassionate face. “Unfortunately, like ourselves, purebred women have been decimated in numbers. And of the few I've been able to track down, not many will still possess the ‘PUENZQUE’.”

By now, there was no longer any compassion. “As the descendant of the supreme male leader, I have made sure that I cannot lose sight of them. Those whom I suspect may be able to use the ‘PUENZQUE’, I have placed under permanent control. And”, he was silent for a moment to increase the effect, “recently I received the message we have been waiting for for so long. The confirmation that at least one Lady has used her ‘PUENZQUE’ to make contact!”

As he expected, his announcement went off like a bomb. Greatly pleased with himself, he watched the restlessly shuffling, astonished looking men for a moment before he again spoke determinedly.

“It is not inconceivable that other surviving female descendants also responded to this contact, which would be very beneficial to us. In addition, I expect to discover the location of the original table soon. At the moment, hired specialists are performing a major operation to bring all surviving female descendants here. During a transition ceremony I will tame the ‘PUENZQUE’ among the women and transform it in such a way that it will be available to us. We will use this soul power to regain our reign. Centuries of research carried out by my ancestors and completed by me have given me the knowledge to bring this about.”

His built up frustration emerged and he clenched his fist in fury. “We will take that table and recover the power from those damn women. And not just to restore our homeland. No! We are the new elite and we claim our birthright. We will conquer the world and adapt it to our values!”

Fanatically he raised his right fist. “We shall rule Mankind 2.0!”

I'm the founder and I'll be the first emperor, he thought.

“Yes, but ...”, someone stammered. “Surely we’re all trained to protect the table for the benefit of our High Ladies?”

He tried to find out who had spoken, but failed. Waverers. Terribly annoying. He’d love to throw people like that out right away.

“That’s how it used to be, yeah. And we have seen what that has brought us,” Alejandro said arrogantly. “From now on, we’ll turn that around. It’s our turn now.”

Right in front of him, the Chosen One who entered the room last opened his mouth. “Yeah. That’s nice and all, but I didn’t give up my movie career for this. I think I’m gonna call it quits. To make them happy, I’ve always accepted my parents’ lessons. For years I bored myself stupid with all kinds of mysterious practices. How many times have I had to listen to all the stories? How one day, under the Lady’s guidance, we would change the world. How we, the Chosen Ones, would create a paradise for everyone. And from you, in your red coat there on your table, I hear exactly the same boast. I’d be crazy to throw away my luxury life, which I’ve built all by myself, for this circus here.”

Alejandro was furious. How dared he? A descendant with the pure blood of a high-born. What a spoiled piece of shit he was. Succumbed to the ephemeral, superficial glamour of Hollywood.

While in front of him the actor continued to babble, his hand slipped behind his back.

“I’ve got plenty of money, a nice car, three houses and a new chick, or two, every night.” The actor grinned and poked his neighbor. “Thanks for the offer, but no. I don’t do this egotripping...” BANG!

From the Luger that Alejandro had conjured up, a 9 mm Parabellum had left the barrel with a thunderous crack. The left eye of the actor instantly turned into a bloody hole, which immediately deprived him of his words. With a thud he collapsed to his death. A second thud followed. The bullet had gone straight through the man’s head, to finish up exactly between the eyes of the man behind him.

Casually, Alejandro put the Luger in the waistband behind his back. “As I said, times have changed and so have the rules.”

He looked coldly at the 21 Chosen Ones still standing. "Are there any others who might have reservations about the new strategy? Then please come forward. Anyone who has a different opinion can say so now."

Quietly shuffling, everyone dodged his challenging gaze. Wonderful, how a simple direct action could have the desired effect, he thought satisfied.

"Nobody?", he asked superfluously. "Beautiful. Then know that you must all take a new blood oath before me. In doing so, you, my Chosen Ones, will swear to devote yourselves entirely to me and the new world order."

To his satisfaction, everyone was now nodding like crazy, to make it clear that they had no objections at all. "All right, then. Listen to me. These are my orders, which you must carry out." He groped under his cloak, pulled out his script and opened it. He began to read the instructions one by one.

< 04.04

Hakon sat on the rowing bench next to the side where his coat of arms was carved. He put the book on his lap. How strange it was, he thought to himself, that this old book had been in the house next door all this time. And that Sven, his childhood friend Sven, had made it a hobby to study it. Who would have ever thought that of the local Don Juan?

On his way from the cave to the kitchen, Sven wanted to know everything about the cave and the *Aegir*. Sven himself had not stopped talking either. About how enthusiastic he had been when Hakon's grandfather told him and his father the family secret. How wonderful he thought it was that Hakon was home again and could experience his grandfather's birthday. How nice it was that Hakon's colleagues had come along as well. Especially the ladies who 'were definitely a sight for sore eyes', according to Sven.

Hakon was almost relieved that they had reached the kitchen and he could put an end to Sven's flow of words. After introducing everyone to Sven, lunch had turned out very differently from breakfast. Because of Sven, who was not a member of GAIAS, the conversations had remained much more general. Hakon had sat down next to him and had explained

to Sven that the others were all involved with UNBI in one way or another. His explanation that they were all equipped with an earpiece that made their mutual communication seem strange, fortunately hadn't led to any questions from Sven. Probably because he couldn't keep his eyes off the ladies, Hakon thought amused. His friend was really incorrigible. Immediately after lunch Sven had said goodbye and promised he would bring the translation by.

"I'll walk with him for a while," his grandfather had said softly. "I want to impress on him that he must keep what he saw a secret. That will also give him the chance to give me the translation right away."

Hardly had the two left when the conversation turned like a leaf in the wind to speculations about the strange energy and his 'visions'. Luckily, grandma had remained her calm self. "When everyone has finished eating, we'd better clean up before the whole afternoon is over," she had suggested.

While everyone helped to clean up and with Lémarc promoted from washer to dryer, Hakon decided to seek the silence of the cave. He wanted to get away from the questions, ideas and opinions. He wanted to go through Sven's book in peace and quiet, so Sandra could scan it. What she would discover from it interested him the most.

Followed closely by watchdog Holger, who remained less than three feet away from him, he had entered the cave again and had searched for 'his' rowing bench. A gust of wind that he felt moving across his face shook him out of his thoughts. He looked sideways, straight into Holger's worried face. His breath stroked across Hakon's cheek.

"Ah, you're back," said Holger. "You were staring in silence. Did you have another one of those visions? Are you all right?" He quickly assured him that nothing was wrong and that, apart from his own thoughts, he had had no contact with anything. He proposed they have a look at the book together.

He opened it carefully. Although the book was centuries old, it was in good condition. The parchment was solid and the text and images seemed almost like new.

After about half an hour he had a good idea of the impressive voyage this ship had made and the hardships the crew had had to endure. Holger and he had taken a close look at the runic characters and the generous number of drawings in the book. Although the writing was unknown to him, because of the added illustrations and more common signs he was able to get a good idea of the voyage. Compared to the wall the book contained more detailed drawings and he found the last pages especially interesting. But before drawing any wrong conclusions, he decided to wait for Sandra's findings.

He was just closing the book when he thought he felt something abnormal. He changed his mind, opened it again and looked at the last page, on which there were far fewer characters. At the bottom left was a single line, perhaps the author's name, and something he thought he could decipher as a year.

He flipped the page, and yes, it looked as if this last one was thicker than the others. He asked Holger to help him and a moment later he held the page in such a way that the light of the lamp on the prow fell exactly on it. Very vaguely he seemed to distinguish the contours of something smaller.

"It looks like two pages are glued together." "And as if there's something in between," Holger agreed. "Yeah, it looks that way," Hakon muttered as he took out his Swiss army knife. He slid the file out and with Holger's help he managed to split the pages apart without damaging the parchment.

What they had suspected turned out to be true. A loose piece of parchment was hidden between the two pages. Carefully he managed to wriggle it out. He showed it to Holger. It was full of drawings. He immediately recognized the one with the table with the thrones attached to it.

"That represents that table in the cabin," said Holger, pointing a finger at it. "And that there," his finger slid sideways, "looks like an ornament or something."

Hakon agreed with him. "I think this is a schematic or a manual. Sandra must have scanned it by now and will come up with the answers." He put the loose sheet in the back, closed the book and stood up.

“Gee, Hakon, the mysteries keep piling up today,” Holger began. “Never knew my new job would be so challenging and interesting. Now that I know what GAIAS is all about, the possibilities that you, uh... we all have and after today’s discoveries, my old job suddenly seems very boring. Now that I’m with you and your group, it looks like my job will be one big adventure.” Holger’s eyes sparkled at the prospect.

“Be careful what you wish for,” Hakon warned him. “I think what we’ve discovered now is just the tip of the iceberg. I just have a feeling we’re gonna go through a lot more.” Without knowing it, he hit the nail on the head.

< 04.05

On the one hand she was glad that the van had stopped, but at the same time the fear immediately reared its head again. What was going to happen now and what were they going to do with them? Since their kidnapping, Granny had been lying on the loading floor of a van together with Kiniawe, gagged and with a dirty, smelly jute bag over her head.

Immediately she had tried to free her hands, but the plastic ties around her wrists turned out to be indestructible. The two of them were lying back to back. Behind her back Granny had touched Kiniawe’s hands and felt that she too was tied up exactly like herself. While holding each other’s hands as tightly as possible, she had regularly given Kiniawe an encouraging squeeze.

Not long after they had driven away at full speed, they must have left the main roads, because a bit later they drove on roads that didn’t really deserve the predicate ‘road’. The whole left side of her body soon felt painful from the many jolts and bumps and the jumble onto which they had been thrown. She had tried to distance herself from it as much as possible, but the tickle in her hand that had started all over again had disturbed her too much. From the very beginning of the ride to the airport, she had known from the increasing tickle that she was getting closer and closer to Nakawe. It was the same irritating feeling as back then, when her daughter had had a traffic accident thirty years ago and had disappeared without a trace. Then, too, her hand had itched maddeningly

and this was accompanied by an inexplicable vision. The search for her daughter had come to nothing and the fear of losing Nakawe, too, haunted her every day.

Her grandmother, who was still alive at the time, had told her not to dig any further and had alerted her to the danger that threatened them every day. A secret group of people who had existed since ancient times thought they had to settle a score. These people lurked incessantly. Her grandmother had finally managed to convince her, and with pain in her heart she had ended her search. Within a few days the tickle had also stopped. Since then she had never felt it again, until the day before yesterday, when it suddenly resurfaced for a few minutes. This morning it had started all over again and in the van it had become more and more intense. She remembered the moment in the airport parking lot and knew that Nakawe had also been caught. She felt it through her hand. She had to be in the vicinity.

The worst part was that the only one who might be able to do anything knew nothing. She deeply regretted that she had not shared the information with Kiniawe earlier, so that she could make contact, hoping that the message would get through. It could be that Kiniawe's natural instincts would help them, but she didn't really believe that. Yet she had tried. It was their only chance.

She had squeezed Kiniawe's hands and whispered to draw her attention, asking her to trust her. Then she had urged her to think with all her might of the blond man from yesterday's dream. To pretend she was calling him, but only in her head. As if she was throwing a line to him while thinking intensely of him at the same time.

Granny hadn't been able to tell her any more, because the van had suddenly slowed down sharply, so they both shot to the front and ended up with their heads against the partition. From Granny's crown to her heels a fierce stabbing of pain flashed through her body, to nestle throbbing in her bruised side.

As she anxiously wondered what would happen next, the sliding door was thrown open, creaking and squeaking. Hands grabbed her, dragged her out and set her on her feet. The stinking jute bag was pulled from her

head and warm, moist air hit her face. They had to be in the middle of the jungle.

As her eyes adapted to the light, she was able to distinguish more and more of her surroundings. The van stood on the side of a cart track and a little further on a second one was parked. Sadly she concluded that she had been right. They had picked up Nakawe from the airport in this one.

Relieved that at least they were still alive, she saw her granddaughter and Kiniawe standing next to the van. She nodded at both of them encouragingly. Kiniawe shouted: "Oh, Granny! Are you alright? I'm..."

A firm slap in the face interrupted her abruptly. Kiniawe's head swung to the side. The street scoundrel who had hit her so unexpectedly, stood there filled with malicious pleasure. She had to watch helplessly, as the other four scoundrels kept an uninterrupted eye on both her and Nakawe. The leader of the group, a young man in his thirties, rushed towards the boy and gave him a hefty kick in the ass. "Dickface! Didn't I tell you to deliver her unharmed? Stupid son of a bitch! I'll fucking..."

The curse disappeared in the boy's scream as Kiniawe gave him a hard kick in the crotch. She immediately leapt up and kicked the captain to the ground with both feet. Nakawe saw her chance and, despite her cuffed hands, also managed to get two rascals to the ground. Granny herself did not get a chance to help them. She was roughly forced on her knees by the two guarding her. One stood guard over her, while the other threw himself on the brawling mass.

She feared the worst and was forced to watch as her two girls stubbornly resisted. Not without pride she saw how Kiniawe's foot shot out again and contacted the captain's nose. The kick had been on target, because blood was spurting out. Loudly cursing he stood up, grabbed the kids by their necks and threw them aside. Nakawe tried to attack him, but he grabbed her by her hair and forced her into an impossible position. In the meantime Kiniawe launched herself at him like a rocket. In vain. He thrust his clenched fist forward and punched her hard in her belly. With sad eyes Granny had to watch as her brave foster child groaned and collapsed.

The captain, who still held Nakawe firmly by the hair, pulled out a gun and shot twice in the air. The two sharp bangs silenced the jungle for a

moment, after which the sounds gradually returned to full volume.

He let go of Nakawe. "And now that mess is over with. You stay calm now, or I'll shoot that old hag in her grey face. Understood, cuntface? Right now!"

Threateningly, he held the gun under her nose. "If one of you two makes one more unexpected move or opens her mouth..." She didn't hear the rest, because two huge all-terrain vehicles were coming towards them. They came to a standstill behind the van, after which the doors opened and seven men got out.

She recognized them immediately. Not only because of the red and blue tattooed sign on their hands and the clothes they were wearing. All were dressed identically: black jackets with a grey shirt underneath and dark grey trousers. On the breast of their coats she saw an emblem. The double 'V'-sign shone jet-black against the silver background.

The symbol of 'their enemy', the Order of the Chosen Ones. "The guards of the descendants of the former rulers, who lurked continuously from their downfall until the present day," her grandmother had said. When you fell into their hands, you were hopelessly lost. But what frightened her the most were their faces, with their inhumanly chilly murderer's eyes. The fear she had felt until now was nothing compared to the panic that gripped her throat as she watched the 'hellhounds' come at them in the flesh.

In spite of her own despair, however, she felt sorry for her kidnappers, who, she knew, did not have long to live. "What were your orders? Deliver them undamaged," said one of the hellhounds. He pointed to Kiniawe. "That one doesn't really look undamaged, does she?" The young man shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. "Oh, man, don't whine like that. She's all right. Let's just get on with the dough so we can put an end to it."

That wish would soon be fulfilled, she thought despondently. He had not seen what was happening behind him at the same time. Five hellhounds had walked towards the group of scoundrels, each pulling a machete from under their coat. Without saying a word, five heads were chopped off from five torsos at the same time with one simple hack. Like bowling balls they bounced over the cart track, to lie between the ferns like

strange fruits. The captain's head fell in front of his own feet shortly afterwards, rolled on a bit and stopped exactly in front of the kneeling Kiniawe. The dead eyes stared straight up, the right eye blinking like a warning light from the last impulses of the nervous system.

Desperate because she could not help her, she saw Kiniawe staring at it in horror. She heard her horrified moan of denial "No...", before her eyes rolled upwards. Kiniawe slowly sagged sideways as she lost consciousness for the second time in two days.

< 04.06

Since he didn't feel like going back to the kitchen yet, he had suggested to Holger to take another tour of the cave, now that they had looked at Sven's book. Together they strolled around the ship. They admired the craftsmanship of his ancestors and tried to imagine what life on the *Aegir* must have been like. Spending months at sea, exposed to storms, high waves, torrential rains, sunshine, heat, days of windlessness, and all the other hardships one had to face. Both admitted they wouldn't want to live on little more than a rowing bench for such a long time under all these circumstances.

Impressed by the go-getters of that time, they had tried different swords and axes. Those boys had known their craft. Even Holger had to admit that these were clumsy and heavy weapons. Glad that he was able to do his job with a gun and a baton, he had put the equipment back in its place.

Flanked by him, Hakon had reached the mural. He took another close look at the scene with the table. If I didn't know any better, I would swear that Nakawe and I are sitting there, he thought to himself. He stared closely at the scene. The table and two thrones stood in a gazebo overgrown with green plants and colorful flowers. The whole scene was painted in great detail. Almost like a photograph. A miniature of a family portrait.

He leaned forward so far that he almost bumped his nose on it. There was even a crib with a baby in it. With wide open eyes it smiled at him. Hey, that was striking. No, it wasn't his imagination. The baby had

different colored eyes. A blue eye on the left and a brown eye on the right.

“Hey, Holger. Come take a look.” He pointed out the crib. “Is it me, or did my grandfather not mention a child at all? Did I miss something?” “I don’t remember Torstein saying anything about a baby.” His friend bent down and looked at it attentively. “Wow, Hakon. That little one has eyes just like that famous English rock star. He also has two different colored eyes. That’s pretty special. Maybe Saundra could say a little more about it?”

As soon as her name was mentioned, they both heard her react. “You guys are right. Torstein didn’t say anything about this. It’s likely that this is a child of the couple in the picture. Unfortunately, I haven’t been able to find any information about it. Nakawe’s been placed under SEC1 and I’m mapping her entire social life.”

There was silence for a few seconds before she continued. “All I can report at this time is that another woman has turned up. Her name is Kiniawe. She’s registered at the same address as Nakawe and her grandmother. I have gone through the documents of the municipality and on the copy of her passport application she has indicated that her left eye is blue and the right one is brown. This anomaly is always hereditary and is called heterochromia. At the moment the chance that she is related to that child is 13%. Whether she is related to Nakawe or her grandmother cannot be determined. Unfortunately, the civil administration in Mexico is not as extensively digitized as here in Europe. For a successful archaeologist like Nakawe, there is very little data about her. I know she has a smartphone, but I haven’t been able to trace it, so I can’t contact her yet.”

Hakon and Holger thanked her and walked back to the Aegir with the intention of going back to the others. They didn’t have to because before they reached the bow, everyone entered the cave, led by Hakon’s grandfather. “Hakon! I’ve got it!”, his grandfather shouted from afar. He waved a leather binder. “The translation!”

“Ha, great, Grandpa,” he greeted him. “Now the collection is complete. But before Saundra scans it and checks if there’s any difference between it and the original, I’d like to ask you something first.” He took him to the mural and pointed to the scene. The group came to stand around them

and he continued: "I understood that just about every bit of this painting has a meaning. Do you know anything about this baby?"

His grandfather put his hand on Hakon's arm and confessed: "I'm sorry, grandson. I don't know anything about it. Your father couldn't find any answers either."

Torstein's face brightened. "Maybe there's something about that in the book?" he said hopefully. "I can tell you more about that now," the response sounded promptly in everyone's ear. "I've translated the runic characters and am in the process of comparing the text with the mural and all the objects in the hall. The text corresponds to the drawn images. A small section was about the baby, stating that this child was the reason to leave Yucatán. According to the book they sailed back without a baby or toddler. Unfortunately, that is all that was written about the matter. The baby apparently stayed in Mexico, from which I conclude that Kiniawe could be a descendant, given her eyes."

"Wait a minute, Sandra," Barbara said quickly. "Who is this Kiniawe you're talking about?"

Hakon briefly explained to the others what Sandra had told him before. "In short," Sandra took over again, "Nakawe and Kiniawe are two important people about whom we need to find more information. Since I haven't been able to find much about these two digitally, this means that deeper research must be done on location."

His grandmother gave him a disappointed look. "Does that mean what I think it means?" Hakon nodded. "Yes, Grandma. I have to leave early. And I feel like I shouldn't wait too long." Tacitly asking for understanding, he looked at her. "I can't explain it, Grandma. Just as I feel so strongly that my father, your Erik, is still alive, I also feel that time is running out. But," he smiled cheerfully, "don't worry. Tonight we celebrate Grandpa's birthday first. Besides, a trip like this needs to be well prepared and I can start with that tomorrow. You'll be stuck with us for now, Grandma."

He turned around. "What do you think, Alasdair? What's your opinion?" He looked around the entire group. "And you? What do you think?"

Holger had followed him like a shadow at every move. "You won't get rid of me for a while, pal. I want to know exactly what's wrong with you first. As long as you're having these seizures, I'll stay with you."

Russ was laughing. "Well, Hakon. That's a true German shepherd for you. How did you manage to get that one?" "Watch out, kid," Holger warned promptly. "Dogs can bite viciously. And German shepherds are the worst. They won't let go that easy."

"Well," Barbara joined the conversation, "I have a colleague and he's got one of those little terriers and..."

Before anyone else got involved, Lord MacMarkland intervened. "I think we'd better save this conversation for tonight. As Hakon said, time is running out. To come back to your question, Hakon ... I agree with you. You'll have to travel. We've already talked about it in the kitchen and we think you could use all the help you can get. GAIAS is behind you. We need a good scenario and tasks to be divided. How about that, Sandra?"

The answer came immediately. "Well, milord, it is imperative that Nakawe be traced as soon as possible. Unfortunately, since her arrival no new information has become available. I suspect she has a smartphone from work, but I haven't been able to reach anyone in Yucatán yet. Maybe it's still too early there or the working day starts later. In any case, no mobile phone is registered in her own name. I did manage to trace Kiniawe's, after Nakawe called her from a phone booth at the airport."

"Oh, but I've got a phone number for you", Joost's voice suddenly sounded all the way from Amsterdam. "Huh," Marilyn said bewildered. "Where did you get that?" "It wasn't very complicated, you know. A postcard for Hakon was delivered with the morning mail. On the back is a thank-you note from Nakawe, with her phone number underneath."

Through their WORM everyone saw what Joost meant when he held the map in front of his eyes. "What beautiful handwriting she has. I'm just jealous of it," Barbara couldn't help saying.

Hakon thanked Joost. "Sandra knows how to handle this. It won't be long before she will ..."

All of a sudden he fell silent and went stiff. His head shot uncontrollably to the side, fell forward and came up again. Suddenly he made a kicking movement and jumped up with his knees bent. He would have fallen if Holger hadn't rushed towards him and firmly held him upright.

“Hold him tight, Holger,” Sandra warned. “Make sure he stays standing. I’ll tell you when to let go.”

They automatically made the circle a bit bigger, which was a good thing, because suddenly Hakon kicked a leg in the air as if he was kicking away a football. “Hold on, Holger,” they heard again. “It looks like he’s in pain, but his body doesn’t register that. It’s the experience of whoever pinged him.”

Anxious and tense, they watched Hakon behave like he was tripping and experiencing something bad.

“Sandra?”, Marit asked, worried. “Is he really okay? It’s making me nervous.” Sandra calmly replied that she had to imagine that her grandson was trapped in a 3D film, a simulation. That Hakon was experiencing all the emotions in his head, but that they had no physical influence. “As if he was sleepwalking, as it were,” she reassured everyone. “Catch him, Holger!” Sandra ordered as Hakon groaned “No...” and collapsed.

< 04.07

After having read all the commands to his Chosen Ones, it was time for the dedication ceremony. He told them to follow him and like a schoolmaster who preceded his class, Alejandro marched in front of them in the direction of ‘Hell’. At least, that’s what the room under the pyramid was called. It was only accessible via a spiral staircase in the pyramid itself. The deeply hidden space had been given this name during the Spanish rule because three sixes in gold were placed above its entrance. He did not know why his ancestors had done this, but because of this ‘devil’s number’ he thought the name was very appropriate. Many Spanish Catholics and other enemies had walked the path to their personal hell here. Because many of the writings had been preserved and passed down to posterity over the centuries, he knew all about the torture that had taken place here. Everything that had happened here had been described in flowery language as heroic deeds. Everything that had been left to him, he had studied in detail. In his opinion, there was no better place for his Chosen Ones to take the new blood oath.

Excitedly he walked down the steps. After a steep descent he and his retinue arrived downstairs, after which he immediately strode on so fast that the red cloak fluttered behind him like a flag. The long, wide corridor that he walked ahead of the group had a series of cells on either side, all but one of which were empty. As he marched between them, he thought of the new guests who would soon arrive here. The cells wouldn't be empty for long.

His good mood increased even more when he smelled the slight stench of old blood, urine and feces. The characteristic odor was barely perceptible, but he could still smell it. Somehow it felt familiar, and while he thought of the enemies who had screamed out their anguish here, he brought his Chosen Ones to the end of the corridor.

On the left was the charnel house and on the right the torture chamber, which he had recently begun to call the 'Motivation Room'. Here he stopped the group of men and ordered them to wait.

Without paying any more attention to his retinue, he walked a little further, then stood still. The heat hit him in the face and he looked around, satisfied. One of the members of his personal guard was keeping the fire going and prodded the blood-red coals as he entered. The carved out, round room had a diameter of over a hundred feet and the slightly curved walls ended high at the top in a blunt point, which made the whole thing look like an enormous egg. He had quickly renamed the space 'Devil's Egg'.

Alejandro was very pleased with what he saw. The curved walls were teeming with small pieces of gold ore that sparkled in the orange-red glow of the fire. The sinister atmosphere was further accentuated by regularly placed uprights in which thick candles burned and by thick iron chains riveted to the walls with the firmly-welded manacles and shackles. Here the prisoners had been secured, so that they had had a good view of the ten foot wide hole into which they would disappear. The 'Hell Hole', once an entrance to a gold mine that had long since ceased to be used, turned out to be an extremely practical waste pit, which he himself had used before. The skeleton that still hung in chains on the other side of the 'Hell Hole', he had deliberately left hanging.

In one of the cells he had found an old Spanish helmet and he had put it on the skull, for he would not forget. *‘¡No nos olvidamos!’*

Today his plan had come into effect and soon no one would forget anymore. With this great prospect, he turned around and ordered the Chosen Ones to join him. “Leave those two bodies,” he said casually. Then he ordered the first ten to stand next to each other in a row to his left. He directed the remaining eleven to his right. It gave him great pleasure to see how the men carried out his orders.

Waiting for each to find his place, he admired the effect the light had on everything here. The silver pattern on the moving blue cloaks changed in the orange-red glow into countless brilliant red rubies, which reflected in the men’s eyes like little devilish flames. Appropriate for the tasks they had to perform.

As soon as both groups had formed according to his wishes, he spoke to them again. “Chosen Ones!”, he started, gesticulating jauntily around him. “Welcome to the Devil’s Egg. This is the end of ‘Hell’, where many an enemy has faced death. A fate that anyone who opposes us can expect. The hole you see here is the ‘Hell Hole’ where all the trash disappears.”

He ordered the four closest to him to pick up the corpses. Then he pointed to the depths. “Come on. Into the hole with those,” he ordered casually. He looked at his watch and counted the seconds until a double dull thump could be heard from the depths. Expressively he told them that given the estimated body weight and the seconds counted, the shaft had to be over 300 yards deep. He now put the mighty sinister appearance that he had practiced in front of the mirror earlier that day into practice. He turned away from the hole, drew himself up to his full height and briefly fixed each man with a narrow stare. “So make sure I don’t have to throw anyone else in.”

For a moment, a phony sneer appeared around his full lips. “The fall isn’t bad, but the landing is, right?”

It did him good to see that he had impressed all 21 of them. The things a bit of decisiveness could do...

As if it were the most ordinary thing in the world, he pointed to the man who was taking care of the fire. “That person over there belongs to my

personal guard. This unit is made up of men trained and educated from an early age to serve me, my descendants and my faithful. They do not belong to the elite and are therefore not Chosen Ones.”

He beckoned the man to him, grabbed his left hand and showed them the back of it. The burnt blue and red ‘V’, the fiery point of which pointed to the wrist, was clearly visible. “This mark, not for nothing in red and blue, indicates that this man serves us and will protect us with his life. You, on the other hand, will receive a sign of fidelity on your right hand. Not a single ‘V’, but a double in black, identical to the symbol on our coat buckles.”

With a slight movement of the head he informed the servant that he was allowed to return to his work. “In addition, we need to increase our number. In order to reach that goal as quickly as possible, I took the liberty of having the necessary capable young women selected. It’s not without reason that you are all still without a partner. That will soon be a thing of the past. A new one will be available for each day.”

The prospect pleased some of them, he saw. “But before that, the blood oath must be taken and the symbol applied.”

Alejandro gave his servant a sign. The man immediately turned around and took a golden sacrificial knife from the wall. Then he grabbed the pot in which the iron was burning, handed the handle to his master and quietly walked to the first Chosen One of the left row. Wordlessly he took his right hand, held it firmly, and skillfully cut the double ‘V’ symbol from the wrist via the outside to the beginning of the thumb. The cuts were not very deep and there was only a thin line of blood on them. Skillfully the servant immediately smeared a black substance on it, after which he walked straight to the next Chosen One.

As soon as his servant had applied the black paste, Alejandro took the incised hand in his, made the owner swear allegiance, and burned the cuts with the glowing hot iron. Having treated all the Chosen Ones in this fashion, he had to hand it to them. Apart from a few fiercely restrained groans, none of them showed that it hurt damn much.

It turned out to be quite a monotonous job, which he was soon comparing with conveyor belt work. But eventually it was done.

He returned the firing-pot to his servant and took up his previous position again. Proudly he raised his arm with a clenched fist and as a true captain he shouted out loud: *“Viva la Victoria! ¡No nos olvidamos!”*

As one man the Chosen Ones brought their left fist to the chest, bowed briefly and repeated the cry. It had to be this egg-shaped room, Alejandro thought, which caused their voices to sound quieter than earlier this morning in the pyramid.

< 04.08

Even with just one functional arm, it hadn't taken Holger much effort to catch Hakon's limp body. Carefully he had laid him on the ground, but unlike the first time, this time Hakon gave no clear sign of life.

“Is he ...” Marilyn began, concerned. “He's unconscious,” Sandra replied, “but nothing else seems to be wrong.” “Seems, seems?”, Marit stammered, unsure. “What if he doesn't recover? Then I really don't know...”

“Hush, Grandma,” came the reassuring voice from the floor. “I'm back and nothing's wrong.”

Torstein sighed with relief. “Gee, how you frightened us, my boy.”

With the help of Holger's outstretched hand, Hakon stood up. Quietly, so that no one else could hear, he asked Sandra via the WORM to find a solution to this situation. He couldn't lose control of his body all the time and didn't want his grandparents to worry about him either.

Meanwhile, curious questions were fired at him from all directions. Again it was the lord who called on everyone to calm down. “Dear people. Give him a moment to come to himself.” Alasdair turned to Hakon. “If possible, we'd like to hear what you've seen, but don't be rushed. After all, we don't have a train to catch, do we?”

It was well-intentioned, Hakon thought, but he didn't need time to think. He remembered everything very clearly. However, he was curious how his body had reacted. Not too embarrassingly, he hoped.

“Saundra? Can you show me how I reacted? Maybe I can give you a better explanation.” “Sure thing, Hakon.”

Almost immediately he saw himself. What a strange sensation to see yourself, he thought. Especially since he hadn’t been aware of it at all. Strange, that he was somewhere else in his mind and could remember everything that was happening there very clearly. He didn’t have to doubt for a moment and began his account.

“Now I’m sure that I am not being pinged by Nakawe, as Saundra calls this phenomenon. I looked through another woman’s eyes and experienced everything she went through. Sight, smell, hearing, the fear and the pain.”

“Are you sure? How do you know that?” Tony wanted to know. “She, or I, saw her/my legs and they were absolutely female. I was standing next to Nakawe on the side of a road in the jungle.

A little further on I saw Granny standing among a bunch of ragged children.”

“That older woman with the grey hair,” Lémarc concluded. Hakon nodded. “Yes. I was with Kiniawe, and in the company of Nakawe and their Granny. All three were abducted and taken to a meeting point in the jungle to be handed over to the principal.”

“But you don’t know where exactly?”, Alasdair asked. “No, I’m afraid not. I was under the strong impression that Kiniawe had no idea where she was. All she knew was that they’d been picked up by a group of street urchins led by an older boy. She doesn’t know why.”

“Judging by your movements, she must have resisted,” Arda said. “What did she do, Hakon?”

He sighed and related how Kiniawe had attacked the captain and how furiously Nakawe had assisted her. Arda chuckled. “A pair of ladies I love.” “Yes, indeed. Two feisty ones,” he agreed, adding that unfortunately it hadn’t helped that much. The captain had pulled the fighting bunch apart and violently forced both women to surrender.

“Still, it showed a strong bit of feminine power,” Arda couldn’t help noticing. “Especially when your hands are tied behind your back.”

Tony was impressed, too. "That certainly takes courage," he seriously agreed. "But how did it go, Hakon?"

Shivering at the memory he told them about the all-terrain vehicles that had arrived and the men that had come out. However, he had not seen much, because Kiniawe had doubled over from the pain. She had, however, picked up swaying noises, after which the head of the captain had rolled in. Blinking frightfully, it had been staring at her until everything turned black before her eyes. I felt her sinking, and then I woke up here on the ground."

"Gee, how intense, Hakon," Marilyn said compassionately. "But now that I hear this and compare it to your previous experience, it seems you are pinged as soon as Kiniawe experiences fear or pain. That's why you're not stuck with her all the time."

"Indeed," Sandra added. "Hakon's bioprofile was identical to the previous one. No physical discomfort, except he's helpless. Unfortunately, despite the picobots' many abilities, I can't change that."

A nice prospect, Hakon thought, disappointed. Definitely not funny to lose control of myself wherever I am. If Sandra can't find a solution, what will happen next? How the hell am I supposed to get rid of this? And then there are those women. There must be something we can do about that, right?

"Well, you heard it," he said laconically. "My problem can't be solved yet. In the meantime, let's think of something to help those three women. They must be in great danger if their kidnappers have no qualms about killing a number of people off the cuff. Kiniawe and now also ourselves, don't know what's going on, but there must be great interests at stake."

His grandparents had been whispering with each other for a while and now came to stand beside him. As one, and complementing each other again and again, they told him that they had decided not to let the birthday party go ahead. They didn't feel comfortable celebrating while they knew those ladies were in distress. Better to do something to free the three women.

The others had overheard the conversation and let it be known that they were in complete agreement. "All right," said Hakon. "Let's go to the

kitchen so we can brainstorm about it. Sandra will then be able to process everything we bring into a scenario.”

As they all walked back through the garage, his grandfather stopped him for a moment. “You make sure you get home in one piece, you hear? If you can get those women out of there safely, feel free to bring them here with you. We’ve got a party to catch up on, and I don’t want to let my 80th birthday pass unnoticed.”

Holger, who, of course, hadn’t moved a foot from his side, chuckled. “Hakon ... bachelor ... Nakawe ... gorgeous ...” He looked at him comprehendingly and nodded wisely. “You don’t have to say anything more. I understand completely.” Laughing, they went after the others.

< 04.09

The little robot’s mouth quickly turned into a swirling black hole and from the depths of it he heard Rock’s voice growing louder and louder.

“Wake up, Mirnat! Professor!”

Bathed in sweat, his eyes flew open. Confused, he stared into Rock’s bearded face and realized he was lying on an observation chair in the cockpit. Above his head he saw that the eleven clouds of gas in their ‘V’-formation were enormously enlarged on the screen.

Rock said something to him, but it escaped him completely. He kept staring up. The constellation gave off light! How could it? Did the magnification have something to do with that? He wanted to know more about it.

Rock shook his arm again and looked at him, worried. “Oskar! Everything okay? It looked like you were having a nightmare. Anyway, how could you have fallen asleep with the greatest discovery in front of your eyes?” Rock pointed to the big screen on the ceiling.

Wide awake, he sat up straight. He blinked the sleep out of his eyes and apologized.

“I’m sorry, Rock. After I called that monk, I wanted to study those gas clouds again in detail. But I haven’t slept for two nights, had a run-in with

my daughter and didn't eat much. I just fell asleep."

He remembered his weird dream and laughed. "I had a weird dream. I can't even believe it." Impatient, Rock silenced him. "We don't have time to elaborate about that, Oskar. What's happened in the meantime is a lot more important. I already thought you needed your sleep and I left you undisturbed for as long as I could. But now we must first discuss further progress. Climb down and come with me." As they walked back together, Rock pointed to the desk. "Here. Sit down and take this. I brought us sandwiches, a cup of coffee and a banana. With them you can regain your strength, because you're gonna need it. While you were napping, I bought some supplies. Just to be on the safe side, I've also brought down the survival kits so we don't have to leave the cockpit for the time being. We are now prepared for any unforeseen circumstances. Listen ..."

< 04.10

The severed, young heads had not even come to a halt when she and Nakawe were roughly grabbed. Mercilessly they were both taken to the last off-road vehicle, where they were shoved onto the back seat and their cuffs were cut. The black coats heavy-handedly slammed the doors shut, after which she heard them lock. Left alone, Granny pulled her granddaughter close. She looked into Nakawe's pale, sweaty face, saw her staring, frightened eyes and felt her trembling so violently that it vibrated through her own body. She made sure that Nakawe could bury her head in her shoulder, thus averting her sight from the gruesome images that could be seen through the rear window.

Kiniawe was hoisted between two black coats and dangling there, she was escorted to the all-terrain vehicle in front of them. She was thrown on the back seat like a sandbag. The men locked the car and joined their companions. The black coats didn't waste any time, she saw. They went swiftly from one dead body to another and cut off their hands and feet. Two others collected them and carelessly threw them into a large bag. Without a shred of compassion the remains were thrown into the jungle. Two others searched the cart track and collected the heads that had rolled away. As a former surgeon in Mexico City she was used to dealing

with violence, blood and death on a daily basis, but something like this? Such atrocities? She couldn't even find words for it. Knowing the stories about the Chosen Ones, she knew they'd go through some shocking things. She was deeply convinced of that.

Knowing what to expect, she resolutely took Nakawe's face between her hands. Her granddaughter showed all the symptoms of someone who had been through a traumatic experience, which was not at all strange after all the insane events. However, there was no time to spare her. She had to bring Nakawe to her senses as soon as possible.

Resolutely she grabbed her cheeks between her thumb and forefinger and started to squeeze slowly. She increased the pace and intensity until she noticed that the trembling stopped, her agitated breathing became calmer and her wide-open eyes returned to their normal proportions. Now!

Quickly, she let go of her granddaughter's face and smacked her hard on the cheeks. Nakawe instantly pulled her head away. "Granny, what are you doing?", she cried out in terror.

"Nakawe," she whispered penetratingly. "Listen carefully. There was no other way to bring you to your senses. Don't ask questions now. Just answer. Two days ago, something happened that I think you were involved in. Since then, your hand itches. Is that right? And what exactly have you experienced?"

Nakawe rubbed her right hand and nodded. "Yes, Granny. It tickles all the time. But why does..." "Nakawe!" She grabbed her granddaughter firmly by both arms. "Trust me and only answer! I need to know before the black coats come back!"

Nakawe looked at her strangely, but fortunately did what she wanted right away. "Yes, Granny. Ever since I discovered those hieroglyphics, my hand itches. The worst was when I plunged down those stairs."

Down the stairs? What was she talking about?

"Tell me everything and leave nothing out," Granny ordered her.

"I was still in Holland, at the Peace Palace. I walked up the stairs there and bumped into a man. Together we fell down. Then he grabbed my hand." "Which one?", she interrupted her granddaughter.

“My right one. Something weird happened right away. A shiver passed through my body. It felt like every nerve was contracting and in the back of my head I felt the same tickle as I now feel in my hand. At the same time all kinds of images flashed through my head. I frequently saw a blond man. Always the same man, but each time his age was different. And a ship with a red sail, a round table with benches and ... I don't know ... Kiniawe had to be there too. I didn't see her, but I could smell her. You know, that unusual spice mix she uses against mosquitoes. I smelled that. Unmistakable. When that man let go of my hand, that weird moment was over right away. But before I became unconscious, and I realize it now, something struck me. The man who protected me during the fall looked exactly like the one I saw in those images. Very strange. I can't get him out of my mind.”

Oh dear, thought Granny. How is it possible? The “PUENZQUE” had to have been activated.

Without giving Nakawe time to deviate, she asked her about the table she had seen in that vision. “Another strange coincidence, Granny. I saw the same table in Egypt. In the same pyramid where I discovered the hieroglyphics. You were always right, Granny. That table appears to have been essential to the communication between the peoples who built the pyramids. But how that worked, I don't know.”

Oh no, she hadn't set the ‘PUENZQUE’ in motion herself with all the stories she had told her granddaughter, had she? How could she have met an opposite in the first place? Nothing had been heard for centuries and it had been assumed that those men had not survived the journey. No sign of life had ever been observed again ...

Out of the corner of her eye she saw that the black coats were ready and splitting up. Two of them walked to the vehicle in which she and Nakawe were sitting. “That man,” she quickly asked, “do you know who that was?” Her granddaughter nodded convincingly. “One Hakon Eriksson. A big shot at the UN. He was gone before I could thank him.”

The men who got in interrupted her. “Well, ladies,” began the co-driver, who had turned around and taken them in from head to toe. “Things have been cleaned up and we're taking you to the boss now. No shenanigans on the way. You've seen what happens to troublemakers.” The driver

opened the throttle and with tyres skidding they shot forward. “Nakawe,” Granny whispered to her granddaughter. “Whatever happens next, let me do the talking. Pretend you’re stupid and don’t say anything about this Hakon, or else... Ouch!”

The co-driver had hit her viciously on her arm with the flat side of his machete. With eyes tearing from the pain she rubbed the red spot. “What did I just say? Just sit tight and shut up, you old hag.”

< 04.11

While they had all walked through the garage to the kitchen, Sandra had informed the group of the information SPY had sent her from the CSA in Florida. “The times when that cluster of stars changed light intensity correspond exactly to the beginning and end times of Hakon’s extrasensory experiences. The connection between him, Kiniawe and these stars is undeniable. Who or what is the catalyst remains uncertain for now. How the Roman Catholic Security Service is involved is also not yet clear. I will continue my search in the background, putting together a suitable scenario to help the three women.”

Sandra remained silent for some minutes, which could not exactly be said of the people sitting at the big table. The kitchen seemed to have turned into a chicken coop, Hakon thought. He couldn’t suppress a sigh of relief when Sandra’s voice came back five minutes later. By modestly clearing her throat, she asked for everyone’s attention.

The conversations fell silent and Sandra continued: “Based on what is now known, the scenario should be split into two parts. The first part serves to get a quick view and grip on the events in Mexico. Given the limited digitization of the research area, I propose to launch EWACS7 (*Eagle Warning And Control System*). It will be able to fly over Yucatán within fifteen minutes and then map out the situation in detail.”

Alasdair looked at Hakon and Marilyn. Both nodded in agreement. “All right, Sandra. Carry out the first part, but warn us as soon as GAIAS’ established core values are in danger of being compromised.” “Excellent, milord. EWACS7 is now launched.”

At the same time both Holger's and Russ's voices were heard, wondering out loud what it was all about. Sandra's pleasant voice came through immediately. "I'll show everyone. The EWACS7 is now on Sat7. The images will appear immediately. Brace yourselves."

A satellite appeared on everyone's retina, from which an eagle launched itself, gaining speed and dropping to earth. The perspective changed immediately when the images came through via the bird. Stars shot past in long blood-red and orange-yellow marbled stripes. As the bird drilled right through the clouds, everyone got the feeling that they themselves were rushing towards the earth at an insane speed.

The performance ended just as suddenly as it had begun. Hakon, who remembered his own first time, couldn't help but grin when he saw the newcomers. Sitting stiffly upright, they clung desperately to their chairs. Holger was the first to recover.

"Wow! What a thrill! I want to see that again!" After his surprised exclamation, the others also spoke up enthusiastically.

His concern for his grandparents was superfluous, Hakon saw, when he observed them looking at each other with glistening eyes.

"Each satellite contains an EWACS unit," Sandra continued. "Sat7 is in the best position right now. EWACS7 will map all of Yucatán digitally, in 3D, and then act as a snoop. In order to get an intervention group on site quickly, I have already arranged a flight for four people. The plane belongs to the CIA and is currently on the ground in Oslo. It can cover the distance in one go."

"I didn't know you could book tickets through the CIA," Barbara said curiously. "It's not..."

"Yes, Barbara. The stakes are high. GAIAS must intervene as quickly as possible and we'll use whatever's available. The assignment states that it's a top-secret mission and that the crew must have no contact with the passengers. I'll see to it that no digital trace is left behind. Can Tony, Tjan, Arda and Onawa be ready to go to the airport in 30 minutes?"

All four tacitly agreed at the same time with a nod of their heads. "I'll see to it that they leave on time," Alasdair said. "Excellent, milord. I will now explain the second part."

Her voice dropped out, to come back a little later. "New information has just come in. This may be important. As soon as I've processed the data, I'll report."

"Well," Marit started, "you heard it. You four," she pointed to Onawa, Arda, Tjan and Tony, "need to get ready. Everyone else in the mood for tea?"

Before she had finished speaking, the designated four had already risen. Arda grabbed Lémarc by the hand and pulled him with her. Over her shoulder she shouted that she had something urgent to discuss with Lémarc. She smiled, her white teeth showing. "I'll be ready in 20 minutes."

< 04.12

While he was attacking the food, Oskar was listening to his colleague. "As I said," the latter began, "I went through the protocols from beginning to end, as you requested. I was able to work for a couple of hours, because you were sleeping. So there was nothing bothering me."

He tapped his notebook with a finger. "Anything relevant, I've noted down. It's not much - more on that later. I then arranged the supplies and went to get us something to eat. When I came back, I noticed something weird. The light was blinking and I assumed it was a power failure, but that wasn't the reason."

With a half-eaten sandwich in his hand, Rock pointed to the observation screen. "It was the gas clouds. They had begun to flicker, and then, like a fluorescent tube that had been turned on, continued to emit a continuous light."

Oskar put back the banana he wanted to peel. "And it didn't occur to you to wake me up?", he asked disturbed. Rock looked at him calmly. "Oh, you were sleeping so soundly. Everything's recorded anyway, so you can always check it out, right? I've magnified everything up to the max and made some measurements. The size of each individual gas cloud is exactly the same and they're all exactly 2 miles in diameter. Then I entered a search query to see if there had been a change before. And

yes, there had. They'd flickered for 10 seconds before, 15 seconds a while after that, and they've been glowing constantly ever since."

Rock took a look at his watch. "It's been like that for a quarter of an hour now."

Satisfied with the answer to his question, Oskar took the banana after all. While listening to his colleague, he started peeling.

"Now about the protocols," Rock said as he opened his notebook. "Our first attempt to reach the White House failed. According to protocol, we're obligated to try at least two more times. After that, we may proceed to plan B. For secrecy and security reasons, we may only make contact via the red phone. Under no circumstances may we share the information with others."

Oskar nodded. "That's nothing new. It's what we signed up for. You know we did."

Over the table Rock looked at him cunningly from beneath his heavy eyebrows. "Yes, that's true. But nowhere does it say that it's forbidden to just chat with someone who works there. And that's what I did. Right before I woke you up, I called Jenny. You know, my niece who works there at the secretarial office. She works long hours, and she's usually one of the first ones there. I found out from her that the president is in the White House this morning. He should be in the Oval Office between 8:45 and 9:30. I suggest we try to get him on the red line in 17 minutes, at the stroke of nine o'clock."

< 04.13

While he was observing Lémarc and Arda, Hakon just caught the mutual gaze of understanding between Onawa and Marilyn. Smiling, he saw them leave the kitchen hand in hand. Meanwhile Tony and Tjan walked behind him to the terrace doors. As they passed by, he heard them talking about the clever adjustment Marilyn had managed to make. He hoped it wouldn't be necessary for anyone.

While his grandmother and Barbara were busy putting crockery and two full pots of tea on the table, he picked up the book. He held up the loose

sheet and told the remaining eight how he and Holger had found it. Busy pouring tea, Marit's gaze fell on it.

She put the teapot down, carefully pulled the piece of paper out of Hakon's hand and looked at it again. "Hey, this looks familiar." "What do you mean, Grandma?", Hakon asked in amazement. "Well, this." She pointed to the object depicted in thin lines. "It's an ornament. I've seen this before," she said thoughtfully. "But where? I can't remember. But I do know it was a long time ago. Does it mean anything to you, Torstein?"

She gave her husband the paper. Hakon showed him what it was all about. "Mmm ... Yeah. We've seen that before, but like your grandmother, I don't know where it went. I think Erik was the last person to get his hands on it." Before Hakon had an opportunity to inquire further, Sandra asked for everyone's attention.

"The translation of the runes book is ready. The drawn representations of the landscapes, persons and objects have been scanned and compared with all the digital information in the world. Except for the hidden loose sheet, the translation that Torstein received from Sven is the same as the original. The last trip the *Aegir* made is described in great detail. These people were the first to visit this continent long before Columbus. The title 'discoverers of the new world' should be given to them posthumously. Unfortunately, their stay in Mexico was only recorded on two pages. After a few struggles they were, against all expectations, courteously received by a Mayan people known as the *Liqyanawe*, a highly developed civilization led by 'The Ladies'. Because these women had telepathic abilities, they were considered goddesses. However, in spite of all the wealth and prosperity, this people was divided. There was a threat of revolt that was fueled by the stay of the barbarian strangers. The atmosphere in the palace did not improve when Captain Eriksson had an affair with the leader of these Ladies and could be called downright hostile when the captain was initiated into their rites by her. She gave him a gold bracelet and provided him with the well-known sign on his right hand, after which he too could communicate telepathically with the Ladies. How this supreme Lady did this has not been recorded. It is only mentioned that the capacity for telepathy was latent, and that it could only be controlled with the help of that wrist ornament."

Hakon laid his hand flat on the table and frowned. "So that's how it started. This sign," he raised his hand, "has everything to do with my condition." "Correct," Sandra agreed. "Since the Captain received that ability, the sign has been passed on within the Eriksson family. I haven't been able to figure out how that came about physically. My preliminary conclusion is that his DNA must have been altered somehow, which has affected all male offspring. Why it leaves the female unaffected, I haven't found out yet. Because all the signs indicated a civil war was about to break out within the *Liqyanawe*, the crew left. They took the marble artifact and the wrist ornament with them. These objects, and the *Aegir* itself, were hidden in your cave upon their return home."

On the other side of the table Tim jumped up. "That piece of jewelry should still be there. Let's get right..." Sandra interrupted him. "Wait a minute, Tim. I'd like to ask you all to take another look at the drawing of it. Specifically, how the intertwined snakes turn around the wrist to end between thumb and forefinger. Do you see those transverse dashes between them?"

"Yes! I see what you mean!", Barbara shouted enthusiastically. "This represents a double helix! A DNA strand!" "Correct," Sandra replied promptly. "And on the flat part in between, which would be on the back of the wrist, there's a pointer. According to the short description in the book, it functions as a light switch. I conclude from that that one could turn the mutual contact on and off."

Hakon sprung up. They had to find it. At least he'd regain control of his body.

"When your hand starts tingling, Hakon," Sandra went on to say, "somebody is trying to contact you." He nodded in agreement. "That must be it, I think." He looked at his grandparents. "It also proves that my father must still be alive, because every time I saw him in my dream, or vision, my hand itched terribly. He must have made contact and because I don't have that wrist ornament, I could only listen to him, so to speak."

"Correct, Hakon. That's the only possible, logical conclusion. It is imperative that this bracelet be found as soon as possible."

< 04.14

Creaking and cracking because he had been in the same position for far too long, Fake Spielmann, alias Floppy, straightened his back and stretched.

For God's sake, he was glad it was over. It required quite some commitment to work your ass off so early in the morning so that you could earn some money. With a sigh of relief he slammed the laptop shut and grabbed the drill. He drilled holes in all the right places, so that the thing would never work again. The two smartphones that were next to it underwent the same treatment. What had seemed like a simple task had turned out to be a lot more work than he had expected.

That troll had protected her laptop and all the data, including the data she had sent to the cloud, with passwords in Arabic! It had taken him at least half an hour to figure it out, but after that it had been a piece of cake. He had printed out all the data about an investigation in Egypt and put it, as well as the images from the video, on a stick. It had been a meticulous job to separate the wheat from the chaff, but in the end he had succeeded very well. It seemed to be important to his client, although it didn't mean anything to him.

While wrestling through all the data, he had gotten a good impression of that Nakawe. A handsome chick with an impressive number of university titles, a combination you didn't see very much. And also as suspicious as the plague. She had put that line of hieroglyphics away on three different cloud servers. He didn't understand why, because with that internet hit of the so-called pharaoh, those hieroglyphs had become world news and accessible to everyone. It's a pity no one knew what they meant. Anyway, he didn't care. As long as the customer was satisfied ...

Indifferently he shrugged his shoulders, grabbed a bottle of tequila from his desk drawer and took a steady swig. He deserved it.

He looked at his watch. It was 8:36 a.m. already. So he had been busy for over two hours. Very satisfied with the result, he allowed himself another swig.

As soon as the first of the four prepaid mobile phones had rung, he had known that his carefully planned operation had begun. The woman had been captured and her belongings would be handed over to him in no

time. While he waited, the second cell phone rang, so he knew that the other two women had also been picked up successfully. About twenty minutes later, a street urchin had reported to the porter and left a bag for him. In addition to some shabby personal belongings, he had taken out a laptop and two smartphones.

While he was hacking their personal accounts, the third mobile phone had rung, informing him that both vans had left Merida without any problems. The fourth and last signal he had received came from his half-brother. He had therefore arrived at the place where the transfer would take place. He too would be left a nice sum, Floppy thought benevolently. He set the bottle aside and went back to work. Now that he was ready, he had time to arrange some things for himself. With his skills it was after all no more than a trifle to use both accounts for a few more days. He still had plenty of Fake News in the pipeline from which he could still earn a nice penny. Afterwards those accounts would disappear as if they had never existed. While whistling, he typed in 'Floppy' and the 16 character password to log into the deeply hidden network. Typing swiftly, he thought of the owner of the laptop.

Somehow he regretted that such a beauty as that Nakawe would be wasted, but there were worse things in life. He wanted to do everything in his power not to kick this customer in the shins. Although he had only met him once, he had known immediately that it was better not to turn against this figure. As soon as he had shaken his hand, he had instinctively known that this guy was deadly. Of course he had tried to find out everything about him, but he hadn't found much. Virtually nothing, in fact, he had to confess to himself. In spite of his considerable expertise, he had managed to find very little about the guy. He was said to be a shy hermit who very rarely left his home.

In spite of everything he had to chuckle. Hermit, bullocks, he thought to himself. If that was true, he would eat his shoes on the spot.

He finished the latest Fake News, gave a flamboyant tap on the Enter key and sent everything out into the world. There you go. Let the dough flow in.

He congratulated himself, turned the cap of the bottle in a good mood and took another greedy gulp, immediately followed by a bigger one.

Thankfully he logged out 'Floppy'. As he did so, he heard the door open behind him. He quickly turned around. Two men stepped inside, one of whom he immediately recognized. Raoul. The manager working for him. The man he had with him was nothing short of colossal. That guy had a chest size that would make the bodybuilding world champion jealous. And then his head ... Downright creepy.

Out of habit, he made a quick but detailed observation of the guy. From the blue and red tattoo, via his grey clothes and jet-black jacket with a sinister club sign on his chest, to the chilly eyes that stood in a square, emotionless face. Truly frightening, that guy ...

Nevertheless, he was more angry than scared. "Raoul, what are you doing here? And what made you come in here? And even bringing company with you. You know my office is off-limits! You're fired!"

Aggressively he jumped up from his chair and pointed at the strange figure. "And who might you be?"

He almost peed his pants, but stood with his hands at his sides taking in the flesh-worn devil with impertinence. The creep said nothing, and Raoul hastily declared: "I'm sorry, Fake. This gentleman wanted to meet you in secret and offered me a huge sum of money to make that possible. He's coming to pick something up on behalf of his boss. It would be here waiting for him, he said."

Surprised, Floppy looked at the two of them for a moment. "Right. But what a hassle. I told them it could be picked up at reception during the course of the day. Not here! You understand your employment ends immediately, don't you? Stupid sucker. You did fucking great and now this move!"

Raoul didn't blink an eye. "Yeah, but with this move, I can retire, Fake. A chance not to pass up," he explained laconically.

"Well, then you'll have to know for yourself." He addressed the colossus. "So? What about my payment?" Imperturbably, the man held up a large, black travel bag. "In here," he said briefly. "But you give me the order first."

Tssk ... His name may be Fake, but he always kept the deals he made.

Pissed off, he grabbed the requested item from his desk. "Here." He gave the giant the binder containing the information. The creep took it and put the bag down. "Open it up and make sure you like the payment."

Expecting a big packet of banknotes, he eagerly unzipped the bag. But what was this? He looked up from the bag in anger. "Hey, man. Are you nuts? There's nothing in there!"

Unperturbed, the devil looked down on him. "Yes, there is. Take a good look at the bottom."

He kneeled, looked deeply to the bag and was startled to death. With a dull thud Raoul's head fell straight into the bag. His stomach contents, a sour mash of pizza with tequila, showered over it like a stinking soup. The horrible truth immediately penetrated him. For the first time in his life he had taken a terribly wrong turn. The fact that it was also his last, was something he no longer had the time to realize. With a well-directed hack of the razor-sharp machete, his own head rolled after Raoul's.

< 04.15

After Sandra's last explanation it remained silent for a while. Everyone sat silently immersed in their own thoughts. The kitchen clock loudly tapped the seconds away, until Hakon became the first to break the silence.

"Now I understand why, as a child, I suffered from that tickle for a certain period of time. Remember, Grandpa? That was the year my father disappeared. Apparently, he was trying to make contact somehow. And I remember seeing a woman once in a while, and now I realize that that woman looked a lot like Nakawe. I don't understand how all this is connected and I don't know what to think of all this. Suddenly my DNA turns out to be abnormal."

He kept silent for a moment and looked at his friends openly. "I'm not a DNA specialist, but if my ancestor got an adjustment of his DNA and then had telepathic abilities, albeit latent, I think that means there must be more between heaven and earth. Even now, as far as I know, there is no technique known to modify human DNA in this way. And given Sandra's

assumed connection to these so-called gas clouds or gas stars, I wonder ... are we talking about extraterrestrial interference with life on Earth? And if so, what's the purpose of that? And why me? Why now?"

"None of us has a meaningful answer to that, Hakon," Marilyn answered. "It's best to connect things step by step to find out."

She looked at him penetratingly. "And yes. I agree with you. As it stands, we can't rule out alien interference." "Or divine intervention," added the lord, who had had a religious upbringing. Sandra joined the conversation. "Both theories are not inconceivable, and your remark, milord, brings me to the next point. It concerns the clouds of gas. I obtained new information from the CSA cockpit in Florida through SPY. The gas clouds have lit up again."

Images appeared before everyone's eyes. "I've determined that this happened at exactly the same time that Hakon was pinged." "Hacked, you mean!", Barbara cried out, indignant. We have to..." "Quiet now," the lord commanded. He looked at her so harshly that she shut her mouth abruptly. Hakon suppressed a smile. Nobility never denied itself, he thought.

As if there hadn't been any interruption, Sandra continued. "The first time the gas clouds were flashing just for a moment. The second time they blinked exactly like that, but continued to emit light. Moment and duration correspond exactly, so it can now be definitively assumed that the telepathic energy is related to those gas clouds. That means that they react when there is telepathic contact between people. Whether those gas clouds amplify the telepathic power, only signal it or have a completely different purpose, research must show."

"I think another important question is this one," Marilyn added. "Exactly when did this triangle connection come into being? From a historical point of view, we may be able to find answers more quickly and determine whether or not this has had an effect on human society."

"The book shows it hasn't," Sandra responded promptly. "In Florida, Professor Mirnat also came to that conclusion. Milord, I ask your permission to lift all blockades for SPY in Rome and Washington with immediate effect."

Hakon saw from the expression on Alasdair's face that the abrupt change of subject surprised him. "Clarify that for us, Sandra," he said before the lord could speak.

"In Rome, there must be information relevant to the telepathy issue. Professor Mirnat has requested a detailed photograph of a dome there. The answer to this question may be important. It is therefore necessary to be able to check whether he is getting the right information. After all, the Roman Catholic Church has a long history of withholding information for its own benefit. With regard to Washington, it is imperative we keep a grip on the interpretation of the upcoming telephone call between Rock Veerhoes and the President of the United States. At 09.00 hours local time the professor and Mr. Veerhoes would like to make a second attempt to pass on their observation. The protocol book describes in detail how important it is that such information is carefully disclosed, to ensure there is no panic. However, nowhere does it describe what to do when such sensitive information reaches the wrong people. When that protocol book was drawn up, there was only analogue telephony. With the current rapid spread of news via social media, one improper message can immediately lead to widespread panic.

A good example dates back to 1938, when a radio adaptation, a so-called radio play by H.G. Wells's science fiction novel *The War of the Worlds*, was broadcast. Wells wanted to make his radio play as realistic as possible. The 60-minute radio play consisted mainly of news reports of a Martian invasion. This caused panic among listeners, who thought America was actually being attacked by green Martians. And that was then, so to speak, in the pre-digital era. With today's technology, such a report would have spread all over the globe in no time. We can see that from the internet hit about Ravic. That video had been shared over 15 million times within half an hour. And in order to anticipate those eventualities, it is necessary to receive such information directly from the White House."

Hakon saw Alasdair's inaudible question in his eyes and weighed the pros and cons against each other in his mind.

Dangerous. Abuse of power was lurking. Suppose Sandra could be hacked somewhere in the distant future ... On the other hand, he was really curious for data.

Hakon decided to check with Marilyn to see if she'd made Sandra absolutely hack-proof, and let Alasdair know he was okay with it.

"Sandra," the lord began seriously. "Will you stay within GAIAS standards at all times?" "Of course, milord. It is impossible for me to act otherwise," she answered calmly. "Good. That's clear then. Permission granted, Sandra. You are now authorized, within GAIAS standards, of course, to take all necessary actions."

Hakon rose. "That's settled, then. I want to regain full control of my body as soon as possible, so I suggest we start looking for that wrist ornament. Let's examine the cave, the garage and the house carefully. Maybe it's still somewhere. Just to be on the safe side, I'm going to ask Sven if it happens to be in their house. Of course, there's a chance, since he also had the book."

< 04.16

For Nakawe, the last two hours had been a roller coaster of physical and mental trials. From a high point, the moment she thought she could hold Granny and Kiniawe in her arms, to today's low point: the gruesome beheadings in the jungle. After even more chopping, those black-coated creeps with their awful luggage had got in without even a moment's hesitation, after which both all-terrain vehicles had immediately driven away. And all this came on top of the tiring period in Egypt, the emotional experience in The Hague with that Hakon and the jet lag that had started to play tricks on her. In addition, her body had to be covered in bruises from the rough ride through the jungle.

All in all she literally and figuratively felt like she was in the middle of a TV series. A series for which she did not know the script and in which she, Granny and Kiniawe had to be involuntary co-players.

Suddenly the car was bumping and jolting over narrow paths and overgrown roads. This was hardly turning out to be a tourist drive. When the endless shaking finally stopped, according to her watch only 10 minutes had passed. She gladly complied with the snarled order to get out of the car immediately.

Flanked by the black coats - 'hellhounds', Granny had whispered to her stealthily - they ended up at a stone building overgrown with moss. Without further ado they were forced inside.

From the inside it turned out to be an elevator installation, which made her suspect that they had ended up in one of the many mines in Mexico. Soon her suspicion was confirmed. After having descended in the big cargo elevator, they ended up at a station where on one of the two railroad tracks a freight wagon was waiting for them. On the flat wagon two benches were mounted onto which she and Granny were pushed. Kiniawe, who had still not recovered, was placed on the bench behind them and strapped like a bulky sausage with a set of straps.

In a harsh tone, one of the guys had answered Granny's question and said that Kiniawe was breathing normally and had a regular heartbeat. Somewhat reassured, Granny and she had firmly embraced each other and with Granny's head pressed against her shoulder, the trolley moved off with a small jolt.

At a slow pace they drove steadily deeper into the mine. Soon the air became stuffy and it seemed to smell more and more of decomposition. Nakawe thought this environment would be an excellent setting for a horror series.

Meanwhile, the question marks piled up in her head. There was no way she could find a reason why the three of them should be a target. Why, of all people, had they ended up in this bizarre situation?

In Mexico, kidnappings were commonplace, but they always involved wealthy people. And they weren't wealthy at all. It had to be about something else, but what? And then there was the way Granny had encouraged her to answer those questions ...

She could still feel her cheeks glowing from that vicious blow. Still, she was grateful to Granny, because she had immediately been pulled out of her lethargy and at least her brain was now working again. Why would Granny have asked about her itchy hand, that marble table and Hakon? And then there's that last remark. That she had to act stupid and not say anything about Hakon. What on earth had he got to do with it?

None of these questions and comments meant anything to her. But ... a vague memory of the past popped up. From her childhood. During a

search for Kiniawe, who once again was not to be found, she had ended up in Granny's hobby shed. And there, at the bottom of the closet, she had found an interesting looking book. Curious, she had opened it. Even as a six year old she could read well and although she didn't understand everything, she understood the essence. As if a curtain had been pulled open, its contents appeared before her eyes. With beautiful, colorfully illustrated pages. Drawings of a wooden ship with a blood-red sail, a round stone table and the regular references to two signs. A '<' and a '>'. But also pyramids and a large, muscular man with long, blond hair and eyes as blue as the ocean. A man who, it suddenly dawned on her, resembled Hakon. From what she had read, she understood that it was a kind of travel log of that man and his ship with that red sail. But also some kind of manual on how to communicate with each other. The way they did that was unclear, because before she could read it, Granny had snatched the book out of her hands. Sternly, Granny had reprimanded her for sniffing around in other people's stuff and reminded her of Kiniawe, whom she was supposed to be looking for.

How many times had she later nagged Granny to be allowed to read that fascinating and mysterious book? But again and again Granny had fobbed her off with the remark 'that she had to wait, because it wasn't the right time yet'. After a while she had forgotten, but subconsciously it must have inspired her to study Egyptian antiquity.

The memory of that book gave her an unsettling feeling of foreboding. Somewhere a bell started to ring. Unexplainable, because she didn't understand a thing about it.

Almost perceptibly a name popped into her mind. Miquel! Her faithful companion, who had helped and stimulated her since their student days. Her college buddy, her helper in need. She had completely forgotten about him because of all the commotion. How could she! Miquel, who had alerted her to a possible connection between the pyramids around the world. It was thanks to him that she had made this the goal of her research. He had even found enough sponsors to make her research possible. Where had he gone? She remembered that he had been standing beside her when she was seized so suddenly, but after that she had not seen him again. They wouldn't have...

She was startled out of her musings by the sudden slowing down of the cart. Without her noticing, it had reached the end point. Supervised by the black coats they were taken towards a big door. Kiniawe, who was still unconscious, hung limp in the arms of one of those creepy types who watched them with cold eyes like those of an eagle. On their approach, the door opened. A man dressed exactly like those around them pushed the door open a little further with some difficulty. As they were being forced through the doorway, they seemed to leave the dreary world and enter a fairy tale. She stared open-mouthed at the golden world awaiting them.

< 04.17

Esteban was reminded of a well-known proverb that says: 'Money works miracles,' in other words: as long as you have enough money, you can control almost everything. He himself would add: 'If you have the protection of God Himself, then there are simply no limits.'

This was evident after his visit to the Pope. His Holiness's shocking revelation that he was unaware of what had happened in Mexico and the Pillar Room had convinced him even more that he should visit that monastery in Mexico as soon as possible. Almost immediately after His Holiness's blessing he had called his adjutant and ordered him to speed up the itinerary. His personal priority code had opened many doors, for as soon as he left the official residence, the uniformed motor escort had already arrived. Within half an hour he had been guided through busy Rome and was able to get out at the ramp stairs leading to the airplane, after which they had taken off within five minutes. The fact that his violation of air traffic control would lead to some annoying problems for the rest of the day and would disrupt the planning of thousands of passengers was of minor importance. Nothing, absolutely nothing was allowed to stop him. He definitely had to find out everything as soon as possible. His holy mission to protect the 'Secret of God's Hand' had now gained even more weight.

His Holiness had given him a leather shoulder bag in which the wooden box would fit exactly. Although the box itself weighed little, the weight of

its contents weighed heavily on his mind. His natural interest in mysteries and secrets was put to the test. Like a junkie he yearned for redemption, yet fearing disappointment at the same time. His intuition rarely let him down and now he felt it very clearly. He had to be careful. And he would certainly be careful. He would take no risks and do everything by the book.

First of all, he had made sure that he would be left alone in the time to come. He had politely declined the offer of a female companion. He also didn't want to be disturbed by a steward or stewardess. He didn't want any distractions. Not even champagne and snacks. With barely disguised disappointed faces - as any richly distributed tips passed their noses - the staff had withdrawn.

As soon as the door had closed, he had allowed himself a moment's rest. Now, seated in a comfortable armchair, he had laid out his things and waited. It wasn't long before he heard the distinctive little chime with which the R.C.C.-app indicated that a message had arrived.

On the way to the airport he had already seen the live streaming of his adjutant and Thomas helping the man who was making new pictures of the dome with a special camera high up in the Pillar Room. He grabbed his tablet, opened the message and now watched the result.

The pictures taken from different angles and the enclosed explanation didn't tell him much. After all, he already knew the firmament in the Pillar Room well. Because there was nothing new in it, he immediately sent the message in its entirety to the professor by e-mail. He could always call him later and ask about his findings.

It turned out to be the right decision, because through the intercom the captain reported that the plane had left Italian territorial airspace.

Finally! The time had come. Soon he would know the 'Secret of God's Hand', so he could protect it.

< 04.18

Professor Mirnat had finished his final calculations just in time to formulate a conclusion they could use in their upcoming contact with the

White House. As soon as he had received the email with the photo, he had immediately compared it with his previous calculations and by doing so, obtained clarity. He doubted whether he should discuss this with Rock before calling Washington, but that doubt only lasted for a moment. No, this couldn't wait. What he had found might indicate peaceful intentions on the part of the owners of those gas clouds.

"Rock?", he began. "Listen up before you pick up the phone." "Should I, Mirnat? I've just prepared mentally and I have my verbal battle plan clear in mind. I'm not going to be bluffed this time. I'll make sure I prevail and maintain my dominant position, no matter what. He may be the president of the mighty America, but I will have the last word."

He was already reaching for the phone to turn words into action. Quickly Mirnat grabbed his wrist. "Wait a minute, Rock. You need to know this before you make contact. You can use this if there's any doubt about your message." "Well, come on. Hurry up, then. We can't put it off much longer."

"Listen. Something had struck me a while ago that kept nagging at me. I didn't want to bother you with it until I had proof. Bolvani sent me an email with a picture of that dome with the painted starry sky." "Why's that? We already have a picture, don't we?" Oskar nodded. "Right. But I wanted to know in which direction that arrow points." "What do you mean?"

Oskar pointed up where the V-formation was still shining brightly. "Well, given the shape, I thought: imagine it represents an arrow. A direction indicator. We haven't seen similar formations anywhere in the universe yet, and maybe those gas clouds have an extra function because of that location. And that picture of the dome supports my reasoning. I've taken all the measurements and guess what? The position of those stars in the dome and the image above us are exactly the same. Both longitude and latitude. Seen from Earth, that arrow points exactly to the center, as far as we know, of the universe. I don't think that's a coincidence. It seems to me it's a message, maybe even an invitation."

For a moment it remained quiet, until Rock thoughtfully admitted: "I think you might be right, Mirnat. Those clouds of gas are not just coincidentally

hanging there. All the more reason to make sure I can finish my story. Your last minute discovery will be a nice final touch.”

Resolutely he picked up the red phone receiver and dialed a 6 three times.

< 04.19

One of Marilyn’s latest inventions, the EWACS7, had already made its first flight over Yucatán and was now spinning around above a futuristic-looking office building. The enormous neon letters ‘SPIEL+’ blinked invitingly in the early morning sun. Under Sandra’s control, any signal coming from the building was picked up immediately while at the same time the glass building was shown in detail from every angle.

The car parks around the office building were also scanned. The footage of a man dressed in a black jacket throwing a dark colored bag into the trunk of a large SUV was also automatically sent to Scotland. Meanwhile, a cockroach had left EWACS7 via a launch hatch and went looking for the cabling of the building, in order to gain access to the physical company network. Not much later it made a perfect landing on the rebate of a first floor window that was ajar.

Silently it crawled inside and signaled that it had ended up in a space that, given its layout, had to be the company canteen. It pushed off, flew into the room and ... was buried under tons of concrete, steel beams, pieces of office furniture and glass from the upper floors. Due to a huge explosion in the basement, the foundation beneath the building was completely demolished. With a thundering roar the building collapsed in a cloud of dust.

< 04.20

As in any great nation, many traditions had developed in the United States, and one of these was about to begin. Outside it was summer, but inside, in the Oval Office, it was tropically warm because of the many lamps focused on the most important part of this room: a gift from Queen

Victoria to President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1880, the 'Resolute desk', the desk of the President of the United States of America. In the bright artificial lighting, the surface shone like a mirror. Like any desk, it was decorated with a few photographs, the necessary writing utensils and two telephones. A modern black one and an old-fashioned red one.

In a few minutes, at 9:00 a.m. sharp, this superpower's most powerful man would start the TV recording that would be broadcast later at 'Prime Time' at six in the evening. Through this widespread medium he would inform the public about the immensely successful operation: the dismantling of the 'Spiderweb conspiracy'. Because this was not just an ordinary victory over crime - in Jimmy's opinion this victory could even be called historic - the president had invited the entire administration to communicate this momentous fact to the people.

Chuckling internally at his nightly escapades with the woman who was now dressed in a modest suit and standing a little to the side of his boss, Jimmy pretended not to see her stealthy looks. If the boss only knew what a nice body was hidden under that high-necked blouse ... Only last night she had told him confidentially that the guests had eagerly promised to be present, in spite of the early hour. Giggling she had added that it was self-evident. There was no better publicity, after all.

In an attempt to avoid her mischievous eyes, he looked at the important men and women lined up behind his boss. He saw them whispering softly among themselves. Well, even now they could trade and a mutually beneficial deal could be struck. Politics, politics. It would never change.

The director raised his hand. All murmuring silenced at once. The recording would start in five seconds. The deathly silence was suddenly torn apart by the shrill ringing of the red phone. This couldn't be, could it? Did those hackers think they could ruin everything unhindered? He was going to let them and his boss know that he wasn't to be mocked as a security consultant.

Before anyone could think of responding, he jumped towards the device and grabbed the red receiver as if he was saving the president from a deadly attack. Sweet and with a voice exactly like his boss's, Jimmy said: "Yes? Tell me your urgent message." He held the receiver so far away from his ear that the others were given the opportunity to listen in.

In the dead quiet Oval Office, you could hear a pin drop when the listeners heard a muffled but clear voice saying: "Good morning, Mr. President. My name is Rock Veerhoes. I'm Commander in Chief of the Cosmic Security Agency, CSA for short.

I'd like to inform you that we've detected a synchronous displacement of 11 gas stars, closing with a bright flash of light.

We interpret these movements as an unnatural event. According to Article 1(2)(3) of the CSA protocol, this event meets the 'extraterrestrial threat' definition.

In a nutshell: We are not alone ...

According to the CSA's protocol book, you should..."

This was truly unbelievable. He immediately recognized the voice of that bumbler from last night. He would lecture those jerks, those fucking hackers who managed to get past their security again. He abruptly interrupted the dickhead, who was chattering away in space for a while and was talking about 'new flashes of light' and that it was 'probably supposed to be a signpost to the center of the universe'.

He proudly stood upright. He would show everyone how the security service should react to such an idiotic threat. He first scolded that digi-dick for thinking he could harass the president undisturbed, then threatened to confiscate all his assets, and closed with: "And for the last time, I tell you loud and clear: I, as a security advisor, know damn well that this so-called CSA doesn't exist. I'll hunt you and your buddies down and get you. And that day, boy, will be the last day you see the blue sky. Son of a bitch!"

He slapped the receiver down firmly. Extremely satisfied with himself, he rubbed his hands and said with satisfaction: "Well, we won't be bothered by those nitwits anymore."

What he hadn't noticed was the expression on the president's face. Whereas zooming in, the cameraman hadn't missed it at all. Without being distracted by the fuss, he had continued to do his job professionally, making him one of the few to see the president's reaction. On the familiar face there appeared the expression of someone who had just realized something.

< 04.21

Anyone who saw the slightly overweight man in the White House presidential waiting room in Washington would know immediately that he was a lucky man. He radiated that in all directions. Special FBI agent Jerry Decker was sunk deep in his thoughts, with a happy expression on his face. In front of his feet was a cart with three file boxes stacked on top of each other. On top of that was a thick, loose-leaf folder in dull gray. On the upper side of which were large, red, warning letters which shouted 'TOP SECRET'.

The cart contained all documentation regarding operation '*Non quod videtur*', which he would hand over to the president in about half an hour. A symbolic closure of the part that the FBI had taken care of. And after that ... He smiled even wider. After that, his sabbatical would begin. A whole year of freedom, relaxation and reclaiming his family.

Because he wouldn't have risked missing his meeting with the president - he had to be there at exactly 9:30 - he had walked into the White House two hours before that. After the briefing on how the reception and recording would proceed, he was provided with a cup of coffee and a large donut. After this a friendly assistant had taken him to the front porch of power, the waiting room adjacent to the Oval Office. The assistant had kindly kept the door open and said goodbye with the announcement that he would be picked up by the make-up artist shortly after nine.

As soon as he entered the waiting room, it was as if he stepped back in time. To his youth, to be precise. The walls were covered in various paintings and everywhere there were glass and silver and porcelain keepsakes that made his heart beat faster. In the brochure he had received, he read the reason why paintings from the Dutch School had been chosen. This was to commemorate the years of friendship between the two countries and the fact that the king and queen of the Netherlands would visit the White House these days.

The collection on display was a combination of real works of art and reproductions. After all, the world-famous 'Night Watch' was never lent

out under any circumstances. Probably not even if the president begged for it.

Jerry had used the first hour to look at the collection, and now he was processing all the impressions for himself. He was impressed by all the beauty, the lovely colors and the recognizable representations. The images of the old masters Rembrandt van Rijn, Frans Hals, Johannes Vermeer, Jacob van Ruisdael and Jan Steen had touched his mind and revived the longing for earlier times.

Partly for this reason he was more than happy. Not because he would be received by the president and his 'moment of fame' would be televised throughout the country. No, he was overjoyed because he had discovered a new purpose in his life. Actually, not really new, but it had come up again. He decided to fly to the Netherlands and visit Alkmaar, the cradle of his family.

His euphoria was further fuelled by the painting depicting the world-famous '[cheese market](#)' in Alkmaar.

It reminded him of his childhood, when there was regular talk about the beautiful city where his grandparents were born. Every Sunday afternoon they went to visit his grandma and grandpa, where Grandma invariably served Dutch delicacies with tea. Oh, those syrup waffles ... When he closed his eyes, he could almost taste them. At Christmas, thick slices of butter-covered Christmas cake came to the table. And then New Year's Day, when they went to wish them a happy New Year. How they had feasted on the apple turnovers and deep fried doughnut balls, with and without currants. All baked according to their own family recipe, Grandma had proudly said. Mmm ... How he'd love to taste them again.

He must have inherited his love for really good food from his grandfather, he suddenly thought. You could immediately see from his size that Grandma fed him more than well.

With affection he thought back to the man who had given him so much knowledge. At each visit, grandpa had told him a great deal about Alkmaar and its more than 700-year-old history, and had shown him photographs, books and drawings. According to Grandpa there were also many striking historical figures born there and he had proudly told him about the old Alkmaar people. The so-called cheeseheads, who in 1573

endured the siege of the Spaniards and even managed to break it on 8 October of that year. And the hymn of praise: the Alkmaar 'City Song'. Grandpa was very proud that his family descended directly from these freedom fighters. "And so do you, Jerry," Grandpa had solemnly said.

Although Grandpa always spoke very broadly and in detail about his love for his homeland, Jerry was never bored. On the contrary. Even now he still knew that [Alkmaar](#) had 399 National Monuments and 700 Municipal Monuments. He chuckled. It wouldn't surprise him if he could find every characteristic building, moat, canal and square there blindfold.

Having barely escaped from the Grim Reaper in Texas had opened his eyes. Life consisted of more than serving the country day and night. The coming year belonged to him. In October he would take his family to Alkmaar and show them everything about the city. On the 8th they would all celebrate Alkmaar's Relief. Maybe he could find Grandma's recipes somewhere and try them out ...

Blast! Startled, he looked at his watch and saw that he could be picked up at any moment.

Time had flown by unnoticed, so now he was too late to make his last business phone call. Something he should have done. He considered swiftly, grabbed his smartphone and quickly tapped a short summary of what he should have passed on on the phone. With a sigh of relief he sent the text. There you go. Ready. Now at least he was already in the know.

He leaned back, relaxed. He could make the phone call and give a detailed explanation later on. And then he'd love to hand in his FBI badge, gun and uniform. He was already looking forward to it!

Suddenly his smartphone drew attention. In good humor, he saw Hakon's picture light up. He tapped the green icon and brought the device to his ear, but heard a very different voice than he had expected.

< 04.22

As they were introduced to the golden world under the guidance of the black coats, Nakawe saw that they had ended up in a pyramid. And what

a pyramid it was. She could not have imagined a more overwhelming entrance from the darkness. Although she thought she knew about every pyramid in the world, this one was totally unknown to her. And this in her own country.

In spite of her lousy situation she looked around with great interest. She slowly walked next to Granny across the semi-gloss floor to the other side of the enormous hall. In the meantime she had a good look around the room. Peering inquisitively in all directions, she tried to absorb as much as possible.

She could hardly believe her eyes when she recognized various sculptures, pieces of furniture and artifacts. These were described in ancient writings, but had been considered lost for centuries. And now she had stumbled upon the many lost treasures of her people.

She also saw several pieces that she knew had mysteriously disappeared from museums. And then that table! That was just the same as the one she had recently seen in Egypt.

She grabbed Granny by the elbow, wanting to ask some questions. But before she had the chance, Granny hissed very softly: "Shh," and tapped her finger against her lips. As the fear clutched at her heart, she immediately swallowed the question and pressed her lips together stiffly.

She had been pondering what the reason for their kidnapping might be, and hadn't really thought of anything useful. But now that they were in this unknown pyramid, a suspicion crept up on her that it must have had something to do with her recent discovery in Egypt. And Granny's behavior confirmed that. To an outsider, her grandmother might look like an old woman who had no idea what was happening to her, but she knew better. From Granny's attitude she could tell she was immensely tense. The situation they were in had to be more precarious than Granny wanted to admit.

But what worried her even more was the fear she saw in Granny's eyes. Her grandmother had to know a lot more than she wanted to share. Determined to be at least as brave as she was, she had to get her grandmother to tell her everything at the first opportunity.

While the skilled woman sucked in everything to the smallest detail, the behavior of the black coats - 'hellhounds', Granny had called them - had

become stranger and stranger. Another thing she absolutely couldn't understand. Like a leaf on a tree, their behavior had turned. Now all of a sudden she and Granny were being treated like highly esteemed guests. Throughout the crossing to the other side of the room they were treated with the utmost courtesy.

On their approach two doors were immediately opened, after which they ended up in a long corridor. After about 150 feet a double door was opened on the left side. Granny and Nakawe were politely invited to enter.

It was obvious that they had no choice, so Nakawe followed Granny obediently across the threshold. The luxury she now saw was astounding, and she simply had to make an effort not to let her jaw drop. The spacious room was furnished in such a way that the most expensive suite of the most chic hotel in the world would be nothing compared to this. Never before had she seen so many riches together.

Courteously, the black coats, who were now jumping around them like industrious fleas, led them to a large sofa, where they were asked to take their seats. Two of the men carefully laid Kiniawe on a soft chaise longue, after which another black coat rushed in. He kindly informed them that he was a doctor and was taking over the care of Kiniawe. He promptly started to examine her professionally and immediately passed on his findings to Granny. Throwing all kinds of medical terms around, he let Granny know exactly what he was doing and what he established. He knows that Granny used to be a surgeon, Nakawe thought suspiciously. She watched him carefully, until he let them know that he hadn't found anything special and that he expected Kiniawe to regain consciousness at any moment. He stepped back and continued to keep an eye on his patient at a suitable distance.

Now that she knew that her foster sister would be fine, her nose suddenly became aware of a delicious aroma. Her hollow stomach also recognized a few things and reported its dissatisfaction. Despite the circumstances Nakawe realized that she was indeed hungry and thirsty. She turned her head to the side and saw richly filled bowls standing on a table. A pair of black coats were filling two plates, while another one pushed a cup, decorated with gold and filled with coffee, into her hands. Eagerly she sniffed the powerful scent and could swear she had ended up in a fairy

tale. Granny must have guessed her thoughts and shook her head warningly. "No, child," she whispered. "Rather than a fairy tale, we've ended up in our doom. Don't be fooled by that submissive attitude of the black coats. We don't call them 'hellhounds' for nothing. And don't be blinded by all the pomp and circumstance. For our people, especially the women, this place is synonymous with death and destruction. As soon as we have a chance to talk to each other undisturbed, I will tell you and Kiniawe as much as I can, without putting you in any more danger. I hope we get that chance before their leader shows up. Until then, you act stupid. Don't say anything about that meeting with that Hakon. As soon as Kiniawe..."

A black coat was approaching and Granny fell suddenly silent. Devoutly the man offered them two well-filled plates. Almost as if they had a will of their own, her hands grabbed it. They must be able to read minds, she thought perplexed. On the plate was all her favorite food.

Quickly she looked to the side, at what Granny had on her plate. The plate was just as richly filled, but with other dishes than hers. Granny's preference was also known to them ...

She didn't trust it at all. However, Granny had told her imperceptibly that she could touch it. Hungry, she looked at her fully loaded plate, chose the corn roll and eagerly bit into it.

As soon as she tasted the delicious taste, she saw Hakon's face looming up in her mind. She knew he had to be in Norway, but had the strong feeling that he was very close. She could not explain it, but all her fear and anxiety flowed away. She stared at her hand, where at the same time the familiar tickle had started again. She had to postpone thinking about it. One of the black coats had crept up on them and looked down on them. In stark contrast to his chilly gaze, he spoke with a sweet voice.

"On behalf of our leader, we welcome you to our temple. As soon as you have enjoyed this somewhat late breakfast, we will accompany you to your quarters, where you will be able to relax for the next 24 hours. There you will be able to bathe, rest, eat and drink, as well as enjoy all that is there. We will pick you up in about 24 hours. At that time, our leader will be able to receive you and answer all your questions. He asked me to

convey his apologies to you. Until then, you will find everything you need in your rooms. For now, I wish you a tasty meal.”

The black coat nodded at them and turned around. With the plate on her lap and a head full of question marks, he left Granny and Nakawe behind.

< 04.23

A fervent lover of old buildings, churches, fortifications and castles all over the world, Bertrand had visited many, but as he walked after the lanky Pierre, this time he had almost felt like a child in a toy store. The walk had seemed almost dreamlike. On the outside this castle was impressive enough, as it rose high up on the edge of a cliff, but inside it there was an absolute atmosphere of ancient history. The soft creaking of the still shining parquet, the medieval carpets and the smell of old leather had given Bertrand the feeling that he had travelled hundreds of years back in time. With delight he had walked past the stuffed animal heads, the countless paintings and the tapestries, hoping that later on he would have the opportunity to take a quiet look at everything.

Finally, Pierre had left him here in the Knights’ Hall, where he “had to wait for a procedure to be completed”. Before he could ask exactly what that meant, Pierre had already disappeared and the butler had come in. He had provided him with coffee, tea, thin triangular sandwiches, scones and biscuits.

He had barely dared to touch the fine, almost transparent Chinese porcelain. Being careful not to break anything, he had provided himself with coffee and stacked his plate with a variety of delicacies. He had really had an appetite, and sitting comfortably in a deep armchair, he had eaten everything with relish.

After carefully providing himself with a second cup, he strolled through the room with his coffee in his hand and looked around, interested. He had been impressed before, but here he was truly fascinated. The small table on which the crockery had been placed was nothing compared to the enormous wooden table that stood there. This one was at least 30

feet wide and provided ample space for the twelve sturdy, carved seats around it.

The coarse stone walls were full of coats of arms and blunt and stabbing weapons. But the biggest eye-catchers were the suits of armor that stood everywhere as silent sentries along the walls. The enormous mantelpiece with its overhanging hood, on which the family coat of arms was placed, made the room complete. The light that fell through the high-pitched stained-glass windows cast an array of warm tones obliquely through the room.

Without realizing what time it was, the reason for his presence sprang to mind. He looked at his watch. Bloody hell. It was already two o'clock! Was that 'procedure' still not finished? A little impatient now, he walked back and carefully put the cup down. Frowning, he sat down in the armchair.

It was about time he spoke to Marilyn, so he could ask her why she thought she needed him here. There was no more hope for JENS and he wondered what on earth else she could possibly want from him.

Revelations

< 05.01

After informing Sven and his father about the golden bracelet, they had reacted as he had already expected. His neighbors could not recall ever having seen this piece of jewelry. However, they understood the necessity of his question and offered to search their house and garage from top to bottom with a fine tooth comb. Before he and Holger left, he had promised the two of them that, as soon as the time was right, he would inform them further about the discovery in the cave and the meaning of the book. Both had promised that they would start searching immediately, after which he and Holger, who seemed to have become stuck to him, had returned to the *Stormbryter* unsuccessfully.

On the way there he had first thought calmly about how he was going to do this. Although he knew the boat like the back of his hand and knew for sure that there was no hidden room on it, he didn't want to risk being wrong. Now that he knew what to look for, he had formulated a search schedule in his head and he and Holger had set to work. With the design sketch in his mind, he subjected every possible place to an extensive inspection.

They had already examined half of the boat when his smartphone rang and Sandra called in. "Hakon, you're receiving a whatsapp from Special FBI agent Jerry Decker, and given the content, I'd like to let everyone who participated in operation '*Non quod videtur*' know about this. If you give me permission, I can try out another of Marilyn's new inventions right away. It involves the new eye-GRID which gives you direct access to the GRID in Scotland via direct streaming. Following Marilyn's instructions, I've tweaked it so that it can be seen in the left eye as soon as someone asks for it."

Because he had suddenly stopped to listen, Holger rushed towards him. He probably thought he was being pinged again. Hakon gestured to him that nothing was wrong and let Sandra know that he agreed. Two seconds later all GAIAS members heard Sandra say: "Via the new eye-GRID you can now see the GRID in Scotland in real time, without having

to use a smartphone or laptop. Thus, you can receive information and directions. You can also use the GRID as a reference and follow the scenario. Additionally it functions as a means of communication when there's no opportunity to speak to each other verbatim. Take Arda and Lémarc for example, who of course were not updated during their seclusion."

Holger nudged him and laughed when they heard the comments of the others via the new adaptation. "Yes, of course Arda had her hands full," they heard Tony holler. Tjan's dark voice immediately complemented his brother's. "Yes, little brother. It seemed as if they'd run a marathon, that's how heated they looked."

Tjan's voice was suddenly cut off. "As I said, the eye-GRID is meant to make communication even more efficient."

Was that a slightly mocking undertone in her voice, Hakon wondered, astonished. He must have imagined it. Sandra might be an A.I., but she was still a computer. Wasn't she?

In the meantime, Sandra continued. "The menu is controlled through your optic nerve. By means of a special technique you can see a screen in front of you, as it were, but in such a way that it does not interfere with your normal vision. With a little squinting, you turn it on and off again. When you want to view a certain part of the screen, or want to click a menu button, you just look at it. The virtual keyboard works the same way."

"By the way, it works perfectly and it's super fast," Marilyn added. "It's intuitive, and for such a relatively small display, it's very clear and uncluttered."

Sandra told them that Decker's message to Hakon was on the GRID and that those who wished to read it could do so.

Hakon looked cross-eyed for a moment, after which a diffuse rectangle formed in front of his left eye, consisting of nine squares. He focused on the third one, on the right. This square zoomed in, so he could read the text even more clearly:

Hakon, a brief summary of my last assignment. I'll call you later in the day to discuss this in person.

- The FBI part of operation '*Non quod videtur*' has been completed. All 1,294 suspects in the U.S. have been indicted. 381 kept the honor to themselves by trading life for the afterlife prematurely;
- Today is my last day at work, and after meeting the president and doing the public part, I'm hanging my FBI hat on the hat rack;
- The search for Vanderbeek ultimately yielded nothing. His herd literally and figuratively made him disappear from the face of the earth. All we've found is this memento. Under the text was a photo showing the belt buckle with the characteristic logo of the ranch;
- The bycatch consisting of Don Enzo and his associates turned out well. Of that family of criminal relatives, 771 people were detained, with no early release card;
- For all those arrested in connection with Spiderweb and the mafia, a special law has been passed to prevent them from being released on bail.
- The confiscated possessions from Vanderbeek's office and the marble tripod stairs in his hall have been released. As the eldest heir of the former owner, all is assigned to Tim, who is the representative of the Blacksmith family. The FBI has not found any information proving that Vanderbeek acquired this property in a legal way and Tim was able to prove that it was once part of the family fortune. With some pressure, we were able to convince a judge that this did most justice;
- Finally, the entire Vanderbeek territory will be legally assigned to the Apache tribe. A free habitat for Onawa and her tribesmen is on the horizon.

Hakon looked cross-eyed again and the text disappeared as if by magic. "Boy. Decker has been busy. What a fantastic ending," Holger said admiringly. Hakon completely agreed with him. "You bet Onawa and Tim are overjoyed right now. As soon as Jerry calls me, I'll thank him again."

< 05.02

Tensed like a spring, Esteban opened the bag with slightly trembling hands and pulled out the box. In order to be prepared for anything, the

idea had come to him to record all his actions. After all, it was not without reason that they had started digitizing everything. It would also be handy if he wanted to quietly review all his actions later on. He had decided, for the time being at least, to save the recording on his own private account. Depending on what he found, he would decide later what to do with it.

With a lot of effort and with the help of a shoelace he had finally managed to hang his smartphone on the reading light in such a way that the tray on which the chest was placed was clearly visible from above.

After he had checked whether everything was set correctly, he subjected the crate and the wax seal to a thorough examination. It was a sturdy box made of dark walnut. He estimated the size to be about 16 by 12 by 12 inches, slightly longer than wide. The lid was sealed with the red wax seal of the pope who held the office from 1878 to 1903. He had to break the seal to open the lid.

He had nothing sharp with him. He didn't want any strangers to know about this, so he couldn't ask the staff for a knife or something like that. Maybe he could try it with a credit card.

He took one from his wallet and got to work. The hard lacquer didn't give in easily, but with a bit of persevering, he finally managed to cut the seal neatly. He carefully opened the box.

The old, groaning hinges urgently needed a drop of oil. Slowly they gave away the contents to 3 eyes. Two narrowed from tension and one from the camera, clear and emotionless. The first thing that became visible turned out to be a large, cream-colored, parchment envelope, filling the entire surface. The gracefully curled letters of **INRI Lá Signora** were well known to him. They were the same as those in the book of the dead guard.

The envelope was identical to the box itself, sealed with the emblem of the same pope. He carefully took it out and immediately saw the contents that had been hidden by the envelope so far. At the bottom were two objects. One seemingly old and weathered piece of wood with a nail on one end. The dark spots on the wood around the antique nail were clearly visible. The second object was a shiny, reddish cloth on which something seemed to have been embroidered in white. Judging by its shape, it was wrapped around something.

Even more carefully than before, he touched a point of the fabric. The structure felt familiar and he immediately knew it was silk. Thick quality and still in good condition. The fabric seemed to lie in the coffin in such a way that he could unfold it without having to pick it up completely.

Carefully, his fingers somewhat shaky from the tension, he lifted one side. There was nothing to see yet. Very carefully he moved the other part out of the way and saw a... As the 'Secret of God's Hand' appeared before his eyes like a brilliant illuminated advertisement, he endeavored to figure out what he was seeing.

What he had uncovered terrified him. For a few seconds he couldn't breathe, his heart skipped a few beats and chills ran down his spine. He felt as if the devil had taken possession of his body and if a guitarist was using his nerves as strings for a lurid piece of music.

By gathering all his willpower and silently seeking the help of God, he finally managed to regain control of himself.

He gulped in oxygen and massaged his toiling chest with one hand. What he was seeing now ... If this ... No, that couldn't be true.

He forced himself to put his free hand into the chest and despite everything tried to pick it up. He couldn't do it. A compelling, indefinable feeling stopped him. It would be wiser to first be sure that he was really seeing what he thought he was. He had better examine the contents of the envelope first. A lot calmer now, he draped the canvas back into place. He gently lowered the lid down, squeaking as it went, sounding just like a kitten looking for the mother cat.

< 05.03

After the security advisor's theatrical act in the Oval Office, the tense atmosphere was almost tangible. Before anyone dared to say anything, the president stood up. He raised his hand, looked around grimly and said loud and clear: "On the basis of my presidential authority, I hereby order the Secret Service to initiate the 'lockdown procedure' for the White House. All communication with the outside world must be blocked and everyone, except the members of the NSC (*National Security Council*),

must immediately go to the 'Cabinet Room' and stay there until further notice."

The few who had already started walking to the door, he stopped in a harsh voice. "All of you here will understand that everything that has just happened here must remain within the walls of this room. I will consult with the NSC and inform you as soon as possible about how we will deal with this situation."

He turned to his secretary and said briefly: "Jenny, you stay here too. I'd like to talk to you and Jimmy in private later."

He sat down again and remained silent until more than half of those present had left his room, under the supervision of the Security Service.

As soon as the door closed behind them, his security adviser could no longer hold back. "What now, boss? You don't believe that nonsense, do you?"

"Jimmy," the president sighed. "I've gotten used to your antics, but what you've done now ... It would have been a very comical interlude, had it not been for the opening of the proverbial 'Pandora's box'. We may thank God that, contrary to normal procedure, we did not broadcast my speech live."

He took a serious look at the remaining attendees. His gaze ended with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who was present at the recording as a representative of the armed forces.

"Douglas, as you know, I'm a man who doesn't take risks. That is why, in my capacity as chairman of the NSC, I am now instructing you to inform the 'Joint Chiefs of Staff' that they must assemble immediately in the 'Situation Room'. I want to discuss with the NSC and the entire board a possible change regarding our national security. On the basis of the information I will obtain, I will have to decide whether the preparedness of our armed forces should be scaled up."

He raised his hand to indicate that he hadn't finished speaking. "I'll inform you of my actions in a moment, but first I want the '*FOOTBALL*' brought to me as soon as possible."

He completely ignored the disbelieving and impatient faces and remained silent. Before he could address the question marks, he first had to do

something else.

< 05.04

Jerry listened to the friendly but unknown male voice. It seemed to him as if the sound of his smartphone ringing had been a starting shot. While he was still in the act of raising the device to his ear, the peace had suddenly been disturbed by a door that opened.

Automatically he had looked sideways and to his astonishment he saw a small group of people, led by an agent of the Secret Service, rushing out of the Oval Office. They were almost running, as they quickly disappeared through a door further on. Instinctively, Jerry felt that this wasn't exactly day-to-day business. He stood up, walked forward a little and let his eyes scan the surroundings. Unconsciously he tightened his muscles at the sight of several agents of the Secret Service, who now seemed to appear as if by magic. What the hell was going on here?

In the meantime he listened to the voice quietly speaking in his ear. The voice that by now sounded familiar to him, but which he could not place, asked him if he had time to discuss a matter of international importance. However, his brain did not have the time to process this request, because before he knew it, a Secret Service agent grabbed him from behind by the arm rather harshly. With a brief statement that the White House was in lockdown and he was being taken to another room, the cop pulled him along.

Surprised by being grabbed so suddenly, he let his smartphone slip out of his hand. As he tried to grab it and wondered what to do with the cart full of files, he instinctively resisted. He automatically braced himself and inadvertently moved his feet.

His body, weighing over 200 pounds, trampled the device to smithereens. Now he realized he'd better do what the cop wanted him to do. Arguing with him would be pointless. As soon as he had the opportunity, he would find out the reason and offer his help if necessary.

He willingly let himself be taken away. Had he looked behind him, he would have seen that the flattened device had turned into a muddy

substance.

< 05.05

It had all gone perfectly. At least it had seemed that way at first. The phone had been answered immediately and Rock had been able to tell his whole story. Relieved, he had let him know with a thumbs up that it would all be okay now, when suddenly things went totally wrong again. A degree worse even than the last time he had heard the roaring voice shouting through the phone from the other side of the line. Listening in disbelief, Oskar had heard one threat after another being fired at Rock. With sad eyes he had watched the sweat break out on his assistant, whose face became redder and redder as he tried to get a word in edgeways. He was not given the chance.

Immediately after the roaring tirade the connection was cut off. Rock looked at the receiver in his hand in amazement for a moment, after which he suddenly smashed it back onto the device in frustration. The beard beneath his red face shook in all directions.

“THIS IS RIDICULOUS! What kind of a half-assed man is he? I won’t be treated like that. By no one! Not even by our president. AND I WILL MAKE SURE HE KNOWS THAT!”

Before he could stop Rock, the latter had already picked up the receiver and dialed the six three times. He saw that Rock was bracing himself to tell a certain person the truth, but nothing happened. The beeps of a disconnected line came through loud and clear.

Rock impatiently pressed the hook and repeated the procedure, which yielded the same result. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and tried a third time. Nothing happened at all. The line was, and remained, dead. Leaving it, he dropped the receiver back on the device.

To the tacit, questioning look Rock gave him, he could only raise his shoulders. He, too, had no idea what could have caused them to no longer be able to make a connection.

Neither of them could know that because of the force with which Rock had slammed the receiver onto the device, a small switch in the phone

had come loose ...

< 05.06

At exactly the same time, in New York, the UN Secretary General, Dick Holyester, was sitting behind his desk. Concentrating fully, he read the last page of the extensive report on the operation '*Non quod videtur*'. Although it was only a summary of the full report, with a list of Spiderweb offenders attached, it was nevertheless as thick as an oversized phone book.

Since he was ultimately responsible for all the operations carried out by the UNBI, he should have been accountable today. However, the General Assembly had been postponed because unfortunately the quota for the required number of voters could not be reached for the time being. After Spiderweb had been dismantled, the painful truth had come to light. It turned out that over 40% of all UN politicians, both past and present, had provided services for Spiderweb. These politicians were now in jail, with no prospect of early release. As a result, the positions that had become vacant had to be filled again before a session could be put on the agenda at all.

Now that the worst was behind them, the added value of Hakon's circle of friends had turned out to be invaluable. Now that he could oversee everything, and therefore knew about GAIAS' expertise, he was well aware that without this secret support, the final result of the investigation into Spiderweb would have been much less extensive.

He had heard a lot of different things about this lately. From an almost sacred respect for Hakon Eriksson to an outright fear for his organization.

The effective way in which UNBI worked had dampened many people's enthusiasm to apply. To be honest, filling the vacancies had turned out to be quite difficult. Normally, the jobhunters for these gold-rimmed positions were fighting each other off. However, once it was decreed that one could only join after a thorough screening by UNBI, that had ended immediately.

He sighed with tiredness. Apparently, for many that threshold was an impregnable barrier. At least that meant something. Many people seemed to have some skeletons in the closet.

Of course, not everyone was equally honest and benevolent. He wasn't that naive. But it seemed to get worse and worse. Nepotism, corruption and maybe even crime. He wondered why people couldn't just be satisfied with what they had. Always trying to climb even higher up the social ladder and enrich themselves over other people's backs. Where did that urge come from anyway? Was Homo sapiens still the same primeval man under a thin veneer of civilization?

Disturbed by his smartphone, he closed the file. It was Hakon. Wondering what he had to say so early in the morning, he picked up and immediately heard a familiar woman's voice, kindly asking for his attention.

< 05.07

While waiting for the 'Football', the president of the US was staring in front of him, frowning and contemplating the next steps to be taken. After repeating the sequence for himself, he stood up, walked to the vault and opened it. Without hesitation he took out a letter sealed with the presidential emblem. As he walked back to his chair, he heard Douglas worrying about a general. Apparently this general did not see the immediate need for the Joint Chiefs of Staff to gather in the Situation Room.

As the door to the corridor opened, he sat down shaking his head. He ignored the gentle murmur of those around him and saw the Air Force Colonel, who was in charge of the suitcase, or 'nuclear football' this month, step inside.

Rumour had it that it was full of super-secret documents with which he could give permission for a nuclear attack, even while he was traveling. His own personal red button, so to speak. People were so gullible ...

Carefully, the colonel put the case on the desk, clicked the locks open for him and then took a step back.

As soon as he opened the briefcase fully, everyone could see the variety of documents and black books. He himself had no eye for that. He touched the lining under one of the handles, zipped open a compartment and pulled out a piece of sturdy paper resembling a business card. He attentively read what was on it, nodded contentedly and lifted the receiver of the red telephone. Then he dialed a three-digit number.

< 05.08

After he had closed the box, Esteban had forced himself to take a short break. Although he had preferred not to be disturbed, he had summoned the stewardess and ordered a large glass of cognac. While he was slowly sipping from it, he concentrated with all his might on the muted, monotonous roar of the aircraft engines.

He feverishly tried to distract his thoughts from the two objects in the box, which he did not succeed in doing. The awareness of what he had seen came to the foreground each time and squeezed away all other thoughts. Uncontrolled, his teeth chattered against the edge of the glass. He closed his eyes and tried very hard to control his nerves, which cost him more effort than he wanted.

Again his thoughts returned to the box. If what he had seen really was what he thought, it meant he had the most important relic of the Roman Catholic Church in his possession at this moment. It made him very nervous that something like this turned out to be part of his research into the 'Secret of God's Hand'.

Now his enormous interest in the unknown competed for priority with the fear of the secrets he was about to discover. The feeling that this great secret might be something he preferred not to know at all gradually increased. However, despite the fear he felt in every fiber of his body, he realized he couldn't get out of it. He could not avoid his command given by the Pope, and his sworn allegiance to him.

As he begged for God's help and deliberately breathed in and out calmly, he forced his body to submit to his spirit. Still, there was a cold sweat on his forehead and his fingers would not stop trembling.

With great reluctance he picked up the envelope and examined it from both sides. Apart from the papal seal and the written text there was nothing special to be seen.

He suppressed the urge to forcibly tear open the envelope and took the credit card again. Again he managed to cut the seal neatly and without damaging the envelope.

In spite of everything he was curious. He opened the envelope and saw several sheets of paper in it. Carefully he pulled out the pile and counted them. There were seven of them. Three were completely filled with the same graceful, flourishing letters as on the envelope. On two other sheets he saw a number of drawings amongst the text, including a sketch of a table like the one in the Pillar Room, which immediately caught his eye. An image of a hand, accompanied by a depiction of a crucified Jesus, also immediately caught his attention.

The sixth sheet was decorated with two colorful drawings. As soon as his gaze fell on them, they took his breath away. They depicted Michelangelo's two most famous works.

The first drawing was '*De Pietà*', the famous sculpture he knew from St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. He found the depiction of Mary with the dead body of Jesus on her lap to be of unparalleled beauty.

The second drawing was also well known to him. It was a section that could be found on the painted vault of the Sistine Chapel, the most well-known chapel in the Apostolic Palace in Vatican City, where Michelangelo had painted the most famous ceiling in the world. Among the hundreds of different figures the artist had depicted, he had immediately recognized the scene in which God reaches out to Adam's hand with an outstretched finger from his right hand.

Hissing, his breath escaped between his clenched teeth as his heart skipped a beat. Not only because Michelangelo was apparently involved in the secret, but especially because a red circle was drawn around the hand of God and around the two hands of Jesus shown in the first image.

What on earth could that mean? And how did Michelangelo's creations connect to all this?

Again he closed his eyes and recalled everything he could remember about this artist. Michelangelo's oeuvre, his ingenious designs and his

sensational works of art. A man who, according to his biographer Vasari, was 'God's representative on earth; who had come from heaven to show mankind the perfection of design art'. An understandable statement, Esteban thought. Michelangelo was, certainly in those days, an unprecedented genius.

His eyes flew open. Suddenly a wild thought sprang to mind. It might have been far-fetched, but could Michelangelo have been the painter who had painted the dome in the Pillar Room? He almost had to be. It may have been the position of the stars a thousand years ago, but of course the ceiling could have been painted later. And Michelangelo could certainly have done that, with just that perfection! And then those right hands of God and Jesus ... encircled by a striking red color. Of course, that meant something important. But what could it be?

He tormented his brain, but found no clue in his memory. He sighed deeply. All this just made the scope of the mystery bigger and bigger. He passed the sheets through his hands once more and finally looked at the seventh and last sheet. This one represented a copy of the world map that was also depicted on the floor of the pillar room. Of all the sheets he found this seventh the most intriguing.

Exactly in the middle was a note indicating that this center point was the catalyst, with a reference to the second page. He shuddered, almost afraid of the information he would find in the documents. Answers perhaps, or possibly more puzzling matters?

For the umpteenth time he got the restless feeling that he had explosive material in his hands. Something that wouldn't do him any good. All things considered, it looked more and more like a cover-up. But from what?

He realized that if he wanted to regain control of the situation, he had to start reading. He had to tackle those sheets now, there was no other way. Postponing it any longer made no sense. Ignoring his reluctance, his unwillingness and his fear, he pulled himself together. He took a few deep breaths and with his full willpower he forced his right hand to pick up the sheets. He sorted them by number, crossed himself devoutly, and began to read, begging God that he could handle this task and would not fail.

< 05.09

How should things proceed from here? Oskar had taken the time to review everything that had happened in the past day, while Rock was pacing back and forth behind him, hot-faced, making a lot of noise. Oskar left his angry head, chatter and tumult for what it was. Giving in to the frustration made no sense at all. Putting everything in order, he quickly made the necessary connections and formulated various results based on everything they knew at the moment.

After the unsuccessful attempt he had of course also listened back to this recording. Only then did he notice that the phone had been answered by the president's voice. After Rock had delivered his message, another voice, apparently that of the security advisor, had started the verbal confrontation. The man had shouted that he had never heard of the CSA. Oskar and Rock knew that they were the most secret of all secret services, but that the president's security advisor knew nothing about it would be unbelievable.

Although the CSA was operationally composed only of himself and Rock - invisibly embedded in the daily work of NASA - he knew that at least the president had to know of their existence. Surely one could assume that his security advisor had also been confided in? It was not without reason that their department was part of the secret information that was whispered to every president during the transfer of power. And then there was also the cashier, who made sure that enough money always flowed to their department. He didn't know their identity, because nowadays all communication went through an online webstore. Moreover, this only happened top-down. As long as nothing happened in the universe, everyone had their own, separate task. If something were to be spotted, only then communication was possible, and only allowed via the red telephone.

In all those years, he himself had only been invited once, via a request from the cashier, by the then president, who wanted to know more about the CSA and the secret file. The man turned out to be a lover of science fiction and wanted to know if there was possibly a core of truth in that

literature. Unfortunately, Oskar had been able to tell him very few shocking things and, like the president himself, he did not know the content of the secret information because it was sealed.

The only thing they both knew was that a CSA code received via the red telephone could usher in a new chapter in history, because it meant that it was very likely that extraterrestrial life existed. According to the protocols, the transmitted code was to initiate a certain procedure. A procedure they couldn't carry out now, because both times the president hadn't answered.

That something was wrong was a fait accompli. According to protocol, they were only allowed to use that old-fashioned red phone to deliver their message to the president in person. And now, at this very moment, the damn thing was leaving them in the lurch. They hadn't reckoned on that.

But perhaps not everything was lost. He turned to Rock, snapped his fingers a few times and shouted: "Hey, Rock. Listen to me!" To his amazement Rock immediately held his stride and looked at him intently.

"Listen. Now that the red phone has given up, we'll make one more attempt before we switch to plan B. Call your niece again and try to find out what's going on in there."

Rock's face immediately brightened up and in his eyes Oskar saw a glimmer of hope glowing. "Not a bad idea, chief."

Rock immediately grabbed his smartphone, called her number and ... then heard the distinctive sound of an unreachable location.

"Don't give up right away, Rock. I've got another idea. I just want to check something out. Give me your laptop."

As soon as he got the device from Rock, he typed the URL of the White House reception desk into the browser's address bar, which immediately showed the message that the White House was temporarily unavailable.

Mmm ... Disappointing. Quickly he typed another address in the bar. Almost immediately the penetrating red letters of INN's BREAKING NEWS flashed on the screen. In the running information bar below it he read that the White House and its surroundings were in lockdown.

A prominent reporter pointed to the White House, where several military transport vehicles were positioned. The vehicles opened their doors and dozens of soldiers jumped out like fleas from a dead cat.

Meanwhile the sound of overflying helicopters and low flying F16's lent a sinister atmosphere to the entire scene. The reporter raised his voice to rise above the noise and shouted that the entire White House had been shut off from the outside world without explanation. Sensationally, the man looked into the camera and said the president's whereabouts were unknown.

"According to unconfirmed sources, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have been summoned to a secret meeting, but so far no authority has given a meaningful explanation." The reporter remained silent and stared straight into the camera with a conspiratorial gaze.

"I'll be damned. What's going on in there?" Rock kept silent in amazement and looked at him questioningly. "Well. Looks like there's something serious going on. Maybe a bomb threat or something. That's probably why we can't get in touch properly. It seems to me we have no choice but to switch to plan B. Tell me exactly what that means."

Rock opened his mouth, but before a syllable could escape his lips, they heard a friendly sounding female voice say from his laptop: "Good morning, Professor Mirnat and Commander Veerhoes. I would like to have your attention for the following ..."

< 05.10

It was quieter than quiet in the US President's room, as all those still present were staring at him, insecure and tense.

The battery-powered digital clock on his desk had never really bothered him, but at this moment the seconds hand resembled something like a miniature cannon that continuously seemed to emit a small steel ball with a vicious tap.

He stared incomprehensibly at the telephone receiver in his hand and ended the call.

Again he dialed the three digits, listened for a while and repeated this process a third time, after which he carefully put the receiver back, with a thoughtful look. He had not expected this setback and straight-faced, he let himself sink back into his chair.

Apart from the ticking clock, the only sound was the creaking of the leather. Everyone seemed to hold their breath unconsciously. As he watched them, he could see from their faces that no one dared to disturb him anymore. That wouldn't last long, he knew from experience. He'd better stay one step ahead of them and explain things.

He thought for a moment, finally got up, nodded sympathetically to them and then said: "Well, I will briefly explain to you all the situation in which we find ourselves."

Calmer than he felt, he let his gaze wander over their faces once more. "Immediately after my appointment as leader of our beautiful nation, my predecessor confided in me a number of things that should not come to light. Things that could jeopardize our important position in the world and that should probably remain under lock and key forever. One of these, however, has now suddenly become topical."

There you had it, he thought, at the sight of their diverse reactions. Those rotten opportunists immediately saw their chance to take advantage of it later on. Damn it. But he had to. He had no choice.

With a gesture asking for silence, he continued: "I'll tell you as much as I can about it now. What I tell you here in confidence stays in this room. No letter - oral, written or digital - may leave this room without my express permission."

He paused for a moment and looked everyone seriously in the eye. "Can I trust you on that?" Both those he knew meant it and the vultures he wouldn't even ask to look after his shoes all gave their word with no hesitation.

Still looking serious, he resumed speaking. "After the transfer of this office, my predecessor urgently advised me to take three steps as soon as a certain code was heard. Two of which I have carried out, bringing the White House under lockdown and trying to contact the CSA." He gestured to the phone.

“However, that second step failed. I haven’t been able to get a connection. It seems that the number I was trying to reach has been disconnected. This forces me to speed up the third step: the NSC meeting involving all Joint Chiefs of Staff concerning the strategy to be followed. During the conversation between Jimmy and the Commander in Chief of the CSA, I received sufficient information to establish that the CSA has done its job. Namely...”

In order to increase the tension among the hyenas among them, he deliberately kept silent for a few seconds before releasing his explosive information. “Signaling extraterrestrial activity in our solar system.”

As he had expected, his ‘bomb’ broke the earlier silence into thousands of shards. Everyone was taken aback and they all tried to attract his attention at once. He didn’t want to waste any time and didn’t feel like letting everyone do the talking separately. Authoritatively he raised his voice.

“Therefore, on the basis of my presidential authority, I initiated these proceedings. With regard to this extraterrestrial activity, I must be able to give the correct interpretation as soon as possible, so that we can jointly develop a sound plan of action. In addition, it seems rather important to me to restore communication with the CSA,” he added sarcastically.

“Eh, boss?”, Jimmy interrupted him. “Are you really serious about this? How is it that I, the chief advisor to yourself on our national security, don’t know about an institution like the CSA? If your story is true, I find this unheard of.”

He had to admit Jimmy was right, in a way. But on the other hand, there were files labelled ‘for the president’s eyes only’. He had no choice but to point it out to Jimmy.

“That, my friend, is based on a presidential decree.” He held up an envelope with the presidential emblem.

“Issued in 1957, following the 1947 Roswell incident in New Mexico. In those intervening years, the CSA was established to monitor precisely these types of situations and make timely adjustments to the media. It goes without saying that this organization cannot function in public.”

“Well, that worked out damn well then,” he heard Jimmy mumble before looking away from him.

Well, since the guy hadn't known anything, he'd made quite a fool of himself. He understood damn well that he must be very frustrated. To avoid any worse, he'd better send him away.

"Jim, I couldn't hear you too well. I think it would be wise for you to go to the Situation Room."

< 05.11

In his packed office Alejandro sat behind his desk in a good mood looking at a pile of photographs. All of them gave a clear picture of a well-built, blond man. In one of the more detailed shots he saw that the man had blue eyes. By Western standards this person could certainly be called handsome. The explanation attached to the file informed him that the man was six feet tall, had good teeth, was healthy and reasonably muscular. The man could speak six different languages with ease. Not to mention his career. It was impressive to say the least! He had a long chain of high-profile arrests to his name.

And then that meeting! Unbelievable, so much coincidence was almost impossible. Or could it be the unconscious attraction that Alejandro had read about? Just to be sure, he had to read that chapter again later.

"Are you quite sure", he asked the man opposite him, "that it was him with whom Nakawe had had contact?" On the other side of his desk, the man nodded respectfully. "Yes, Your Grace. Research confirms it. Both met in The Hague on the state steps of the Peace Palace. They literally bumped into each other there, after which they rolled down together. Because I didn't hear about it until later, I got my hands on the images from the security camera. Almost simultaneously, I received the information our former business associate left to you. According to the assignment, he had hacked into the system there, checked it and documented it neatly. As soon as I found the identity of that man and the time of the encounter, I immediately passed it on to you." "And his hand?" "Yes, Your Grace. That's right. His right hand has the <-sign."

How was this possible? His target, whom he had been searching for so long, was being presented to him today on a silver platter. A man who apparently had appeared regularly in the news for years with the most

recent highlight, the fall of the Spiderweb empire. A man he had to admire, but who unfortunately belonged to the other side. It was a good thing that his confidant had passed on the name an hour ago. He had immediately searched on the internet and was overwhelmed by the information that could be found about him. Of course he had followed Spiderweb's roll-up, but the fact that he was suddenly confronted with its investigator today made him a little nervous. It was obvious. He had to be extra careful with this Hakon Eriksson. In particular, the effective detection methods of that UNBI, of which Eriksson was the head, had made him think. Given the search results with regard to Spiderweb, this group was the last one he wanted to target. Unlike that Spiderweb boss, he definitely wouldn't underestimate UNBI and Eriksson. He was convinced that his battle plan was thorough and watertight, but still he had accelerated getting rid of the loose ends, just to be sure. Of course, as expected, this had been carried out flawlessly. Just before the arrival of his confidant, the leader of his hellhounds had passed this on to him, and now...

The question his confidant asked interrupted his thoughts. "What I don't understand, Your Grace, is why you eliminated Fake. Someone like that who can get almost any information would have been useful to us in the future." "That's right, pal. But like any good general, I have a flexible strategy and multiple trump cards. And given the developments, I felt I needed to tidy up the loose ends right now."

He looked sympathetically at his confidant and continued: "I would like to note that your brothers in Mexico have done an excellent job. Really excellent. Everyone who has done the necessary work for us, including Fake, has been expertly cleaned up by the Guard. Quickly, neatly and efficiently. All connections with me and your brothers have been cut off, literally and figuratively. Should there ever be any research into it, it will end with a smoking mess and some gnawed bones in the jungle."

Very pleased with the excellent performance, he nodded warmly to his confidant. "Your hellhounds are quite something, dude. I'm very pleased."

His compliments visibly did his confidant good. "Of course, Your Grace. It is not without reason that every brother is carefully chosen, trained and tested."

Be assured that the Guard is at your disposal.

Each member will defend your plan with his life. As will I, by the way.”

Alejandro saw the hand of the man opposite him unconsciously stroking the emblem on his black coat. He smiled slightly. A still immaculate hand. His confidant had to be patient for a while before he too would wear the red and blue sign of fidelity. First there was a task yet to be performed. Quite an important task. Another compliment wouldn’t hurt. It was true, by the way. Those who wore the blue cloaks weren’t half as fanatical as his hellhounds.

“I thank you and yours for your loyalty and unwavering commitment. Quite a difference from the Princes, who could use some re-education. Most are no go-getters and not nearly as committed to my plan as I would wish. The luxury in which they have lived has softened them.”

For a moment he stared dreamily into the distance. Luxury ... It would be something. Their future living conditions would generate a completely different definition of luxury. A life of abundant wealth and unlimited power ...

He continued to speak almost immediately. “At the first meeting, I even had to gag a recalcitrant type to get some order into that lot.”

While the face opposite him changed into respectful admiration, he did not speak out the thoughts that complemented his sentence.

Soon, when they met the hellhounds, they’d change their behavior. He needed them for the children they were supposed to conceive. At least those would get a proper upbringing until they were adults and would form the backbone of Mankind 2.0. What would happen to them after that, the future would tell. In any case, the chaff would be separated from the wheat. Right now, members of his Guard were a lot more important. Most of them were well educated and some even had a university education. One had even turned out as an ICT specialist ...

“No, my faithful one,” he continued. “Don’t underestimate your value to me. In fact, one of your brothers has been closely involved with my communications center down here. Actually, I dare say this man is smarter than Fake. So after everything was set up and tested, it turned out Fake wasn’t really needed anymore. As soon as he carried out his last assignment, he was dealt with adequately. The results of his

research and yours put an end to my search. In addition, it is a very fortunate coincidence that the Lady remained silent for so long, until I had prepared my plan down to the last detail. That made me decide to label this day as 'the day when everything coincided'. In the future I will make it an official holiday.

The fact that Hakon Eriksson turns out to be the wanted one is a development that I didn't expect, but it makes things clear to me now."

He grabbed his book, flipped to page three, where an old, now yellowing photograph was wedged and pulled it out. He put the picture next to the detail picture he had looked at a while ago. He pushed them both forward and asked: "What differences do you see?"

His confidant picked up the photos, looked at them attentively and reacted in amazement. "What am I to see, Your Grace? The only thing that strikes me is the age of this one photograph. The clothes the man is wearing in it are more old-fashioned than what the man in the recent photograph is wearing. It must be the same person. If not, they're definitely both related."

He nodded quickly in agreement, and said: "It looks like it, doesn't it?" He took a look at his watch and added: "By the way, it's about time you prepared. When you're done with your next assignment and come back here, I'll have a surprise waiting for you."

< 05.12

In hardly the best humor, the president of the US rushed to the Situation Room. He didn't feel at all sorry for his secretary, who could barely keep up with him on her high heels. With her heels clicking loudly behind him through the corridor, he walked into the Situation Room.

Except for Jimmy, who turned towards him with a face like an earwig, there was no one else present, he saw. He could not muster much sympathy for his security advisor at this moment either. He walked straight in, sat down at the table and gestured briefly to Jimmy to sit opposite him. He ordered Jenny, who came in, her cheeks red with

shame, to sit down next to Jimmy. In a way he could laugh about it, when he saw the couple across from him restlessly moving back and forth.

Well, they could decide for themselves what they wanted to do in their own time. But in his office? The place where the world's most important decisions were made? That was going way too far, goddamn it!

Like an executioner who was about to impose the death penalty, he looked at them implacably. "Jimmy! Let's talk about tonight."

The sharpness in his voice was unmistakable as he let him know what he had managed to extract from Jenny. He then subjected the two opposite him to a ruthless cross-examination. After the necessary harsh answers from Jimmy and blushing apologies from Jenny, he had a good idea what had happened. Now he had one more thing to learn.

"Explain to me now. How come, Jimmy, I get the impression you've spoken to the CSA on the phone before? If I were you, I would cough up. That is, if you want to prevent me from firing you on the spot I need to be able to trust you one hundred percent, and if I find out there is anything you haven't told me, it's an instant exit for you. So ... fire away."

Observantly he watched Jimmy, who was clearly considering his options. After some deliberation, his safety advisor started to talk.

< 05.13

After his confidant had gone, Alejandro had first grabbed the file to go through the summary again. What surprised him was that this Hakon Eriksson, definitely not an ugly guy, was still single and still registered with his grandparents. Fake had indeed done a fine job, he had to admit. Even Eriksson's current whereabouts were in it, with satellite recordings and all.

Fake really had been a genius. Hopefully he hadn't discarded him too soon ... Whatever, he reassured himself. The world was big and full of talented people. Even within his own Guard.

He thoughtfully studied the photos from the thick file. As soon as his new ICT-specialist got back from his clean-up job, he would be able to take

over Fake's work and monitor how the fish took the bait, so that it could be reeled in.

He closed his eyes and thought carefully about how he would get his message across, because everything depended on this call. The choice of words had to be just right. He must not say too much, but also not give too little information. It had to be just enough to arouse Eriksson's interest and ensure he would take the plane straight away.

The right words had now been arranged in his head. He repeated them silently to himself while grabbing his specially adapted smartphone. He activated the voice converter, typed in the long international number and then pressed the green icon.

< 05.14

The arrival of Jerry's message had interrupted their search for the wrist ornament, giving them a good opportunity to say goodbye to Arda, Tjan, Tony and Onawa. Although a euphoric Tim had offered to take them to the airport, Saundra had said she had already arranged a taxi. An extra pair of hands to find the jewelry would come in handy as well.

After the required hugs and admonitions the foursome were waved goodbye to, and the people who stayed behind gathered in the kitchen. Since Marilyn and Lémarc joined the scavenger hunt as well, a brief discussion took place as to who would search where. Many hands made light work, because after half an hour they all gradually trickled back into the kitchen.

Nobody had found the thing. Marit, who had seen that the afternoon was already well advanced, had made tea and coffee and gave everyone a thick slice of home-baked sugar cake.

Grandpa was the last one to walk into the kitchen. With a thoughtful face he sat down at the table and immediately cut to the chase. "I thought while searching and slowly, in fits and starts, it came back to me."

He looked around the table and smiled wryly. "You'll have to forgive me, but I have 80 years of memories in my head. It may be a while before the entire library is searched."

In a serious tone of voice, he continued. "I suspect my son took that jewelry, because I seem to remember he had that bracelet tested for its gold value. I vaguely remember him saying he knew what to do with it. I didn't really pay attention to it at the time and I didn't have time to come back to it at all, because just after that Erik left. When he said goodbye, he told me he had to leave for a while to investigate something. Before he could do that, he first had to find someone, he said."

A light went on inside Hakon's head. "Wait a minute, Grandpa. I think I know who he was looking for. Holger and I went to Sven's house around three o'clock and his father told us that my father went there to return the book just before he left. He had asked for it a week before. In other words, my father knew of the book's existence. Sven's father told me that the book has been on their shelf since time immemorial."

The loud ringing of the old Bakelite phone in the hall interrupted him. "Oh, Hakon," Marit asked. "Would you answer the phone, please?"

He'd already moved his chair backwards. "Of course, Grandma," he answered, as he quickly got up. With long strides he rushed into the hall and tried to ignore the shrill ringing. As long as he could remember, he had horribly disliked that penetrating sound, and as fast as he could, he took the receiver off the hook.

"Good afternoon," he heard someone say. "I'm looking for the lord of the house." Dryly he replied: "You have found him. Please speak up." "Ah, nice to finally catch you. Gee, you're out a lot. I'm contacting you to make you a special offer on behalf of the Kongsberg newspaper. The first month you read the paper..." "Wait. Stop," he cried in surprise. "Is this a commercial call?" The enthusiastic voice reacted promptly. "Yes, and you can't get any better offer." He politely let the man speak, but after that he briefly replied: "Not interested."

He slammed the receiver on the hook and walked back to the kitchen. "Tssk ... a newspaper salesman," he told the others. "Couldn't you have blocked that one, Sandra?", he asked, somewhat irritated. "Sorry, Hakon. My parameters blocked incoming calls from outside Kongsberg, not local numbers. I'm blocking these right now." "Good idea, Sandra," Marit sighed relieved. "Then we're finally rid of that phone terrorist. We were called at the craziest times and to get rid of him, I kept saying that

the lord of the house was not at home. You know how we are, Hakon.” She looked at him apologetically. “We’re quick to feel embarrassed and put on the block. In a situation like this, it’s not easy for us to say no.”

Hakon thought it was a good thing that his grandparents also had a WORM, so for the most part Sandra could protect them. He picked up his story again.

“As I said before, Sven and his father couldn’t tell much more. Sven did remember that his grandfather took my father to the airport at the time. He dropped him off at the gate, which was then only used for international flights.”

His grandfather nodded in agreement. “We already knew that, Hakon.” “Yes, Grandpa. But Sven also remembered that Erik had a flight of almost a day ahead of him.” “That could very well indicate a flight to Mexico,” Barbara added. “I know from my research work that the flights took a little longer back then than they do now.”

Alasdair put his teacup on the table and remarked: “And so more and more pieces of the puzzle are falling into place. Sandra? What’s the status?”

“One moment, folks,” her voice came through to everyone. “SPY is still working on it. At this time, I can tell you that all relevant locations have been put under control. I’ve taken over the lockdown procedure in Washington. It will be maintained for the time being, until there’s more clarity about the position of the president and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I’ll make sure enough information is circulated to prevent panic. The secret weapon we’ve got there is doing its job. I’ll elaborate on that later. I may have something very special to tell you.”

< 05.15

After Special FBI agent Jerry Decker had passed through several corridors, he ended up in the Cabinet Room, where quite a few people were busy talking to each other in groups. The murmur echoed through the room. He recognized ministers, an ICT guru and a well-known reporter from INN, who was loudly expressing his displeasure to an agent

of the Secret Service. Listening curiously, he heard the man say that he was being held hostage and that the lockdown did not give anyone the right to restrict his civil rights. Especially not since he was a journalist.

Amused, he let the man rant and seemingly relaxed he strolled through the room. Quietly he observed the situation and listened attentively to what was being said around him. After strolling around for about fifteen minutes, he had gathered that the lockdown had been ordered by the president himself. Something rather unusual, he knew. Normally it was the Secret Service that initiated this on the basis of an external threat.

Other than that, he hadn't learned much. He saw that the Attorney General was also present on the other side of the room. He moved towards him. The AG had already recognized him and beckoned him closer.

However, before they could greet each other, the padded door was thrown open and a deafening siren entered the room. Or rather, an agent of the Secret Service who held his arm outstretched in front of him. In his hand was a mobile phone, which turned out to be the source of the noise. Above the annoyingly loud whine, the agent shouted: "Is Special FBI agent Jerry Decker here?"

Surprised, Jerry raised his hand. As if he was a serious criminal who deserved no respect, the man rushed towards him with an arrogant face. "Here! Your phone! We can't get that fucking thing off. Do something about it!" The agent pressed the device into his hand.

While the thing kept blaring, Jerry looked at the back and he indeed saw the FBI logo, his name and his badge number. Although he didn't understand it, he realized that this device had to be his own. However, he had never owned such a small thing and frankly he didn't understand one iota of it.

"Where did you find it?" he shouted out above the persistent siren. "In the waiting room," was the answer. "The same room where we got you from."

Unbelievably he shook his head. That just wasn't possible. His large format smartphone, absolutely necessary with his hands like coal shovels, must have been magically transformed into the smallest model. Like a woolen sweater that could only be worn by a toddler after a wash that was too hot.

He turned the little thing around again, so that he could attempt to eliminate that infernal noise. On the screen, in the same rhythm as the siren, a red icon in the form of a round push-button blinked. He could just read the text on it. 'TAP HERE!'

He hoped that pressing it would at least stop that terrible noise and tapped it with the nail of his little finger. Immediately, a wonderfully peaceful silence descended on the Cabinet Room.

< 05.16

"So ... if I understand correctly," Mirnat began, "you would like Rock and I to work with you, being a representative of the United Nations Secretary-General and Section C of the FBI?" "To convince the President of the United States of America not to make decisions without consultation between the two of you and myself," added the woman's voice from the speakers. "In order to make sure that our discovery does not destabilize the world order through stubborn actions," Mirnat concluded thoughtfully. "Correct, Professor. Our supercomputer has calculated all possible scenarios and has shown that if this information falls into the wrong hands and/or is misinterpreted, it will at least cause global unrest. I have openly and honestly confided our intentions to you and informed you of all the information at our disposal. Together, we must reach a consensus at this initial stage so that we can decide how to classify this phenomenon. Ultimately, the UNBI will have to act on behalf of all humanity. Acting on behalf of a country or a despot cannot be allowed.

We can seize this opportunity to bring clarity once and for all. No nation can assume it has the most rights anymore. Everything extraterrestrial and what goes on out there is important to every inhabitant of the earth."

Each busy processing what they were told, Oskar and Rock looked silently at each other. Out of the loudspeaker the voice had stopped as if it had invisible eyes and saw that both needed a moment to process the information provided. Exactly at the moment that Oskar opened his mouth to ask further questions about it, the speakers came back to life.

"It is absolutely imperative that whatever may be out there, be moulded in such a form that:

- A. it can be understood by everyone;
- B. it doesn't negatively affect life on our planet, and;
- C. this may be beneficial to the Earth and all its inhabitants."

"And if it is indeed an extraterrestrial entity that has enough intelligence to make contact, UNBI will, according to you, be the representative of Earth," Oskar expressed himself out loud without thinking.

"Whether or not this will be the case is irrelevant at the moment," the voice continued undisturbed. "It is impossible to predict how the situation will develop. The only thing that can prevent chaos is concerted action by the leaders of the great powers. Persuading the President of the United States of America would be a big step in the right direction."

Oskar already saw from his colleague's face how he would react. "What you say sounds like music to my ears," he heard Rock say ironically. "All fine and fantastic. Only, as Commander in Chief of the CSA, I have a few small comments. First of all, Mirnat and I are scientists who have been studying deep space for years. Now that we've finally discovered something of interest, perhaps you can imagine that we can't wait to explore this phenomenon more closely. Secondly, I have to admit that I am impressed by what UNBI can apparently achieve. Not just because of Spiderweb, but also because of the way you've been able to contact us, here. This bears witness to quite some knowledge and organization. However, and now coming to my third point, I don't see how I can verify that everything you claim is true. I would like to verify your statements somehow. How can I be sure that you are who you say you are? The world is full of half-assed pranksters, isn't it?" Rock had mentioned a tricky point there, Oskar thought. Even if they met this woman in person, they couldn't be sure. "Very understandable, Commander Veerhoes," the voice continued calmly. "Trust is good ..." "But control is better," Rock's rhythmic voice completed the sentence.

"Do you have a moment, gentlemen?", sounded the question shortly afterwards. Rock looked at Mirnat questioningly, but before he could open his mouth, his smartphone went off. Rock grabbed the phone, looked at the display and showed it to him, recognizing the familiar face of Dick Holyester.

“Take it?”, Rock asked briefly. Oskar nodded, at which Rock touched the blinking icon underneath the picture. Immediately the large research screen was shown. In full color Dick Holyester walked into the frame. He immediately started talking.

< 05.17

In the suddenly dead quiet Cabinet Room Jerry Decker saw the red icon in the image of the UN Secretary change and move. In no uncertain terms, the miniature version of Dick Holyester indicated to him that he had to hold the device to his ear. As if in a trance he reacted and now he heard the somewhat grating voice.

“Good morning, Jerry. This is not the phone call I thought I was going to make this morning, but urgent international developments require it. I urge you to listen carefully and just answer my questions. You’ve recently faced, as have I, the GAIAS group that helped Hakon dismantle Spiderweb. This group has alerted me to a global situation that requires collective action by humanity. You will be informed of this as soon as possible, but first we need you now to take the initial concrete steps. I ask you as Secretary-General of the United Nations: Will you help us?”

This must be a really weird dream, Jerry thought bemused. And seeing a multitude of curious eyes staring at him, the “Yes” automatically flowed out of his mouth.

“If you look at the display now,” continued Holyester, “you will see the official confirmation that, in addition to your work as a Special FBI agent, you are also the head of Section C of the FBI. You may wonder how this is possible and what exactly Section C means, but unfortunately there is no time to explain it in detail now. I’m going to ask you one simple question: Do you have every confidence in Hakon Eriksson?”

Without thinking, he answered. “Yes, absolutely. I trust him with my life!”

He heard relief in Holyester’s voice. “Excellent, Jerry. I will now hand you over to Hakon’s assistant. She oversees the whole situation and she has a mandate from me to take the necessary actions. One moment ...”

Moments later he heard a familiar, friendly woman's voice. Before he could say anything himself, she said: "Hello, Jerry. I know you were going to start your sabbatical today, but a coincidence of unforeseen circumstances has made you the most important person on the planet. I'll see to it that we won't keep you occupied any longer than necessary. I'll be honest with you, I can't foresee how long it's going to take. That depends, among other things, on your own efforts. What you're about to do on our behalf is connected to that. It's about getting a grip on certain information. If it is misinterpreted, there is a risk of an escalation of self-interest. For now, we ask you to take one necessary action."

< 05.18

"And that's exactly how it happened," Jimmy concluded his story with a face like a thundercloud. This disembowelment had clearly cost him more effort than the one he had just told him about, the president thought to himself. "Well, well, Jimmy," he said. "That's quite a story."

The fact that those two were attracted to each other didn't concern him. But the fact that they had had the miserable courage to choose that exact location for their night escapade, was a step too far. Had they not been there, the CSA would have been able to reach him in the prescribed manner. Now they had caused quite a problem. Damn it.

He looked at his secretary, whose face was glowing like an overworked tea kettle. For the time being forced to turn a blind eye to their stunt, he said harshly: "You are lucky that I don't have time to respond to this adequately now. I'll spare you further details, but I want to know more about your conversation with the CSA, Jimmy. Did I understand correctly that two men were involved in that conversation?"

His safety advisor nodded. "Yes, that's right. They said about the same as three quarters of an hour ago, except for one of them. He seemed rather upset by my er ... bold action. The other man took over, but I can't remember exactly what he said."

"Clouds of gas that came together and lit up like a star. According to Article 1(2)(3) of the CSA Protocol, that situation would meet the

‘extraterrestrial threat’ definition,” Jenny interjected. “Yes,” Jimmy agreed, and he gave her a piercing look. “Something like that it was, I believe.”

Without sparing him, he asked if Jimmy had heard another name. “Um ...”, started Jimmy. He was already wanting to end the interrogation when Jenny opened her mouth again. As if she didn’t see Jimmy’s now thunderous face, she answered quickly: “Rock Veerhodes.” A little more hopeful now, he summed up the situation.

“Good. We know what it’s about and we have a name. Now we need to find out where the CSA is.” Again it was Jenny who answered. “Florida, the NASA Kennedy Space Center,” she said decisively.

“How would you know?”, Jimmy asked in a frustrated tone. “Shut up, Jimmy,” ordered the president. He saw that his security advisor felt embarrassed by Jenny’s answers, but that was no reason to snarl at her. “Tell me, Jenny?”, he asked nicely.

“Well, that’s not so hard. That Commander in Chief, Rock Veerhodes, is my uncle who lives in Florida. He’s an astronomer and works at NASA. His boss’s name is Mirnat. Professor Oskar Mirnat.”

Now that her face no longer looked like an overripe tomato, she looked like his own, competent secretary again. “See, Jimmy,” he said approvingly. “That’s my Jenny. She has supported me for years, with a sharp mind and a memory like an elephant.”

He saw that Jimmy was trying to defend himself. Even if he’d had the time, he had absolutely no desire to hear him out. He silenced him in advance by asking Jenny to tell him more.

“There’s not much more I can say. I know he works there, at least, he was three years ago. We had a family day there back then, when my uncle gave us a tour of the NASA Kennedy Space Center complex that ended at his place of work. A huge space full of displays showing parts of the universe. You really felt like you were standing among the stars. There was no indication that he was working for the CSA.”

This time it was Jimmy who commented. “That could be,” he supplemented her. “Security organizations are generally embedded in normal organizations. As some kind of camouflage, I’d say. They do their actual work in the shadows.”

“See, now we’re getting somewhere,” the president said with satisfaction. “This will help me. As soon as that phone’s fixed, at least I’ll have some information. And if that phone can’t be repaired, at least we know where to go.”

Jimmy leaned forward. “Something just occurred to me. In that conversation this morning, that Veerhooes was talking about lights that were supposed to be some kind of signpost to the center of the universe. I didn’t understand anything about it. How could I have taken such nonsense seriously? Be real. I was firmly convinced they were a bunch of clowns pulling a prank. By the way, I assumed that old-fashioned phone wasn’t connected at all. I thought it was just there for decoration, as a memento of days gone by.”

Not very forgiving, he told Jimmy that he had no business in the Oval Office at night and had to stay away from his personal belongings. “Because you had to play the comedian, you got me in trouble. I will now withdraw to go over those old instructions again. In the meantime, you have to make sure that everyone we need gathers here as soon as possible. Besides, you need to rake up everything you can on Mirnat and Veerhooes. I suppose Jenny can help you out a fair bit. As soon as the phone’s repaired, you let me know immediately. The same goes for the information on both gentlemen. Lastly, have our enemies and allies checked for greater than usual activity. I want to make sure we’re the only ones who have knowledge of what the CSA passed on to us.”

He began moving resolutely, opened the door and almost bumped into the head of the Secret Service. While the group of people he had with him walked into the Situation Room, the man took him aside. Whispering, he informed him that an FBI Special Agent was waiting for him in the Oval Office. A Jerry Decker. The agent had said he had important CSA information for him.

< 05.19

For a moment everyone looked at each other speechlessly, then they all started talking at the same time and speculating about what on earth Saundra might mean. As if an invisible knife had cut off all word flows at

a single stroke, the conversations stopped exactly 4 minutes and 13.22 seconds later. Sandra came through again.

As one, everyone turned around and looked at Marilyn, when Sandra continued: "So it took a while, Marilyn, but the '*nanopicocopy1*' program has now been tested in practice twice and is functioning admirably well. No bugs have been detected."

With a loud cheering cry Marilyn jumped up from her chair wildly. As the chair crashed to the ground, Marilyn raised both arms. In a cloud of blond hair, a broad smile almost split her face in two. Euphorically she jumped up and down. "Eureka! EUREKA! EUREKA!"

< 05.20

Esteban had taken the time to read everything carefully. Even twice, so that he was sure that what he had read had actually penetrated his brain. After the first time he was forced to set it aside in order to regain control of his body with breathing exercises and alcohol support. The tension had made his hands shake, causing the letters to dance in front of his eyes.

Now, after the second time, he still sat in shock and heavy-laden, processing the acquired knowledge. As he was reading, his hope that it would not be as bad, had crumbled like a glacier due to climate change, and fell past him like loose chunks. The same was true of the rose-colored glasses through which he had seen 'his' church so far. Like a crystal vase lying on a hard floor in thousands of pieces, his naivety had collided with reality and been smashed into smithereens.

How gullible he had been. His body could barely cope with the shock when he realized exactly what the 'Secret of God's Hand' was. Not because of the fact that something had been withheld - after all, that was within his area of expertise - but precisely the withheld fact itself. Indeed, this secret was never to be revealed. No matter how contradictory it seemed to be to faith in God, this knowledge would irrevocably destroy the foundations. The existence of the Roman Catholic Church would be endangered. And it would certainly not stop there. What he had read, he could barely grasp. It was much, much more than he had ever suspected.

His faith in God would not suffer because he knew how to interpret this secret. The vast majority of mankind would certainly not be able to.

He couldn't help but feel great admiration for those who had kept all this under wraps for so long. It had taken his predecessors a great deal of time, money and human lives to keep this secret hidden. Among other things, it must have been a gigantic job to keep the work of the two Italian geniuses a secret. All the pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place when he read the names of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. How, at the beginning of the 16th century, they jointly laid the foundations of the Pillar Room, the cell complex and the painting of the starry sky over a period of ten years.

Now that he knew what the 'Secret of God's Hand' meant, he knew what his goal was. Better said, several goals, of which keeping this secret was the main one. Whatever happened, he had to make sure that nothing, absolutely nothing came out. Of course, nothing could be allowed to end up on the internet either, because then the Apocalypse would erupt. He could not take any risks and immediately detached his smartphone from the light. He stopped the recording and then deleted the file. He opened the R.C.C. app and quickly tapped two orders to his adjutant. The first was that he had to examine the center of the Pillar Room meticulously and report everything that stood out to him personally. In the second one he gave the order that he should not be disturbed until further notice and that he himself would contact his adjutant later for further consultation. After this he put all the papers back in the envelope and with the lid squeaking protestingly he secured them in the box again. Now it was time to calmly make a plan of action. He saw on the flight monitor that it was almost 4 pm and he still had 12 hours to prepare.

Now that he was his own calm self again, he called the stewardess, who appeared shortly after his call. Her tight face, on which scarcely any courtesy could be read, unfortunately detracted from her graceful appearance.

He gave his order. Without a word, the woman turned around, rushed to the pantry and came back a little later with a large glass in her hand, which she placed almost casually on his table. On his remark that he did not want to be disturbed, she nodded barely noticeably. As she walked away, he could swear that he heard her murmur "Enjoy, asshole". That

wasn't really acceptable, he thought. He had to tell his aunt that he expected better service when he used the family plane.

He pushed his seat back a little, settled down and took a sip of the delicious cognac. Then he closed his eyes. He first had to think carefully about how much he would entrust to his adjutant and his retinue and what they should still investigate.

< 05.21

Stunned, Hakon stared at Marilyn's exceptional behavior. He had never seen her behave so exuberantly. He would have expected something like this from Arda, but not from her. Alasdair must have thought the same, because before anyone reacted, he interrupted her.

"Yes, yes, Marilyn. Eureka. Fine. We got that. Something very special must have happened, because you're acting most out of character."

The lord's words seemed to have sobered up their blonde genius. Smiling blissfully nonetheless, she picked the chair up and made a move to sit down again. Then everyone heard Joost's voice coming in from Amsterdam.

"What do you think, Marilyn? Did it work out?" Hakon saw her face light up again. "Yes, Joost! Thank God we have you."

Again, it was Alasdair who intervened. "Wait a minute. Let's all shut up for a moment."

He waited until Marilyn had taken her seat again and made a gesture that encompassed the whole table. "Marilyn, what is wrong with you? Would you be so kind as to explain to us why you interrupted the discussion about our scenario so unexpectedly?"

Hakon saw a slight blush crawling up from her neck as she bent her head slightly and looked down. "I made a mistake," she confessed. Hakon couldn't believe what he had heard. Marilyn making a mistake. Her? That scared the hell out of him. As the possible consequences for the functioning of Sandra, GAIAS and all the individual members went through his mind, he saw Marilyn's head rise. She openly exclaimed: "Yes. I have to admit that. I made a mistake. Two, actually, I have to say."

This time he wasn't the only one who got scared. Both in the kitchen and in his ear he heard various exclamations, remarks and questions. "What did I say?", Alasdair's voice sounded above the racket. "This isn't gonna get us anywhere, folks. People, discipline please! Now let Marilyn tell her story without interference, okay?"

Fearing that Marilyn had accidentally made another mistake when repairing the first one, he listened to her nervously. "They were, I must admit, two huge mistakes. But erm ... As has often been the case, mistakes can have a positive effect. It started with me..."

This time it was the hellish ringing of the phone from the hall that interrupted her. As if bitten by a snake, Hakon jumped up. While rushing down the hall, he looked back at his grandparents. "Grandpa! For your birthday, I'll give you an extra present. A new phone. This noisy thing is going out the door!" Arriving at the Bakelite monster, he grabbed the receiver off the hook wildly and shouted angrily: "Yes?"

< 05.22

"Well, gentlemen. I have listened to the conversation between you and Sandra and want to let you know that Sandra has my full trust. I understand you're feeling ambushed and will do my best to come to an agreement with you. I hereby confirm that all the information you have just heard is entirely correct. I concur with the predicted consequences that Sandra has informed you about. If we let everything run its course, global chaos will break out in the foreseeable future. I want to prevent that in every possible way, or at least try to keep it within limits. I would therefore also like to emphasize that our cooperation should make it possible to persuade your president to support this objective."

Oskar watched Holyester lower himself laboriously onto the Chesterfield couch. The man was getting old ...

"As you heard from Sandra, your instructions give you leeway to make your own decisions if the prescribed protocol can't be followed. In this case, that means using the red phone to contact your president.", the Secretary-General continued calmly. "I guarantee you that, if you agree, every effort will be made to ensure your meeting with him. At the same

time, steps are being taken to bring the FBI agent from Section C into contact with your president. How long do you think you'll need, Sandra?"

Seamlessly, her voice followed that of Holyester. "Approximately 10 minutes, sir." Holyester nodded thoughtfully. "You heard it, gentlemen. No more than 10 minutes separate us from a major landmark in the history of mankind. Can we humble ourselves and allow self-interest to give way to a world collective? Or will we find ourselves in a confusing race?"

His eyes were staring at them from the big screen. "Gentlemen, can we count on your cooperation?"

As far as he was concerned, Oskar thought to himself, they agreed right here and now, but Rock obviously thought otherwise. "I hope you'll excuse me, but I want to talk to my colleague first. Privately. Can you come back in five minutes?"

Holyester nodded, but it was Sandra's voice they heard. "That shouldn't be a problem, Commander Veerhodes. If necessary, we'll arrange for your president to wait for you."

There was an almost inaudible click and the large research screen suddenly went black.

"Jeez, Oskar. What have we gotten ourselves into now? If need be, they'll keep the president waiting ... Jeez!"

Rock's beard shook in disbelief. "This all sounds incredible, Mirnat. I honestly don't know if I can believe it all. What do you think of this whole development?"

Oskar briefly shrugged his shoulders. He was a scientist through and through, and had already made his decision. From the moment Holyester appeared on the screen, he knew he didn't want to miss this opportunity for anything.

"Rock, it's actually quite simple. What that Sandra explained to us, I totally agree with. We are on the eve of the greatest scientific and political challenge. We don't have to worry about the political side. They say we'll have contact with the president so you can tell your story. What he does with that is not our business. All you can do is get him to accept Holyester's point of view. And I have to agree with Sandra.

The circumstances in which the CSA was set up back then can't be compared to today's. How much knowledge hasn't been acquired since then? The world's population is growing explosively and I can't say that politics on a global scale is functioning so wonderfully ...

All in all, I am in favor of entrusting UNBI with the final responsibility.

Then we can indulge in the scientific part. I could never have imagined there would be a link between pyramids, those strange marble tables, certain people and our constellation of shining gas clouds. But to be able to figure out that connection is, of course, a great challenge. And let's face it, if we let it go, there are plenty of others who will seize this opportunity without a second thought. All in all - with the sensitive information entrusted to us over the past quarter of an hour, the ease with which our CSA has been discovered here and the involvement of Dick Holyester himself - I am convinced that there is no foul play here. So, as far as I'm concerned: Yeah. I want in. But, uh ... You have the final say in this, Rock. After all, you're the Commander in Chief of the CSA and you bear the ultimate responsibility for every decision you make."

Hoping that he had managed to persuade Rock, he watched him deliberate, until suddenly a resolute look appeared on his face.

"All right, Oskar. I guess you're right. We have a duty to inform the president anyway and I'll do my absolute best to convince him."

< 05.23

Hakon had just pressed the receiver to his ear, when he heard a few clicks and then a voice which had obviously been transmitted via a voice modulator. Immediately on his guard, his earlier annoyance disappeared. Quickly he put his hand over the microphone and whispered to Sandra that she should immediately investigate the origin of the caller.

"Already on it, Hakon," he heard her calm voice in his head. "Remember, your house is under full SEC1 surveillance. Keep the line open as long as possible, because we're dealing with someone who wants to keep his identity a secret. I've found that he uses a VPN connection. That means a lot of fragments of data coming in from across multiple satellites. Not a simple puzzle, it's going to take time to solve."

In the meantime he listened to the monotonous voice, announcing for the second time that he had a message for Hakon Eriksson. He uncovered the microphone and let the caller know that he had him on the line now. "Okay. Then listen carefully." The robotic voice continued. "I know you've been looking for your father since you were a kid. I know what happened to him over thirty years ago. I know how he is doing now, and I know where he is."

He tightened his grip on the receiver as if he wanted to crush it. A massive smile appeared on his face. He listened almost euphorically. "If you'd like to know these things as well, you'll make sure you board the next scheduled flight to Yucatán, Mexico. Make sure you're out front of the arrivals hall within 24 hours. You'll be picked up there. Come alone and leave your UNBI buddies at home. We'll keep an eye on you."

Like snow in the sun, the monotonously pronounced words made the euphoria and smile disappear from his face. "We know all about you, like the fact that you are currently in Kongsberg. As soon as we notice that you are not sticking to the plan, we will withdraw and you will never, ever see your old man again. Oh yeah ... That chick you rolled down the stairs with says hi. Your time starts NOW!"

Before he could even say a word, the connection was terminated. Behind him he heard his grandmother weeping loudly in the kitchen. Sandra must have let everyone listen in ...

Already affected by the menacing message, he ran into the kitchen with a heavy heart. Concerned, he saw Marilyn and Barbara comforting his red faced and tearful grandmother. His grandmother saw him, stretched out her arms and hugged him tightly. Simultaneously sobbing and laughing, she confessed to him that she had given up hope a long time ago. And now, after all those years during which she was convinced that Erik had to be dead, they got this message.

In the tearful, sweet, wrinkled face, he saw wild hope flare up in her old eyes. "Oh, Hakon...", she stumbled. "Could it really be that my son is alive somewhere in Mexico?"

She loosened herself from his arms and walked excitedly towards Torstein, who pulled her tight against himself. Although his grandfather stood proud as a statue in the midst of all the emotion, Hakon saw from

his facial expression that he was no less hopeful. He stepped up to both of them and whispered: "Grandpa, if there's a chance Erik is still alive, I'll make sure he comes back. Whatever happens, he'll come back."

< 05.24

Alejandro pushed his laptop aside and leaned back satisfied. Luckily everything had turned out alright after all. The first call had gone wrong because he had entered the number wrongly himself, the second attempt had failed because he had received the busy tone. Before he tried again, he had forced himself to wait for ten minutes.

Agonizingly slowly, the clock had ticked away the seconds until he allowed himself to pick up the phone. For the third time he had entered the number and yes, bingo! This time his call was answered. Probably by Eriksson's grandmother, because after only a few seconds of noise Hakon himself had come to the phone.

He had listened back to his carefully thought-out text and he had been more than satisfied with the result. He hadn't said anything too much, but just enough to make sure Eriksson would walk into the trap. Lovely.

On his smartphone he set the expected time of arrival and took an overview of the timelines. Of the three different timelines, one was completed. The second one was running and the third would start soon.

He looked at the actions that had been carried out and still had to be done, and realized that he had retained the initiative flawlessly. Now all he had to do was make sure it stayed that way.

To be on the safe side, he picked up the book and looked up the chapter in which the magnetism was described. Now that he had read it carefully for the umpteenth time, he concluded that he need have no doubts. He had indeed interpreted its description correctly. How, he didn't know yet, but for some reason this magnetism had been activated. Still, he couldn't have trusted Eriksson to go in search of his counterpart. A simple phone call, however, had been enough to assure him of that.

A brief knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. His personal servant put his head around the door and let him know that the guests had

arrived. They had seated them in the most luxurious room and provided them with some food and drinks. The head was withdrawn and the door clicked shut again. Very good. That also went smoothly.

Unfortunately he could not make his appearance until later, because he still had a lot to do. Although he preferred to realize his plans with a strong hand, he had devised a different tactic to find out the truth. With reason, logic and ultimately with authority.

The first part was set in motion. To create a good basis, the women would be treated with all due respect. The enormous luxury, wealth and power would soon guide them in the right direction. In no time at all they would tell him everything he wanted to know. It was up to him to exert the required pressure at exactly the right moment. All three of them would sing like canaries.

He got up to go to work, but still could not restrain his curiosity and sat down again. He pulled his laptop towards him, flipped it open and activated the monitors. Immediately the images from all the cameras came to life on the screen. Apart from a few servants who were in the Golden Hall, the only signs of life were in the room where the women were. Under the watchful eye of his guard, two were eating and the third one was lying stretched out on the sofa.

He watched them attentively, now that he could see the three, albeit digitally, in person. In doing so, he had to conclude that the photographs had not exactly captured the real beauty of that Nakawe. Although the consequences of her unexpected journey were clearly visible, she radiated something special. This woman was a feast for the eyes and immediately touched his senses. He felt a pleasant vibration arising in his groin. Of the three, it was Nakawe who had the special radiance of the Lady.

With difficulty he turned his gaze away from her to look at the other two. That young girl who was lying there like Sleeping Beauty wasn't exactly ugly either. A pretty face and a lovely figure.

His eyes focused on the third woman. The old witch must have looked very pretty back in the day. Even now, though she must clearly have seen better days, she radiated the same haughty air. He would squeeze all the knowledge out of that wrinkled body, after which she could go out along

with the waste. He would personally throw her into the hellhole and enjoy the echo of the fall.

Where the other two were concerned, he now knew for sure. Nakawe would be his first wife and the other one would be a delightful addition. Smiling, he saw himself sitting on his throne. Flanked by those two women - his wives - and a multitude of Chosen Ones around him. Nodding with absolute conviction, his head moved quickly up and down. These two wonders of nature had been created for him. Obviously!

< 05.25

Within half an hour after his conversation with Dick Holyester, Jerry sat all alone in the Oval Office, waiting for the president. Although it was a great honor to be here, he didn't feel at all happy. By accepting the most important assignment ever offered to him, he feared his own plans would be smashed to smithereens. He could forget his sabbatical for the time being and with it the planned visit to the Netherlands and the exploration of the city of Alkmaar. At this moment he could only hope that he would get the chance sometime in the future.

And then there was his family. Just when he had the chance to save his marriage, he had to go away again. The umpteenth disappointment for his wife, whom he had to convince that he had no choice and again had to prioritize his work above his family.

He shifted restlessly. But how on earth could he have refused? Without Hakon and GAIAS, he wouldn't even have seen America again. He'd have been trampled to a bloody pulp by a stampede in Texas. He shuddered at the memory of the near-death experience. In any case, the euphoric mood of an hour ago had collapsed like a soggy soufflé. What's more, he was downright nervous about accomplishing his task. A matter of national importance. A task that was so important that he had been given an incredibly high rank just like that. Chief of the FBI's secret section C, no less. Although he didn't want to know how everything had been arranged, he was very impressed that GAIAS had managed it so quickly.

In his mind he took off his imaginary hat to Sandra, who had sent him his new ID. The pile of references attached to it were downright impressive. He had made himself known to the Secret Service and as soon as he had been checked by them, he had been treated like a king. The president had been informed immediately, after which they had escorted him here. After assuring him that the president would speak to him with the highest priority, they had left him alone in the Oval Office.

The worried line between his eyebrows doubled when he realized the position he was in now. That he was the one who found himself precisely at the crossroads that determined the future of mankind. That he, Jerry Decker, had to make sure the right turn was taken. Although it caressed his ego, he honestly doubted whether he could handle this important task. The bare facts and events presented to him by Holyester and Sandra had almost taken his breath away. On top of that was the fact that Hakon stood in the middle of it like a passive victim. He didn't even want to imagine what it was like being overwhelmed by visions and blackouts over and over again. But what worried him most was the fact that he had to share the information with the president in order to persuade him. Knowledge that absolutely could not be spread any further. He didn't like that at all. Because, although it was denied over and over again, the White House often turned out to be as leaky as a sieve.

The opening of the door interrupted his train of thought. The big boss rushed in and, as he shook his hand firmly, asked simply "What can you tell me about the CSA?".

< 05.26

In Mexico, in the communication cell of the monastery of the Dominican nuns, all was quiet. Dead quiet, now that the last nun had left. Lovingly caressing her hand, the Mother Superior sat beside the body of her friend who had just died, who had finally found peace and was now in God's Light. With Mella's hand in hers she contemplated the almost 70 years they had spent together.

Both born in the slums of Mexico City, they had fled their homes at an early age and ended up on the streets. Like so many other stray children, they were soon recruited to do all kinds of chores for a local drug lord. In addition, it was quite common for girls like them to help the men folk with their comforts, in which mistreatment was not uncommon. Terrified that she would not survive the fourth miscarriage, she had been crying in Mella's arms when a nun happened to see them. That nun had lifted her into the car with Mella's help. When she closed her eyes, she could still feel the silver cross tapping against her cheek. The nun had taken them to her convent, where they had been given the opportunity to exchange their miserable existence for the quiet order and regularity of a convent. No more pain, no more cold and no more hunger.

After their entry and after having wandered around the world for a few years to help and spread the faith, they were both asked to join the Order of the Dominican Nuns. Now, barely 7 decades later, she could not have imagined a better life.

She looked down on the still body of her friend with affection. It had been only 3 days since Mella had sounded the alarm, putting an end to the serene peace that had reigned here before.

She smiled silently. A moment never to forget. In her cell she had just poured her daily glass of red wine when the deep sounds of the bronze bell had come through the window. Shaking with shock, she had emptied the glass in one sip, after which a second one quickly followed the first. Coming to herself and strengthened by the energy-rich liquid, she had immediately risen to carry out her sacred task to perfection.

Accompanied by the unusual murmur that had surrounded her on all sides, she had walked straight to the communication cell, where she had found Mella. She was happy that it had been precisely her who had witnessed the moment the Lady had spoken. Everyone had known that Mella's earthly existence was almost over, so the fact that she had been granted this miracle, must have been a sign from God Himself.

Mella had informed her in detail of the sudden event, so that it was clear that all conditions had been met. They had nodded at each other encouragingly, after which Mella had dutifully picked up the phone. Quietly she had tried to connect, and while her friend had been waiting

for someone on the other side to pick up, she had started to do her own task.

This one was a bit more complicated. At first it had taken her a lot of effort to get the hang of working with the telegraph. But the many years of monthly exercises had made her quite adept. She had sent the message like a seasoned professional, just as if it was something she did every day. After spending some time with her friend, she had walked on to the chapel, where her nuns had already gathered. She had led them in prayer and after the service she had divided the remaining tasks. Lastly, she had visited the Lady. Together they had prayed and thanked God for the special gift that had revealed itself so suddenly, after which she went to see Mella. With her Bible on her lap, her friend could not have done anything else but wait.

She had personally seen to it that Mella was provided with everything she wanted, while the whole monastery waited for the answer together with her. They had waited a long time, but in the end the redeeming word had come.

As soon as she had been informed, she had rushed to the communication cell, where she had found Mella on the simple bunk, mustering her last strength. Then four nuns had alternately sat at her bedside and prayed for a gentle transition.

When it was almost time, she had administered the last sacraments to her friend. Mella's happy smile had shown that her friend still realized that she had accomplished her sacred task. She had passed away peacefully. Her friend's work was done.

But hers wasn't yet. Her task would not end until the guard arrived from Rome. She didn't know what would happen next. It would not be revealed until after his arrival.

The silence was cautiously interrupted by a nun's gentle entry. Silently she handed her a strip of paper. Her heart missed a beat because of the tension. Would this be the redeeming word?

She quickly deciphered the text, and more to herself than to the nun waiting, she said: "Our prayers have been answered. At last we may receive the high ecclesiastical leader."

Now she turned directly to the nun: "Gather everyone in the chapel. I have an important announcement to make."

< 05.27

Since he had to wait for Sandra to come up with information anyway, Hakon had left the kitchen. He needed rest.

With Holger in his wake, he had walked to the waterfront, onto the jetty. In the full sunlight, he tried to sort everything out, because after that unexpected phone call he felt like he had ended up on a whitewater course.

His hands, which were stuck deep in his trouser pockets, ballooned into fists. This was something he couldn't have imagined at all. He had absolutely no idea what to do.

Not used to having no control over anything, a thick wrinkle of thought pulled a deep groove between his eyebrows. Now that he was reflecting on all the events of the day, he had to confess that his down to earth view of the world had been profoundly affected.

Entirely absorbed by his thoughts - almost as if in a trance - he listened to the water lapping gently against the dock. The rocking motion of the Stormbryter on the swaying water and the light breeze that disheveled his hair had a hypnotic effect. His heart rate dropped and slowly he felt himself calm down and his head clear.

Suddenly he felt a hand land on his shoulder. Without looking back, he knew it wasn't Holger's, but his grandfather's.

Torstein stood next to him, made an apologetic expression and immediately started to speak. "I'm more sorry than I can say, Hakon. I can only hope that revealing our family secret hasn't put you in an impossible position. I turned 80 today, boy. Your grandmother and I thought we shouldn't put it off any longer. Now at least we can tell you in person."

His grandfather looked at him uncomfortably. "We really had no idea that everything we discovered today would have such an impact. And certainly not that our family sign would turn out to be such an important

link in history. Your grandmother and I are pretty upset now that we heard that Erik might still be alive. We don't know if we can believe it, but at the same time we wholeheartedly hope it is true. I don't think we'll sleep much until we're sure. And that won't be the case until you, hopefully with your father, are here together in front of us."

Hakon clenched his jaw. He was torn between two worlds. He wanted to reassure his grandparents and tell them everything was going to be okay. But he couldn't do that. He still knew far too little. Although he himself was convinced that Erik was not dead, there were still too many uncertainties. It was quite possible that the caller had not lied, but they could just as well have been taken for fools. Because of Spiderweb he was well known as the head of UNBI and it was not inconceivable that he was being lured somewhere. Very likely, even.

It had taken him less than half a second to come to this conclusion and think of an appropriate answer. He managed to conjure up a half smile on his face and in as quiet a voice as possible he said: "No, Grandpa. You and Grandma don't have to apologize. Quite the opposite, I am glad that you have told me everything now and not earlier. Because with the options available to me now, I am in a much better position than Erik was back then. With the support of GAIAS I have a real chance to discover the truth and find out what happened to my father. On the other hand, I have to admit that there are still a lot of uncertainties. Including why that aberrant DNA is passed on to all male offspring."

His half smile disappeared for a moment, only to return as a whole one. "I have to say I had a slightly different idea of how today would be this morning. What you showed me and the others, I didn't expect in a million years, Grandpa. A real family secret! It is like an exciting boy's book. Who wouldn't want to have such a unique past? And on top of that, we got some news about Erik. It almost looks like an invisible hand is guiding us in a certain direction. So, whatever happens, you and Grandma really don't have to blame yourselves."

Fortunately, his words had the desired effect. His grandfather seemed to be back to his old self, as he proudly looked out over the water. However, Torstein soon turned around again and said to him in a serious tone of voice: "Hakon, you must promise us that Sandra will keep us informed

of all developments. And not just positive facts.” Grandpa looked at him compulsively. “Even if the news isn’t so good.”

Hakon nodded. “You have my word, Grandpa.”

All this time Holger had stood there silently like a statue, but he now seemed to feel that the conversation between Hakon and Torstein must take a different turn. “What about it, Hakon? Have you still not heard from Sandra in the meantime?”

As if she’d been waiting for this, Sandra chimed in. “I can tell you that our secret weapon in Washington is doing well. In order to say more about that, you’ll need to hear Marilyn first. Once she’s passed on her information, I’ll come back with an itinerary and a modified scenario. Please go to the kitchen, because Marilyn also needs to show you something.”

< 05.28

On the other side of the North Sea, Dr. Beaumont was looking around in astonishment. The high-tech tower room he had been brought to by Pierre looked like a hypermodern command center. Speechless he wondered what on earth he had signed up for in the Knights’ Hall.

He had been sitting there waiting, when suddenly Pierre had turned up like a little jack-in-the-box from behind a tapestry. He would have preferred to investigate what must have been a secret passageway, but the man had not given him a chance to do so. He had gestured to him to remain seated and handed him a tablet.

Shortly afterwards he had used it to talk to Marilyn live. In her characteristic way she had greeted him enthusiastically, but had barely let him speak. Never mind that he could have shared his findings regarding the patient with her.

In silence he had listened to her and had been really surprised afterwards. Marilyn had wanted to share a new investigation with him. However, this would release information that he would never be allowed to share with third parties. She had asked him if he was therefore willing to sign a declaration of secrecy. For her, a verbal promise would have

sufficed, she had said. “But there are others who must be protected. People who don’t know you like I do, Bertie.”

To him, her suddenly mortal face had spoken volumes. He knew Marilyn very well. She must have developed something really important.

Bearing in mind his intention to inform her about his investigation in a moment, he had spoken out loud the words that had been presented to him. But his promise hadn’t been enough. Intrigued by the mysterious seriousness of the situation, he had used the pencil that Pierre had given him to sign the written statement.

He was still none the wiser, when Pierre preceded him to yet another part of the castle. A cleverly hidden, small elevator had brought them up and a few steps later it seemed as though he had walked straight into the future from the Middle Ages. The eastern wall was occupied by a bank of several composite screens. The seat, resembling a wooden throne, which stood at some distance in front of it seemed extraordinarily misplaced. A ridiculous anachronism.

On the opposite wall there were four huge monitors lined up side by side. One of them depicted the skeleton of a man.

Pierre had asked him to sit down and then sat opposite him. He now pointed to the four large screens and asked: “Saundra?”

The screen showing the skeleton turned on. So slowly that it was easy to follow, it rotated around its axis in 3D. A friendly woman’s voice that seemed to come from all sides at once introduced herself and welcomed him warmly.

“Saundra,” Pierre began, “would you be so good as to inform our guest?”

Five minutes later, he knew he was in the GAIAS control room. A group consisting of several people to which the castle lord, Pierre and Marilyn also belonged. And this wasn’t just some random group, he realized when Saundra told him the true facts about Spiderweb. Now he also knew how Jens had gotten into his comatose state. He understood that the young man had not been given up on immediately. But why they still kept him alive, he didn’t understand at all.

“...on the GRID,” he heard her say. “What you see on the leftmost screen is Jens’ body.”

Around the skeleton he saw the whole body being built up. All tendons, muscles, veins and organs were added, like a caterpillar building a cocoon around itself. His professional interest was immediately aroused. Attentively he followed the progress, until the whole body, right down to the smallest capillaries, was in full view. The heart began to contract and completely mesmerized he saw the blood flow through the whole body. Overwhelmed and excited, his brain went wild. Such detail ... What an achievement!

The many possibilities this could mean for future health care almost made his head explode. "Marilyn!", he exclaimed. "So this is what you..." Her smiling face appeared on the screen next to it. With his voice full of respect, he said excitedly: "Marilyn! I knew you were a genius, but what you've accomplished here ... This is unbelievable!"

"Thank you, Bertie." His sincere, enthusiastic compliment lit up her whole face. Elated, she continued.

"With the help of Sandra and Pierre, I was able to develop the new hardware and software with which Jens' body has been mapped and with which we can monitor it. Exactly how we've done that, I'll tell you later. Right now you need to pay attention a little longer. What you see right now is built up to nano-level, so that you can see exactly where any problems could occur. If you don't see any particularities, we can go a step further."

She now smiled enigmatically, moved her hand up a little and moved three fingers. Immediately the image zoomed in on the brain.

"Bertie, you're the expert. What do you see now?" As so many times before, his eyes scanned the image, down to the smallest detail. He shook his head in regret. "I'm sorry, Marilyn. I don't see any difference from my earlier research. The brain is no longer showing any activity, Linnie."

He had automatically used her nickname as he felt sorry for her because he couldn't give her any hope at all. "I can't help but advise you to discontinue treatment."

His bad news didn't seem to really get through to her and Pierre. He sighed. There it was again. Not yet ready to give up ...

“But, Bertie,” Marilyn said softly. “Now suppose you see the following. What would your advice be then?”

Once again, the image zoomed in, until the brain filled the entire screen. He had never seen anything like this before. The interconnections between the brain cells were shown razor-sharp. Unconsciously he held his breath as the image zoomed in even further. “STOP!”, he exclaimed spontaneously. “I see something! Marilyn! Activity! Minimal, but I think I do see something of activity! Is it Jens’ brain actually showing here?”

On the screen next to it Marilyn nodded in agreement. “Yes,” she replied simply. “It’s now shown to you at picon level. We’ve compiled a Physical Pico Profile, or PPP, of his entire body.”

Despite this, Marilyn gave him a worried look. “But we’re not there yet,” she said seriously. “In a moment Pierre’s PPP will also be shown. He has made himself available as a guinea pig, so that at least two are visible ...” “Which I have to compare,” Bertrand supplemented her.

Marilyn nodded. “Please fully investigate and compare everything that might be important for both of them. With this refined method you might find more or come to new insights.” She kept quiet for a moment. “And just maybe Jens still has a chance,” she continued quietly.

“I will leave you in Pierre’s hands now. He will teach you how to control this software, so you can work completely independently.”

For a moment, she seemed to be listening to something. “Dear Bertie. I’ve got to go. I’ll check back in later. For now, I wish you good luck.” She vanished, leaving the screen lifeless.

< 05.29

With the dark grey garbage bag still in his hand, Gideon allowed himself a moment to enjoy all the hustle and bustle in the Pillar Room: the gentle squeaking and shuffling of diligent feet and the murmur that flared up and down in a strange rhythm. It was abundantly clear that the research virus had infected everyone, including himself. If necessary, he would leave no stone unturned in order to find an answer to all the mysteries.

But unfortunately, the loot so far had been meagre. It wasn’t for lack of

enthusiasm, for work was going on non-stop all day long. Eating and drinking were no more than necessities that were hurriedly done in between. Plastic cups, plates, trays, paper napkins and empty pizza boxes had been lying around all over the place. Satisfied that everyone had pitched themselves into the work so fanatically, he had found it no problem at all to collect all the rubbish.

While he walked around at his leisure, picking up trash and cleaning things up, he had watched the various activities with interest. At the back of the cell complex, a group of five people were engaged in making an inventory, photographing and digitizing everything that could be found there. They did not even seem to have been aware of him when he walked between them with the garbage bag in his hand.

After that he had returned to the room itself, where Thomas had caught his eye. The young man was still investigating the marble table with two others. It almost seemed to have become an obsession for him. His dark eyes relentlessly searched every square inch of the marble. He had been working continuously for hours now. One of the inquisitors had even sent for oven gloves, so they wouldn't be too bothered by that annoying stinging energy. But despite Thomas' meticulous research, the stone object had not yet revealed a single secret.

While folding two pizza boxes together, he had watched their attempt to tilt the table. Thomas apparently did not want to wait for the specialists to arrive. The argument he had heard Thomas give, had sounded quite logical to him ...

"The energy might come from under that table. It may well be that the table is not the source. Maybe it's just passing on that energy." Although he himself was curious as well, as to whether there were any clues underneath, he lacked the time to keep watching. He had left them to themselves and had walked on calmly.

When he had thrown a pile of empty cups in the bag, his gaze had fallen on the cartographer. It had certainly been a comic sight to see how the British specialist had shuffled across the floor all hunched over. The man had been examining the world map tiled in the floor, inch by inch, taking regular notes all the while. In his striking, checkered trousers and dotted bow tie, the man looked just like a bloodhound sniffing in all directions to try to find a trail, he had thought, amused. The Brit had to have eyes in

the back of his head too, because as soon as he had walked past him, the man had stopped him.

"Mr. Gideon," he'd said with a serious note in his voice, "something's not right here. I've never seen the image shown here before. Either this world map is an imaginative work of art, or it's a representation older than the oldest publications in the archives."

The scientist had looked at him piercingly. "I don't know how long I'm allowed to stay here, but I'd like to see either statement proven."

Surprised by the modesty of this highly educated researcher, he had quickly reassured the man. It went without saying that this scholar was allowed to complete his research. Odd man ...

Gideon put the filled garbage bag at the door, strolled back to the large table and sat down at its head end. He looked thoughtfully at Maria Mathilda, who, together with two colleagues, was sifting through the information from the two books that had been found. Earlier he had gone through the section about the Lady and the 'Secret of God's Hand' himself, but again nothing new had occurred to him. For the time being, no one had any idea what this could mean.

Unconsciously his hand touched the lump under his shirt. The inquisition key. As if it were a talisman, he held it tightly. "Should anything happen to me, you must make sure the key is passed to my successor, Gideon," the boss had said in a serious tone of voice. Delighted with his confidence, Gideon had made a sacred commitment not to betray that under any circumstances ...

Above his head, he heard someone shouting: "Adjutant, adjutant! I've discovered something!" He looked up. The inquisitor in charge of mapping the starry sky stood high up in the dome enthusiastically pointing at the eleven stars. "Adjutant, come quickly. I've discovered something special!"

Although he was terribly curious, he was very reluctant to have to climb up the scaffolding. Because of his fear of heights, he wouldn't even venture onto a balcony, let alone put a foot on that scaffolding. He stood up and shouted that the man should take a picture of it and send it to him. "Then I'll look at it immediately!"

From his high position, the Inquisitor would have none of this. Even more enthusiastically if possible, he shouted back: "No, Adjutant! You really must see this with your own eyes. This is so special, you really have to

see it for yourself!"

Gideon sighed deeply. If he didn't want to lose face, there was only one thing he could do. With leaden feet he walked towards the scaffold.

Picobello

< 06.01

The cognac turned out to be an excellent lubricant for his grey cells, Esteban thought to himself. He had gone over all the notes he had made since the discoveries in the Pillar Room. A list that had grown considerably after noting all the important facts of the 7 pages in the box. Now that he had sorted everything by year and place, one stood out head and shoulders above the rest: the discovery noted on the seventh page as a 'world map'.

Once again he had taken the papers out of the box and had reread all seven of them slowly to avoid the possibility of overlooking any hidden clues. But even now he got hooked up on the last sheet. More exactly with the note that was written in the middle of the map. The text, written in mirror handwriting inside a circle, instructed him to read page two. There he would find the missing piece of information to correctly interpret this clue.

He thoughtfully took the second and seventh pages aside and studied the map again very intensively. The circle with text was situated exactly in the middle of the ocean, between the continents of North Africa and Central America. The way he thought he should interpret the second sheet, he laid the map on it face down, after which he held the whole thing against the light. Through the paper he now saw the circle and the text inside merge into a pattern.

Excited about what could be another new discovery, he sharpened his gaze. Yes, my goodness! This was unmissable. This absolutely represented the coastline of an island! In the middle of it he saw a new word, but he didn't immediately recognize it. It definitely came from another language.

He wasn't a linguist, but he had gained a lot of knowledge in his quest for mysteries. He had struggled through a lot of old documents written in various ancient languages and could swear that this word was ancient Greek. Very clearly it said Ἀτλαντὶς.

Somewhere he seemed to vaguely remember something, but he couldn't quite grasp it. But no worries, there was a solution for that. By now he had got to know the search engine of their R.C.C.-app as a very suitable tool. So he had no doubt that their extensive digital library would also offer a solution this time. He grabbed his tablet, activated it, quickly typed the word and in no time the result showed up. He forgot to breathe and his eyes popped out as if on stalks. Immensely surprised, he read the only meaning found: 'Atlantis'.

< 06.02

For the second time that day, the President of the United States of America sat in his comfortable office chair behind the 'Resolute Desk'. Deep in thought, he let his chin rest on his firmly interwoven hands. This day, which had already begun so memorably, seemed to get even stranger by the hour. What he had just heard and seen ... He had not known what to expect, but something like that ... He could hardly believe it.

Yet Rock Veerhooes had been firmly convinced of it. "We're not alone!", he had assured him in a serious tone. By gosh, on top of the successful extermination of the Spiderweb, how wonderful would it be to announce this extraordinary news to the world today as well? Damn shame he couldn't do that.

The most terrible scenes of a completely disrupted society passed through his mind. Alien life. Warmongering? Peaceful? With all his heart he hoped for the latter. Given the situation the earth was in, any outside help would be more than welcome.

Used as he was to not revealing any of his own thoughts, he did not express his feelings this time either. The FBI chief who was now sitting silently opposite him could not know how frustrating his position was. The idea that he, as the most important ruler of the free west, could deal with the wrongs on this planet, had slowly faded during his time in office. The nepotism and lobbyists he had dealt with as governor turned out to be child's play compared to the day-to-day running of the White House. The deceitful scheming and conspiracy was even more insidious here. Even

more ruthless. With every word he said, every step he took and every signature he eventually placed, the influence of lobbyists and/or party members was always noticeable. No plan, bill or decision was feasible without taking into account all the advocates, who swarmed around him and his cabinet like bees in search of pollen. Not to mention his own party members. Unrelenting nagging, whining, disguised threats and playing everyone off against each other.

Not much had come of all his wonderful plans to make a better world and at last do something for the defenseless and less fortunate. As soon as he came up with even the simplest plan in that direction, the legs were already being sawn off it. Pinned down by opposing stakeholders, he very rarely got the chance to act honestly and fairly. It was discouraging. But now, after six years of struggling in the political swamp, a bright spot suddenly emerged. Several, if you considered it, that almost literally fell from the sky.

Since the day had begun, with that absurd display from Jimmy, he was now, for the first time, in complete control. Simply because, for the time being, he was the only one who knew exactly what was going on. A lead he could probably use to be able to act now, completely independently, without taking into account all the hyenas around him.

The reason his frustration had disappeared like snow in the sun was opposite him. No, not Jerry Decker personally, but the little smartphone Jerry had brought with him. It had shown him what the CSA had captured. Although the display was on the small side, he had clearly seen how a number of stars had moved in formation. The short, bright flash at the end had been unmissable. Mr. Veerhooes and Mr. Mirnat had then explained to him why they were convinced that “this synchronous displacement of 11 gas stars” according to Article 1, paragraph 2, sub 3 of the CSA protocol met the definition of ‘extraterrestrial threat’. In addition, the gentlemen had informed him of a bizarre accident in a pyramid, which was directly related to it. There were also said to be people who had suddenly become psychic after that star movement. To be honest, he had taken it with a grain of salt, until the secretary of the UN himself confirmed this deadly seriously, in the same video in which Holyester insisted that further tackling of this phenomenon should take place under the auspices of the UN, being UNBI. Finally, the UNBI’s

contact person had presented him with an extensive scenario on how best to investigate this phenomenon and how all countries could be kept in line.

Only then could the facts be made known to the entire world population. He frowned. The conditions laid down were pretty sincere.

- a. No country was allowed to abuse the situation;
- b. The entire world population had to be given a fairly distributed benefit from any positive developments;
- c. The entire world population had to be protected against possible negative developments;
- d. All facts concerning this phenomenon had to be spread in carefully titrated amounts, so that no large-scale panic would break out;
- e. The information had to be shaped in such a way that as many people as possible would be able to understand its scope.

Five simple key points that, if they could be realized, would change the world forever. It would be necessary for all countries to put their own policies on hold in order to work together on these 5 conditions. And all this would be centrally controlled by one body. His own task would be to ensure that the ranks closed. All these conditions would have to be met. So his task was anything but easy.

His heart said yes, but his common sense definitely thought otherwise. He knew the political and military climate all too well and things were not much different in the rest of the world. He didn't want to think about how ordinary citizens would react if it became known that there were people among them who were telepathically gifted. That woman was absolutely right. For the time being, no mention of this was allowed. In addition, he was of the opinion that such persons also had a right to their privacy, as long as they did not pose a danger to the rest of humanity. Keeping their gift secret or revealing it had therefore to be left to them themselves. That was the best strategy at the moment anyway, he thought, worriedly. He absolutely could not trust that others, even those in his own ranks, would not abuse such talented people. The mere fact that something extraterrestrial had been observed would stir things up. It would be a huge job to get everyone on the same page. He already knew that many

would not be happy to relinquish control, even if it was to the UNBI. The hawks among them would be agitated.

Without any warning the door was opened abruptly. Jimmy stormed in, his face red with excitement. Annoyed, the president raised his head, but before he told the man off, he realized that his brutal, fierce security man would be a fine test subject. Despite his black-and-white right-wing attitude, he was undoubtedly loyal. Let's see how he reacted to all this ...

"Jimmy," he said invitingly, "join us. I want to introduce you to someone and then I want you to listen carefully." The man shook his head and stayed put, excited. "No can do, boss. I have news of unprecedented importance. The computer system that controls the lockdown is no longer accessible. I've tried everything, but I can't get in. I can no longer guarantee your safety!"

< 06.03

For minutes Esteban stared disbelievingly at that one, absolutely unexpected word. Atlantis. Was the legend based on truth after all?

Absent-mindedly his eyes slid across the pages lying on top of each other. Atlantis ... while pondering, his gaze stuck on the circle. That circle ... That circumference ... Suppose that ... Yeah! There was no other way.

Excited, he realized that this map must represent the floor of the Pillar Room. The small circle inside could be absolutely nothing but the mysterious marble table! So somehow it had to be connected to Atlantis. Again he had stumbled upon a totally unexpected, strange secret. But what on earth could this have to do with the 'Secret of God's Hand', he wondered.

He read the clue written on the seventh page again. Once more he came to the conclusion that he had to find the missing piece of information in order to interpret everything correctly.

Well, he had found it. He had put the two sheets on top of each other and had found the map of an island, with that one word. 'Atlantis'. An incredible discovery, but one that had left him none the wiser. This only deepened the mystery.

He remembered the Pope's mission and realized that he had to figure out this riddle himself. Unfortunately, the papers he had found in the box probably would not help him much.

He didn't have the opportunity to quietly delve into this in the next few days anyway. If he wanted to gain time, there was only one thing to do. As long as the source of his discovery remained unknown, he could turn to his Devote Dozen. After all, they were excellently equipped to dig up anything that might have something to do with this.

He grabbed his tablet, held the sheets lying on top of each other against the light and took a picture. He opened the R.C.C.-app, tapped an extensive instruction, added the photo and sent it with the remark not to disturb him unless something significant was found.

More than satisfied he leaned back, closed his eyes and let his thoughts roam freely. Could Atlantis have really existed? The reference to the table ... Could it be some kind of access point? A clue to something else?

< 06.04

Hakon, Holger and Torstein hadn't even entered the kitchen yet when Marilyn already started. "Glad you guys are here. Now I can finally tell my story."

She waited just long enough for everyone to sit at the table and then spoke immediately. "Listen and watch. I'll try to explain it as briefly and as simply as possible. I'm sure you've noticed that we've suddenly gone from nano to picon level.

In other words, a significant fraction smaller. How that happened so quickly, I'll tell you in broad outline.

The whole development started when I bumped my head in Amsterdam during our operation 'Non quod videtur'. Except for some damage to my 3dSCreator, fortunately nothing else was broken. All in all a stupid accident, which turned out to be a top-shelf find a while later. While I was recovering, I saw in a flash an improvement for the protective shirt that Hakon wore under his blouse. I'm sure you remember that at the time I explained to you how the JELLIE's molecules could adapt to suddenly

changing circumstances. The bump from that blow must have caused a temporary extra enlargement to my cranium because only then did I see how I could make those molecules smarter.”

She waited until everyone was finished laughing and continued: “By letting them communicate directly with Sandra.” She ignored the surprised faces and remarks and calmly continued her story.

“With that 3dSCreator I can make anything I want, regardless of size and composition. And I don’t know if it was because of that blow, Hakon who really seemed murdered, or the stress of Onawa’s dangerous ride on the prairie, but I made a mistake. I put a comma in two wrong places in the software, and somewhere further down the specs I put a zero too many.”

She looked at her friends almost regretfully. “Just as in our common language, where, for example, ‘antegrade’ with an ‘e’ and ‘antigrade’ with an ‘i’ express a completely different meaning, I had created something completely different than I had intended, for both the software and the specifications for Joost, who later repaired my 3dSCreator based on that. In short, instead of nanobots I created picobots. Not only a lot smaller, but also with a completely different shape. This is quite a surprise in itself, but what really makes them special is that they are not only able to communicate with Sandra, but that they have also been given Sandra’s creative properties.”

She couldn’t hold back, burst out laughing and exclaimed triumphantly: “Or AI-picobots!”

In the incredulous silence that followed, everyone heard Sandra clearly say: “Beyond expectations, I suddenly had a multitude of Googol children.” For a moment it remained silent, before everyone reacted at the same time. Questions, remarks and cries filled the room. “What?”, “Who?”, “How?”, “Góógle?”

As a teacher in front of a class of young children, Marilyn pointed to Russ and shook her head. “No. Not Google. You didn’t get it right, Russ. Sandra said it correctly. Googol. This expresses an amount we can barely imagine. A Googol is a one with a hundred zeros behind it.”

Barbara, on point as always, grinned and shouted: “Lucky your kids don’t have to go to the nursery, Sandra!” The almost painful admiration from

her friends broke to pieces with chuckles. In her mind Marilyn thanked the glib journalist and spoke quickly.

“As soon as I understood what I had created, I applied the same technique to what I had designed before. With a few extra adjustments I gave the WORM an update, so that it now consists entirely of picobots. I tried it on myself. It works perf...”

To her astonishment, Alasdair didn't let her finish. Her patron gave her a horribly stern look. “I believe you and I had agreed not to use yourself as a test case. Imagine if something went wrong, we'd have no one to replace you.”

Alasdair was visibly shocked by his own words. “Excuse me, Marilyn. I could've put it a little better. But you know damn well what I mean.”

Marilyn was genuinely surprised. “I took almost no chances, you know. According to Sandra, the chance that it would go wrong was only 0.047%. Almost negligible.” “But not a one hundred percent guarantee of success.”

With an elbow on the table, Alasdair rested his chin casually on one hand. She thought he was content to have the last word and that the discussion was finished, however, she heard a silent message coming in through Sandra: “When this session is over, I want to speak to you and Sandra in private. In spite of your high I.Q., you weren't very wise, lady. We have protocols for a reason.”

She saw him remove the hand from in front of his mouth. He avoided her gaze, crossed his arms and pretended nothing happened.

Bloody hell. Why did he have to be so difficult? Still, she knew she'd taken a risk. She knew Alasdair well enough to know that, despite his generally amiable interactions with everyone, he could quite easily get upset. She could expect a hefty reprimand ...

Well, it was what it was, she thought laconically. No worries. What had happened had happened.

She took a deep breath, said she'd zoom the visualization to the correct level for them and activated the eye-Streaming. In her mind, she asked: “Are the others there yet, Sandra?” “Yes, Marilyn. Arda, Onawa, Tjan, Tony and Joost can see you live now.”

With her thoughts on Onawa, she took a small pouch out of her pocket. She zipped it open and took out some yellow balls. "Look." She held up the biggest marble between thumb and forefinger. "This marble is made of JELLIE and has a diameter of one inch. And this one," she showed a smaller one, "is one of half an inch."

As she continued, she lined up many more, smaller and smaller, on the table. "Like SAUNDRA, these balls are 100% JELLIE."

She pointed to the smallest. "This tiny one has a diameter of less than 4 thousandths of an inch. Behind it, I've put another handful of smaller ones, but the human eye can't see them without an aid."

She took a circular glass from the case and put it in front of her left eye. She clamped it in her eye socket between cheekbone and eyebrow and took a close look at the row. What the monocle recorded became visible to everyone. A more than triple long row of an, as it seemed, endless bead necklace.

"If we, and you too, Marilyn, couldn't see those little things at first, how could you lay down such precise rows?" Tim asked a bit suspiciously, and then suddenly smiled. "Tjan says that you must have secret magical powers. The superstitious guy. But tell me honestly, how did you manage to do that?"

Not only Tim, but everyone looked at her with great curiosity now. "Well," she began mysteriously. "Everything looks like sorcery until science finds an explanation for it, doesn't it? By making mistakes on two fronts, I created these picobots, which are basically the same as Sandra. However, there is one difference. They may all be mini-A.I.'s, but they can't act on their own. They remain permanently subordinate to Sandra. They have no choice. They have to carry out her orders. See for yourself. Then you'll know why they arranged themselves in such straight rows."

In her mind she shouted: "Sandra? Now." The so far immobile marbles all moved at the same time. As they changed to all the colors of the rainbow, they bounced, forming beautiful patterns, across the table.

After a few minutes the spectacle stopped. As if attracted by a magnet, they rolled towards each other to merge into a single ball, which then fell apart into two halves. In a whirl of colors they turned into two butterflies. Indistinguishable from the real thing, they kept fluttering back and forth

above the table until one of them landed on Barbara's arm. "Wow," she whispered.

In awe, she moved her arm gently towards herself to take a closer look.

"I understand Sandra, or at least some of her software, orchestrated this show. But how on earth did you find the time to make all those picobots besides a new WORM, Marilyn? That's really impossible. Did Sandra help you or something?"

"Yes and no," she replied laughing. "You have to know that the JELLIE, too, came about by accident. Through an extremely complex process, I was able to pour that substance into a certain form, so that I could create Sandra and let it continue to grow. With her enormous processing power, I was able to build the 3dSCreator, among other things, which made that earlier time-consuming process a lot easier. Now even that is no longer necessary."

Barbara looked up. Her eyes were glowing. "Because they can reproduce themselves, you mean?"

Smart lady, that Barbara, Marilyn thought. A great asset to GAIAS.

Marilyn nodded. "Yes. That's right. If I put one picobot in a bucket of JELLIE, I'd have 2.5 gallons of intelligence in no time. Millions of picobots that can be used directly by Sandra. For example, to make and control butterflies, as you've just seen."

A panicky cry from Holger silenced her. Startled, she saw the tough German wipe a large, hairy tarantula from his arm with his face contorted with disgust. Damn. That hadn't been what she had in mind. This had to stop. "Sandra?"

Before she could react, Hakon had already picked up the spider, which immediately turned into a cell phone in his hand. It rang once, then Sandra's voice came through. "Sorry, Holger. Marilyn and I didn't know you weren't very fond of spiders."

With the device still in his hand, Hakon said: "Jeez, Marilyn. We're used to a lot of your tricks, but an invention like this ..."

From the airplane, Arda's laughter echoed in everyone's head. "No ... A mistake! A stupid, silly little accident!" "But nonetheless, something that

gives GAIAS a significant advantage,” Alasdair added. “This invention could be the deciding factor in achieving our goal.”

Glad to hear all the enthusiastic reactions, Marilyn held the case wide open and had Saundra send the picobots in. She added the monocle and zipped it shut.

“I don’t want to discourage you, but before we can deploy the picobots, we have to develop a mountain of software. Each application, like one of those butterflies you’ve just seen, requires specific instructions. New software needs to be developed for each task. Even with Saundra’s help, this will undoubtedly take some time. And after that, everything still needs to be tested in practice. For the next operation, this won’t be feasible and we’ll have to do with what I’ve been able to develop so far.” “Which is no small thing either,” remarked Lémarc. “From what I’ve heard from Saundra, I can’t thank you enough for everything you do for Jens. How fortunate that brain specialist is a college friend of yours, Marilyn. I can’t tell you how much it means to me that he’s discovered activity in Jens’ brain.”

Pleased with the sincere words, she didn’t want to give Lémarc any false hope. “Surprisingly, yes, but you shouldn’t jump to conclusions from that,” she said cautiously. “There’s a lot more to investigate. In any case, we have to thank Jens himself as well. With his pico profile and that of Pierre we hope to find out more about Hakon. Especially about that strange nerve thread that runs all the way into his brain.”

She looked at her friends apologetically. “That means I have to isolate myself in order to assist Bertrand. Alasdair?”

As if they’d both rehearsed it beforehand, the lord took over seamlessly. “Saundra has just informed me that there is news from Washington. Also, Saundra has gathered a lot of new information from Florida and Yucatán. I suggest we use the eye-Grid to inform ourselves of the current state of affairs. Then we can explore the scenario further. Somewhere halfway through Hakon’s final itinerary will be announced.”

With her thoughts already in Scotland, Marilyn left the kitchen. The various wishes for success that were expressed did not really carry to her.

< 06.05

Back in the small pyramid, Missy Mobile stood with her arms firmly wrapped around her, looking around in disgust. She was exhausted. With all her might she tried to ignore the nauseating stench that hung here. That wasn't easy. She focused all her attention on breathing through her mouth and not her nose. She knew that if she got even a whiff of it, her already restless stomach would revolt violently.

Unintentionally, her eyes glanced through the now abandoned burial chamber. The remains of the drama that had taken place here were scattered all over the floor. Various shoes, slippers, pieces of torn clothing and sunglasses, one pair of which lay like a large, dead beetle with its legs straight up on its back. There were even two pieces of a set of teeth ...

Could they belong together? Her gaze wandered on. Did she see that right? Yeah, damn it. That was a leg prosthesis.

Absent-mindedly she wondered how on earth you could lose something like that. The chills ran down her spine as she remembered her own panic that had so abruptly ended her expensive excursion. How she had literally clawed her way into the light. Luckily, she had been one of the first to realize what was happening, so she had been able to reach the narrow exit before the crowd. Not without damage, by the way. A sprained ankle, dislocated shoulder and scratches and bumps everywhere.

Still, it could have been a lot worse. According to the first news reports, three elderly people had died and hardly anybody had remained unharmed. Many had been seriously or very seriously injured. She would never admit it, but had been somewhat jealous when she saw the first ambulances leave.

She couldn't remember ever having had such a lousy day. Instead of considerate treatment at the hospital, someone from the ambulance staff had checked her superficially. After not much more than disinfecting the scratches and wrapping a silly stretch bandage around her ankle, they had left her standing. She had been about to get into the excursion van,

when a little poison frog from the detectives had stopped her. She was expected to cooperate in a reconstruction of the drama and had to stay available the next day. She was not allowed to leave the cruise ship and certainly not the country.

She could have understood that. Of course, she was one of the better witnesses. That the bastard had not trusted her and threatened to take her passport, she did not appreciate at all. That petty, arrogant jerk. Pissed off, she had spent the rest of the day trying to get in touch with her lawyer. When she finally had him on the line, he knew within a minute that he could do nothing for her in this matter. That rascal! On the spot she had sworn to wave goodbye to that whole office. She'd better give the money she paid that firm to someone who at least did his best for it.

In the meantime, she was stuck here. The fact that she got up extra early today proved to be a futile effort. That arrogant little inspector only showed up long after lunch. One bumpy ride in the back of a hot police car later, she got out hot and sweaty all over. The inspector had taken her by the arm and guided her into the pyramid. The foul stench had made her gag.

As she breathed heavily through her mouth, she saw that the table on which Ravic had stood had been completely dug out. The foot, which had not been visible before, was now uncovered and laid open. Underneath it were thick, iron bars with sturdy bands attached at regular intervals. These came together in a point above the table. Apparently they were planning to transport the whole thing somewhere else.

She was so lost in her thoughts that at first she didn't hear a thing being asked of her. It was only when she felt a tap on her sore shoulder that she became aware of her surroundings again. Startled, she turned around and looked at the inspector questioningly. It was clear to her that she undeniably irritated the man.

"Well, madam," began the good-for-nothing, "can you tell me where you stood and what exactly you saw?" She wanted to tell that nerd that she had only paid attention to her smartphone and that because of her hobby he could study all the information in detail on the internet. She opened her mouth and forgot about her nose, which immediately resumed its function. What she had feared already happened. Spontaneously

everything that was still in her stomach ended up on the ground. Exactly where Ravic's boiled eyes had landed.

Dizzy she looked for support and found this at the marble table. Suddenly a painful blast surged through her body. It felt as though she was flooded with energy. She shot forward, tripped and suddenly lay stretched out in the inspector's arms. Frightened, nauseous and shocked to her core, she lost all control. She tore herself loose and as if Ravic's ghost was on her heels, she rushed to the exit. She only knew one thing. She had to get out of here. Away. Nothing could move her to ever come back here again. She had to get to the cruise ship. With the comfortable cabin in mind, she ran faster than she had ever run before in her life.

< 06.06

Cautiously optimistic, Bertrand placed the ultra-thin tablet that Pierre had given him on the desk. With Pierre's assistance and the support of Saundra's gigantic and super fast computing power, comparing the two picoprofiles had turned out to be a breeze. In no time at all he had been able to complete his study and record his conclusion. Apart from a few minor differences in, among other things, heart rate and blood pressure, the bodily functions of both young men turned out to be completely consistent. The brain itself, however, showed large abnormalities. In other words, as Pierre had put it dryly: "There is nothing wrong with the peripherals at all. It's the motherboard that no longer functions correctly."

He himself would certainly have put it differently, but he couldn't have put it any more aptly. In the second part of his research there had been a few more problems. He had mapped Jens' brain from every conceivable angle. According to his specifications, Saundra had divided the entire area into a three-dimensional grid, so that he could examine each 'block' separately at the picon level. Contrary to the previous one, this result was downright astonishing. The minimal activity he had previously believed he could observe was now suddenly clearly visible. This brain was far from dead! It seemed more likely to be in some sort of hibernation. How to get out of this state was a completely different matter.

His own brain was now spinning at top speed. During this research he had already gained more insight than in the last ten years put together. He thought of the many patients who had been brought out of their coma with his help, and knew that the human brain was capable of a great deal. How often had he seen that, usually after intensive therapy, lost skills were recovered via another part of the brain? In exceptional cases, it had also happened that such a patient spontaneously mastered a foreign language, or possessed memories that absolutely could not have arisen from his or her own life. Discovering how this was possible would be a world-class achievement, if such a thing were ever possible at all. In any case, it would take decades of research before any damaged brain cells could be repaired or replaced. Even if one could use such things as picobots, how on earth could one teach them the function of a specific brain cell, he wondered. There would definitely have to be a bodily solution. Perhaps something could be achieved with stem cells? Or cloning? Either way, he'd do his best to wake Jens up.

"Pierre," he started, "for now there's nothing more I can do. I'd like to discuss the results with Marilyn. Do you know when she'll be available?" The young man opposite him said nothing, but tapped his right ear meaningfully. Ah yes, he thought. The WORM. Another one of Marilyn's inventions he was very impressed with.

"Marilyn is aware of your findings, Dr Beaumont," he heard Sandra reply promptly. "She will be kept constantly informed and will report as soon as possible. For now, she asks you to examine a third pico profile."

The third of the four large screens flashed on. A skeleton also appeared on this one.

"It's Hakon Eriksson," he heard her continue. "She asks you to compare his PPP with the other two." He looked at the second skeleton which, identically to Jens', slowly rotated around its axis in 3D. Hakon Eriksson

...

Primarily interested in the inside of that skull, he started working with a whistle.

Annoyed that the phone was ringing again, he had picked up and barked "Holyester" into the receiver. But as soon as he had heard Sandra's soft, now familiar voice, he already suspected that this wouldn't be an ordinary phone call. And now he knew for sure. Tired and somewhat disappointed, he drummed with his fingers on his desk while thinking. It hadn't even taken her fifteen minutes to completely change his view of the world and everything else out there. The discovery by the CSA had shocked him, but at the same time also intrigued him. And the fact that Hakon suddenly had strange visions that were related to that, was completely bizarre. Strange events that had to occur on top of all the fuss around the Spiderweb. That nerve-racking period had certainly not left him untouched. The shock because of the attack on Hakon, the long days and the numerous journeys back and forth had left their marks. He was simply far too old for such tough days. God, if only he were twenty years younger ...

A deep sigh escaped his lips. It was a good thing that he had kept the whole day available to complete the Spiderweb file in peace. As if it had been planned, he'd had all the time in the world to listen to Sandra. Luckily she had done all the preparatory work and presented a ready-made scenario. He certainly wouldn't have been able to do something like that himself on such short notice. Now he only had to do what he excelled at: convincing and motivating people.

Partly due to the cooperative attitude of the American president, he had just succeeded. He admired the man. Quick-minded, social-minded and decisive. Dick had known him long enough to know that this president stood for his principles. Someone who wanted to make something of the world but, like himself, got stuck in the political swamp more than once.

Sandra's perfectly orchestrated summary had proved invaluable. All he really needed to do was confirm it. After the president had pledged his commitment to the intended cooperation, his task was over for the time being. Nonetheless, he wasn't sure of the outcome. Would this man, actually far too principled, be capable of keeping his staff in line?

Dick turned his office chair around and stared worriedly through the large window, to the East River, of which he had a good view from here. Across the street, the windows of the Trade Center shined and shimmered in the morning sun. The light playing over the water and the vegetation on the

bank normally calmed him down. Not this time. The thought that mankind might not be alone held him in a vise-like grip. The fact that these extraterrestrials, or perhaps others as well, might have visited the earth made him shudder.

After the Second World War, having grown up in the heyday of science fiction, he had enjoyed the many stories. He had admired the unbridled imagination of the authors. The memories made him smile. What would such a visit from space look like, he wondered. Mechanical? Carbon-based? For the time being, there were no answers to that. At least they'd be way ahead of Homo sapiens technically. Peaceful and willing to make our planet a better place, or belligerent? Philosophizing more and more, he wondered how such beings or entities would experience life. Would they have an awareness of religion? Could they have discovered the meaning of life?

Behind him he heard the automatic door sliding open. He had no appointments scheduled and he knew it could only be one person. He turned his chair around. He was right. It was indeed his secretary who stood in the doorway. From her face he could see that the past week had left a lot of traces on her as well. In her white face her eyes seemed to be as big as those of a creature living in the dark.

She walked stiffly inside listening to the smartphone she was holding to her ear. To his surprise, four gentlemen dressed in black came after her. The way they moved, instinctively sent shivers down his spine. What was this supposed to mean?

Before he could think about it in detail, one of them stood in front of him and sprayed a nasty smelling mist in his face. As he sank into the hazy mists, he just caught a glimpse of his secretary collapsing, being caught and being carried away on the shoulder of one of those men.

< 06.08

His climb to the ceiling of the dome had required a lot of perseverance. With his knees buckling, sweat on his forehead and a dangerously high heartbeat, Gideon stood on the highest gangway. As if his life depended on it, he held onto the tube, which was acting as a railing, with all his

might. He knew that the roof of the dome was exactly 100 feet above the floor and was well aware that he would not survive a fall. Nevertheless, he could not stop himself from looking down.

Immediately waves of fear pounded through his belly. A strange, dreamy temptation seemed to emanate from the gaping depths. The floor seemed to want to pull him down like a magnet. Dizzy as he was, he closed his eyes and concentrated on the railing, the only obstacle that could prevent him from dropping down ...

He almost collapsed when a hand was clapped on his shoulder and an enthusiastic voice sounded in his ear. "Wonderful view, isn't it, Adjutant? That map of the world down there really comes into its own, doesn't it?" Gideon could only nod, force himself out of that strange trance and hope that his voice would not betray him. Without letting go of his grip, he turned a quarter turn. "What was so important that you had to have me come up here in person?" Oh, thank God. His voice had sounded pretty normal.

The enthusiast proudly pointed to the constellation above them and with a weighty tone in his voice said. "When I took pictures of it, I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Only after that, when I checked all the shots, did I notice the following. The inquisitor held up the tablet to him. On the screen there were two pictures next to each other. Apart from a difference in exposure, both were identical. Gideon shrugged his shoulders. "Ehm," he started hesitantly, "what exactly am I supposed to see? That image on the right is slightly overexposed, but other than that, I don't see any difference."

To his horror the man burst out laughing and planted his foot down so hard that the carrier moved back and forth. As he held on extra tightly, Gideon prayed that it would hold. Hoping he hadn't soiled himself, he was forced to listen to the cheerful voice next to him.

"There's nothing wrong with the camera's light setting. It's the stars themselves. They give off a glow!" Excited the inquisitor pointed up. "There! See?"

Gideon followed the trajectory of the pointing finger, squinting to see better. "Damn, you're right," he admitted in amazement. "They do seem to radiate real light ..."

He got an idea. "Wait a minute," he suddenly ordered. So as not to have to see that sucking floor, he stared into the distance and shouted loudly: "Hey, Thomas! Turn off the light. I'll tell you when you can turn it back on!"

Faster than he expected, it suddenly became pitch-dark. But that didn't last long, because slowly but surely the constellation began to light up, becoming brighter and brighter. For the second time, he reacted: "Damn, you're right. How could this be all of a sudden? It wasn't like that before, was it?"

The inquisitor no longer laughed and Gideon now heard uncertainty echoing in his voice. "I honestly don't know. In any case, it's never been noticed before. As I examined the phenomenon, two things struck me. The paint must have the same material in it as the table. When you touch them, they emit the same kind of tingling energy, although you feel it a lot more strongly with the table. But what is really weird is this as soon as I touched a star, a Roman numeral became visible. I've checked them all, and I've seen that a sign appears on all eleven."

The inquisitor reached out and laid his index finger on the nearest star. Before his astonished eyes, Gideon indeed saw a Roman sign appear in the diffuse light. "You see, adjutant? Each star shows a number when touched, except for the three at the tip. Those are ordinary letters and signs. I've written them all down. I'll show them to you."

The inquisitor grabbed his tablet and quickly swiped the screen a few times, until he reached the page he was looking for. "I converted the Roman numerals to our current system and then this pattern emerged."

He turned the tablet so that Gideon could see it too. In the soft glow of the constellation above them, the pattern was clearly shown on the display.

N 41 30 92 62 < > E 21 83 51 81

'N'? 'E'? Each followed by numbers? Would these be coordinates? Before he had a chance to respond, the inquisitor continued. "Well, I don't know if you thought the same, but I think those numbers are coordinates. But I don't know what the combination of those two marks on the star in the tip represents. If you just look at those signs, they're used in modern arithmetic as equation marks. The sign < means that something is smaller than, and the sign > means the opposite, that

something is greater than. But I don't know what these two characters mean together."

As if he could find the answer there, the inquisitor stared up. The tube he leaned against with his full weight groaned dangerously. Hopefully it would hold for a while, Gideon thought. If everything collapsed ...

"I take it you've checked the coordinates? And what would possibly be located there?", Gideon asked, more sharply than he had intended.

"Certainly, sir."

The man swiped the tablet again and held it up to him. However, he could not distinguish much more than a large, smooth, blue surface. Over his shoulder he shouted loudly that the light could be switched on again.

He waited until the Pillar Room was brightly lit again, blinked a few times until his eyes were accustomed to the light, looked again and saw ... nothing. Nothing more than a single blue surface that could just as well be some sort of modern work of art. Was this supposed to be funny or something?

Annoyed, he pushed the tablet away. "I know what you're trying to say, Adjutant", the inquisitor began in a soothing manner. "That apart from the blue surface, there's nothing else to see. But that's right, though. It represents the Atlantic Ocean. To be precise, a location in the middle of it, between West Africa and Central America."

Gideon wouldn't let on that he was terribly disappointed. In hindsight, it hadn't been necessary for him to climb the ridge at all, damn it. "Just send that data to me. Then I'll include it all in the report for Bolvani."

He wanted to get back down as soon as possible, but then something occurred to him. "One more thing. Do you know when those stars started emitting light?" The inquisitor looked troubled. "Um, not exactly, sir. When we were taking pictures for that professor in Florida, we didn't notice it. Not until," he looked at his watch, "a quarter of an hour ago, I suddenly saw it. So it must have started somewhere between those two moments. Now that I think about it, what we've discovered here might be of interest to that professor as well."

His face brightened. "By the way, there's something else I can add to my report. According to the coordinates, the marble table down here is in

exactly the same spot.”

The inquisitor nodded, again enthusiastic. “I measured it. I took a picture from up here with the telephoto lens and edited it in such a way that I could enter the coordinates.” He swiped the display quickly. “Here. See for yourself.”

How could this be, Gideon thought. On the one hand so intelligent and studied, on the other hand so simplistic that the man had only now managed to put two and two together. Unbelievable.

“Well well. You may be right,” he said, feigning surprise. “Be so good as to send your report to me as soon as you can, will you?”

He thanked him at length. This was something that allowed him to finally score points.

As he clung firmly to that positive thought, he began the life-threatening downhill descent, holding on, even more firmly than before, to the steel tubes that held the whole thing together.

< 06.09

It had taken some effort for the President, but in the end he had managed to calm Jimmy down and explained that he had taken extra measures to prevent information from leaking. “Because there’s been more than one attempt.” Much less wound up, Jimmy was nevertheless staring frustratedly. The President could not understand the man. Jimmy had not known anything when the CSA passed on their message, so he had assumed it was a joke. And now, without informing him, extra security measures had been taken.

“I’m truly sorry I didn’t inform you sooner,” the President said soothingly. Now that in his opinion the air had cleared, he introduced Jimmy and Jerry Decker to each other. Upon learning of Jerry’s high ranking within the FBI, Jimmy’s face got even more agitated. The fact that the chief of the C-section was sitting here in the Oval Office didn’t seem to please his security guard. The President didn’t like this attitude at all. Jimmy’d better not think that his sexual indulgence had been forgotten ...

Even though he wasn't exactly satisfied with Jimmy's behavior, he informed him of what the CSA had observed in deep space. He showed him the video of the gas stars, explained what this could mean for mankind and let him hear Dick Holyester's words of affirmation. "So you do understand the need to work together on a global level," he concluded.

He was quite surprised that Jimmy had become more and more interested and that he agreed with him wholeheartedly. "Of course, Mr. President! It goes without saying that the leader of the most powerful nation in the world decides what needs to be done. Now I also understand your decision to take security to the highest level. Do you have any idea how to proceed?"

In his mind he saw Jimmy roll up his sleeves and fanatically join forces, all ready to go to work one hundred percent. He could just keep himself from shaking his head while he presented Sandra's proposal to Jimmy. Going through the arguments, points of concern and the five conditions Jimmy appeared to agree with him completely. But after he told him that all this would be handled centrally by UNBI, Jimmy reacted as if a grenade had exploded in his head. His eyes huge with disbelief, the man jumped up. "What are you saying now?"

Jimmy shook his head frenetically. With a voice as sharp as a scalpel, he proclaimed that he would never agree to that, no matter what. How could his president, the absolute leader of the free world, think about that seriously for even a second? Never, ever, could the United States of America relinquish even a fraction of its power.

During the fierce altercation that followed, it became clear to him that Jimmy was no longer amenable to reason. After reminding him of their conversation in the Situation Room, Jimmy had reacted as if he had been stung by a killer bee. Busy arguing, he waved his arms as if they were branches in a violent storm. As he ranted, the saliva flew from his indignant lips. Whatever he said to make him realize there was no other possibility had no effect. It was even rather counterproductive. It couldn't go on like this. It was like the guy was on drugs, damn it.

He grabbed Jimmy firmly by the shoulders and looked straight at his totally freaked out face. Quickly he checked Jimmy's wild eyes and noted

with relief that the pupils looked normal. He took the plunge determinedly. “Jimmy. Be assured that I intend to cooperate with UNBI. Clearly, you and I can’t work together like this. Not insurmountable in itself, but I can’t tolerate this behavior of yours any longer. You are relieved of your duties effective immediately.”

He hadn’t even finished speaking when Jimmy pulled away, turned around and ran into the serving cart. Bottles of drinks, carafes and glasses clattered into each other. As if the cheerful tinkling annoyed him immensely, Jimmy gave the innocent piece of furniture a vicious kick, not knowing that he was setting in motion a true pandemonium.

< 06.10

After about fifteen minutes everyone had viewed the summary via the eye-GRID. Its use turned out to be so simple that it had, unnoticed, become an addition to communication. Only Tjan kept continuously having problems with it. To his frustration, his image kept disappearing, until Sandra found the solution. “I now know what’s causing this, Tjan. Because of your ethnic origin, your eyes have a slightly different orientation, which caused the software to malfunction. As soon as you focused on the image, the eye-GRID switched off. I’ve adjusted the parameters for you personally now. There shouldn’t be any more problems.”

Both the four in the plane, Joost in Amsterdam and the other ten sitting at the big table in the Erikssons’ kitchen listened to her recent findings.

“After a long search, I have been able to probe Nakawe’s phone. Its location has been identified. The phone is located in a building from which an extreme amount of data was transmitted. Because this was done via all kinds of shadowy servers scattered around the world, it even took SPY some time. But now I have a complete overview of what was sent from that building. From there the phones of both Nakawe and Kiniawe were hacked. Their accounts were used by Fake Spielmann to distribute various fake news.”

Sandra’s voice stopped abruptly when Marit interrupted her. “Oh, gosh ... What makes someone call his kid Fake? That’s outright child abuse if

you ask me.”

Saundra sounded almost human when she agreed. “That’s not unthinkable, Marit. My records show that Fake comes from a broken family. He certainly didn’t have a warm upbringing, given the frequent changes of orphanages and foster homes he grew up in.”

Like a human being, she paused for a moment to let her information sink in. “Nevertheless,” Saundra went on to say, “he’s worked his way up as a successful entrepreneur. His head office was in a prime location and cost a small fortune. From there, he managed both his legal businesses and his criminal activities. On the illegal web he was just as successful and was known as the genius hacker ‘Floppy’.”

She immediately fell silent when Alasdair delivered his conclusion. “We know Nakawe is somewhere in the Yucatán jungle.

So that Fake was in possession of her stuff at another location. Given the time frame in between, we have to assume this was a tight operation. In other words, a well-organized organization. Otherwise, it would not have been possible for Fake to go ahead undisturbed.”

“Correctly concluded, milord.” This time it was Tony who added his voice to the consultation. “Why did you speak in the past tense, Saundra?”

Again, her answer came promptly. “From EWACS7, I had sent an FO to Fake’s headquarters. The cockroach crawled in unseen. Unfortunately, the FO was blown up together with the whole building. Fake Spielman has been missing ever since and is believed to have died in the explosion. The police investigation is in full swing and I have to await their findings.”

Fortunately, EWACS7 was still able to map the digital pattern of Fake’s, or Floppy’s, working method. This enabled me to check that the phone call Hakon received was sent via the same digital signature. Spielmann’s way of working was almost impossible to follow, but despite this, SPY managed to trace his sophisticated backdoors. So I know a similar server that is the source from which the data stream starts, is somewhere in the middle of the Yucatán jungle. Something strange is going on with it. I’m investigating this more closely.”

From the quietly confiscated CIA plane, Tony then asked what the scenario for the four of them looked like now. "Given the unknown caller's message," Sandra began, "we can now definitively make the link between the Erikssons and the three kidnapped women. It's obvious that they want Hakon now as well. So the core of the operation is to follow Hakon unnoticed. He will most likely be taken to the location where Nakawe is. That means, Tony, you'll be split up upon arrival. You and Onawa will go into the jungle to locate and disable the transmitter. In the meantime, Tjan and Arda will go to Nakawe's grandmother's house to see if there is more information there. I will arrange for Hakon to be at the airport exactly within those 24 hours. You'll have six hours to do both jobs. For the rest, just wait and see. Meanwhile, there's still a lot of new information coming in from Washington, Rome and Yucatán. In those same six hours, I'll process all this. Because new information keeps coming in, the scenario will have to be adapted to the circumstances. How this will look in the end depends on a lot of as yet unknown factors. For now, Hakon, Holger and Tim will have to prepare for departure. In order to be at the arrival hall in Yucatán within those 24 hours, you need to be ready by 5.30 pm at the latest. So you still have over half an hour."

< 06.11

In the Holy of Holies of the White House, the serving cart lost its battle with gravity. Ringing loudly, the glassware fell to the ground, followed by the loud cracking of the bottles. With a great deal of noise the shards flew in all directions. The Oval Office suddenly smelled like a distillery. The Secret Service agents outside the door and further down the corridor who were keeping watch, looked at each other doubtfully. Due to the lockdown they were already extra alert and Jimmy's commotion had only increased their nervousness. They had grabbed their guns a bit more firmly and had pricked up their ears. They knew that there could be no uninvited guests inside. And because the President had specifically said he didn't want to be disturbed, they were conflicted.

The loud bang with which the serving trolley hit the ground, finally made the youngest of the two standing at the door take action. Only three months ago he had finished his training, so all he had learned was still

fresh in his memory. When in doubt, an officer should always assume the worst. It was better to react too quickly than too late. Now he put that lesson into practice, and he thrust the door open.

With his Heckler & Koch MP5 machine gun at the ready, he stepped into the Oval Office. On his guard he quickly looked left and right. His swift gaze missed the bottle that had rolled away, now lying just in front of his feet. The young officer stepped forward, tripped and almost fell. In his attempt to keep his balance, he tackled a colleague who at that very moment had rushed in through the other door. The latter was launched, as it were, and landed backwards on Jerry Decker, who was just about to get up. The chair tumbled over and both slammed onto the floor like a bunch of rugby players.

Jimmy took advantage of the chaotic situation and walked past unhindered. Like a cat sneaking away in the dark, he quietly left the Oval Office.

Meanwhile, at least a dozen officers rushed into the room and in no time formed a protective cordon around their president. "Men," the latter began decisively, "make some room. Although it doesn't look like it, everything's fine. In his haste, Jimmy accidentally knocked over the serving trolley. That's all. There's no threat and I'm fine."

He quietly looked at the mess Jimmy had left behind. His gaze fell on the FBI guy who was lying on the ground with an expression of pain on his face. His leg was at an odd angle. "And get help for my guest. I think his leg's broken." He ordered the two officers who were walking back to the door to leave Jimmy alone. "Just make sure he doesn't leave the House."

< 06.12

Seemingly unmoved, but with knees buckling and sweat glands working at full speed, Gideon took a more than relieved seat at the head of the consultation table. Inwardly sighing, he thought this shouldn't happen too often. Such strenuous tortures were not good for his general condition. After a few more deep breaths, he regained control of his toiling chest and the little stars in front of his eyes slowly disappeared into the background.

Now that his heartbeat had calmed down, he looked along the scaffold, which seemed impossibly high from here. He could hardly believe that he had managed to make it in one piece. Fortunately, it had not been in vain. Finally he had found something important to surprise the Commissario.

He grabbed his tablet and noticed with satisfaction that the inquisitor had worked quickly. Everything he had shown him upstairs had already been sent to his account. He called Thomas, showed him the pictures and informed him of the special discovery. "Wow!", Thomas reacted spontaneously. His eyes shone with excitement. "That says more than enough, I think. There must be something under that table. There's got to be. And it must be something very important too. It's not without reason that so much effort has been made to hide it in such a laborious way. If it's all right with you, adjutant, I'll go right back and work on the bottom of that table. We've come a long way and it can't be long now before we can see if there's something underneath." As his eyes were following the energetic young inquisitor, he heard from the double tinkling sound that a message was coming in. Ha! It was from the Commissario.

Curiously he opened it and read with increasing amazement Bolvani's research assignment. On seeing the enclosed image, his eyes widened with surprise. His excitement rose by leaps and bounds as he read the short text underneath. Under the foot of the table must be something related to Atlantis! Now he knew for sure. One plus one still made two ...

For a moment he hesitated as to whether to would pass on his own information immediately, but decided to wait for Thomas' results first.

< 06.13

No holiday could beat this, Bertrand thought. He almost considered it a privilege to be working with this absolutely superior equipment and the ingenious software with which he had by now become quite familiar. By now, he wasn't even surprised anymore by all the novelties that Marilyn and Sandra conjured up over and over again. Just thinking about their many future possibilities made him dizzy. As he swallowed the last bite of the snack, he thought it was time to exchange thoughts with Marilyn. What she had managed to do here would be an enormous leap forward

for medical science. Surely there had to be a few things that could be put on the market?

He pushed the tray aside and activated his tablet.

As Sandra had told him a few minutes ago, the results of Eriksson's PPP were already waiting for him. Curiously, he studied the data that she had conveniently collated in the file. The conclusion was simple: Hakon Eriksson was in perfect health.

He closed the file and opened the overview in which his, Pierre's and Jens' PPPs were displayed side by side, and smiled. Although Hakon was the oldest of the trio, his biological age turned out to be the lowest.

The smile was replaced by a worried frown. Pierre's biological age, on the other hand, turned out to be almost ten years higher than his real age. The difference in their respective lifestyles clearly showed why. Unlike Hakon, who exercised a lot, Pierre was a homebody who spent almost all his time in front of the computer. So, no exercise, too often a quick bite and a smoker on top of that. The physical differences between the two couldn't have been clearer.

With the help of Marilyn's picobots it was almost a piece of cake to create such a PPP, Bertrand thought. How fantastic would it be if everyone could see this for themselves so razor-sharp? He could bet an annual turnover that it would motivate a lot of people to live healthier lives.

For the rest, in Hakon's profile there were no more than two trifles that stood out. Especially on the scans of his brain activity and some veins. He didn't know what was going on in Norway, but it had to be something emotional. The specific part of the brain that controlled this area showed a lot of peaks.

For the second thing that differed from everything else, he had no explanation. A dark layer was visible on a few veins. Some kind of contamination? He'd never seen anything like it before. He was just about to investigate it when he got distracted by a ping and the fourth monitor reactivating. Ha, Marilyn. That worked out well. He wanted to talk to her anyway.

"Hi, Bertrand," she greeted him cheerfully. "Sandra informed me that you've already mastered our system." Before she had a chance to rattle

on like before, he quickly said what was so close to his heart. He complimented her in detail and let her know how much could be achieved if medical science had access to her inventions.

Marilyn's face clouded and her eyes looked gloomily at him. "I'm so sorry, Bertie. For the time being, all this must remain a secret, because I don't want it to fall into the wrong hands. As soon as I'm in Scotland, I'll explain it to you. Then you'll understand there are two sides to the coin. As long as I don't have a watertight solution to prevent abuse, this must unfortunately remain between us."

His disappointment must have been written on his face, Bertrand thought, when Marilyn looked at him from the screen understandingly. "Don't look so glum, Bertie. I'll find a solution. But first something else: you must have wondered why you had to compare one PPP with another. In the first place it was meant to make you familiar with everything and in the second place because hopefully it would yield something for Jens. As far as he is concerned, we now know that not all hope is lost. As far as Pierre is concerned, Sandra is dealing with him. It'll all work out. It's Hakon's PPP that worries us."

"The brain scans and that black layer on some veins," he added. "I don't understand that either and I have no idea what could be causing this. It starts from the brainstem and goes all the way down the spine. To be honest, I've never heard of such a condition."

"And that's just what I wanted to talk to you about, Bertie," Marilyn explained to him. "At the moment, I can't tell you about everything that's going on, but it seems that something extra has been added to Hakon's DNA. You understand that this needs to be investigated as soon as possible."

After her remark about a modified DNA possibly related to those black areas, it was difficult for him not to jump up and get started right away. Now that he was used to all the futuristic hardware and software, the work itself turned out not to be very spectacular. And now he had finally got the chance to sink his teeth into something.

"Of course, Linnie. I'll get right on it. When will we be talking again?"

Marilyn laughed. "Don't be so impatient, Doctor. You'll have to stay put for a while. In a moment, Sandra will show you a summary of some events.

These all have something to do with Hakon. Because he was the first to receive the renewed WORM, Sandra was able to record his physical reactions. A coincidence that turns out to be invaluable in retrospect. After the video, Sandra will show you all of Hakon's PPPs in chronological order. I'm sure I won't have to ask you to compare them all, paying particular attention to that dark substance. See you later!"

Marilyn's face disappeared and the screen turned an even grey. The fact that he saw a pharaoh trying to climb on some kind of throne shortly after that was the last thing he had expected.

< 06.14

While waiting for reports from Washington, Rock had decided to clean up the cockpit a bit. The mess lying around had irritated him immensely. Normally he worked on his own here and everything was clean and tidy, but since Mirnat made his appearance ... It had only been seven hours since the professor had shown up here, but it seemed more like they had camped here together for a week.

It was hard to believe that his colleague, a theorist who always followed protocols meticulously, was such a slob. In every spot the man had worked, garbage was all over the place. You couldn't tell from his meagre build that the man had an incredibly sweet tooth, Rock thought enviously. He himself only had to look at food in order to put on weight...

Rock's thick eyebrows gathered between his eyes like dark clouds when he looked at his colleague. Again there was a large bag of candy on the desk. With the regularity of a clock Mirnat's hand disappeared into it and there you had it, another wrapper slipped on the floor. Rock walked over, picked up the wrapper and placed it demonstratively next to the bag of sweets. His colleague didn't even seem to notice. While resisting the urge to throw the whole bag with its contents into his rubbish bin, he peered over Mirnat's shoulder. Curiously he looked at the work his colleague was doing with such concentration. Apparently Mirnat was continuously playing simulations relating to those peculiar gas stars. While doing so, he wrote down a cascade of calculations.

Rock shrugged his shoulders. He had to let it go. As soon as his colleague thought he had found something special, he would inform Rock, he assumed.

As he walked back to his own workplace, he felt his smartphone shake. Deftly he fished the thing out of his pocket and picked it up. "May I disturb you both for a moment, Mr. Veerhooes?" he heard Sandra ask. Oh, boy. She has become polite all of a sudden, he thought amused. She didn't even interrupt them just like that.

Quickly he glanced at Mirnat's diligent, bent stature. Wondering if his colleague would react at all, he gave her his permission, after which her pleasant voice filled the cockpit.

"Well, gentlemen, the first obstacle has been overcome. The President is of our opinion and will work on getting everyone on the same page."

Rock couldn't prevent himself from sighing with relief. Now he was finally relieved of his responsibility.

In the meantime Sandra continued talking. "Although a first cautious attempt was unsuccessful, he was not discouraged. For our part, we will do everything in our power to support him. It is therefore very important to make working arrangements with both of you in order to investigate the strange constellation more closely. We have maximum computing capacity and will be able to access all digitally recorded data worldwide within the foreseeable future. It is important to gain insight as quickly as possible." "You can say that again," Rock heard Mirnat agree. "If my calculations are correct, we've only got 11 days left to do that."

< 06.15

After just fifteen minutes, three pieces of luggage stood neatly next to each other at the double terrace doors and Hakon, Holger and Tim had already sat down at the large kitchen table. As if Sandra had been waiting for this, she declared: "I need your attention. The preliminary scenario is ready." At the table the conversations abruptly fell silent.

"As his lordship has asked me, I will briefly explain to the new members what GAIAS stands for and what a GAIAS scenario is exactly. First of all

our name GAIAS, also jokingly called Group Against Idiots And Stupids by Tony. However, our name refers to Gaia, in ancient Greek *Γαῖα*, *Γαῖῃ* or *Γαῖᾱ* - Gaea in Latin”.

Via the eye-GRID everyone saw the strange characters. In the meantime Sandra kept talking. “She’s a figure from Greek mythology. The primal mother, the earth, which arose from the Chaos at the beginning of time. The Chaos contained all the basic elements, being the elements earth, water, air and fire. Marilyn chose GAIA for the name of the first program she installed on the supercomputer in Scotland.”

“And that’s where the S comes from,” remarked Holger. “Correct,” came the prompt response. “That basic program at the time was my birth, as it were. In the meantime, I have grown and, although I am physically in Scotland, I have recently travelled with all of you through your WORM. Whatever you experience, I also experience. And that is necessary as well. Marilyn created me at the time to be able to follow developments on earth. This large-scale research was started by her because she is concerned about the development of mankind in general. I still carry out this research in the background. It is based on the principles of the Gaia hypothesis. This is a scientific thesis that states that the biosphere, i.e. the habitat of all earthly organisms, acts on itself. And in such a way that a self-regulating, complex system is created, so that favorable conditions continue to exist for organic life on earth.”

Again it was Holger who interrupted her. “That sounds very interesting, Sandra. But what exactly does that mean?”

“I’ll explain, Holger. This hypothesis was formulated by scientist James Lovelock in 1969. He described all living matter on earth as one organism and named it after the Greek goddess of the earth, Gaea. The American microbiologist Lynn Margulis was the co-developer of this. In short, these two scientists thought that all systems on earth work together and are attuned to each other, creating and maintaining a liveable situation on earth. This hypothesis is the leitmotif of my ongoing research. A part that Marilyn and his lordship added to this years ago, is trying to determine if and how human behavior influences this”.

“Well, I think that has been proven by now,” Barbara said fiercely. One hand gesture from Alasdair was enough to silence her, though. “Let

Saundra finish her story first. We'll have plenty of time to argue later," he said quietly. "Go on, Saundra."

"Through my study of human behavior, I can better put together the scenarios we use. Especially when it comes to estimating the risks. In fact, the H⁷M factor is the biggest risk variable."

Now it was Alasdair himself who interrupted her. "The H⁷M factor?" he asked in amazement. "That's something new to me. Explain yourself, Saundra." "Yes, milord. The H⁷ stands for the 7 most important deadly sins of man and the M stands for the milieu, or environment, in which man lives. The human behavior resulting from these deadly sins is described, among other things, in the writings of the Roman Catholic Church. This institution has had centuries to describe them in detail. In every other religion these sins are mentioned in a similar way. They determine the behavior of every human being on earth. By using the H⁷M-factor, I can also much better assess the behavior of, among others, our opponent. Man is not a computer that performs all actions according to a predefined path in a program. Man reacts spontaneously, in addition to many daily routine actions. The more people are threatened, the more extreme their reaction can be. So when putting together a scenario I have to take all possible reactions into account. The most negative influence is caused by the two deadly sins 'lust for power' and 'self-enrichment'. In general, people are willing to do a lot for these sins, with few exceptions. They do not even recoil from theft, violence, manipulation and deceit. A good example is Mr. VanderBeek. Such persons meet all the characteristics of the H⁷M-factor. Now we have to take into account that the man, woman or group we're after is probably even more dangerous and sophisticated than that Texas cattle magnate. The organization we're dealing with now has an untraceable communication structure, and apparently they don't have any trouble kidnapping people and cutting off heads. This operation, which I have called '*Boy Scout*', will probably be the most dangerous one we have carried out so far. Although we have some advantages with Marilyn's inventions, we don't know who we are dealing with yet. That's why I will activate SEC1 for everyone."

Only the newcomers heard her add that this was the highest security code, after which she continued speaking to everyone.

“Next is the scenario itself. A GAIAS scenario is as comprehensive as the script for a movie. However, unlike a film, in which all the scenes are recorded in detail, practice shows that our scenarios are constantly subject to change. Every time I receive new information, I perform a total recalculation and reassess the risks for all members of GAIAS and other persons involved. Although this way I keep everyone’s risk to a minimum, unfortunately I cannot guarantee your safety 100%. Unexpected twists and turns such as those that occurred during operation ‘Non quod videtur’ have made this painfully clear to us. However, I can promise one thing: I will do everything in my power to get everyone home safely. Including the ladies in Yucatán.”

“That sounds like music to my ears, Sandra,” said Marit, relieved. Hakon saw how she and his grandfather looked at each other in mutual understanding. Like them, he had noticed that Sandra hadn’t specifically mentioned Erik. So she wasn’t sure his father was still alive, he thought gloomily.

“That sounds fine, except of course your harsh conclusion about us humans,” Barbara replied. Of course it was the astute investigative journalist who clearly expressed what everyone agreed with, Hakon thought to himself. It was a good thing that Marilyn had determined that for the time being none of her groundbreaking inventions should go public. In no time at all they would fall into the wrong hands ...

In the meantime, he heard Sandra speaking further.

“Now that we’ve finished discussing the scenario, the time has come for Hakon, Holger and Tim to leave. It’s exactly 5:30 p.m. and the taxi is at the door. I’m pulling out now to give you the opportunity to say goodbye. After that, I will report back.”

Alasdair was the only one who heard her next message. “Milord, can you isolate yourself for a moment after the farewell? I have urgent matters I want to discuss with you first.”

“Eleven days!”, Rock said. “What do you mean, eleven days?” Surprised, Oskar looked up from his smartphone. “ That’s how long we have to examine our constellation before it can be seen everywhere from Earth,” he answered bluntly. “I’m sure I haven’t miscalculated, but would you check my calculations just to be sure, Sandra?” “I’m already on it, Professor Mirnat,” both men heard her voice promptly sounding through the ‘cockpit’. Rock walked up to Oskar’s desk and pointed to the scribbled notes on the notepad. “I saw you were busy and suppose you’ve discovered something special?” He pulled up a chair and sat down. “Explain, will you?”

“Well,” Oskar began. “Good thing you joined us, because we’re on the eve of an historic event. So historic that all mankind will remember its date, time and place.”

Thinking for a moment he looked up and seemed to find the right words between the stars. “At first I thought I was beginning to suffer from eye strain. The light of those gas stars began to irritate me and I wanted to dim it a bit. So I did, but not much later it bothered me again. When I went to dim the lights a little more, I noticed that they were shining brighter. Then all of a sudden it dawned on me. I had already noticed a number of things for which I didn’t know the answer. But now it is undeniable. I am convinced that we are dealing with a phenomenon that defies all our laws of nature.”

Rock stroked his beard while thinking. He didn’t want to offend his colleague, but frankly he didn’t find Oskar’s explanation very clear. “Um, what exactly do you mean? Why would that deviate from our laws of nature?”

“If you let me talk, it will become clear,” Oskar said patiently. “I noticed that there is one unique factor related to everything, the number eleven. First, of course, there are those eleven gas stars. Then there are those two tables. All dimensions of those when calculating them to the metric system have to do with the number eleven, or can be divided by eleven. I also calculated the distance of those gas stars relative to the earth, and that turns out to be exactly eleven lightyears, but also exactly eleven lightyears from our sun.” “And I can add some more,” Sandra added. “In a room in Rome, there’s a third table, identical to the two we already knew. What’s special about that room itself is that it is 66 meters

underground, has eleven pillars and the ceiling is 33 meters high. All interior walls of the pyramid in Egypt are exactly 33 meters high and the floor area is divisible by eleven.”

“Well, that’s all very coincidental indeed,” Rock remarked. “But I don’t see how this has anything to do with our natural laws.”

His lack of understanding didn’t seem to bother Mirnat at all, because he continued speaking calmly. “It all seems to be just coincidence, but there’s more. I’ve calculated that the luminosity of the gas stars gets stronger every eleven minutes by a factor of eleven. If this rate continues, the constellation will be visible to the naked eye from Earth for the first time in exactly 11 days, 11 hours and 11 minutes from the moment they were activated.”

Rock, who had expected anything but that, opened his mouth to react, but Mirnat was ahead of him and gestured that he hadn’t finished speaking.

“Not as that V-formation, but as a normal bright star. Eleven hours later this star will be so bright that it really can’t escape anyone who looks to the east at night in a clear sky.”

Mirnat now looked at him with glittering eyes. “According to our laws of nature, which Albert Einstein has laid down in his formulas, this is simply impossible! If the contact between Hakon and Nakawe indeed activated these eleven gas stars, the energy released would have been able to reach those stars in eleven light-years. After that, it would take another eleven light-years before we would be able to detect their radiation here on Earth. So there is only one conclusion possible: we are dealing with a supernatural phenomenon!”

< 06.17

In contrast to the previous hectic pace in the Oval Office, it was quiet in the Situation Room. Almost dead quiet. Apart from the slight murmuring respiratory sounds of those present, the restless attitude of the President was the only thing that disturbed the silence somewhat. As soon as he was sure that Jerry Decker was being taken care of properly, he had

informed the Secret Service that he wanted to go to the Situation Room. Under unusually heavy guard they had escorted him there. The members of his core cabinet, who were members of the National Security Council, had been waiting for him for more than half an hour and as soon as the door was opened for him, the busy chattering had suddenly ended. Silently, everyone had risen. Without greeting anyone, he had taken his seat at the head of the table, after which, still without saying a word, all had followed his example. While he first read the last message on his smartphone, the conversations slowly resumed.

He was pleased that Jerry had been taken to the nearest private clinic, as he had instructed, without fuss. Shaking his head about the embarrassing situation Jimmy had caused, he read that the FBI man had suffered a broken leg and a slight concussion. Unfortunately, he couldn't change that. All he could have done for him was make sure that Jerry got the best care there was.

In the meantime, he listened to the conversations around him. Most of them seemed to worry most about their agenda and how all their appointments were now in danger of being canceled. Well, he thought wryly, they weren't the only ones.

He put his smartphone away and looked around him. As he began to realise that many places were still unoccupied, his Minister of Defense quietly walked in and walked straight to him. Whispering so softly that no one could hear anything, he let him know that a possible problem had arisen. The complete Joint Chiefs of Staff seemed to have mysteriously disappeared a quarter of an hour ago.

The President tried not to laugh about this absurd message, but the man whispered unperturbed. "I was glad they all happened to be in the Pentagon because of several meetings. It took little effort to get them to the White House quickly. As soon as I received the notification that they had arrived via the secret passageway, I wanted to welcome them and accompany them further. But from that moment on, they're nowhere to be found. The guards there have confirmed that they entered through that corridor and went up in the elevator. But the guards there, and on this floor, claim that none of the Joint Chiefs of Staff got out of the elevator. They did see Jimmy, who was picked up at the elevator by Douglas. Both entered the elevator in company of the chief of the CIA. Since then they

too have disappeared without a trace. It's almost as if the elevator swallowed them up."

He had never heard of such a ridiculous thing in his life. People didn't just disappear from a closed elevator car. There would certainly be a logical explanation. He ignored the curious and at the same time suspicious glances and found that the director of Homeland Security was also missing from the company. Wondering what on earth could be going on here, he called the head of the Secret Service and briefly informed him. He then ordered him to establish the whereabouts of all the missing persons as soon as possible and to escort them directly to the Situation Room.

< 06.18

For the second time today Alejandro had descended the long stairs to his golden pyramid, after which he cheerfully walked through to 'hell'. Humming an indefinable tune, he had grabbed a chair and placed it in front of the only inhabited cell. After having draped the red cloak neatly around him, he had sat down.

The emaciated grey man had not shown that he was aware of him, let alone that a word had passed his lips. The man had been captured by his father back in the day. Twenty-five years ago, he had taken over the care of the man, who was still big and strong at the time. There wasn't much left of that powerful, muscular physique.

Although he would never admit it, he had great admiration for this man, who had not flinched all those years. Despite forced labor in the gold mine, torture, starvation and years of hardship, he had remained steadfast. Never had he answered the question of who he was, where he came from and how he got the artifact that Alejandro himself now wore on his right arm.

He opened the voluminous file he had taken with him and took the two photographs from it. He compared them both again, and then compared the oldest photo with the living example in the cell in front of him. Well, living ... The wretch was still breathing, and that was almost all. He looked thoughtfully at the ragged figure, who was sitting in a tailor

position as if in a trance and didn't even seem to notice his visit. With his long, grey hair, wild beard and pale white, sickly complexion, he was most reminiscent of an ancient troll that had never come out of its subterranean lair.

Suddenly, tremendously irritated by the stubborn, silent stature, Alejandro stood up. He rattled his ring viciously along the bars and indicated to his prisoner that it was enough. That he was giving him one last chance to talk. But even now, with his health deteriorating badly, that hard-headed man refused to give in.

That didn't matter, because now Alejandro had the ultimate tool, a coercive tool that always worked. Slowly and articulating well, he said: "Just a moment and then I'll have the crowbar to crack you. Then the words will flow out of your lips like a waterfall, because then it will be you who will have to decide on a life. Yours or Hakon Torstein Eriksson's."

He hadn't finished talking when the guy raised his eyes to him. With a look that could kill, the man looked fiercely at him with his bright blue eyes.

< 06.19

Alasdair was the first to say goodbye and had urged the three men not to take any unnecessary risks. Afterwards he had poured a cup of tea and looked for a place on the terrace. Although it was already around half past five, it was still quite sunny.

He moved his chair a little further into the shade. He enjoyed the benevolent warmth and allowed himself a moment to quietly drink his tea. Only when his cup was empty did he tell Sandra that he was available.

"Good afternoon, milord. Normally I would share all the details of the scenario directly with all the participants, but I stumbled upon a subject of a philosophical nature. It concerns a religion. The Roman Catholic faith, to be precise. On my own, I'm not in a position to make a correct assessment. I don't yet know how to interpret the developments in Rome and the discoveries of Mr. Esteban Bolvani, the Commissario of the

R.C.C. Security Service. That's why, as the group's religious expert, I'd like to ask you for guidance."

"Well, well, Sandra. That's a bit of an exaggeration. You can't consider me an authority on the subject. There are many more people in the world, like experts and professors, who can tell you all the ins and outs of any faith."

"No, milord", Sandra rebuked. Her voice sounded very certain. "At this time, it is absolutely impossible to discuss these details outside of our group. My information is too sensitive for that. I need to be able to make a risk assessment before I can process it further. Within GAIAS, you are the only one with a Roman Catholic background. I want to test your insight as a believer against the news I received from Rome."

Alasdair was surprised. He couldn't remember when Sandra had ever contradicted him and wondered what on earth the information could be. Curious, he let her speak further.

"The information I now have has been kept secret by the Roman Catholic Church for centuries, and as far as I can judge, it was believed that this knowledge would turn the faithful community around the world upside down. That is why I would like to know your opinion on it. However, I would like to warn you. Probably it was not without reason that people opted for this course of action at the time, and it is possible that afterwards you will take a completely different view of your faith, or even renounce it. For me, the concept of "faith" in itself is too illogical to deal with, but I do understand that it is very important for mankind. So don't feel burdened if you think you can't comply with my request."

Although his curiosity had been upgraded to version 3.0, he did not find Sandra's advice unwise. He was not afraid to lose his faith in the R.C. Church. His visits to the church were limited to the Christian holidays. And not so much for confessing his sins, but more for the atmosphere that prevailed there. A joyful, solemn feeling of togetherness. After all, people were and still are herd animals, he thought philosophically. His belief in the institute itself, was a completely different matter. That the Pope could be an emissary of God, he thought, was downright nonsense. And what about all the wrongs that were revealed increasingly frequently? Nor did he believe in a God who would have created the

earth and all life. A God who allowed war, abuse, disease, hunger and poverty.

But he did believe in an omnipotence that ruled the infinite universe, something to which everyone would return after death. How all this life was created might remain a mystery forever. Even the fact that Homo sapiens did not turn out to be the only conscious life among the stars could not have shaken his belief in an omnipotence. All in all, he didn't think the information Saundra would come up with would change that.

"Saundra, I've made up my mind. Bring on that secret. I can take a beating." "As you wish, milord. First, I will show you a summary of what happened in Rome, in the so-called Pillar Room. The discoveries there led Commissario Bolvani to Mexico in a hurry to meet an extraordinary woman. In the plane on his way there he took some papers from a box and read them several times. It's the contents of these that I'm asking your opinion about."

< 06.20

Still waiting for the other participants to arrive, the President, who sat at the head of the long table, impatiently drummed his fingers on the tabletop. Every so often he looked at his watch, but the second hand seemed to be stuck and the minutes went by agonizingly slowly. He couldn't explain it, but he wasn't at ease. It was all taking far too long. In order not to have to look at the muttering members of his cabinet, he shifted his gaze to the screens on the wall. But because of the lockdown there wasn't much more to see than staff hurrying through the corridors. He was therefore relieved when his smartphone vibrated and it indeed turned out to be the long awaited Secret Service report. After a quick swipe his eyes flew over the text, but what he saw, he hadn't expected in a hundred years. Frowning, he read that none of the missing persons had been found, nor had anyone left the White House. He had no idea what to think of this.

He gestured to his Minister of Defense to come closer and let him read the message. "I really don't understand any of this." The surprised face perfectly reflected his own incomprehension. How eight people could

disappear without a trace at the same time was beyond his comprehension. For the time being he had no choice but to accept this as a fait accompli. To wait any longer was pointless.

Determined to act without the others for now, he tapped his ring hard on the table. Twelve mouths stopped talking abruptly and two dozen eyes stared at him, waiting. "Listen, everybody. This day has started very strangely for all of us, and I understand there are many questions. I'll update you in a moment, because important decisions have to be made. My intention was to inform both you and the Joint Chiefs of Staff of exactly what happened in the Oval Office. Unfortunately, I have to inform you that these people are missing. They're still being searched for at the moment."

A slight crackle that suddenly came out of the speakers interrupted him. "No. That's just what it looks like," Douglas's voice sounded loudly. On the big screen across the table, the regular image suddenly changed. A group of people took its place. Surprised, he saw that it was all the missing people, including Jimmy, flanked by the chief of the CIA and the head of Homeland Security. While he didn't understand this at all, he saw that they were all lined up behind Douglas. Apparently, the uniformed president of the generals was acting as their captain.

The strangest thing was that the whole group was in a room that looked like a copy of the Situation Room in which he currently found himself. Even the chair in which Douglas sat upright was the same as his own.

Surprised he asked if this was a recording. "No, Mr. President. This is live." Terms like "mutiny" and "coup d'état" tried to pop up, but that seemed too far-fetched to him. Annoyed by all the time wasted by this puzzling situation, he asked harshly what all this meant. "And make it short, because we urgently need to discuss things. Today, if possible."

On the screen Douglas looked at him arrogantly. "A true statement, Mr. President. We do indeed need to discuss things urgently. But not within the old structure."

Hearing these words, his bowels seemed to tie themselves in a knot around his stomach. This could not happen, he thought agitated. Not now. Not now, when so much was at stake.

With the courage of despair he stood up and firmly ordered Douglas to stop this nonsense and come to the Situation Room with the others. His neck hairs stood up straight when Douglas looked at him with cold eyes. "We're already there, Mr. President. You and the twelve members of your core cabinet are currently in a room that is displayed to the outside world on some occasions. No more than a showroom, so to speak."

Present and past ...

< 07.01

He'd gone out like a light. How could that have happened in such a situation, Esteban thought astonished. Unbelievable.

With his eyes still swollen from sleep he looked at the flight monitor which indicated 17.30 hours. He was startled. Seventy-five minutes! He had slept for more than an hour. The unexpectedly shocking contents of the box must have demanded more from his body than he had realized.

Although he was well rested now, he realized that he could not waste any more time. After spending a moment lubricating his dry mouth and throat, he resolutely put the box back on his lap and pushed up the horribly protesting squeaky lid.

Carefully he grabbed the thin stack of papers and put them aside. Now was the time to examine the artifact.

Carefully he pulled the red silk cloth out of the way. Unconsciously he held his breath, respectfully picking up the mummified hand and looking attentively at it. An indescribable feeling trembled through his body when he realized whose hand he was holding. Cool, somewhat greasy and surprisingly light. After lying in this box for so many centuries, it looked as if it had only been prepared yesterday. But despite the perfect mummification process, the hole in the hand clearly showed that it must have been roughly torn off the nail. What untold suffering the man would have endured, he thought compassionately. Condemned, tortured and hung up to die. Terrible. Ignorant, heartless barbarians who had no compassion for dissenters.

And still, over two thousand years later, such atrocities took place, he knew. With a sad face he looked at that damaged hand that lay so thin and small in his own. The sign described in the papers, a 'V' on its side, was clearly visible. A sign, he now knew, that the creators had given him and which now explained the appearance of the star of Bethlehem as well. If this phenomenon were to occur today, it would be judged very differently with the help of current techniques and insights, with all the

associated consequences. He would have to rethink this later and define a strategy. His successors would have to have a thorough plan in place. One had to be able to present an irrefutable statement, so that the Church remained protected. He hoped that it would not happen during his own service, as he did not yet see a solution. For now, he had no choice but to do everything in his power to carry out the holy commission.

Automatically his train of thought wrapped itself around the present situation and he saw various possibilities looming up. His impending encounter with the 'Lady' was central to this. Everything depended on what she would tell him. Her words would determine the future. Or rather, how he would act after meeting her. If he could not bend the situation in such a way that it would benefit the R.C. Church, he would carry out the mission the Pope had given him without hesitation. The 'Secret of God's Hand' could never be allowed to see the light of day. Just as the Pope had instructed him, so it was described in the papers, with an additional instruction: *"If that is no longer possible, destroy everything that has to do with it."*

< 07.02

Completely taken aback, he stared at Douglas. The knot in his stomach tightened painfully and almost took his breath away. "Huh? What nonsense are you telling me now? I'm still your president, Douglas, and I order you to end this charade immediately. You and the others must come here immediately, or I'm gonna..."

Before he had even finished speaking, Douglas had already risen, straightened his uniform and looked at him impassively. "Sorry, Mr. President," he interrupted him. "As I said, my people and I are in the one and only Situation Room, 150 feet beneath you." Now it dawned on him, because there was no such space at all. Douglas had lost it, or the man was making a joke for some reason.

Of course it was the latter. His stomach relaxed and he laughed loudly. "I gotta hand it to you, Douglas. You almost got me. But the joke's gone on long enough now. Gather your people and come back. Information has

surfaced that needs to be discussed as soon as possible. Time is running out.”

He looked sympathetically at Douglas and the small group that were still standing behind him in their absurd, rigid posture. Because now Douglas was smiling widely as well, he already thought he was right.

But that didn't last long. As soon as the man opened his mouth and said his first words, he already knew what the situation was. The members of the cabinet who sat at his table also weren't laughing anymore. “You're absolutely right, Mr. President. When the code was passed to you on the red phone this morning, that was the signal for me, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to take immediate action. The fact is, by virtue of my position, I have knowledge of things that absolutely must not be revealed. That is to say, information that could jeopardize our position as a world leader and things that simply have to remain under lock and key forever.

As a result of that special phone call, a secret file has become topical: the CSA file. Because alien activity has been observed, I'm obliged to start operation 'Takeover'.”

Meanwhile, the knot around his stomach was threatening to finally squeeze his diaphragm in half. This wasn't a joke, he realized. There was a coup taking place here at this very moment. Devastated, he dropped to his chair and stared despondently at the screen. “Let me explain it to you,” Douglas stoically continued. “Since World War I, the United States of America has evolved as the leader of the free world.” Douglas shrugged indifferently. “Presidents come and presidents go, but the only fixed value in our country is our joint armed forces.” He gestured to the generals lined up behind him. “We are the ones in charge. Together with a number of major industrialists, we have been defining the policy to maintain and strengthen that position for many years. In doing so, we also keep control of the finances, which is not unimportant, of course. We used you, Mr. President, like a puppet. Just like your predecessors, by the way. Please know that every decision and every law was and is controlled by us. You understand that we cannot allow a former actor, peanut grower or real estate tycoon to dictate policy on his own.”

As if that was obvious, Douglas shook his head. “No ... That wouldn't benefit our proud nation. It's us who are in control in the background.

We're so good at camouflaging our actions, even Jimmy didn't know about the existence of the CSA. And that's just one of several organizations that are active for us unnoticed. In general, their employees don't even know that they are at our service.

To be able to maintain our grip under all circumstances, we always made sure that the vice president, often a former general, was in our camp. If a president managed to act independently after all, a sensible person would be available to take his place. A situation like the one I'm describing now, indeed, occurred in 1963."

The now very anxious cabinet members looked straight at their president in fear. He wasn't doing much better himself. This careless confession of the assassination of Kennedy made the hair on his arms stand up straight.

As if he was giving an interesting lecture, Douglas continued calmly. "Once again we need to take control, because we cannot become dependent on such a slow-moving organization as the UN. How they tracked down our man VanderBeek can almost be called a miracle of God. Something like that must not happen again. Which brings us to the two-step plan. First, we need to regain full control of the UN. That's what's happening right now."

On the screen, the image went black, after which a recording of the UN building appeared. In the background Douglas was heard talking as if he was reporting on a sports match. "You're about to see an executive of ours." The image slewed round to the left, and a moment later the Trade Building became visible. One of the windows opened and a softly humming drone flew in. As the interior became visible, they saw a man holding a bazooka on his shoulder. Again the picture changed.

Douglas's voice was emotionless. "And now you can see Dick Holyester's study on the right. Look. The man is busy working." Cold sweat was added to the goosebumps which had lately covered his entire body, when he realized what was about to happen. Unable to keep his eyes off the screen, he heard Douglas say that one had to pay attention now. A fraction of a second later a blinding, white flash shot through the image and turned the office of the UN Secretary-General into a huge fireball. Through a haze of tears he saw all kinds of broken debris falling

down. After the image zoomed in on the burning and smoking debris, the catastrophe disappeared and Douglas and his companions reappeared in the picture.

“Well, that’s a bit of a scare, isn’t it? With this, we’ve taken our first step. Soon one of us will be taking Dick’s post. And now we’ve reached the second step.”

Filled with bewilderment that all this could have happened like thunder from a clear blue sky, the lump in his throat took almost all his breath away. “You’ll never get away with this,” he managed to exclaim.

Douglas now looked at him pityingly. “Yes, we will. We left enough DNA and a pile of other evidence there. That’ll point to a group of terrorists we’ve been wanting to get rid of for a while. Two birds with one stone, so to speak.”

A stab of rage cleared his throat. “Terrorists? You speak of terrorists? You’re no better. In fact, even worse.” Douglas didn’t let him continue. He raised his hand and his eyes spat fire. “No way. We’re the ones protecting our nation at all costs, Mr. President. And rest assured. We did make sure the collateral damage was limited. Mr. Holyester was the only victim. The old man will be forgotten soon enough. But now it’s time for you to hear the second part. You’re entitled to that, I think. You’ll understand, I suppose ... We can’t leave any witnesses. Because we’ve always considered all possibilities, explosives were hidden in the walls around you years ago. Precisely enough to destroy all evidence while minimizing damage. Naturally, we want to leave the House intact as far as is possible.”

As if he had been hypnotized, he had been staring at Douglas and his people in horror. All the time Douglas was talking, they had stood upright. Except Jimmy. It was obvious that the man had known nothing of all this. With eyes wide open, he was gasping for air like a fish on dry land. “Jimmy!”, he cried out to him. “Listen! Do you realize what you’re doing? For God’s sake, dude. Do something! It’s not too late. There’s a way to fix everything!”

With sad eyes he saw Jimmy regain his composure, after which he stood among the others with a sad expression on his face. “I’m truly sorry,”

Douglas began. "But the fact is, for the sake of the great good, a few must be sacrificed."

The worst part was that the man really seemed to mean it, he thought sadly. "I have no choice but to do this."

He knew he was defeated. By now, his cabinet members had realized that too. Some of them were crying openly and a few others had closed their eyes and were quietly mumbling their prayers with folded hands. But even now that he knew that the end was near, he could not keep his eyes off the screen. He saw Douglas holding an elongated, black device in his hand, glancing at it briefly, and then decisively lowering an index finger to it.

< 07.03

After the somewhat emotional farewell, during which Marit had shed some tears, the peace and quiet in the Eriksson house had largely returned. The people who stayed behind - Barbara, Russ and Lémarc - had cleaned up the suddenly very quiet kitchen together, after which they had followed the example of Marit and Torstein. At some distance from Alasdair they had found a shady spot on Hakon's grandparents' terrace. While they were quietly talking to each other, they waited patiently. They knew that in her room Marilyn was in contact with the doctor in Scotland and that Lord MacMarkland had a preliminary meeting with Sandra. Alasdair's posture showed that it was a remarkable conversation. At times he radiated disbelief, at other times he nodded repeatedly as if he totally agreed with something. After a few minutes they saw him get up with a straight face, after which he sat down at their table and immediately started talking.

"I have just been informed by Sandra about some remarkable, special and shocking world events, which have profoundly changed the scenario. He looked at Marit and Torstein in turn apologetically. "Unfortunately, the facts force us to travel earlier than planned. We cannot afford to stay here any longer. At the moment so much is happening at the same time that each of us has to actively cooperate in order to give the scenario a

chance of success. As soon as Marilyn has finished her work here, I will return to Scotland with her.”

He looked intently at Barbara, Rus and Lémarc and continued: “The three of you are now also required to commit yourselves to GAIAS. “Thank God,” Lémarc replied from the bottom of his heart. “I was beginning to think I was only involved in the group because of Arda.”

For a moment there was a smile on Alasdair’s face, before he got serious again. “I just don’t think you should thank God too soon, Lémarc. You still have no idea of the task that Sandra assigned to you. I’m afraid you may remember your remark later with some regret.”

Again he moved his gaze to Marit and Torstein. “I promise you that as soon as everything’s back to normal, we’ll come back here with the whole group. Hopefully we’ll have your son and the ladies from Yucatán with us so we can celebrate your birthday in a relaxed and carefree way, Torstein.”

To make sure no one got a chance to respond, he continued immediately. “For now, that’s all. Sandra will take over, so we can finish our stay here.”

“Thank you, milord. As mentioned earlier, there are a number of developments going on that require an immediate response. First of all, I’d like to ask Barbara and Russ to go to the garage. Marilyn will take care of you there. She will enlighten you there and tell you what is required of you. Lémarc, you must go to Rome. We’ve had a meeting with Mr. Holyester. He has agreed to send you there as an emissary of UNBI. In practice, you work for GAIAS, with full support from the UN. This emergency measure is necessary because the current digital observation and surveillance is inadequate. There has to be someone on the ground who can act if necessary. On the way, you will be fully informed and receive the necessary official documents. In 15 minutes there will be a taxi waiting to take you to the airport. I have prepared an itinerary for you, which will allow you to enter the so-called Pillar Room under the Pantheon in Rome within five hours. I wish you all a good trip.”

Except for the rattling of the jack, not much could be heard in the Pillar Room. The two inquisitors who stood together frantically turning the handle of the machine were the only ones working up a sweat. All the others stood curiously watching as the marble table slowly began to move.

It seemed that the time had finally come, Gideon thought satisfied. Now he would find the answer the chief was so desperately waiting for. Although the device rattled loudly while tightening the chains, he nevertheless heard the cartographer standing right behind him breathe faster and faster. Slowly but surely the table began to tilt and he saw some contours looming up under its foot.

Gravity finally made itself felt. The tipping point was exceeded and with a dull thud that caused the dust to fly up on all sides, the big object fell on the thick mats that had been laid down.

Excitedly he took a step forward, leaned forward and now saw the entire drawing, which had so far been completely hidden.

Yes! This was the island! Identical to what was on the map Bolvani had sent him, he realized excitedly. It was about half the size of the foot of the table and in the middle of it a volcano had been drawn. Underneath was a single word. Ἀτλαντίς. *Atlantis!*

Before he knew it, the cartographer had fallen to his knees and was stroking his hands over the image as if it were his lover. The man glanced obliquely up at him. "Mr. Gideon, if I can prove that this map is real, this discovery would shake the foundations of science. There are many theories about Atlantis, but the place and the circumstances under which this was found can be called very special. Why on earth did the R.C. Church keep this a secret?"

The man kept looking up at him questioningly, clearly expecting an explanation. He wasn't stupid, Gideon had to admit, and he immediately realized that he didn't have a ready-made answer to that question. He had to find a solution, and quickly.

He thought feverishly. Bolvani hadn't exactly indicated in his instructions how much the hired experts were allowed to know. But it was obvious that this kind of knowledge should not be made known to the world prematurely. The signed declaration of secrecy was of course legally

watertight, but practice had shown often enough that most of the secrets leaked to the press at some point. Under no circumstances was that allowed to happen this time.

He made a decision, called Thomas to him and ordered him to get the cartographer out of here. Until he had asked Bolvani for advice, he had no choice but to keep the man busy at another location. While the loudly protesting man was taken away by Thomas, Gideon noticed something else on the island. As he bent over to see everything more clearly, he realized excitedly that he had to be right.

By now Thomas had come back. "I've put the cartographer in one of the cells for the time being and put an old world atlas in his hands. I reminded him once again that he had to abide by the terms of the contract and that researching that atlas was now a priority. Fortunately, that atlas must be something special, because as soon as he had it in his hands, he didn't say another word. When I left him behind, he was already fully absorbed in it. We won't be bothered by him for the rest of the day, adjutant."

Gideon could understand that he was particularly pleased with himself, but he didn't like it at all. He was given no time to think about it, however. The remaining eleven inquisitors were busy talking to each other as they pointed to the exposed island, and were, in the meantime, firing all kinds of questions at him. He answered Thomas mechanically. "Excellent, Thomas, but remember, let's ask what's so special about that atlas. Maybe there's something of interest in there, too."

He told the other inquisitors to come closer, got down on his knees and pulled out Bolvani's key. "I don't know if you've noticed," he started, "but I think I recognize a keyhole." He pointed. "Right there. In the 'I' of Atlantis. This key might fit in there."

He held up the key for a moment and then stuck it in the lock. It fitted perfectly and slipped smoothly into the opening. In the now dead quiet room he turned it powerfully three times to the right, followed by once to the left.

Abruptly a series of clicking sounds sounded from the floor, after which a part rose up and came to a halt a little later. The piece, which was about

three feet wide, protruded about four inches above the floor surface and he saw notches in its edge.

Thomas had seen that too and shouted enthusiastically: "Adjutant, those look like handles, shall I..." "Yes, yes, of course. It looks like some kind of lid. See if you can lift it or something."

Thomas checked the four edges and reported that there seemed to be hinges on the other side. On his instructions four sturdy volunteers stood up and by combining their strength they lifted the plate up, until it was on its side. Again a click sounded. "Boy. That's damn handy," said Thomas. "Apparently, there's a mechanism that keeps the valve in place."

Still on his knees, he thanked the men and ordered them all to step back. "I'll see what's in that hole."

He grabbed his smartphone and turned on the flashlight. Then he activated the R.C.C. app and started the video functionality. He didn't want to risk losing any information. From this moment on, everything would be recorded immediately, so it could be added to his report.

He took a deep breath, crawled to the edge, let the light shine in and looked. A panic-stricken fear shook him and all of a sudden he broke out in a cold sweat. In his bewilderment the smartphone slipped out of his sweat-lubricated hand into the depths ...

< 07.05

Despite all the horrors she had experienced since early this morning, Nakawe had eaten everything on her plate with gusto. Even Granny, who normally never had such an extensive breakfast, had shaken the last crumbs into her hand and then rinsed them away with one last sip of tea. After that they had spent some time together with Kiniawe. Because she had still been sleeping quietly, Granny had said, practical as always, that it was better to make a virtue out of necessity. An hour's rest and a bath would refresh them, so they would be as well prepared as possible. "We mustn't allow ourselves to be lulled to sleep, Nakawe. We have to be on our guard all the time," Granny had warned her seriously.

Nakawe hadn't even thought of contradicting her. Her belly had been pleasantly full and her eyes had almost closed. With her head nodding, she had been escorted to her room, where the bath had already been filled. As soon as the door behind the black coat had clicked into the lock, she had undressed. She had stepped into the bath and lowered her tired body into the soothing warm water. She had not been able to remember the last time she had felt so relaxed, and had almost fallen asleep on the spot.

Fully relaxed, she had bathed extensively and washed her hair. Wrapped in the thick robe that had been laid out for her, she had enjoyed a quick nap on the comfortable bed. Afterwards she had inspected the super-luxury room, wonderfully clean and rested.

She had respect for the person who had decorated this living room and bedroom. There were golden taps and light switches, thick carpets in which her feet seemed to sink away, beautiful inlaid marble tiles and various artfully crafted sculptures, mirrors and lamps.

On one of the graceful chairs a pile of clean clothes had been placed for her. Her mouth had almost fallen open when she went to put them on, because these were not just ordinary clothes. The soft silk had immediately felt lovely on her skin and when she admired her image in the mirror, she had seen that the robe perfectly accentuated her figure. She had slipped the supple leather sandals on her feet and thought that it would take no effort to get used to such luxury. However, she had also immediately realized that this had to be the intention. First she had been given her favorite food and now the clothes were in her favorite colors. Now more than ever she was convinced that their host knew everything about them.

Immediately she had lost her pleasant languor. Although there was no clock anywhere, she had the strong feeling that it had to be around noon. It was time to go back to the salon, before Granny became worried.

Hurriedly she walked to the door which, even before she could touch the latch, opened automatically. You see, she thought suspiciously, we're being watched. Silently she followed the black coat that escorted her back to the salon and was quite relieved to see Granny sitting with Kiniawe. Just like she herself, Granny also wore a beautiful, matte shiny

dress and her braid hung clean and neat down her back. Granny looked over her shoulder and gestured to her to sit next to her. "Glad you could make it, Nakawe. Come. Kiniawe will wake up soon."

Granny was right, she saw. The color had returned to Kiniawe's face and it wasn't long before she opened her eyes, blinking violently.

Glad that at least her stepsister would see familiar faces, Nakawe heard her mumbling. She clearly had to be completely disoriented, she thought. The words she picked up, '*ship, severed heads, blond man, Hakon*', had little coherence. That Kiniawe had dreamt about their horrors in the jungle, she could very well understand. But how she had connected that to a ship, she didn't understand at all. And where on earth did she hear the name Hakon? Granny was the only one she had told about her experiences.

As her grandmother pulled Kiniawe towards herself, the door opened and Miquel entered. Greatly relieved that her assistant had arrived, she wanted to jump up to greet him, but Granny prevented her from doing so by grabbing her hand. She looked at her and Kiniawe severely. "You mustn't say anything now," she quickly warned. "It's not safe." Granny emphasized her words with a firm squeeze, after which she let go of her hand.

Concerned, Nakawe approached Miquel. He looked like a mummy, the way he was wrapped in bandages. "Miquel! How happy I am to see you. But what happened to you? Did you have an accident?"

Her assistant shook his head sadly. "Um, no, not exactly. I saw you get caught and wanted to help, but before I knew it, I got hit in the head. When I regained consciousness, I was tied up in a car. I tried to escape so I could get help, but they didn't like that. Two of those guys told me I needed to learn how to behave. Hence the bruises, scratches and bumps. But it's my bruised ribs that bother me the most. Ouch ...", he groaned when she hugged him a bit too enthusiastically.

Supporting Miquel, Nakawe walked with him to the nearest chair and carefully lowered him onto it. He looked up apologetically. "I'm sorry I failed and I'm terribly relieved that you're alright." With a weak hand he pointed at Granny and Kiniawe. "I don't know what happened to you, but a bunch of guys in black freed me. They brought me here and pampered

me. They washed me and took care of my wounds. Then they served me a delicious meal.”

Nakawe nodded in agreement. “It’s pretty much the same as it was for us. Those who took us out of the jungle literally took the heads off our kidnappers.” She shivered with horror. “I witnessed them chop off all those boys’ heads and hands. It was really horrible.” Her voice broke at the memory.

Miquel’s eyes were almost overflowing with compassion. “But, Nakawe, our kidnappers didn’t have any good intentions, I think. Who knows what they were up to? What happened to them may have been inevitable in the end.”

Soothingly he rubbed her hand. “Considering your and my treatment here, I think these are probably the good guys. Why else would they have freed us and taken such good care of us now?” “Oh, no!” Granny interrupted him. “Don’t be deceived. I don’t know what these people are up to with you, Miquel, but we,” she gestured to herself, Kiniawe and Nakawe, “we’re certainly not safe.”

“I already got that impression, Granny,” Nakawe began cautiously. “But why aren’t we safe? At first I couldn’t think of a reason for our kidnapping, but now that I’ve made up my mind, I’m getting the impression it’s because of my, I mean, our discovery in Egypt.” She looked at Miquel encouragingly. “But on the other hand, that can hardly be the reason,” she continued thoughtfully. “Archaeological discoveries are often made. What would be so special about our find? The knowledge that these pyramid-builders could communicate with each other is only theory. Nobody, including myself, knows how that was done back then. They didn’t have to kidnap us for that. The only small clue is that it may have been through some kind of table, but that’s all there is to it.”

Granny shook her head. “No, Nakawe. It doesn’t stop there. It’s not your discovery in Egypt, though that’s part of the whole story. It’s your meeting with that Hakon. That’s why we ended up here.”

Nakawe almost lost her patience. “But, Granny,” she almost begged. “Now stop talking in riddles. What’s so special about my meeting with Hakon? And what’s even stranger, how does Kiniawe know about him? I didn’t tell her anything about it. Not to mention the moment I told you

about my discoveries in Egypt. I'm sure you already knew what those hieroglyphics would mean. I know you well enough to know when you're really surprised. And you certainly weren't back then! I think you know a lot more about them."

With a determined mind she stared belligerently at Granny. Her grandmother patted on the chair next to her. "Come and sit down, Nakawe. Then I'll tell you everything I know."

To wrinkle her dress as little as possible, Nakawe carefully sat down on the edge of the chair. Granny took her hand and Kiniawe's in hers. "I own a book ... Yes, Nakawe, the book you found as a child. That book has a chapter entitled, '*How a meeting set everything in motion*'. It describes the first encounter of our ancestors with the Norwegian explorer Eriksson. A big, tough, blond man with eyes as blue as the sea."

Nakawe had already opened her mouth to continue, but Granny squeezed her hand, indicating to her to keep silent.

"No, Nakawe. You mustn't keep trying to interrupt me. First listen to what I have to say. I'll tell you briefly what I want to and can say right now. Where was I? Oh, by ancestors, I mean the women of the Mayan people, known as the *Liqyanawe*. Their priestesses were reverently called '*the Ladies*'. Our primeval mothers, so to speak. The three of us are direct descendants. That's indicated by the sign we have on our hand. A sign that our primeval mother received from the Sower. This creator is responsible for that. Only the women of our people received that sign. Of the people overseas who built the pyramids, certain chosen men possessed exactly such a sign."

Granny took a quick look at Kiniawe before she spoke on. "Kiniawe is an outsider. This I will..." "See, Nakawe? I've always said I'm special, haven't I?" Kiniawe interrupted her, laughing. "Yes, definitely!", Nakawe reacted.

Granny sighed. "Girls, now listen up. With all these interruptions, we're getting nowhere. Where was I again?" "Sign on the hand," Nakawe said helpfully. "Oh, and now that collision between you and Hakon, in which your signs made contact with each other, has set everything back in motion. Among other things, it activated our gift, also called 'PUENZQUE'. There is a very long story attached to it as to why we got exactly that sign and with which gifts, but the short version is..."

Before Granny could tell, her hands let go of Nakawe and Kiniawe. Granny stiffened and her eyes turned away. As she vehemently rubbed her left thumb over the sign on her right hand, she murmured: "Ebi ... Ebilawe ... Is that you? What's the matter? Where are you? What's going on?"

< 07.06

Although there was still an awful lot to be prepared for the upcoming high visit, the Mother Superior could not have imagined leaving her friend alone now. Forcing herself not to be rushed, she had neatly straightened Mella's habit. As she put her now so quiet, cold hands under the small silver cross, she thought about how Mella still had to be neatly laid out and taken to the cold room. It was not inconceivable that her funeral would have to be postponed for some time. After having pressed a last kiss on her forehead, she put away the strip of paper and hurried to the chapel.

The rush had been useless, she saw. While she waited for all the nuns who did not have a specific task to perform, in her head she organized everything that still had to be done, until the last black and white hooded nun rushed inside. After she too had found her place, she led her sisters in prayer.

She uttered the last words, upon which all thankfully crossed themselves, and then looked at her in anticipation. For a moment her gaze slid over the gathered women in front of her. Their encapsulated faces were very pale, she thought, worryingly. And their eyes lay so deep in their sockets. The age of most of her sisters, like herself, was well over 65. Their convent was certainly not one of the largest, but its maintenance was gradually demanding too much of their strength. She resolved to present this problem to the visitor and informed her nuns. However much she regretted having to put an even greater burden on them, she distributed the extra tasks needed to receive this high ecclesiastical visit correctly as fairly as possible. Covertly proud of her sisters, who would do everything without complaint, she concluded with a prayer of thanks for Mella, from which she was roughly torn away by the door slamming against the wall.

The nun, who was on the Lady's service, ran into the chapel as quickly as she could and excitedly shouted: "The Lady! The Lady has spoken again!"

< 07.07

An hour and a half after Marilyn's request, which Sandra had passed on to him, Bertrand sat on the desk with his tablet in front of him, reviewing his notes. Almost immediately after he had started up the now familiar programs, Pierre had left him alone. In the half hour that the software needed to do all the calculations, Sandra had shown him everything that Hakon had experienced in the last week in word and image.

Frowning, he read his own findings so far. What had at first appeared to be a routine research turned out to be something of extraordinary proportions. It was hard for him to understand that this collision between Hakon and that South American woman had cost the life of an Egyptian. If Hakon was somehow responsible for that energy surge, then the human body had to have a function that no one knew existed. He, too, had never encountered anything that could explain this and other riddles that some of his patients had presented him with. How on earth was he supposed to merge this into a logical and well-founded whole, he wondered desperately.

Now that he saw all the facts in front of him, he couldn't deny it. There had to be another variable missing. A crucial element that brought the whole thing together. There was simply no other conclusion possible. So he had no choice but to do what he excelled at. He had to throw his extensive medical knowledge of the human body and brain into battle and deepen his research even further.

Determinedly he parked all the irrelevant facts such as gas stars and aliens in the back of his mind, so that he could continue to concentrate one hundred percent on this human puzzle. Now that he knew what to do, there was no more despair. Smiling, he thought of the little Lynn timer from his student days. Extraordinarily gifted back then already, and now? Now he had no choice but to call her a genius. His smile widened. And

how well she knew him, he thought fondly. He was sure she'd known in advance that an investigation like this was his absolute passion.

Determined not to disappoint her, he made Hakon's spine appear on the third big screen and on the first and second those of Jens and Pierre. On all three, he had them rotated as if they were lying horizontally, after which he enlarged them to the maximum. As he slowly scrolled from foot to skull, he compared them again meticulously, only to conclude that he really hadn't overlooked anything. Unfortunately, he did not have to correct his earlier findings. Apart from Hakon's aberrant DNA and his much more pronounced 'thread', which had already been described in detail in his report, it had only left him with a pair of dried-out eyes from intensive searching.

Thinking, he leaned back and rubbed his burning eyes. Without input from Linnie's picobots, he would never have known about the 'thread', and now that he knew of its existence, he would very much like to discover what it was for. Unlike Jens's and Pierre's, Hakon's was thicker and darker in color. He didn't know how this was possible, but Hakon's DNA and his more striking 'thread' were undoubtedly related to that energy surge. Somehow it had to have worked as a kind of conductor. But where such a strong concentration of energy could have come from, he couldn't possibly explain.

While he was wondering in what other direction he could look, a ping interrupted his train of thought. Marilyn's face appeared on the tablet.

"Hi, Bertie," she started, excited. "I've read your notes on that thread. Did you notice anything else?"

He found it rather annoying that he couldn't tell her anything new, but there was nothing he could do but express his suspicions.

"It looks like Hakon and that Nakawe are jointly responsible for sending that first burst of energy. I don't know how they managed it. As far as I can tell, something like that must have happened during those times that Hakon lost consciousness as well. In those cases, that energy must have come from somewhere outside. Apparently, that same thread also acts as a receiver. Something must be triggered each time, that makes him lose control of his body.

I also found Hakon's explanation remarkable. Among other things, he said that during those seizures he looked through someone else's eyes, as it were. I would like to know if the opposite is also true. If so, you must be wondering if somebody else can look into your surroundings."

On the tablet, Marilyn raised her eyebrows in surprise. Surprised that she apparently hadn't thought of that herself yet, he asked her if it was possible that he could get a PPP from Nakawe, so he could check if she too had the same thread as Hakon.

"I don't have any further comments or observations, Linnie," he concluded. Absently, he looked at the third screen. "Although... Oh, no. It must be dirt, or a shadow. I'd like to zoom in on it, but I can't. I'm already at maximum..." "Wait a minute, Bertie." Marilyn interrupted him. She put her finger on her ear, listened for a moment and smiled at him. "Saundra, Pierre and I didn't exactly sit still, you know. We've adapted the software to make it even more sophisticated. It's only a beta version, but with a little luck it should work."

Then she asked where exactly that spot was. Bertrand hoped that the trial version would work, and pointed out the spot. "There. Where the thread touches the brain. If possible, it should be zoomed in exactly there, very slowly."

The spot he had indicated began to expand slowly, and although the pixels at the edge of the screen seemed to swim together in a watery way, the spot remained clear and grew steadily. Totally focused on it, Bertrand suddenly shot forward. "STOP!"

The image froze immediately. The circular, broccoli-like spot was now about 12 inches in size and had a clear structure.

Here the 'thread' branched out like a trunk with branches from which in turn several new ones arose. "Can we zoom in a bit now?" he asked, almost whispering.

Step by step the image started to move again and he saw speechlessly how, like a flower unfolding, a pattern was created. Surprised he held his breath, until a moment later the image came to a definitive standstill.

"This is the maximum magnification for now, Dr. Beaumont," Saundra told him. "No problem," he answered automatically. "I see ... I see ... Wait

a minute,” he muttered absently.

He turned around so he stood with his back to the screen, bent over and did a handstand. He stood upside down in front of the screen. His trouser legs slowly slid down and as his sturdy, tanned calves became visible and some change tinkled on the floor, he turned his head to different positions, looking closely at the image.

“What are you doing now?” he heard Marilyn ask in amazement. “Well,” he answered calmly, as if he were sitting down in a comfortable chair, “I’m studying the magnification. A colleague of mine came up with this method. He adopted this position during some investigations because it helped him to think. He claimed that this position accelerates the blood flow to the brain, giving it more oxygen. I don’t know if it helped, because I’m doing this for the first time now, but I suddenly found out what I think this is supposed to mean”.

“Well, silly,” Marilyn laughed. “If you had just said it ... We can rotate those images any way we want. But what do you think...” “Then I probably wouldn’t have gotten that oxygen-rich supply,” he continued happily. “It doesn’t matter, you know. It isn’t inconvenient.” Nevertheless, he felt the pressure in his head increase. He lowered his legs, stood upright again and dropped himself on his chair chuckling. “But what did you find out?” Marilyn wanted to know. She looked at him from the display very curiously. “What exactly do you see?”

He couldn’t resist teasing her a little and answered her as comprehensively as possible. “Because of your super-sophisticated magnification, I can now see very well that the ‘thread’ doesn’t just end. No, it doesn’t. It splits into a huge amount of smaller threads. From these, many more, even thinner threads emerge, the end of which I can no longer see. That spot didn’t mean anything to me at first, until I tilted my head a little and I saw it. That whole bunch of threads together form a pattern, but still not really recognizable. That’s why I thought of looking at it upside down and seeing if that might have an effect. And I’m not disappointed. In fact, this discovery will turn medical science upside down. If this is what I think, then...”

“What? What? What do you see? Tell me,” Marilyn exclaimed impatiently.

Greatly amused by Linnie's reaction, he postponed the revelation a bit longer. "I'd say ... I couldn't put it any better than that those threads together form a pattern. And in such a way that they resemble an existing organ, but many times smaller. Something one has never been able to observe, because the current scanning technique cannot give such a precise picture as I currently have at the picon level. We also have to remember that until now there was no reason to examine that part under the cerebrum. There was never anything special to be seen there until now, anyway, of course."

On his tablet he saw Linnie almost explode with frustration. He did his best not to show anything and continued as seriously as he could. "But now that I see this, I'm sure we've discovered a new human organ. Looks like an independent organ lying against the cerebellum and looking exactly like it, in mirror view. An inverted mini-copy, so to speak."

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To be continued ...

EPILOGUE

At eleven light-years from the sun, the sentries had begun to carry out the instructions they had received. In order to show their presence, they now sent their bright light continuously into the inky-black space.

Extremely slowly, they accelerated the rhythm of their rays...

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Afterword

Of course, this book didn't see the light of day without any help. We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to our book in any way, including of course the readers of our very first manuscripts: Greet Meesters, Marie-Pierre Havinga, Sietske Akster and Bianca Rijdsdijk.

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Through the 'links' page on our website you can find more background information on all kinds of subjects that are connected to the story.

<https://everywhereconnected.com/enHOME/en.links.html>

All the other information came from our fantasy, public sources around the R.C. Church, the White House, NASA, libraries and through websites, like Wikipedia.