

My Brother 's a Spy

Alex Roysh

adventure/ comedy

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“ESPIONAGE, MY FRIEND, IS A SURE WAY TO HAPPINESS”
—FROM MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO’S LETTERS TO THE DUKE
OF WELLINGTON, VOL. LXLXVIII, P. 12345

Prologue

Dear passengers on the Time Train, looking through a book-sized window for an escape from boring, choring, and snoring reality,

This book is a work of *pure* fiction, which means that no spy state or real agency (um, pardon me, I meant no *real* state or *spy* agency) and no uppity bureaucracy have been booed, offended, scolded, or laughed off. Persons and names bearing any similarity to real personalities or institutions are, of course, a sheer coincidence.

Any abnormal word combinations (“Dutch courage,” for example) are wholly accidental, too.

This novel means to tell you what any no-nonsense espionage hobbyist (or, for that matter, a fledgling journalist) needs to nab a napping crook or foreign agent: a tip from a sly cabbie, a pair of mirrored sunglasses, a remote microphone, a pair of handcuffs, a hired car, a run-down bar, a brother’s counter-intelligence ID, a briefcase full of cash and, most importantly, a bit of luck.

My Brother 's a Spy

Those without a military background could find here—*if* they read attentively, that is—all the basic elements of urban espionage: conspiracy and data encoding, informer and bug installation, liaison and persuasion. Also, mild brainwashing and friendly intimidation (try the latter on your college dean, mother-in-law, or your boss *before* they use the same on you).

For those with an eye for a serious, problem-laden volume, this book offers a slight glimpse into how the Second Falkland War plans just may have been thwarted.

And finally, the book contains *a lot* of forbidden, yucky, funnily obnoxious, and innocently provocative observations that *no one* in his right mind should attempt to read while eating a snack. The author is neither responsible for any sudden swell in undertakers' profits, nor doeth he assume any liability for injuries incurred in this manner.

Enjoy!

Survive!

Surmise!

1

FIVE YEARS IN JAIL? PEANUTS!

“Shoot, dummy, they’re closing in on us!” John yelled, pushing the heavy boat off the crumbling embankment.

“But... how?” Carl staggered at the stern, trying to keep his balance, fumbling with a heavy gun in his shaking hands. “The trigger's stuck!”

Time was too precious to squander on words, so John dashed to the helm and pressed the starter. Two large motors at the rear churned and growled, revving loudly and creating a little eddy. Shuddering to life, the sleek boat almost sent Carl—and his gun—down into the water. From the opposite canal bank, where at least five black motorcycles now crouched, a muffled shot whizzed through the air, sounding like a plastic bag burst. Another one followed. A round hole appeared in the middle of the boat’s low windshield, encircled by a crown of shattered, chipped glass.

John felt that time was running out.

“Get down! They’ll shoot you in th’ noodle!” Not waiting for a reaction, he pulled his brother down by the jacket. Carl, in his brown tweed suit, thumped onto the wet

bottom of the vessel. He was still fumbling with the gun in search of the safety switch.

“Ching-ching-ching-ching!” The assault pistol suddenly woke up. John’s eyes widened, and Carl’s jaw dropped. Four bullets, able to pierce a half-inch thick steel rail, buzzed through the moist air, across the canal.

“It won’t stop!” shrieked Carl. He released the trigger, and the salvo halted.

Suddenly there came a loud explosion-like sound from the opposite bank as the last of the four little steel-headed monsters ricocheted off a scaffolding pipe and knocked the nozzle off of a high-pressure paint hose. The creamy liquid burst forth through a waving, writhing rubber snake. The hose worked itself high into the air, covering everything and everyone yards around with a profuse layer of white. It blinded the leather-clad, helmeted shooter and covered the bikers’ shiny black hogs with a greasy, thick pomade.

John couldn’t watch the metamorphosis that turned Bandidos into angels. After all, he was steering a hot-blooded, skipping speed-boat for the first time in his life.

... It all began just a couple of weeks ago, with one innocent phone call that came during an ordinary Monday lunch break. The slim mobile buzzed imploringly. “Zzzz! Bzzzz-bzzzz! Zummm! Zummm!” It twittered in his side pocket as though trying to skip out onto the unvarnished wooden table.

“Yep?” John answered the call, even though it was during his sacred lunch break. “Oh, hi, Carl! Hello! Haven’t heard from you for years! How’s life? How’s the wife?”

The voice on the other side chuckled. Carl, his older brother, called him every week or so. They had always been friends, and surely not the types who shunned one another.

But for John, whose job was to lure new bank clients with a gentle trickle of kind words, then stun them with a waterfall of convincing words, and finally hypnotize them by the glowing sincerity of his expressive blue eyes, all in order to sell them risky papers they mostly didn't need, such superlatives were daily bread.

After a full morning of speaking in three languages, composing cunning emails, and reviewing dull faxes, John was hungry. Cramming the flat mobile against his ear, he gazed with a craving eye at the two hard-earned pieces of rye bread with tomato and cheese on the plywood tray. Still, he'd never cut a talk short with his brother over something as trivial as eating.

He filled his mouth with words instead. "Can we *perhaps* meet – what 'perhaps', oldie? Always! What? This Wednesday afternoon? Of course! That is ... um, maybe, and-what's the emergency that brings you to call me today, might I ask?"

The less wordy person on the other side chuckled again.

"I've got a fine new piece of writing, from 'Visit Britain' program," Carl said, then paused for a moment. "I shall begin work on it today. And... I need your advice."

"Oh, great, grandiose, excellent!" The superlatives flowed freely. John had always been an enthusiast for his brother's writing, ever since Carl had pursued a journalism diploma through a Cambridge correspondence program.

After listening to a sparkling, half-minute long monologue, Carl chuckled again. John came back to earth. “Umm, I’ll help, o’ course! Should I bring something along? A book, a chart, a .. um, stock report?”

“Bring *yourself* along—it’s by far enough,” the reserved brother said, with sober humour.

“Ah, c’ me on, if you call me days in advance, it can’t be without a reason!” John replied teasingly. “What an advice you need—cat care, wind energy, Shanghai funds?”

“Well,” Carl began. He wasn’t at all baffled by his brother’s generous offer to help. “If you have *some* time, you could write down what it means, in your own terms, to be Dutch? I’m set to write a couple of essays on our main twelve features—seen from the Dutch and the English sides.”

“Sur’, o’ course I’ll do it, no problem. I work best in dozens!”

Carl, himself a man of few words, smiled—which John’s mobile phone couldn’t detect. Eloquent and exuberant John, who was able to speak some two hundred words a minute and write just a few less, tried to be helpful at every turn. He’d always been like that, from childhood.

“Great,” he said, ready to finish up this talk, which was for him long and hectic—as talks with John usually were. “I’ll come along to your office at a quarter past three this Wednesday. Bye.” He hung up.

John glanced at the now-silent plastic handset and grinned, too. He himself agreed that he could be *a bit* verbose, especially compared to his tight-lipped brother.

He'd once been told that finishing a phone call with him took either a miracle, an act of God (like a bolt of lightning to cut the phone line), or the Napoleonic will needed to squeeze one's teeth and simply hang up. His brother specialized in the third.

Suddenly remembering his hunger, John grabbed his sandwich and gave it a good bite. Then, holding it high in one hand, he hurried back to his broad desk and pulled his thickset, rumpled agenda out from beneath a pile of files and books. He added to his as yet skimpy Wednesday schedule "Wed wri 12 Dt pt fr Crl! 15:00—Imp!"

As emotional and passionate as he was unpunctual, John would surely always be late if he didn't use small tricks such as dropping the quarter hour against himself.

&

John and Carl Cheesekop were brothers so strikingly different that only a trained artist's eye could find any similarity, and only their own parents would have the surety to call them siblings. John was as vibrant as mercury, a mid-sized (as he called himself) slender guy with curly dark blond hair, pale blue eyes that never lacked twinkle, and the polished manners of a not-too-big bank's small clerk.

His brother Carl, who was eight years his senior, was almost a head taller. He was built like a heavyweight boxer, with straight chestnut hair and an even straighter way of speaking. Carl was the type of person able to keep silent for three days, if need be, and whose words, when they finally sounded, were few, pithy, and weighty. He was presiding over a power station near the southern Dutch city of Den Bosch.

It wasn't that they had nothing in common. Both carried the funny family name of Cheesekop, and both were born in England, where Carl had also gone to preparatory and secondary school in Reading. Since that time, now a bit remote and forgotten, John went only rarely to the other side of the Channel. His older sibling, however, went there every year to tour his relatives and school friends in the old, long-suffering Mini he garaged there, as well as to visit a small summer cottage he kept up near Dover. He even kept a British passport.

As maybe one of a very few people who resided in both England and Holland, Carl regarded himself both as a Dutch-speaking Englishman and English-rooted Dutchman—a man of two cultures, two tongues, and two homelands, lands so close and yet so different. He knew first-hand that the English weren't grouchy, grim, pharisaic, and I-couldn't-care-less type roughnecks, and neither were all Dutch nosy, narcissistic, penny-pinching, and beer-guzzling cowards.

The bi-cultural 'Denglishman' was, however, well aware that very few people shared his unique aptitude, or cared to look deeper than the dusty jetsam of clichés heaped up on both shores of the North Sea for centuries. That's why, as the first dram of ink began to dry on the first page of his first essay's introduction, Carl clamped his short-clipped engineer's head with his bulky hands.

"Dash, how little we folks know of each other!" he uttered, barely believing it himself. "And we're thought to be the closest relatives in the Anglo-German family!"

£

The next day, somehow unbenown to busy Cheesekop brothers, Norman Davis, an English MI6 major who had been summoned to duty by a phone call at dawn, ambled through the familiar lobbies at the Vauxhall Cross. He had spent almost a quarter of a century spying abroad and he knew (or at least *felt*, by some sixth sense), even before being called, what sort of service—a job, a chore, a cinch, or a trick—was up the sleeves of his direct bosses. He hadn't himself advanced to a boss's cushy leather chair, perhaps because he'd been too honest. But this deep-seated thought he kept to himself.

As a long-time insider, Norman knew that there were no more 'ambitious' jobs to be done. Some of his comrades believed, after the suspicious Litvinenko poisoning case on British soil, that most jobs were fixed at one point or another on some invisible plutocrat's order form. While that might be a smart way to mend one's skimpy purse, it was a poor way for British Intelligence to keep up a reputation. Anyway, a job was job, and *he* was summoned that day to do one.

"Papers," he heard at Chamber 17, the stall from which he normally began his identity shift. Norman accepted what was being handed to him and nodded, glancing at the new passport. He stood as Norbert Douglas. The passport cover carried a unicorn and a lion, and he noted with vague amusement that he was suddenly some two years younger.

A cinch, concluded the major, without even smiling. For a tougher task, he'd get at least two passports—one of them diplomatic—and would have to visit the adjacent room to see or at least hear his liaisons. He signed the now genuine (that is, false, or, in official terms, 'necessarily adapted') document, read his new birth date another time to commit it to memory, nodded goodbye, and left.

“Luggage,” he heard at Chamber 21 (which was next to Chamber 17; Vauxhall Cross had own laws and rules). He accepted a small leather suitcase, a carry-on for the flight, as usual. The slightly worn, medium-grade leather was as dull and forgettable as possible—and, in this respect, was a copy of Major Davis himself: middle-height, middle-aged, never discernible in a crowd. But, unlike the invisible military agents that were neither poor nor rich, the case itself was quite well off.

“Open?” asked Norman, now Norbert, just to keep up the procedure that dated to the times of Sir Roger Hollis or earlier. The officer at the desk confirmed (for at MI6, you can’t ‘agree’, you must ‘confirm’). The major did what he was asked. Three rows of bank notes—dozens of little bundles with crisp paper belts—spread before his eyes like a Chinese paper fan.

“Amount?” asked Norman, also in accordance with instructions.

“Three hundred thousand,” came the answer, as dry and staid as the department itself. Norbert nodded, coolly and indifferently, without raising a brow or adding a single heartbeat to his well-regulated pulse.

Davis was used to asking no questions before a mission, yet he sensed that it was that bloated seventh department—the one that dealt with East European “Block” issues—that was serving him the job. He’d probably be in for information gleaning, or double-agent rewarding, but nothing as exciting as coup preparations. That sort of job was done elsewhere these days.

No one (besides the top MI6 brass itself) could count how many consuls or top officials in all corners of the planet

were imposed, deposed, lobbied, or ‘inclined’ with his invisible help. His job was to promote anything that would be ‘within the British scope of interest’, or dissuade that which would be against it.

Looking down at the dull leather case, a thought crossed Norman’s mind: How much money had he carried in his life in briefcases just like this one? Be it sterling, dollars, deutschmarks (or recently, Euros), Swiss franks, yen, or even Thai bhats—if he summed up all the capital he had lugged around with him, he could buy a three-storey villa on each continent, and leave a memorable legacy for his descendants for up to six generations. But he never once attempted to even touch the cash; what counted for him was his officer’s honour, his honesty, and his mission.

“Task and route,” came next, in Chamber 75C. As usual, he couldn’t make any notes about his task in his notebook or write down any names in his assigned mobile. He had to memorise it all: Place, date, liaison or proxy, hotel, meeting spot, backup meeting spot, emergency meeting spot, exit, emergency exit, and Plan X for quitting the mission. All was usual.

The major stood between two table lamps as he examined the thin folder of briefing notes that had been presented to him. He ‘photographed’ the necessary data into his trained mind.

“Confirmed,” he said into the dark stall that was Chamber 75C. Since 1973, the outgoing agents could no longer see his department tutor; they had to concentrate not on the face in front of them, but on memorising the facts—their lives depended on it.

“Repeat, please,” came the immediate reply.

He recited the content of the entire folder from memory. There was silence. Five long minutes passed.

“Repeat, please,” came the same request, this time from another person. He did.

The procedure was running to its end. The date confirmation took place in the next chamber. The major was almost certain that the mission would begin in no more than three hours, as cash missions normally were. He was right.

“Tickets and reservations,” came from Chamber 34, the last (and at times most intriguing) chamber. “Amsterdam,” read the agent aloud. “Economy, March 20. 9:54.”

That meant he was departing in a couple of hours. The major didn’t even raise his brow. He’d travelled all around the globe at the drop of a hat. Yet, as the years rolled on, the youthful excitement that the job once raised had cooled down like a barbecue left in the cold wind.

There were few countries he’d never visited, under one name or another. The next day or the next week, he could be off to Tbilisi, Barcelona, or Adu Dhabi, Ougadougou or Port-Moresby—it didn’t matter. The Crown entrusted him with a service, and he *always* fulfilled it, no matter what it might be. This made him feel useful, at times exceptionally so, and often content—maybe even happy. After all his years of tough service, sleepless nights, crossing borders in the dark, and a couple of incidents that had almost sent him home in a metal casket, he still liked being a secret agent.

... In one hour and thirty-four minutes (Norman didn’t need to look at his watch to know the amount of time that had elapsed), the major’s unassuming shoes slid over the grey

marble floor of Schiphol Airport. He beelined straight to the taxi stand, where a lean moustachioed chap loitered by a dark BMW at the front of the cab line.

“Sur, a druyv?” asked the cabbie eagerly, opening the rear door and not waiting for an answer.

Davis nodded, even though the cabbie seemed to be talkative, a trait that the major genuinely disliked. Still, a refusal would make him conspicuous, and that was the cardinal no-no on his mission.

“Grand Hotel, please,” he said plainly, as the driver closed the door.

“Gudd.” The vehicle bounced off the curb and onto the crammed highway which led to buzzing North Venice.

“Tuurrist?” the chauffeur asked in his broken English, seeking the major’s small eyes in the oversized rear view mirror.

“Business,” returned the major shortly. It was his normal way of speaking with taxi folks, from Cape Town to Tokio. Tourists seldom come alone; executives often do.

“Oh, Amsterdam iz gudd fur buzznes,” agreed the semi-bald guy at the steering wheel. “So menny bunks... so-o much munny... oh!” He lifted his finger up, then winked and continued, in a low voice “Sum guys even com with koffers full of munny heer.”

“Really?” Norman, as Norbert, lifted his left brow in a very well-practised look of amusement and surprise. Luckily his own suitcase couldn’t speak...

“Yep, sur, I give my hand to bee chopped off eef eetzs not so!” The driver spread his hands, leaving his grip on the steering wheel for a good while. The car began to lose its lane, though this didn’t cause Norman to even blink. He knew how to steer a car from the back seat, how to escape when being shot at and how to drive in the moonless dark with the headlights turned off.

Soon, the wordy chauffeur and the silent passenger began manoeuvring between the endless lanes and alleys of downtown Amsterdam. Norman, whose photographic memory had learned a different route to the hotel, turned his eyes two or three times to the side, watching better routes recede behind them. This didn’t escape the experienced cabbie’s notice -the chauffeur of course knew that Keisergracht had been closed to traffic that day for a water main break that happened last night. *How on earth could the newly arrived visitor know that?* the driver pondered.

“No prublem, sur!” He lifted his, a bit crooked finger up in the air. “I’ll breng you deerec to de dawr! De same munny! I no cheat!”

Norman nodded, smiling modestly. That was why he didn’t like babbling cabbies...

&

Just a couple of miles away, still a bit dejected by the morning’s nauseant traffic jam, John grinned when his office mate, Matt, who was equally as glib as himself, thundered into the office. He was showing his usual bravado, and began to shower on John the latest news he’d just heard on the radio.

“Know wha?” Matt prodded. As a typical Amsterdamer, he ate up most of the words’ ends, making his speech nonchalant and ‘hip’. “Th’ capital is abuzz with a new affair!”

“What’s that?” John asked, suppressing a yawn. “Has the government fallen again?”

“No,” Matt frowned with both brows instead of his usual one. “Nope, not such a trifle. A ship chock-a-block full of torpedoes and missiles has stopped in Delfzyl, and they wanna haul t’thing to Rott’rdam if the repair won’t succeed in th’ province. Wher’ has our intelligence been keepin’ its eyes?”

“Sounds like a cheap tabloid duck,” John chuckled. His own ‘newspaperman’ brother was the only one he trusted not to breed news ducks.

“So I also thought, man.” Matt flopped on his desk and turned his laptop on, and in so doing launched a thick civil law volume onto the floor with a thump and a dust cloud. “That’ s, until I read a couple o’ things, an’ then fel’ goose-skin, y’ know? My aunt lives in Rott’dam. Jus’ imagine if th’ darn thing exploded into thin air? An’ th’ people, eh? Who’d pay?”

John chuckled again. The last words were very much Dutch and very much Matt’s, who was busy in marine insurance. Rotterdam, some forty miles away, wasn’t in his portfolio, yet an irresistible fear had already begun to grip him like a pair of gigantic tongs.

“Look at t’ news, man, jus’ look!” Matt landed, finally, in his chair and turned around four times, like a fighter pilot in training. “Real messy stuff!”

John opened a tabloid's web page, which he normally didn't read, and then brought up a couple of its more serious, less sexy, more boring, and more indebted competitors. Indeed, a photo of a freighter's rusty hull filled every front page, dwarfing the peppy daily trifles and gossip designed to hook the reader.

"See 't, man?" he drummed his stumpy fingers against the computer screen. "I bet you two hundred to one that this is going to be the buzz of the year."

John remembered his friendly bets with Carl and grinned. He wouldn't bet a dime against Matt, who would accept money from anyone, including his ninety-five-year-old granny, the King of Tonga (where seashells are used for coins), or a mendicant friar. In the last case, Matt would take the last pennies together with the monk's only frock.

"My goat, every day sha' make us richer, by hook o' crook, by truth o' bluff," Matt chuckled after repeating his favourite motto, which he himself had hammered together from tabloids clichés. "But, mate, I'd bet my nose tha' this is gonna be messy stuff, and it will jus' mean trouble."

John closed the news sites and opened up the boring client database. *Oh, let the bread-winning begin*, he thought. But his mind wasn't yet ready to still. *Where was that written, 'give us this day our daily bread'?* he pondered, *'I'll ask Carl on Wednesday.'*

The day had, however, different chunks of bread for each of them to bite. The glassy brown door suddenly opened and Boss peered through it. He looked abnormally small, pale, and rather un-Boss-like. *Which pin on earth could prick his unsinkable boat?* John wondered.

“Matt,” Boss called to the older clerk, who half-rose from his chair with eyes as large as saucers. “I’m going for a special meeting; Gary will answer my calls.”

Matt nodded, still silent.

“Listen,” Boss continued, “you do the marine insurance files, right?”

“Ye-es,” stuttered Matt, his face beginning to assume the same tinge as his light grey suit.

“Prepare an offer, in English. Three hundred million, fully anonymous, dangerous and special goods. Make it short term, state guaranteed, eight and a half points rent,” muttered the Boss in an unusually colourless tone, as though repeating someone’s instruction. “Forget all your other work until it’s done. Understood?”

“Sur’.” Matt nodded and reached for a hanky to wipe a streak of sweat on his forehead.

“So long!” The director’s shivering palm rose and fell. His raincoat pressed against the glass for a moment, and then he was gone.

Matt fell into his chair and gasped. Then, he glanced at John. “Eh, man, am I asleep or wha?” he asked, even pinching his left hand. Irregular pink and scarlet splotches began to appear all over his cheeks and neck, and his ears turned red like two overripe tomatoes.

John felt his own jaw begins to drop, too ...

... As the averagely built, modestly smiley, striped-collared Mr. Wednes, and his wobbly, pale-faced chum Day, appeared on the horizon of River Time, the scrupulous

researcher of Dutchness also arrived in downtown Amsterdam.

Carl had brought along a folded bike, an original English Brompton, which he had bought in the bicycle's native country for a hundred pounds in the good old days when the sterling was still worth more than a bike's wheel nut. The two-wheeler, in turn, was laden down with his oversized briefcase—or, an undersized chest filled up with a dozen note pads, a dictaphone and a camera, and countless pens and markers.

There was also a special pocket for electronic parts and switches, complete with wiring diagrams and several mysterious gadget prototypes. Those had lingered there for years—ever since the time when Carl had given up his freelance gig with a military academy, for which he had also crafted two or three secret devices. What the appliances were for, exactly, no one knew; after delivering them to three nameless generals, the taciturn engineer signed a 'non-disclosure statement', forcing himself to seven years of total silence about 'the matters concerned'. The generals urged him, too, to destroy all the prototypes and diagrams. He didn't.

By the time Carl had perfected some of his ideas about the screwing-up of dictaphones and like devices, he was already using the hybrids for his never-forgotten love—journalism.

John was waiting for him near the station, leaning against the hump-backed bridge. They launched their silent two-wheelers in motion.

"This street is Singel," explained John with the tone of a local sage who knows not only every lane, canal, and tree in

the vicinity, but also every cat in every gateway. “The older buildings are seventeenth-century. They’re still looking great and a real draw for tourists.” He swerved, narrowly avoiding a direct hit with a gaping tourist tottering atop a yellow bicycle borrowed from his hotel.

“Sooor-ry!” squeaked the tourist, and pedalled slowly on.

“Let’s stop for a mo.” Carl slowed down his pocket bike, whose miniature wheels shuddered and skipped over every bump. “I have to take a couple of photos.”

“Sure!” John agreed. They dismounted from their puny, hard metal beasts, locked them to a metal fence, and strolled across a stone bridge flung over the broad canal. “Charming view, isn’t it? The houses could be palaces! Look how their elegant facades are reflected in the shimmering silver mirror of water.”

“Eh?” Carl asked, unmoved by his brother’s poetic turn of phrase. “D’ you think exposure ISO-800 is all right?”

“Yep,” John was, as usual, deaf to purely technical stuff. Then, he pointed to a colourful house across the canal. “Look—that one has a golden stag’s head at attic level!”

“Huh,” Carl swallowed a joke over a mouse in one’s attic and tried a different angle for his shot, attempting to catch the glitter of the water with his camera. “The angle’s too narrow,” he sighed ruefully.

“Narrow? This bridge must be one of the widest,” John countered, always ready to correct, though much less ready to listen. “I bet it’s at least twenty yards wide. Much wider than any London bridge, for sure!”

There came no answer. Carl grinned diplomatically, and John went on.

“O’ course we mustn’t forget the Royal Palace,” John noted, back in tour-guide mode. He nodded toward the Dam over which the late-Classical palace loomed.

“That’s fine, Johnnie,” Carl agreed. “Maybe we should walk, though. What do you think about trying to talk to folks?” He grinned, noticing a shadow cross John’s forehead. “Nope, not about deep stuff like ‘feeling Dutch’. I’d like today, say, some easy-to-digest pancakes, instead of heavy bacon.”

“Like?” John prompted.

“Today, I thought we could interview people on the subject of ... sincerity. What d’ you think?” Carl’s left eye twinkled.

The clerk stopped, smiling like the rising sun. Finding, in Amsterdam, sincere people ready to talk to would be as easy as hitting a cow’s rump with a fiddle. Of course there would be loads of *vox pop* material, and of course those cynical, reserved, phlegmatic Brits would blush and sweat and wriggle in their creaky armchairs as they read about how informal, easy, and pleasant a society can be *here* in the Northern Venice, which never sleeps, is never tired, and is always optimistic and modestly drunk.

But—oh, that common and explosive word!—the fate of the day, the fate of both brothers, and the fate of the still-sober capital, some diplomats, and a handful of spies, was about to be changed. For unexpectedly, stealthily, in the blink of an eye, an invisible finger—the finger of an ancient, unageing, pre-computer Providence—touched the unseen

scales on which lives and destinies are weighed: heavyweights are toppled, and kings hurried like errand boys.

John and Carl didn't see that finger, of course. John's eyes wandered in search of their first sincere victim. Carl, meanwhile, reached for his notepad he kept in his breast pocket; he pulled it out and wrote 'questions' on the right of a fresh piece of paper, and 'answers' on the left. Then, he squatted to fetch a marker from his briefcase, which stood upon the trivial cobblestones, eyeing them with the same air that the Eiffel Tower assumed when peering down at the Parisian ants.

And then ...

Carl froze as though scared by a ghost. His eyes fell on a little rectangle tucked between a tree and a bulky metal ring on the pavement. On it he read something... strange. Weird. But, real. No, too strange to be real. Wasn't it? He shook his head, rubbed his eyes, and cautiously picked the card up to read the text again. There, in Dutch and English, frighteningly clear, were the words:

Kingdom of the Netherlands. AIVD General Intelligence Service. Officer IPNL-940-30085. The holder of this card has the right to question, search, and/or arrest any person in the territory of the Netherlands and its sovereign waters.

Carl opened his mouth, then closed it. He took off his glasses and wiped them with a clean hanky. He flopped them back on his face. Again looked down at the card, which was still nestled in his hands. It hadn't disappeared or turned into a harmless tram ticket. This was a real intelligence card, of that he was sure.

There was a picture in the top right-hand corner. He studied it closely, blinking a few times. The photo was a very copy of him: a middle-aged, dark-haired man with a strong chin and a farmer-like, slightly bulging, oversized nose. His head snapped up in surprise. *What the...?* He glanced at the card again, his eyes stopping at the warning:

Government property. Unauthorized use will be punished, in acc. with Art. 45a of the penal code with up to five years confinement.

The miniature text was so ghastly that it almost prompted him to throw the card in the water, before this tiny thing had the chance to get him into big trouble. But his hand stopped as a brave, incredible, wild thought came into his head. Now he could... Now he ... Now...

“It just can’t be true!” he exclaimed in a whisper, turning the card around and scrutinizing it like a bomb disposal expert examining an unexploded shell—one blunder and you’re in the *next* world. His eyes, the trained eyes of a skilled electronic engineer, noticed a rounded, thick area at the left-hand side of the card, and a miniscule metal band, covered with plastic, at one end.

“Uh oh. A USW or GPS antenna, charged by a solar cell,” he muttered to himself. His mind began to whirl, to heat up, to buzz like a rising helicopter. *The metal ring must have covered the antenna and kept the sunlight off of it... that’s why it hasn’t been found yet*, he figured, remembering, in a twinkling of an eye, his own wireless devices. *I must get it into a metal box—the sooner the better!*

He opened his briefcase with a violent jerk, as a bank robber might open his bag of swag—every second mattered. There were numerous metal transistor covers and thyristor

cooling plates—but none of the size needed. 'Oh...' moaned Carl silently. *'The card could be sending out a 'lost' or 'alert' signal at that very moment, and... the real spies could be dosing in on me!*

"Excuse me, sir." A serious, quiet, deep baritone voice sounded behind him, and a stiff finger touched his shoulder. Stunned with fear, Carl jumped up, biting his tongue. Slowly, guiltily, he turned around. Two stumpy, mousy men who could have been twins in their grey raincoats and mirrored sunglasses stood behind him. The first kept his right hand in his pocket. They didn't smile. Their faces were deadpan—too deadpan, threateningly blank.

I'm a goner, thought Carl. He gulped, feeling cold fear creeping up his spine. His hands trembled. *They're already here! But I would always say I just found it...that I was just curious...that I was going to take it to the poli...*

"Sorry, sir," the man said again, tougher this time. "Do you have a minute?"

"Ye-yes," hiccupped Carl. The card was clamped in his right hand. *What's next? Will they use handcuffs, or just arrest me? And how many years in jail did it say on the card?* His heart thumped, the sweat breaking out on his forehead. His eyes searched for John's, but his brother was busily chatting with a sincere passer-by on the other side of the bridge, an oblivious eighteen paces away.

The first man slowly began to take his hand out of his pocket.

"Can you pliz show uss de way to de Royal Palla?" An innocent map was suddenly in his narrow, tanned hand.

Carl started shaking again, this time with relief. He was ready to spit on the ground despite the good manners he had acquired in England, the Netherlands, and elsewhere. Words failed him. He nodded slowly, the card still clenched in his hand, and silently pointed to his left, towards the throngs of people on the far side of the bridge. He hiccupped loudly as his stomach ceased hovering and returned to its normal place.

“Tank you!” replied the other gent, with a noticeable Latino accent. The first crammed the map back into his pocket. Together they sauntered off in the direction Carl had pointed, gesticulating and chatting in a southern tongue.

“Crazy,” mumbled Carl, barely regaining his composure. *But, man, the smart card was still spying on me, sending coded signals. Where’s a metal box? A box! His mind was racing in overdrive. What’s floating there, in the middle of the canal? No, it’s an empty plastic cup... just some plastic crap... I need a metal box!*

“Carl!” A familiar voice whipped his taut nerves again. He was so shaken that he jumped again, the card almost slipping from his sweaty fingers. “Are you talking to a fish?”

The older brother didn’t get the question at first, then frowned as though from a sudden toothache. John wasn’t known as a joker; he took his energized, whimsical ideas much too seriously for jokes. And when he did make a joke, it was usually too obvious, too deep, or too poignant.

“Uh, hmm, well,” Carl mumbled, turning the card in his hands, not knowing what to say. He was too preoccupied by what to do with the card. He must find a metal box, and soon. “Um, Johnnie, have you got a metal box?” he asked suddenly, loudly, and without warning.

John's brows rose rapidly, like two halves of a folding bridge.

"A *metal box*?" he repeated, blinking twice. "Wh... what for?"

"Er, I need one. I really need one, right now." Carl's thoughts began to whirl again. He had very little time; he could be caught on the spot at any moment. The card had that GPS chip, and it was spying on him. He felt as though he was standing there almost naked.

"Yes, er, it's b' cause I'm standing almost naked," Carl repeated his last thought aloud, so distracted was he.

John shook his head, a hint of real concern appearing in his aquamarine eyes. Had his cool-headed brother got sunstroke? He even glanced up at the drab, pale yellow sky.

"A can, a can, my kingdom for a can!" muttered Carl loudly. The fragment of Shakespeare (with 'horse' substituted with 'can', of course) suddenly floated up from the English half of his mind, like a forlorn rabbit drawn too late from a hat in an already empty, darkened circus tent.

This last phrase baffled John beyond all comprehension. What had happened? A sudden virus? A mental breakdown? "Um, Carl, what's up?" he asked carefully, trying to recall whether such a spring syndrome had ever been known in their family. "Are you all right? Do you need some... water?"

"I'm all right, absolutely all right!" declared Carl, again too loudly. He followed up with an almost maniacal assurance that everything was fine, everything was perfect,

everything was great, and that he was in *perfect* shape. “We need a shop. I need to buy a tin can. A tin of corn, okay?”

“Aw right,” John said slowly.

“Can you take me to one? Right now?”

John nodded. Of course he knew of a nearby supermarket—the mom-and-pop corner stores had become defunct ages ago. “We have to go up here, turn left, then right, and there’s one. But ... what’s up?”

“All right, first a shop, questions later,” mumbled Carl as he tucked the card into his inside jacket pocket and started to run. John shook his head and followed, for what else could he do? His reserved Carl didn’t usually display such kinks; the last time had been twenty-five years ago.

“Where?” roared Carl, gasping, crossing the bridge and overtaking the two grey-clad men who had scared him out of his wits just minutes ago. The back of the Royal Palace beckoned him from behind the curtain of sweat that dimmed his eyes. *Look, there are some metal boxes on the gates!* he realized with joy. *Oh, hang on, it’s the Royal Palace. I can’t just rip a box off a national treasure. Or ...?*

“Turn right here!” John cried, following his brother, racing, he thought, like a hare chasing a wolf. The comparison, nutty as the whole situation, didn’t make him laugh.

Carl obeyed the directive, and within moments the tall, blue-and-white facade of a large supermarket loomed in front of them.

“Carl, what on earth’s happened?” The puffing junior clerk finally caught up with sweating chief engineer as the

two made their way along the spacious, crowded aisles of an Albert Hein mall. “Why a tin can? Why corn? What’s going on?”

“Jus’ a mo. I’ll tell you, o’ course, o’ course. But first, a tin of corn, quick.”

Carl grabbed at a tin in the middle of a tall pyramid-shaped display and pulled it out, causing a tinkling tinny avalanche. He gazed at the small cylinder in his hand, then tossed it aside with a groan. A security guard glanced at the two rumpled men but said nothing. Carl, his hands trembling and heart thumping, grabbed at another can one display over. *Dammit!* He needed a can with a ring pull! Where were they? He briskly headed to the end of the aisle.

“Yes!” Carl triumphantly grasped the all-important can as though it were a sizey diamond, or at least a winning lottery ticket.

“Good?” said John, rose-faced from running and shame. There were two security guards standing behind them by now.

“O’ course it’s okay!” thundered Carl. “See? Ring pull!” At least six other shoppers turned their heads, and John knew why—when Carl was excited—really excited—he lost control of his voice and started to speak like a deaf man: hoarse, fast, and very loud. And he gesticulated like a drunk mime.

Carl ripped open the can, tucked the curled lid into his jacket pocket, and stared at John. His eyes were misty, glowing, and slightly insane. “D’ you have a spoon?” He fired the question hot and loud like a shot from a double-barrelled

shotgun. John looked about them. Except for the security guards, the canned vegetable aisle had emptied.

“A *spoon*?” He frowned and shook his head again. “What d’you need it for?”

“To eat it, what else!” boomed Carl. “I need a tin container—an empty tin container!” He didn’t wait for John’s reply; with the open can in his hand, he marched straight up to the security guards and grabbed one by the sleeve.

“Where’ re th’ plastic spoons? I need one. I really need one *now*, please!” He shouted in the guard’s ear like a heroin addict desperate for a fix.

The guard pulled his balding head into his shoulders, glared at the insane customer, and took his walky-talky from his belt. But, not quite sure what to say into the CB radio, he stumbled along the aisles and pointed to the plastic cutlery. “Here, sir,” he said, still uncertain of whether he should call the police, an ambulance, a psychiatrist, or to just wait.

“A spoon, a spoon!” yelled Carl with the air of a Robinson Crusoe who had spent twenty years eating with his hands and had finally seen a real spoon again. “Hallelujah!”

Putting the open can on the shelf, he ripped the micron-thin plastic bag so hurriedly that it tore, sending the flimsy plastic utensils rattling in all directions—over the freshly cleaned marble floor, over the guard’s shiny shoes, and under the shelves. Carl didn’t care; he knelt down and grasped the spoon from inside a mop bucket. The guard, ragingly confused but showing no temper, took care of the rest.

“Thank you, friend!” shouted the pink-faced, red-necked customer, patting the guard’s shoulder. He picked up the precious can from the shelf and hurried to the cash desk. The evening rush hadn’t yet started, and the queues to the tills weren’t yet as long as an adult giraffe’s neck; they were still only at the youthful alligator stage, each maybe two yards long.

Carl chose the shortest line and got to work with the plastic spoon, gulping down the corn almost without chewing. John skulked behind his sibling’s broad back, pretending to be just another empty-headed shopper, trying to make his expression bored and vacant. For the first time in his life, he was happy that he didn’t look like his brother.

Carl was the centre of attention, but he hadn’t the slightest clue that he was. The queue moved on and the brothers—one smiley and talkative, the other as shy and silent—were suddenly standing in front of the checkout girl.

‘Jus’ the corn, and a pack o’ utensils!’ Carl’s voice was brave and broad enough to fill the whole hall. “Yep, th’ can’s empty, but that’s no problem, I’ll still pay!” he pranked, willing to confirm his honesty with word and deed.

The young cashier, clad in a neat headscarf, had worked only six months at the market and hadn’t yet come across many such ‘loony shoppers’. She scanned the empty can and the broken bag, then said in a voice as hollow and flat as a robot’s, “Two Euros fifty-four cents, please.”

Carl rummaged through his pants’ pockets. There was only a stray one-Euro coin. *Oh, ducks*, he thought. He was not used to doing the shopping. Where was his debit card?

“One moment,” he said, and, with a hint less panache, set his massive briefcase onto the conveyor belt and lifted it open. Where on earth was his debit card? *No, not in here*, he concluded after riffling through dozens of pages of loose notepaper. Could be in his jacket? Yes!

He grasped the plastic rectangle from his inside pocket and vigorously swiped it through the pin-machine. Unreadable. Another time. To no avail. The cashier, with a weary face and beginning to seethe inside, asked, “Would you like me to try to swipe it for you, sir?”

“Yes,” consented Carl, still quieter, now almost at the noise level of a sleepy autumn fly. He placed the card into the cashier’s hands. Two pale, agile hands took the credit-card sized object and prepared to slide it through the reader once again.

Suddenly the pale, agile hands turned stiff, hot, then sweaty. The stiffness and sweat travelled higher and appeared on the face and forehead of the checkout girl.

‘Kingdom of the Netherlands,’ her stunned eyes read. *‘AIVD General Intelligence Service. The holder of this card...’* She lifted her head sharply. Was this a hoax? “It must be the wrong card,” muttered the cashier, wiping her wet face with her polyester uniform sleeve. “Sir?”

“No, it’s the *right* card,” Carl responded, sure that his respected Bank wouldn’t have issued him an outdated debit card. He spoke with a loose, soft assurance that sounded almost sinister to the trembling girl’s ears.

The eyes of the real cashier and the fake spy met for a long second. He stood, radiating quiet confidence, and waited. Half a minute passed before the young market

worker broke into loud tears. The six other cashiers stopped scanning and gazed up at her. First a corn can clean-up in aisle two, then a crazy man at the plastic cutlery station, and now a crying cashier... What was going on?

John was just as curious as everyone else in the store. What on earth had gotten into his brother? He pinched his own arm, hard. *Maybe it's me who has sunstroke*, he thought.

"You," the cashier whimpered, hiding her face in her hands, "you *an't* arrest me right now... I... don't steal... more than anyone else here! Truly, I don't steal at all! ... And you can't arrest my man... yes, he's wearing ... a beard but... we have no machine guns at home, I promise!" A minute of unstoppable sobbing followed. The card fell from her shaking hands onto the checkout desk.

A security guard who'd been looming nearby came closer and glanced at the card, too. He scratched his chin and nodded to his colleague. The other guard approached and set up the 'Closed, please join another desk' sign. He, too, stretched his hand out for the card—only to pull it back as though there was a live scorpion on the counter.

The sobbing cashier and the two concerned guards stood in awkward silence, while Carl's shoulders were held proudly and John's face was hidden behind an occasional magazine. Finally, the senior guard muttered, "I'll call the manager," and disappeared.

A sudden hush of sheepish silence fell over the supermarket, which was as large as a half a football field. Even the most pompous customers suddenly felt petty, like the change tinkling onto the till. They all knew that in small, staid Holland, *nothing* big happens. And if something big *does*

happen, then it's wrong and you'd better chicken out, look down, never notice, never get noticed...

John didn't feel either petty or grand. He was puzzled, baffled, and stressed. He could no longer assume the air of an innocent bystander. It was time to step up to his second role, but the script was unread and the stage crowded with motionless characters. He had no idea where to start...

Just then a sleek, narrow-faced department manager in a shoestring tie hurried onto the scene. He halted, focused his eyes onto the card on the counter, stretched his hand out to it, then quickly pulled it back. Gulped. Tidied up his slim tie. "Hmmm," he began, looking Carl in the chin and darting his eyes over to John. "Um, good afternoon, sirs!" The greeting sounded silly in the tense silence.

Carl nodded, weightily. He had finally begun to sense, with his gut rather than his mind, that he'd given the *other* card to the cashier. He gulped, willing to cut this circus short as soon as he could.

In a half-minute, the manager had regained his ability to breathe, turn his head, and speak.

"Ughgh," he went on, licking his dry lips. "I see, I see ... hmmm, I see." He began to bob his head like a Chinese doll. "Sirs ... hmmm ... do you plan any action ... here?" he almost whispered the last words.

"No, our action had just been finished," Carl returned, also in a low tone. He suddenly began to feel the chilling, killing, thrilling power of James Bond's lifestyle. "Thank you, sir. You are free to leave now."

The retail boss' cheeks blushed slightly from hidden shame and anger, yet he'd been too well drilled at his management school to ask too many questions from those who never answer any. He nodded dryly, turned to the cashier to whisper a last instruction, and sauntered away.

Carl, knowing that a couple of hundred eyes in the whole stunned, frozen, dumbfound supermarket were fixed on him, felt that he was beginning to blush as well. He felt like a kid caught cheating on a spelling test. They had to go—within seconds, not minutes.

“Michael!” he barked to John, pronouncing the ‘ch’ in the French way, as ‘sh.’

John glared at him, grinding his teeth to avoid sudden laughter or raised brows. What now? After this whole crazy time, complete with corn gobbling, a spoon chase, and scaring a throng of Amsterdammers with God knows what, he had only one thought left: *What now?*

Carl discretely touched his right pocket. Someone had to *pay*—after all, a secret agent should be doubly honest (just as a double agent should be secretly honest). The sentiment whirled, like an uninvited eddy, in his mind.

Luckily, John dug his meaning. The money-wise bank clerk knew exactly where his change was. He snatched his wallet from his inner pocket, and counted two Euros and forty-five cents onto the desk.

“Merci,” Carl said curtly. He grabbed the card and both men marched out, followed by several hundred scary, wary, sheepish eyes.

Outside, both galloped silent for a good two minutes—Carl resisting the temptation to run, John resisting the growing desire to snatch his older mate by the tie and make him stop. After a minute, Carl pulled the corn can from his pocket, placed the card inside it, and sealed the lid on the can.

“Carl!!” John stopped and clamped his fist around Carl’s elbow until his knuckles turned white. “Either you tell me what on earth this is all about, or I go back. You get it?”

The engineer nodded. Sighed. Scratched his head.

“Ugh,” he muttered, turning his head around to study the cobblestones.

“What do you mean, ‘ugh’?” John demanded, suddenly fiercely mad. “Did you get an electric shock from your power plant? Or have y’ been watching too many horror movies? Speak up!”

Carl put his finger to his lips, which were reddish coloured from all the biting and confusion.

“I’ll let you know,” he whispered, “but first, let’s go... now!”

“But... where!?” John roared, as fiercely as a hungry lion in the Namibian desert. “You’re already here!”

Carl jerked, then turned around. Almost bumping into a postman who was coming out of a tall doorway, Carl lurched through the still-open door of an old, marble-faced building.

“Damn.” John spat on the ground, then reluctantly followed his brother. This time he really was ready to take his phone and call an ambulance.

Inside the completely unknown building, in the common entrance area to three flats, Carl sailed down a narrow, steep staircase, crouching low as though hiding from invisible chasers. John followed him with heavy feet. Coming to a dead end at the bottom of the steps, they stood by a closed door that seemed to lead to someone’s basement.

Carl examined the walls and the ceiling, and then said, very quickly, “Forty seconds!” He began to root around in his pocket.

“Forty?” John asked, having heard only the first word. “What’s forty?” It was already too much for today. He was so exhausted he couldn’t even remain angry.

“Look!” Carl took the mysterious object from the corn can, holding it out for John to see. “Forty seconds, then we have to hide it before th’ antenna has a chance to contact the satellite!”

John looked closely, reading the text on the spy card. He whistled. And then he shook his head.

“You’re *crazy*, man!” he exclaimed, but with less anger now. “What d’ you plan to do with it? It says ‘up to five years’ incarceration for abuse!’ Bring it to the police, or post it to them. That’s what any normal person would do, anyways.”

Carl tucked the card back into the can, then hid the can in his briefcase and sighed.

"I *am* normal," he drawled, as though searching for words. "But... but the philistine normality isn't at all normal!" he said, suddenly curt. "For a born journalist, it's... it's..." he shook his head and trailed off.

"What d' you mean?" John frowned. He'd never known his brother from *that* side before. The man he knew was careful, scrupulous, sedate. But suddenly, here was the other Carl—dare-devilish, adventurous, even reckless. Why? John had gone on a safari once, Carl had never shown the slightest taste for danger. Until now, it seemed. What was going on?

"They'd nab you in three days, I'd bet you two hundred to one!"

"And I bet a thousand to one per cent they *won't*," Carl reminded him, grinning with sparks of boyish joy in his brown eyes. "Don't forget which one of us has written a Ph.D. thesis on wireless and satellite security." His grin grew even larger.

"Phew," John sighed again, recalling all those tricks with the corn can in a new light. Could his brother actually have known what he was doing in those few, maniacal minutes? "All right—not in three days, true. But then you'd really be asking for five years behind bars! And you've got two kids, don't forget, and Helen... stop kidding yourself, old man!"

"John, this is th' *only* chance I'll ever have in my life to do something like this. The *only* one—you get it?" He bent close to his younger brother's face. "And this is the only way to get people to give me their core dump for the essays! I'm sick of all the platitudes, the clichés, and all that shallow stuff I get in my interviews. I'm sick!"

“I see,” John said sarcastically.

“Good.” Carl took a step back on the tiny basement landing, but he didn’t stop speaking. “What did you want to be as a kid? When you grew up, I mean.”

“A merchant captain,” John said, smiling at the buried thought. He laughed softly, knowing the next question.

“And me?” Carl was grinning now, too, with a victorious and slightly moonstruck air.

“A military spy.” They both laughed, but John’s good humour drooped in a second. He was concerned—again.

“But Carl, what’s going on?” he asked. “Where would you use it, and what then?”

“What then? A set of brilliant essays on the Dutch people, that’s what!” returned the engineer. The look on his face as he spoke was saying, *Life is so simple, man!*

“And ... the card?”

“It would go into the sea, I guess.” Carl shrugged as though he was speaking about an orange peel.

“And you don’t plan on using it for more than a few months?” John dug. He felt that the weight of Everest was being lifted off his shoulders.

“What d’ you mean, a few months? Man, a week or two and that’s it!” Carl seemed to be returning to his common sense sooner than expected.

“Aw right,” sighed the junior clerk quietly. “Aw right.”

... The two were still standing by the closed basement door, in some unknown entry hall, with someone else's intelligence card in an empty corn can. Suddenly, John lifted his head. He had an idea, which happened to him from time to time.

"Hey, Carl," he said, poking his brother with his elbow, "you're telling me that all you wanna do is jus' force men on the street to sincerity with that card? That would be like... like shooting sparrows with an anti-aircraft gun!"

"Um, what d' you mean?" Carl asked, his mind stirring from its technical thoughts.

"I mean that you can ... catch a *real* spy!" fired John quickly. After a short hesitation, he went on, "It's a counter-intelligence officer's ID, right?"

"Really?" the brown-headed chap lifted his brows. He only remembered 'five years' incarceration', and he still couldn't figure out whether his essays were worth that risk. *In five years I'll be forty-seven, he calculated. Would they take me back at work? And who'd pay off the mortgage?* His mind suddenly calmed to its default engineering mode. *What if I soldered the battery off? The card would likely become untraceable... but would that add a couple of years to a sentence?*

"Haven't you read what's written on it yet?" John pressed on. Carl took off his glasses and wiped them again.

"Well, more or less," replied the engineer. He slowly scratched his ear with great thought.

John sighed, exasperated. He meant something else. "But listen, oldie. If you *do* catch a spy, then they'd pardon

you for the card abuse,” John smiled both sincerely and cunningly, as only he could.

Carl’s lips slowly pulled up into a smile too. *My little brother’s got me there*, he thought. “John, you’re a treasure!” he exclaimed. *The essays will have to wait a week, but the big game is worth a big risk, right?* the thought flashed through his mind like a fork of lightning. In his excitement Carl nearly dropped his glasses to the floor, but he caught them halfway to the crash. “Know what?” he asked with a growing twinkle in his eye. “If they’d forgive one, they’d just as easily forgive two!”

“What d’ you mean?” The smile began to wane off John’s smart face.

“Surely one person can’t catch an agent alone,” Carl said, suddenly sounding like a seasoned spy guru. “Right?”

“Right,” echoed the younger brother, without much ardour. “But .. jus’ for one week, okay?”

“Fine!”

The brothers shook hands and made their way back up to the front door of the marble-clad building. The secret agreement had been made, and the chase was about to begin—two brave hunters going after big game in a safari of their own making.

2

BIG FISH BITES

“Know what?” Carl said after the would-be spy-bashers had left their bunker. “I’m hungry. D’ you want to have a snack?”

“Great idea!” John was thinking the same thing. The dash to the supermarket, the strain and stress at the check-out counter, and a heated discussion afterwards had been just too much for his crimped stomach.

“While we eat we can figure out what *else* we need,” Carl added mysteriously.

“What d’ you mean?” John’s voice turned sour at the thought of weapons. He’d never held a firearm in his hands. Guns meant blood, or at least the two were never far from each other. So their father had told both brothers when they were kids.

“No muffled rifles, man!” Carl frowned, reading his brother’s face. “We’re not hunting down a drug dealer or th’ like! We need more *refined* stuff, I mean.”

“Like what?” John prodded as they entered a pizzeria.

“Let’s sit down first,” Carl said, looking over his shoulder suspiciously. He puffed and saddled, with obvious delight, a creaky wicker chair by a lonely corner table.

After a stooped, silent waiter took their order, Carl fetched a ballpoint pen from his jacket.

“See?” he began to speak in short phrases, or half-words, as spies did in his imagination. It was becoming irksome for John; too odd and amateurish to go unnoticed, wasn’t it?

“See what?” John shrugged and grinned with one corner of his mouth. “A pen?”

“Yes, a *pen*,” Carl replied. His eyes didn’t even twinkle. “And we need a...” he trailed off.

“A piece of paper?” John suggested with the air of an office worm for whom pen and paper were bound forever like Tom and Jerry, or politicians and scandals.

“Nope!” Carl grinned, the mischievous sparkle in his eye returning. “We need a remote microphone of this size, up to three hundred yards range.”

John nodded, blank-faced. What else could he do? He wasn’t a hardware magician or a spy freak. “What for?” he asked dully and sipped the orange juice that the speechless waiter, who himself could have passed for a clandestine school student, had brought.

“To tap phones and eavesdrop on conversations in cars,” Carl replied, in a drier tone. “Fine idea, eh?”

John gulped. His brother, a former solid citizen, was deteriorating into a slightly maniacal, obsessed nerd whose only dream was to eclipse both the fictitious James Bond and the real General Canaris.

Carl smiled mysteriously, rummaging through the pages of a thick copybook with wiring diagrams. “Hmmm, this microphone module can be ready in the morning,” he said, pointing his thick finger at one diagram and glancing up at John. “Can you take a day off t’morrow?”

That was just the question the younger Cheesekop had both expected and dreaded. Unplanned days off weren’t well regarded by his private bank’s bosses. Carl looked at him imploringly, suddenly seeming quite sheepish.

“Hmm, maybe. I’ll try,” John squeezed out, tapping the table with his fingers. “I’ll try.”

“Please, brother!” pleaded the engineer. “Tomorrow I’ll come with my car, and bring” he lowered his voice to a whisper, “the microphone along. We’re only doing this for a week, remember?”

The long-faced waiter came by with two steaming, sizzling pizzas. Two hungry mouths stopped their confidential talk and began to indulge in the activity that even the world’s best spies cannot avoid—chowing down.

Carl gobbled up a couple of larger slices, then washed them down with two gulps of orange juice. Then he set his massive briefcase on the shaky table. He took off his tortoise-shell glasses and pulled a small jar from the depths of

the case, then slowly began to rub the smelly liquid onto the lenses of his glasses, all the while whistling a silly pop melody. John frowned.

“What’s *that* now?” he asked, his stomach sinking and his pizza-inspired delight spoiled at the least expected moment.

“Amalgame fluid,” whispered thickset Carl in a grizzly-like tone. “When it’s rubbed upon the lenses, it makes them look like mirrored glasses.”

“Oh.” John shrugged, still not knowing what this was all about.

Carl knew, however. “And we’ll buy a pair for you!” He summed up with the sunny, easy mood of an amateur painter who’d just sketched another ‘Gioconda’.

“Carl,” John began, sighing. “It’s not cool to wear mirrored sunglasses anymore.” He clearly didn’t want to look like a novice crook or a low-drawer pimp.

“Oh, Johnny, I know,” Carl said with a frown. The budding chief agent was filled with sudden, sincere compassion for John’s slender nose, which had never known the yoke of glasses even on tropical holidays. “But... imagine if someone takes a photo, on the sly, and you become known to the press, or...” he trailed off.

“Or?” John stopped chewing. *The police?*

“Or... to a foreign intelligence,” Carl whispered, almost touching John’s ear with his greasy lips.

The junior co-agent drew back. He leaned against the dilapidated wicker chair, crossing his hands on his chest and

shaking his head. It all sounded so grave now, so serious. So... sinister. *Luckily this game will all be over in a week*, he consoled himself.

*

How could John have known how wrong he'd turn out to be? The 'game' they were pulled, whirled, and plunged into wouldn't last just seven dull, bob-tailed calendar days. No, it would swallow a couple of months, nearly sink a ship with a secret cargo, and cause one of the novice spy-hunters to have to escape the country in the boot of a vehicle. But how could either of the brothers have known that their plain, common, flavourless lives were about to be suddenly plugged into a high-voltage power system of international intrigue? But there was no way back now, and at the moment, neither of the modest, polite, clean-shaven, fair-weather brothers had a slightest clue of the great gale ahead.

*

"Shall we go?" Carl asked when he'd finished polishing his spectacles. He placed them upon his nose with the panache of a multiple-Oscar winner and stood up. The two halves of his bottomless briefcase snapped like a mid-sized dinosaur's jaws, the latch clicking like the lock of a calibre nine pistol.

"What else have you got in there?" John asked curiously, pointing his chin towards the larger-than-life briefcase.

Carl just smiled conspiratorially and said nothing.

John shook his head, grinning weakly. He stood up reluctantly. From his baby years on, he'd been told to follow

his older sibling—who'd never do him any harm, who was always sober and punctual as a Swiss watch, and as boringly predictable as the Dutch rain. Suddenly, for the second time in his life, John doubted that his older brother knew best.

“Where 're you hurrying off to?” John demanded as they passed out the doorway of the pizzeria. He couldn't understand why Carl was almost running again; the macho-style, adrenaline-boosted life of a junior co-agent was too fast-paced for a well-mannered tweedy bank clerk.

“I' buy you mirrored sunglasses!” Carl boomed, not slowing his frantic pace. “It's almost June, right? There should be sunglasses vendors everywhere! Dash, where are they? Any idea?”

John frowned as though from a dental pain. It was late March, to be precise. Obviously, the strong wine of being a 'secret intelligence officer' had gone to his brother's head, and it was beginning to whirl.

“There's one! I see one by the taxi stand!” announced Carl triumphantly, almost colliding with an occasional policeman.

“Sorr-ry?” growled the minion of the law as Carl raced on.

“A pair of mirrored sunglasses, please!” orated Carl to the bored, unshaven salesman with an earring who was hunched behind the stall.

“Yes, sir!” The trader stood up. “Y' mean, sun lenses for your eyeglasses?”

“No! Yes! That is, no!” The engineer's head turned like a turret in a computer shooter game, each time shifting in

another direction. His gestures were as broad as they were uncertain.

“Huh?” The trader couldn’t follow.

“I mean, um, the sunglasses are for the boyo.” Carl nodded nonchalantly over his right shoulder, where a grey-bearded gentleman in his eighties was wading along, leaning on a weathered walking stick. The entrepreneur’s eyes rounded.

Just behind the aged gentleman, John groaned. He didn’t like being called ‘the boyo’ one bit. He walked up to the stall with a heavy step. “The sunglasses are for me,” he said wearily, trying to cover his brother’s sudden madness with his own coolness.

The salesman, who had seen many a queer fish in his life, nodded. “The mirrored ones are at the top. There are three rows over there.” He pointed.

John grabbed the first pair of cheap, plastic mirrored spectacles he saw and tossed them, with sheer disgust, onto his nose. He looked into a mirror held up by the salesman. He glanced at Carl uncertainly.

“They’re not bad, but you’re looking like... like a spy!” summed up the chief co-agent with an expert’s air.

“Well, is that wrong?” John raised his shoulders. “Shouldn’t we look like, y’ know?”

“Oh, Johnnie, a spy who’s looking like a spy is not a... a *good* spy!” declared Carl in a loud pitch. He was again wound up like a grandfather clock’s tight spring, and again losing control over his voice, almost shouting his last words. He

turned his head toward a taxi driver who was lingering nearby, listening.

“Yeah, sur, you’re ruyght!” nodded the moustached driver with a strong, stuttering turkish accent. He smoothed his skimpy hair and added, in a lower voice, “Eh, sur, y’ knoou, eef you need to catch a reel spy, ask me!”

“Really? Why?” Carl stopped shouting and rumbled closer to the cabbie.

John sighed. *What a profanation I’m taking part of! A cabbie as a spy-hunting tutor! Why not use a janitor’s advice to learn opera singing?* he begrudged.

“Eehm sir, I stood here for tvelv yeers.” The cabbie came near and began to bend his fingers, ticking off his observations. “At furst, a spy is a forrenner, ruyght?”

“Sure!” Carl agreed. A Dutchman would never become a traitor, that was as clear as the sun. John paid for the mirrored sunglasses, tucked them into his jacket, and came closer.

“Sakondlee, I see a forrenner from free hunnerd yards.” The Turk’s eyes twinkled with seasoned bazaar savvy. “I’ve seen a lut, and cun tell yee a Franchman from a Spunniar, a Sweede from a Dane, a Korean from a Chinnese. Reellee!”

“Really?” John asked incredulously. He himself could barely tell a Japanese from a Hindu. “Fine, let’s do a test, then. Who’s that gent with the rucksack?” John pointed to the left, where a tourist-like man with a map in his hand was sauntering along the pavement. John’s unbespectacled eyes narrowed. If the cabbie failed this simple test, Carl could

come back to his senses and the absurd theatre could be laid to rest that much sooner.

The chauffeur knit his brow, rubbed his square chin, and pinched his long nose.

"A Franch!" he concluded, leaning his head to the right, nodding as the man walked on. "Yep!"

"Okay," John responded. He glanced at Carl, then raced toward the fellow with the rucksack. "Excuse me, but what time is it?" he asked in Dutch. John clamped his hands with a foretaste of triumph. The guy looked like a German or a Dutchman. *What is he talking about, French?*

"Pardon, monsgineur ... parlais-vous Français?" sounded a guttural melody instead of the familiar grunting.

"Um, non," John confusedly shook his head. "I... no... do," he blurted, grinned and retreated awkwardly, spreading his hands. He only spoke Dutch, English, and German; as with most folks in the Netherlands, the language of Richelieu and De Gaulle wasn't within his range.

When he stumbled back to them, the triumphant chauffeur and a respectful Carl stood next to the cab. The driver shook the hands of the would-be counter-intelligence squad.

"I'm Selim!" he introduced himself. "And yu are poleece studdents, ruyght?"

"Yes!" Carl replied immediately, nodding. "That's so."

John, who didn't like white or 'business' lies, kept silent, only bobbing his head lightly. *Ufff, when will this insane week end?*

“I luyk studdents,” purred Selim. “Yuo cun use my car to watch, yu need a lut of watchin’, ruyght?”

“That’s right!” agreed Carl, who was planning the same—that is, to watch his victims from a car with tinted windows the next day. Today he had no car with him. He glanced at his brother. John shrugged. *It’s your day, man*, the junior clerk’s blank face seemed to say. *It’s your music to order—and your turn to pay the bills.*

“Yes, please!” Carl opened the BMW’s finely curved rear door, ready to take a seat. He admired how a new Dutchman could show such patriotic verve—

The man avidly lifted his hand. Carl stood still. *What’s up?*

“Eet’s for fiftee Euro an hour,” the cabbie informed them and smiled. “Eets no prublem for yuo, ruyght?”

“Oh, that’s *no* problem,” Carl replied, smiling broadly. Then he quenched his grin a bit. What if they should sit in there for three hours? And was that rate per person, or ...?

Carl climbed into the low automobile, settled his case to his left, and waved his hand to John.

“Yes?” his younger brother asked sourly. *What now?*

“Know what?” Carl said in a low, quiet voice, assuming the assuredness of a chief officer who gives orders. “I don’t carry much cash along. Could you please take out three hundred for me? I’ll give you my card.” He rummaged in his jacket, where the spy card still dangled inside the empty corn can, in search of his debit card, but found none. “Sheeps ...” he mumbled, wary to ask his younger brother for money.

"I'll take out the cash," John said sourly, briefly touching his brother's square shoulder. *I earn three hundred Euros a day, true. But I'd never throw a dime away on a nutty spectacle like this!* he thought.

John was back in five minutes and climbed into the cab. Silently he passed the crisp bank notes to Carl. The driver sat in the front seat listening to the sounds of rustling cash—music that was sweet to his ear.

"A hundred, at first," Carl said as he placed two pastel notes into the driver's narrow palm. "To start."

"Gudd," agreed the cab driver as he crammed the cash into his worn wallet. "Me gaw and seet in de car before, me tell naw-buddy who you are, gudd?"

"O' course," nodded the two brothers, finally together.

The front door closed behind the bony back of the moustachioed, police-friendly Turk. Both brothers sighed—one with relief, the other with rising anger.

"Carl!" John poked his older 'broer' with his elbow.

"Ye-eah?" The superspy-in-training stopped peering through the low window and looked at John.

"I feel like the last idiot, to tell you the truth." John slammed his palm against his thigh so firmly that a fine dust rose up, dancing under the pale roof and obscuring the already-dystrophic sun that was trying to poke its fleshless ray fingers through the budding leaves of the trimmed trees beside the canal.

"Oh, Johnnie, th' week' ll pass quicker than a whip!" the senior Cheesekop patted his voluminous case. "If

anything goes wry, I'll foot all the bills. You'll be as clean as a tear!"

"If only it would be that easy," mumbled the junior co-agent.

A moment of stuffy, stale, strained silence settled in. There were throngs of people, both Dutch and foreign, walking along both sides of the canal, driving neat cars or junky scooters, leisurely stretched out on tour boats or busily cycling.

Who among them is a spy, for goodness sakes? John wondered, sighing agitatedly. *What a fool I've been to agree to this plan...*

"We can't lose time," whispered Carl, suddenly and meaningfully, and cleared his throat.

John, too mad to answer, didn't even nod. He looked at his watch. Indeed, they were killing time in a rather weird, and expensive, way.

"I shall use this place to train my voice," concluded the older brother, clearing his chest again and trimming his necktie. He straightened up and opened his mouth broadly, like an army sergeant.

"Kingdom of the Netherlands! You're arrested!" he boomed, then glimpsed at John. "Sounds good?"

John stared at him and chuckled. "Sounds... pitiful," he replied honestly, shaking his head. "Like a bad joke."

Carl coughed a couple of times, then took his glasses off and wiped them, not caring that the precious mirror fluid

was soaking into the hanky. He was getting nervous; two scarlet spots appeared on his cheeks.

“Hmmm, hmm,” he mumbled, then rubbed his forehead. “How does one begin, then?”

“No idea,” John returned, feeling some rare pity for his comrade-in-unseen-arms. “I’ve never picked anyone up before.”

Carl was rapidly—and loudly—improving. “General counter-intelligence service. Your documents, please!” he thundered with the severe face of an ancient Greek tyrant announcing the last battle of the Trojan war.

John giggled openly this time when he saw the cardboard deodoriser tied to the rear-view mirror swinging around from the force of Carl’s breath. “Sorry,” he muttered as he wiped some miniature tears from the corner of his eye. “If the poor spy doesn’t die on the spot from a heart attack, he’ll die later from laughter!”

“Y’ mean... too loud?” Carl wasn’t amused at all.

“Three times too loud!”

“All right.” Carl nodded, then went on, almost at a whisper. “General counter-intelligence service; you’re arrested!”

“Too quiet,” John shook his head, “it seems you’re *begging!*”

“Sheeps!” This time it was Carl’s palm that flagged his own pants, raising another cloud of wool dust.

“That’s good!” John commented.

“What? What’s good?” The engineer frowned. Streaks of sweat began to show on his forehead.

“The intonation.” John looked serious. “You can’t *beg* for someone’s documents. You should *demand* that they do. Get it?”

“Yeah!” puffed the chief engineer, already bone-tired from fighting the invisible enemies of State. “If a good newspaper report is like a flight to the moon, then how hard can catching a spy be?”

The front door of the taxi screeched open, and the moustachioed head of the driver poked in.

“All gudd?” He smiled down at the two. “Wanna a snuck?”

“I’d visit a toilet, with pleasure,” John took advantage of the costly help. “Are there any nearby?”

“Ugh,” the cabbie said with some hesitation. “M-maybbee, fur you. Juss a mummet!” He disappeared inside the crowd, which was getting thicker as the evening rush drew closer. He returned in a couple of minutes.

“Gaw to eh kebab!” his voice twinkled. “Juss neer heer.”

In the kebab’s dingy loo which resembled a refugee camp, complete with cracked windows, three rolls of barbed wire, a cow’s horned skull, and the crankshaft of an unknown vehicle, the undercover officers said farewell to the pale-yellow remains of the bright-orange liquid they’d guzzled an hour earlier. They sneaked back into their position. The driver climbed into the front seat.

“Eh, freends, I see yu’re *reel* studdents.” He drummed his not-very-clean fingers on the greasy front head rest. “I cun tell you sum fin.”

“Something?” Carl assumed the role of the boss again. He found that it went easier each time he did. John noticed this, too.

“Yep, sum fin.” The cabbie hushed his voice to almost below hearing level. “Me curred a reer cleent yestr’ die.”

“You gave a ride to someone who sat at the rear seat?” John asked with a frowned brow. The deep accent was too strong for his ear.

“Shut up, please!” Carl, afraid of the driver’s reaction, whispered and poked John with his elbow. John winced and pouted.

“Eh, eh, I allavuy curree d’ cleents at de buck seet!” exploded the temperamental Turk, returning to a very audible pitch. “I sey, me curred a re-ear cleent, thut meens, un-ussal! You get?”

“Perfectly! A rare bird!” Carl seemed to tune in his hearing.

“For wun hunner I’d tell yu what he lookt luyk.” The driver switched back to a half-whisper and knit his other brow, which surely would mean *a lot* for another Turk, but was of unperceivable importance to the two pale-faced agents.

John glanced askew at Carl. This time he really smelled a hoax. The cabman was simply churning out his hard-earned salary!

“Please.” Carl passed two other fifty-Euro notes into ready palms.

“Gudd.” The cabbie took the keys from his pocket and continued, “O' cors, you nev'r hurd eet from meself.”

“It goes without saying!” Carl declared.

John nodded, feeling like a silly doll. *Bullocks*, he thought, bemused.

“Yestr'die, me took a chup frum Schiphol. I stood dere until noon,” Selim trimmed his moustache and began his story. “En he wus a purfect stranner!”

“Yes...?” Carl's glasses began to regain their victorious shine, even without much fluid on them.

“Yu knoe, he told me, ‘Grand Hotel, please’ and de Keisergracht is clozd, y' knoe?”

Both nodded, although the street name was known only to John.

“And he wus almos' askin' mee wyy me goes anuthr way 'round? Hou cun a stranner knoe?”

This question didn't mean much for John. Carl began to rub his chin.

“Was he upset, then?” the elder brother enquired, with an almost professional air.

“Yep, but huydinn it so gudd!” Selim's voice again hovered at new heights. “Wyy?”

Carl looked at John, who just shrugged, and then back to the driver.

“So... he was different from a normal tourist, wasn’t he?”

“I’d swim de Amstel ovve twanty timms eef he wusn’t!” Selim put his hand to his throat. “He’s a spuy o’ sum fin lake dat.”

“Good, man,” returned Carl after a full minute of silence. “Your observations will be taken into account by us. Can you, please...”

“To Grand? Wun hunnerd!” Selim’s arithmetic was very straight and simple. John’s eyes rounded, which the diligent driver noticed at once. “Eh, eh, me use a metter, me use a taximetter, allavauy, but yu need a speeshal service, eet fur speeshal tariff, eh?”

“No problem. Please,” Carl gave his assent to the cabbie, feeling both remorse for picking the spy card up and a thrill from the imminent use of it. “Let’s go, then.”

“Eh, munny, sur!” The narrow palm opened again between the wide front seats. Carl, now grieving the fact that he was getting deeper into his younger brother’s pocket, pulled out the last note. It was no longer a pair of pastel-coloured fiftiers, but a green hundred.

“Eh, hunnerd!” Selim folded the note and squeezed it into his bottomless wallet. “You’ll hev a lack!”

“A luck?” John couldn’t hold his sarcastic remark back. Indeed, three hundred Euros were gone from his bank account, in less than an hour. *A lack for one is always a luck for another*, he mused sombrely.

“Eh, man, eef *me* say dat you hev lack, you hev a reel lack!” gesticulated Selim, throwing his sizeable vehicle

between tinkling trams, tooting buses, swearing scooter drivers, and cheeky bikers. The rush hour had struck, and traffic in the capital's centre had stalled, turning into its usual afternoon nightmare. Or, it had *almost* stalled, for some cheeky cabbies were pushing through, using even the smallest gaps of free tarmac or the 'sacred cow ways' that were the broad bike paths.

Even with Selim's outstanding skills and daring impudence, some forty minutes passed before the Grand Hotel facade, familiar to every cabman but wholly unknown to the freshly-baked agents, beckoned to them. Selim moored his four-pawed beast into the 'taxi only' lane, the sole free space available, and turned the guzzling engine off.

"Heer wee are!" the asphalt gladiator boomed as he wiped his forehead with a large hanky that looked like Arafat's headscarf. "Now cutch heem!"

"What exactly did he look like?" Carl asked the last question. John peered at his brother with a mix of slight disgust, growing uncertainty, and genuine care. Did he *really* intend to launch out into the dusk and wave the spy card before an unsuspecting tourist's nose, scaring him out of his wits with it?

"Hee lookt, okay, he lookt saw," Selim trailed off. He rubbed his forehead. Yesterday's guest had *no* special features to speak of; he was so mousy and indiscernible that even his trained mind began to overheat like the eight-cylinder motor of his car had minutes ago. "He had smawl ayys, an' brownish haar, an' he wore a grey jakke and a brown tuy... an' de tuy wus too narrow fur Amsterdam!" he concluded, finally grasping at least one unique feature. "I saw!"

Carl and John looked at the driver, then at one another. The tip wasn't worth a shoelace, yet what alternative did they have? It was dawning more and more upon both espionage hobbyists just how much they lacked. They had no 'base' to fall back on like the regular unseen military have—no apparatus of hundreds of experts who made photos, wrote dossiers, analysed data, checked facts, compared logs, and did a thousand and one other chores before their agents headed out to nab the proper guy. Now, both felt like petty, unskilled babes in the dark, thick woods of greed, high treason, and slick diplomacy, where the kings quarrelled or gambled for fun while the pawns lost their heads.

"We're going!" commanded Carl, reaching into his jacket pocket and grappling for the corn can. Then, he scowled, as from a sudden toothache. That nutty GPS antenna. Within three minutes it could, as little as it was, find a satellite in the open, and the spy trackers would be hunted down. Suddenly, his eyes caught sight of a half-eaten chocolate bar on the dashboard.

"Can I please, sir, have the chocolate?" Carl asked without any reserve—and even with a hint of newly-bred impertinence.

"Eh? Chakolut? Pleez, pleez!" The driver was ready, his wallet stuffed with 'feeftees' and a 'hunnerd,' to show some Eastern generosity at the end.

Carl wasn't intending to ward off the chattering teeth and goose skin he felt, very unpleasantly and clearly, with a brief Lucullian pleasure. No, he had another idea. He removed the foil and tucked the rest of the bar, for just a moment, into his inside jacket pocket. Next, he folded the aluminium foil in four, then wrapped the card in it. *That's better*, he thought with sudden relief. The foil would make do

as Faraday's cage, blocking the wireless connection or at least weakening it.

"Wait for us for half an hour, please," communicated Carl before leaving the rear seat.

Selim nodded and lifted both his thumbs in the air. He looked alert and serious.

The two brothers stepped noiselessly out of the dark vehicle and trotted, slowly and uncertainly, towards the brightly lit white facade. Carl didn't utter a word. What on earth should they do? Enter the hotel and show the card to a porter and order him to show them the logbook with all the tourists' names? But the cabbie hadn't conjured up a name, though he couldn't be blamed for that. Two small eyes and a necktie too narrow for Amsterdam were pitifully weak clues.

"Where shall we go... or stand?" John asked after they'd been stuck for a good five minutes to the middle of the pavement, loitering there like passengers late for a train—aloof, fidgeting, and dejected. The western wind blew stronger, carrying candy wrappers and empty plastic cups along with it. The street was draughty and cold.

"No idea, to tell you the truth," Carl admitted with a shrug. "We could stand... behind a tree."

"Carl, please!" John rolled his eyes, almost ready to cry. "Why not climb *up* a tree? Then you could jump down onto the spy's head!"

The engineer scratched his chin. The trunks, indeed, weren't thick enough to serve as a hiding place even for slender John, let alone his own bulky self. No, it would be up to him to invent a spy-bashing technique newer than those

used in the time of the Norman Conquest or the Hundred Years' War.

"Should we... walk, maybe?" Carl suggested. "From left to right, and then the other way around? That way we won't get cold, at least."

"Well..." John, who was now beginning to feel shivery, was on the brink of agreeing to anything. "Let's walk," he sighed.

... After circling around the street twenty times or so, Carl stopped—so abruptly that the junior agent bumped into his back. "Know what?" he decided, scratching his aching shoulder, "It's getting too dark for this. Let's go into the hotel and pretend we're going to book a room."

"Loony," disagreed John, rubbing his aching nose, "one doesn't arrive at a posh hotel in the evening without luggage."

"I've got a briefcase," opposed Carl, but he soon resigned himself. To begin with, he'd forgotten his chest in the taxi, silently hoping that their cabbie wouldn't drive away with his microchip-filled treasure box. What's more, even if he'd been holding it now, it was quite possible that the porter would tell them that all the rooms were booked, and what then? "Isn't there a restaurant?" Carl sniffed the crisp air. "I feel like I smell ... roasted steak!"

"I feel dog tired," countered John, as sincerely as he could.

"Then come along!" the senior co-agent clamped his oscillating comrade by the elbow and dragged him towards

the glass door. It flung open and a porter in lush livery stood in their way.

“Sirs?” asked the porter with the uppity dignity of a rich man’s minion.

“We’ve got a dinner booked,” said Carl coolly, almost snobbishly. John kept silent, looking straight ahead, wondering at how quickly he’d learned to not even notice lies. His tacky mirror glasses were still lying in his pocket.

“By the name of, sir?” the clean-shaven chin yielded a bit.

Carl’s stomach fell a fraction of a centimetre. “Misters Axel van den Bergh and Serge Lefebre,” he cited the first fable names that came to his mind.

The servant produced a cream-coloured note card from his breast pocket and studied it for a long twenty seconds. By an unattainable miracle, Carl’s blind shot had hit the bull’s eye. ‘Serge L.’ was printed there, followed with a comma and three dots. That meant another, anonymous, person would be joining him.

The porter stepped aside. “Please,” he bowed to the now-worthy guests, switching his voice to a kinder, warmer, and more servile register, “the cloak room is to the right. The usher will accompany you to the restaurant. Have a nice evening, sirs.” He reached for a dated-looking phone, picked up the black ebonite receiver, and spoke briefly.

The brothers ventured into the brightly lit hall where uniformed, stately waiters carried small silver trays with champagne. A lean, red-eyed man in a too-tight tailcoat came up to them.

“Good evening, sirs,” he said in decent English, pointing towards the double doors to the dining room. “Your table is the third from the left.”

Carl nodded curtly. He felt that he shouldn’t talk to the flunkies unless it was necessary. They should play the roles of people of importance—people who ambled in there whenever they wished, to dine for the price of a small car.

Inside, the usher shuffled behind the two rather shabbily dressed visitors and helped both to sit, pulling out their chairs with the knack of a thoroughbred waiter. They sat down.

“Carl!” John whispered to his brother. “What’re you thinking, man? Imagine they come up? Th’ guys who booked the dinner?”

“Then I’ll pull out the card,” Carl cut him short before nodding briefly to another waiter, this one in white gloves, who brought the menus. Carl himself seemed too tired to conjure up any smart way out.

John drooped his head and glanced at his watch. Sixty. Normally he’d be back home by now. He’d get a poignant call from his wife at any moment. He sat there stiffly, as though on needles.

“Carl, I have to go to the loo,” he whispered to the chief co-agent. “I have to phone Sveta!”

The older brother nodded and John started across the finely decorated room.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Carl hissed.

John stalled, halfway to the lobby. *Yes?* his burning eyes asked.

“When you’re back, put the mirrored glasses on!” he whispered loudly.

&

... Two storeys above the restaurant, another clean-shaven fellow in a grey jacket and a narrow tie sat as though on needles. Major Davis knew that the job should be a cinch, but he already felt, even before it had begun, like he was at the end of his tether. Years of knife-sharp intelligence work had created a sixth sense within him—a keen intuition, a ‘nose’ for future events, a sort of clairvoyance—though he didn’t actually believe in mediums or the like.

All he felt now was a hollow, sucking, gnawing foretaste of a flop—and a nasty one, at that. No one likes being flunked at school, much less failing at work, and still less to flop at the end of one’s career. Yet, Davis was a Brit born and bred, and he knew, deep in his genes, how to ‘meet triumph and disaster, and treat those both impostors just the same.’ A red Triumph stood in his Sussex garage, ready and running, and now... now it seemed to be the time for the other half of Kipling’s verse to materialise.

He glanced at his watch. It was six-eighteen local time. He had to go. His liaison, one Serge L., was to be seated at the third table on the left side of the dining room, wearing a pair of mirrored tortoise-shell glasses. Nothing else about him was known, as usual; the receiving side, most likely a diplomat or an incognito dignitary, hadn’t been too plentiful with concrete data. The success of this mission, then, depended on solid planning, perfect timing, and faultless conspiracy—and such was what his Secret Service was

known for. *And on some luck*, Major Davis added in his head. Luck had always seemed to follow him. At least, so far...

Down in the restaurant, an unsuspecting usher accompanied the nervous major to the third table on the left. There, the upset engineer, pretending to read the menu (though holding it upside-down) was sitting alone, impatiently waiting on his brother. Without him, he didn't feel at home in this voluptuous hall dotted with tacky, gilded fountains and pseudo-antique marble statues. He also fretted that he was without his tacit aide—his boxy briefcase—for the first time in years.

Five strides short of the table, the usher halted. "Here, sir," he said to the new grey-clad diner, bowing.

"Thank you," uttered Norman, glancing back as the tailcoat vanished between the rows of Corinthian columns.

Carl lifted his head and trimmed his tortoise-shell glasses, on which, he believed, the remainder of the reflecting fluid still rested. *Do they still shine as they should?* he wondered, briefly and intensely.

Davis came three steps closer. Carl raised his head, not knowing if he should greet the visitor. *Who on earth could this be?* he wondered nervously. *Is this chap indeed that Axel Bergh, or the Frenchman? What should he do? Retreat, beg his pardon, tell a joke, or what?* Carl felt treacherous sweat flushing down his forehead.

"Good evening, sir. May I ask what time it is?" the rather uneasy MI6 officer began the prepared charade. The proper coded answer had to be, 'My watch is seven minutes late, I'm sorry.' If the answer was correct, then the major could go on with the plan—that is, hand over the briefcase.

Then, the mission would be over. In the morning, he would be ambling through the well-known Heathrow halls on his way back home, slightly bored at having completed another dull job—a bacon-and-eggs lunch at a five-star hotel, in simple terms.

“Good evening!” replied Carl, who had, of course, no insight into the MI6 codes and plans. The rather sweaty engineer looked at his watch, which was neither late nor early. “It’s six-twenty-two in the evening.”

The visitor didn’t move or speak a word. *Strange...*

For a long, endless second Carl’s bespectacled eyes stared at the man in front of him, and the major’s inquisitive eyes peered back.

Wait a minute, thought Carl suspiciously. *Those small eyes, that grey jacket, that narrow tie... Was the wolf running straight to the hunter?* Carl jumped to his feet, making the heavy oak chair crash to the ground. He snatched the card out of his pocket, not caring that the crackling chocolate foil was still stuck to it for a brief moment before it fluttered over the table and landed on the floor.

“Kingdom of the Netherlands, counter-intelligence,” he announced dryly and, so it seemed, toughly. He weightily stepped on the treacherous foil. “You documents, please!”

The major gazed at the card, then glanced at Carl, then assumed an ‘innocent tourist’ face. “Sorry?” he asked, trimming his tie and eyeing the card again. His heart sank. It was *indeed* a real Dutch counter-intelligence ID; he’d studied such cards for long enough to know a real from a fake blindfolded. This was no hoax or provocation. They’d

certainly be circling the hotel by now, with the police in civil—

“Your documents, please!” Carl’s repeated command interrupted his thoughts. The engineer felt the sweat beginning to fog up his glasses, and he was maddened by the fact that he couldn’t wipe them.

Norman shrugged, put his hand into his side pocket, and nimbly pressed both of the alert buttons on the inside of his jacket—an indication that meant ‘Yellow alert! I’m snapped! Abort mission!’. The next minute, if all went well, these words, sufficiently coded, would appear in the Office. If he was lucky enough to keep his jacket, he’d get a coded answer on a micro-SD card to copy to his handheld mobile and read. If he was searched, or jailed, he would try to destroy the button-sized transmitters in his jacket and reach the Embassy at any cost.

Next, the major pulled his passport out and placed it, politely, into Carl’s trembling hands, which he’d just managed to wipe against his shirt. The officer used the brief moment when the pseudo-officer was studying his empty-shelled document to glimpse behind him. The view behind him wasn’t smooth sailing, either—in the shiny lane between the columns stood another fellow in mirrored sunglasses, his right hand tucked into his jacket pocket. That John had just placed his cell phone, and not a muffled gun there, wasn’t revealed to anyone.

“You are arrested, sir,” declared Carl, “on the power of Article 43 of the Dutch Penal Code. Follow us, please.” The novice ‘agent’ didn’t have any time to wipe the rolling sweat from his forehead. His heart thumped like an awakened volcano, and, worse still, his knees began to tremble almost visibly. A couple of minutes more and Carl knew he’d be

shaking like a late-stage Parkinson patient—and that would mean a shameful end of this whole ‘Grand Operation.’ *Wait a minute*, Carl thought, fighting guilt, shame, and fear. *Why did I arrest this guy?*

Davis’s trained eyes had noticed all of Carl’s wayward body language and he felt a bit easier, but, on the other hand, he was more confused than ever. *These guys look and act like a pair of amateurs, sweating and teetering and toppling furniture. But the ID was real, the timing perfect. Who’s playing a nasty joke on me, and why?* the major wondered coolly. *All right, let’s see...*

“Follow me,” repeated Carl, hiccupping from emotional hyping as he stepped over the fallen chair. Jostling against the table, which creaked and swayed, he marched to the double entry doors, paying no attention to the massive crystal flower vase which shook, tilted, and thumped down upon the table top.

“Your briefcase, please?” asked John, stretching his left hand towards Norman. The younger brother, instead of turning crab-red like Carl, assumed a morbid pale green face as he always did when upset or afraid. He still had his right hand stuck in his pocket, and couldn’t pull it out, he was so paralyzed with confusion and fear. “Please keep your hands behind your back!” he uttered, falling short of breath, woodily plodding on his heavy feet. He couldn’t remember in which movie had he heard that command. Maybe it was in one about cowboys and Indians some twenty years ago.

Norman, sagged and sullen on the surface but modestly hopeful inside, handed the briefcase over and then folded his hands behind him as required. Yes, he knew enough martial arts to make those flabby chaps fly through the hall; both were clumsily exposing their temples, necks, and throats like the stuffed mannequins in the Office’s sports

and wrestling range. But he easily decided that he would *not* use those skills now. The situation was plainly daft; it was all one thick haze. And what if ...

While the three were passing under the troubled eye of the head waiter (for chairs and vases don't fall over too often in five-stars hotels) and through the entry hall, a gasping guest in a costly suit and mirrored tortoise-shell glasses stormed in, almost knocking the liveried porter off his feet.

"Whaaaaat? I—I—am Serge L.!" he bellowed with a strong Eastern European accent, shoving the scared servant aside like a rag doll. "It's *me*, you blockhead! Get lost, yob tvoyou!" He almost ran into the dining hall.

Catching sight of the new guest, Norman chuckled as loud as he could afford and turned his head, almost at an owl-sharp angle, towards his real proxy. The new arrival wasn't looking anywhere except at the third table on the left side, under which the flattened chocolate foil lay and upon which the drenched tablecloth hung sloppily, half on the tabletop and half draped over the silk-upholstered chairs. Two baffled waiters lingered nearby, one scratching his head and the other rubbing his chin. The crystal vase still rested on its side, and three thin waterfalls were trickling down onto the thick carpet.

The rumpled porter, his eyes round, gaped at the three silent chaps. The one in the middle had his hands behind his back, and they were trotting one after another, like an honour guard, towards the exit.

"Sirs?" he mumbled feebly, seeing three jackets dissolving in the dusk. "Eh?"

... Inside the dark, empty taxi, the brothers felt a bit fortified. They were at least back to their 'home base'. The culprit sat squeezed in the middle of the dusty, smelly car, without his passport or his briefcase.

What do we do now? Carl wondered. They couldn't take council with themselves any longer on how they were to act, and there was no script or stage director. *Selim, where are you?* thought Carl feverishly before he drove the indecent, pesky thought away. They had to interrogate their captive, but first they had to know how. *Fine, how does James Bond normally begin?*

The driver, as it turned out, wasn't far off. He was babbling with another moustachioed brunette in the cab behind them. He was dying from curiosity, wanting to see if the third guy was, indeed, that strange 'buzznessman' he had brought to the hotel just the night before. But he left the play, too serious to meddle in, to the others. What if the grey-clad chap was armed? He decided to let the 'poleece studdens' practice alone.

Both 'studdens,' however, sat in his car in almost complete darkness and uneasy, stuffy, pin-drop silence. John felt that he was beginning to blush from shame. After three or four tense minutes, Carl attempted to switch the interior light on. Sitting behind the driver's seat, he leaned in towards the steering wheel and began to grapple with buttons on the dashboard. *Where on earth have those Munich wizards put the cabin lights?* he muttered silently.

"Umm," uttered Carl, his belly pressed up against the seat. He was getting mad from holding back a belch and was sweating again—all because of one stupid, unreachable switch. He shifted his body weight and tried with his left hand, to no avail; the broad dashboard remained an abracadabra of signs, buttons, and levers. Only the alarm

button was alight; the rest were dark. *Drat! Why didn't we ask Selim earlier?* came more silent cusses.

"Sirs, let me help you," their captive suddenly spoke out. "The light switch is the third in the second row, if I'm correct."

Carl chuckled, jerking his whole body. The words had come unexpectedly, and too loud for the silent interior. But he said nothing, and began to fumble again. *Second row ... but, man, from beneath or from above?* After trying both, the engineer held his hand back again, confused and speechless. *What now?*

"May I?" asked Davis, who felt almost free now. Holding his victorious grin back, he took the initiative over. There came no word from his captors, so he reached forward and flipped the proper switch. He could have done the same in most mainstream cars, trucks, and buses, in the total darkness, or even underwater. The light shone.

Oops... the amateur agents' faces spoke that unuttered word so clearly that the genuine agent needed real effort to refrain from a genuine giggle.

With the precious light finally on, Carl pulled the passport from his jacket and opened it. *Dash it...* The forgotten chocolate that he'd tucked hastily into his left inner pocket had melted, gluing the pages of the hapless booklet shut solidly. All he could do was pry the nameless rear cover open. He glanced at the candied document and crammed it back into his pocket, producing a slopping sound and moistening his pointer finger with the dark brown mess. *Do intelligence agents give the passports back to the people they search?* he thought briefly. But they were supposed to act, not ponder for hours.

“Good afternoon, sir,” announced Carl, not knowing how to begin, hardly able to keep up his weighty intonation. He was too confused to notice that his greeting came far too late. The major didn’t even bat an eyelid. “Your name is?”

“Douglas, sirs,” Davis responded in a plain, colourless voice. He was able to withstand forty-eight hours of cross-examination by four enemy officers—*real* enemy officers, that is. “Norbert Douglas.”

“Please open you baggage,” requested John, handing the little leather briefcase to the major. The request only bothered the real agent slightly; it would take a truly overzealous interrogator to notice that the bank certificates the Office used to back the cash were replicas.

“Can I possibly know what the charges against me are?” asked Norman, politely but firmly and with the air of a no-nonsense person who knows his rights and keeps the phone number of his lawyer handy.

“Article 45a of the Dutch penal code,” John returned suddenly. He felt that he was responsible for the briefcase, and therefore that he should answer the culprit’s present question. Carl gave his brother a lightning-like stare that could have perhaps killed a bullock on the spot. *You’re not supposed to speak!* his eyes yelled.

“Umm,” Norman murmured, lifting his brows a bit. “The other gentlemen cited Article 43, right?”

“That’s correct!” Carl’s mind sought a suitable answer much like a drowning man would grasp at a stick. “You’re charged with both, for bank frauding and ... umm, money laundry,” he cited the first accusations that rattled somewhere in the back of his memory. “But in *here*, we ask

the questions.” He finished the last phrase so curtly that John blinked.

Norman, asking nothing more, keyed in the code for both locks and clicked the briefcase open.

“Wow,” uttered Carl, peering at the numerous packs of bank notes inside. “Sir?”

“Yes?” replied Davis innocently, with the well-trained air of a jovial millionaire who always keeps a quarter million in cash handy for a little shopping.

“That’s... a heap of money!” exclaimed the middle-class engineer, grappling for the next thread in this badly cut and woefully stitched interrogation.

“Yes it is,” the major agreed with a tiny teasing note to his voice. *Come on, sissies!* his defiant heart urged.

“It’s... exactly three hundred thousand Euros,” added John with the coolness and knack of a professional bean counter. He suddenly felt like he was back at his office. “Have you any documents for this amount?”

“Yes, of course.” Norman tilted the case’s lid further up and searched for the bank papers in the inside pocket, carefully keeping his lips unmoving to hide his silent cussing.

John took the bank prints into his hands and scrutinised them with a trained eye. He often dealt with cheques, SWIFT, and anonymous money transfers to and from a dozen countries.

“Which account is the cash drawn from?” asked John dryly. He noticed that the issuing bank code—the internal one—contained three ciphers, numeric codes that were

reserved for government offices only. *Who is this guy? Is he indeed a spy? Or a money courier?* pondered John seriously. For the first time he felt as though he was perhaps doing a good service for his country.

“Um,” stuttered the Brit. Now it was Norman’s turn to have an overheated brain. “It’s from my company,” he explained and stopped. *Who are these guys, dammit?*

“Your *company*?” John grinned slightly. “Can I know its name, please? Because the bank code on this page tells me something else.” He underlined the long row of ciphers and letters across the bottom of a bill.

“Let me give you my card,” the officer said readily, still hoping that the usual business path would lead him back to freedom. He grappled inside the briefcase’s pocket and pulled a card out. “Please.”

“Norbert Douglas, Manager,” read Carl aloud, happy to grab the initiative back. “Eton antiques.”

As his brother’s voice dropped heavily in the stuffy car, John continued to look at the cash declarations, which were dull to everyone but himself. “These are not signed by a bank officer,” he pointed out. “Why not?”

“I can’t say. Sorry,” the officer said and shrugged lightly. “Those banks... they are so messy at times.”

“Oh, really?” John began to smell a rat, like a full-blooded anti-spy. He had dealt enough with banks from the other side of the Channel to know they weren’t sloppy by any measure. Surely not when a quarter million sterling in cash was to fly overseas!

“Shall we send one pack to be evaluated?” Carl clumsily meddled in the expert’s talk, stretching his hand towards the pastel-coloured fortune. His heavy arm swung a jot too far, however, and his finger, still greased with the dark, almond-flavoured cocoa, brushed against one of the tidy ten-thousand-Euro packs, leaving a large brown blotch on it.

“Ugh!” the reserved officer couldn’t curb his outburst. “Sir?”

Carl clamped his teeth together, holding in the ‘sorry’ that was almost ready to flutter from his lips, and reached for his own briefcase, which now occupied the front passenger seat. He fetched a little LED-flashlight from it, positioned the device over the chocolate spot, and pressed the button, illuminating the unsuspecting cocoa with a bright bluish-white light. Then, turning off the beam, he brought the flashlight casing close to his eyes, pretending to read some fabled data from it, and tucked it back into his case—all in full, mysterious, and meaningless silence.

John, holding back a mixture of woeful sighs and loud giggles with the last vestiges of his willpower, tucked the banking prints back into the briefcase’s pocket. He opened the door and stepped out. “You may go, sir,” he said to the man, whom he’d most happily have kept under arrest if he’d had the authority. “For now.” The last words hung in the air like an omen.

The military officer climbed out of the vehicle in a silent rage, but he didn’t leave the brothers straight away.

“Yes?” John’s mirrored glasses sat crookedly on his nose, but he didn’t try to tidy them up.

“May I have my passport back, please?” he said modestly but audibly enough, turning to the dark space inside the car.

Carl, who had also heard the question, kept his peace. What could he do? The hapless document had turned into a sort of chocolate-glazed pancake inside his pocket: warm, sticky, and almond scented. But if they took his document with them, the guy would report them to the police, and the cops would surely find the passport and arrest them in the process! Carl, who could nearly feel the stale air of a prison cell closing in on him, shuddered.

“Here!” Carl stretched his hand out to deliver the passport, keeping the almond-stained side upside-down. ‘Norbert’ reached for it, then, after just one glimpse at the polluted document and a very brief cuss, hurried back to the hotel, where he hoped—with a hope as tiny as a poppy seed—that the *real* liaison would still be sitting at the third table on the left.

He didn’t get far. Twenty yards from the front door of the hotel he heard, unpleasantly close, the rattle of a motorcycle’s engine behind his back.

The major turned around. The two-wheeler rode, very slowly, along the empty pavement. *What now?* Davis thought, trying to cope with the adrenaline rush coursing through his body after the nutty taxi talk. He stood still, peering into the dimmed headlight of a large motorcycle equipped with a set of blue flashing lights. A policeman in a leather uniform dismounted and stopped the rumbling engine.

“Sergeant van Dyke, police corps of Amsterdam. Can I see your documents?” he asked, reaching for a walky-talky on his hip.

Norman sighed, openly and gloomily. *What a doggone night.*

The policeman stretched out his hand, which was clad in a coarse glove. Davis, trying to look as innocent and baffled as he'd been trained to be, grappled in his pockets to fetch the passport.

"Um, sir, there was a little accident with it," he mumbled. "It has just fallen on the ground."

The sergeant took the chocolate-bound booklet and attempted to open it, to no avail. The substance had quickly hardened in the evening chill, and the smeared cocoa mass had cemented the small rectangle shut like pine resin.

"What's that?" he demanded, pressing a button on his talking device. "Is that your *passport*?"

"Sorry, sir. It has just fallen onto the ground. I... I am awfully sorry. I'm a tourist, just out for an evening walk, and..."

"And your papers fell straight into a pool? A pool of knee-deep *mud*?" The leather-clad police officer frowned, weary from listening to the same silly excuses for so many years. "Show me where," he challenged. He pulled a long flashlight from the back of his motorcycle and switched it on.

Davis, his stomach heavy as a stone, fidgeted, turning his head aimlessly around. The dark BMW where he'd sat just minutes ago suddenly made a sharp U-turn and belched out an acrid exhaust cloud. Screeching its wide tires, the vehicle disappeared from sight. *At least those odd balls are gone*, he thought.

“It was... it was more or less... here,” he muttered, trying to look and sound like a silly tourist but feeling that the excuse simply didn’t fit, no matter what the circumstances. There were no puddles of *anything* for yards or acres around, no traces of any liquid whatsoever—which was unusual for Holland, to have the pavement as dry as dust.

“Where?” the sergeant’s voice gained some metal tones. Norman, who couldn’t contrive any further tales, kept silent. The uniformed man pressed another button on his walky-talky and grunted several words in Dutch.

Very soon—*too* soon for the overwhelmed agent—two other police officers came up from the hotel’s door, which seemed to be hanging askew on one hinge and lacking a large chunk of glass. Between the officers limped the head waiter. The velour collar of his finely tailored livery had been torn brutally off, his right hand was hastily bandaged, and his left cheek was red.

Seeing Norman, the lackey stopped, swelled his lips, and raised his undamaged hand. “It’s—it’s him!” he stuttered, nodding like a wound-up doll. “Yes sirs, yes sirs!”

“Follow us, please!” boomed the newly arrived police officer. He carefully took the candied passport from the sergeant. “We must question you on your role in the affray.”

“*Me??*” the well-bred MI6 officer sincerely raised his brows.

“Yes, sir,” replied the policeman. “You were seen in this hotel moments before the fight began.”

“The fighting?” repeated a baffled Davis. *What on earth? Had everyone gone nuts?*

“Yes, sir,” returned the officer curtly. “What have you done with your passport?”

“I... I... I’ve just dropped it,” shrugged Davis, feeling his heart sinking like a millstone.

“Well, we’ll *just drop* you at the police station,” concluded the other policeman, his mouth set in a firm line between his greying hair and the three stripes on his chevron. Davis looked at the ground and slumped. *What a nasty flop.*

... The undersized and overcrowded downtown police station looked like a field hospital after a short yet fierce battle. At least half a dozen men and one woman, their heads and limbs bandaged and their faces patched up, pined away on hard benches and stools that had been hastily brought into the main hall for this occasion. Amsterdam had never been a sleepy, boring hamlet with only one church, two cemeteries, a barber shop, and a post office. Still, this evening was too hot by any standard.

Davis turned his head around in well-hidden disbelief. Three guys in badly torn tailcoats must have been waiters or ushers; two others, in ruffled tailor-made clothes and model shoes (one of which lacked a sole) were possible diners; one was a cook in a partially white apron; and the last, with his long, greasy hair and torn jeans, looked like a tramp. *What the sh.. happened?* The acute, poignant thought raked the M16 officer like a jagged knife. He felt that this whole pathetic ruffle had been caused by him—or, rather, by his forced absence.

After taking his fingerprints, the police officer pointed Norman towards a wooden stool behind a tall barrier. “Sit down, please,” he said gruffly and opened the new protocol—the fourteenth one of the evening. *Doggone night...*

“Name and surname?”

“Douglas, Norbert.”

The grey ballpoint screeched its way across the greyish recycled paper.

“Birth date?”

“The twenty-seventh of September, nineteen sixty-nine.” *If that were true, I'd probably have a bit less grey hair*, he chuckled to himself humourlessly.

“Country and place of habitation?”

“United Kingdom, Holmwood, Surrey, one-fourteen James Street.” *I should really visit that place one of these days*, he thought.

“Purpose for coming to the Netherlands?”

“Antiques purchase and general business.” *Oh, if only that were true!*

“Occupation?”

“Manager of an antique dealership.” *How long do standard Dutch interrogations go on for?* thought Davis, hiding a nervous yawn.

As though overhearing his last thought, the officer ceased writing. Those questions were just blossoms; the fruits had to follow, as Norman knew well. The policeman turned on his well-used chair and fetched a file. Not even looking at his suspect, he began. “According to the evidence of waiters Mr. Kip, Mr. Kok, and usher Mr. Klok, you asked the latter

to guide you to the third table on the left side of the restaurant.”

“Yes,” replied the major cautiously.

“According to their evidence, you expected to meet a certain man called Serge L.”

“Hmmm,” Norman hemmed, trying to gain time. His mind, though trained and drilled to focus on two or three threads at once, was working in overdrive.

“It that right?”

“Yes, but...” stalled the secret officer

“But?” The ballpoint hung in the air like an auctioneer’s hammer.

“But I’m not sure he was there,” Norman finally put his theory into words.

The uniformed officer sat back and reached for another file.

“According to the written evidence of the aforementioned witnesses, you left the restaurant at Grand Hotel, in which you also had your stay booked, at six-twenty-five p.m., in the company of two men. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” The major knew that fighting hard evidence would lose him time and energy.

“Who were they?”

The question, which had been expected by the MI6 functionary, dropped like a cold boulder on the desk’s worn surface.

“I... I can't tell you, sir.” Norman's mind suddenly formed a plan. *Let's see how it'll work...* All the instructions and escape variants he'd learned at the Office suddenly became a pile of junk.

“You *can't*?” stressed the interrogator. “Why not?”

“Hmmm, it's too... it's too *private*, sir.” Davis tilted his head to the side..

“You mean,” the policeman wrote down his suspect's last answer, “that those people were known to you?”

“Sort of,” agreed Norman cautiously, suspecting a trap and grappling to figure out where it was lying in wait.

“But one of them was Serge L., correct?” the inquirer clarified, glancing at the agent with hidden exultation.

For a long, endless second Norman sat speechless. *What's he going to ask next?*

“Sir?” The officer wrote something down and gazed at the major again. “Do you know the person called Serge L., with whom you had arranged a meeting tonight?”

“Yes, I... I do,” Norman carefully weighed his words.

“Have you seen him tonight?”

“No.”

The police officer's face turned blank, plain, emotionless, and even bored. A bad sign, Davis knew from all the psychological workshops he had taken part in at the Office; it meant the other side didn't trust you at all. The policeman pressed a couple of buttons on his phone without

picking up the receiver. The side door opened and a young chap in a sergeant's uniform appeared with an envelope. The policeman opened it, took out a photo, and placed it before Norman.

"Do you know this person?" he asked dryly.

"No," returned the secret agent in like style, but of course he did recognise the fellow pictured. It was his liaison, Serge L.

"So you weren't waiting for this person tonight?"

"No."

So this guy thinks he can play games, noted the policeman, before going on without raising an eyebrow. The photograph was still in his hand.

"This person arrived at the same table you'd been sitting at just a narrow minute after you'd left," the policeman said as he glanced through a fat file. "Who was he looking for?"

"I-I don't know," stuttered Norman, feeling like the last cretin. He hadn't felt that bad in years. The police officer nodded, the movement rippling his white shirt and dark navy badges. He went on reading.

"According to the evidence, that guest—" he thrust the photo into the air "—who was in a certain stage of intoxication, by the way, shouted at least four times, very audibly, um, let me see now, 'Where's that, um, eff-ing Englishman?' Now who could he have been referring to?"

"I haven't a clue," replied Davis. *Dash, a drunken liaison! Even in my younger years, I couldn't even have dreamt of such... clients.*

“You haven’t a clue,” drawled the policeman. “Incidentally, *you* were the only Englishman at that hotel tonight.”

Norman looked straight ahead, silent and deadpan on the outside, sullen and grumpy on the inside. *What else can I do?* he thought desperately.

“Sir?”

Norman glanced at him, moving only his eyes.

“Can you comment on that?” asked the inquirer, leaning over his papers again. “Facts known to us prove that this person, who later, together with his chauffeur, began to hurl the furniture and inflict multiple corporal injuries on the personnel and guests of the aforementioned hotel, was waiting for *you*.”

Norman remained still.

“Do you agree, sir?”

Not a sound.

“Shall we regard your silence as agreement?” the inquirer pressed on.

“I have the right to refrain from informing about a third person,” said Norman, pulling one of his last trumps. “Haven’t I?”

The policeman nodded several times, drumming on the desk with his fingers. His suspect certainly knew Dutch laws—or those befitting him, that is. *Hmm, then he might be no less than a money courier for the Mafia, a recidivist from Eastern Europe with fake or stolen papers*, the policeman speculated

silently. *It's not fair that this riffraff comes from all over the world to Amsterdam, making us pore extra hours over an obvious Interpol problem!* The officer was getting hot around the collar just thinking about it. *Jug him for thirty days and let the Justice Ministry figure out in whose cage such birds have to sing their terms out!*

"Yes, sir, you have these rights in terms of a third party," he said as he set his head, briefly, upon his hand. "Let's talk about *you* now."

Norman sat still. These tricks were gaining him some time, but he didn't need that now. What he badly needed was a valid dark blue passport with a 'Corps Diplomatique' imprint. *But the Office slashed their use after those couple of scandals the other year and now they don't want to risk libel,* Norman recalled acidly. *And now I am paying for someone else's quiet sleep with my old hide!*

"You arranged a meeting with Serge L., correct? And what was the purpose of that meeting?" the officer went on, innocently blinking his greenish eyes from under his pale brown eyebrows.

"To view some antiques catalogues," Norman responded, still trying to keep afloat.

"Is Serge L. an antiquarian, then?"

"Yes, I think so..."

"And where is he from?"

"From Holland, I presume," shrugged Davis. "I only met him once. In London."

"Where?"

“At Sotheby’s.” Norman smiled weakly in the vain hope that the millionaire’s fair name would persuade the law that he, Norman Davis—or, rather, Norbert Douglas—was just a law-abiding, well-off Brit who came to Holland for some big shopping and got into some minor trouble.

The officer’s face didn’t change. “So, you brought *some* money along,” he asked in a cold, sinister tone. He didn’t smile.

“Yes,” agreed Davis dully, sensing what the next question would be and finding no feasible answer. A chilly, shivering wave of dread passed over his back.

“And *some* chocolate?”

Norman knew that, at this very moment, the interrogating officer was examining him as a scientist would examine new bacteria under a microscope. As if that weren’t enough, another officer with two stripes on his chevron came by and sat down next to the first. Now, four attentive eyes stared at one tired man in a grey jacket.

“Sir?” the first officer lifted his head a bit. “Have you heard my question?”

“I won’t answer any further questions without my lawyer,” replied the secret agent, using his last, flimsy life buoy—one that was, if fact, a legal shipwreck, not to mention a second big dent to his previously ironclad military honour. *What a shame*, he thought, *to lose against two dilettanti and a chocolate bar ...*

Both Dutch officers looked at each other, then at their suspect.

“If that’s the case,” said the first one deliberately. “I’ll have to issue a thirty-day arrest warrant for you so that we have time to confirm your identity. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” echoed Norman weakly. *What else can I do?*

“In your briefcase we found three hundred thousand Euros, complete with a large chocolate smudge and a fingerprint that isn’t yours,” the second officer read from the file. “This same fingerprint was also found on your passport—or what was left of your passport, anyhow. You possess, at the moment, no valid identity papers apart from this candy wrapper.” He took the sticky brown booklet from a plastic envelope and glanced at Norman again, as though offering him one last hope. “Can you comment on this?”

There was a pause. “No.”

The first policeman glanced at the second and picked up the telephone receiver. A short, barking phrase in Dutch followed, and, in a short while, two armed sergeants stomped in.

“Take him to the detention cell in Southwest,” commanded the two-star officer before he turned, almost bemusedly, to Norman. “You’re arrested on the grounds of insufficient personal evidence and charged with illicit money trafficking under Articles 17 and 145a of the Dutch penal code. Tomorrow you can contact your Embassy. Now sign the interrogation report, please.”

The captive did, his hand woody, his face deadpan.

“Good night.”

Davis kept mum. This was the second time in twenty-two years that he'd hated his job.

"With or without?" one of the sergeants asked in Dutch, after a brief silence.

"With," replied the first officer. "He can *run*."

The sergeant who stood closest to Norman turned towards the captive. "Stand up, please!"

The major did. For decades, sergeants had stood in *his* presence.

"Stretch out your hands, please," came the next command.

Norman sighed, very lightly, and did as he was asked. 'With,' in Dutch police lingo, obviously didn't mean a cup o' tea with milk. It meant that the detainee should be handcuffed. The cold, hard metal rings embraced the MI6's wrists. He felt a gloved, hard hand on his elbow.

"Go on," prompted the sergeant. There would be no more 'pleases'.

... While the silent brothers Cheesekop, not really believing what they had just done, sat on the east-bound train, quivering at every rustle, and the tacit M-I6 agent languished behind the plexiglass wall on the hard rear seat of a white-and-blue striped car, and while the second consul Serge Lemonkin, his knuckles still aching, saddled the leather seat of an armoured vehicle, cussing into his satellite phone, the doors of the police station slid open. A well-fed man, wearing a forgettable suit and a preoccupied look, hurried in. The waiters, forgetting their injuries, turned their heads like soldiers in a trench. One attempted to get up.

“Please,” he said, looking at the reception policewoman and barely nodding to his decimated staff. The hotel boss flipped a document onto the reception counter. “That’s a complete list of all the damage incurred.” He pulled a silk neckerchief off his neck and wiped, nervously, the abundant sweat dripping from his wrinkled forehead and plump face.

On the watermarked paper, the following had been meticulously written:

Livery, 4 suits, torn and bitten through:	€ 7,200.00
An upper-jaw denture, trampled upon:	742.45
3 antique tables, damaged beyond repair:	33,000.00
8 windows, smashed with a table leg:	4,000.00
A 100-quart beer cask, cracked:	354.00
Crystal chandelier, destroyed (set as a collar around Apollo statue’s neck):	1884.54
Fountain “Pissing Cupid”, abused:	17,000.00
Moral compensation for 6 employees:	36.00
Total:	€ 64,216,99

3

CONSULS AND PANTS

... While the long, slender, seemingly endless tiger snake of the Greenwich meridian was yet drowsing, dreaming about the first sunrays, several early birds had already hovered to their secluded nest. Those weren't common cormorants, ospreys, or vultures, but sizeable birds of high altitude, high flight, and zooming salaries.

Sir Malcolm Evans, the lifelong peer and general director of MI6, greeted his red-eyed comrade with a taut, yet cheery good morning. "While the tea is being made," he said, "a short briefing, please."

"Good morning, sir." Colonel Geff Raleigh, director of seventh Department, nodded, standing up to greet his boss. "A briefing over the ship with the *special* cargo, I assume?"

"Yes," Evans replied, wearily sitting down and turning in his chair to glance at the grey dusk outside ... *Man, not even six o'clock yet!* he thought ruefully.

“Good morning, good morning.” The third Department director, Max Boyd, the last member of the high-flown assembly, hurried in and shook outstretched hands. Evans nodded for him to sit down. It wasn't the best manners, surely, to appear later than one's commander, but Sir Malcolm wasn't peevish over trifles in general, and today in particular. A lot was at stake for both his Military Intelligence, his country and his own honour.

“Just to remind you, sirs,” Raleigh stood up and opened one of the heavy folders at his right, “a mix-up of Latino governments has signed up a two hundred million arms order by the Russians, and hired out a Panama-registered vessel, *La Bonita Marguerita*, to transport the stuff.”

Lord Evans nodded, slightly. Not the end of the world, yet- The East European spy boss went on, as though reading the mind of his manager “Nothing special or even new - besides the trite fact that the mouzhiks are peddling their MiGs and AK's at our loss - Britain's share in world's arms trade is shrinking.”

The director nodded again, a bit weightier this time, yet still without words. He didn't like such generalizations ... *Concrete facts, please!* he thought, knitting his brow.

“Now, to *this* deal, and why so much ado about but one vessel with torpedoes, anti-aircraft missiles and sub parts,” Raleigh read now from both his boss' mind and a large fact sheet in his hand, “This time, and surely not for *the first* time, the base, raw military order has been beefed up: a by-cargo of smart electronic pointers, fuel cells and self-aiming warheads had been loaded in Hamburg.”

“Has been?” the boss repeated poignantly.

“Yes, sir,” the East European observer replied plainly, “we managed, however, to throw our twopence in.”

“Alright.” Sir Malcolm nodded drily. It was an operation large and pricey enough for him to monitor in person, even though he didn't remember all details. What he knew is that he selected the men – the best, tested and seasoned men, including his old friend, Norman, for it and suddenly, everything had gone terribly awry. He nodded to Raleigh.

“One of our costly,” – Geff chuckled, “men in the diplomatic circles inserted two igniters in the ship, one deep in the cargo deck and another at the engine.”

“In Hamburg, during the by-load, I presume,” Evans remarked.

“Exactly,” Raleigh nodded, “for which service, fairly well done, according to us, he required the fee, to be received outside Germany, Russia or Britain, for *certain* reasons.”

“Did *he* insist on Holland?” the lord knit his greying eyebrow.

“Honestly speaking, no,” the colonel replied, with a very light sigh, “it was our idea, he agreed – Amsterdam has been a safe shed for such lapidary deals for decades.”

“Was an alternative taken into account?” Evans asked, just pro forma. He knew what the reply would be.

“No,” Geff told the concise, sad truth, “such briefcase deals in Europe have become so banal that the back-ups weren't worth an eggshell. Previously we also used wire transfers, now ...”

"I know, I know," the lord disliked the dragging of difficult talk into an easy rut. "Why, in your opinion, did this bombproof deal flop like a card house?"

The department boss paused, then, leaning closer to the salt-and pepper-haired gentleman, said:

"We suppose a mole at the department."

The lord nodded again – this time, heavier and sadder. The inflow of new officers had been a problem for years, as one detector after another was making a pitiful show of MI6 personnel pickers. Again – a mole ... after several clean-ups and reshufflings. Should his super-tough men have a superman in their midst, a person more English and patriotic than the Prince of Wales?

"Your further steps?" he asked without much expression. There wasn't much time left to ponder.

"First of all– the labourer is worth his wages," Raleigh replied promptly. "I had a nasty sat-phone talk with Serge the night before; he was boozed up and swore like a boatswain."

"But did he agree to wait?"

"Until tomorrow," the colonel said concisely, "it seemed to be a miracle that he agreed to wait *that long*."

"Indeed," the lord could barely hold back a sarcastic remark. *As though we've got a printing-press here ...* he thought, bitterly shaking his head.

"Well ...the job wasn't peanuts to do, for his rank..."

“Umm,” the aristocrat threw in with a sour face. He knew *a bit*, of course – about hard-boiled criminals turning diplomats, and at times vice versa.

“Alas, that's the world we've got to live in,” the department boss said hopelessly, spreading his hands over the table.

“Anyway, you imply we *should* pay asap or he blackmails us,” Evans said curtly.

“So he meant, I, umm, loath speaking open text over a sat phone, the conversation could have been copied by a couple of ...” Geff chuckled, obviously reviving – and reliving again - the rowdy night talk with the unscrupulous liaison. “Concerning blackmail: I doubt he's on the heavyweight level in the diplomatic world. Can do some harm, though, leaking the photos to the press.”

“In Russia?” the lord finished half-jokingly. “Men, why should *consuls* tamper with the ignition gadgetry, haven't you got anyone, say, a rank or two below?” He slid toward a more grudging mood, “Your budget, to mention just that, is already roughly one-third of the whole pie- and every next double agent is a big drain on the kitty!”

He peered at his subordinate with an air of a skipper who is himself at his wit's end, and asks his crew to steer clear of the mist and whirls.

“To admit another sad truth, we *did have* some, say, rank and file informers and small fry, but ...” he put his palm to his throat, “no more!”

“Snapped?”

“Liquidated,” Geff returned, simply yet expressively enough to make any stout-hearted Robert the Bruce get chill bumps.

“By?” Sir Malcolm suddenly demanded more knowledge – even though it wouldn't change anything.

“I suggest, by such, umm, diplomats, who later offer us *their* help, all too readily and greedily,” he put both hands on the table, drooping his head for a moment, “they ...well, cut off any inner competition with a medieval cruelty. We really have no choice.”

The lord nodded, thinking. The other directors sat in silence.

“How high is the possibility of recovering the first batch?” Evans asked. “Any contact with Norman?”

“The possibility is around sixty per cent,” Raleigh exhilarated briefly, “Norman is to get a new passport from our Embassy in Netherlands, he could be bailed out ... I would guess, in three to five days.”

“Good,” Evans agreed, “Serge mentions now a Brussels trip, doesn't he?”

“Yes,” the colonel replied readily, “and ten per cent higher fee!”

“Darn the greedy crook princes!” the peer clinched his fist, then opened it.

The taxpayers' money is again going to oil the shady crook machinery ... bah ... he kept silent for a while, sighed and finished up with one word, “Agreed.”

The long-awaited tea was brought, together with a milk jug and spoons in blameless paper wraps. The men switched, willingly, for a break in the heavy matters, able to etch out a stomach ulcer if continued for too long. They grasped the glasses. The mood, with the subtle help of the warmhearted Sir Lipton's loose leaf, warmed up and loosened a little.

“Gentlemen,” Sir Malcolm began, as it seemed, another part of the meeting, “let's recall the *global* picture of this deal. Not every ship, from Russia or Iran or even North Korea is so chaperoned. There's a connection to some deeper matters, as far as I know.” He turned to Boyd, who was, so far, tacit.

“Indeed,” the middle-deep bass of the third department leader rumbled across the neat chamber, “the situation is graver than a usual such deal, save the one young Castro attempted with the Russian missiles in the early sixties.”

“Really?” the brows of the reserved peer crept up, “again, a Latino nuke dream?”

“Not completely,” Boyd leaned his head a little, “such a big stick demands a big enemy and a deep purse, and these aren't on the horizon. Yet, power dreams and oil..”

Sir Malcolm raised his head. The small, three-lettered word had always been written in capitals in the political world and had drowned, in recent decades, a couple of cabinets, not to mention sparking up a handful of wars. The third department boss went on.

“After they lost the Faulkland War, there was left resentment and a humiliating aftertaste – not just in Buenos

Aires. The Latinos are, luckily for us, a bunch of very different states which all look, geopolitically, a different way – or don't look anywhere at all."

The lord nodded lightly – these facts were long ago known to him, and could be known to anyone who was apt in Spanish or Portuguese.

"In the last decade, however, a local colossus has begun to emerge, and a search for more power, influence – and oil."

"Well, aren't the Brazilians using methanol for fuel?" Evans recalled.

"Right, yet it's no longer enough" Boyd reached for a thin red folder and opened it, "oil also means plastics, polyethylene and plenty of other stuff which methanol or any other plant fuels cannot supply. Oil is the core of chemical industry, to mention just one."

"Understood," Evans nodded.

"Like the rest, they also have been irked – or frightened, or both, by the events in the Middle East, all that history or instability in the oil states. The States or Britain have some oil of their own, while the Latinos have only Venezuela – a small, local producer ..."

"Which sells seventy-plus per cent of its supply to the Americans, first lambasting them in a classy caudillo-style," grinned the boss, making a sweeping gesture with his hand.

"Exactly," the smaller director, digging deeper into the red folder, agreed. "*Our* problem is that the bigger players in South America are anxious to create their own oil

backyard, like Alaska or Canada for the States, or Norway and Russia for Europe ... the one *not* depending on a couple of shaky sheikhs or loony dictators.”

“Little wonder,” Evans nodded, “with eight or so per cent yearly growth.”

“Yes, little wonder but a bigger trouble – they're looking south!”

“We’ve once beaten them off in the Falklands,” the lord shrugged, “while the world stood by and watched.”

“One thug you can mug,” Max replied, perhaps citing a headline from a tabloid, “but the combat is far less sure when there are three chaps in front of you, one sumo-sized fighter.”

The general knit his brow one more time, then rubbed his wrinkled forehead. The world was becoming still more unpredictable and suspicious. There were no longer any sleepy corners at all, with good places going bad, and bad places going bust. Or, bursting up, like Libya the last time.

“Do you consider the new Falkland war threat severe?” he asked outright.

“The threat is *growing*” Boyd stressed, “of course we're working on it – that's why, so far, no joint Latino forces, either ground, air or marine, have appeared.”

“So far!” the lord exclaimed, almost standing up, “you mean?”

“They're already being planned for a decade,” Boyd pulled a paper with a “Highly Confidential” strip and placed it before the intelligence director. “Please!”

Two department chiefs waited in silence, interrupted only by the cautious tinkling of glass on saucers. In a couple of minutes, the paper was pushed back to Max. The short-clipped, polished nails began tapping on the table. It wasn't an SOS code, nor an easy seaside tune.

"How many crewless subs could they produce," he asked, "in *real* terms?"

"Three, I suggest." The colonel answered. "In a year."

"And these could be powered by the German fuel cells and noiseless electric engines." Sir Evans continued to think aloud, citing the newly acquired data.

"And armed with four smart torpedoes, each able to help HMS cruisers or nuclear subs see bottom," completed Boyd, flopping the document back to the folder.

"All right, let me speculate a bit," Lord Evans rubbed his chin, "as the politicians are fond of. Then they ask us, cadre military, what to *do* – but never follow our advice."

Both department bosses grinned. They were, at least, spared in taking part in the Cabinet's special seating assignments, with all the teetering uncertainty and swaggering fear.

"Let's assume two HMS's are in the middle Atlantic, bound south." He placed his tea glass on the table, and pushed the saucer further off. "And there's a couple of Argentine men-of-war lurching around Faulklands. Who'd dare to attack our vessels in international waters? The times of total wars of destruction are past, aren't they?"

“I agree,” Max nodded lightly, “yet, suppose the samba-dancers would *lend out* a couple of crewless subs to tango-dancers, or the hidalgos would manage to set up a puppet government just offshore *Islas Malvinas*, and those marionettes would summon *all* Latino states for help? Then, we'd lose the whole south Atlantic, including St. Helene, South Georgia Islands and all!”

“And - the Latinos would lose the whole European market?” suggested the lord, uncertainly, “and American support?”

“I bet they won't.” Boys shook his head. “Spain and Portugal, and maybe France would exculpate their former colonies as soon as they could. Spain was against the first Faulkland War, as you remember. We'd certainly get no military support, not from EU nor US or even South Africa. Alone, Britain just narrowly won the first war. ”

There came no answer – Malcolm Evans remembered the nineteen eighty-two events all too well, the loss of almost three quarters of HMS ships, and maybe deeper than all the rest, the words of lord Craig 'six better fuses and we would have lost'. He, himself a petty officer at the 'Invincible' carrier thirty years ago, couldn't forget that short phrase.

“All right, the situation is grave enough,' Evans said, rewinding the whole complex panorama through his mind, “to justify wrecking the cargo, if not the deal.”

“That's an attempt to derail *all* future deals, I daresay,” Raleigh quickly added, “and to create a distrust, if not an aversion. The second igniter – complete with an incendiary bomb - had been placed between the fuel cells

containers. Who'd buy weapons which self-ignite long before reaching any battlefield?"

Evans nodded, easier this time. The clouds were clearing from his face.

"That's why, I stress, we've so soon agreed over the fee amount," the seventh department chief related. "The cargo was, of course, guarded by less bribable German guards in Hamburg, and few, if any un-consulaire officials could pass the cordon – and then, *help* the onboard guards not to look, too. "

"And the gadgets should have been installed in Germany, not in Petersburg," thought the spy chief aloud.

"Yes, sir," Geff nodded, "it *wasn't* a cinch and, as a *man*, I can understand why one gets drunk and shatters windows with a table leg when the fee doesn't arrive on time!"

"Oh, really?" Evans grinned teasingly, "and I wonder who messed in Guinness bar a week ago!"

This joke was met with hearty laughter from both third- and seventh-departmental throats.

"Fine, folks, you've indeed done a *job*," the general's voice reflected a more jovial tone.

"I hope," Raleigh smiled briefly, "the further steps, after setting the sub parts on fire, is a *controlled* international scandal." The colonel spoke more freely now, with the optimism of a smart armour-bearer clarifying to his lord the only way to pass Thermopylae. "The igniters would go off when the ship crosses the forty fifth parallel or the tenth WG Meridian, independently from the navigation time. The

temperature of a burning fuel cell winds up to three thousand grades. In less than forty minutes.”

“Fine, and?” Lord Evans seemed to be fascinated, the plan was so well-thought-out that, surely, only a mole in the bloated seventh dept could thwart it so badly.

“And the ship would, um, literally melt in two halves and go down in an hour, leaving no traces of our work behind.”

“Also, as far as I know the Latino mentality,” Boyd added, “they're volatile enough to skip from love to hatred in a minute's time, to tear a cherished, long-term treaty with Russians in pieces.”

“Well done, guys, well thought out,” Sir Malcolm concluded, joining his fingers to somewhat replicate a ship's bow, “some unknowns remain, however -”

“Haven't yet seen a much less complex operation without at least two question marks.” Raleigh cackled briefly, “Such is our job.”

“Well,” the general slowly stood up, and his subordinates did the same, “the operation 'Deep Fire' is, then, back on track. Where's the ship right now?”

“If nothing changed, it is passing, after a brief technical stop in Delfzyl, Holland, the Channel between Dover and French coast,” the officer related. “My Department is monitoring her every move.”

“Good job, folks, good job,” said the general, shaking hands with his staff, and patting their backs, “I'm proud of such servicemen. Britain is proud of you.”

The tired but content servicemen began folding up their files and packing the fruits of their brainstorming, headache, and sleepless nights into their briefcases, ready to depart, to loosen their ties and relax their minds in the solitude of their own offices.

Suddenly, there was a loud, persistent knocking at the door, like a short automatic rifle salvo. A courier officer loomed at the threshold, carrying a transparent case and a troubled look.

“Yes? ” the lord scowled, bracing for bad news. The whole office knew that his 'dawn talks' with department bosses were a sacred cow – except for very, which meant, *extremely* urgent cases, no one, including the Prime Minister or Chancellor of the Exchequer, could dare to interrupt.

“Urgent news, Sir Evans,” the courier declared, “the ship, *La Bonita Marguerita* has caught a fire off the Dutch west coast. She's now being escorted by their marine to the port of Rotterdam. Here're the last satellite photos.” He unbuttoned a transparent file, “Please,” he said, passing the papers to Geff Raleigh, bowing his head, and noiselessly closing the door.

Three crestfallen men, their jaws dropped, gazed at one another in horror ...



... While the whole long, slender, endless silver sabre of the Rhine river was yet dreaming over the first sunrays, to tickle its tarnished, hoary, old face, some big fish had already sneaked to their secluded lair. Those weren't usual barracudas, pikes, or sharks, but significant fish of deep waters, deep thoughts, and deep purses.

“Guten Morgen, Martin!” Jorgen Katzenbach, the German BND counter-intelligence boss, greeted captain Martin Schlesinger, the man in charge of marine operations, with a troubled smile, “What's the situation on the deck?”

“You mean, that *Marguerita*,” Martin replied, in a rather serene mood. “I do have good news - all is clear now. There was a fair job to do, and Rodriguez is surely worth his weight in gold.” He opened a file with densely written, freshly decoded messages. “I've brought a twenty-pages report along, Herr General.”

“Well, and to make the long story short?” The boss was today clearly not in the mood to read lengthy papers, “There was an igniter in the machine compartment, if I don't err?”

“*Two igniters and an incendiary bomb*,” the blond-haired officer replied meaningfully, “that loony consul, Serge, has launched off to intercept the ship when it was still near the Polish border. Luckily, he's so used to his armoured Mercedes that we have little trouble spotting him.”

General Katzenbach nodded. He personally ordered the hidden radio emitters to be installed in the vehicles of several slick diplomats – not just those from Eastern Europe.

“I was, first, in the engine compartment, as a 'control technician' - thus, not hiding,” the officer went on, “he came, lurched around, to check if he was alone, and began using all tricks, excuses and later, threats, to get everyone out.”

“You did get out as well,” the BND boss half-asked, half-stated.

“Yes. I saw he's on a mission, given the bulkiness of his, so to say, briefcase which he lugged along.” Schlesinger replied, grinning, “Officially, he came for 'pure paperwork'!” He paused for a moment, wiped the jeering half-smile off his face, and went on, “In real terms: I could have chosen to stay, and risked being shot or caused him to relay that he's closely watched - or, worse, both. Or else, I could have kept that old tub a couple of days more in Hamburg. Her engine is one big pigsty with wires dangling over your cop and rats rubbing against your shoes.”

“No, not that,” the general in civil shook his head, “the Latinos had cashed out twenty million for the fuel cells and would cry foul!”

“Or, mister *second consul* would try to sneak or swim there at night,” Martin added thoughtfully.

“That far?” Katzenbach knit his brow, “that would require at least an aqualung. Hamburg is no Zanzibar!”

“I'm afraid he'd go that far and further,” replied the captain, “if any other ways' d failed. He's surely armed and, *normally*, might not be searched, just for your information.”

“Good,” nodded the German spy boss, after a brief silence. The combination of diplomatic immunity, a muffled pistol, a dogged determination of a seasoned crook and loads of cash to bribe most private guards wasn't the best cocktail he'd like to serve his own men, “You left him alone, and?”

“He installed the devices, got in his car, drew a gulp of vodka, called from his sat-phone one open-text word 'rusty', and hurried off for a feel!” The employee grinned again.

“To Amsterdam?” The general had a good memory, without coded protocols.

“Exactly,” nodded Martin, “yet, that's the other half of the story. The first is the *Marguerita* – as you remember, we've made all efforts to hire that Filipino crew where Rodriguez is installed.”

“He's working a good while, if I'm right,” added Katzenbach, scratching his ear.

“Eighteen years and three months,” replied the captain, with inborn German minuteness, “and has always had good scores.”

“This time was no different, I've just heard,” the general tilted back in his chair.

“Precisely,” the operational officer nodded, “we supplied him with a couple of hidden wireless IR cameras, when *La Marguerita* was on its way to Petersburg – just out of prudence. He managed to install them in four key points, also configured 'em to send all suspicious screenshots to his mobile.”

“Just to his?” Katzenbach knit his brow slightly.

“Well, if he'd send coded transmission to me, the data could be intercepted, or marred on the way,' Schlesinger spread his hands, “Rodriguez is very cautious ...”

“All right, all right, go on.” Katzenbach sat down and put his rough-shaped chin on his fist.

“That's why he could, without much fuss, see what our *friend* Serge added to our cargo – and *where*.”

“Yes.”

“Then, he just went on his routine electrician duties, and found the igniters,” the captain explained with a smug smile, as though boasting over his own success, “*two* of them, the second joined to incendiary bomb, crammed between two wooden crates with fuel cells!”

“Dash!” the general pounded with his fist at the desk, “if we didn't have him!”

“Better not to think,” shuddered Schlesinger, “the temperature of a glaring hydrogen fuel cell could wind up to three thousand grades.”

“Well,” the general's face grew serious, very serious, “are you sure he removed them both?”

“Absolutely.” The captain said, nodding. “And tossed overboard.”

“Why?” the graveness in the eyes of the intelligence boss reflected a spark of indignation, “what if they have GPS antennae?”

“The bottom ooze between Hamburg and Bremerhafen is seventy centimeters deep.” Martin shrugged. “Now, *they* could call the operation 'Deep Mire'...” he added with a visible Schadenfreude.

“So, he dumped 'em,” the general said quietly. He stopped, his thoughts spinning around the devices; he would *love* to open up one – and discover where it is from ... and then, maybe see an ambassador blush. That was his dream - hidden from his own staff, longed-for, but still unrealized after all the years of service.

He stooped and looked to the floor, thinking.

This puzzling operation was one big headache - Jurgen knew with almost ninety-nine percent certainty that consul Serge, the pesky double agent whom he couldn't throw out of the country, was working for the British. As a spy boss, he couldn't go too far, and cautiously proposed to arrange a 'controlled international scandal', leaking photos of igniters to the 'Bild' tabloid and maybe 'WeakLeaks' or such like. But his idea was rejected outright by the tacit Chancellor's Office - without comment. He was only allowed to 'take steps to protect the cargo.' Huh. What was indeed going on between Berlin and London he knew only vaguely; mostly, he imagined it was a sort of insider trade of overseas influence in exchange for technological know-how, an investment or a pro-British move on the European mainland. For that sort of unfathomable political thicket, his straight-shooting soldiers' mind was too plain.

"And then?" The boss winked, waking up from his thoughts. "What's the situation now? Again, a mole among the bats?"

"Yes," Martin nodded lightly but firmly, able to continue his report after any break - a minute or a week long, "Rodriguez isn't sure about the other half of the crew, those, so to say, drunks."

"Well said, *so to say*," the general agreed, "the Russians are very good in feigning they're boozed up, and then twisting you around their little finger."

"That's why the gadgets are now talking to the shellfish," the captain declared, "Rodriguez' last message was 'all clear.'"

“How old is it?” Katzenbach raised his head a little.

“Two hours and seventeen minutes.”

The general stood up and walked in thoughtful silence along the wall dotted with the photos and portraits of Prussian and German intelligence heroes, beginning from King Friedrich II, at times slowing down his pace, as though seeking advice or inspiration from those cunning, tough, or deadpan faces. Then he changed his course and shifted a large map of Germany out from another wall. He glanced at Schlesinger as the captain came by.

“Where you suppose the bomb lay?” He took a smartphone from his table and began tapping on it.

“En route, that is along the usual marine route from Hamburg westward,” Schlesinger replied, “you mean, danger for fishing boats?”

“Exactly,” the general nodded, without looking at his officer, “are they using dragnets at times?”

“No idea, to be honest.” The land captain shrugged. “I can check out, if need be.”

“Do so, and then issue a quiet warning for fishers, through the Bundesmarine HQ in Kiel, over some unexploded WWII bombs in the area. All right?”

“Yes, sir,” the captain replied.

The general stood still for a while, stepped closer to his subordinate and asked, in half voice, even though the two stood alone in a room with double isolated doors.

“The last – was Rodriguez rewarded accordingly?”

“Yesterday, our man from Singapore has brought his family in Manila sixty-two thousand dollars,” replied Schlesinger, “I’ve got his report. Bequest papers, notary, ready.”

“Great,” the boss straightened out and grinned, “I’m proud to have such servicemen. Germany is proud of you.”

... While both officers were exchanging well-deserved smiles, a sharp, loud telephone ring pierced the cautious, shallow silence in the office. It was the red phone, only used for urgent, very urgent – or *bad* - news.

Jorgen Katzenbach clomped to the table and grabbed the receiver, clamping his lips and losing his grin.

“Urgent news, sir,” the emergency-duty officer reported, “the ship, *La Bonita Marguerita*, has caught fire off the Dutch coast. She’s now being escorted by their marine to the port of Rotterdam - the last satellite photos are being sent to your desk.”

“The ship is burning,” the general threw the red receiver back, “man Scheisse! Jump in the car and drive to airport, I arrange a ticket to Holland. This very minute!”

The captain, his jaw dropped, gazed at his boss in sheer horror.

“All right,” he mumbled, too dazed to grasp what had just been said.

“Do you understand?” Katzenbach asked, biting his lips. “Ship’s on fire!”

“All right,” repeated the captain like a robot whose batteries had run flat. Then he shook his head. “Something is ... burning? ” what? ... which sheep? ... “sorry?” he asked, dizzily.

“Grab all your papers and gear and fly to Holland, Marguerita's ablaze!” the chief spy repeated for the third time. He was old enough to avoid shouting.

“Yawohl!” Martin turned on his heels and, forgetting his file with reports, ran from the office.

\$

... While the whole long, slender, endless lace of the southern North Sea beach was yet dreaming of the first sunrays to tickle its ruffled, sandy, misty face, several fat cats had already prowled to their cozy, secluded basket. Those weren't commonplace tabby, Siamese, or Persian species, but grand beasts with invisible claws, impenetrable eyes and illegible speech.

“So,” Fred Cruykschanck, the inland security boss by the Dutch AIVD, glanced testily at his three subjects from under his square glasses, “I'd like, finally, to find out anything *concrete* about the last bank action!”

The department bosses chuckled, fidgeted, but kept mum. Yes, they knew they'd piled up twenty-one weighty folders with secret data, installed eighteen officers in seven banks in three cities, piddled a week away on discussions, and managed to spill out some plump ninety thousand Euros. Yet, the results of these brawny efforts looked like a scrawny leech, too decrepit to suck anything out of its feeble thumb. And now, they had to get something out of theirs ...

“Um,” Niels Jenssen, the Information unit boss, opened his mouth, glanced around, and closed it again. Doesn't everyone grasp *they* should start? He only gathered data, not knowing what for, didn't he?

He shrugged, tapping, under the table, at his neighbour's foot.

“Hmm,” Jens Nielssen, the Operations unit captain, hemmed. He installed his men in banks, of course, yet the *plan* wasn't his – those were pondered over and contrived in the Administration unit. Wrong plans lead wholesome actions to destruction on the reefs all too often, and it wasn't his fault, right? He glanced askew at his colleague by the round table.

“Ugh,” the Administration unit manager, Jos Houtsma, tidied up his necktie and hawed. Of course, he designed an action plan, which was, as usual, perfect, *but* happened to be based on data so poor and erratic that King Solomon himself would have plucked his beard out reading the misery! (and then, surely would hang such 'informers' on the nearest acacia tree). He cleared his throat, sighed and stared back at Niels Jenssen, like the enraged bull at a torero.

Fred Cruykschanck, feeling that he should pull the taciturn department bosses by the tongue, looked at the Information chief, too. *Someone should be a scapegoat, in a good old Dutch way, eh?* He thought, figuring out whose turn it could be.

“Niels, can you specify the situation on the data front, please?” he asked drily.

“Of course,” the man at his left spoke up, “after analyzing the data received from our liaison intelligence and

other sources for three months, we concluded this.” He opened the first of the numerous files, for which a special table was set next to the window. “A certain diplomat from, um, a French-speaking country, (we concluded his name is Serge) should have attempted to wire-transfer a large sum from a Swiss bank account to a private bank in Holland. From here, he'd overdraw the money to Hong Kong, where a deal is being signed.”

“Which deal?” the director raised his brows and wriggled on his chair.

“Umm, that piece of the puzzle doesn't fully fit in, as yet,” Niels shrugged, “our experts hypothesize that, in some twenty-four per cent probability, the deal entails piracy in the Moluccas strait.”

“Well ...” Fred scratched his chin, “could you clarify a bit?”

“To be sincere, not much,” the information guru muttered vaguely, “our Macao informers have to rely on their informers, and those are seldom, hmm, sufficiently informed.” He shrugged, with some tepid innocence. “As I myself deducted, that cash juggling is just a cover-up for the piracy money laundering. The capital so gained should be wired to the South African connection, from where, it seems, a ship could be freighted, via Brazil, to Russia.”

“For the purpose of?” the spy director raised his head. The more he asked, the less he seemed to know.

“No idea, to be honest!” Niels spread his hands. “We presume, with a by-load of cocaine and illicit diamonds.”

The director, more confused than informed, turned to another officer.

“Mr. Nielssen, please clarify the state of operations,” he asked in an official way - not because he disliked the tall fellow himself, but because he was always mistaking the two – Niels and Nielssen, together. To make the confusion more acute, one of them was Jens, another Jenssen ... why don't they carry those small straps with their names on chest pockets?

“Hmm,” Jens rubbed his chin, “I could evaluate the operation as a general success. Eighteen officers installed, seven banks observed, three more banks are to follow, two photos of suspicious customers taken.”

“Is one of them a ... diplomat?” Fred enlivened for a second.

“Hmm, hmm, it's not yet clear.” The operations man rubbed his ear for variety's sake. “The suspect surely spoke French, wore a too-neat suit, and came to cash a large cheque ..”

“And?” the director's fingers rose in the air, ready to drum a victory march, “is he ... arrested?”

“And ... and he cashed it, took the money, and walked out!” the officer related with woody simplicity, “if he'd been a diplomat, hmm, our men didn't yet figure it out. To my mind, the observation should go on for at least a month. Then, we could try to take any, um, harsh steps.”

The boss wearily tilted back on his tall chair, knitting his brows and folding his hands. He turned to the

only one of the three who was neither Niels nor Jens, nor their derivatives.

“Jos, what in this whole murky game matters to *us*?” he said in a bored, dull tone. “Why on earth should *we* meddle in that African freight, even if financed with the Malay pirates’ booty and filled up to the top with stolen gold? The ship isn't bound for Holland, right? We can't force the world to consider honesty the best policy.”

Without waiting for the wise answer, the boss' laptop peeped suddenly. Fred nodded mechanically, turning his eyes away from his men and glancing at the screen. Some confidential data had just been mailed to him.

“By the way, sirs,” he said slowly, “do you see, by chance, any link between the operation 'Deep Wire' and a ship with truck parts from Russia, bound for South America, which caught fire and is being escorted to Rotterdam?”

“So much as my data bank tells me, no,” Niels Jenssen returned at once.

“Hmm, rather not,” Jens Nielssen cleared his throat and shook his head, “besides, we're badly stretched on the current operation – all active and reserve officers are engaged. I even called one back from a holiday!”

“Not at all!” the pouted Administrator shrugged. “I'm more than sure we should expect a ship with an illicit cargo, for which a bakshish is about to be wired in a couple of days, from the totally opposite direction - or I don't remember my name!”

“Good,” nodded Fred, finally fortified by the assurance of his 'right hand', “good. We'll hang on the 'Deep

Wire' for the next two weeks. 'Thank you all for the good service. Holland is proud of you."

... In contrast to the neat, quiet, air-conditioned rooms in the spy agencies, it was broiling-hot, abominably stinking, and unbearably noisy on the poop deck of *La Bonita Marguerita*. While nine well-spoken, well-bred and more or less well-informed chaps in London, Pullach and Zoetermeer debated and wrangled over their secret plans, wire transfers and igniters, six sweating sailors and two swearing guards hurried with leaky pails, foamless fire extinguishers and rusty crowbars around the sooty funnel.

A stern cabin was ablaze. No one knew when and where the fire broke out – some sailors were wakened by the heat, others - by the howling fire alarm, still others by the rush and uproar over their heads or rats escaping from frypan-hot air conduits.

"Where's the water?" the captain roared into the billowing scarlet-purple dusk, unwinding a leaky, flat, mouldy fire hose, "Vasya, switch the pump on!! who's beneath in the engine?"

"No one's beneath," Vasya Deryugin, the engineer, the only chap who stood still amidst the buzzing turmoil, his tattooed hands folded, his look and pants absent, called back, "and the water pump has no motor. I told you three weeks ago!"

"Muck!" panted the boatswain, hanging on an oversized crowbar and trying to force a large rusty faucet to turn. He sprang down, yelling in Tagalog, "Someone help me, eh?"

“What's up, are you ravin'?” Vasya asked coolly, even attempting to grin.

“Help meee!” the four-foot tall chap shrieked in English, “press eet down!”

“Eh, man, it's a sewage pipe!” Vasya returned, “the air intake is over there!”

“Then gooo!” the little Filipino snatched the large tool off from the wrong tap and schlepped it across the stern, which already glowed, here and there, from intense heat. The engineer spat on his large palms and followed suit, cussing in Russian. Together, the two leaned with their whole weight at the crowbar, which creaked and began to bend. The faucet didn't yield.

“Ay-ay-ay, Santa Juanita!” someone's falsetto called aloud, “I smell paints burning!”

“Then call SOS, call it, call at once!” The captain reappeared on the scene and hollered orders, plucking at his hair which appeared ghostly-red in the dancing tongues of fire. “We've got eighty tons of H6 explosives aboard! In twenty minutes we'll be all sent flying!”

“The radio station has no battery!” Rodriguez, the electrician, who also served as the radio man shouted back, “I told you two weeks ago!”

“Dash!” the skipper skipped to the bridge and, coughing profusely, lurched back with his satellite phone. It was now the last straw, the only connection with the dry land. “Block the ventilation intake, engine slow, dummies!”

He rushed to the foredeck, stumbling over ends and bits of the tackle, which began to flop onto the deck,

smoldering and burning. "International sea emergency number ... here!"

"Tulong, agad!! Tulong! Apoy nakasakay! Bapor pagkasunog!!" he yelled in his mother tongue, forgetting he was just eight thousand miles away from Manila.

"Sorry, meneer?" replied a half-sleepy coast guard officer in Dutch, "Wat is daar gebeurd?"

"Tulong, help, help, we're burning like a firecracker!" The skipper screamed again. "Agad, agad! In ten minutes we'll fly into the air! I'm captain Malaki, from Bonita Marguerita freight ship!" He hurried back, covering his nose with his burned-through sleeve.

... In a couple of hot, noisy minutes, the engineer, with the help of four Filipino deck hands, one axe and two Russian crowbars, finally managed to thump the rusty ventilation intake valve closed. The ship slid into a slow speed, a near-drift along the low, unassuming Dutch coastline.

The fire from one chamber on the lee side of the poop deck didn't stop. The belching miasma of acrid smoke, mixed with dark-purple, fetid, brownish tongues of flame refused to cease. Three jabbing Filipinos still darted around, wasting time, sea water and nerves.

Engineer Vasya, his sooty hands clutched behind his flower-patterned underpants, stood, whistling a melody from 'Gentlemen of Fortune', next to three of his unshaven compatriots, and stoically watched as two little dots off the misty, barely discernable Dutch shoreline began to enlarge, slowly taking the shape of fire-fighting speedboats.

He sighed. It was his only, soiled pants which he soaked, a day before, in a twenty-gallon barrel with kerosene, hanged them on a decrepit power wire to dry, and climbed, after twelve hours on duty in the abusively hot, clattering engine room, into his smelly hammock.

Vasya had not finished at university, didn't study the exciting Theory of Relativity or the staid Laws of Thermodynamics. Yet, as every sailor in their right mind, he knew the quirky, unreasonable, yet unattainably feasible Murphy's law – which here, on their rumbling, rusty, swarming-with-rodents deck, read: if a stray funnel spark or a short-circuited wire could happen into an open vessel with fuel, it surely would.

And, it did ...

4

EAVESDROPPING AND THE STYX

The next morning, both siblings woke up with heavy heads. Carl hadn't been able to sleep well at all, wriggling and jerking all night on his broad bed in a delirious half-sleep, chasing—always chasing—someone, or else escaping from a labyrinth of cobblestone-walled dining halls, velour-covered streets, and gigantic corn barrels with moustached guys in mirrored sunglasses lurking at the bottom. He woke every hour or so and raised his sweaty head, listening. Whose cautious steps were those approaching? Were they coming? Were they by the door? Were they already in?

Carl sneaked home deep in the night, after having cycled, straight from the train station, with his bike's light off, to a forest on the city's outskirts where he dug a pit with a dry stick, his pen knife, and his bicycle pump. In that shallow hole, the co-ordinates of which he noted only with his eyes (no traceable GPS points saved on his smartphone, no!), he placed the counter-intelligence card in its tin corn container. He camouflaged the pit with dry leaves so that the card would be well protected from radio receivers, satellites, and curious Martians. He hands trembled, as did his knees, his jaw, and even his hair, which was now adorned with a little spruce twigs.

John, by contrast, slept like a log, despite (or, thanks to) all the stress and neurons burned the day before. So long did he enjoy Morpheus's embrace that he was almost forty minutes late getting to his desk. As he slid through the front doors, he noted the clock above reception and bit his lip. Tardiness was not a trump card to employ when hinting about a salary raise.

The usually boringly busy office was today in a rare mood: everyone seemed upset, expecting, and suspecting. The clerks, presales agents, and even department managers were sitting with long faces, mechanically tapping keyboards or receiving phone calls; the secretaries and cashiers were chatting or smiling or both, yet with rubber smiles and deep-frozen eyes.

What's up? John thought as he passed through the long lobby to his place.

No sooner had he hung up his jacket than Boss's secretary peeked through the door. "John, come along. Mr. Stelling would like to see you."

John nodded, then pouted. Of course, his forty minutes had been noticed, and he thought he had no trick in his hat to cover it up. He was wrong.

"We are very pleased with the contract you arranged yesterday," said Boss after the junior clerk had perched his narrow bottom on the edge of a chair, which was rooted in front of a table as spacious as a small yacht's deck.

John nodded, not knowing what to say. Then he smiled lightly.

“I’d love to see all my employees work like you do,” Boss went on, leaning back in his broad leather chair, “and bring us that much profit. To show my appreciation, I’ll give you a half day free today.” The director trimmed his tie and settled his gold-rimmed glasses back on his nose, which meant that the brief audience was over.

“Thank you very much,” John said, with a smile that was broader, but still modest. “I’m just doing my best.” *But what is this all really about?* he wondered, though he didn’t dare utter a word.

Adding a tasteless platitude to the witless, watery, hazy mood, John stood up, resisting the temptation to shrug, and departed. A half day off wasn’t bad, but much better would have been to have a half day off on Friday—that is, tomorrow. *Oh, man, Carl will come today, and he’ll bring along that crazy card and his home-brewed spy microphone,* John thought, feeling a bit happier at the thought that lucky coincidences didn’t always shun him. *But why didn’t he call? I guess I’ll call him...*

After four tries where Carl did not pick up, John began to wonder. Finally, on the fifth try and a full half hour later, there was an answer. “Hi, brother!” he called into the warm-with-use receiver. “Are you okay? I’ve got the afternoon off, y’ know!”

“Dash it,” he heard from the other end. “I’m, um... I am not really ready to...”

John misunderstood his tone. “Are you sick? But ... you’re at work!”

“Yeah.” Carl coughed a couple of times. “But ... I had a terrible night.”

“Understood,” John said. He felt the pain. He always did, even when not asked to.

A brief silence hung in the air. The younger brother didn’t want to force the conversation, and the older hesitated. “Know what?” Carl finally said. “I’ll come along, at twelve o’clock. But this will be the last time.” There was a pause, then came Carl’s weak voice again. “Johnnie, are you... happy?”

“That I am.” John grinned, refraining from any more comments.

To tell the truth, both the senior engineer and the junior clerk had had enough of being spies; they were already through with the chilling fright and the costly adventures. Yet, as Murphy’s Law would predict, the spies hadn’t yet had enough of them...

&

While the younger Cheesekop had slept in, and while the older had been gulping down a handful of pain killers for his headache, there was a lot happening behind the curtains of the money temple where John served the volatile, faddy goddess of Mammon to earn his chunk of bread with butter. In fact, John had been right: it wasn’t just the top quality work that had prompted his director to grant him a sudden furlough. There was more to it than that—much more...

By the time John had rolled in forty minutes late, it had already been a long day for Boss. He had been brutally woken up at half past five in the morning by two guys in plain clothes who had appeared at his door. The doorbell rang long and demanding.

“Mr. Stelling?” he heard through the intercom.

“Yes, but—?” he tried to protest. It was not even dawn yet!

“Open the door!”

The director, still in flannel pyjamas with a birds of paradise pattern, flogged downstairs. Grappling with the rails, he pressed, unwittingly, a hidden switch that automatically inflated a life-sized rubber boa constrictor meant to scare away potential burglars.

Once on the ground level, he opened all five sophisticated locks and warily let two similarly looking chaps into his spacious vestibule. *Police?* he guessed. *Or something worse? Goodness, not the tax office! But I'm clean, Boss* thought frantically. *At least, as far as I ...*

They weren't from either agency. Without further overtures, and without conjuring up any papers, one said plainly in a bored sotto voce, like a bus driver, “Algemeen Inlichting Veiligheids Dienst, inland security department. We need your help, sir.”

The drowsy gentleman glanced at the mousy guys in similarly drab jackets and worn jeans, without mirrored sunglasses or any other conspicuous stuff. By now, the springy inflatable reptile (which had assumed the size of an adult anaconda) was staring at the uninvited guests, too. Their faces began to lose their trained blankness.

“Yes?” he replied, half readily. An unpleasant out of control feeling gripped him like a chilling steel glove. *What on earth...?*

“Please come to your office straight away. We’ll follow you at a distance.” The words plunked down like oversized pieces of hail: still, cold, and colourless, but not so weighty—perhaps because the inflated, computer-manipulated ‘beast’ had just unhinged its sizeable jaw and poked its pointed, black tongue in the direction of the first guy. The long-faced agent stumbled back, stepping on his colleague’s toe.

“Now?” asked the boss of the house, feeling that he was becoming the boss of this situation, too. He lacked any clue as to why the tables were turning in his favour. His snake was lurching beside him at knee height, invisible to its owner.

“Now. And don’t forget to leave the rear door of the bank open.” The last phrase was spoken with the speed of a professional auctioneer.

That said, they hurriedly turned around without another word and, bumping into each other, slipped into the early morning fog. Mr. Stelling was left almost alone, in the company of his speechless, albeit hissing, ten-foot-long orangey-black ‘pet’. He scratched his ear, grinned, and switched the python pump off.

He reached his bank’s tall doors an easy twenty-five minutes later, hours before the tormenting morning rush. Roughly a minute after he’d finished up with switching off all the alarms, he climbed into his chair (which felt uncomfortably hard and suddenly less broad) and heard the sound of cautious but sure steps tapping down the hall. So, the faceless men were punctual. They clomped in without knocking and sat down without an invitation.

“Sir,” the clandestine officer said, peering dully at the wall behind the manager’s chair. “A certain action is taking place. Your bank is a part of it.”

“Oh,” he nodded, then shrugged. *Dash, why does stuff like this always happen to us?* he thought. *First, the leaking roof, and now such... oddballs?*

“It is necessary for the security of our State,” came the next phrase.

Of course. Boss nodded, thinking sarcastically but trying to assume a patriotic face. Or, failing that, at least a respectful one.

“We are installing operation officers in several banks. These officers will be stationed in direct proximity to the cash receptions,” the same voice uttered in the same deadpan tone.

The manager nodded again, suppressing a yawn. *And...?*

“Your bank is supposed to take part in the operation from thirteen-fifteen today to sixteen-fifteen today.”

Humph, thought the director. *There goes my extended lunch break.* He wriggled in his chair. “Can I ask something?”

“Later,” came the dry, sobering, almost curt reply. “First, let’s see the place.”

The banker stood up and followed the duo downstairs to the main ground floor hall, switching the lights on as they went. Once in situ, he noticed the guys

walking around the reception area with plans in their hands.

How'd they get our building plans? he thought with brief disgust, bleak respect, and slight panic. His private bank's plans had never been made public...

After a short trip around the room, the two mystery men stalled, gazing at a narrow door in the wall—a built-in closet for brooms, buckets, and the like.

"We need a key for this chamber," the first nameless person requested.

"Um, I think it has no lock," supposed Boss modestly. "Go ahead and try it."

The second guy pulled on the handle to open the flimsy plywood door and peer into a dusty, secluded, claustrophobic receptacle that was only deep enough for one slender person to stand. At the moment, a very lean, undernourished broom and a cracked blue bucket were its only occupants.

"Fits?" asked the manager, no knowing if he could finally ask something, or whether he'd better keep his peace.

"It does," uttered the agent, without looking at the director. Glancing around, he added, "Another?"

"Another what?" clarified Boss. *Another hall? It's in the bank across the street, dummies*, he thought.

"Another such room?" The man's tone didn't budge. His face remained blank.

“A-ha. You mean another storage closet.” The director was already feeling pretty cross, but he didn’t dare let his impatience slip into his tone. “It’s on the other side of the counter, if I remember correctly.”

The tacit visitor walked around to the other side where, normally, waiting clients were seated. He gripped the door handle. This time, the stubborn door didn’t yield.

“Sir?” the talking one of the two men, who appeared to be in charge, awarded the director with a prompting glance.

“A-ha. You need a key.” The manager was fed up with the agents’ cheekiness. *They’re lucky that this bank isn’t one of those bloated, mammoth types where one could barely give a tinker’s damn about things such as closets*, he thought. At this bank, Boss knew all of his employees by name, and what each did. He even knew that this closet was used to harbour the presales team’s car kits.

“One moment.” The solid, plump-faced man turned around and trotted, like an errand boy, back to the offices. The presales department, where John de Cheesekop and Matt Dapperman sat, was fourth on the right. *Okay, and the car kit box key would be... right here, between the desks. Bull’s eye!* Boss thought. *Matt will never notice, but John... Well, I’ll figure that out later.*

He triumphantly returned to the front counter, dangling the key from the end of his outstretched arm. “Please,” he said with feigned gratuity.

The key screeched and turned in the lock. The agent glanced inside, nodded, and then— then he stored the key in his pocket without any pardon asked! Boss gulped.

What a pity I can't have the same inflated beast here, he thought ruefully.

"At twelve-fifteen, our officers will take up their positions in these closets. Can you make a small lunch break, so that no visitors will enter this hall at that time?" This was the concluding question of the defender of the State. "And can you, um, also arrange your staff in such a way that people who are, let's say, *overly spontaneous* will be kept out of this area for the afternoon?"

"Of course." Boss smiled smugly, not knowing (nor caring) if he was more amused by the ad hoc staff juggling that he'd have to plan, or by the fact the uninvited parvenus were leaving—for the moment, at least.

&

... When the fair-haired junior clerk ambled through the ornate front door punctually at noon (that is, at twelve-ten or so, in John's terms), he didn't need long to spot Carl's café-latte brown Rover parked—or rather, crammed—in a narrow space between a tree and a footbridge. He opened the car door and tossed his thin briefcase in.

"Hi! Who's next on the crosshairs?" the younger brother began jovially, but he stopped short. One look at Carl's dark-circumferenced eyes was enough for John to conclude that today's hunt wouldn't be all that brisk. "Um, are you all right?"

"I'm not... sick," the engineer wheezed out, sounding like a run-down engine. "I'm just not very well, either. I haven't slept at all."

John nodded, compassionately. Indeed, James Bond's burdens could be heavy.

Carl started the engine and turned to his brother. "I've buried it!" he hissed.

"What, then? Have your dog died in the night?"

"No, not my dog. *It!*" Carl repeated, in an even more mysterious and quiet tone. He joined his fingers to form a rectangle. "You follow?"

"Where?" John couldn't believe that the same person who'd been so ardent about their spy mission just hours ago would chicken out so easily.

"In the forest," came the short, hoarse reply. Carl sneezed and blew his nose.

"In th' city, you mean?" John frowned, considering that the city's colloquial name was Den Bosch, which also meant 'the forest' in Dutch.

"No, not in the city, man!" Carl forced a smile. "Deep in the woods. Not far from the spot where we had a barbecue last year, y' know?"

John nodded a couple of times. He felt some degree of relief that was mixed, nonetheless, with a light, brief regret that they couldn't hack it for even one week as spies. After all, the Dutch were known for their angelic patience and endless endurance! He sighed.

"Don't worry, man. I didn't bury the remote microphone along with it," Carl rustled, barely audibly.

“Ohhh,” John said, grinning. “Are we going to follow some girls, then?”

“Oh, Johnnie, when will you grow up?” the power plant boss chuckled. “You are still so... so...”

“I was *joking*,” the younger brother suddenly countered, with a slightly singed tone.

“Fine then. Sorry!” Carl was, as usual, unable to grasp John’s humour, few and far between as his jokes were. He usually meant everything he said with one hundred percent earnestness.

For a while, the two explorers of the unknown drove in silence. The traffic lights, which at times exceeded the number of cars, turned red for the umpteenth time.

“Let’s do it!” Carl whispered aloud, gradually feeling more light-hearted after the card burial. “We need to switch our mobiles off, and then I’ll turn th’ mike on.”

“Fine,” John agreed, without much enthusiasm.

“Ready?” the enlivened would-be spy asked.

“Ready,” the enervated would-be assistant echoed.

“Let’s go!” Carl zipped open a narrow dust cover and pulled out a pen-sized object with a fluffy round end that resembled a bear’s head. He placed the sincerity-discovering tool on the dashboard, inserted the power cable into the lighter, and turned on a miniscule switch.

John glimpsed at the gadget. “Do you hear anything?” he asked, noticing that Carl had lodged an earphone into his right ear.

“One moment,” Carl said as he pulled the jack out of the socket. “I’ll try to focus the range.”

John nodded dully. He always did when unable to delve into technical depths.

Carl pulled the car over, grabbed a screwdriver from his case in the rear seat, fetched a magnifying glass from the glove box, and began to tamper with the device.

“Hmmm, it should be focused to within one yard of the subject now,” he mumbled, searching for their first guinea pig with his short-sighted eyes. “There! Huh?”

John looked in the direction his brother had pointed to and nodded. On the other side of the canal there was a cafe. Most tables were vacant, for the lunch rush had not yet begun. A lonely guy with a newspaper shivered at a corner table. Carl rummaged in his briefcase and hauled a pair of binoculars from it. John’s eyes didn’t even twinkle. His brother’s coffer could contain anything, from parts of an Assyrian chariot to an astronaut’s boot with lunar dust still on it. Nothing surprised him anymore.

“John?” Carl raised his finger.

“Yeah?”

“Set thirty!” came the command, as though the two were a fighter jet squadron hunting down an enemy aircraft.

“Done,” the clerk replied as he moved the unscaled lever, not sure of where he was adjusting it to.

“Uh huh,” Carl grunted in satisfaction and plugged the audio jack back in. This time, the result was very different; the sounds were coherent and clear.

“Shala-le, shala-la, shala-le, shala-la, I’m in love again,” heard the primed ears of the self-made spy officers. Carl grinned. The crooning vocals from the opposite side of the canal went on before shifting to more serious matters. “Oh-oh-oh, those darn waiters won’t raise a finger! Where’s my coffee? I’m freezing! Shala-le, shala-la... well, at least that waitress has a nice ass... why’s she not my server, eh? Come here, kitty, come to me, please! ...I’m in love again!”

“Carl!” John poked his brother, who was quivering from suppressed laughter, in his side. “Is *this* the kind of information we are here for?”

“Well, it’s you who’s setting the range. Aren’t you?” his widely grinning brother replied.

John didn’t ask what amused Carl more—the pop song or the horny joke. “Forty yards!” the fair-haired junior spy declared.

Carl swung the fuzzy bear-headed mike to the right. This time, the mood was dry, rough, and petulant:

“No! I said no!” a man’s voice yelled over a cell phone. “Four per cent? Who do you think I am, a bum? Four and a half? Offer it to your granny to pay for her undertaker, or to some charity. Nope, no less than *six*, or I’ll see you in court! Yes! No! I’m done with this

discussion! Next week? No, next week is too late; kiss my rump! I won't—"

Without waiting till the end, Carl snatched the jack out of the socket and glanced askew at his comrade.

"Huh," he uttered. The second talk didn't paint their fellow compatriots in any prettier a light. Carl's thoughts about writing a glistening essay had become overcast, even a bit sombre. As though ceding to his mood, the natural sun also frowned and hid its tired face behind the greyish flannel of a cloud passing by.

"*I know!*" Now it was John's turn to raise his pointing finger. "We shall first find out who's talking in a calm, friendly way. Then we'll know they're surely talking about something nice, as we Dutch often do! And then we won't waste any more time."

"Great idea," Carl nodded. "Try people sitting in a car so there won't be too much background noise."

"Okay." John took the binocs from his short-sighted sibling. After a brief survey, he spotted three middle-aged ladies seated in a small red car with a rear window open. They were chatting, it seemed, in a calm and friendly way.

"Sixty yards: what do you think?" he asked Carl, who, without the binoculars, couldn't tell a bike from a scooter from as close as twenty yards.

"Yep," the engineer agreed, without even looking in the direction.

"Okay, I'll set sixty." John cranked the lever a little bit one way. "Can you flip the volume up, please?"

“Yep!” Carl turned a round handle clockwise. And then...

“And?” the first voice they were eavesdropping on seemed to be echoing their thoughts.

“We’ve visited all the flats, from number two to number one-twenty-four. We talked to three people who were open enough to listen. We offered them the writings about the last days and Armageddon.”

“So, how many have received the word of truth?” enquired the first voice. It was peremptory, conceited, and stern.

“None...” came the weak answer, followed by a weary sigh. “But I hope...”

“You can’t just *hope*, Sister Elizabeth! You must *do* what the organisation had entrusted us to do,” the first voice shut down Sister Elizabeth’s flimsy excuses like a rock slide cutting off a mountain trail. “We’re in charge of saving the world, and gathering the elect from among the twelve tribes!” There was a meaningful pause, filled only with two deep sighs. After a moment, the monologue started up again. “Still, when you approach our mission the way *you* do... it’s little wonder that our district has the lowest conversion rate in Holland!” The holy tirade ended on a dramatic, phoney tone.

There came no answer. All John and Carl could hear was what seemed to be a soft, not very calm and not very comfortable sobbing. The older brother lifted his brows, and the younger brother frowned. The steep contrast between saving the world and the district’s low results was too abyssal to bridge.

... For a while, the brothers drove aimlessly on, manoeuvring between bicycles, trams, and jaywalking tourists. “What?” John reacted to his brother’s long silence, “Already fed up with a tough man’s job?” He grinned lightly.

“No, Johnnie,” the engineer looked sullen and sombre, like an eclipsed moon. “I’ve been feeling a real pity on... my countryman from...” he trailed off mysteriously.

“What about?” John asked. “Are you having a big feud with your neighbour?”

“Nope.” Carl brushed the thought away with his hand, as though he were chasing away a bumbling June bug. “I mean, ugh... that poor Englishman, whoever he was!”

“Now, come on, Carl,” John snorted. “Are you getting old? You’ve never been so sensitive before!”

“Well,” Carl tidied his necktie up, “all that chocolate, and that nutty theatre yesterday... I’ve played a nasty joke on that guy, and I should ask his pardon—if he’d ever accept it! The cops snapped him the very next minute he left the taxi, eh? That was probably all my fault. I feel... really lousy!”

“Man, you’ve got it all jumbled up,” the clerk shook his head. “It’ll just take the guy a mite of time—a half minute or so, or less!—and he’ll have scrubbed all the cocoa off his passport, and voila! Clean as a baby. Besides, walking around with a case full of cash isn’t a crime. Except, to be honest, his bank certificates were fishy, to say the least.”

“Yeah, maybe.” The engineer leaned his head to the side. “But th' whole thing just doesn't sit right with me. I'd love to ask his forgiveness, if we ever meet again. Maybe ... in London?”

“Carl, I don't even recognise you any more!” John rubbed his forehead with his palm. “One day you're set to stage a daredevil show, then you're afraid to say 'boo' to a goose!”

Carl turned his head. “But men aren't geese. If I ever meet him in, say, ten years, I bet I'd still recognise his face as sure as I would my own!”

“And then he'd flip your driver's licence into a loo and call a road cop!” John giggled. “Would that make you feel better?”

Carl didn't reply. Spinning his thumbs around each other, he thought. *Maybe I should spend this year's summer holiday in England. I'll take the kids along and try to find him... in Brighton, perhaps? Just to say that I'm an honest man, not a real spy basher. Or, maybe I should announce something in the local press? 'Someone is sought to ask pardon?' But where? In Kent, or Surrey, or maybe Auckland? Where do English spies normally go on holiday?*

The traffic suddenly slowed—not to the paralysed level of the evening jam, but it did slow down noticeably. Carl peered anxiously forward. John didn't—it wasn't worth the effort; it was probably just a lorry being discharged one street ahead. Or maybe two cars had a fender bender and the drivers are exchanging insults, injuries, and business cards.

To switch his sights from the endless grey pavement dotted with pink and creamy-coloured chewing gum clumps, the junior clerk glanced above him. There, between the modestly tall buildings that were well spaced by the canals, a good chunk of modestly blue sky was visible. That's why he loved Amsterdam on the whole, and its downtown in particular: for the mood, light, and space its broad canals brought along.

This time, however, amidst the company of the fluffy, gleaming white clouds, which leisurely sunbathed in their invisible rocking chairs, one whirling round object floated right in the middle of the spot in the sky that was visible to John. The object resembled a round face and was looking. Looking at *him*. *Who are you?* The thought electrified him. He felt both excited and confused.

Hi! John greeted the seemingly alive cloud with his eyes alone, intensifying their gaze towards the object. *What's up?*

"I'm up, and all is fine!" he heard the immediate reply, in a plain, silver-clear tone. "In a week, a ship runs ashore, the engineer flees. Tonight, the lights burn, you cross the river, but return."

"Umm," John gulped aloud. The cloud had spoken in a rhyming riddle, and he could only grasp it in part—and a very little part at that. He didn't know what to think...

"Yeah?" Carl turned his face to him.

"Oh, nix," John replied weakly. Too much explanation would baffle anyone, and there had already been enough suspense yesterday.

“D' you think th' jam will last for long?”

“Well,” John began as he glanced more upwards once, noticing the silver cloud bouncing a couple of times between its creamy colleagues before launching off with a neck-breaking speed. “To tell you the truth, I’m thirsty.”

“Then let’s make a stop,” said Carl firmly. The solid citizen had almost reconstructed his normal crust of indifferent philistine normality, which he’d dreamed of shedding with the help of the spy card only a day before. “I’ve just smelled popcorn!”

By an occasion or a miracle—or maybe some legacy of the silver-sided cloud—a parking spot ten yards in front of them became vacant. The clandestine officers steered their coffee-coloured beast into it.

“Oh, man, we’re only a hundred yards away from my bank.” John slapped his knee and chuckled. “What fun!” He loved coincidences as much as he liked his office.

Back inside the car after visiting the vending popcorn cart, the brothers consumed their provisions, for the first few minutes, in silence. Then, Carl pulled the microphone jack from its cover and plugged it into the socket. He turned the ignition key halfway to power the device.

John knit his brow. “More?” he demanded with a sour face. “Haven’t you had enough for today? I have.”

“Well, just another minute or so,” the older brother said excusably.

“What for?” John refused to cease. “Are you planning on starting a detective agency?”

“Um,” Carl scratched his head in deep thought. “Maybe that’s a good idea!”

John, frightened that he was once again brewing a beer that he himself would have to drink, kept his sultry peace. Carl, feeling the mood, plugged the jack in and squeezed the earplug into his ear. John watched with growing amusement as his brother’s thoughts fluttered around his face like frivolous butterflies about a stump.

“Girls?” he asked Carl’s unplugged ear, sure that this time he’d hit the bull’s eye.

“Gulls!” the engineer replied. He was indeed following the winged dancers turning somersaults over pale blue water.

John chuckled openly. His brother had taken half a day off work, had driven a hundred miles from home, had even brought secret gadgets along—and all just to hear the screechy, sharp, guttural calls of the sea fowl. What an oversized child in a square suit and shiny shoes!

“Feed them your pop corn, then,” John said to the electrician’s ear. “They’d fly nearer so you wouldn’t need your gadgetry.”

“Oh, indeed!” Carl flung the door open, and stuck his right foot outside, ready to celebrate nature.

“Sheeps!” he cursed as the seat belt he’d pulled by accident recoiled sharply like a bowstring, then caught on the open popcorn bag and dragged it backwards until it smashed against his shoulder, strewing the bag’s contents

all over his jacket and the car. “Tosh! I just cleaned the car last week!”

“Hang on, Carl!” John finished his juice and whopped the engineer’s shoulder, now white from salt, several times until both brothers began to sneeze. “I’m just two steps from my office, right? I know we’ve got a vacuum for our sales team’s cars. I’ll just grab it from the closet, clean the car, and bring it back.”

“Oh, great, Johnnie. Thank you!” After John climbed out of the car, the older brother walked around the vehicle and got into the driver’s seat.

John hurried towards those elaborate doors he knew so well, searching for his key ring in his pockets as he walked. He smiled slyly to himself. *Good thing I’ve got this spare key for the car kits closet*, he thought. *Boss will never be any the wiser..*

... In the bank’s reception hall, four sour-faced clients were lingering, filling in reams of dull forms or reading even duller financial services adverts. Two early, lazy spring flies sat on water cooler, rubbing their legs together and crawling around. John, greeting everyone he passed with a glistening eye, rushed to the car kits closet, snatched the key from his pocket, and plunged it into the lock—all within four ephemeral seconds.

“John, wait, wait!” the reception lady called to him while she waved her hand frantically. The customer who’d just stepped up to the reception desk peered, with a grumpy face, at his watch. John, too busy with his search to hear or notice anyone else, turned the handle.

The rumpled junior bank clerk swung the door open and stood there, frozen stiff, his previously carefree face growing long. Instead of a mobile vacuum cleaner, two car kits, and extra sets of windshield wipers, a complete stranger peered out at him from inside the dusty closet.

“Sorr...” John mumbled, slamming the door closed, turning pale, and gazing around him in growing horror. Had he come, by mistake, to the wrong bank? *No, this is definitely my bank*, he confirmed. *The lady waving at me from the reception desk is the same one who waves at me every morning..*

“John, lock the door, please!” The receptionist ran hurriedly up to him, trying to rescue the situation while looking back over her shoulder to soothe the disgruntled client with a most charming smile she’d learned from TV shows. “Okay?”

But John didn’t hear her. He’d feverishly deduced that the guy in the closet was surely a bank robber. He ran out into the street, snatched his mobile from his pocket, and tapped 1-1-2.

“Amsterdam Police, how can we serve you?”

“Our bank has been broken into!” the junior clerk yelled. “I just saw a robber hiding in the broom closet! Please come quickly! My name is John, and I work at the bank, and I know that no one should be in that closet besides a vacuum and brooms, but there was someone standing inside of it! Please, it’s probably a gangster! Hurry up!”

“What is the address?” the dispatcher asked dryly, without sharing his fright.

“Singel, twelve-thirty-seven!” the clerk shouted into the phone, scaring off the innocent gulls that had just been lured by the pop corn floating down the sidewalk on tiny gusts of wind.

“There’s no bank at Singel twelve-thirty-seven, sir,” came the unemotional answer.

“Oh, sorry. I meant, um, twelve-seventy-three. The office at the corner, near the post office, y’know?”

“Are you sure there’s no one at work on the electrical or plumbing?”

“Absolutely not!” John couldn’t believe that the police wouldn’t believe him. The Dutch were supposed to be trusting! “It was a locked closet, and there was someone standing inside it! He’s a robber!” A thought suddenly came to him like popcorn on the breeze. “What if he’s armed?”

“Your name, please?”

“I’m John... that is, Cheesekop, John, born on September the twelfth, in Rea—”

“We’ll share your information with the street patrol. Thank you, sir.” Suddenly there was a dial tone in his ear. As usual, he thought grudgingly.

John whirled around on his heel a couple of times, not knowing what to do. Should he run back into the bank? Or wait outside for the police? Or call Carl and tell him to flee for safety? A car tooted behind him, interrupting his frantic thoughts. *Who, what, why?* John’s mind raced. *The police? So soon?*

“Johnnie, is your vacuum cleaner broken? I’ll cope, I guess. Get in!” Carl must have seen him come out of the bank through his binoculars and assumed that the errand had met a roadblock.

“Oh, brother, I’ve found a bank robber in the closet! Will you come and look?” his lips fired, his eyes skipping from Carl to the still-unguarded front door. *What if the thief was indeed armed?* John gulped, beginning to fall prey to his own fears as his power of persuasion, usually employed to enchant clients, turned inwardly against himself.

In the meantime, another car—this one stuck behind the brown Rover, which was blocking the way—tooted loudly. A line of cars and lorries had begun to queue up, reminding John that one-way streets weren’t always a windfall.

“I’ll drop the car at the bridge!” Carl called as he pressed the accelerator. The Rover screeched its tires for the first time in its life and dashed ahead just thirty yards. Carl parked crookedly and jogged back to where his brother was standing.

“Johnnie, what’s going on? Are you sure it’s a robbery?” Carl’s voice was hesitant. He still hadn’t fully recovered from yesterday’s foibles. “Haven’t you got cameras all around?”

“Come, Doubting Thomas, please!” Suddenly regaining his bravado, the ardent warden of the investors’ riches pulled the reluctant technologist towards the bank door. “Come and see!”

“Do I really have to... have a look?” doubted Carl again. Become a *witness*? All that signing of endless papers, and then a court case... And few things are more costly and boring than a Dutch court case, he thought suddenly and rather unpatriotically.

“All right, then come and listen!” John still wanted to nab the crook—if not with his own nimble hands, then at least with the brawn and firearms of others.

Inside the reception hall, there were now at least eight sullen customers sitting or standing, waiting their turn. The lonely lady at the desk was toiling like a Korean factory robot, yet the line up of disgruntled bank clients only grew. Even the flies weren’t relaxed anymore—they buzzed around the water cooler like two small aircraft.

The poor receptionist was swamped; there was no way she would notice the Queen of Sheba, complete with a caravan of twenty gold-laden camels, entering her reception hall—much less an ‘overly spontaneous’ employee returning for the second time on his afternoon off.

Thereby unnoticed, the two scared brothers hurried through the hall and snuck, on their tippy-toes, towards the unguarded closet.

The clerk set his ear to the door and cupped his hand around it. Carl did the same. Several clients glanced at them askew and retreated, tactfully, a couple of steps away. What a bank ...

“Hear anything?” John asked, himself hearing a sort of remote rumble from within.

“Yeah.” Carl’s ears were a notch better than his eyes. “It’s almost as though someone is... um...”

“What? As though someone is *what?*” John’s heart raced quicker than a gnu fleeing from a leopard.

“As though someone is, um, flatulating inside,” declared Carl, rubbing his chin. He couldn’t decide if he should grin, frown, or show no emotions in light of the gravity of the situation. “Are you sure that’s not a W-C?”

“A W-C?” John exclaimed, insulted. Catching the irked looks of the distracted customers, he straightened up and switched back to whisper. “Our only rest rooms are a floor above. This is my *car kits closet!*”

“Have you got the key?” Carl asked, too simply-mindedly for the situation.

“Ye-es!” John hissed, lowering his voice to the level of a night breeze. “I already opened it, and instead of the normal stuff, a chap was standing inside it! A total stranger!”

“Hum.” The engineer’s deepest instinct was telling him that John’s take was a little fishy. “How could he get through a closed door?” he asked.

“Well, Carl... um, bank robbers use picklocks, don’t they?” John asked with a shrug. “Haven’t you ever watched a crime show?”

Carl straightened up, then tapped his fingers on the door. He set his ear back against the wood, listening. The muffled sounds went on, now followed by an acrid, unwholesome smell. “Um, I think we better wait,” he concluded, scowling and waving his hand under his nose

to dispel the odour. He nodded towards the exit. "Come along; let's get some fresh air."

Back in the tiny entry lobby, the older brother leaned towards John's ear and whispered, "To my judgement, you'd better keep out of that."

"Why?" John couldn't believe his ears. "A gangster's inside! You mean—"

"A gangster—or maybe an undercover cop?" Carl grinned shrewdly.

"What for? Put there by whom?" John shook his head, disbelieving. He felt himself cooling down a bit, however.

"Johnnie, don't be so *simple*," Carl said with a frown. "People pilfer at work—is that news for you? A year or so ago, I had hidden cameras set up in my power plant, and guess what? The pricey copper wires stopped 'disappearing'. You get it?"

"Dash," John puffed. "I've already called the cops."

Carl groaned and clamped his head with both his hands. "That was a silly move! Get in the car, the quicker the better!" The older brother lurched off towards the Rover, but John lingered behind, biting his lip. He felt like a yacht caught in a strait between a ferocious western current and a lashing eastern wind—he was pushed out by his yearning for safety, yet pulled back by his unwavering sincerity. *One moment, please*, he wanted to beg, but there were no moments to spare.

No sooner had the engineer's shoes crossed the narrow lane than the blinking blue lights of a police car

sped up to block the bank's entry. Two officers sprang jauntily from its doors, one of them almost hitting John with his elbow.

"Police Corps Amsterdam, good afternoon!" he said. "Your documents, please?"

"Are you coming to my call?," John asked, displaying the bank ID badge that still hung around his neck. "I guess I'll take you inside, then."

The officers followed John to the reception hall. Finally able to glance up from the unending line up, the receptionist gaped in astonishment at John and his posse. Then, she pulled out her mobile.

"Sorry, Mr. Stelling, but can I... um, have a moment of your attention?" she almost whimpered into the device. "Yes. *Quite* serious, sir."

John and the two officers were unaware of the lady's dread.

"Where?" asked the officer in charge.

"Here!" John led them to the closet door and tapped on it with his fingernails —subtly, as if he were unwilling to disturb the gassing gangster inside. The officers stood by, unmoving. Then, one of them spoke a couple of words into his radio and stretched his hand toward the door knob.

The receptionist spilled into the hall, the mobile clamped to her ear. "Sir!" she urged as she touched the police officer's blue-clad elbow. "Our director would like to talk to you."

The policeman took the phone. John stood by, feeling helpless, lonely, and empty. His proverbial yacht was about to run aground ...

“Yes, lieutenant de Leeuw.” spoke the guy in uniform into the receptionist’s cell phone. “Yes... yes, I understand... uh huh... yes... who?” he reached for a note in his pocket. “Mr. de Cheese ... Kop ... something like that... no, I can’t tell...yes, of course... I understand, sir... Goodbye!”

He passed the phone back to the receptionist. As he did so, he noticed the many pairs of astonished eyes staring up at him from their financial briefs.

“Sorry, ladies and gentlemen,” the head policeman uttered. “Just a routine control call. Goodbye!”

As the four riveted, black-polished heels rattled down the stairs towards their police cruiser, John, himself riveted to the floor, felt a streak of cold sweat on his forehead. He knew what was about to happen...

“John!” the receptionist said curtly as she passed the mobile to him. “Mr. Stelling is on the line for you.”

The junior clerk shuddered and turned pale. How could a boon like a free afternoon have ended almost with a swoon?

&

This afternoon, both brothers were men of few words. Carl felt guilty that he’d opted out too rapidly and left John behind for what boiled off to be heavy talk with his bank’s boss. John, on the other hand, was too stunned to babble. The last words the director had roared into the

phone were still reverberating over and over again in his ears: "Mind your *own* business and be as still as death!" John tried to explain that he'd just had the bank's best interests at heart, but the director hung up on him before he could get the words out.

As he listened, for the second time in less than an hour, to the lifeless dial tone, something broke inside him. It felt like a spring or a valve in the intricate, delicate machinery of his soul had let go.

"How about I give you a ride to Utrecht?" Carl asked, trying to drive out the self-imposed guilt with self-sacrificial chauffeur service. "Eh?"

"Just give me a ride to the train station, please." John's voice was suspiciously slow, notably colourless, and eerily empty. "That way you won't spend the whole evening on the A2."

Carl nodded slightly. Of course he knew that the motorway between Utrecht and Den Bosch was plagued with heavy traffic jams, and he also sensed that John would like to be alone—but that it would not be good for him to be alone now. *Luckily, he won't be alone at home*, the older brother comforted himself. They drove in silence to the train station. John got out of the car and closed the door softly behind him.

"Bye, Johnnie," Carl called as his brother gave a quick farewell wave through the window. "Call me after the weekend." The engineer's spectacles oozed a little warmth and a tiny light, while over the bluish, now sparkless eyes of the junior bank clerk, a patina of cold, dark, and lonely night began to fall.

After the train ride, John listlessly cycled home from the Utrecht station. He could barely find the strength to turn the pedals, even though his legs weren't sore; no, his pain sat deeper, where no medicine could reach and where no medium could see.

He gobbled up dinner without tasting the spicy food on the plate. Afterwards, he stood motionless by the kitchen window before he trailed into the living room and plunked down onto the sofa next to Sveta, who was watching an Indian soap. After an hour, he wandered upstairs absentmindedly to his home office and tried to read a couple of reports just to keep his mind busy and dissolve the pitch-black clouds that seemed to be engulfing, strangling, and petrifying his heart.

"I'm going to bed," he told his wife at about ten o'clock, and he padded into their bedroom, feeling a strange numbness in his chest.

Sveta knew that something unusual was going on: her usually lively, eloquent, and sunny-eyed man had no more joie de vivre. The man who had come home to her that evening had been a grey shade of a person, with stony eyes and a wooden voice.

John lowered his darkened face onto the pillow and lay on the bed, motionless, still, quiet. Too quiet...

#

Am I asleep? John wondered. or am I in a weird dream? I'm walking down a steep slope, it's dusk, it's turning dark, shadows and shuffling sounds are creeping around everywhere, but I'm alone ... or am I? I look around to see that I am ... where am I? the slope is endless, the lights that at first

My Brother 's a Spy

shone above, somewhere above, are now desperately remote, weak, sputtering ... they're beginning to disappear ... I'm groping in the darkness ... it's like a wall, this pitch blackness... but somewhere over there, a feeble twilight is beckoning... yes, a weak silver twilight... It's not light, exactly. It's a... a misty shadow of... of what? a ... river? a river of mercury...

#

“He came home as though he'd been stricken by a thunderbolt or bitten by a cobra.” Sveta stood downstairs by the phone, speaking worriedly into the receiver. “No, I've never seen him like that before... No, he wasn't drunk!... No, Mom, not everyone, even in Amsterdam, smokes dope. I just don't like the way he was... it was as though his heart had been pumped out, with no more sap left. You know?”

It's a broad, a very broad strip of mist... a very pale, lifeless, still lake... or is it a bay? ... a river? where am I? why can't I feel the ground? why can my hands pass through each other like they're immaterial? why' s it so dark... Is anyone there? Sveta? Carl? Anyone? Mother? Matt? ...whose shuffling and moaning can I hear? is anyone ... alive out there? what's that dot emerging from the mist? ... a cart? what is it? a ... boat... a lonely boat by the shore...

My eyes see only shades, shadows, and whirling darkness creeping around like endless spiders and snakes ... there's someone in the boat, a lonely figure in a long robe... does he know the way? does he know where I am, or what this is all about? does--

Sveta finished her talk with her mother on the west side of Holland and hurried upstairs. Her heart was heavy with suspicion. There was a foreboding, a

feeling of a dreaded peril, weighing her down. It seemed like an ominous event, or the touch of a poisoned glove, was about to fall upon her household. She perched on the edge of the bed and touched her husband's cheek. It was pale, parchment-coloured, and too smooth. *Why is it so cold?* she wondered.

"Boatman, boatman, what sea is this?" she heard John mumble. She turned pale ...

My voice is dull, hoarse, stuffy, as though I'm speaking from the depths of a cave—a lifeless, pitch-black cave where a single ray of light has never once fallen, not even the light of a half-shade... the cave is full of thick, condensed, impenetrable darkness... Boatman, who are you? boatman, what sea is this?

"This is the Styx, the river of the dead," the hoary-haired figure spoke.

Why? Why am I here? I'm alive, aren't I? Or? Or...

I try to move and speak, I can't. I move my hands in front of my face and see nothing I pinch myself to wake from the dream and feel nothing. I'm elastic, like the tongue of a flame... I feel weightless... I should enter this boat, I just know it... there's no way back. My feet aren't obeying me, they pull me, they move me forward, they push me into the vessel... I'm already inside ...why? no, I want back. no... why? no! I ... back... why can't I speak when I need it most? the boat is launching out into the silent water. I'm crossing the water, but why? to where? Where?

"Hello? Good evening, my name is Sveta Vaysatvi ... sorry, Cheesekop. I'm calling to talk with a doctor... Yes, it's urgent... Thank you."

Sveta drummed her fingernails on the wooden top of the hall table. She played with the ochre-coloured edge of her sari. She nervously twirled her hair around her finger. *Where is the doctor? I said it was urgent, didn't—*

“Oh, good evening, sir. I'm calling because... my husband seems to have stopped breathing. No, no alcohol! No, no funny stuff... He's thirty-four ... Yes, I know! That's why I called! ...Did I what? ...No, I don't know how... Yes, he's very pale. What should I do? ...What do you mean? What!? It's Pandorastmaat one-thirty-nine in Utrecht. What? Sir?”

Sveta heard long tones on the other end of the phone. The ambulance was coming, the doctor had said. He also said that the only thing she could do now was *pray*.

She rushed upstairs to the small storage chamber one floor above their bedroom, where her movable altar with the little statuettes of gods usually stood. It wasn't there.

Her thoughts whirled. She moaned, thinking that the altar should have remained with her mother, some hundred miles away. She joined her palms and bowed before the empty shelf where the altar usually stood. *Which names should I call in a time like this, Brahman ... Shiva?* she wondered, feeling her head begin to whirl as well.

I'm on the other side, the shore is dark and stony. It's very cold... it's icy now ... there 're no sounds, no movement in the air... there's no air... I'm not breathing anymore... I'm sliding down, down, down, as though on a runaway railway cart with

cement blocks tied around my neck ... are there no posts to catch hold of? no ... trees, no stumps? there's not a single feeble blade of grass, not a stone... nothing to catch and grasp and clutch and cling... there's no way back...

+

“Om, Adyanta shakti devi, Adi shakti Maheshwari, Om Jaya Jagadheesha Hare, bhakta janonke sankat, bhakta janonke sankat, kshan me dor kare.” Sveta stopped for a moment, unable to remember the proper lines in Sanskrit, then she went on anyways. She knew she must be mixing up all the prayers and mantras, but it was she, not the learned pundits from Varanasi, who was now desperate in the cold, silent home as her man lay breathless in bed. She had no time to waste with pondering. She felt, with an inborn intuition inherited from uncounted generations of her diligent Vayshia ancestors, that time was running out like sand through her fingers. The caravan was departing.

“Gods, give me my husband back!” she pleaded, this time in Hindi, feeling a strange emptiness in her head. “Send him back, even from Nirvana. Please, please!” She stopped, unsure if she should dare to bother the major gods over one little soul, which had perhaps reached an end of one of its lives on earth—and was ready to be infused into a body of a baby somewhere in Orissa. How could she dare grab his soul back and risk turning herself into a pariah who never reached Nirvana?

She needed a smaller god, or a younger god, so her dear husband wouldn't be so soon resented... a smaller god... Goodness, which one in her sizeable

pantheon was smallest? And how could she, a mere mortal, judge which god is inferior, if they are all eternal? *No, there's no time to call mom and ask for names...*

She clasped her head with her hands, trying to visualise all the ocher- and saffron-coloured figures so well known from her youth. They blended together in her mind like one thick crowd with many faces, hands, and legs, much like the dancing Shiva.

Wait a minute! she thought. She learned from her mother that, when a Hindu arrives in a foreign land, if there is a valuable god to find there, then he could be added up to the rest. When she'd arrived in Holland as a young girl with her parents she'd done as her mother had told her and bought, in a large, empty downtown edifice, a small porcelain figure of a bearded man in a white overcoat. The robe was, in her judgement, a bit too short for a major god. Maybe that was why most people in her new country had deserted him?

She'd put the statuette among the others on her now-missing altar, and later she'd painted over it when the other members of her pantheon had their yearly decoration time. Only the bearded face remained white, for the glossy porcelain didn't keep the gouache well, and everyone knew that shabbily-painted deities couldn't be happy. They could take revenge, scaling her karma down—or worse.

“What's his name?” she muttered aloud feverishly, feeling that she was losing the very last seconds she had left to save her husband. “Oh, you young unknown god in a white robe, find my husband and bring him back... please!” She stopped to wipe tears, which suddenly and abundantly streamed down

her cheeks. Deep within, however, she felt some tiny, weak relief, like the invisible presence of an invisible god—a good god—had entered her cold, lonely home.

Who's pulling on my hands? Go away! Why? Why can't I cry out, or even speak, or whisper? My lips are burning with thirst... thirst... I'm pining from thirst! My mouth can't close anymore, my tongue is swollen. My tongue is larger than my head. It's larger and drier than a volcanic bomb! I'm writhing from thirst... Water... water... water ... who's wrenching my hands? have you any water? just a sip of water? even just a drop ... a dew drop... a drop of ... slop that the pigs slurp up ... the pigs ... the pigs ...with those funny coiled tails ... why are they here? why do they have such strange fiery eyes and ...claws? such sharp claws ... any water here, anyone? red, searing pig tails... coiling and claspig around my legs ... tails ... why, are those tails, or snakes? or leeches swarming under my feet? ...water ... is there any? ... please, anyone, a drop ... one drop ... one drop of water ... whb ..? ...why are those worms creeping up? ... I shudder, yet they don't fall off ... who's bound my hands behind my neck? ... th' worms ... they climb up to my throat... no, not worms... they're crimson snakes! th' snakes and the worms are searing me! burning snakes are creeping over my face... water... wh... ah... ter...

The doorbell rang, long and loud. Sveta launched her slippered feet down the stairs, taking the steps four at a time. Maybe those physicians could bring John back to life, if all the gods were too busy...

“Thank goodness! He’s in here! Follow me!” A small procession quickly moved through the tiny home.

It didn’t take long for a diagnosis. “A full cardiac arrest. Defibrillator, quick!” The two ambulance men

snatched a boxy device from their bag, ripped John's pyjama open, and pressed two ebonite handles to his narrow chest.

"Three kilovolt, discharge!" one of them commanded.

Sveta closed her eyes, watching the body of her happy-go-lucky, always supportive husband jerking up and limping back down like a deflated doll.

"Pulse is weak," one finally declared after the seventh or so attempt. The man in the apron wiped sweat from his forehead. "pulse is stabilising..." He sat down on the bed and kept his fingers trained on John's wrist for quite a while.

Sveta stood on her tip-toes, afraid to move even an inch. "Can I... come closer?" she asked finally.

"Sure," the physician stood up and retreated to the other side of the bed. "Now he needs to see you, not us."

She leaned over her husband's exposed chest and whispered into his ear. Slowly, little by little, the eyes of the pale-faced man began to open.

"John, can you see me?" Sveta asked anxiously.

"Where am I?" he responded, rubbing his arms, trying to shake off the invisible burdens that were still so real, so harsh, so weighty. "No chains? No river? Where are ... the pigs ... gone? ... the snakes? Where... water ..." his voice trailed off and his eyes closed. His head drooped back onto the pillow.

Sveta burst into silent sobs. Had John lost too much oxygen to his brain? The doctor, however, seemed to retain a cool head.

“Bring a glass water,” he told his assistant.

“The bathroom sink is across the hall,” said Sveta, waking up from her paralyzing grief.

The assistant was back in an instant. “Water,” he said to the seemingly listless man. “Here, drink up.”

John suddenly lifted his head, took the glass, and drank it all in one go. “Have you got... any more?” he wheezed quietly, slowly, brokenly.

This time, Sveta hurried to the sink for the precious liquid. When she returned, she squatted down next to the bed and touched her husband’s hand. John smiled weakly and sat up.

“I’ve had a ghastly dream,” he whispered. “Or maybe it wasn’t a dream...” He put the glass to his lips and emptied it once more, this time a bit slower.

Sveta nodded a couple of times. “It’s over,” she said, smiling softly, wiping the rest of her tears with her already wet sleeve. “You’re all right now.”

... The specialist tapped John’s chest in a variety of rhythms, scowled, nodded to Sveta. She waded out to the front hall, anxious and stiff, bracing herself for the bad news.

“Your husband has a very, very healthy heart,” the doctor said, shaking his head. “I’ve completely *no*

clue why it so suddenly stopped. He had a short clinical death—or was on the brink of it at the very least.”

“What should we do now?” she asked, biting her lip. “What does he need?”

“Exercise,” suggested the doctor with a shrug. “Less stress. More... love.”

“You mean...” she began, then frowned. *This is a bad time for lewd jokes, sir!*

“I mean just *that*, madam,” the man nodded, without any hint of a smile. “It’s good for the heart. I’ll write a letter to his bosses to excuse him from work. I’ll fax it tomorrow. Now good night.”

5

THE QUEST

For John, the long weekend turned out to be even busier than the eventful week itself. He spent Friday – his first sick leave in three years – mostly at home, after the ambulance man called his bank. The minor clerk even received apologetic calls from both major heavy-weights – the Madame and the Boss. The latter went to great lengths-- even promising *never* to use over-the-top rebukes. If only that could be true.

The whole Saturday John sat, with a glued-up smile, among his countless Hindu in-laws who crammed their modest, one-in-a-row house up to the attic. They tried to condole and comfort, although no one had died, and to advise, while no one asked for it. For the first time ever, no-one stayed overnight – Sveta tacitly warned every aunt, nephew and cousin that her man now needed more rest and more air. She whispered to her mom, alone, that he also needed more *love*.

The secret word, however, didn't remained hidden for long – and the caring, close-knit, verbose visitors left over were three Kamasutras, two in Hindi and one in English, and a pile of spicy victuals, including roti, bara and five dishes

with sambal sauce – the culinary seduction able to awaken libido in an impotent hundred-year-old or to turn any timid honeymoon into one incessant *fete l' amour*.

On Sunday, by contrast, only four guests were expected – Carl and Helen, with kids. After a brief family council, the brothers decided *not* to tell their parents about the sad event, and not to risk an irreversible cardiac arrest by an elderly person. Four were a world less than thirty-seven, the sea of words was much quieter, too, and John, coming to himself at last, craved to ask Carl a question. Or, two, to be correct, both deep as River Time and weighty as a new iceberg.

While the ladies sobbed and lamented in the bedroom over their dear men's unexpected frailness, and the giggling teenage kids played a console in the living room, two unsmiling males occupied the kitchen. Similarly to the week before, they could sit down in look one another in the eye.

“Carl, I've got a problem,” admitted John, more sincerely than even his confessional in church – where, honestly, he hadn't appeared for pretty close to eighteen years.

“Umph,” Carl trimmed his glasses and said, “then, begin with the greater one.”

John didn't say a word. Joining his thumbs and index fingers, he pressed them against one another until the knuckles turned white, then unlocked his grip. Carl waited. The wall clock chanted its trite, sinister, endless refrain. The moist wind outside the narrow window teased the uncombed green hair of an old, moaning willow, the half-closed wicket annoyingly rattled against the low fence. It was beginning to rain outside. It was already cloudy, windy and pitch-dark inside John's mind.

"I'm afraid to die," he said suddenly, in a raspy, low tone, peering at the table cloth with silly fruit patterns. "I mean ... to die again, and never come back."

Carl raised his head and scratched his chin. This time, there was no roof window to glance through in search of an ethereal answer. To be honest, he'd never experienced a clinical death himself. The would-be newsman, however, didn't give up the hope that he'd be *eventually* able to offer some help. First, he chose the typical beaten path: more information.

"Why?" he asked kindly, with a strange feeling of playing an ecclesiastical role. A journalist is a sort of a modern priest, he'd heard this once as a half-joke, but ... a joke becoming reality?

"t was ... t' was too real, at first," John returned, gazing dully at the table, "too real to forget ... I can't sleep in a dark bedroom anymore." He stopped, glancing at Carl very briefly, "I'm afraid I'd again ... fall, slide, flop down ... to a place where there's no way back."

"But ... you're back," Carl tried to cheer him up by the obvious, irresistible fact.

"That I am ..." John grinned, very weakly and somehow eerily, "that I ... am."

He trailed off. Again, there fell a bout of hollow, foreboding, chilling silence. Carl felt, with his sixth sense of a budding reporter, that his younger brother hadn't said all he wanted to. Why?... was it too dark, too deep, too difficult, to be clad in words? He nodded lightly, saying nothing.

“That *I* am ... back,” John repeated, his voice colourless and plain, “the rest isn't ...”

Carl shuddered, feeling goose-skin rushing up along his spine.

“Have you ... seen anyone in this spirit world?”

“I've seen a lot ...” John's voice broke, “far too much, and --”

“Uh-huh,” nodded Carl. He knew it, in general, from the Friday phone call.

“Max was there ... as well,” John said in almost a whisper. Carl gulped and tightened his lips. Max was their cousin from Sheffield, killed in a traffic accident half a year ago.

A spell of shivering silence settled in.

“What shall I do, Carl?” John finally spoke up, obviously recalling the dreary, fresh, so fresh underworld images again, “I just ... can't forget ... they've all been tied up, like ... cattle waiting for the butcher ... me too.”

“Yes,” Carl tilted his head, as though trying to shake off the gloom, “you say, tied up with ... cords?” He didn't know what to say, let alone how to comfort.

“The chains,” John cut in. He wished to be precise, even when speaking of *the next* world.

“The chains,” Carl nodded, mechanically, “but, you've got rid of it, right? So, the dream went off ... positive, at the end?”

"The *matter* is," John returned slowly, with a deep stress on the middle word, "I still can't figure out if it was a dream or ..."

"Alright, on the positive side..." The patient newsman tried to find at least one concrete fact in the murky, uncertain, unbearably dark story, "You've got rid of the chains."

"No." John suddenly shook his head profusely as though it was a pendulum, "I didn't." Carl tilted back and snatched a hanky from a pack to wipe his forehead.

"What d 'you mean?" he asked softly. Now, he really was afraid that John ... was sane no longer after that ghastly night.

"I've been ... released," John replied, with a sudden assurance - too bright, positive and strong for the abysmal mood and chopped, fuzzy narration, "That's as sure as day."

"By ... whom, then?" Carl knit his brow. A releaser, or redeemer had been made known to him from the Alpha Course, which he'd completed a couple of years ago by mail. Suddenly, that remote, abstract, pure theological feature has turned three-dimensional. Even powerful.

"A certain man ..." John began, stuttering, "let's call him ... that way ..."

"No wings behind his back," Carl threw in, not knowing why. He wasn't in the frivolous mood of a church joker.

"No," John shook his head again, without a trace of a grin, "no wings. He came by when I'd already been lined up ... with my hands behind my neck, so ..." he drooped his

head and clamped his hands in a familiar, resigned, hopeless grip he couldn't forget.

Carl nodded distractedly. His eyes weren't the keenest in the world, yet he was almost sure he noticed two deep-blue bruises encircling John's wrists, like two deep-etched tattoo rings. He ground his teeth, withholding the question, which could, he was sure, like spreading salt on fresh, jagged wounds. John shuddered, gazing Carl straight in the face with a pallid, eerie glimmer in his eyes.

"I've heard this ... grinding of teeth ... there," he sighed deeply, "sometimes as loud as yours, sometimes much more loud. It ... seemed that, when words – and groans - fail you, your agony can't be expressed ... another way."

"But you've been set free." Carl didn't want to dwell on pining and whining any longer. His own comforting powers had already been badly stretched.

"A-ha, free ..." John's eyes cleared up a bit, "free, yes ...free." he went on recalling what happened, "He came up and said, he ... just said: 'Someone has called on me, without even knowing my name. I send you back', and that was all." John put his head on his clamped hands, "In a moment, I was as though launched through a tunnel. Deep, heavy clouds dissolved, I saw two guys in white aprons bowing over me ..."

Carl nodded again, trying to force a grin. He couldn't. The story was too grave, too dark, and too real, to respond to. He wanted to treat it as a loony dream – but John hadn't been known as a dreamer. The last dream he could remember was twenty-five years ago.

“Who on earth could this be?” John asked, with almost painful eagerness, “*why* didn't he set anyone else free? Who had called for... his help, without knowing the name? Did *you*?”

Carl shook his head.

“I surely didn't,” he replied simply, “I just sat in my chair Thursday night, with a new issue of the electronics journal. The microphone we were using was ... too weak, y' know? I searched for a way to enhance the range.” He paused, feeling guilty of being so insensitive, indifferent, unhelpful, “Did you ask ... Sveta?”

This time, John shook his head.

“Nope,” he said slowly, “we still can't discuss that. It seems ... she's shunning the matter, she doesn't wanna remind me, and I ... I never take the initiative either.” He stopped and kept silent for a full minute, “Maybe in a month, or three,” he finally squeezed out.

Carl didn't say a word. He already wanted this heavy-as-lead conversation to be over. John's verbal images were so real, so bright, so scarily near – and at the same time, denying any common definition. His brother felt, as it seemed, the same – yet he wasn't stopping. He couldn't.

“Know what? Friday I visited a church, while Sveta was at work, of course,” John said, without much enthusiasm, “and I asked the priest who he thinks the man in white coat was.”

“And?” Carl felt a bit easier, but a good deal baffled, too. John visited a *church* - maybe the first time after

his own wedding, the third or fourth time after his baptism as a baby.

“The cleric told me it could be Jesus but-- ” John grinned weakly, and rather unappetizingly, “still, I should order a Mass. Two hundred and sixty Euros – candles, incense, playing organs and a robed choir. No taxes atop.”

“Umm,” Carl didn't know what to say. Commend the new spiritual zeal or condemn the money-wise clergy?

“When I asked who the Mass should be for, I'm not dead, after all,” John went on, again peering at the tablecloth, “he replied - to pray your soul out of the purgatory. Well. I didn't have that much on me and he ... didn't sound too convincing, to tell you the truth.”

Carl nodded, tightening his lips again – this time to hold back a grin.

“Then, I excused myself for being impolite and asked if, um ... if he himself 's sure I've indeed been ... there, in that ... purginary,” he glanced at Carl for a correct word.

“Purgatory,” said the engineer. He knew some theological terms, from his college books on the English reformation.

“Exactly,” John spoke a bit smoother, as though with a lighter heart. “If I was precisely ... there, because the place didn't look like ... y' know, a cleaning-room or a laundry, not at all. Not a drop of water for miles around ... I've ... told him a couple of other things I've seen ... know what he said?”

Carl lifted his eyebrow, in a wordless question.

“That he ... himself doesn't believe in heaven or hell anymore!” John shook his head, his reddish eyes widening. “I was flabbergasted. That was ... t' same as if I'd deny, at work ... say, the existence of money ... or, cheques clearing, at least, so I thought. And I asked, then, if he meant it.”

“And?”

“And he shrugged and walked away. “So ... I went home, too ...”

The older brother kept silent for a while. Just a couple of days ago he warned John to abstain, at all costs, from playing a 'we-against-them' game. If he'd now begin to advertise *his* church, its clear and logical – for him - doctrines, or smiling ministers who could marry, he'd be doing the same. No, no way -

“So, you've been left out in the cold,” Carl said quietly, “you still don't have a clue who delivered you, and on whose notice.”

“Still don't,” John's head drooped, “and I ... y'see, I won't tour all the churches and cults in Holland for the answer.” He pulled his smartphone from his breast pocket and toyed with it in his hands, “I've surfed a bit last Friday, y' know, they all give you a different answer, all quibble with each other, and shout *their* truth is the *only* one ... what a madhouse!” He frowned, shaking his head, “Is there any sense to it?” he raised his head and peered into his brother's bespectacled brown eyes.

“Hmm,” Carl drummed at the table, “I don't remember much, it's written somewhere, that 'if *you* know the truth, the truth shall set you free' ... something like that.”

"If?" John demanded, bitterly, "and ... if not? Who has the *true* truth?" he grinned wryly at the pathetic tautology.

"Keep searching," Carl said, "until you get your own answer, your own --"

"Truth ..." finished John, with a note of bitter sarcasm, "know what?"

"Not 'truth'," Carl shook his head, "your view of it, your own perspective ..." He rubbed his square chin, "imagine the fruits of truth - the *true* faith, that is - as growing on a tree, and they are of all sorts: some are grapes, others hot chilli, still other walnuts ... and there come fruit-pickers, and pick some, leaving others out ..."

"And each claims only he's got the *real and only* stuff," John grinned, with a tiny shade of hope, "sounds like the tale about three blind men and one elephant."

"Exactly," Carl was delighted that his training on imagery and ideas visualisation had helped his only brother, in such a moment. "In this context, keep searching - until you'd find the food, say, your teeth could chew."

John nodded, saying nothing. Carl saddled his bony philosophical horse. "See, those who pick fruits, instead of sharing them as they are, fresh and diverse, begin to candy, or pickle, or deep-freeze, deep-fry, parboil, scorch, or grind the crop to powder ... do you get it?"

"Very much," John nodded several times, "until the helping they cook is either palatable ... or poisonous?"

"Right!" Carl grabbed a stray fork from the table and prodded it triumphantly, like Neptune's trident, in the air. "Then, what's the next problem, eh?" After the first half

of their talk, every other subject seemed to him mere peanuts.

Unexpectedly, John stood up, closed the door and dimmed the light. Carl chuckled. What's going on?

"The other thing is ..." John began – livelier but almost whispering - "that ... Sveta is cold."

"Ugh?" the fork, degraded back to its commoner's status, meekly took its old place, "you mean?"

"I mean, in the bedroom, of course." John felt as though blushing wasn't far away – that's why the chandelier's power had been reduced from that of the Australian sun to the level of a medieval castle torch.

"Oops," Carl scratched his nose, then, his ear. Quite a switch of subjects ...

"And those ... docs recommended that we actually 'do' more in bed, for my heart's good!" John grinned, uncertainly. The subtle subject had never been a priority in their talks. In fact, John had never told anyone, including his father or the best sexualologist in the city, about his shortcomings. It was all ... too private.

"Uh-huh," Carl nodded, still not knowing what to say. His mind was still by the truth tree, the wretched fruits processing, and the hungry truth-seekers starving out next to the heaps of indigestible spiritual junk-food. He did know, however, a thing or two on how to make the marriage bed hot and spicy. But to switch from the crispy heights - or chilly infernos - of the spirit to the sultry, lazy valleys of Eros, he needed at least a quarter of an hour, if not more.

John fixed his eyes on the table-top and kept silent. *Now, I've totally confused Carl!* he mused despondently, *Why did I tell him? He's rather ... old.*

For a short while, both sat under the canopy of dusk and stillness. John, of course, knew that Sveta was for years disgruntled over positions, lighting, timing and, most of all, the lack of ... *that*. But ... how to wrap that vague knowledge in precise words?

“Yes, y'see,” he said finally, “we're doing ... that, but she doesn't have ... *that*.”

He glanced at Carl, with the air of a Malay tourist stuck in the winter in an Alaskan Inuit village, where no one speaks a word of English. No words to express the unknown-before feelings – no words for snow and cold, besides ... 'I'm feeling *that*, help'!

Carl chuckled, trying to translate the imploring mood into concrete terms. “Alright, if I've got the meaning, you are ... sleeping together but she doesn't have ... orgasm?”

“Uh-huh,” the uncertain chuckling had switched sides. The glib pre-sales was ... grappling for words. *What nonsense!* John thought in silent rage, feeling that he was indeed blushing – not from some little shame, but from hated helplessness.

“Well,” Carl drummed on the table with his stumpy fingers, “if we'd remain, so to say, by the kitchen allegories, then ... a pancake can't get baked on its own!”

“Uh-huh,” John said absentmindedly, “you mean?”

“That ... *you* should warm up your wife,” Carl shrugged lightly, “Tell me, *if you can* of course – how long does your warm-up play last? A quarter of an hour, at least?”

“What ... play?” John returned with a sour grin, “which quarter of an hour? The ...whole run is over in five minutes or so ...”

“Like a fire-engine mission,” finished the older brother, feeling that he himself was finally warming up to the sudden task of a bed coach. Some glimmer had again appeared upon his spectacles – optimistic, encouraging, even playful. John noticed it, without a smile, with only a passing grief. Again, the older brother knew better ...

“Well,” he tilted back on the hard kitchen chair, “I’ve never known any other ... way. There’re no sex schools in Utrecht, either,” he trailed off, curious to know how he could explain things in a different way than he knew and, at the same time, mortified to plunge into the unknown waters.

“Why, man, what does your macho-instinct say?” Carl grinned a bit broader, “your tutor is, in simple words ... inside you, isn’t he?”

“Ugh,” John panted, “*my* tutor, or instinct, only tells me to push and ply and poke and plunge ... then, let *it* loose, turn to right side, and fall asleep! Short, brisk, and to the point.” he shrugged, with an innocent, or maybe helpless, air.

“And egotistically,” added the older man, “do you at least talk to Sveta ... after?”

“Well, that’s a good question.” John shook his head, “We often ... don’t talk *before*, either!”

“You don't say!” Carl pounded the guiltless table with his heavy fist. The half-full water jug shook and tinkled against the metal sugar-box. “A woman loves with her ears, write it down in block letters.”

“Really?” John countered with some mischievous tinge in his voice, “I thought it was with something else!”

“Phe-ew,” Carl sighed, “that's the first blunder of a man.”

“What ...” John furrowed his brow. He was returning to his own self, that is, to no longer listening closely, “which blunder of the first man?”

“Nope,” Carl giggled briefly. “Not to insult you – but you're acting like ... the first man on earth, who had never ...” he stopped talking and stood up, almost bumping his head into the plastic chandelier over the table. “A picture's better than a thousand words, right?”

John nodded and placed his chin on his hand. *What is Carl about to do?* he mused half-teasingly.

“A woman is like a castle,” Carl began using another allegorical story, this time beefing his colourful words up with uncertain gestures. “First, a bridge, then a moat with water, then a sky-high wall, then the garden of pleasures. Right?”

“Yep,”

“You're a *friendly* conqueror or an ally she wants to invite and entertain,” the wireless connectivity Ph.D. began his first body connectivity lecture, “how do you enter in?”

“Umm, like a paratrooper,” John's answer was prompt and plain, like an early apple on Newton's head, “straight into the pleasure orchard!”

“Johnnie...” Carl laid his hands aside. “Alright, another task: the garden is roofed, you can't land as a commando. Your actions?”

John shrugged.

“Then, I'd ... ask her to open?” he said uneasily. His dry mind, used to concrete operations on debit and credit, on refinancing or market shares, didn't possess a great imagination. The 'castle' with 'garden' and the like accessories were not the pictures in his gallery.

“Good,” Carl grinned warmly, “you talk to her, right? How do you begin, if I may ask?”

“Yep,” John shrugged again. “Simple ... I just amble into the bedroom and, if she's not asleep, ask her to ... take position and ... get ready”

“Holy mackerel!” Carl clamped his head with his large hands, “take position! ..you're not drilling a squad of new recruits! You should warm her up with your words, then, go on, with your fingers, with caressing, with nimbly massaging her erogenous zones”

“Which ... bones?” John's asked grumpily, expecting nothing less than an hour-long anatomy lesson, and rueful over his zero-level bedroom smartness.

“Zones, not bones,” chuckled Carl, “a woman has at least eleven – a wonderful ensemble from which a skillful conductor's baton could evoke the mood of a delicious spring breeze in the dead of an Antarctic winter.”

“Huh?” John never imagined his tight-lipped brother to produce sentences of such a length and style, “A *baton*? ... you mean, the ... caddy?”

Carl chuckled, squeezing a louder laugh.

“Why *that* all at once?” he asked, his left hand stuck into his jacket pocket, his right hand making a couple of vague figures in the air. “Johnnie, you're talking at work like Cicero, why not use your talent at home?”

“Oh, that's simple,” now, the glib brother was finally ready for a broader comment, “First off, I'm often bone-tired from babbling the whole day long, and expect some stillness in here; and second, I've tried, a couple of times, to tell her ... what happened at work, what did I feel over this and that ... she asked me to, in fact ...”

“Fine,” Carl grinned delightfully, “that's what a woman loves”

“Maybe,” John shook his head, “but, I'll tell you; I used to sit down and talk, she'd smile, listen, listen, smile and ... fall asleep. So, I stopped with ... such -”

“Overtures,” the music-wise engineer completed the phrase.

“Yep,” John stretched on his chair, “and I didn't talk too long, as far as I remember...”

“How long, more or less?”

“I guess, never longer than half an hour, maybe to forty-plus minutes” John scratched his ear. “Y' know - it's not that I didn't try at all but ... it only went from bad to worse.”

Carl nodded, saying nothing. He knew that John was now feeling nasty, guilty, and the last thing he wished to do was to make the unhappy man more miserable still. He tried to think up a solution, to find a way to share his ... bedroom skills, but there was nothing feasible at hand. One could coach a young ballerina, tutor an attorney, drill a soldier or train a new pilot – standing, sitting, marching or flying together with the student; but who'd drag a coach along into his married bed?

Suddenly, his short-sighted eyes fell upon an oversized kitchen pen which hung on the magnetic cord by the fridge. *Where there's a pen, a piece of paper should be*, the engineer thought, recalling their first spy talk in the pizzeria.

“Have you got a ... piece of paper?” he asked.

“Of course, a lot,” John shrugged lightly, “eh, you .. won't recite Kamasutra, I hope? Sveta always plunks the plump volume on my night-table ... a bunch of silly tales!”

“Of course not!” Carl chuckled, “why should I? Your wife is the best book you can read in the night, always fresh, never boring, an exciting journal, a pleasure garden, with a pond of champagne in the middle --”

John snorted. The brothers grew up in a painfully sober, straight-laced family in which wine was a symbol of Eucharist rather than an invention of dissolute Bacchus. “And while in bed you *don't* have to be sober!” Carl declared, with a strangely mixed, academical-frivolous air.

John stood up and glanced through the kitchen. The paper was plentiful in his office, high upstairs, yet he wasn't at all eager to sneak up and fetch a sheet or two – the

ladies may think he's overhearing their hushed talk. He patted the tops of shelves and the cupboards.

“Here!” he pulled a large piece of Bristol pasteboard from the top of a tallboy, “is that enough?”

“I hope so,” Carl conceded, “I'll just briefly describe the three stages of warming-up, some positions and ... the sweet zones,” he finished the phrase with almost, so to say, a modestly *hot* accent.

John leaned over the table. Down went the thickset pen, trying to catch and sketch and scribble and outline the positions of bodies, limbs and even fingers in the following stages of *jeux l'amour*. The yellowish, aged, unemotional paper refused to blush in the presence of all the new tricks and hints, which could perhaps teach a harem-owning sheikh a thing or two.

“In short, Johnnie,” said Carl, rounding up the session, “to begin with, any bla-bla is good, from weather to fads, don't forget to mention how lovely she looks in what she's already wearing. Rule one: a hot night begins with a warm compliment!”

“Uh-huh,” nodded the clerk, finishing the last sketch, complete with several arrows. He almost never noticed what she had on, and was chagrined that he couldn't reel off easy - or, *any* - compliments, which, in his direct mind, were simply a sort of disguised white lies.

“Rule two: a gentle touch - kiss her hands a couple of times, slide up to her shoulders,” went on the advisor, “remember that she'll still be willing to talk, even when you're *ready* for action. She ... just needs more time, to warm up!”

“How long, then?” John asked with a sullen air, “an hour? She'd again fall asleep in the meantime!”

“Patience, Johnnie – that's rule three,” Carl's glasses glimmered with cautious confidence, “plus a bit of self-assurance, and all will come out great. I can't teach you intuition, and that's a pity,” he added with a sudden shade of sadness in his generally inspired voice, “because ...that's what you need the most!”

“Know what?” John drew a long line under the 'digest', as though it was a yearly balance sheet, “Let's make coffee.”

“Fine!” Carl nodded, “can I ... ask a cup of tea?”

John stood up, recalling he and Carl were different in culinary tastes, too, squatted by a cupboard and began to grapple in its dark depths in search for a kettle. After a while, he found the device and poured hot water in. Next, he set the stainless jug on the electric stove - and hurriedly turned around, ready to take his place, read the paper through and ask a thing or two more.

“Argh!” exclaimed Carl, seeing how John's elbow dragged the kettle's long handle along and toppled the full jug onto the floor. Before it landed, with a noise of a crashing UFO, it spilled most of its hot contents onto the clerk's left cuff and right knee.

“Sheeps!” shouted John, whirling around in search for a napkin or any such like 'woman's stuff', to mop the water up. There weren't any in sight, and John, a complete layman in the kitchen, had no clue where they could be. The warm water from his drenched pants began dripping into his shoe.

"I'll take it off," he frowned, unbuckled his belt and pulled his trousers off. Next, he opened the kitchen door, intending to sneak into the entry lobby, where a pair of garden pants hung, and put these on. Carl's daughter lifted her bored face from the screen and waved her hand.

"Can I ask for a cup of tea, too?" she asked, blinking. John slammed the door closed. *Did they hear everything?* he thought uneasily.

"Carl, would you bring me the pants from the lobby?" he pleaded, "You Marianne is, um, almost seventeen."

"I guess she'd have no problem," Carl shrugged, standing up and squeezing water from a paper towel into the sink, "we've been together by the sea, haven't we?"

"Later she'd giggle and tell family members for the next five years." It seemed John wasn't at all lucky of being ridiculed by his witty niece. *By the coast, everyone's wearing shorts or bikinis, and here ...*

"Of course, I would." Carl opened the door and stepped in the living-room, "In the lobby, you say?"

He ambled through the cramped hallway into the tiny lobby, where rubber shoes lay in disarray and some clothes were hanging. There was a pair of green garden pants in its right corner, indeed. Carl rolled the all-important piece of clothing up and transported it back to the kitchen.

"Darn," John poked his leg into too small, crimped trousers, "these must be Sveta's! Didn't you seen any other?"

The engineer sighed and stomped through the living-room another time, now followed by closer looks from

his both adolescents, on whose faces double-meaning smiles began to flutter. On the rack, there was nothing more that resembled trousers.

"I'm afraid, there are no more," he spread his hands, "shall I ask Sveta, maybe?"

That wise advice came a second too late, however. While he still spoke, the dark-haired lady appeared behind his back and peered at the scene of awkward disarray.

Her blond-curled husband was jumping on one foot, red-faced and bare-legged, in the shimmering light of a dimmed chandelier.

"John, Carl, why are you sitting in the dark?" she demanded, turning the dimmer back to the maximum.

"Um, well, hmm," John replied, skipping on the other leg. Carl chuckled, not knowing what to answer. Any shade of a smile was gone from Sveta's face.

"What's happening here, guys?" she asked louder, with a growing irritation in her voice, "Where're your bottoms, John?"

"They're wet, honey." John finally yanked the feminine outfit on and attempted to button the trousers which were three sizes too small, "the kettle, you know?"

"They're *wet*," she repeated, with an almost sinister air, "well-" Without any more questions, she came to the counter and gloomily switched the coffee express on.

"Would you drink something?" she asked Carl, without looking at him, "Helen asked for a coffee and ... she thinks it's time to leave."

“A tea for me and for Marianne,” the engineer grinned lightly. Behind his glasses, hot, frivolous sparks still danced, and Sveta noticed it, with much displeasure. *What were they doing here?* she thought, suspecting the worst ...

... No sooner had the door closed behind their four Sunday guests, than Sveta's dark olives stared into John's bluish water wells.

“What's it all about?” she asked curtly, “you spend your every free minute with Carl, or in Amsterdam, with other guys. Don't I appeal to you anymore?”

“Honey, I love *you*,” John rolled his eyes, “we--”

“Why didn't you tell me where you were last Thursday afternoon?” she demanded, “why should I learn that from Helen, all over again?”

“But, honey, we --”

“Wait a minute: Carl let his wife know he's leaving, but you?” she came close to him, peering into his eyes like a hungry panther at a cornered rabbit, “you don't care what I think or feel!” After that frightful night, she tried hard to refrain her tongue, to be kind, to forgive him his irksome foibles ... but today, the old bitterness popped up to the surface, sudden, poignant and several times greater.

John sighed, turned his face away from the inquisitive, almost hypnotizing, gaze and retreated upstairs, to fetch a pair of whitened, frayed jeans he normally wore at home when there were no 'special' visits.

“I'll go to the loo,” he called from a safe distance, and escaped to the miniscule closet. There he crouched,

nervously listening to every rustle outside, and heavily in thought over his further strategy.

What shall I do? he pondered, both hands in his hair, *tell her all the truth, or postpone it for later, or try to avoid such deep stuff for now? I hope I managed to flip the pasteboard back onto the shelf-top ...* He was back in ten long minutes, smiling timidly, like a child caught gobbling up a forbidden cream cake before lunch, still unsure how much truth should he risk revealing. His wife wasn't in the hall. John sneaked back upstairs and pushed, cautiously at his bedroom's cream-coloured door. *She should have calmed down ...* he thought. But the stillness was only the eye of a hurricane.

“Ouch,” he uttered, seeing Sveta sitting on the bed with the newly written hot-night manual in her hands. *Dash, I thought I'd hurled it onto the topmost shelf!* he thought feverishly, unwittingly covering his mouth with his hand.

Sveta glanced at him askew, again set her eyes on the aged paper, and finally gazed at her man with an open disgust.

“What's *that?*” she asked coldly, lifting the A3-sized sheet into the air, as though it was legal hard evidence, demonstrated by the judge at a final court seating.

“It's...an instruction,” John replied, trying to pull his lips in a sort of rubbery grin. He felt the situation was silly and awkward, and his smooth words were pouring fresh oil onto a smouldering fire but – he just couldn't help himself.

“What?” came the next question, the voice taut like the steely muscles of a rising cobra, “what for?”

“For...sex, honey,” John countered, having decided, in a moment's time, to tell her the whole story, no matter what the result would be. Sveta gasped and sprang to her feet, knocking her sandaled foot against his shinbone. John stepped back.

“For *sex*?” she peered into his eyes so earnestly that John thought an electric discharge would crack in the air between them, “with *whom*?”

“With .. you, honey ...” muttered the hubby and turned his eyes downward.

It was a wrong move taken at the wrong time – the next moment a large pillow, snatched by a little brown-coloured hand, thumped upon his head. The impact was mighty enough to tear the cushion and send a little round cloud of feathers fluttering around the man's shoulders.

“Oops,” he mumbled, fearing that, after the thunder, the rain should follow. It did.

“With *me*?” the wife cried, insulted to her depths. She lifted the fluffy weapon for another hit, “How can you lie so cheekily? With me? Me? I'm a woman, ain't I?”

“Uh-huh,” he mumbled, swaying to avoid the pounding.

“And women have breasts, not 'tits'!” She hurled the gutted cushion onto the rumpled bed, and grasped the hapless sex handbook again, “Where have you learned all this, you wimp?”

“Umm--”

“Who is it for: 'begin with any bla-bla, kiss hands, babble over looks, embrace the waist, rub the erogenous zones, erection, ready,’” she cited from the paper, “who d'you think I am, a goose?”

“Eh, umm--”

“Why're you so still; you don't have anything t'say, right?” she yelled, now completely sure that her man saw her like a machine, “Dummy cheater! You only married me because you wanted my dowry! My gold! The gold my grandfathers laid aside through their sweat and blood, toiling on cotton fields in Suriname! They were sparing every dime to provide for my future, and what? 'Kiss the zones' is all I've got from you!”

“But--”

“Shut up!” with a lightning-quick movement, she grabbed the pillow and pounded him once again. Now, she felt white rage, a rare stance for a polite, restrained Hindu – but, when it strikes ... then, perhaps, one Bihari peasant can chase twenty Dutch soldiers away with one pillow, “Get out! You love *men*, now it's as clear as day! I always felt you gaze at big tall fat brown-haired guys, as a fly at a honeycomb! You --”

John giggled, half hysterically and half sardonically, so absurd and ridiculous her reasoning was. That was the last drop ...

“Get out!” she screamed in such a high pitch that a loose glass tinkled in the windowpane. Next, she skipped onto the bed, over it, flung the wardrobe doors open and began hurling John's clothes on him. He giggled and snorted, louder and louder, unable to hold back the bubbling laughter.

The first shirts, suits and socks, complete with wooden hangers, began reaching him in a couple of seconds. He caught some, escaped the direct hit of the others, and let still others drop onto the narrow stairway, tumbling over the steps. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught view of Tabby beginning to catch rolled socks and bite at his snake-long neckties.

He burst out in open laughter.

“Go away, you sucker, to your sweet guys, kiss their waists or bottoms or whatever!” Sveta shouted, emptying his wardrobe in such record time it could have put a trained circus juggler to shame, “You have guts to *laugh* now! You need *that* to learn sex! What a baby! If you'd only listen to me, or read one page of Kamasutra! But you never did! Now I know why! Get lost!”

With no more textile ammunition in stock, she hurled both doors open and reached for some packs and boxes on its bottom. The wardrobe tilted, creaking, ready to fall over, its bottom contents slid onto the floor. Sveta grabbed the first of them, a fatty pink magazine. John stopped laughing, finally, and moaned. *What a padlock!* he thought, stepping back for more security, *a worse moment for her to find the darn paper couldn't be found!*

“What?” she yelled again, “again nix to say? Did you plan this for *me*? The 'new vibrators, satisfaction guaranteed'? Did *you* buy it?” “I - I ... did, but --” John gulped and trailed off, too distracted to search for late explanations. Yes, he bought the thick pink-press magazine some two years ago, but not for the cool vibrator offer. A sort of funny manual on how to get more pep and spice in one's bedroom was there, at the last page. With chagrin he realized he never had time to look!

“Ouch!” John whooped as the thick volume whopped his shoulder. He suddenly realised it would, indeed, be wise to leave, at least for a while. Or, for a couple of days. Sveta was already too mad to talk to, and that silly magazine ... why didn't he stoke it away somewhere in his office?

He sighed, fidgeted and trampled downstairs, grabbing his briefcase along the way and picking up some stuff from the floor. Tabby mewed, snapped up his best bordeaux- coloured necktie and brought it to the owner.

“See you later, friend,” John muttered softly, picking up the tie and tripping towards the hall, schlepping a pile of shirts, jackets and stock reports he needed like air.

“Who are you talking to?” Sveta appeared on the stairway, with the torn pillow in her hands, “eh?”

She hurled the bulky cushion at him, sending another, more abundant feather cloud fluttering over the floor. John picked up the gutted object – it was his 'dowry', together with the whole furniture set, and a good sixty-plus per cent mortgage ... but it wasn't time to talk about peanuts, or try to mend a garden stool when the trees over it were ablaze.

He grappled in the dark lobby for his shoes, to find just one. He tucked a pair slippers, instead, in his jacket pockets; he'd put them on in the car. The keys ... the wallet ... the phone ... his laptop was always in his briefcase ...

While he loaded his chaotic baggage into his neat car (which was luckily his from the beginning), the house door swung open, and his damaged feathery dowry thumped upon the dewy driveway. Without a word more, the door slammed closed, the impact sending the copper plaque with

the names 'Sveta and John Cheesekop' down upon the reddish cobblestones. The plaque didn't break, however.

John grabbed the cushion, tucked it into the boot and gave his home one last look, only to see the green eyes of Tabby peering at him from the low window. The cat sat on his hind paws, mouth open, its claws desperately scratching the impenetrable glass.

Bye ... John nodded to his four-footed friend again, turned around and took his place at the steering wheel.

Suddenly, a sharp thought pierced him – he knew, liked, and felt sympathy for a speechless animal more than his own wife: he and Sveta lived, ate, slept together, went on holidays, and even laughed at a comedy, at times, yet ... they didn't actually know each other. As though a similar glass wall stood between them ...

...In the miniature central Holland, average car hops seldom last longer than an hour, so, according to these unwritten rules, in some forty minutes the auto with the silver four-wheels badge had decisively turned right. It headed into the small town of Waalbergh, lost in the Veluwe heatherland and pine forests between modern Apeldoorn and ancient Nijmegen, an area very well known to every Cheesekop.

It was already dark, the decrepit corner lantern gave out some shimmering light only when it wished to. The pallid-grey branches of an untrimmed poplar obscured even those flimsy rests of photons from reaching the drab pavement. His parents' house seemed empty, but it was a known mirage: John was sure they were in, and if not, he could still get inside – he'd always kept a spare key in his car's glove box. With a mixed feeling of a prodigal son and an

amateur burglar, he pulled the key out and set to the lock. It didn't fit.

John sighed, vaguely recalling what his dad said a half year or so ago. They wanted new locks, after some doubtful types began roving the neighbourhood. *So, you've installed them*, he thought, pressing the pre-war looking bronze bell knob. On the opposite side of the street, a window creaked open. The absence of light was, as is normal in small provincial hamlets, no hurdle for the friendly gossip ...

Within only two endless minutes (John pulled his head in shoulders, hearing at least three other sleeping-room windows open) the light, slow steps of an elderly man paced through the hall. The spyglass slowly opened from inside.

“Hi, dad, it's me, John!” he called in Dutch, shaking the rest of the feathers from his fair-coloured curls. The screeching of latches followed, and after a moment, an aged copy of John peeked outside, cautiously, behind the protecting chain.

“John?” his father was a man of few words, “fine. Come in.” Then, he was silent. As though his younger son had just come back from a corner shop, not from another city after a half-year absence.

As soon as the late visitor stepped over the threshold, more substantial steps creaked above. A tall, strongly-built lady in her late sixties stormed down the stairway.

“Oh, goodness, Johnnie, what's up?” she bellowed in English, throwing her plump hands in the air. “Where's your other shoe? Why all those clothes, and ...” she came

closer and brushed his hair with her large hand, “feathers? What on earth? Have you had an affair at home?”

“A bit, mom,” he tried to grin, “I’ll fetch the pillow from the car ”

“No, sonny, do sit down, you’re surely bone-tired. I’ll set coffee.” She grabbed the whole pile of clothes from his hands, almost lifting him up, too, and hurled them on the long leather bank, “Jack!” she turned her head to her husband, “bring the pillow, please, it’s surely the one I made myself, from lovely aunt Betty’s geese down! And don’t stand like a salt pillar, the pillow’s in John’s car - goodness, where else could it be?”

John sat down obediently, and smiled lightly. His mother was always the same - energetic, wordy, and lovingly predictable. After forty-four years together, his parents still spoke their own tongues, read their own newspapers and watched separate TV channels. Yet, they were best friends on earth, on that both he and Carl agreed without a shade of doubt.

In no time, over the hovering coffee steam and a rising pancake’s aroma, a friendly small talk followed. A side observer could have called it a monologue with a few cut-ins. But it had always been so, for years and decades, and his parents knew how to handle each other, without hard words or bickering. John envied it. *Does one need to be born with such knack?* he pondered, nibbling at the pancake and listening. According to the unwritten family tradition, children keep silent for the first five minutes at the table. John was still one ... or he still felt so.

“Sonny, cheer up,” his mom said, as though reading his mind. She patted him on his shoulder, whopping off a

couple of stray feathers. "You've just begun! What is five years, eh? A wife learns to fry an egg after two years in wedlock, a usual wife, I mean, *I* knew a lot before!"

"Um," his dad said, in Dutch or maybe in English.

"Of course I knew!" mother raised her arch-like brown eyebrows, "I knew a large cookery book by heart before we ever met!"

"I remember I often ate at the canteen then," returned the truth-loving father.

"Oh, don't say it was my cooking. You just wanted to." Mother stood up with excitement, brought a creamer from the kitchen and set it on the table, "You were so spoilt by *your* mom!"

"There's already one," father pointed to the porcelain cream jug, omitting any comment on being spoiled. In fact, he wasn't listening too closely.

"Oh, yes, yes," mom trimmed her thick tortoise-shell glasses, "I didn't notice." She turned to John again, "Don't worry – after twenty years all wranglings will be forgotten, right, oldie? We haven't quarrelled for ten years in a row, eh?"

Father kept silent, contemplating two creamers, one full, another empty, crowding the center of the table. He didn't like it so. Why should there be two, if one is perfectly enough? He began feeling a bit annoyed by women as such, and his in particular.

"What did you say?" he asked without much emotion, resisting the temptation to stand up and bring the useless empty jug back. Ten years ago, he'd just do it ...

John glanced at his watch and joined the conversation. "That, in twenty years all quarrels between you both were gone and forgotten. Right, mom?" The mother nodded three times.

"Well," Father tried to glance upward to the ancient chiffonier adorned with three Delft blue vases, "I guess ... we surely haven't quarrelled for twenty-two days by now."

"See?" Mother poked the fair-haired son so heartily with her elbow that his half-eaten pancake almost landed in her tea cup, "as usual, I'm right!" She triumphantly stood up again, to bring another portion of warm pancakes from the beeping microwave.

"John," Father whispered to him, "bring the other jug back, please. It's so ... silly." John nodded, grinned, snatched the empty vessel and, hiding it in his hand, hurried to the kitchen.

"Pardon?" Mother, whose ears were a class better than her eyes, loomed over the table, her face more sour than the cream, "Are you saying I'm *silly*? John--bring it back!"

6

DELIRIUM

On Monday morning, John, for the first time in a year, was awakened very early by a mini-rooster creaking, like a rusted hinge, at the neighbour's micro-farm. He grinned amiably, recalling his teenage years in the countryside, the morning chill, the rumbling of a milk wagon and the lazy barking of bored shepherd dogs. He stood up and cautiously tiptoed toward the monumental chestnut chair upon which a solid, dark-navy suit hung.

The formal, dated, naphtaline-scented set belonged to his dad. By a sudden twist of the padlock, John ransomed from his home three brown pairs of pants and two bordeaux jackets, but no complete set. The colours were 'biting', Mom declared with full authority, and the only solution was a borrowed, 'serious' suit. Dad was glad to agree and to air his wardrobe a bit.

While the junior clerk, clad like a Home Secretary in pre-Churchill times, sat in his car en route to the nearest train station, his smartphone buzzed. It was the Boss. *Fine, man, it's not yet half past eight!* the employee pondered, *and my office shift begins at nine ...*

"John, good morning, are you feeling better?" The director spoke softly, perhaps too softly, and with an unnatural kindness in his normally tough voice. *You never begin a talk with the rank-and-file with anything as kind as 'good morning',*

man, what's up? John thought, both curious and baffled. “*Are you feeling unwell or....?*”

“I'm all right,” he answered, “coming to the office.” He hesitated. It was yet too unclear which wind he represents today--- to sail with or battle with – a lull, a breeze, or a gale.

“Uh, oh, can you, if possible, please put on a ... umm, more formal suit?” the next phrase followed, mild as a morning zephyr on Easter Island. John grinned and gulped, swallowing a remark. What's up? A sudden funeral at the Transport Ministry? But he's not a fish to be invited...

“I'm already wearing one,” he said, rather plainly and without emotion. “Is a dark-navy colour fine?”

“Oh, yes, it is,” the boss chuckled enthusiastically, “it's quite possible you'd score an important contract today,” he trailed off mysteriously.

“Good.” John bit his lip, still unable to grasp what was it all about. “In Amsterdam?”

“In Rotterdam. A taxi is already arranged. Please drop by my office when you arrive.” The wary talk was coming to a sure end, “See you!”

“Good-bye, Mr. Stelling.” John flipped his phone close and trimmed his formal tie, trying to figure out what important deal could await him, as nothing like this was noted in his weekly agenda. It took only two right turns to reach the backwater, barn-like, unassuming Ede station with a couple of demure, tiny bars at the left and a mighty, hectare-sized bicycle parking lot at the right. He hadn't been there for ages either, but this time no adolescent memories popped up in his mind--too busy for uncalled-for emotions.

What is it all about? he thought uneasily, furrowing his brow, *Rotterdam? Matt had to get there today...*

John pulled out his handy again and scrolled the 'Names' menu down. 'Matt Dapperman' entry was there, of course, near the bottom, not too often used, yet ... He pressed the green receiver key.

"The number six-nil-eight-five-nil-five-ten-two-two is currently unavailable," the cold voice of a phone robot plunked out, like change from a torn pocket.

"What?" John asked aloud, not believing his ears, and pressed the key again, climbing up the steep stairs to the platform. The same lifeless computer voice shared with him the same useless information.

"Dash ..." the baffled man in the baggy suit whispered, "Matt's phone's *off*? He must have died, then!"

In fact, John was neither right nor wrong. Matt wasn't completely dead, yet for a half an hour he wasn't just 'alive'. He wasn't a common human being anymore. His inner eyes had finally opened, and he was now a Prince of Jungaria, the new kingdom which had engulfed Holland after a series of sweeping floods, fulminating volcano eruptions, and an alien invasion which he bravely fought, tooth and nail, this very morning. Why did they stoke the throne successor away and cram the national hero into a shabby-looking chamber, one was left to guess.

Only fifty fleeting minutes earlier, Matt, still a tame office creature, had finished a heavy phone conversation with the boss. He was about to leave for the office – but instead, he flopped on his tiny couch in his cramped flat some four miles away from the bank. His teeth chattered.

...I was right, that vessel with arms and warheads and heavens knows what else caught fire ... and I'd have to enter the charred chamber to assess the damage ... and ...and ... then it'd all blow up! ... he thought, feeling that the uncontrollable, wild, tower-high fear began to grip him, squeezing his heart like a gigantic vice, *it would all blow up, and ...I'd fly back here, roasted like a piece of steak ... that tub would explode, surely, it also has nukes ... a lot of ... and it would all blow up ... no ... not that ... no-*

Matt dashed to his skimpy medicine chest, where a lonely jar of Paracetamol pills lingered, forgotten for years. He didn't remember when he had a gripe last time, let alone any major disease. Next to the defunct painkiller, however, three mysterious little boxes stood, stacked one upon another. Matt grinned like a six-digit lotto winner – he recalled that, almost a year ago, a weird-looking, long-haired, hooded chap he barely knew from the university, sold him the packs during a noisy birthday party flung at Matt's home.

The smelly pills were distilled, according to the modern Hippocrates, from some miraculous roots and shrubs which only grew atop Kilimanjaro, blossomed once in three years, and contained really unique stuff able to crank one's temperature up, for a 'healthy fever' and an immunity boost. The more or less sober-minded, healthy-as-a-bullock, senior clerk bought them only to get rid of the annoying peddler. Now, the dust-gathering boxes suddenly turned out to offer him the last straw...

“Uh-huh,” mumbled the pale, frightened square-shouldered guy, scanning the instructions and 'side effects' flyer with the speed of a professional editor. 'By overdoses: hallucinations, uncontrollable fever, in some cases delirium,' read the leaflet, printed on a shabby grey slip which resembled a shred of toilet paper rather than a respectful

druggist' info, 'maximal doses: three pills for an adult weight up to 200 Lb. **Do not mix up with alcohol. Danger!**' the boldface letters reeled before his eyes without much reaction. He's not boozed, and ... three pills ... hmmm, that's for a cachexic creature; for *him*, thirteen would be fine.

He gulped down a dozen lopsided, bitter, greasy pills and dashed to the kitchen, turning the tap open. Normally, in ninety-nine cases out of hundred, a stream of clear, fresh, carefully recycled water would gush from it. Awaiting the cool jet, Matt grabbed a glass from the cupboard. The tap grunted, snorted and produced one single drop of water. That was all.

“Darn!!” Matt hollered, throwing the useless glass into the equally useless sink, “A water main conked out again! Darn old town!”

He staggered with a heavy foot and still heavier stomach, back to the living-room. Any water in the watering can? No, also dry as dust – his cactuses didn't need much H₂O. Feeling a bit dizzy, more from expectation than from the pills themselves, he stumbled to the kitchen and swung the fridge open. There should be some juice, milk or yoghurt.

There were none of those, however – a solitary, tall beer-can gazed at the fearful insurer from the empty door shelf. Matt caught his reflection on the dark cylinder's surface, and smirked, weakly. *Mixing with alcohol forbidden?* he thought briefly, *but beer is no alcohol ... it's a soft drink, right?* In a second, the contents of a pint of strong porter had left its tin vessel, cooling down the man's belly and appeasing the tinkling sensation inside it.

For a while....

Smoldering hot and sweaty like a sauna client, Matt smiled broader and broader. Now, he loved this day. He was safe. The fever was clearly rising, he lowered all four windows of his car, yet two streaks of sweat still trickled down his cheeks, as though he stood at the mouth of a blast-furnace. That was *very* good. Soon, so soon, he'd stop his car on an empty lawn, anywhere, and call an ambulance. And the ambulance would call the bank! And ... he's clean, no visiting of charred cabins or teetering between warheads; a day off would serve him very well, too – he, Matt, is no more dense than John, who feigned those heart attacks last Thursday.

The senior clerk rode on, first whistling, then wheezing and panting, turning the power-steered wheel slacker and slower with every yard. Now, he felt unbearably hot. No, opening windows wasn't enough, he should open whole doors, asap. *Well*, he thought, wiping the sticky stream of sweat from his face with his drenched sleeve, *all is fine with me, but why do so many roofs have today such strange pink, whirling, twinkling balls bouncing upon their tops? And ... those four-winged, wasp-coloured birds, buzzing low over my car, are ... so large? So many?*

A-ha, I'm in Italy! ... there are such giant birds, pink houses, and also green people ... a lovely place ... everyone is there singing in the streets! Bo-ono giorri! It's me, Matt, prince of ...

&

“To patrol ninety-two, Amcorps, receive. A man is standing on the road crossing at Muntplein square, singing, babbling, waving hands and blocking traffic. Control and handle, ambulance sent to the spot, urgency level middle, receive.”

“Patrol ninety-two, order taken,” replied the motorcycle rider in white, blue-striped leather police uniform, and rode off. Even in the early rush hour in Amsterdam, a two-wheeler was possibly the only motor carriage still able to move one from point A to B.

And, at point B, a rumpled, red-faced chap jovially yelled a carol in a foreign tongue, squatting in the very middle of the second busiest road junction in the capital. He swirled and swayed upon the rumbling roof of his fire-engine red car which had all its doors, its boot and bonnet wide open. Some motorists lingered about, next to their stalled vehicles, others were taking photos or video shots, the third group sat despondently upon the very warm bonnets of their cars or grumbled into their mobiles. There was no movement on the roads for miles around.

“O-o so-olle mia! O donna gonna! Mi qianti bianti fianti pianti ma-mma mia!

I can sing so wonderfully, right? Well, well, no such applause, I've just began ... some green-faced guys in white aprons? ... what? ... what, shall we go? No way, I'm making folks here happy with my voice! Go away! ... pronto, pronto! ...what? other public is awaiting? .. thank you, thank you, ciao!”

&

...The small toxicology ward by the Amsterdam University hospital was a sleepy place on Mondays. Most weekend booze or drugs cases had already been 'fixed', and the doctors, who often – quite often, indeed – had to toil on Saturdays or even Sundays (two last sacred cows in pagan Holland) had their unofficial, but real, days off on Mondays. A lonely third-year medical student, Joost Wessels, sat there on a tall, hard chair, yawning and poring over a full-sized

anatomy atlas. The final exam wasn't far away, and he'd again forgotten the Latin names of all skeleton parts, except the *mandibula*. That was the jaw bone – daily used by any student for nibbling at sandwiches, jeering at snobbish deans or chatting to one's sweetheart.

A high-pitched phone buzz destroyed the laid-back idyll in a brutal way. The future physician shook, raised his own mandibula from the fist on which it rested, and reluctantly took the receiver.

“Toxicology?” The curt ambulance man didn't greet him or wait for an answer, “Hum, we've got a hallucinating guy, age thirty-plus, the police is searching for papers.”

“Have you applied a tranquilizer?” Joost was worried. “A piperazine or diazepam, at least?”

“No, man, we don't have such heavy stuff anymore!” the voice on the other end chuckled, “and he's already too high and too active! Have ye got a strait-jacket?”

The slender-built student bit his lip. A fine beginning of the week.. “Yes, of course,” he replied, cautiously, “should I call for more staff?”

“Surely,” replied the ambulance man, with a peculiar, half-compassionate, half-teasing intonation. As though he knew Joost was alone and no heavyweight judo champ.

“So far,” Wessels threw the receiver back, to pick it up again in a fraction of a second. Who's normally on duty today? Whom could he call for an emergency? He tapped, feverishly, one number after another...

...John reached his office some full forty minutes earlier, in a fine mood. Like most Dutch, he had a built-in feeling of obligation, of getting things right. What 'right' meant was now open for discussion on many levels in society, yet for John, on this particular day, it was plain: he'd wanted to get even with his last week's shortcoming. And now, it succeeded.

Followed only by the eyes of a disgruntled cleaning woman, John ambled upstairs. The boss' door stood wide open. Hmmm.

"Good morning. Can I....?" asked the junior clerk, stalling like an English setter, at the broad copper threshold.

"Of course! John, how're you?" the director lifted his head from a thick file with two gilded anchors on its cover. "Please sit down."

John did as asked, carefully hiding a wry smile. When did he hear any 'please' from the boss in the last years? When did *anyone*, besides the Madame, of course, hear it? But it wasn't the end of the surprises.

"Would you like a cuppa coffee?" asked Mr. Stelling. John's brows flew up.

"Umm," he hemmed, not sure what to say.

"I've got my own coffee-express last Friday," the manager smiled smugly, "I'll make one cup for you, too."

"Thank you, sir," John murmured, rather uneasy. Which fly had bitten boss this time? Surely not the tse-tse. He didn't have to guess for long.

“Matt is sick,” the manager took the helm firmly in his hands, “and I’d like *you* to underwrite a ship in Rotterdam. I trust you can.”

“Oh,” was the only word that passed from John's lips. There were two reasons to be baffled: Matt had *never* been sick, and he, John, had *never* done marine insurance. He didn't even know where a freight ship had its engine! The director tilted his head.

“John, I know, you've never done the stuff,” he said, softly but resolutely, “but the file is ready to the last word, the customer agreed on all main points – you just go, see, talk and sign. And go back home, no need to return here. A cool plan?” the inquisitive, lively, small eye blinked.

“Of course,” John furrowed his brow, “I can of course ... talk, but ... what should I talk about?”

“I'll explain.” The boss turned the weighty file around and placed it before the clerk, “the fire broke out here, see the red arrow?”

John nodded hastily.

“This means hull damage. It was covered by the previous insurance, which expired, according to the rules, after the first major fire on board. You need to sign up a new one. Simple?”

“Uh-huh,” John nodded cautiously, “indeed, nothing complex.”

“Then as for the engine,” the director jauntily stood up and brought two fine china cups on a cork tray. Then he pressed on with the business at hand. “See the blue arrow beneath? The camshaft came loose, it needs new bearings,

otherwise the temperatures in the tropics will destroy all the machinery beyond repair. And the cargo can't wait. You grab? Every day behind schedule costs eighteen thousand greenbacks.”

“Alright,” John nodded a bit firmer, “a sprint insurance for a speedy repair.”

“Exactly,” the boss said, “that's why I selected you for the task – you're just smart enough for it.”

John smiled modestly, sipping his coffee and leaving the compliment without a comment. The director fetched a business card from his briefcase and handed it over to the employee.

“That's the direct phone to my friend in Dutch Marine Register. If any problem develops, say, on a professional level, don't hesitate to call. He knows all you can imagine about ocean ships, special cargoes and broken engines. Okay?”

“I'd try to do my best,” John folded the bulky file, weighing at least five pounds, and crammed it into his slim briefcase, which wasn't, like its owner, used to such big stuff.

“Can I read it through in my office?” he asked, standing up.

“You'll read it in the taxi,” nodded the manager – politely but firmly, “the cab is already by the door, if I'm correct.”

“Oh,” John was a bit astounded by the fire-engine speed deal. At this moment, the intercom rang. Boss took the receiver, listened, and barked a couple of words.

"The cab's ready," he told the employee, "and I'm totally sure you'll get it right. Good luck!"

"Good-bye, sir." John walked out of the spacious office and stumbled downstairs to the entry hall. *Would the cabbie again happen to be Selim?* He thought half-jokingly.

"Good morning, sorry for being late," the taxi chauffeur remarked. Then, he ducked inside the cab and opened the rear door. "To Rotterdam?"

"Yes," sighed John, climbing into the back seat.

While the taxi rode down the crammed lane toward the city ring, an ambulance with its twinkling light on but its siren off passed them at a high speed. The driver chuckled.

"Umm?" John half-asked, without lifting his head from the file.

"Fourth time today," the driver said, "and I spent an hour in the morning in a darndest jam I've ever seen!"

"Uh oh," muttered the clerk distractedly, "why?"

"Oh, they say a guy danced upon his car and sang in French, in the middle of a road crossing!" the cabman shrugged, "those loony tourists again!"

John produced no answer. He had just an hour or less to learn the complex art of multimillion-worth business branch, and to strike a deal which wouldn't misfire or backfire.

...Just a couple of miles away, two sweaty ambulance chaps and one shivering student tried to get the no longer jovial, broad-shouldered man into the ward hall.

“And what -- you call *this* my throne chamber?” thundered the new visitor, “where's the chamberlain? Where's the butler? Why' re you all wearing those silly white liveries? Get them off, quickly! At once!”

Joost, with a hundred-plus booze, drug and psychotic cases on his resume, did as asked. The ambulance men hesitated.

“You!?” Matt glared at the first of them, “you, a mere worm, a serf, disobey *me*, Prince of Jungaria? You're playing with your life!” He grabbed the physician by the apron and ripped his clothes to both sides – with enough wild energy to cleave an oak trunk. The medical man's white apron, khaki-coloured blouse under it and black T-shirt under the blouse tore in two like wet paper, his phone flew out from the inner pocket, flopping upon the marble floor five yards away and shattering in hundred pieces.

“Run!” Joost whispered aloud, “I'll cope!”

He didn't have to ask twice. Snatching their baggage and the remains of the phone, the pale men hurried to their pallid-yellow car and drove away, tires screeching.

The student, hastily classifying the situation as an acute post-alcoholic psychosis, was left alone-- again. He knew, from study manuals and a year of practice, that too large a crowd could enrage such a 'client'. Shouting could do the same, not reacting to a loony order too. And so on.

“Your majesty, please,” he bowed, pointing to the intensive therapy chamber, “the chamberlain is coming soon.” Matt, mumbling something, staggered in the direction shown, but somehow missed the four-foot wide door. He slammed, instead, against a glass cabinet next to it, causing it

to sway and sending two flower-pots tumbling down from its top. Joost, amused and scared, covered his mouth with his palm. Would his patient survive till the department professor arrived? How could he lure such a 'sovereign' into the chamber and set him on the infusion?

In the meantime, the wacky duet of ethyl alcohol and saline acid, juggling the stray molecules of whimsical root extracts in Matt's stomach, squirted an immense crowd of neuro-accelerators into his overheated brain. The last wasp-coloured birds and green-faced people had dissolved among the violet palm trees; more tangible, frightening images took their turn. It was time for action ... the decisive action ... the *last* action, to defeat the teeming enemy army.

Dogs! Doggies! You're here! Great! Bark loud! Bark! Thousands of battle dogs are coming, from every side, to my palace ... every doggie has three hundred teeth! And ... the teeth are--knife-sharp! They're r-razor-sharp! I'll show you, friends, what to do! First, you bark! ... rrr-uff, rrr-uff, uff, ruff! Bark all together! Good! Great! Once again! And now – bite!!

“Oh, goodness, he's barking!” sister Sophie, the first of the ward's female staff members, exclaimed, barely stepping over the threshold. Her little faux leather bag slipped from her slim hands and landed upon the metal rubbish bin, producing a loud 'bang'.

“Who's there?” Matt whooped, slowly turning around like a heavy tank's turret, a cracked flower-pot in his hand. “You take to arms again, you vile Anchurians? No way! Dogs! Servants! Armour-bearers! Listen to me! Bite! Smash! Fight! Strike! I'll show you how--”

The pot with dried-up geraniums launched toward the wall, scoring a direct-hit on the three-feet tall

photoportrait of academician Ivan Pavlov and sending a cloud of dust, dry ground and earthenware across the room.

“Joost! Catch him!” yelled Sofie, skipping around the ward like a prima ballerina in a dynamic, quick-paced modern group dance, “Argh! He's bitten me on the ankle! Have you called Professor Jacobson?”

“Long ago!” Joost shouted back, not risking a direct confrontation with the patient, obviously as strong as a hippopotamus. The strait-jacket lay ready on his chair, yet it was a pure pipe-dream to attempt to fit it now. He needed *at least* five brawny, well-trained men, and doubted if that many – or, that few, rather - would cope. He ducked under his desk and grabbed his warm, sweaty, sticky handy again.

“Mister professor, mister professor, the patient is now wildly active, he's barking and hurling flower-pots,” Wessels whimpered, “what's the prognosis? What shall I do?”

“It's a delirium,” he heard from the other end of the line, “I'd call the surgery, dentistry and gynaecology bosses. They'll find and send some guys to our ward.”

“When?” Joost trembled again, hearing another flower-pot shattering -- this time against a glass cabinet with chemicals and liquid nitrogen. “When will they come?”

“Hold on for half an hour. Have you got some nails and a hammer?”

“A *hammer*?” the student's eyes widened, “what for?”

“You must nail all entry doors to the hospital chambers, the sooner the better.”

“But ...” he gulped, “I can't get out ...”

“Listen, listen,” the professor tried to comfort and mobilise him at the same time, “what is he raving about?”

“Some ... dogs, armour-bearers ... a palace ... argh!” the fledging doctor heard a desk next to his tumbling over. Was his hiding-place the next to go?

“Alright, then, walk on all fours,” came the cool-headed advice, “use your brains and they won't be smashed out! Eh, you can sneak out through the fire exit, am I right?”

“Yep,” yipped the student, assuming the role of a dingo, and ventured out.

&

The taxi rolled into the last open space for civil transport in the parking lot by wharf twenty-eight in the vast, endless horseshoe of Rotterdam haven. It rumbled over bumpy driveway, and stopped. John paid, took the change without looking, and ambled, uncertainly, to the nondescript pier. The ship concerned wasn't yet allowed to moor, a couple of commissioners were to visit it, and a handful of papers signed.

The slender clerk carried in his slim briefcase the lengthiest and perhaps the most important of all paperwork. To complete it, he had to find the cutter named *Feyenoord Mermaid* – the name spoke volumes to anyone who knew a little bit about Dutch football. The cutter's owner was surely a crazy fan of the local club, which meant that one should better not even mention the name of its Amsterdam arch-rival, Ajax. Or the name of capital itself.

John glanced around. Along the dock, littered with rusty steel rope ends and squashed beer-cans, a couple of

jean-wearing folks strolled. They didn't look at him, let alone wave or smile. John came by, tripping between the rows of corpulent, cawing seagulls which didn't even bother to skip aside.

“Sorry,” he said to the first, “I’m looking for the skipper of “Feyenoord Mermaid. I’ve got an appointment at ten forty this morning.”

“It’s me, mate,” replied the sun-tanned, bearded chap in faded sweater. “To the Marguerita?”

“Yes,” John smiled cautiously, “am I the only visitor?”

“Yep,” returned the skipper and pointed with his coarse hand toward a low, once orange brown-streaked hull. It was adorned at the bow with a plastic figure of a tailless siren and a deflated orange ball. John headed forward, stumbling over the narrow stairs and setting his foot, reluctantly upon a wobbly deck – for the third time in his life.

“Eh, man, are you from Utrecht, maybe?” asked the captain, suddenly more friendly as he detected a clear central-Dutch accent. “You don’t speak like a zero-twenty!”

John grinned broadly. Zero-twenty was a pet name, or maybe a jeering nickname for the natives of Amsterdam. This was the capital’s dialing number.

“I’m living there,” he replied, “are you from the east, too?”

“I’m from Veenendaal.” The skipper grinned. “So, two land neighbours found each other on water, too!” The curt tones, reserved for the Zero-twenties, had evaporated completely.

“It seems,” John shook his curly head, waited a moment, then asked, “can you please tell me a thing or two over ... ships?”

“O' course, whatever you will,” the man nodded and turned the helm. The aged water taxi shuddered and plunged its jagged bow into the bottle-green water of Rotterdam bay. “What you need the most?”

“Umm,” John rubbed his clean-shaven chin, “I ... really need *everything*.”

“Phew ...” the skipper pulled at his pointed beard, “is it your first tub, then?”

“Yes,” John nodded, “I'm just, um, replacing a sick profi.”

“Alright,” the captain tumbled the engine speed lever to 'slow'. “Ask, man.”

“First,” John knit his brow, “where's the engine in a seaship?”

“At the poop,” replied the seaman, “mostly, just beneath the crew cabins.”

“Uh-oh,” John shook his head, “and, the fuel tanks? Also there?”

“Mostly these are shifted to the stem,” came the answer, “to balance weight.”

“Uh-huh,” John nodded again. He had no clue what 'stem' could be, and was too confused to keep asking about every trifle. *Is 'stem' a mast? he thought briefly, or a sort of onboard orchard?*

“Y’ know, I should examine the engine, where some, uh, bearings have come loose, and also a cabin which burned out,” he told the man at the helm, “What should I turn the most attention to?”

“Look,” the captain pointed to a low-sitting oiler pulled by a tugboat into the inner haven, “if there’re no under-the-waterline damages, examine the hull and the deck. Any holes, missing bolts and ill-fitting hatchways could endanger the vessel or cargo.”

“Uh-huh,” John nodded, “and ... why so?”

“Because, come any storm, tons of water would rush inside, within hours!” the sea dog gazed at the landlubber as a Pope might have gazed at a crude heathen suddenly found in the heart of Vatican. But he didn’t burst into a sneering laughter.

“Alright,” John nodded, scribbling on a tiny card. Then, he pulled the file from his briefcase. “What’s the ... umm, a cumshaft?”

“You mean, the camshaft?” corrected the skipper, this time unable to refrain from a light giggle, “it’s a large, let me say, axle with eccentric runners which press the valves and make the fuel injection possible.”

“Is it ... thicker than my hand?” asked John.

The captain chuckled. “On a vessel like Marguerita, some thirty thousand tons deadweight, the camshaft is thicker and longer than a street lantern.”

“They claim the bearings on this ... shaft came loose,” John went on, “what could such a repair cost?”

The water taxi boss whistled and scratched his ear. "I'd guess, more than I can earn in five years!" he said with a chagrined smile.

In the meantime, the cutter steered near the sooty stern of a freight ship with half-erased letters 'Boni ... Mar..e' on it and pulled along her board. The run-down water taxi looked, now, quite a new and elegant vessel. At the freighter's deck, no one appeared. The skipper pulled at a leather strap which swayed above his shoulder, producing two loud, shrill toots. There was still no one in sight. To complete the ghostly, forbidding scene, nothing more than a frayed rope ladder was hanging down the weathered ship's board. The enigmatic 'Boni Mar..e' with her sooty stern and decrepit, slanting funnel resembled an oversized copy of Flying Dutchman limping home after a century-long voyage.

"Are we on the spot?" asked John, measuring the towering steel wall with his un-expert eye, "the thing is ... quite tall!"

The captain nodded, raising his brows a bit. His passenger was a 'land mouse' in its purest form ...

"Umm, don't they have a sort of ... staircase?" the timid-as-a-mouse clerk asked, swallowing, at the last moment, the word 'lift' – which, he concluded, mustn't be present as a standard tackle in freight ships.

"Well," the skipper frowned slightly, "they say their accommodation ladder's burned. See that dangling rope thing? A pilot ladder."

"Yep," John nodded, hiding his fright under a deadpan face, "is this *all* they have? How ... d'you climb it?"

“Normally,” the hunched, graying seaman shrugged, “with y'r hands and feet. You ain't handicapped, if I'm right. I can still climb it with my hands only--both ways.”

“Phew,” the clerk whistled. The suspiciously thin, patched-in-a-couple-of-places rope ladder was swaying in the morning breeze like a lonely pear at the end of a top bough. It seemed ripe to fall down at any moment, and was short of reaching the deck of the low-sitting cutter.

“Hey, man, at least three guys older than you climbed it yest'day,” said the sea cabbie, “only th' coast guard has a helicopter. The rest rub their bellies against the board!”

“Alright.” John peered up at the some twenty-plus yards tall board, from which an eighteen-yard ladder was hanging, “can I leave my jacket ... by you?”

“Only because you're from Utrecht, man,” grinned the skipper, “I'm Johan, by the way.”

“John,” nodded the other central Hollander. Both local compatriots grinned. It was double fine to meet a fellow from the same area, who was sharing your name, too.

Next, both the sea cabbie and the clerk ventured onto the tiny deck. The rope ladder was unreachable from it, but seemed to be more accessible from the cutter's rusty cabin roof.

“Haven't you got a ... strap, to hang your briefcase at?” asked the captain, recalling his previous guests. “Most folks who turned out before you carried rucksacks.”

“I've no such thing,” muttered John, peering at the soiled ladder, dotted with chipped wooden planks every two yards or so, “I'm in for the first time.”

"I'd dig something out for you." The other John shook his head and disappeared in a hatchway. In less than a minute he was back with an oversized light-brown belt or, maybe, a large dog's leash.

"Try this, friend!" he boomed jovially, "should be long enough. It's from my dad's stall. He sold all his mares years ago--"

"Th-aank you," John replied politely, trying hard to hide an unpleasant surprise. *I'm not a stallion*, he thought grudgingly, *and no circus acrobat!*

The boat shuddered again and crawled a couple of fathoms forward. John, barely able to keep his precarious balance, snatched the low-most, decrepit wooden cross bar of the pilot ladder. Yet, the swinging object was still too high for his legs to stand. He looked down, helplessly and hopefully.

"That's good!" the second John glanced at the first one, "wait a bit – for a larger wave. The cabin will, then, skip up. You catch a moment ... and hey-ho!"

"Dash," muttered the clerk, not used to such stunts as hopping over a swelling sea, "what if I dive between the ship and the cutter? A flounder flat John isn't of much use..."

"You'll cope," he heard suddenly, and shook. The familiar, lively, ready, cheerful voice! *The Silver Cloud again!* John thought, wrenching his neck to lift his head up. He was right – the whirling, indestructible, unreachable round object hovered, as it seemed, miles above the rusty board, "Wait two minutes."

Indeed, after a hundred or so endlessly long seconds, a crested wave from a passing uncomfortably close speed-boat juggled the water taxi up, sprinkling the white-handed office man with a profuse pailful of salty water and foam. He snorted, grasped the second cross-bar of the pilot ladder and finally struggled up to his knees at the first. "Thank you!" he said briefly, trying to be thankful to the Cloud for a very timely pointer.

Panting and sweating at the swaying ladder, John stubbornly crawled upwards, feeling his weighty briefcase painfully whopping his ass. *What a tosh!* He thought in a quiet fury, *Matt had a good nose to opt out ... he's surely not climbing up anywhere, except to his bed!*

... "Joost, he's climbing up the cabinet, argh, ay-ay-!" shrieked Sofie, balancing on one foot atop a tall furniture piece and trying to hold back the enraged Prince of Jungaria, bombing him with feeble packs of cotton wool. "Where can I run to? I can't fly!"

"Stop jumping for a mol!" the student pleaded, "if you'd stand still, behind a curtain or such like ... maybe he won't notice you!"

The pale, gasping lady, scared out of her wits and bitten a couple of times on her both ankles, crash-dove down from the massive cabinet which contained, besides bandages and books on traumatology, also a man's skeleton dubbed Hamlet. This bony chap, capped by a couple of pranking freshmen with a frivolous Panama hat, had been brought a year ago by Professor Jacobson from his former New Jersey clinic.

The busy student, standing on all fours, a long screw-driver in his mouth, hopped on. As a 'battle dog' – in

the eyes of the raging sovereign, of course – he had a lot of freedom now. A couple of barks and growls, and you can do what you'd imagine – until the Prince's next command.

Joost was darting back and forth like a squirrel in the wheel. He decided to avoid any needless noise and to use screws, instead of nails, to block all the ward chambers' doors, behind which five alcoholic and two drug patients shivered. *Now, they'd finally quit for good*, thought the future toxicologist with a strange mix of joy and jitters.

In the meantime, the situation around the strategically important wooden cabinet had changed. Sofie managed to escape into a tiny staff WC, slammed the door behind her and locked it. She felt a bit pricked by her conscience, to have left a slim youngster alone in the heat of the battle, yet both her ankles cried out in acute pain; landing down from the six foot high cabinet, she nearly twisted her knee; and she was just awfully scared, too.

After a jerk and a tilt, the tall chest creaked and moved a half-inch forward; both folding doors opened, and several bulky books rumbled out from its left half. From its right one, the neat skeleton stared, unblinking, its eyeless sockets blandly open, at the scene of savage ravage. Then, Matt's blood-tinged eyes caught view of Hamlet ...

“Urrr, arhhh, that's *you*, coward, the false king. I've got you at last!” he boomed, grappling for his 'sword', which was, until this moment, a mop stick. The ruler of Jungaria swung up his mighty weapon, engraved with the mysterious, obscure, ancient motto: 'Dep.Tox.II, please bring back after use elsewhere! Thank you,' and whacked it into the upper side of the cabinet. The flimsy pole broke in three pieces, Hamlet's hat wagged, its skull nodded, its jaw half-opened.

“Whaa-at?” bellowed Matt, hurling the rest of his sword away and knocking a Darwin's portrait off its nail, “are you *laughing* at me? You imposter! Where's my crown?? Now! Count down from ten, it's your last minute!”

This said, Matt dashed at his speechless, sinister, sworn enemy. Two soiled, aching, badly scratched, bleeding hands grasped the skeleton's immaculate throat – or, rather, its spine, as Hamlet's throat had deteriorated, for some reason, forty years ago. The foe refused to count, so Matt grabbed both him and the opportunity.

“Ten ... ninety ...” he began, mixing numbers up according to his logic, known to him alone and hidden from mere mortals and maligned Anchurians, “sevens ... sux ... four fourty... fortnight ... one ... crown or life!” There came no words from Hamlet, only his skull was bobbing, teasingly. No, *that* went too far...

“Come out, let's talk like two *men*!” Matt snatched his adversary by both non-existent throat and his rather bony left hand, and thrust it out. The skeleton, still cheeky enough to keep his tongue, fell forward, together with the black velour wall to which it was tied.

“Stand up, you sissy!” bawled the triumphant heir of the spacious Jungaria kingdom, which, as every child knows, is stretched somewhere between Greenland, Atlantida, Gibraltar, and New Caledonia. “A true knight dies on his feet!”

There came not a word from beneath the velour crepe, only some choked rattling or screeching, so the Prince, for a brief moment laying his dignity aside, bent down and shoved the wall up. The foe now stood, shaking. Little wonder, who wouldn't shake in the presence of the Crown

Prince? Matt swung his heavy hand and pounded the vile impostor with a series of upper-cuts and straight chin strikes. After this barrage, the Panama hat flopped down first, the skull followed suit.

“My crown!! My mantle!” shrieked Matt, throwing his hands in the air and letting Hamlet loose. He grabbed the faded hat with frivolous pink lipstick marks on its rim and placed it, with all deference and veneration, upon his ruffled head, gasping and turning his eyes wildly around, “Chamberlain! Call the heralds! Butler? Where's everyone!”

The headless rests of the routed false king flagged down onto the floor, raising a cloud of fine, forty-year-old dust and scattering several bones across the badly littered room. Matt ripped the black velour piece off the rear side of the skeleton-carrying panel and hurled it over his wet shoulders.

“Whohoho-hawhawha-aw!!” the victory outcry reverberated across half of the university. Sofie cringed next to the water sink, her teeth rattling...

Yet, the ignominious Anchurians hadn't given up so easily. Behind the treacherously white entry door, unbeknownst to the Prince, a newly formed commando platoon of two gynaecology, two surgery and two dentistry students, led by Professor Jacobson in person, lay in ambush behind the front porch of the embattled castle. The enemy chieftain borrowed, by the way, a seven foot long oak board, and swaddled it in an equally long cotton cloth. Of course, a board thump wasn't the mildest way to end a delirium, and the professor, a Yale medical school graduate, knew it in both theory and practice. At the same time, to passively sit back and wait until the violent raving phase would subside

into a submissive, quirky or lethargic one was too risky, too costly, or both.

“Hear, folks,” whispered the former Navy doctor to his new ‘conscripts’, “I count down from five to zero, the door’s already unlocked. At ‘run’ you should *wally* run in.”

The daring, teetering crew members nodded.

“Two first guys catch his right hand, the third and fourth take care of his left one, number five and six sit at his feet – with your whole weight, you grasp? I’d try to fit the strait-jacket on, or ...” the professor glanced at the last, speechless commando – “the weighty board.” The dental students nodded gloomily, clenching their teeth, as though not sure if their own pearly grins would survive the hurtle into the madhouse.

“Five ... four ... three ...” Jacobson frowned, hearing a nutty mix-up of whooping, whopping and tinkling, “two ... one ... zero! Now ...” he swung the door open, “run!”

*

... Exactly at the same moment, another door was finally opened, too - after John pounded, called, and peered through dark, sooty or broken windows for the umpteenth time.

“Whaa?” A tall, hiccupping, tattooed churl glared at the rumpled clerk from inside a dark lobby, “hav’ ye got a pint o’ vodka?”

“Sorry?” John didn’t grab the meaning. The name of the basic Russian elyxir which uses were as broad as they were dangerous was more alien to his ears than a Beethoven’s

symphony for a deaf man. Without further comments, the door slammed close before his nose.

“Sheeps!” John was at the end of his tether. He was breaking his nails to get onto this worthless tub, help those captives to finally be able to moor and rest – and getting this reception! He staggered back to the board from where the ladder was hanging. *Should I ... just go back?* he thought with heated indignation. *Nope, the job should be done ...* He peered downwards, where 'his' cutter danced upon the waves like a Lego toy.

“Sorry, Johan!” he called as loud as he could, “a question?”

There came no answer, so John despaired of being noticed by anyone except sea fowls. He picked a piece of thick steel rope and dropped it on the little deck beneath. After a shell-like clank, the bearded man climbed out from his cabin, peering upwards and rubbing his eyes.

“They ... don't open!!” John yelled, losing his voice, “what shall I do!?”

“Go to the bridge!” came the answer, half swept away by the wind. “Up there!”

“Thank you!” John hadn't learned much, yet was fortified by the very fact that there still was someone alive around. If only he'd have had time to ask the skipper what the 'bridge' meant ...

After taking council, for the absence of anyone else, with himself, the unsure insurer ventured toward the funnel, next to which a bridge-formed antenna was visible. But all his pathfinder's investigations only led him back to the closed

side door he'd already knocked at minutes ago. *No, I should switch tactics*, he thought after coming along the same dead-end for the third time, *if one door is closed, another one must be open elsewhere*. John trimmed his black tie and tripped around the stern.

Indeed, at the leeward side, sheltered from the sweeping wind, three jaded, unshaven, bored folks were sitting on an upside-down orange safety raft, next to a wide open door. One was peeling furrowed, small, greenish potatoes, another mended his torn jacket, and the third tried to kindle a kerosene lamp. The sooty, as most things around, object was giving out a sharp screeching and a pungent stench, but no fire at all. The men, chatting in a blatantly non-English tongue, didn't even glance at the new visitor in a boiled shirt and a rust-smudged tie.

"Oh, good morning, sirs, fine to see you!" John grinned broadly, pleased as Punch to finally see a human form on this ghost ship, "I'm looking for Captain Malaki, concerning a new insurance, my name"

"I'm the captain," the guy without a jacket cut him short, "what d' you want?"

"Umm, hmm, I'd like to see the fire damage," John took back his hand which he'd stretched out in vain hope of a handshake. He didn't regret it, however – so soiled and greasy were the hands of these crew members. There came no answer, at least in English. The talk went on in Tagalog – without any major switch in subject.

"One more chump with a briefcase," commented the guy with the potato bowl, shrugging and suppressing a bored yawn, "number fourteen, I bet?"

“D'you *still* have anything to bet?” smirked the skipper, blinking, “you owe me eighty bucks!”

“Oh, man, y'know I can't break even,” returned the cook, with feigned anger, “my playing cards are burned!”

“Eh, mate, I've got three packs of cards,” the third chap knit his brow, grinning, “wanna borrow one?”

“Come on, Rodriques!” the skipper giggled, “he could only win with his stack!”

“You'd better keep your muzzle,” the cook replied, this time with some more tangible irritation, “you never play yourself.”

“And that's fine,” the captain finished running a green sew at his blue jacket with the strap 'Cpt. Raul Malaki' on its worn breast pocket, “you'd better get married when we're back, eh? Then, you'd knock every dime home.”

“Me? Marry?” the brownish face gathered more wrinkles than the ancient-looking potatoes, “only when I'm sixty and rich!”

A bout of genuine laughter followed. John gaped at the seamen, feeling silly and lonely in a small crowd. Were they talking about him? About potatoes? About both? His vague thoughts were ended by a rough clap at his shoulder.

“Come along, mate,” the skipper said in English. He buttoned up his jacket, leaving the cooking to his two friends, “I'll show you the damage.”

... In less than twenty minutes John knew and saw it all – the sooty kerosene barrel with the rest of pants nearby, the roasted rats collected into a bucket without a handle, and

the defunct engine which seemed to lack more than just its 'cumshaft' bearings.

The skipper, so talkative in his own tongue, turned out to be as taciturn in English. He nodded at John's remarks without looking at him, and signed up the vast report without reading. John felt relieved because the tortuous visit was nearing its end – yet, the silent ease with which the deal went through alerted him. He glanced through the sheet again.

“And ... the cargo?” he asked warily, “hadn't it been damaged?”

“No,” cut the captain, watching the deck.

John nodded, almost ready to turn around and leave. Then, recalling how much the boss entrusted him, flipped the file back to the beginning. “The underwriter is obliged to inspect the cargo in case it is:

- a) damaged
- b) belongs to 'dangerous' or 'special' register
- c) has changed its position'

“Umm, I think I must inspect the cargo, too,” the clerk said, too honest to omit or 'forget' the clear instruction. As every normal Dutchman, he had an inborn respect for all instructions, regulations, and laws, even senseless ones. Or, maybe, especially for the latter...

“I've no key, and all doors are sealed.” Skipper Malaki frowned. Now he gazed upward. The phone in his breast pocket buzzed. “I shall go,” he declared, not looking at the clerk, “Bye!” The heels of his crocodile-leather boots tapped softly over the sticky metal plates.

John was left alone in the middle of the soiled, smelly deck over which fresh breeze, no longer meek and mild, swept. A bulky crowbar, rolling over, tumbled against a battered windlass, with a sharp knock which whipped the office man's ears. He scratched his chin – and waddled to the foredeck, pondering and guessing.

Again, John smelled a rat. Again, he began to feel the same creepy, bubbling-up suspicion he still remembered from the last Wednesday. Instead of an English agent (let it be so), now the mystery cargo and wordless skipper were the re-agent and catalyst of the reaction, which began to send adrenaline into the man's untrained veins and emblazoned his ever-polite eyes with a gleam – victorious, feverish and slightly insane.

Soon used to the rudeness on board and aware that no-one would roll out a red carpet before his shoes, John rambled through the desert-like deck, with a very slender hope that he'd *somehow* find a door to the cargo hold. Or, a hatchway, at least.

But there were no doors or hatchways in sight. The broad deck between the bridge and the bow had four massive, giant lids which only a port crane could attempt to lift. These were, indeed, sealed with coarse lead seals dangling at the ends of rusty wires. *Are these the doors?* the insurer thought, climbing the first of them. The lid looked a bit like the square trampoline he loved to bounce upon as a child. He tripped along its rand and hopped three times. The steel sheet under his feet responded with three moderate rumblings. Next, he skipped from the low cover, now almost ready to throw in the sponge and climb down the pilot's ladder. He wouldn't go over the top to fulfill a blind instruction. He ---

Yet ...Soon after he landed softly upon the deck, there came three cautious clanks – from *inside*, from under the ton-heavy lid. John stooped, his eyes widening. Is someone *down there*, in the sealed-up cargo compartment? But, barely two minutes ago he was told they had no keys! John squatted, kicking off a rat's cadaver, and put his ear to the cold, steel surface dotted with rusty spots.

On the other side of the same lid, Martin Schlesinger, the BND intelligence captain, was balancing atop a rusty ladder which lacked a couple of cross-bars. He heard the coded three taps, and replied in kind, butting the moist ceiling with a crooked metal pipe. Next, he ventured backwards, happy that his emergency visit in the smelly, dark resounding ship's belly was over. The bright LED flashlight on his neck was only enough for a meager, twinkling glow some four yards around. The ship's engine was dead as a stone, there were no power generators on and not a spark of light.

Halfway to the exit, the unseen military stopped. Before he could set foot on the surface, catch some fresh air, get connected to a satellite and finally talk to General Katzenbach, one more coded signal was a must: Rodrigues had to knock the lid again. Once.

No one aboard or abroad knew that, instead of the long-time loyal agent, an unsuspecting clerk was tapping the lid with his plastic heels. In gloomy silence, the whole German overseas-ops staff sat as if on needles. The last report deadline had already passed, yet Captain Schlesinger didn't send any signals. Something must have gone wrong...

John waited until his ear began aching from cold, but caught no more sound. Was it an illusion? Or, just a loose nut that fell off its bolt inside, and clanked a couple of

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times? He straightened up, with a taut face and rust-daubed cheek. Through this posture change, his weighty briefcase, still hanging on its leather strap, slid down and pounded against the lid. Once.

“Na endlich!” muttered the spy beneath, lifting the pipe and making a final strike.

“Bang!” This time, the metal clank from inside was so loud that John shuddered. He had no more doubts: a person is underneath the deck. There were two last questions left: where's the hatchway, and what sort of man could sneak behind the ton-heavy lids and locked doors? Now, John was almost sure what sort of bird could be nesting there...

With his heart throbbing and eyes racing from one deck's end to another, the hunter waited for the pheasant's head to bob up between the bushes. Any hatchway? John sprang upon the other cargo lid, to get a better sight. Anything moving on the right? Anything on the left?

The excited spy-hunter's eyes were running from one lid's end to another and, in a moment, he himself began to lurch, like a sentinel, across the sonorous metal cover. Then a sharp, high-pitched shriek sounded, from none of the directions expected. John froze, turning his head broadly, like a pelican. A-ha, a roll of ropes there in front...

The blond-haired man with one brown cheek skipped from the lid and ailed to the foredeck. Indeed, a small, chaotic-looking bundle of ropes was moving up and down, propped up by an inconspicuous lid beneath it. *A hatchway!* John thought, turning pale from excitement and expectation. A spy is almost in his hand, like a silly sparrow flying straight into the trap. Now ...

John pulled the loose rope end off the hatchway, and the round, rusty, rumbling lid creaked up. Behind it, someone in a dark-green baseball cap poked out. Nothing else was visible, and the newly ferreted-out game wasn't prompt to climb out into the open. Instead, he was busily chatting - in German.

“Ya ... alles ist ganz klar. Der Lage ist sicher ... ya ... nein ... ya, bitte sehr, Herr General!” John heard the peeping sign-off tone of a satellite phone. The guy in a baseball cap turned around, pushing the tight lid to open wider. He pressed it down and peered, now at the completely unknown fellow in more or less white, spotted shirt, with a greasy briefcase on a coarse leather strap and a necktie which flapped in the wind like a pair of rising osprey's wings.

“Which 'general?” John asked bluntly, in an impolite, un-Dutch way, “What' re you doing here?”

“Good morning,” Captain Schlesinger returned with a well-trained rubber smile. The initial fright was gone as soon as it came: the sudden intruder was alone, and no intelligence service on the globe in their right mind, from Myanmar to the U.S., is sending a loner to check a suspect: “Casper Millhausen, engineer, from Rheinland Metalls AG.” He spoke in a drummed-up, serene, unemotional tone. He didn't stretch out his gloved hand. “Wid whom do I have de pleasure to?”

“John Cheesekop,” muttered John, gazing at the capped chap as Sherlock Holmes could have gazed at a seasoned crook in his backyard, “what're you doing down there?”

“Um,” the clandestine officer hemmed. His left hand was on his mobile, in the jacket pocket. Three rows

beneath, one left, enter – he selected, blindly, Rodrigues' number. A light-winged 'alarm' sms fluttered noiselessly over two heavily thinking heads.

Next, the German replied in English, not even trying to conceal his strong accent: "I'm inspecten orr goods." He shrugged, slightly, and almost sincerely. "And you, sir?"

"Ugh," it was now John's turn to search for words and gain time, "I'm afraid I shall inspect' em, too." The secret agent's eyebrows flew up.

"Zo, you're from an insurance firm, aren't you?" he grinned again.

John nodded, grudgingly. He was angry at himself. Instead of babbling out who he *really* was, he should have tried to arrest the chap's documents – and crack him up.

The BND agent, now no more afraid of John than he could have been of a toothless lizard, climbed out of the narrow hatchway, took off his rusty gloves and unbuckled his flashlight from his bullish neck. Sinewy and strongly built, he glanced at the civvy, slender guy in front of him. His cold, grey, Nordic eyes reflected no humour.

"Have you got a searchlight?" he asked politely, carefully concealing any sneer, pointing to the pitch-dark hole with a subtle movement of his chin, "it's *rather* dark down dere."

"Hmm," John furrowed his eyebrow. *Can I borrow yours?* He thought briefly, but scrapped the dilettantish idea on the spot. That would sound too amateurish and silly, too – one moment he's demanding an answer, the next minute he's begging for a lamp!

“Good-bye, Mister Chisekopp,” the capped man said, brushing off rust and decrepit spider webs from his waterproof black jacket with a flat, folding brush. He tossed his flashlight into his rucksack, zipped it and trod away toward the bridge. He didn't look back.

John nodded, mumbling a belated goodbye and following the suspect with a sullen, stormy gaze. A foreign spy is walking the deck of a ship in a Dutch harbour, as surely and safely as if he's loitering along a boulevard! Of course he, John, a faithful citizen, could call police or maybe, the counter-intelligence. But – who'd believe him? He's *feeling* that capped Casper is a spy, *feeling* that the cargo is fishy; he even began to *feel* that the Brit they almost caught last Wednesday came to Holland because of that vessel, too. Feelings ... John shook his head and snorted, resignedly. In the steel-gloved world of dry facts, ruthless evidence and venerated PR lies, any 'feelings' or intuitions were just tacky paper flowers.

“Moment!” exclaimed the clerk, “I'll call Carl!”

... “Moment, your highness!” boomed the first student who reached, unscathed, the Prince of Jungaria, and grabbed Matt's right hand. Another would-be surgeon did the same without courtly parlance. A portly, red-eyed man in Panama hat and black mantle peered at both. *Two enemy serfs?*

“Anchurians!!” he hollered so deafeningly loud that the third medical commando froze and plugged his ears, instead of grabbing the raving man's left hand.

“Folks, quicker!” Professor Jacobson urged his timid platoon, “left hand, feet!”

Two dentistry knights followed their gynecology comrade along the narrow lobby, falling at the Prince's feet and embracing them, as though in an act of weird medieval homage.

"You?" Matt pushed both future surgeons so wildly with his right hand that both tumbled onto the floor like two flimsy feather cushions. One struggled up – but didn't dare to catch the enraged Prince's hand once again.

"Guys, please, we've no time left!" yammered the professor, pushing his last reluctant warriors to the corridor. He was right – there was definitely no time to spare. Matt identified the new visitors as intruders, as enemies. And foes of Jungaria are fought claw and nail, ruthlessly!

"You?" Matt grabbed both future dentists by the collars and lifted them up, like a pair of stuffed plush rabbits. Next, he swung his hands to both sides of him – sending the pale-frightened fighters flying through the spacious chamber. Both thumped on their bottoms, sliding along the littered, chipped parquet. The student on the right landed straight upon the hapless relics of Hamlet, scattering his poor bones through the whole ward. The Prince gazed, now, at the lonely professor only armed with a single oak plank. The last student shivered behind his boss' not-too-broad shoulders...

"You??" the sovereign yelled, turning around in search for his larger sword. It was there, by the wall, where some moronic servants had again hung their rags on it. Fine -

Matt plucked the bulky metal clothes rack off the solid brickwork like a feather off a goose' rump, and stomped, slowly, along the corridor, hunching, his weapon poised above his head as he neared the last live enemy. The physician waited, gasping in his trepidation and holding up

his plank, which was shorter and much weaker than the chromed metal in his opponent's tottering hands. In his whole career as a Navy doctor and, later, the toxicology boss he only had three such frenzied cases. This one seemed to be the most acute.

“Listen!” whispered Dr. Jacobson to the last student, pale and round-eyed, “after he hits first, I'd skip aside; the rack is long – jump on it and hold it down. Ok?”

“Uh-h-h-huh,” stuttered Hippocrates' pupil. His knees were ready to fail.

No sooner than the last words left the professor's mouth, than Matt swung his eight foot long steel blade, aiming it at the foe's head. Jacobson, using all his former batter's skills, tilted his board, fencing the severe blow off and forcing the rack to glide along the coarse-grained wall, striking up a plume of dark-reddish sparks. The welded metal frame rammed the floor, creating a foot-wide crater in the inch-thick oak parquet and raising a cloud of concrete dust and crumbled wood. The student, stunned but eager to get the bugbear anatomy exam passed in no time, (Jacobson's promise to the volunteers) threw his light, sparsely muscled body onto the cumbersome weapon.

“A good Anchurian is a dead Anchurian!” yelled Matt, jerking the rack, together with the youth still clinging to it, up again. The future physician's eyes turned white with fear – he was being hoisted up on a rack, like a pilot trainee!

“Vowowow!” bawled the student, leaving the 'springboard' and spreading his arms in a desperate hope. His hands seized, suddenly, the rim of an old-style metal chandelier. In choking, gnawing, white-eyed fear, propped by

the blind self-preservation instinct, he climbed the elevated, safe place and perched upon it, too shocked to look down.

The next attempt to swing the lightened weapon was, however, less effective still – the long rack tangled in a thick handmade chain on which the chandelier hung. The enraged throne successor pulled and pushed his 'sword', causing the chandelier, together with the student clasping its shaft, to swerve and sway wildly like a Christmas bell. The old, solidly made chain held.

These two meager seconds were enough for the quick-witted doctor to fling up his oak plank and dash it, with measured force, flat upon Matt's head. The Prince swagged, oinked, rolled his eyes and collapsed to the floor. "A score, right off the bat," said the old player to himself, catching his breath and wiping his forehead, "Game's over."

A hush of sudden, almost eerie silence engulfed the ward. Five pale fighters, each holding their hands at an aching part of the student's body, timidly poked their necks toward the lobby. The unconscious former Prince of Jungaria lay sprawled there upon his rumpled mantle. Above him the crooked rack swayed, creaking. Above the rack swung the chandelier with the future ladies' doctor, his eyes still firmly closed, his lips still whispering a prayer.

"To the intensive therapy chamber!" breathed Jacobson, squatting down next to the swooned sovereign and feeling his wrist, "Pulse hundred and fifty, hurry up!"

It wasn't, however, only Professor Jacobson who was in haste. Fifty miles to the southwest, a blond-haired chap in partially white shirt nervously pressed the keys on his phone.

“Carl, where's *that?*” John tried to accentuate the last word as heavily as he could, speaking loudly to overpower the whizzing wind and splashy waves.

“Umm, what d' you mean?” the engineer had just returned from a busy meeting. “Are you looking for ... the manual on a hot night?”

“No, not *that*, but 'that!'” John was almost mad. He was striving for his land's life or death! How could Carl?

“Sorry, Johnnie, I don't follow,” Carl shrugged.

“The ... *card!*” John squeezed out, “Hey, no joke: I almost caught a spy!”

7

CAFE 'BOND'

After a long, wrangling Monday, which ended up giving him a wretched headache, Carl braced for a busy evening – the last thing he wanted. Gulping a couple of Paracetamol pills on the way, the chief engineer waded downstairs to his car.

Leaving behind two creeping traffic jams and eighteen blushing lights, a cream-brown steel stallion reached the vast parking lot next to the city's only large grove which could be called, with a strained imagination, a 'forest'. A tired, yawning man in a brown suit reclined inside, still too wound up to take a nap or delight and relax in the nature. His excitable, ardent brother was late – nothing special, or even new. Carl chuckled, opened the door, climbed out of his English saloon and waddled along the low lumber fence toward the entry. There, under a lopped linden tree which lacked half of its leaves, loomed a lonely log bench which lacked a left leg.

Carl plunked down on its right, stable part, suddenly recalling he was not only dog-tired but lion-hungry as well. Helen was surely cooking a yummy lunch, while he was stuck in this forlorn, damp grove, cooling his heels for his zealous sibling who'd surely arrive without a shovel, a metal detector or even a pen knife – but with a sackful of parleys, plans and phantasies.

He pulled his phone and found the first online snack-bar. An express order, done. He didn't try to phone his brother, however. Years of talks, quarrels and simply hanging together had created a sort of sixth feeling in them – something between an intuition, a knowledge and an assurance. At the moment, Carl felt the latter – an assurance that John was near. Maybe very near.

The invisible essence proved true, as usual: in less than four yawns' time, a bright-sliver car darted over the parking gravel, raising a cloud of dust and nearly colliding with the fence. It stalled as suddenly as it appeared, the driver's door flung open, a lean guy without a tie sprang out.

“Oh, man,” Carl muttered, “he's ready to dig the earth through.” The engineer stood up and waved his hand. The fair-haired man almost ran toward him.

“Hi, oldie, shall we go?” he halted by the entry for a brief second, too revved up to stop, let alone to sit down.

“Hi,” Carl said and sat down instead. It was the surest way to 'anchor' the quicksilver chap in one place for a moment, a trick known to both from childhood. “Are you going to catch the spy right now?”

“No, but ...” John's head still swiveled, but his drive and urge to go, go at once, go at any cost softened a little.

“Then sit down or whate'er.” Carl grinned, weakly. “I ordered two packs French fries and chicken. Have missed both my lunch and dinner t'day, can you imagine?”

“Oh,” the younger brother broadened his eyes. Missing a meal happened to him time and again, but was

almost unknown to Carl. It was, in fact, a serious felony, to lighten Helen's culinary efforts.

“Alright,” John said, quieter, but not yet calm enough to sit down, “I, too, haven't a crumb in my mouth since morning! But it's peanuts, man. Y' know, I almost caught *him*!”

He gazed at the engineer - so keenly and ardently that the poor linden tree behind the tired man almost caught fire. Carl didn't, however. He knew his brother well enough to grow 'fireproof'.

John flipped his briefcase on the lame bench but didn't entrust his own weight to it - not because he saw that one leg was gone, but out of bubbling excitement. His words began to fill the forest, silencing and crowding out the timid squeaking of birds.

“Know what - I was on him like a bloodhound after a fox, or a duck on a June bug, all over the ship,” the curly chap began zealously, scooting to and fro and gesticulating. “When he escaped to the bow, I hunted him back to the poop; when he hid in the engine, I ferreted him out onto the deck! He had no chance!”

“Uhh-,” hemmed Carl, suppressing a yawn. “Honestly, Johnnie—have you seen him at all?”

“Of course, seen and heard!” John pouted like an adolescent lad, “both seen and heard, and he spoke German! Herr General, herr General! Which normal person on earth would talk to a general? Who?”

“Well,” Carl tilted his head, “I did, a couple of years ago. What's wrong with it?”

“Oh, man, *you're* a different story!” John whirled around, raising a little dust cloud, “but that guy *was* a spy, he looked and talked and ... and walked like a spy!”

“How, then?” Carl grinned, a little bit teasingly. This time, John wasn't offended.

“Y' know: silently, jauntily, sprightly, like, say, a panther – in such a way,” the new state defender paced a couple of yards in a loop. Carl's face turned more sour still.

“Johnnie,” he said wearily, “just a week ago we nabbed an Englishman, crammed him like a sardine into a taxi and wrestled to crack him up. The result?”

“Tosh!” John shook his head and waved his hand, “then, we had no hard evidence, no *real* clues besides a couple of feckless tips from the cabbie. Now, I've seen, heard – and even made a photo!”

“Did you?” the engineer enlivened a bit, “can I have a look?”

“Here!” John pulled his smartphone and began tapping the touchscreen, with the speed of a busy red-capped woodpecker, “see?”

“Hmm,” the Doubting Thomas was unimpressed again, “all I see is soiled jeans, a shiny black jacket and one gloved hand, but no face.”

“Because I took the shot on the sneak, y' know.” John shook his curls. “Unawares, in fact.”

“Uh-huh,” Carl nodded, tilting back again, “what're you planning now?”

“A *lot*,” John trimmed his non-existent tie and made a broad circle with his hand, “Now, I’ve got it all: I’m the boss of the ship, without my signature it can’t leave the harbour!”

“Yep. What’s next?”

“Then,” John said, slicking up his face, “if the gent was a spy indeed, he’d also know the departure date, logical?”

“Um,” Carl gulped. His thoughts weren’t in Rotterdam. *Where’s the delivery boy, dash it?*

“The sailing-off is scheduled on Thursday,” John patted his briefcase, “and I bet seventy-seven to one that t’ agent would show up by the pier, too!”

“Well,” the engineer said, suppressing a hungry hiccup and pressing his mind to follow the scheme in which he saw no soldering-point for himself, “And?”

“And we’ll catch ‘im!” drummed up John, with a fanatical, unswerving faith.

Carl snorted. Now, he began to come to terms with his own role – the once-reluctant aide had turned into a commander and needed his card *and* him. That simple.

“Agreed?” pressed on the younger brother. The older still had scruples.

“Jus’ a moment,” he hemmed, “you won’t have to visit the ship again, would you?”

“No,” John shrugged with that perfect air of a know-it-all home-brewed ‘expert.’ “Why?”

“Where, then, would you find the Jerry?” Carl furrowed his brow. “Why, to your mind, should he again schlepp his ass to Rot' dam? And if, by some miracle, yes, why should it be the same guy?”

“Which one doesn't matter!” John fired with the speed of a muffled machine-gun, “If they'd dispatch another muckworm, we'll grab the grub! As easy as a kermess lottery win!”

“Really?” Carl was leery about win-win situations. His mind, too pragmatic and sober (except in the bedroom, of course) was rebuffing the very idea of an easy catch.

“Listen,” John lowered both his voice and his shoulders, “I've devised a *plan*, and have got all the trump cards in my hand. To make sure he shows up, I'll send a fax to Germany, that, um, 'the state of cargo and its position are no longer satisfactory', so I can't release the vessel from the port. A perfect bait!”

“Uh-huh.”

“What 'uh-oh?’” flared up the spy-basher, “they'll *have to* send someone! I appoint the day, time, and place, and voila! My car, your card, our trophy. Agreed?”

“Fine, fine,” Carl spun his thumbs around each other, staring at the ground. He was deep in thought – and the more he mulled over the upcoming plot the less he liked it. Also, cerebrating over heavy matters by the triste accompaniment of a vacuous, rumbling belly was obnoxious. He raised his head. “And then – imagine the guy is arrested, you have all the evidence, and?” he asked. “Would *you* call the police? Or, escort him to a jug, on your own?”

“Neither of the two,” an odd glitter sparked up John's eyes, “we' d question him until he breaks; then, we write a dynamite reportage, a TV broadcasts it or a magazine publishes it and--”

“We both end up in jail; the spy drives home whistling,” completed Carl, on a grouchy, dyspeptic note of a habitual grumbler – which he, normally, had never been.

“Carl, I can't believe my ears,” John rubbed his forehead. “*You* picked up the spy card, *you* craved to sieve out and churn up, with its help, some hard-core truth off the chaff of those fickle fibbing petty-bourgeois clichés, *you* were ready to risk your hide for a couple of reports milked from small fry ... and now, with a big game at your fingertips...?”

There came no answer - Carl gloomily gazed at the greyish gravel which impatiently grated under the gluey soles of the greenhorn gentleman of fortune.

“Know what? I agree,” he squeezed out finally, “just for one day. Y' know, my kids ... puberty ... they need a dad, not a dud.” he trailed off, still not looking at John.

“But, but ...” the clerk implored, raising his brows dramatically, like Pierrot in a street pantomime, “if we'd catch the spy, would you help me to lock 'im up in a barn?”

“A *barn*?” now it was Carl's turn to lift brows, “that's quite a thought! D' you mean, um, my garage?”

“Nope,” John shook his head so widely that it bumped into a dry twig, “our cottage near Groenlo, you remember?”

“Phew,” the engineer couldn't hold back a grin. Indeed, the two brothers bought, years ago, a small, woody

piece of ground far in the 'cheap east' of Holland, with a rough holiday hut in its middle. "But that's, man," he giggled, "that's ... barely ten miles from the German border! Or, would you hire a private army?" he finished with cautious sarcasm.

"I already ordered a pair of handcuffs," John whispered, blinking. A steel-coloured shade passed through his normally serene, polite, candid eyes. Carl sat up, his jaw began to fall open.

"John, you're...dangerous," he muttered. The peace-lover who never toted even an air gun and knew no karate punches or judo grips, bustling to jail a foreign military in their dusty, messy, middle-of-nowhere cottage? A swashbuckling bean counter? Well...maybe John got a sunstroke on the deck?

His jumbled thoughts were, luckily, disrupted by the rumble and clatter of a delivery scooter. A helmeted chap dismounted his smelly beast and opened the large box at its rear. Carl hurried to the messenger from a more cozy, palatable, predictable world than one they were about to plunge into, reaching for his plump wallet and assuming a bland, grateful face.

"Thank you, sir," he blurted out, receiving the pack with junk food victuals.

"Thank you, sir, have a nice meal" echoed the rider, slightly abashed by the courteous greeting. In ninety-five per cent of cases, he was met with a weary 'Oh, finally!' The rest hailed him with a cuss, a watch pushed to his nose, or a yelping 'yep'.

For the next two hundred seconds, the only sound heard under the stumpy tree was crackling and slurping. Carl was so scared that words failed him. John, on the contrary, was so stirred up that the teeming, swarming hordes of nouns and adjectives were simply too many to single out one to begin with; he was also busily emptying the paper bowl with frites, bemoaning the fact that just one little hole had to both let food in and ejaculate words out. *Why don't men have two mouths?* he speculated briefly – and at once snorted at the booby idea. Carl stopped chewing.

“Wha’?” he asked with difficulty, an end of a triangular potato chip sticking out from between his lardy lips. His eyes were now even more bleak and sheepish, with 'five year's incarceration for ID abuse' visible in them as certainly as the December Tax Office form in one's mailbox.

“Um, nothing,” John returned light-heartedly. The crackling went on. After a hundred more itchy seconds and a fourth gulp of acrid juice, Carl managed to squelch most of his Dutch cowardliness and summon all his English bullshness together.

“John, listen” he requested, with a long, fatalistic face of a vacillating mutineer, “do you *really* mean all that?”

“Yep,” John said cheerfully, “very much so.” He shrugged. Carl shuddered.

“You don't grasp how high the cards are we're playing,” he spoke slowly, trying to pick with his teetering hand the last chips at the deep bag's bottom, “What if we lose?”

“We jus' *can't* lose!” John shook his head and popped the empty paper pouch with his palm. “We've got all the trumps!”

“You mean?”

“Look there,” John hastily wiped his hands with a paper hanky and pulled his phone out, “the ship is *not* carrying derrick parts or engines, as the cargo slip reads.”

“What then?” the engineer peered at the long, slender cylinders on the dark, pitch-black background. “What's this?”

“Missiles or torpedoes.” John shrugged again. “I borrowed a miner's flashlight from the skipper of my water taxi and surveyed the cargo holds. The ship's full of arms.”

“Phew,” Carl panted and wiped his suddenly sweaty forehead, “but that could mean ... an international scandal!”

“Uh-huh,” John nodded, grinning serenely, “isn't that what every journalist is hunting for and dreaming about?”

“Johnnie,” Carl clasped his head with his hands, “I'm not working for a tabloid!” “Doesn't matter.” The intrepid clerk smirked and produced a bright-yellow notice block from his dark, ancient-looking jacket, “I've scribbled it all down, jus' look:

a) I'm sending the fax, they dispatch the spy on Thursday. Baited.

b) We go to Rot'dam and meet him at the harbour office. Checked.

c) You show up the card, I pull the bracelets. Nabbed.

d) We rush to t' cottage and chain 'im to a heating pipe. Stranded.

e) He's cracking up and we write down the *true* story. Broken.

f) We transport him, in the night, to the German border and kick him out. Scored.

g) You have loads of material for a blazing reportage, at the end. I may send a letter to the Jerry spy bosses, with all pictures and the report from their broken G-man. If they squeak a word out, the stuff flies direct to their evening paper. We win!"

"Eh, a moment, brother, that's called blackmail, in plain English" Carl jumped from his half of the bench, causing the limpy object to sway and skip, "do such tricks without me, please!"

"Carl," said the younger man sulkily, "a week ago you begged me for help. I yessed. Now, a fishy deal is being played right before our noses, and?"

"Alright, alright." The older one furrowed his bushy brows. "Tell me, how deep do you plan to muckrake? And, the biggest question – *what for?*"

"Well," John blinked two times, "b'lieve me, I only wish to remain myself, to stay clean and honest. Not staging up a bombastic new Messiah who's straightening up all that's crooked - from bananas to societies. That's going upstream, true. Guess what the most folks here would do, in my place?"

“Opt out or keep mum,” Carl said sourly, looking down, “that's the normal Dutch way – nod, cuss, and chicken away...”

“I opt for...” John straightened up, again blinking with a strange mix of benign innocence and dogged determination, “maybe I'm not a normal Dutchman, or ...”

“Or you've inherited too much English blood from our mom!” Carl snorted in a short, good-hearted laugh. John followed suit.

... The next three days were full of strained waiting for Carl and hopeful scurrying for John. He safely received a pair of real steel handcuffs with the engraved text 'Houston Police Dept. Texas' at his bank; he sent a couple of cunning faxes to Germany; and he learned from Madame that Matt wouldn't appear at the office until the next week. All preparations done on Wednesday afternoon, he sat by his desk as if on needles, rubbing his hands in foretaste of a triumph. A big triumph of civil honesty and integrity.

“Well done, old man, well done,” he quietly applauded himself, skipping from his creaky chair, sitting down again and whirling around several times. Then, he lifted his finger, shook it menacingly in the air and spoke to the invisible, far-off foreign agent, “Wait a minute, bug, wait, wait ... we're coming.”

And they came.

On a partially sunny Thursday afternoon, punctually at half past two, two clean-shaven, unsmiling, volunteer agents climbed out of a silver Audi parked in front of the round-shaped tower of Rotterdam Harbour office. They weren't talking. The spy card, hilariously tinkling a week ago

inside its empty corn can, kept its peace, too: it was now crammed into a chic stainless case which John got from the boss two days ago.

At the bottom of that radiowave-resistant case, a bright-yellow adhesive paper was stuck, with all the steps of their second spy-bashing noted. John liked his plan. It was wise, deep, concise, and consisted of seven parts: the number of perfection. Why was this odd number so dignified at the cost of its even neighbours --polite, complaisant six and infinity-friendly eight -- John had no idea anymore. But he loved his scheme dearly.

As they were passing, in their hazardous hunt for the Jerry bug, the numerous lobbies and halls, an unpleasant, cold thought bugged John once again: he still had received no reply to his fax sent to the obscure company, Rhineland Metals. To be honest, he wasn't sure such a firm even existed. There were umpteen German businesses dealing with metal, and a handful of which names began with 'Rhineland'. The Rhineland Metals itself was found only three times, in Cologne, Dusseldorf and in a little village near Ulm. None of these had produced any reply yet.

... At the same time, less than a half-mile away from the scene of the busy chase, Martin Schlesinger was boringly filing his fingernails in a grey-facaded, decent-looking, three-star hotel near the Erasmus bridge. The fax John sent to all three fake firms, was for days stored on his satellite phone. Captain Schlesinger, residing in the modest suite under the civvy name of Marcin Slezak, a peaceful Polish electrician, had received from Der Zentrale only one coded warning - to be ready to leave his temporary base. That could mean, he mused, that the person who 'photoflashed' him three days

ago is lurking around, or that he is under a closer scrutiny. The threat wasn't severe enough, though, to make him neglect his nails.

“Dash!” exclaimed John, after their too-strong micro-crew circumnavigated the vast Harbour Office for the third time, stirring up the attention of a lonely security warden strolling about a lobby, “Where's the chap? I hate waiting!”

“Hmm,” Carl opened his mouth for the first time in an hour, “are you sure your fax got through?”

“Absolutely!” the clerk said, “the fax report line read 'passed'.”

“Have you also tried to call?”

“Yes,” John said, less ardently, more wearily, “if I'd only know where exactly. On the cargo slip, there were only postboxes and a half-erased fax number to find, y'know? The company name was a puzzle, too – the first one I called only had an answering machine in German, the second confirmed a receipt but didn't squeak out a word more, the third was always busy. Well, the ship's real and is to depart within two hours – *if* I sign the papers!”

“And ... if you won't,” Carl furrowed his brow, “would the harbour or, say, coast guard arrest her? The dock time is pricey in Rot'dam, as far as I know.”

“I'm sure no ship can leave a port by us without complete paperwork,” John replied, still less loudly, as though persuading himself of this theoretical truth.

“Maybe they're--” Carl began but wasn't able to finish. John's phone buzzed and rang. The man's blond brows rose.

“Yes?” he raised his head. The Madame was on the line.

“John, good afternoon,” the secretary's voice was hushed and oily, “are you already, um, in Rotterdam?”

“O' course!” the clerk flared, “what's up?”

“A-ha, it's alright, then. I've just received a fax from Germany. As far as I see, the goods owner had authorized the Captain Mamaki ... am I right?”

“Malaki,” John's face turned long and sour, “go on, please!”

“Alright, the Captain Raul... let me see ... 'to inspect the cargo and sign up the harbour bill. The engineer Casper Munchausen is now represented by the skipper Malalik'. Point.”

“Sheeps!!” John couldn't find any other words for his righteous indignation, “but - that—that's ... against all rules! What do they think? I'll complain!”

“John, John, cool down a bit,” the supposedly highbred and certainly highbrow Madame wasn't spoken to in that way, and everyone in the bank knew it, “Where do you see a problem? The captain is waiting for you in ... let me see ... room four-seven-eight. The policy is, in financial terms, wrapped up, Mr. Stelling told me. Do you follow?”

“Yes, I do,” John sighed so heavily that Carl grinned, compassionately, “can you please forward the fax to my mobile?”

“Have already done so,” the secretary was wrapping up this uselessly hectic talk as well, “check your mailbox please. Good luck.” The habitually benign clerk was now so mad that only the presence of Carl and the security man had held him back from hurling his business phone against the panelled wall. The older brother kept diplomatically silent.

“Let's go,” the deflated underwriter muttered, gazing at the sand-coloured carpet, and pawing an innocent stray feather with his shoe, “what a bullsh ..”

Carl cleared his throat. *In theory, I'm not needed anymore*, he thought, with a paradoxical mix of partial pity and perplexed mirth, *hmm, but I'll say nothing...*

As though reading his almost audible thoughts, the younger sibling peered up at the older.

“Please don't flutter away,” he said, heavily stumping upstairs, “I feel ... our guy is within a hand's reach. I jus' smell it!”

Carl, who didn't smell anything besides a whiff of not-too-refined toilet water trailing behind a passing-by group of douane officers, nodded – just out of courtesy. He knew his brother for a lifetime, to concede John's sudden bouts of jackass-style stubbornness. When such a spell struck, one should better leave the bland, blond, beady-eyed man alone – he was becoming unstoppable, incorrigible and unceremonious, to mention just a few.

The older brother, fortunate to be just himself, while the spy card was tucked in John's briefcase, obediently waited outside Room 478. Before he was able to count all the windows on a great poster of a huge ferry, John stormed out, following a five-feet-one-inch high dark-haired chap. Carl reluctantly stood up. John stalled like a salt pillar.

“Let's go,” he winked, in a more sanguine mood of a detective who is 'on track', “our guy is next door. Really!”

The tactful engineer didn't open his mouth while the duo rocketed to the lift and, in no time, stood again by the squatty silver vehicle, smooth-skinned but hot-blooded like its owner. John unlocked the car, flipped his briefcase upon its still warm bonnet and gazed triumphantly at Carl.

“He's in a hotel nearby, I've just learned” he said shortly, almost curtly, and grinned. Carl didn't like it. It wasn't a kind, amiable, or soft-pedaled smile anymore. It was a stern grimace of a hunter who's finally pulling the trigger after hours of an exhausting chase. “Have you got a pair o' binoculars?” he requested, with a rare, ironclad confidence in his voice.

“Huh?” Carl woke up from his escapist thoughts, “What did you say?”

“Binocs,” John repeated, louder, but without anger, “got it?”

“Aye, sir, I've got one,” Carl came to his aid, as he normally did, in the company of his sizeable chest. He ducked into the low auto and rummaged in his box. The large binoculars were too heavy to drag along, so after the last action he selected another, smaller species.

“Here,” he stretched out his large arm with the small pair of binoculars, which were only a pinch larger than opera glasses. John grabbed the 'lorgnette', not caring about the size - which mattered a lot now.

“D' you remember his looks?” Carl asked discreetly.

“Of course!” John exclaimed, although he couldn't recall any peculiarity besides a black jacket and short-clipped hair - the German agent was as mousy and indiscernible as his English 'duplicate' a week ago, “but I'm not scouting him now. I'm checking on a car with German licence plates!”

“Good,” Carl assented, thinking that the real emissaries use a broader choice of transport – including anonymous trains or buses. And, if the agent arrived with a German-registered car, why on earth should it get stuck in front of a hotel?

“Dash, all parking lots over there are occupied,” John grouched, shaking his head. “Know what? Let's walk.”

“Alright,” the engineer agreed readily. He liked the idea of discharging their stress and unwinding revved-up emotions by some perambulation.

John liked the walk even more: the imposing, humped Erasmus bridge was, of course, a windy place, but provided an eye-catching view of a trunk of the Rhine delta which lifted its sand-lipped head for the last time behind a light chiffon of misty, damp air, and succumbed to the restless, grim, grey-headed, whipping North Sea billows.

At the opposite shore of the same river, Martin Schlesinger folded his mobile manicure set and crammed it back into his rucksack. He could have placed the flat leather

case onto a shelf or in a bathroom cabinet, but he had a custom of keeping all his baggage ready. It wasn't a whim: at a moment's notice, he could be ordered to decamp, to skip on a train, a hired car or a chartered plane – and strive for his politically-demure, tacit land's numerous interests.

His sat-phone peeped. Martin knit his brow, pulled the device from his breast pocket and unlocked the screen. A coded message. Umm? The officer launched a decoding program – to start it, three more passwords were needed. He pressed the tiny keys cautiously - two errors, and the program would vanish from the device without warning. The sms was an alert: a lonely word 'mira4' popped up on screen, to disappear in three seconds' time. It was Rodriguez, 'mira' meant 'watch out' and four was danger level – moderate to high.

“Fine game,” the officer said, pulling his oversized Carl Zeiss binoculars from his undersized rucksack and coming closer to the window. From the top floor of his Tulip hotel he could easily see the opposite 'island' where the skyscraper of Harbour Office peaked in the company of a couple much smaller concrete-glass pals.

Two saucer-sized lenses of a costly Saxon device glowed with the mysterious violet varnish as two attentive, sharp-sighted grey eyes behind them swept through the parking lot a half-mile away. Among the usual bustle of arriving or departing cars and delivery vans, there were two conspicuous, rumpled chaps hanging about a low silver auto. One of them was leaning upon the open front door, another, fair-headed, livelier and shorter, peered through a pair of amateur-looking opera glasses. Martin chuckled.

“Oh, it's you again, friend!” he said quietly, with the mixed feelings of wary amusement, light fear, and a fleeting

sneer. This fast-paced, stressful mission had gained still more fresh colours now. His fair-headed 'sparring partner' from the ship deck wasn't alone anymore— a taller, dark-haired, hunched gent loitered by. The secret agent rubbed his clean-shaven chin. A bodyguard? A chum? A cop? *What are you going to do, guys?* he pondered, without as yet any change of pulse or mimics.

While he watched, the shorter man passed the opera glasses to the taller one, both grabbed their briefcases (which seemed to match their owners in bulkiness), and busily trod away. For a moment, they faded from his view, but in less than a minute showed up again – making their way to the broad bridge which had his hotel at its end.

The clandestine officer cleared his throat, placed his binoculars back into his rucksack and sat deep in thought. He began to feel a light thrill, a rare, poignant feeling of danger at close quarters, nearly forgotten in the routine of daily paperwork and dull, passive 'work' missions. Were they about to get *him*? How? Was the taller guy a cop in civil? So far, the BND Zentrale had given him no extra clues. Well, maybe none were necessary – in this affair, he was the only profi and should know how to act.

Martin came back to the table, flung his baggage onto his sinewy shoulder, locked the entry door behind him, and took a lift to the ground floor.

“Please!” he passed his key to the receptionist. “See you!”

“See you,” blinked the puppet-faced young chap at the desk, automatically reaching out for the key and flicking it onto the glass case on the wall.

The agent passed the front door, strolled over the vast pavement and got into his hired Hertz car – which never knew any licence plates other than yellow Dutch ones. He figured out that his chasers would need up to ten minutes to traverse the long bridge and barge into his hotel. Captain Schlesinger was a curious man. He was sincerely intrigued as to why or for what money a harmless insurance clerk would be stalking him so doggedly. Suppressing a half-nervous, half-bored yawn, he pulled a pair of sunglasses from his jacket and flipped them onto his nose. The motor growled and the six brawny cylinders hurled the four tight-lipped wheels onto the numb grey tarmac. The feline-mannered big game, rolling on those wheels, wished to face his hasty hunters.

“What a lovely view, isn't it?” John sang out, stopping next to a hand-thick rope on which the bridge hung. He held his palm over his eyes to shade off the sun which suddenly gleamed from between two rows of clouds. Carl looked briefly and nodded reservedly. His own eyes weren't designed, as he joked, for another Rembrandt so, instead of trying to gaze into the bright haze hanging over the mirrored water, he glanced at the other side.

There, a string of cars, lined up like a file of work ants, crept along the humped back of the bridge. One of them, with large letters 'Hertz – fly and drive' on its side, passed slowly along the rightmost lane. If it weren't for a broad bike path between the pedestrian and motor lanes, Carl could have touched it with his outstretched hand. It seemed that the guy at the steering was smiling.

After the brothers-in-arms stomped across the large treeless terrace in front of the hotel, John frowned.

“Dash, a vacant parking lot!” he commented sourly, peering at the place where the German spy's auto had stood minutes before, “Why haven't I seen it?”

“Johnnie, *you* wanted a walk, didn't you?” Carl was a bit abashed by the steep mood change.

“Yes, but ... how would we trap our guy?” returned the sullen commander. “We've forgotten the car!”

“Hmm,” Carl scratched his ear. Indeed, with no more taxi at hand, they were to lead the nabbed spy away from any witnesses' eyes and tuck him into a closet, asap. And, not just that, they had to carry their suspect to the other end of Holland. *Ouch*, the engineer thought, *what a faux pas!*

“Know what?” John said, halting by the rotating front door, “you begin to rake the hotel through; I'll run back and fetch the car. The card carries your photo, after all.”

“Uh-huh,” Carl replied, on a grudging note. There was very little enthusiasm in him for any 'raking', after the last week's botched raid in Amsterdam. “What shall I do?”

“See, oldie, it's simple,” John eyes began to glitter like two stars, “you show the card to the reception guy, we get the names of all Jerries in the hotel. Okay?”

“Uh-huh,” Carl nodded glumly. *What if there're eighty of 'em?* he thought.

“Then we check the suites and arrest our guy. Just so plain!”

“But,” Carl hemmed, “what if he's not in his room?”

“Then,” John scratched his ear, “then ... we ask a porter to lock the door and ... ambush him.” The last words weren't so vivid as the first, neither were they so sure.

“And if he comes back the next day?” Carl knit his brow, “or, the day after?”

“Then ... then ... then ... we'll still wait!” John declared firmly. And looked at Carl with a carefully concealed fear that the 'bigger' brother wouldn't agree.

“Whew,” sighed the brown-suited man. John still peered at him, the same way he did in boyhood times, when he craved half of Carl's ice-cream, after gobbling up his own.

“Alright,” Carl clasped his lips, “but I'd only lie in wait until midnight. I've got two heavyweight appointments t' morrow.”

“Fine.” John nodded readily, pulling his mirror glasses out. “Then go.”

They did.

“Good afternoon, Inland Security,” Carl said weightily, shoving the intelligence ID by the nose of the young, plain-looking receptionist.

“Good ... day,” peeped the visibly scared fellow, pulling a long face. “Yes?”

Carl tucked the card back into the safe metal 'cocoon' and glanced askance at John. The clerk cleared his throat.

“We must have the names of all German guests at your hotel,” he ordered, his face as plain and deadpan as he could assume. The narrow-chested man in striped shirt shuddered,

then fidgeted, then nodded, scrolling down the database at his broad display.

“Umm, sirs ... I'm afraid there're no Germans at our hotel today,” he muttered , “only two Austrians, if it helps. Please have a look ...”. He turned the screen to them, joining his podgy palms in a servile, expectant way. John glanced at Carl, then knit his brow, without paying any attention to the screen. *A spy can carry false papers of another country!* the thought flashed, like proverbial lightning, through his seething mind.

“Then, we'll have to check all suites,” the clerk barked, in a stern, soldierly tone which wouldn't tolerate any objection, “beginning from the top down.”

“Now?” the receptionist's brows almost flew off his forehead.

“Now,” John's mouth was as firm and strained as a steel rope, “*right* now.”

The man at the desk beckoned to a porter to take his place, then stood up. “Shall I, um, print out all guests' names?” he asked. “Can I ... call t' director?” “Yes,” John first nodded, then shook his head. “No!”

“Sorry?” the receptionist blinked helplessly, “sir?”

“Ye-es, print it out,” John drawled, teasingly “and, no-o, don't call the director.” He turned to Carl, poked him with his elbow and snorted, softly and friskily: “That pipsqueak isn't too bright, eh?” The engineer winced and gulped. His polite, at times sheepish little brother was behaving like a Mafia thug in a Russian beach bar. John knit his brow again - sternly.

“Hurry up!” he nailed down the last order.

Both bespectacled agents stood and watched the sluggish ink-jet spewing out one sheet after another. They didn't utter a word – the engineer didn't want to... the clerk didn't know what more to say. After three tense minutes, a rustling file with a little over two hundred names was clipped together and handed over to the shorter, blond-haired chap, who seemed to be in charge.

“Top floor?” meekly asked the receptionist, grabbing the keys of the empty suites. They weren't few, so he emptied the basket with too-early plasticky Easter eggs and crowded it with the jingling metal plates.

“Yes,” John confirmed. Carl nodded. The frowning trio launched into action.

In the stuffy, poorly-ventilated lift cabin Carl felt he was beginning to blush – from both stale air and the ridiculous situation. All three men gaped at their shoes – one with staggering dread, the other with belated penitence, the last with severe firmness. The red diode ciphers above their heads twinkled vacuously as the lift glided upwards. At the number six, the cabin halted, the men stumbled out on the broad beige carpet. The receptionist, now more pale than the freshly whitewashed lobby wall, weakly pointed out to the first door, saying nothing. His hands were visibly trembling.

“Suite six-nil-one, Hidalgo Morales, from Costa-Rica, seaman, and Fernando Gomez, born in Honduras, a seaman, too,” John read aloud from the file. He trimmed his mirrored glasses and decisively knocked at the door.

Behind it, lively music was heard, mixed up with a woman's profuse, giddy laughter and some odd, smacking sounds. No one hurried to open. John knocked once more – with his meagre fist. The flimsy plywood-faced door

quivered, a scared stray cockroach landed upon the floor and scurried away. After full three minutes of thumping, the soft slap of barefoot steps drummed upon the floor. Someone gasping came close to the door but didn't open.

“Que es?” a low voice croaked, instead. The brothers looked at one another.

“Police, open!” John called. Carl tapped on his pockets, in search of the card.

Some more profane Spanish words followed, the key hiccuped in the lock, the door slowly creaked open. A short, black-eyed, sun-tanned chap only clad in a soiled bath towel wound around his middle gazed at the trio. Carl fetched his card, holding it at eye height.

“Your documents, please!” John demanded, “inland, uh, security.”

“Momento,” the heavily breathing fellow tripped to his room and darted back with a large, gaudy plastic card reading 'Hidalgo Morales' on it. John glanced at the ID, snatched it from two hot, greasy hands and handed it back in a moment: its owner resembled the grey-eyed German agent as much as an ostrich could resemble a blast furnace.

“Is there anyone else in the suit?” he requested, in a less sure tone.

“Que?” the seaman glared at the three uncertain chaps at his threshold, “Una senorita hoy en mi camara! Comprendo? Una senorita sin falda!” He made a couple of bawdy gestures.

John, too preoccupied to get the meaning, either spoken or shown, tried to shove the guest aside and to set his foot over the low threshold. That wasn't greeted with open arms –

the mariner suddenly grabbed John at his tie and pushed the office man back.

“Que va, gringo!?” he yelled, setting his callous palms right before the clerk's face, “Hay una senorita desnuda en mi cama! Una gerl!” he finished in broken English.

John gasped, not knowing what to do – play a macho cop and scuffle (but he hadn't a clue how), or parley in order to save face, or just retreat. He glanced, half helplessly, at Carl, who chuckled, and glanced, in turn, at the not-too-bright receptionist.

“There's, um, a woman on his bed,” the man with the Easter basket said, with a very light smile, “the lady is, umm,” he trailed off.

“What?” John cockily lifted his head, “what d'you mean, 'umm'?”

“The lady's *naked*, sir,” the hotel servant told the bare truth.

“Ugh,” the 'land mouse' was baffled by the basic sailors' activity ashore.

“Uh,” Carl hemmed and shook his head, lightly. *I won't muck in*, his face said.

“P'haps ...” John stepped back. The door slammed shut before his face. The fighter for his land's good trimmed his tie and stumbled, without more comment, toward the next suite. His smug smile began to wane and his countenance was now livid. By some odd idiosyncrasy, a similar smile started to gleam upon the dumpy visage of the hotel man.

“P'haps, we ...” the clerk set his eyes at the next line of the guest file, as his light shoes were carrying him to safety – to the next door. His reticent retinue rolled after him.

“Marcin Slezak, electrician, from Poland,” read the bluish eyes of the fair-haired man, “Alright! For us, everyone is a suspect, from an electrician to a prime minister!” he asserted, winding up in a righteous anti-spy anger, and whopped the door – with his left hand this time. His right one was aching after the first exploit. There was no reaction.

“Police, open!” John ordered. Not a word, no rustle inside. He pressed his ear to the cold, creamy surface. Silence... then, a soft crinkle, as the hotel man hemmed, feebly trying to draw John's attention to a key he just dug out of the basket. John paid no attention. The sound surely came from inside!

“Open at once, you!” he shouted, pounding the door with his both fists. No sign of life.

John stepped back to the opposite wall of the broad lobby. No, he was not one to be toyed with. Just a moment...

“Police, open!” he bellowed, “three more seconds and the door 'll fly off its hinges! Three ... two ... one ...” Carl covered his wide mouth with his broad palm. *John, you're not just dangerous, you're worse!* he thought with paralyzing fear.

“Sir?” the hotel servant raised his hand.

“Uh-huhh?” John stalled for a second, his left shoulder poised like a battle ram.

“Please, a key,” the receptionist said, with a wry grin, “this guest is absent.”

“A-ha,” John sank his shoulder back into the office position, “a key! Well!” He grabbed the dangling object from the delicate hand, without any sissy 'thank yous' and drove it, with overabundant force, into the run-down, shiny-from-constant-use lock. He swung the door open and stormed in. *It could be your guy's room!* his intuition whispered.

“Where're you, scoundrel?” the vain question reverberated in the void chamber.

... Exactly at that moment, the villain in question was peacefully sipping caramel beer at the sunny veranda in a hotel several hundred yards away. Assuming the appearance of a tourist, Captain Schlesinger could even use his powerful binoculars to monitor his pursuers on their way back. So far, the complex optic device remained in its cache. It wasn't needed – the agent had seen the busy duo closely enough to memorize their looks and gait. As soon as they got back from his hotel, say, in two hours...

“Sorry, sir?” the soft voice of a waiter in a glossy black vest disrupted his thoughts.

“Yes?”

“Can you please move back, to the first table at the right corner?” the man pleaded with an almost sincere frown, “I'm awfully sorry, a large delegation ... all front terrace tables have been reserved ... please, if that's not too great a problem.”

“Oh, that's all right,” half-grinned the agent, even though it wasn't. He wasn't at all blithe with the prospect of sitting further off and being unable to view the bridge. But, open emotions, like an open fireplug, are too conspicuous, not befitting a special-ops officer on a silent mission.

He stood with a sprightly flare, grabbed his weighty rucksack and followed the waiter to a lonely table at the back. It wasn't vacant, noticed the German with well hidden displeasure. A fellow in his fifties, middle height, mousy, lingered there with a copy of 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung' in his hands. His face was bland, carefully devoid of any emotion, professionally deadpan.

'*Oh, a colleague,*' thought the spy after the first look. "Good afternoon," he greeted the guest, trying to fake an American accent.

"Good afternoon, sir," returned the rather small gent with the large newspaper. Captain Schlesinger sat down and pulled from his rucksack an English periodical – 'The Independent'. He wanted to watch, if not the bridge, then at least his table neighbour - and he could do it in a number of ways. One, very old, was from behind a newspaper 'wall'.

On the opposite side of the flimsy table, sat no one less than MI6 major Davis. The English intelligence man had had a drab, unsmiling week, now behind him — three neurotic days in a Dutch detention cell, a couple of quixotic interrogations, release on a plenteous bail and three boring days in the UK Embassy. The nearly shipwrecked mission was saved, the double agent reimbursed in Brussel by Davis' younger colleague. But a big dent to Norman's military honour still wasn't plastered up, let alone fully mended. He couldn't hope for a prompt revenge, and it was ungentlemanly, too, to settle scores in person. Yet, he was still very eager to find out why, and *by whom* his mission was befuddled so thoroughly, and was glad to get 'The Vauxhall Cross' order to monitor the ship and hunt down a mole in British informers' circles in the Dutch capital.

Today, the greying serviceman of the Crown climbed into a low silver car with the yellow letters 'Hertz – fly and drive' on its side, and headed south. The SIS had gleaned reliable data that the arms ship with two concealed English-made igniters was to sail off this afternoon; he, Davis, had purposed to monitor the departure of the 'Marguerita' and to meet a local liaison informer. The latter, just a 'conduit' between him and a high-seated dignitary at Dutch Transport Ministry, worked as a reception man at the vis-a-vis Tulip hotel. The chap, normally known as punctual, was today somehow late...

The two suspicious profis weren't all alone, however. The impartial, cool-headed, light-footed Western wind whirled between the two very biased folks in grey and black; it rustled with its thin, musical fingers through the pages of their newspapers; and he, himself illiterate but very good at reading thoughts, wondered why those two guys so stubbornly held before their eyes texts they couldn't understand ...

Smart Mr. Wind was right. Major Davis, who only knew some Spanish and a smattering of Mandarin, was given a wrong newspaper by his Embassy staff - he asked for a Dutch one, but a secretary ordered a 'Deutsch', that is, a German copy. And captain Schlesinger, who also spoke French, Polish and Hausa, knew very few written words in the tongue of Chaucer and Thomas Eliot. He could speak some English, nonetheless, and grabbed the first paper from a press stall when he arrived in Holland.

Very soon, however, both captain and the major began to dart their eyes over to the columns in their mother language. They knew they should conceal it; they did conceal

it— yet, both were too well drilled to pass each other's fine play unnoticed.

'This guy is a military, and he knows no German,' Schlesinger deducted, vainly waiting for his counterpart to concentrate on reading, *'and, he's English or Scandinavian.'*

'Hmm, you're a secret agent, and can't read English, Davis thought, vainly waiting for the same, *'where are you from, chap? Central Europe? Germany?'*

The waiter, trying to reimburse somehow the forced 'exile' of both guests from the seaside row (Major Davis was asked to reseat five minutes before), brought two extra caramel beers, gratis. He placed the glasses before each of the guests and blinked cleverly. The message was received, two light, grateful nods ensued. Next, the garcon slipped from his tray two dark-red booklets in leatherlook covers.

“Menus, sirs?” he asked kindly, “English or Dutch?”

“English,” Schlesinger replied first. He'll cope. He's to play a Yankee, someday.

“Dutch.” The major clung, of course, to the other option. He knew not a word in the language, as murky and impenetrable for him as German, but made up his mind to play a Swiss tourist - polite, well-off and apolitical. What else could he do now, with that silly Jerry paper in hand and smart, attentive, ironic grey eyes two yards away?

The vested chap left, two thick papers flopped upon the brown table-top, four palms clasped the red pasteboard covers. Two empty stomachs candidly begged for fodder, yet it was miles away, behind the thicket of inscrutable, impossible words. Both men felt a natural drive to rub their

foreheads or chins, in an ancient gesture of perplexity. Both suppressed that drive under the controlling gaze of the other - it simply couldn't be otherwise.

'Man, what on earth is 'stewed veal hindquarter dotted with cranberry and garnished with parsley, English walnuts and daikon?' Martin pondered, trying hard to find a French, Polish or German equivalent for unexplainable 'veal'. The only word he sieved out from his trilingual mind was 'veine', and the captain almost shook his head – he's not a gourmet on such extravagancies as roasted blood vessels. His eyes switched to the dish below. It wasn't an easy sailing, either - *' broiler with mashed potato salad and sour cream'*.

He clasped his lips to cover up a sigh, and stiffened his forehead to conceal a frown.

'By Pete, what's 'gesmoord kalwemlees met johannesbeere en dillie, walnoten en japaanse radijs?', the major wrenched his mind, reading the Dutch description of the same veal meal. He scanned the 'double Dutch' lines, which were, for him, less readable than Chinese hieroglyphs, and slightly regretted that a clandestine officer must petrify his face and overheat his mind – and perhaps also torment his stomach, if the lackey brings a dish he didn't envision. And, according to Murphy's law, which reaches even to the high spy ranks, it surely could happen ...

The garçon, his readiness to serve two reseated guests pronto screwed up by the head waiter, came back very soon – too soon for the heavily thinking diners. Of course each of them had a dictionary in one's smartphone, able to translate and read out any text in any language under the heavens, save the tongues of the archangels and the Cherubim. But under the slick glances of the other, no one risked pulling out his device. They both were *supposed* to be smart enough to cope.

"Please, sir?" the waiter smiled at Casper, who seemed to be 'ready'.

"Soufflé and pasta," ordered the captain, in a tiny hope it was somewhere in the menu.

"Umm, sorry, sir," the brows of the only civilian by the table flew up, "we've no soufflé today. Would you like ... an omelette, perhaps?"

"Yes," Martin replied firmly, happy to hear a French word at last.

"Followed by?" the waiter wrote down the first dish.

"Shrimps" the BND man blurted out. It was simply one of very few English cookery words he knew. He didn't know its meaning any longer, alas.

"Shrimps?" the perplexed table servant frowned as if from a toothache. *What shrimps? They're not in today's menu.* he thought briefly "Sorry, our fish cuisine is tomorrow, um, if you like, I can ask the cook, he should have one langouste ..."

"Alright," briefly nodded the captain. To be honest, he had forgotten what those mysterious langousts were. A sort of vegetable salad, he recalled vaguely?

The sulky servant sought the eyes of Davis. The major hemmed.

"Um, maybe, a corn pudding?" he said uncertainly. The waiter sighed dismally.

"I'm sorry, sir," he scratched his ear with a pencil, "the only pudding we have is a fruit one. Would you like a, um, some roasted meat for the main course?"

“Fine, fine,” nodded the officer, unwilling to speak for a longer time than his 'opponent'. “At your choice.”

“I'll order the fried chicken's wings, then. Fresh from our farm,” the garcon rounded up an unexpectedly heavy talk. “Just a minute.” He glanced at Martin and strode away.

If it weren't for his rank, dignity and the presence of a supposed 'adversary', Norman would have waved his hand in avid protest. He hated chickens' wings from the depths of his being, belly and brain!

While waiting for their too-diligent waiter, two deft officers switched, as if by autopilot, onto another level in their subtle game – cracking each other up.

'If you're a Jerry, you're not too bright,' the Englishman thought, *'industrious and painstaking, right, but not as smart as we are.'*

'Well, if this guy is from Albion,' the German agent mused, under a deadpan mask, *'he'd jumble all sorts of stuff together. They're not as precise and perfectionist as we.'* Next, he produced a precise semi-smile and, darting a semi-askance look at Norman, asked:

“Tourist?”

“Business.” The graying gentleman almost frowned, barely able to hide a sneering grin. *'Surely you're a Teuton, so shamelessly direct and not able to begin with small talk, as all well-bred folks do! No problem, I'll teach you a lesson, you greenhorn.'* He glanced around.

“Fine weather, isn't it?” he asked, trying to snatch the initiative back and set the talk on English rails. “Perfect for a tourist.”

“Yep,” nodded Martin lightly. ‘*Only those English and French begin talking over trifles, and end on that,*’ he thought, squeezing out a yawn, ‘*No problem, I’ll crack you up in five and half minutes, you old fox.*’ he glanced upon the table, where the oversized German newspaper rustled its numerous pages. “Do you spik German? It was once mine drim, to rid Goethe in de origin.”

‘*Dash,*’ the major thought, fiercely trying to recall all rudiments of German he’d studied at secondary school, just to forget it years later. He nodded, benignly, “Yes. We Swiss learn German and French from the cradle.”

“Lovely,” the BND captain smiled modestly, trying not to allow a single longer break in the conversation. One little pause – and the opponent can grab the initiative away. He went on, “I’d like to visit de Alps one day, dose cuck-cock clocks, sprinns and chockolates ...’ he halted for a fraction of a second, grappling for those elusive English words – that meanwhile was enough for the seasoned MI6 man to snatch the helm.

“I see you know a lot about my country,” he grinned lightly, “I assume you’ve travelled widely, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, we Americans are bon tourists,” replied the German agent with a broad, sunny, confident smile. Well, not so completely sunny, maybe - that long English ‘or’ was a trouble, again. Norman lifted his brows slightly, and Martin felt he should be careful - he himself had only been once to the other side of the Atlantic.

“Oh, fine, my nephew lives in Georgia,” the Englishman grabbed the sudden trump. What he said was *almost* true – his friend’s brother stayed in Maine some eight years ago. “As far as I hear, you’re from the South, too, am I right?”

"No, I'm a Westerner from Arisansas," returned the German quickly, trying to cover up his lack of Dust Bowl and Wild West geography with a drummed-up tone. He noticed, however, two little sparks of near-laughter in the eyes of Norman. *Man scheisse!* he thought feverishly, *'I should have twattled a humbug'* He blinked and asked immediately: "And you, sir?"

"Oh, I'm from the east of Switzerland, from Geneve," replied Norman.

'Ha-ha, I got you, Geneve is in the west and is solely French-speaking!' Martin exulted silently. This time, the same soft near-laughter flickered in his his eyes – and was registered by the major. *'Tosh!'* he thought, *'I should have babbled some baloney!'*

After that mutual blather, both servicemen felt they could better creep back into their shells and hold their tongues. This little bout of silence came good in time, like a pleasant stretch of clear water in a whirling mountain torrent. The sworn opponents had survived the first skirmish; both were equally quick-witted, both had alike strong and weak sides, both were similarly coached, drilled and hardened by their psychology instructors. 'What's next?' the same thought popped up in two busy minds, which then began to switch back to their missions.

'Well, I'm here not to parley with you, chap,' concisely thought the captain, *'whoever you are - a bully, a bumpkin or both.'*

'I'd better stop blabbing and consider my liaison,' pondered the major, knowing from his inner 'clock' the exact time, *'Whoever this guy is – a Hun or a hoodlum.'*

These thoughts, still wrapped in cushiony silence, were cut short by the stomping of a well-laden person. The

sweaty-cheeked waiter carried on his tray an oversized dish, or maybe an undersized earthenware platter, on which a regular hill of scrawny, deep-brown wings towered. The little, triangle-shaped eyes of the MI6 officer turned smaller still ...

"Have a nice meal, sir," uttered the gasping garcon, sincerely and without a jeer. Yet, it sounded like a plain mockery in the ears of the poultry hater. To add injury to the insult, the bowl, heavy as a yacht's anchor, thumped upon the table very close to his nose. A smaller one, with a pale-yellow omelette, followed suit, landing on the opposite side. The waiter, feeling a well-earned servant's pride, nodded to Martin, "Your langouste is ready in ten minutes, sir." Then he was gone.

The German agent glanced at the insipid, wobbly yellowish mass in front of him. It wasn't perhaps that bad, but the client vis-a-vis had his *favourite* dish – the broiled wings. And, that weary western wind ... why should it blow the aroma of the deliciously seasoned poultry straight into his nostrils? Two men, one sagged and nearly desperate, another almost devouring the top wing with his artificially tin, lackluster eyes, kept silent –yet, this silence was no longer tense, hostile or empty. It was rather ... friendly.

'*Poor old Norman,*' the cheerless Englishman pitied himself, '*such stuff my spaniel, Jacky, won't even piss at! This dish one can give to his sworn enemy ...*' he blinked, in a futile hope that the detestable platter would vapourise. It didn't. '*Moment, moment,*' his mind picked up the last word, '*the enemy ... this time, the foe isn't a world away!*' He cleared his throat.

"Umm, help yourself, please," he waved his hand over the brimming dish.

"Really?"

“Sur’ly,” Davis nodded, “we, Swiss, are renowned for generosity.”

He spoke out the maxim, as genuine as a quack's virility pills, with a very light smile. Martin Schlesinger, getting the subtle irony but shuffling his honour, for the moment, behind his stomach, didn't need to be asked twice. Soon, the dish was pulled to the middle of the table, the cautious nibbling gradually gave way to cheery gnawing.

In a couple of crispy minutes, when the large spiny lobster arrived on the scene, it was greeted with the equally greedy eyes of the islander. The captain, reading through the deadpan face of the major and glad to compensate the 'Swiss' liberality of his table comrade, repeated the words he heard four and a half minutes earlier.

“Really?” now, it was Norman's turn to hide his wonder. He loved seafood as much as he loathed fried chicken.

“O' course!” the German nodded, “we Americans aren't too gridy, eidah!”

In the next half an hour, the two men's perennial enmity was very much eaten away. They even lifted a toast to Arthur Wellington and General Bluecher, the bond between whom saved the Continent from that bloody monster at Waterloo. They still didn't mention their real names, still didn't exchange their phone numbers or email addresses - but it wasn't needed: both had the intuition keen enough to grasp for whom they were working. Their private data was classified, their oaths irreversible, their patriotism unabated. Yet, both still were men of flesh and blood, able to strike a brief amity by the table. And, what is brief, shouldn't be shallow ...

After the last crustacean's pincer and half of the chicken's bones had lost their flesh, two almost-friends left two blue twenty-Euro notes under their plates and sauntered out. Both felt their phones buzzing, yet even in this 'friendly mode', neither the captain nor major would risk checking the message under the watching eyes of a competing profit.

With the new bond of table friendship's, the two ambled discreetly to their hired vehicles – which, by the universal Law of Birds-of-The-Feather, lingered side by side on an almost empty, vast-as-half-a-football-field, parking lot. Both opened their cars' boots – to place one's decent, non-conspicuous baggage pieces in – and to check the situation around while shielded out by a metal cover.

And then ...

Along the embankment, barely four yards away from the watchful military, two rumples, panting folks lurked, closely following a short-clipped chap in a shimmering black jacket and slightly soiled jeans. Their smiling victim was busily chatting over his phone – in a language too familiar to Martin and too foreign to Norman. While he was still speaking, one of his pursuers flanked him, passing around and blocking the way. He stopped. The other guy, in a brown suit, trimmed his glasses, trimmed his tie and produced a credit card-sized object from his pocket. Next, the thing was set before the unsuspecting eyes of the man, who was no longer smiling.

“Casper?” The smaller chaser asked – loudly and curtly.

“Casper.” The baffled gent in black jacket shrugged lightly.

“German?” plunked down the next question, rowdy and rough.

“Yes, but--”

“You're arrested.”

Both secret officers gaped at the quiet horror scene from behind their vehicles. Next, they glanced at each other – flabbergasted and bemused. Far off, a dog yelped ...

8

THE CHASE

The widely stretched hands of Big Ben were pointing towards heaven and the underground, reminding the few ignorant morning visitors about both the sublime and the ridiculous in the former capital of the world (or, at least, the better half of it). A group of well-shaven and well-bred individuals—three high bosses of SIS spy agency—were waiting in silence in a somehow funny Lego-styled building a couple of miles away, in the sublime side of London.

Their silence was sober, sombre, stern, and pretty dear. Every hour of direct monitoring through a spy satellite cost more than the average Joe could win with a three-digit lottery hit, or just a bit less than a dirt-poor and flagrantly corrupt Banana Republic could squander in a quarter of a year. The smart overhead projector, connected to a laptop with a still-smarter antenna, buzzed busily. The three suited gentlemen sat still, almost on the breathless, paralytic level, and peered at an image of the rusty hulk of a freighter ship.

The freighter was passing, slowly and surely, across the invisible, irreversible, fateful, sinister line of tenth WG Meridian. The three men held their breath, for they knew that two igniters, hidden deep in the cargo bellies, had to go off in an eyewink in order to change both the course of the hapless 'Marguerita' and that of the modern history of arms trade.

“Five... Four... Three...” The ciphers on the onscreen clock counted down. The people gulped, blinked, and furrowed their brows.

In the next tense seconds, the three waited for the ignited fuel cells to flare up to white-heat level—that is, to the temperature on the surface of Venus, if not Mercury. Such heat should be at once picked up by the keen infrared eyes of the near-space colleague of the plain-clad officers, the XSWh5 military satellite. “Two... One... Nil.” The men looked between one another. Had it worked?

“Hmm,” hemmed Geoff Raleigh, the seventh department boss, nervously. It had been, in fact, his idea to install the stuff. Now, the tension at the table had reached its climax.

Twenty long seconds crept by at the pace of the world’s slowest snail. The Object Temp range in the upper right corner of the screen remained at the same, bluish-green level. Cold.

“Um.” Lord Evans, MI6 top boss, lifted his brow a bit. He wasn’t the biggest expert on arson technology, yet one fact was, for him, clear: a frying pan set on a burner should turn hot within a minute; if it doesn’t, something is wrong.

Forty more seconds passed, at a scared sloth’s tempo. Then, a hundred more, tripping like a stodgy penguin on thin spring ice. Lord Evans felt he should break the chilly, murky silence. “Well, gentlemen,” he began, clearing his throat. “The initial time is exceeded by two hundred per cent. Your explanations?” He turned his pale, inquisitive grey eyes first to Geoff Raleigh.

“Uh, sir, there could be a sort of... um, *water cushion* formed between the incendiary device and the deck ...” Raleigh stopped and trimmed his tie. “The appliance could have started, yet—”

“Where would the water have come from?” Sir Malcolm demanded, grudgingly. *It will be me, not the department bosses, who'll have to report the matter to Downing Street, no later than tomorrow afternoon, and what would such a report contain? Water?* he thought sourly.

“Um, I suppose rainwater could have formed a sort of pouch, or, uh, a *pool* between several crates, or, maybe, a leakage of water is the cause.”

“I shouldn’t have to raise the question of whether the devices were all installed, should I?” the lord remarked, as drily as he could.

“We are in possession of hard evidence that they were, sir—the photographs taken first-hand by Serge,” countered Max Boyd, the third assembly member who had been, until then, rather taciturn.

Lord Evans nodded gloomily. Of course he’d seen the photos, and he was used to trusting his subordinates. Yet... where was the raging flame, the stratosphere-reaching fume, the planned accident on the high seas? Where was the Deep Fire that was supposed to be as sure as the moon tide? Where was the *temperature*?

The same cheerless question seemed to be bugging all three of them, simmering their overheating minds.

“Monitor the situation every half hour and report me hourly, please,” said Sir Malcolm, standing up. “I still hope

we won't have to resort to the last means." Raleigh and Boyd, the Latino and Eastern European spy bosses stood up too, nodding woodily and yessing blandly.

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At the same time, one time zone to the east, there was absolutely no lack of heat and fire in the busy phone conversation between another two suited and shaven, but non-military, men.

"But, say, why're you so scared? We left the guy at a bus stop, not on an uninhabited island!"

"At half-past one o'clock in the middle of the night!?"

"Alright, but accidents happen..."

"Rubbish!"

"You mean?"

"I mean that I quit—no more kidding around, no more night raids, no more arresting the guilty or the innocent, no more nothing!"

"Man, can't we do it just one more time?"

"Nope."

"But I'm sure he'll be leaving t'morrow! From Ams'dam..."

"No, don't you get it? I'm through with all that. We're up to our eyeballs in illegalities. Just think!"

"Alright, but tell me this—who started it?"

“Me-e, yes, yes, that’s agreed. And I’ll be the one to stop it, too—at the same point where I began it those two rabid weeks ago!”

“Huh?”

“I’ll leave t’ darn thing at the same place I found it, washed and wiped clean.”

“Why so far?” chuckled the voice on the other side of the wireless line lightly. “Isn’t there an easier way? A canal, a river... a rubbish bin in a park?”

“No, man. I’ve already decided, and it has to be this way! I won’t go into detail about why this and why that. You can be present—that is, if you *want* to be.” Some bitter-sour irony accompanied the last phrase.

“Fine, it’s a good idea. Know what? How about I take you out for lunch, to make up for the one you missed last Monday. Sound good?”

“Ne’er mind lunch!”

“Alright, then, I won’t. But when will you come to do the other thing?”

“How about, say, about eleven in the morning? By the same broad bridge over... you know, that canal?”

“O’er Singel? Okay, sure. See you tomorrow at the bridge.”

Carl and John finished their talk, which was of a very stormy variety for these two sibling-friends, and each sighed on his own end of the line—one with relief, the other with passing grief.

The engineer, who had just put another scary, sleepless night behind him, felt as though he was ready for a couple of weeks in a sanatorium. The last ‘agent’ they’d nabbed in Rotterdam (after churning some forty-plus hotel guests from a dozen lands, tribes, and peoples) turned out to be an innocent philosophy student. So shocked was the short-clipped, feline-pacing Erasmus researcher that he couldn’t stop prating, pleading, and persuading the brothers in a loud, monotonous pitch that he was no one other than a meek and mild bookworm etching his life through the fathomless depths of Plato, Gegel, Spinoza, and Kierkegaard.

After a four-and-a-half-hour-long monologue in broken Dutch, decent English, and very good German, the future philosopher (or politician) talked his way to freedom and landed at a desolate bus stop in Den Bosch with only a curt and brief excuse from his interrogators.

“What’s next?” John sighed, peering into the dark screen of his phone. “The ship has set sail, the card means nothing, the Jerry spy’s as free as a bird, and there are still those nutty warheads.” He frowned, sagging slightly under the stone-heavy thought.

He knew his phlegmatic, peaceful older brother well—but he also knew Carl’s on-again, off-again sour temper and anger. In fact, they knew each other like two fingers of the same hand. The older had been in charge of the younger since pre-school times, and so his *yesses* were more affirming and his *no* was more negative. Now, John felt that the curt ‘nope’ he’d just heard had closed the door completely on the last spy-nabbing hope he’d had to hold onto.

“How could one man stop a ship already on the high seas?” he muttered, rubbing his chin. “What magic wand would be needed?”

The clerk drooped his head over the table, drumming his fingers over the tabletop. His thumb nudged, unwittingly, the sensitive screen of his communication device, the touchscreen woke from its i-slumber and twinkled its open menu icons. The first on the left was Press, linked to the English *Financial Times* and the Dutch *NRC Handelsblad*. The busy bank employee simply had no time for anything else.

“Hmm,” he murmured as he raised his head, “it seems like there’re no miracle reporters and no staff journalists willing to take a stand—but at least I’m still here to do it!”

He launched the browser, selected the first search engine, and tapped in ‘southern UK press’. His intuition, which followed him most places he went (with, alas, one and only one exception), was persuading him to turn to a local paper rather than to *The Sun*. After some surfing and linking, he steered to a county news periodical called *The Daily Warbler*. The jovial name didn’t discourage the searcher. Soon, his nimble fingers began tapping the little device keys as he created a query destined for the *Warbler’s* inner offices.

“Good morning. My name is John Cheesekop, employee of IND Bank in Amsterdam, Holland. I was tasked with a ‘special goods’ ship insurance account and examined the cargo aboard this vessel. Instead of derrick parts and engine shafts, I found the cargo holds filled chock-a-block full with missiles, warheads, torpedoes, and the like. I won’t play a fiddle in an orchestra of death, and so I am turning to you to shed some light on this potential disaster. Please find attached the photos.” John stopped typing, then read the text over.

The email wasn’t the most cute, artful, or expertly written, and John knew it, even without having taken a journalism course. He didn’t care about the style, however.

A picture is worth a thousand words, he thought, attaching the whole list of photos to the email. *Even if these news editors don't take my material, at least I'll know I tried, and my conscience will be clean.*

He pressed the Send button without much heart-throbbing—and without the slightest clue that he was also sending dozens of diplomats, politicians, policemen, and military captains into a feverish, insane dance and forcing them to finger-point, fist-clench, forehead-rub, and table-turn. The light-winged data flew over the Channel, overtaking the cawing seagulls, the whispering clouds, and the wailing sea winds in an instant. Then, it nestled in the humming electronic post server of a small Sussex paper—where it waited to unleash, mere hours after it arrived, a hurricane.

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Saturday mornings hadn't been known for being a tough time for the off-duty MI6 officers—except, as some of the Old Guards dared to say, once in a blue moon. It seemed, however, that the Earth's faithful, yawning and predictable companion had gained, on the sly, a cyanic tinge the night before...

The phone rang, loudly and imploringly, at Max Boyd's Victorian house. Geff Raleigh was on the line.

"Hallo," the as of yet unshaven colonel cautiously greeted his colleague. "What's up?"

"Our salaries," returned Geff with his dry Yorkshire humour. The joke fell, apparently, short, so he cleared his throat. "Haven't you heard yet? The English press is moonstruck!"

“What for?”

“The Marguerita. They’re claiming she carries British-made arms to Argentina!”

“What??” the stylish receiver nearly dropped from Boyd’s hand onto the shiny chestnut tabletop. Without bothering to pick it up again, Max dashed to his laptop and turned it on. Indeed, the headlines of both the tabloids and the white-collar press were blistery: *UK ships arms to the Argies—is the Cabinet blind?; Second Falklands war near—who’ll win?; Our defence secrets cruise to Latinos by boatload.*

“Unbelievable,” muttered the intelligence officer as he tilted back in his hard Chesterfield chair. He knew what’d come next—night meetings, endless discussions, pointing fingers at each other, and maybe even staff reshuffling in the worst-case scenario. Would the press really go this far to breed a duck of a story?

Max, suddenly feeling the plastic mouse becoming repulsively slippery from his own sweat, clicked on a couple more links, zooming in on several photographs. He suddenly groaned and clenched his teeth. *Damn it!* he thought, realising this time that it was no news duck at all. In the photos were very true, real, well-known British-made missiles and warheads that he should recognise more than anybody.

He struggled up and staggered back to his writing table. Would it be right to call Lord Evans, or should he wait? He should surely shave and suit up—

A doorbell rang, interrupting his thoughts. The sound was loud, long, and implacable. The colonel dashed to the front door and peered into the intercom’s video screen. A

bobby? Certainly *that* wasn't a mirage, either. He selected the code and pushed the heavy steel door open.

A constable saluted the SIS officer, clicking his heels. "Sergeant Pitkin, Metropolitan Police. I have an order to drive you to an emergency meeting at an appointed place."

"Let me get ready. I'll be down in two minutes," replied the intelligence man, according to emergency protocol. He took the stairs two at a time. *Dash, this is just the beginning*, he thought feverishly, cramming his phone, a Philips shaver, and a disgruntled beeping laptop into his briefcase. *I hope I won't end up toeing the early retirement scheme!*

Along the known, sinusoidal Thames embankments, under the howling siren and blinking lights of the police car, Boyd heard a helicopter clutter unpleasantly close by. *A-ha, Lord Evans is arriving by air*, thought the colonel shortly, both envying his commander's exclusive travel means and enjoying the fact that the *utmost* responsibility wasn't on his shoulders. Obviously, the game they were playing wasn't peanuts, given the uproar he both heard and felt.

Once inside the familiar Admiralty hall, Boyd felt both baffled and fortified. He expected a large high-flown assembly, but he had not counted on the swarming, bubbling level of confusion he saw when he arrived. The Defence Secretary, the Foreign Minister, the SAS general, both top spy chiefs, and the London police brass rubbed shoulders with the Commanders of the Royal Navy, Army, and Air Force. They sat around a rectangular table in the hall lit only by the morning light from four tall, half-shaded windows. The Prime Minister was abroad, and everyone knew it—and wondered if he had already been informed. There was no press present.

“Good morning, sirs,” greeted the Defence Secretary, who sat at the head of the table. He stood up, his face taut and concerned, and continued, “We must decide within hours, not days, what to do with the cargo, and the ship as well for that matter, before this scandal has a chance to shipwreck the government and destabilise all of Britain. Lord Evans, would you please brief us on the situation?”

A grey-haired, grey-faced, sagging person stood up and looked around the table. His voice was weak. Boyd, seated at his direct boss’s right hand, peered at his curved reflection in a mineral water bottle.

“Gentlemen, our Service has taken all steps, at the highest professional level, to drown the deal, and maybe the rest of the cargo as well. I monitored the situation in person. However, despite our best efforts, we were unable to sink the problem. My assumption is, most probably, that a minor, unexpected technical fault resulted in the failure of our current plans. I must admit that the ship now has a ninety-five per cent chance of proceeding to her destination unhindered.”

Colonel Boyd nodded at the assessment, as weightily as he could. “Thank you.” Lord Evans returned the nod and nearly flopped back down into his seat.

The Defence Secretary knit his brow and opened a file in front of him. “Our information proves that the sensational press reports are, unfortunately, correct. Britain sold those arms to Russia in 2002, in an attempt to brush up the stockpile of outdated weapons. The deal was of the type known as a ‘silent’ one, with the sender and recipient agreeing not to disclose its details, in any way, for forty years.”

There was a murmur around the table.

“However, a severe information leakage took place,” the Foreign Minister joined in. “As I understand it, this leak was perpetrated outside of any diplomatic or defence circles.”

“Yes.” The colourless word plunked down like a cold drip under one’s collar. No one turned their head to find out who’d spoken. It didn’t matter. Max Boyd gulped. *Was it me?*

“Was the ship left unguarded in Holland?” the Foreign Minister went on, his question not truly expecting an answer.

“If I may, to add a word,” came Lord Evans’ weak voice as he struggled to raise his head again. “The Marguerita did carry, according to all freight documents, *civil* cargo. There were only some onboard guards, and no external security men posted in any of the ports.”

“Where were those onboard guards last Monday?” asked the Defence Secretary in a half voice. His rhetorical question vaporised without an answer.

A canopy of heavy silence descended again over the long, light-coloured, thin-legged table, around which a dozen overloaded minds were working on full turns. A political scandal was inevitable; it would be ugly, loud, and threatening—not only to their country, but (it went without saying) to their own status, clout, and salaries as well.

What’s more, there was an unspoken agreement around the table that Britain, that both little and great, splendidly isolated land, should rely exclusively on its own brain, brawn, and stick to survive. And that stick was now in their hands—hands that must be kept strong, even if it *seemed* unfair to some.

With these things in mind, the Defence Secretary cleared his throat. "Your propositions, sirs," he said as he closed his file and looked down the two long rows of uniformed and plain-clothed officials occupying both sides of the table.

The SAS general, who sat in the middle, shook his balding head first. "None, so far," he said quietly. "Besides, the ship's not even in our waters, so our options are limited."

"Sinking it isn't in the cards, either," grunted the Royal Navy Admiral, making a short gesture hinting at denial. "It's technically possible, but politically suicidal."

The Army's Chief of Staff kept silent. In fact, his high seas colleague had taken the words out of his mouth—for which he was both grateful and disgruntled. He glanced askance at the RAF commander, who sat at the right hand of the meeting's chairman—a position he had perhaps not taken up by blind chance alone.

The Air Force chief took his turn. "We could, of course, drop several floating, world war two-type mines," he said, his lips barely moving, "and announce that region of the seas un-navigable. Yet the ship in question is already in the Atlantic, her skipper has twenty-plus years of experience. He's able to find and use the narrowest corridors. Also, there'd be *a lot of* fuss and costly hassles with other freighters that are now in the area, or en route to it. Plus, we'd *have to* answer to why some stray mines popped up from the deep after sixty-seven years in the ocean. It'd be a very hard nut to crack."

The Defence Secretary nodded a couple of times, deep in thought. As the assembled officers watched him think, there came a light rustle from the left side of the crowded table. The chief of police lifted his hand high enough to be

almost impolite in the company of *real* generals, admirals, and spies. The chairman raised his eyebrows.

“Sirs, could we possibly consider a strategy on the media front?” the top policeman said anxiously, pointing to his smart phone where one news alert message was chasing another. “There are, at this moment, seventeen riots in greater London alone, the latest in front of the Defence Ministry.” He stopped and glanced down at his device, where a photo of a straw Defence Minister being hanged had just appeared on the screen. He cleared his throat to continue, choosing not to share this image with the real Minister a few seats away. “I already summoned three platoons of reserve officers; the shire and county constables aren’t sending any, afraid of their own public order. The situation is getting pretty dire—”

His hand went down, and several heads drooped. No one slighted the uproar, surely led by some dismayed Falkland War veterans; no one risked calling it hot air. The wily plot to buy, first, an array of medium-range missiles from Britain, and then to sell the whole lot to Argentina—only months before the thirtieth anniversary of the Falkland conflict—could be a clumsy Kremlin’s revenge for England’s role in throwing some Russian spies out of the U.S. It didn’t matter now; a sure way *out* had to be found, and it had to be soon. Within hours.

“Couldn’t we just tell them... the truth?” the Army commander suddenly asked on behalf of everyone, and maybe for himself as well. While a valiant suggestion, his sincerity might have stemmed from the simple fact that it wouldn’t be him telling that bristly truth to the public.

“What is the *truth*?” the Foreign Minister cut in, with a Hamlet-like air. “Can you tell me? Or, can anyone else? How

many real facts could we risk leaking to those vulturish newsmen—those same folks who'd turn a gnat into an elephant in two mouse clicks?"

"I suppose we could leave the final public relations battle to Downing Street, for the time being," the Defence Secretary cut in, steering the discussion back onto a course of concrete action. "I suggest that we form, for the next couple of hours, two groups: one concerned with media relations, and the other with military action." He turned to the Foreign Minister. "Would it be possible for you to chair the first one?" The man in the smart black suit nodded and stood up, ready to take his place.

"Sirs Rogers, Alvyn, Larry, Stuart, and Lord Evans, can I please ask for your advice in a room apart?" He looked from the SAS boss to the RAF boss, then at the head of the Royal Navy and both military intelligence bosses. The selected five silently stood up and followed their direct leader into an adjoining chamber with a dark blue carpet and a round table. After the Secretary wearily sat down, the other five men followed suit. For a while, no-one dared to break the silence.

"What *can* be done—concrete, prompt, and to the point?" the Secretary asked finally. "It seems that the ship can't see bottom; fine. But we must keep it from seeing Sao Paolo and Buenos Aires by all means necessary."

"Then we should pray for fair weather," the Navy commander advised, shrugging lightly. "A raid is only possible in calm seas."

"You ... suggest that an air operation would be best?"

“No. Too much noise, too risky at night,” cut in the chief aviator. “The onboard guards could be armed. Any *subtle* action should be taken from the surface.”

“You’ve got the commando troops ready ’round the clock, haven’t you?” the Secretary asked, just pro forma.

“Yes. People and gear aren’t a problem,” the Admiral returned. “But action itself *must* be perfectly organised, or we’d just add new injury to an old insult.”

“If you need some assistance...” the SAS general offered, tilting his head.

“Alright,” agreed the Defence Secretary, some hope gleaming in his eyes. He briefly nodded to both. “Suppose a commando platoon boards the ship at dark. Then what?”

“There are some choices,” Lord Evans, the former Royal Navy officer himself, joined the planning with the raising of an index finger. “One is mild: manipulating the ship’s course towards a Crown territory in the Caribbean.” He held up a second finger. “The second one is tougher: blowing up fuel cisterns aboard the vessel.”

“And the third?” asked the chairman with a weighty raise of an eyebrow.

“Too radical to mention unless necessary.”

“In both of these cases, the crew’s expected to take a very long nap,” the Secretary said warily. “Right?”

“It wouldn’t be hard for us to make *that* happen,” the MI5 chief threw in.

"We can help with that too," Lord Evans nodded assuredly. "Liquid, gas, or vaporising pills..."

"Non-lethal, I presume?"

"Of course," assured both spy bosses with half grins. For a while, an anxious yet hopeful silence hung over the unemotional furniture.

"But blowing up fuel tanks would leave a great oil smudge in the middle of the ocean," the Secretary mused aloud, with a sour face. "Ecology and stuff like that... Not to mention that some missiles could, um, follow suit."

"Right," the Navy chief curtly agreed with a shrug. He didn't know much about ecology, and he didn't care much about it, either. But he didn't want to take lives of civilian mariners in peace time; it wasn't fair.

"Then not much is left over," mused the Defence Secretary, tilting back in his chair. "Besides Operation Bermuda or the like."

"I can order a destroyer with two speedboats and a commando platoon on the alert," Admiral Larry offered with some degree of excitement. "That is, if a surface operation is on the addenda."

"Exactly," agreed the Secretary, knitting his brow. "Please calculate the route, set the timing, and summon the commando platoon to Portsmouth's RN base." He turned his head to the SAS and MI6 bosses and lowered his voice. "Please take care of the means for deep sleep. Enough for a ten-strong crew," he clarified. "Our next meeting will be at six this afternoon, aboard the destroyer."

... While very tense emotions bubbled and boiled to high grades under the staid, well-behaved, though slightly grumpy English clouds, the mood above a grand Amsterdam canal was as still as it could be in a hurricane's eye.

"Anything for you, sirs?" asked a waitress in a black mini-skirt, glancing cautiously at two sombre-looking, taciturn chaps occupying a remote corner table.

"One coffee and one tea, please," the first of them, the shorter and fair-haired one, ordered with a half-grin. The other one, taller and bespectacled, chuckled disgruntledly and glanced at the first. "But no lunch, okay?"

"Sorry?" The waitress knit her meticulously shaped brows and clarified, "You mean, something to eat, sir?"

"No, nothing at all, thanks!" declared the bespectacled one of the pair in a loud and croaky tone. Then he nodded heavily, peering at the pavement.

Why do I always get the oddballs? wondered the waitress with a silent groan. "Alright," she said and nodded, feeling anxious to get away from the rather heavy mood that was hanging over the corner table. Her light, pointed heels rattled away upon the cold cobblestones like beads falling from a broken necklace.

The steely silence set in again. The two men were looking in different directions, avoiding each other's gaze. The taller one was glancing, every half minute or so, at his watch; the shorter one was looking over the nearby canal, trying to conceal a mix of a heavy sigh and a light grin.

"Three and a half minutes yet," the first one grumbled.

“Man, we’re not waiting on the Queen. Jus’ go an’ leave it.” His table comrade resignedly shook his head. “You’ll spare us both a couple of burned neurons.”

“Hmm,” hemmed the man in tortoiseshell glasses. “Indeed.” He stood up reluctantly and peered toward the opposite side of the broad canal, his thoughts four times deeper than that pocket-sized waterway. They were as deep as the always-frowning North Sea, or perhaps the Atlantic Ocean itself—and just as turbulent. Their daring spy experiment was off. It was as clear as a Spanish day or a polar night—yet now, *right now*, the journalistic half of his being had come to and was protesting, albeit rather feebly.

He now felt chagrined that he had listened to his younger sibling and entered that agent-nabbing craze. It would have been much better to use (or mildly abuse, as it were) the card as a mind opener for his essays. Now, that chance was gone; it was all too late...

He sighed, as shortly as he could, to conceal his feelings, then hefted himself up from the table and waddled, hunched and sagged, over the bridge to the parking lot where his half-Rover, half-Jaguar loomed. That sudden, noble change had taken place the day before when the clumsy garage mechanics had broken off, by mere mishap, the rear Viking rowboat emblem, and had replaced it, gratis, with one carrying a fierce wild cat’s muzzle. Just until Monday, sir, they’d said. Drop in for a visit whenever you’d like, blah blah and so on. To tell the truth, the half-Jag’s owner wasn’t at all in a hurry to switch back to the lowlier emblem.

The brown-haired man trod towards the place where he’d found the spy ID card two weeks previously, between a tall poplar tree and the jagged marble embankment. The old, rusty metal ring was still there, and the sludgy green water a

couple yards beneath was also just where he had left it. Even a half-drowned plastic cup rocked on the miniature waves in just the same way.

Bye, adventure, for ever ... thought the tall gentleman with an ugly feeling of downsizing to the stature of a small, petit-bourgeois creature whose bobtailed thoughts would never outgrow the yellow press gossip and whose mean remembrance would never outlive his burial. *But c'est la vie*, he mumbled weakly, slightly despising his own very practical (and very Dutch) cowardliness. "I'm just back to earth," he murmured. "Both feet are planted."

He stuck both his heavy hands into the deep pockets of his jacket in a sort of a decisive, manly gesture—a semiconscious cover-up for his overall sissy situation of consenting a defeat of one's own bravest boyhood dreams and brightest journalism affairs.

As he did so, the thumb of his left hand pressed, on its way to the pocket's soft, safe bottom, the small 'open' button on his car's advanced remote control. Four orange parking lights blinked twice, and four cafe-latte doors unlocked. The jaguarish Rover's owner didn't notice, however; he was too preoccupied, too sad, and too short-sighted. He turned his gaze back to the greenish water, where the cup seemed just on the verge of going under.

The double-twinkle and unlocking doors were, however, very well noticed by two bald, bearded, leather-clad chaps lurking atop two shiny black motorcycles. As if waiting for a coded signal, one of them grabbed a grey suitcase from his bike's side car, flipped the boot of the pseudo Jaguar open, and shoved the object in. The loud clank of the closing boot was silenced by the still-louder vroom and rumble of a pair of Harleys roaring to life.

The brown-suited man looked up as the bikes roared past him, then snorted and sneezed several times, waiting for the cloud of acrid exhaust belch to disappear. As the fumes glided away towards the canal, he stooped down and warily touched the boot's lock. The cover sprang up, as did Carl's eyebrows. He peered inside to see the metal briefcase squatting in the middle of the otherwise empty luggage room. As his two large, delicately trembling hands reached out to take the sleek object, his two short-sighted eyes peered at two chip-coded locks.

"What on earth?" he muttered, feeling his pulse speeding up. "A drunk Santa Claus mistaking the season?"

He pressed down on the locks, shivering from both the chill of the canal and the goose skin that was creeping up his back and across his plump cheeks. *Locked.* The bespectacled man turned the briefcase upside down, shook it, and weighed it in his hand. He recognised it immediately as a top-class, costly, fireproof valuables container. By some luck, he had chanced upon the occasion to unlock such a case before when a CEO's secretary at his city had deleted all codes on a very similar-looking chest and had begged for his help before her boss found out. He'd kept the micro-chip opener in his own box for just such an occasion. At least, he hoped he still had it.

He sprung to open the rear passenger door and snatched his briefcase from under the seat. In less than a minute, the thirty-two legs of an aged but reliable Eprom chip passed, precisely, into the small awaiting openings concealed on the new briefcase's bottom. Two smart locks, outsmarted by the electronics Ph.D., buzzed, clicked, and opened. Two trembling hands pried the metal jaws open. Two tortoiseshell eyes peered in.

“Dash.” That was the one and only word able to pass through two suddenly bluish-grey lips. The tall, tweed-shouldered man dashed to the canal’s side and, scaring both the hovering pigeons and the cafe’s waitress, yelled, “John!”

The waitress tripped, crashing into the corner table and taking with her a tray laden down with a tea jug and a coffee cup.

The fair-haired man was looking at him in surprise from across the canal.

“Come here!” he bawled, waving both hands. “Run!”

John jumped to his feet as though a sudden, mile-deep crack had opened up under his table, then darted along the bridge, narrowly escaping a collision with the perplexed waitress and a couple of passers-by.

“What?” he panted, peering into Carl’s eyes—which seemed, now, to be larger than even his glasses.

“Take the wheel, quick!” ordered the older brother. “Questions later!”

John did as ordered, and Carl climbed into the passenger seat beside him. The front doors closed with a loud bang as the tires screeched, pushing the vehicle into the narrow south-bound lane. At the first set of traffic lights, John glanced at the scared engineer. “What’s up? Where to?”

“A p-p-police station,” returned Carl, with a shudder and a stutter. “Or, no... p-p-perhaps not... Darn!”

“Carl, what’s up?” The clerk was baffled and growing more confused by the second. “Where’s the card?”

“I” card is in my pocket,” said the taller man with a frown. “But ne’er mind it. Just go and have a look in the boot!”

“What’s there?”

“A briefcase with a gun and packs of cash—” he stopped.

There was a heavy silence as both brothers held their breath. “A...a what?” John finally cried, skipping out of the vehicle and rushing to the boot, which was still open, as was the briefcase. He peered at the seemingly unlimited stacks with Ben Franklin’s green-tinged portrait on them. A long-barrelled gun with a silencer completed the scene. John groaned in horror, then jammed the lid of the boot closed. The traffic lights changed. John hurried back, took his seat, and pressed the accelerator.

“Where are we going?” he demanded, not looking at Carl and clenching the steering wheel so strongly that his knuckles were turning white. “Why... why don’t we jus’ throw the thing into a canal? That way if the police stop us—”

“We’d better start thinking about what *they*’ll do after finding out they put it in the wrong car!” Carl replied with another question. His bulky hands began to shake.

“Who’s *they*?” John asked with a scowl. “I’ve had enough puzzles for today.”

“There were two guys on black Harleys,” peeped the engineer, swivelling his head around to get a better look at his brother. “I really haven’t a clue as to what we should do!”

“Maybe we should just leave the car somewhere noticeable with its doors open?” John proposed cautiously. “Eh?”

“Fine, o’ course. But—” Carl frowned and stopped. “What’d they do to us *later*? Those guys can find anyone, anywhere!”

A short silence hung in the air. The car’s interior was anxious, stuffy, dreary.

“Where do you think the money came from? Any idea?” John asked, manoeuvring between the bulky tram cars and hordes of cyclists.

“Surely not a grocery shop income, or even a lottery win,” Carl said, burying his head in his hands. “That’s a Mafia racket loot or such like. And they never leave any witnesses to their deals. Oh, man...”

“Sheeps,” John said and bit his lip. “Maybe you’d better throw th’ card in th’ canal, and then we should drive to the cops.”

“Uh huh,” mumbled the bigger man, but he didn’t attempt to open the window.

“What?” John probed nervously. “Do something, already!”

“I’m afraid to look out, to be honest,” Carl said, his voice quivering. “Dash! Why does stuff like this always happen to us?”

For a couple of minutes, the tea-with-milk-coloured pseudo-Jaguar raced forward, aimlessly spurting ahead at traffic lights only to get stalled at the next, a hundred yards away. John, frustrated by the stop and go, rolled down his window to get some air.

After they'd struggled through six or so intersections, Carl tensed and grabbed John by the sleeve.

"What is it now?" The younger brother wasn't equally as scared—yet.

"Didn't you hear it?" Carl's face was pale, cringed, and wry. It suddenly seemed very old.

"What?"

"A motorcycle!"

John trained his eyes on the rear-view mirror. Carl was right—two black shadows were approaching from behind, pushing their way between undulating rows of cars. In less than two minutes, they were rumbling directly behind their modest civvy saloon like two hungry, oversized ravens chasing a lean, scared thrush. The traffic light turned red.

Carl let out an odd-sounding wheeze that John had never heard come from a human before. The car stopped, the first in the rightmost lane of a four-lane road, right under the dusty stoplight.

"John, I've got two kids..." Carl's voice trilled. "I... we... y'know... Oh, goodness..." He bowed his head almost to his knees, clasping it with both his hands. The fair-haired man at the steering wheel kept silent. He didn't want a bullet in his neck, either—but there was very little he could do about it right now. Even an attempt to fetch the mobile from his pocket could turn fatal.

The bikers rode their shiny black hogs up to each side of the had-been Rover, blocking both doors. Without a glance, the one on the left pulled a short-barrelled gun from his

leather jacket pocket. He stretched his arm through the open window and put it to John's head.

"Yes?" asked the clerk, as innocently as he could. Fright had always worked somewhat tardily on him.

"Keys to the boot, roach!" ordered the burly guy in sunglasses gruffly. His worn jacket had the word 'Bandidos' in large letters. He shoved the gun closer, putting his smelly hand under John's nose.

"Um, it's open, sir," John replied, still in the same silly-sunshine mood, and grinned. "Do you need a hand?--"

"Shut up," barked the biker, easing his gun slightly from John's temple and nodding at his accomplice to grab the briefcase. The other chap dismounted his low, stodgy, clucking metal beast, set in on the kickstand, and waded to the rear. He swung the boot cover open. The lights turned green.

Carl's holding his head low, John mused, watching both bikers on the sneak. Suddenly a dazzling thought sparkled in his mind: drive away. They're to bring the cash to the cops, and they'll *do* that, even at gunpoint! *I can duck mine, too... the guy's not looking at me anymore... So here goes: three... two... one...*

With an ear-shredding squeak, the light brown car dashed forward. John bowed his head to the steering wheel, and for a brief moment was unable to see the road. The gunman pulled the trigger. A loud shot ripped through the air, a bullet whizzed three inches over the blond and brown ducked heads and made a hole in the car's passenger window before lodging itself in the fuel tank of the other Harley.

The sudden thrust jerked the boot cover closed, wrenching the briefcase from the hands of the second leather-clad chap. He lost his balance and plunked headlong into the road, tumbling and tossing about for a good three yards before knocking his capo off the saddle of his hog with his heavy army boots. His arm momentarily caught in the open Rover window, the shooter thumped down onto the road, too—right into the pool of pungent, stinking gasoline that was pouring freely from both pierced sides of the tank. His idling motorcycle fell on them both, completing the jumble and rumble.

“Rotten roach!” yelled the gangster, finally struggling to his feet and back into the skull-patterned saddle. “I’ll get you!”

The rear wheel spun in the oily puddle, barely able to push the heavy machine forward. In the meantime, the unemotional traffic lights turned red again and an array of screechy trucks, rattling scooters, pushy cars, and bulky buses streamed from the still broader cross street. The motorcycle’s engine roared and, nosing into the traffic, the gunman waved his hand madly, pawing the ground with his high, spurred boots and belching out the most macabre curses he knew. Yet even that couldn’t pave him a way across the thick, rapid, incessant six-lane traffic. In Amsterdam, after all, the calibre of one’s firearm alone can’t slacken the merciless grip of the stoplights.

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While the fuel was still trickling from the jagged hole in the hog’s gas tank, another less fetid (but equally as profuse) stream was pouring from a different source three miles away. This unrelated but plentiful stream of words was about more

or less the same matters that the brothers were unwittingly dealing with: guns, money, and chase.

"I s'ppose," said Fred Cruyckschanck, the Dutch Inland Security chief, as he paraded in front of several police and civil guard authorities with a thick file in his thin, short hands, "that the diamond cash convoy, if it happens at all, would take place *t'day*. Maybe within two hours, maybe within twelve, or maybe in this very half an hour."

"Umm," mumbled one of the top police chiefs, wriggling in his chair. "In the latter case, it's too late to intervene."

"Surely not!" The spy commander shook his head profusely and sneezed as a result. "The amount—some two million dollars, according to our data—won't be carried abroad by air, or by any other means. What's more, our finks in the Ams'dam underworld assure us that the greenbacks in question are set to be divided right *here*, in one of our downtown cafes, behind closed doors."

"How sure are you about the location?" the other police general demanded.

"Almost ninety per cent," confirmed the AIVD chief with a firm nod.

"Alright," both generals assented.

"So," the spy boss went on, "as you o' course know, one of the beneficiaries of the diamond deal is Marcel K. On the surface, he's a solid citizen—a quiet bartender with no criminal record. We managed to scabble up some tax-dodging stuff to jug him for three months, just to see if he'd apply for parole."

“And?” the first, thickset police chief raised his head. “Did he?”

“Yep.” The second one, lean and tall, grinned broadly. “Precisely today! Do you think that we should grant him his request, or—?”

“Undoubtedly,” the intelligence man cut in, not waiting for the other general to finish. “Surely he’d lure a couple of heavyweight crooks and some of their henchmen to his bar.” He stopped, bowed toward the ear of the first general, and whispered, “Y’ know, from law enforcement circles.” He straightened up again. “Y’know, sharks always follow a pilot fish.”

“But wouldn’t they, say, be too cautious to arrive?” probed the first policeman with a frown. “Today’s release could seem too fishy, couldn’t it?” It wasn’t clear whom he meant by ‘they’—the crooks? The corrupt policemen? Or both? The information he’d just received thrust his thoughts in a deep, scattered array. The deepest (and also the most grievous) of these was that he wouldn’t be likely to see *his* share of the green cash.

The spy boss splayed his short fingers. “In organised crime rings, greed goes above self-preservation. If you don’t show up at a money-pie-slicing in person, you get nix. No matter how much you’ve invested, no matter how well your men can shoot, etcetera.”

“That’s right,” the second police boss agreed, nodding woodenly.

“And, when someone meddles in matters that are not his, he ends up in a canal with nine grams of lead in his noodle,” added up the first top cop. His voice sounded gruff,

curt, and out of place, yet he was anxious to send a coded warning to his uniformed colleague—and to cover up his sheer annoyance.

The generals glanced at each other. Both loathed Inland Security for putting fingers into *their* pies and spoiling the little presents that had been coming their way lately. Yet, in this case, they didn't have much to say. Indeed, there should be an AIVD mole among their top brass, shouldn't there?

"If Marcel K. gets day parole from noon until midnight, would that be enough time?" asked the second police boss after a spell of icy silence.

"Completely."

"What other pointers might you share with us?" asked the first general, ready to stand up, and even more ready to spit onto the floor or to slug the slick spy boss with the longest riot police rod he could find. "Anything special?"

"Please keep track of a mocha-coloured Jaguar, licence plates JG-RJ-81."

"A liaison?"

"Yes, just a passive courier to ferry the briefcase to the destined cafe. Either that, or it's a decoy travelling in the opposite direction with some fake cash bundles and a harmless gas gun in the boot."

"Alright," the general said coldly. *Sheeps, they know all the details*, he thought dismally.

"The other car of interest is a dark blue Mercedes, number plates U-TVV-14. That vehicle—much less conspicuous—is more likely to be carrying the *real* stuff that

is meant to be collected by two Harley bikers. Let 'em do their job. We've already installed enough hidden cameras in the cafe," the chief agent finished with visible pride on his wrinkled face.

"So, you mean for us to launch a last-minute raid?" Both the first general and the criminal police boss frowned as though from a toothache. "In bulletproof vests?"

"If that's a problem for you, I can dispatch my men," the spy topman said with a light, fleeting sneer.

"No problem, sir," returned the pouted general, officially and coldly.

In a short while, eight plainclothes police and intelligence officers in four black cars and on two white motorcycles began sweeping the main and backwater streets of the ever-busy capital. The work of the men was a cinch—keeping track of two cars and a couple of black bikes. The task was made even easier as the morning rush subsided and driving became smoother, speedier, and less unruly. As usual, however, not everyone respected the prescribed rules of the road.

Police sergeant Jos van Dyke, straddling a sleek BMW motorbike in his worn yachtman's jacket, had just stopped at a set of traffic lights. He was slowly chewing a gob of peppermint gum, watching the routine bustle of delivery vans and local vehicles from his vantage point. He was bored. He could recognise traffic in this vicinity blindfolded, just by listening to the engines' growls, clanks, and rattles. Nothing much was happening on the cross street, either.

As his light turned green, a coffee-tinged car flew across the intersection in front of him, clearly having blown a red

light. The law enforcer chuckled; he wasn't on a road patrol today, otherwise the daring—or maybe reckless—motorist would surely soon become poorer by some two hundred Euros. His trained eyes noticed, however, a conspicuous, too-white dot on the right front window of the speeding vehicle. *Umm*, the sergeant thought briefly, pressing the accelerator but unsure of the direction he meant to go in. *What's that? Bird poop? Chewing gum?... A gun shot?*

There wasn't much time to ponder as he motored into the intersection, so the policeman, dismissing his last theory as having only a meagre five per cent chance of being right, headed straight forward. It wasn't the best choice, though. Within seconds, a black Harley flew straight toward him from the left, speeding well above all limits. To avoid a direct hit, the sergeant gunned his machine, the white motorbike rose up on its rear wheel and dashed through the crossing. It was a close call, however; the sergeant felt the black bike's broad handlebars scraping his shoulder blades as it passed.

"What next?" muttered van Dyke. Setting his brow, he made a U-turn in the intersection. "First, a light brown Jaguar, and then this—"

Preparing to join their trail, he fetched a small transmitter with a blinking blue light from under his seat. He fixed it on the headlight of his white bike and took up a semi-anonymous chase. In a few moments, a strange procession was speeding along the crooked, cobbled Amsterdam streets: the cafe-latte Rovero-Jaguar in the lead, the raven-black Harley on its tail, and a snow-white BMW as the rear guard.

"Darn cops!" the gunman muttered, darting his red eyes from his rear-view mirror to his fuel gauge (which had been, for a good while now, stuck deep in the red 'reserve' position). "Why d'y'e alway' come at t' least expected time? I

can't blaze away t' roach wit' ya here, and I'm running out o' gas!"

To make the already nutty scene more schizoid yet, gasoline was running down both sides of his drenched jacket..

"John, what're you doing!?" yelled Carl, almost hysterically. "He's right b-b-behind us! We'll be shot d-d-dead any second!"

"I bet we won't," the younger brother replied, unexpected coolness in his voice.

"Why not?" the engineer gasped.

"Just look behind us," John returned with a serene smile. Carl anxiously turned around in his seat, gaping backwards with the yearning and passion of a stranded sailor peering into the misty sea. Even with his glasses on, his eyes could only catch a glimpse of the white motorbike trailing behind the black one.

"So?" he asked, more confused than assuaged. "It's another bike."

"A bike with a blue blinking light," the driver returned, snapping his fingers. "You know what that means, don't you?"

"An ambulance?" Carl blurted, subconsciously thinking that they'd soon need one.

"A *cop*," John chuckled. Then, he knit his brow as a brief, intense thought set in. "Shall we... um... hand the briefcase over right now?"

“Yes.” Carl scratched his chin, then shook his head. “No. Not yet. Y’know, I—”

“Throw the card out the window,” John advised promptly.

“Right under the cop’s eyes?” Carl asked incredulously, then frowned. The common sense that he always seemed to have a lot of was returning to him little by little.

“Dash,” the clerk said, shaking his head. “You really have to get rid of that spy thing on the double.”

“Uh huh,” murmured the older brother, still riveted to his seat by heavy dread. “That’s exactly what I’m thinking about, too.”

John rolled his eyes. “You better speed up your brain, man!” John seemed to make up for his belated fear with a sudden surge of anger. “Yer window’s been shot through! The first cop we meet on the road’ll have something to say about that—”

Carl scrutinized the hole in the glass, testing its size by probing it with his little finger. “Sheeps,” he muttered. “I can’t pull it out!”

“Argh,” John groaned, slapping his forehead with his palm. “What a day...”

Carl finally wrestled his finger out of the ragged round hole and turned back to watch the black bike behind them, leaving his right palm resting on the door. He didn’t notice a streak of red, sticky fluid oozing from his deeply cut fingertip and spreading, like a scarlet plume, down the cream upholstery. After gazing behind them for a good three

minutes, he plumped back in his chair and snorted with satisfaction.

John snapped his gaze up to the rear-view mirror attentively. "See?" he said, grinning cheerfully. "The black bike's gone!"

"A wonder, a real wonder... Oh, good heavens, what a wonder!" Carl was, as usual in times of great stress, becoming wordy, religious, and sentimental. "We've broken loose!"

... At the same moment, just a hundred yards behind the brothers, a conversation was taking place with very few, very hot, and very loud words. Four guzzling cylinders had gobbled up the last ounce of fuel and had started to suck in air. The engine began to cut out.

"Sh-hit!" hissed the biker, recalling the shameful feeling of getting stuck with a posh cult vehicle in the middle of the road. Very few things are more ignominious than that. It had happened to him only once before, and he'd sworn to himself that it would never happen again. Every sissy in a common, feckless car had overtaken him, and some white-collar office lice had even pulled a sneering grin and tooted. The gunman, feeling dizzy from the ubiquitous stench of fuel on his jacket, jeans, his boots, and even in his ears, gave it some gas through the right handle once again. The motor clucked, clanked, choked, and balked—for good. His feet hit the ground to steady himself.

"F-f-f...ck!!" bawled the motionless Bandido, suddenly as harmless as a toothless rattlesnake. So thunderous, explosive, and charged was this short outburst that a green parakeet, watching the one-man theatre from his cage in an open window, jerked up his head and fell from his perch, breathless. *A Harleyman is born to ride, not to push stalled*

motorcycles! the biker cursed silently, whacking both his gloved hands against the dry, resonant fuel tank.

Still sixty yards behind, Sergeant van Dyke's mood was neither elated nor surly. He noticed the Harley's rider gasping and shoving his heavy two-wheeler uphill to the only free, narrow space between two cachexic trees. He knew that leather-clad bikers seldom leave their stranded black hogs unattended, so he noted the place and rode on, following the Jaguar (which, lacking its two chic chrome exhaust nozzles, seemed to be somehow un-Jaguarish to his eyes).

Van Dyke knew from the earlier briefing that the licence plates to be monitored were JG-RJ-81; the letters and numbers on the coffee-coloured vehicle in front of him seemed to fit the tip like hand in glove. Still, he wished to be double sure, a hundred-and-ten per cent. He was a Dutchman, after all.

The policeman left the flashing light on the front of his bike, for this allowed him to cross the street on red, yet he kept a safe, sixty-yard distance between him and the monitored object. Still, he wanted to check if there was a bird's dropping stuck to the plate, making the second letter from the left look like 'G' instead of a 'C'. To do that, he only needed to get rid of the bulky delivery van clunking along between him and the car.

Suddenly, his walky-talky buzzed from his inner pocket. The sergeant pressed the Receive button set on the handlebar.

"Twenty-seven, situation report, receive," came the familiar lady's voice through the radio waves and ether fluctuations.

“On track to an object, plate check, receive,” reported van Dyke into the microphone hidden in his helm, expecting just a routine notice. He was wrong.

The next moment, his ears heard the weirdest order he’d ever got in his career: “Task halt, break twenty, start wait, receive.”

So baffled was the policeman that he almost blurted out a through-and-through civvy term, ‘Sorry, what?’ But *that* would make him the laughing stock of his station for the next three years, so he tightened his lips and instead asked, “Command repeat, twenty-seven ‘B’, receive.” He repeated, on purpose, his patrol number, to be sure the base hadn’t confused him with one of his novice colleagues.

“Task halt, break twenty, start wait. End,” heard he again. This time the order, spoken in the same plain, unemotional tone, was followed with the pithy ‘end’—which meant that it had to be obeyed *at once*.

“Taken, ready,” he muttered into the microphone and switched off the blinking light. Sergeant van Dyke wasn’t a high-grade functionary, so he couldn’t know much about his commanders’ plans and strategies. Yet he simply felt, deep inside, that something was wrong—*very* wrong—about this whole monitoring game. *What’re our bosses gambling for now?* he wondered, bemused and sulking. Pulled over on the side of the road, watching as grocery vans passed him by, van Dyke continued his chase in his head—with his lucid conscience the only alarm bell around.

...Now free from their posse, the mood inside the mocha Rover was more or less relaxed, save for the petty, pesky fact that one little finger had a deep cut.

“Dash! On and on it flows,” the engineer grumbled. “Have ye any idea how much blood a person can lose before he’ll, um, swoon? Would it be wise to drive to a hospital, do ye think?”

John giggled. “Seriously? Man, minutes ago you didn’t even notice it, and now you’re dying! Just use something to make a bandage.”

“But the only pack of tissues is long used up,” Carl complained.

“Then use, say, the sleeve of yer shirt.”

Carl’s eyes, which had barely returned to their normal size, widened again. “My *sleeve*? It’s my best shirt, man!”

John shook his head. ‘*Man, what a sentimental vainglory,*’ he thought softly. Had his brother really donned his best clothes to say farewell to their botched spy venture? *Oh, dear duffer...* “Then yer tie—use yer tie.”

“Well, fine then.” The engineer slipped his tie from his bullish neck and began to bite at the knot.

Now it was John’s turn to widen his eyes. “Eh, what’s up now?” he asked warily. “Is everything alright?”

“Yep, I jus’ can’t pull it with two hands,” Carl said, a bit louder than usual. “The finger’s bleeding like crazy!”

“Uh huh,” the younger man nodded. distractedly. “Where are we driving to, by the way?”

The engineer didn’t reply. He’d finally gnawed an inch-wide hole in the strong polyester. He jerked at his tie with his left hand, keeping the bitten-through end firmly in his teeth.

The attempt to rip the tie failed; the thick fabric cracked but held.

“Feeef,” he muttered, the narrow tie’s end still in his mouth. “fel fave to ufe ole of fit.” He busied himself winding almost a yard-long tie around his little finger, making a couple of loops around his wrist and forearm as well. Then, instead of seeping into the car’s seat or door panel, the obstinate blood began to soak the stripy, cream-coloured cloth right through.

“Phew,” the older former agent sighed in relief, studying the bandage overkill on his right hand, which looked like a giant silkworm cocoon. He peered distractedly at John. “Sorry, what?”

The clerk rolled his eyes. “I said, where should I drive?”

“Right, right,” returned the engineer. “To the nearest embankment, please. I’ll tie a stone or such like to the card, and adieu!”

“Okay, sir,” John agreed, assuming the role of a ready cabbie. He didn’t fit the role very well, however, for this part of Amsterdam was fairly unknown to him. He didn’t exactly know where the nearest canal was. *Alright, maybe to the Amstel*, John thought briefly. The Amstel was a river that flowed right through the capital. It was deep, broad, and busy—in fact, it was a great place for drowning the evidence of one’s pranks.

The calm that the two formerly jittery men in the brownish car were enjoying was, indeed, as ephemeral as the Dutch sunshine. For unbeknown to the brothers, and alerted by the biker in charge of the diamond loot box, at least two dozens other shiny black Harleys had begun to comb the

downtown. Both of the nearby Amstel banks were rumbling and belching with motorcycles that were grating upon the nerves of silly street pigeons, frail grannies, and gaping tourists.

Just as the broad, greenish-blue mirror of the short, wide Amstel River finally glittered before the searching eyes of the brothers, there came a familiar rattle and roar from both sides at once.

“Is it... *them* again?” Carl’s face, having just barely assumed its normal colour, turned grey like a wet concrete slab.

“I guess so,” John frowned. “But this time, we have no way to turn around.”

“Why not?” Carl wheezed.

“Look.”

“W-w-what’s that?”

“Water.”

“So?”

The younger brother didn’t reply. He was too fixed on driving along a very narrow, one-way side street which led, if the road signs were correct, to a small yacht pier. A plan began to take shape in his mind.

In a hundred yards, the street became impassable: a bright red plastic construction sign was flapping in the breeze from a red and white bar positioned over a deep ditch. John stopped the wounded car and gazed over at his self-wounded accomplice.

“Hey, man, that’s our first blood shed in action,” he smirked with the same steely bit of glitter in his eyes as he’d had days before.

The engineer was too upset to get the humour. “The first and the l-last, I ho-ope,” he drawled, again close to stuttering.

The fair-haired man didn’t want to lose time. He jumped out of the driver’s seat and dashed to the rear. Then he swung the boot cover open, grabbed the briefcase, and ran toward the embankment—all this without a word.

Carl, climbing out of the car, stepped on the loose end of his gory tie, and the long, wet, slippery strap unwound from his wrist and flopped onto the dusty road. The engineer didn’t pick it up. Leaving the passenger’s door wide open, he grabbed his own briefcase from behind the driver’s seat and hurried in the same direction his brother was headed.

“Dash!” gasped John, reaching the pier. There were no motorboats puttering about at the ready—only several tarpaulin-covered rowboats and one yacht rocking upon the lazy green waves. *There’s no chance of escaping by a sluggish rowboat—the first shooter from any embankment or bridge would get us in a second.* The clerk deduced, glanced around, rolled up the sleeves of his jacket, and snatched the thick mooring rope of the yacht.

“What are you doing that for?” Carl cried out.

“Psst,” John shook his head, intending for his brother to be quiet. “We need shelter, man!”

Both sprang, more or less clumsily, onto the narrow deck. They sat, their faces cringing, their hearts thumping.

The low cabin was barely tall enough to cover their stooped shoulders and bowed heads. After a minute of hearing nothing besides their own heavy breathing, the adventurers caught the sound of cautious, heavy steps along the shore. Both shuddered, swivelling their heads, not about to risk it by standing up. A sweaty chap in a black leather jacket, gun in hand, was peering at the empty pier from the bank. Apparently seeing nothing, he trudged on, cussing and gasping. Jogging certainly wasn't the favourite pastime of this beer-bellied biker.

"Is he gone?" whispered Carl.

"I dunno," John returned in like manner. "But we should get away from here—and the sooner the better!"

"How?" The older man drooped his greying head and moaned. "Oh, God, I'm too young to die!"

John darted his eyes across the lazily rolling river, deep in thought. They couldn't go back—that would mean a sure bullet in the stomach or head. Worse, they had no water vehicle to escape with, and there was no sense in piddling away precious time on an off-kilter, algae-covered yacht.

They sat in silence amid the lapping, splashing little waves (which, truth be told, created no poetic mood in the brothers' teetering souls). Suddenly Carl jabbed John with his elbow.

"We could call a water taxi!" he winked. "If it arrives quick enough"

"And if it doesn't?" John interrupted, shaking his head gravely. He was the one carrying the money-filled briefcase—the first target. But his brother might be on to something. He

pulled his mobile from his jacket pocket, then glanced at Carl. "T" boat won't come on its own." He looked at the shore nervously. "But we don't want to get too far away from witnesses, in case..."

"I think we'll be able to cope," returned the engineer with unexpected firmness. He looked down at the illicit briefcase.

John turned pale. "You mean ... the gun?" he asked, not believing his ears.

"No, I'm not crazy!" Carl shook his head so violently that it almost banged against John's. "I mean the card!" He made a hurling gesture, then winked again.

John, still not getting the exact meaning of what Carl was planning to do—toss the card into the water? or throw the boat's owner overboard? or both?—launched a browser and searched for motorboats for hire. Luckily Carl held a steersman's diploma, so their rental choices included a speedboat—the type of vessel they so badly needed now. If only it could arrive in minutes.

To kill time and finally stop the blood, Carl opened the money box and slipped the elastic band and one green paper from the top pack. He rolled the bill tightly around his damaged little finger and fixed the makeshift bandage with the rubber band. The plump face of Ben Franklin blushed, as though angry at being used as a crude swath. Yet, the scarlet fluid seemed to have stopped oozing.

&

Saturday afternoons were known in the capital as calm times, peppered only with the occasional prank call before

the late-night revelry was in full swing, and when police receptionists could read a tabloid in peace. This Saturday afternoon was different. Several more stations were on call to monitor the eight extra patrols, and the special unit had been languishing since noon, getting ready for the night-time raid that would take place, in all probability, in the wee hours of Sunday morning.

The taut, fragile peace was interrupted by an emergency call. A *real* one.

“Emergency services, Amsterdam police.”

“Good afternoon, I’ve just found a strange car next to my flat,” a girl’s voice whined. “The doors and boot were open, and there are blood stains everywhere. Plus, my doggy sniffed out a tie or such like, soaked in blood, too. I’m afraid...”

“Your address and name, please,” the receptionist asked, pressing a button to start saving the recorded conversation, as medium-urgent protocol demanded.

“It’s Amsteldyke four-four-five, and I’m Mirtle Akerman, age thirteen. Can I still walk my dog? There’re some guys in black running around and I’m just wondering if...”

“We advise you to go inside your home for a while, madam,” the lady at the calling desk returned. “A patrol is being dispatched to the place.”

Sergeant van Dyke was more or less in the middle of his forced lunch break (against which, as such, he had no objections) when his radio device suddenly came to life.

“Twenty-seven B, task check, Amsteldyke four-four-five, possible shooting. Thirty-two A join, receive.”

“Order taken, follow, receive,” the policeman reported, leaving a half-eaten hot dog on his paper plate and hurrying out of the fast food joint. He felt an unpleasant feeling creeping up his back. This called-in area wasn’t the easiest, every year someone was found floating face down in the river.

Once he arrived at the location, van Dyke found a half dozen folks gaping around a car. Its passenger door was wide open and blood-stained. The boot was ajar, as was the left rear door. The sergeant chuckled to himself. His earlier hunch had been right—it was exactly the same strange ‘Jaguar’ that he’d been following half an hour ago. He peered closer to confirm that yes, it was a new gunshot hole in the side door. He opened up the seat of his motorcycle and fetched a roll of red-blue-white tape, then fenced off the area from passers-by.

“Base, twenty-seven, task check: eight blood stains, size up to two square feet, blood-drenched tie, calibre-nine side window shooting hole. Area secured, receive.”

“Report receive, task force three, dispatch,” came the response from another station—or perhaps even Head Office itself. The sergeant frowned; soon the street would be white and blue with police uniforms, as three patrols from other vicinities would be diverted here. It could all simply be an old crooks’ trick to get their hands free for a break-in elsewhere.

An aged gentleman with a walking stick came by, his eyes round like two giant cherries. “Has someone just been

murdered?” he asked, not waiting for an answer. “Where will t’ police look?”

“We’re investigating the event,” replied the plainclothes officer, standing next to his motorcycle with its blinking blue light. “The situation is under control.” He didn’t like this part of his job—answering busybodies’ cheeky, senseless, and repetitive questions.

Within the next ten minutes, loads of blue-blinking, white-red-and-blue striped cars would rumble in, clogging the narrow, curved street and the little parking lot next to an old flat.

Listening to the barrage of radio commands and replies, the lonely sergeant turned no attention to the innocuous, purring noise that was coming from the other side of tall rampart.

There, a smiling chap in a gaudy seaman’s cap was mooring a large, posh boat to a narrow, drab, seldom-used pier. Two suited, rumpled-looking fellows loomed aboard. They didn’t look like the usual rich tourists who were able to lavish out eight hundred Euros for an hour’s hire. Still, many well off folks were nowadays so modestly clad that no one could be judged by looks alone.

“Good afternoon, sirs!” the skipper jovially greeted them, pulling the broadest smile he knew from TV soaps. “A trip?” He stretched out his hand to help the worthy clients descend into the cabin to take their seats at two plush banks.

The passengers didn’t move. Instead, there was heavy, impenetrable, five-seconds-long silence. Then, the taller, brown-haired guy in sombrely-shining glasses pulled a credit-

card-sized object from his jacket pocket and shoved it before the boatman's unblinking eyes.

"Inland Security, counter-intelligence. We commandeer your boat until further notice."

"Um..." The candied smile began to vaporize away from the captain's suntanned, wrinkled, round face. "Sorry?"

The smaller chap with the shiny briefcase in his hands and a tie around his neck cleared his throat. "Get out," he said bluntly.

The baffled boat captain, not knowing what to do, was frozen stiff. His showy water vehicle had cost some pretty hundred thousand Euros. And he wasn't a babe: he'd spent a quarter of a century at the helm, and had seen a thing or two. And these guys... they just couldn't pass off as secret agents.

The captain prided himself in being someone not to be fooled with. *One uppercut for each, and...* he mused, clenching his hands behind his broad back. His Sherlock Holmes- (or maybe Bruce Lee-) style thoughts were, however, cut short brutally and early on: the smaller man clicked his sleek briefcase open and pulled out a long black gun, holding it by the barrel.

"Shall we help you off?" His voice was raspy, cold, imperative. It left little room for debate.

The skipper winced and gulped. Unlike the 'agents' themselves, the firearm seemed very much genuine. Anyway, one unarmed person is no match for two armed (and maybe law-protected) chaps. Slowly, huffily, he stepped up onto the pier, clenching and un-clenching his heavy fists.

"Keys?" demanded the blond-haired man.

“In the ignition, sirs,” stuttered out the captain. “The engine’s running.”

“The speed limit lock key, I mean,” the taller man said weightily, taking his place at the helm and stretching out his left hand. The skipper noticed that the right hand’s pinky was wrapped in an expensive American bill. *What sort of 'officers' are you, guys?* He mused suspiciously.

Whatever they were, those folks knew a thing or two about speedboats - more than the average Joe did, at least. The boatman nodded, confused and scared. It was safer to obey before the last, long-barrelled member of the strange trio skipped into action. The skipper stepped back onto the boat, sighed, and opened a little drawer with a key that was still attached to his belt. From inside he retrieved a long, triangular key and handed it over to the man at the helm.

“Here.”

Without any thank-yous, farewells, or even a passing look, the chaps took their seats on his boat. The captain felt he’d been dismissed, and hurried off the boat before something terrible happened.

Carl put the vessel into gear, run a left half-turn and a swallow tail in a rather slow, yet sure, manner. Then the three hundred horsepower engine roared to life, churning up a billow that rocked the flimsy peer and hurling the speedboat into the open water. Its finely shaped bow began to rise.

No sooner had the pirated vessel turned into a miniature white dot between two curved bridges than two white, beaked caps appeared above the ground rampart. Their uniformed owners were strolling along the water’s edge, looking for the victim of the shoot-out—be it a corpse, a

wounded, or perhaps even an unconscious. There was no breathless body floating in the water or a hapless wounded crouched in a culvert.

The officers' eyes began to wander. On the pier, they saw a dumpy, well-clad guy fidgeting, milling aimlessly about. He looked very upset.

Hmm? The same thought appeared under both caps at once.

"Good afternoon, sir," a police corporal said, coming by. His colleague, who had officer's chevrons on his sleeve, stood five steps behind, his arm on his pistol. "Your documents, please?"

The skipper sighed—a sigh much deeper than the Amstel itself. All his papers and IDs, as well as his thickset wallet, were left on his chic boat. Too overwhelmed to say a word, the captain spread out his empty hands. His broad face was now getting red.

"You don't have any?" asked the corporal, measuring up the fellow—who was too elegant, glittering with gold bracelets in the middle of a Saturday afternoon— with a suspicious eye. "Do you live in this vicinity, perhaps?"

"No, 'fraid not," the boatless boatman muttered, seething with powerless anger.

"Then come along," ordered the officer, moving two steps aside.

"But I'm waiting for... for—" the river cabman tried to protest, but stopped himself, grappling for words. *Who was* he waiting for, anyways? Two spies? Two of the policemen's colleagues? Two *gangsters*?

“You are waiting?” The officer knit his brow, snatched his radio device, and barked an order. “who exactly are you waiting for?”

“For, um... two Inland Security men,” squeezed out the boatman, feeling like the last idiot.

Both policemen grinned; the senior officer swallowed a giggle.

“A fine joke, sir, but a bit out of place,” he said. “Now come along.”

...While the cheerless skipper wobbled and bounced in a police car en route to a more substantial talk, two ruffled, windblown chaps were having top fun in his boat, just as the onboard advert guaranteed. Carl, holding the steering wheel with one hand, reached for the spy card with the other and hurled the loathed (albeit at times very useful) rectangle high into the air.

The intelligence ID made a somersault over the racing vessel and glided down into the wide, foamy wake that was being frothed up behind it. The plastic object plunged under the surface, then whirled and tossed—but it didn’t drown. Half-submerged in the bottle-green, cold, and unemotional water, the card bobbed and floated face up, displaying the scary warning of “five years incarceration” to the illiterate, intrepid water birds that at once began to nibble at it.

“My stuff’s gone, hurrah!” Carl boomed with a broad smile. “Now, your turn!”

“T’ briefcase goes to the cops, not to the crabs!” reminded John, shouting over the powerful din of the engine.

“Alright,” Carl conceded. “Where should I steer?”

"I dunno. To any pier upstream," John suggested with a shrug, his eyes glittering. It seems that he was enjoying the free ride so much that he would like to prolong it.

"And then?" Carl slowed the motor down so that they could hear each other better. "What'll you tell them at the police station? That you found it on the street?"

"Something like that," John said. He rubbed his chin, knowing that it was all much easier to say than to do. Selling the inquisitive Amsterdam cops such cheap baloney would mean a five-page-long protocol, a couple of hearings, and loads of poignant questions. Why were Carl's fingerprints, with and without blood traces, everywhere? How did they manage to open a valuables container with a smart electronic lock? Or, should they tell them that they found it unlocked? But who'd leave two million bucks in an open briefcase on the street? And the gun—why were his fingerprints on it? *No, no, my fingerprints shouldn't be found on it at all*, John decided firmly.

The rumbling engine continued its song alone. Both men sat in silence, Carl's hands glued to the helm, John busily polishing the gun with his sleeve. The young clerk peered at the weapon over and over again, holding it up to the light to be sure there were no more dactylographic lines to be find.

"John, jus' toss it overboard, why don't you? Why're you petting it? It ain't a woman," Carl half-grinned. He was returning to his normal, teasing, big-brother mood sooner than expected.

"Indeed," John grinned, wondering why this simple solution hadn't come to his mind sooner. Maybe he'd been too preoccupied. "But man, what if a diver or an angler

picks it up?" he asked, knitting his brow. "Would that be dangerous? Are there such things as waterproof pistols?"

"Haven't a clue!" the engineer said with a shrug. Even though he was an espionage freak, he wasn't close enough to military circles to know that much. "It's up to you!" His face suddenly became serious. "Listen, I wouldn't worry so much about t' gun if I were you. *We* both could be in trouble much sooner than y' think."

"Do you guess the skipper's told the cops by now?"

"I'm more than sure he did. This beast costs as much as a small airplane!" Carl, who knew a thing or two about water transport, peered at John gravely.

"Then maybe we should moor just anywhere," John suggested as he threw the heavy firearm back into the briefcase then snapped the lid closed. "At least we don't have the spy card to worry about any more."

"Luckily," the older man said grudgingly.

Carl slowed the speed of the boat down to the level of a lazy Nile raft, looking along the passing shores in search of a pier or a stairway. But there were none. After a couple of minutes John's keen eyes caught sight of a little grey-coloured dot above them. As the dot drew closer, it rattled and cluttered, taking on the shape of a helicopter. John held his breath as the oh-so-familiar navy-and-white stripes appeared along the helicopter's body.

"Police!" John yelled. "Steer back, or else they'll get us in no time!"

But the noisy machine was already hanging over their boat, buzzing and flashing its bright blue lights—the same

type of lights that had saved them less than an hour before. This time, they were anything but glad to see them.

The engineer shook his head. Why was life always so nutty and complex? One minute you're being chased by the crooks and you need the cops, and them suddenly ... you don't.

"Head for those trees!" cried John, pointing to a patch of overhanging branches further away, along the narrow downtown canals. *But there could be still more cops, both in boats or on dry land*, Carl reasoned. He sighed and stopped the motor.

"Why're you stopping? We can't give up now!" cried John, looking desperately at the briefcase.

Carl smiled tightly and took the triangular key from the drawer, then busied his hands somewhere near the gear box. *Now that the speed limit lock's off, this vessel can make a full eighty knots an hour.*

"Put on your safety belt," he said to John, teasing. The younger man grinned wryly.

Down went the throttle lever and up went the narrow bow with a tacky, teathy shark pictured on it. Whizzing through the damp air, the speedboat dashed in a broad arc, raising a two yard-high swell in its wake and scaring endless quacking ducks, screaming tourists, and swearing anglers.

Carl's mind also worked on full turns, trying to find the best place to land the speeding vessel. The broad, mighty (for the small-thinking Hollander's mind) Amstel ran into a nondescript bay that was bluish-grey in any weather. This bay, the Het Ij—or, for you squire, just The Eye—would be a bad place to launch; the air police would likely alert the

military patrol chopper, so that port was out. And the way upstream would certainly be blocked by water cops, Carl determined grimly. The only place where the adventurers could try to 'dissolve' was the downtown spider web of concentric canals.

"Man, why should we take to our heels again?" John shouted into Carl's ear, his modest jowls flapping in the firm wind. "We're not crooks!"

"In *their* eyes, we're just that!" the engineer shouted back, making a broad semicircle to avoid directly hitting a long, rusty, low-lying gravel barge. As the labyrinth of bridges and viaducts began to appear before them, Carl slowed down; it was too dangerous, too crowded, and too narrow a place for such a large brute of a boat.

The man at helm chuckled anxiously and rubbed his chin. He knew that all over Holland, inner-city waters were closed to beastly speedboats. Frowning, he gloomily steered into the first side canal they came across, trying to figure out if he'd committed enough delinquencies to merit a year behind bars. He took a quick inventory in his head. *Illicit commandeering of a pleasure boat, navigating three times over any speed limit, entering forbidden waters...* He shook his head.

The dark waters of the Princengracht, or Prince's Canal, seemed serene and unruffled compared to where they'd just come from. No helicopters rattled above, maybe because the old city was forbidden to them as well, or maybe because they were, plainly, useless. Carl and John looked around themselves anxiously for a place to land. There were lots of stairways leading from the pavements down to the water. Most of them had no mooring posts, however.

After a couple of teetering minutes, John beckoned the new skipper to pull along such a stairway. The street above it seemed to be busy enough to absorb two new, sneaky pedestrians. John had devised a new plan: they'd disembark and leave the boat just long enough to jump on any passing tram and leave the briefcase by the engineer. Not the bravest action on earth, he conceded, and no guarantee that the cops would get their hands on the case. Still, there was a good chance they would. At the very least, the crooks wouldn't get its loot, and he—John—would again be himself: honest, clean, and uncompromising.

Carl carefully brought the boat next to the stairs. John slowly, stealthily stepped back onto dry land and, slipping over the mossy granite steps, climbed up to the sidewalk above, nearly touching the paving stones with his low-hanging head. Carl followed his daredevil sibling a dozen steps behind, after having stopped the rumbling engine. As the younger man neared the top of the stairs, he stuck his head out and turned it at least ten times all around until his neck ached. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary: no black motorbikes, no oodles of police cars.

A tram stop was just four hundred yards away. John stood up and took the first step along the narrow grassy belt under the trees, still too cautious to step onto pavement.

"Hands up, friar!" he suddenly heard behind him. Shaking as though a whip had come down on his back, John did as asked, lifting his hands—together with the priceless briefcase—above his head. With his side vision he took notice of the lean chap in sunglasses who was wielding a gun at him. The gunman was standing next to a cracked, half-open green door across the street.

Reaching their highest point, John's hands began to shake, and the briefcase slipped from his sweaty fingers and fell upon the ground. It bounced against a tree and slid down the stairs, hitting Carl (who was halfway up the staircase) on the knee before bursting open. In an instant, John leapt aside, hiding behind a tree trunk. He braced himself for the worst, but no shot was heard; the lean man had pocketed his gun and was hastening towards the canal, coming across the street amidst a throng of tourists on yellow bikes. John winced, but the guy looked past him. He seemed to have much less interest in John than he had in the briefcase.

Carl snatched up the pistol that was spinning down the stone stairs, then looked up. The lean guy, his own gun in his pocket, was fidgeting at the top of the stairs, anxiously darting his eyes between Carl and the busy traffic just a yard away. Carl stood still and, hidden from the street in the stairwell, held up the firearm in his left hand. He gulped.

What if the guy shoots at me through his pocket? The icy thought touched Carl like the jagged claw of death itself; he felt his hair standing on its end. Two armed men watched each other, both unable (or unwilling) to fire and uncertain of the next step.

Then Carl, feeling by some sixth sense that the gunman wouldn't shoot, plunged his free hand into the briefcase, fumbled around for the pack of cash without a rubber band, and pulled it out. Then he folded the wad of cash in two and hurled ten thousand worth of Ben Franklins and Ulysses Grants high up into the air.

The slim chap, surprised by the sudden move and scared that a hand grenade might be flying in his face, winced and lurched back towards the other side of the street. The shower of green papers danced through the air like odd postcards

from a rich overseas uncle or a sudden windfall from another planet—a planet where bread and money grow on trees. At least three cars, two trucks, four scooters, and a dozen bicycles screeched their brakes and came to a sudden standstill.

“Money!” The very next moment after the shriek sounded, resounded, and echoed through scores of windows, dozens of ears, and hundreds of minds, hearts, and souls of people on the street, pillaging began. The following scene was one that the End of the Ages itself could barely equal. The most cherished, endeared, and sacred Dutch word—“money,” a word that was sucked with mother’s milk (and tasted much sweeter than it), a word that was loved and worshipped and by countless millions—sounded over Princengracht lane like the last trumpet or a peal of thunder. And oh, what a thunder.

The greenbacks were grabbed, caught, and snatched from one sweaty hand by another. They were tucked into torn, faded students’ jeans, into costly tweedy suits, into ladies’ Armani handbags, and into schoolkids’ flimsy knapsacks.

A barber left his client with a half-clipped beard, only to bump into him on the street moments later as he was gleaning the green papers from dusty poplar twigs. A married couple stopped yelling at each other and rushed, at once filled with deep peace and tender love, towards an unexpected boon. A brass band, waddling behind a long hearse, flopped their instruments on the pavement and rushed, together with the driver and the two undertakers in tall black hats, for an extra honorarium.

On the way back, the ushers to the *next* world checked to ensure that their tight-lipped customer still rested in his hard

wooden bed. He did—and yet, in a sheer, breathtaking, eerie wonder they noticed that a hundred-dollar note was clutched in his bloodless, cold, wax-coloured hands ...

John, grinning and frowning at the pathetic (albeit very Dutch) scene before him, skipped down the stone stairway, pulling Carl by his jacket. Once at water-level, he hastily got into the boat.

“Why are we still running?” the engineer asked from the shore. He’d had more than enough tripping, skipping, and risking his hide for someone’s overblown honesty.

“Have you forgotten the darn briefcase you’re still holding?” John returned. This said, Carl needed no more words. With the gun in one hand and the briefcase in the other, he hurried back, this time flopping on the rear seat that faced the stern. As John took his place at the helm. He didn’t notice that he had forgotten to unmoor the boat. Carl glanced, unawares, to the opposite bank and stiffened with fear.

“John, look! Look, on the other side!” The engineer pointed with his trembling hand. John, who was back on the embankment untying the boat, did as asked. He turned pale. One by one, a line of black motorcycles was rumbling out from a narrow side lane.

In half a minute, four leather-clad figures, their right hands in their pockets, lurked like sentinels of an army of darkness along the canal. Only the jovial crowd of money-gleaners just above the brothers’ heads seemed to prevent them from coming over - or shooting outright.

“W-w-what should we do?” stuttered the engineer. There was very limited (if any) way to flee, either by land or

by water—unless, of course, a stray submarine popped up from beneath the surface of the four-yard deep canal.

“Shoot, dummy! They’re closing in on us!” John yelled, pushing the heavy boat off the crumbling, stony embankment.

“But... how?” Carl swaggered at the stern, trying to keep his balance, fumbling with the heavy gun in his shaking hands. “The trigger’s stuck!”

Time was too precious to squander on words, so John dashed back to the helm and pressed the starter. Two large motors at the rear churned and growled, revving loudly and creating a little eddy. Shuddering to life, the sleek boat almost sent Carl—and his gun—down into the water. From the opposite canal bank, where at least five black motorcycles now crouched, a muffled shot whizzed through the air, sounding like a plastic bag popping. Another one followed. A round hole appeared in the middle of the boat’s low windshield, encircled by a crown of shattered, chipped glass.

John felt that time was running out.

“Get down! They’ll shoot you in th’ head!” he bellowed. Not waiting for a reaction, he pulled his brother down by the jacket. Carl, in his brown tweed suit, thumped onto the wet carpet that lined the floor of the vessel. He was still fumbling with the gun in search of the safety switch.

Ching-ching-ching-ching!

The muffled assault pistol suddenly woke up. John’s eyes widened, and Carl’s jaw dropped. Four bullets, able to pierce a half-inch thick steel rail, buzzed through the moist air across the canal.

“It won’t stop!” shrieked Carl, aghast that he had no control over the weapon. He released the trigger, and the salvo halted.

Suddenly there came a loud explosion-like sound from the opposite bank as the last of the steel-headed flying monsters ricocheted off a scaffolding pipe and knocked the nozzle off of a high-pressure paint hose. The white, creamy liquid burst forth through a waving, flagellating, writhing rubber snake. The hose worked itself high into the air, covering everything and everyone yards around with a profuse layer of white. It blinded the leather-clad shooter and covered the bikers’ shiny black hogs with a greasy, thick pomade.

John couldn’t watch the metamorphosis that turned the Bandidos into white angels. After all, he was steering a hot-blooded, swaying, skipping speed-boat for the first time in his life.

“John, slower, please!” Carl begged, then tossed the gun in water with a disgustful face, not caring for the anglers’ safety any longer. He turned back towards his brother. “The canal’s very narrow!”

Carl watched warily from his seat in the back. The croaky, furious rumble of Harley engines seemed to reach them from every side, and from every bridge a bullet could fly. *And, if those leather-clad chaps were to catch hold of a similar boat and set chase...* Both brothers seemed to have that same thought at once. A palpable fear passed between them. Yes, they could vanish, if not vanquish the bikers on the water. But how would they escape an ill-intentioned motorboat when their only trump—speed—was now gone?

"*We're* sitting ducks now, not them!" Carl wheezed out, pale-faced. "D' you know what're you doing?"

"I guess I do," grumbled John, craning his neck in all directions. A broad, flat tourist boat half full of passengers was chugging along the canal. It was a smart, shiny, modern Dutch product, with the skipper's cabin in the front, not at the stern—which made manoeuvring through narrow canals easier. A female guide, her face and shoulders above the low glass roof, gesticulated, pointing to the right or left, and the tourists' heads followed. No-one seemed to glance back.

John slowed down and steered their boat to the port side of the flat ship. A couple of open windows gaped there, the seats behind them seemingly empty. The clerk, no longer a total laymen on the seas, looped the mooring rope and hurled it inside. He pulled at it a couple of times until he was sure that it was anchored to the back of a seat.

"Hold the wheel, man," he whispered to Carl. The engineer surmounted the back seat and set his knee upon the helm. John climbed up through the window of the touring vessel. Carl watched him with a strange feeling of being an amateur actor playing an amateur pirate. Once safely aboard, John held his arm out the window and Carl cast his aged, trusty briefcase up.

John took hold of it and placed it on the heaving, swaying floor. Next, the engineer grabbed the metal-clad money case and hurled it up, too. The fireproof container was still unlocked from its earlier fall down the canal steps. Its two halves swung open during the short, whirling flight. Its green paper contents streamed down towards the dark green water. "Sheeps," John muttered, shaking his head. He caught the empty briefcase and dashed it to water.

“Good!” Carl grinned, sincerely and jovially. Now, they were merely ticketless passengers—not fake secret agents, illicit gun owners, sleazy embezzlers, or police dodgers. They hadn’t even schlepped that darn Mafia cash along. Carl set his right foot on the old black tire that was hanging from the ship’s handrail, then pushed off with his left leg so that the speedboat drifted away from them. Moments after he struggled through the window, the crewless boat began to deviate toward the shore, bobbing and swaying until it got jammed in a gap between a houseboat and a cleaning raft.

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The smiling female guide raised her brows slightly as she counted forty-two guests leaving the ship when only forty had boarded, but she kept silent. She knew that staid and private Grand Hotel visitors liked no questions asked. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she watched a tall gent without a necktie and a smaller one without a briefcase noiselessly head towards Centraal train station, which towered over the canal’s dead end. The duo didn’t follow the rest of the boat passengers to the double-decker tourist bus. Hmm ...

“We should separate, I s’ppose,” John whispered as they ambled into the dusky hall of Centraal. “It’d be safer. I’ll take the first train to Arnhem, in eight minutes time,” he said as he nodded to the broad digital timetable on the wall.

“Alright, Johnnie, and I’ll take a taxi or a bus,” the older brother agreed. “Drop a call to Helen and let her know that I’m fine, won’t you? My phone battery’s dead.”

“Will do, o’ course.” John nodded a couple of times, then frowned sadly. “Sorry for all that, old timer. I’ll pay for a new window for your Rover.”

“Ne’er mind the windshield,” Carl chuckled softly. The worry was so very John, and also so very Dutch—to care for petty material damage only minutes after one’s own life had been at stake. “The insurance will take care of it. I hope the bikers won’t get you.”

John sighed, stooping, then glanced at the large wall clock. They were both avoiding talk of the dangers that still surrounded them.

“Bye, Jonnie,” Carl said, opening his arms. For maybe the first time in his life, he wasn’t one hundred per cent sure that he’d see his lively, ardent, reckless brother again. They hugged briefly—the older man with sadness, the younger with a gnawing fear that he’d begun to feel only now.

The digitalized lady’s voice announced the Intercity train to Arnhem and Nymegen. John lifted his head and glanced with painful helplessness into Carl’s eyes. “See you,” he said, trying to grin, then ran to the platform without looking back.

The engineer watched the small, vivid figure he knew so well scaling the steep station stairs until it was out of sight. Then he sighed; his younger sibling was just the same as he’d been in boyhood times: act first, think later. Now, it seemed that they both had *a lot* to think about. Carl craned his short-sighted head around a couple of times, watching out for both the Harleymen and the cops. For the time being he had to be wary of both.

Shaking his head and grumbling about the quirky turn that his solid-citizen’s life had spun into once again, he left Centraal’s hall and headed right towards the nearby taxi stand. Coming up to the first vehicle in a long line of cabs, he pulled his best ‘hasty businessman’ face. The driver sprang out and opened the rear door, ushering Carl in.

The weary engineer plunked down, for the first time realizing just how tired he was. But he knew he couldn't dwell on matters of the flesh—he had to know where to go where he'd see no bikers, cops, or Inland Security men...

The dark-haired cabbie peered into the rear view mirror, waiting for the rumpled customer with his peculiar finger bandage to direct the ride. Carl cleared his throat.

"To the bus station," he finally squeezed out, in English.

"Norf o' souf?" came the polite, concrete question. Carl rubbed his nose, having no clue what to say. He'd never used a bus service in the capital, and seldom elsewhere.

"South, please," he finally decided. He kept silent for a while before adding, with the awkwardly feigned air of a bored traveller, "I jus' need to get to the seaside, you know?"

"Where to?" grinned the cabbie, sensing a cashy foreign client with enough money to burn. "To Sheveningen, maybe? It's oor best beach!" he boasted on behalf of all Dutchmen.

"Alright," the engineer nodded, then immediately felt some regret. The beach resort was some fifty miles away; a cab ride that far was a rather pricey pleasure. He raised his head a bit and asked, "And the price?"

"Oh, it's peanuts," the driver replied, knitting his benign left eyebrow. "Jus' sum eighty Euros, oka?"

"Sixty," returned Carl with a suddenly firm tone, which even to his own ears sounded rather un-touristy (and quite Dutch).

The driver knit his other, sterner brow—a move reserved for local misers—and proposed, “Seventee?”

“Good,” agreed the frugal engineer. He was supposed to be playing a tourist and not be attracting extra attention. Once the price was settled, the wary driver and the uncertain client had nothing more to discuss. The cabman turned the radio on.

Instead of the usual mental chewing-gum of pop music, there was, unexpectedly, an on-air news flash.

“The Police Commissary appeals to the inhabitants of Amsterdam and the population of Holland for help. A national search has just been announced. The authorities are looking for two armed men, ages between thirty and forty-five. One is tall, wearing a pair of tortoise-shell glasses with straight brown hair. The other is below-average height, with curly blond hair. No further special features are known so far. The suspects have been using a stolen security service card and a calibre-nine automatic pistol for a series of hold-ups. Considered dangerous. Reward for a tip - five thousand Euros. Pictures can be found on the police national web site under ‘Wanted’. Thank you.”

Carl gulped, feeling dizzy and down. *When did the cops take our photos?* he mused, sagging and hiding his eyes. Suddenly, as though a videotape was winding back in his head, he saw a dazzling white light flashing from the helicopter—exactly when he’d looked up. *Dash*, he thought, feverishly. *I’m in a pickle now!*

Carl sat still, feeling that he was turning pale and pretending he wasn’t grasping a word of what was being said in his father’s tongue. The driver snatched his not-so-smart

phone from its cracked holder and began scrolling down a long menu.

To add insult to injury, the driver smacked with his tongue. “Five thousan', huh? Some gudd cash, eh?” he boomed in broken Dutch, forgetting that he was carrying a ‘foreigner’—or, perhaps, exactly because of that. “Jus’ dat much I lack for a new cub. Why haven’t me got Internet on me phone? Darn!”

Man, don’t call that Selim, for all goodness’ sake! the engineer half-thought, half-prayed. He was half-satisfied by the fact that the cabman hadn’t looked closely at him—as of yet. Who the man at the steering wheel did actually call was uncertain. Carl’s frustration grew as he listened; lisping Turkish phrases chased each other like hot-blooded Yanichar cavalry; every Selim-like-sounding word set a new scourge mark on Carl’s sweaty back, or else whizzed over his head like a sharp arrow.

After half a dozen revved and stormy calls, each ten minutes to a quarter of an hour in length, the cabman’s phone battery ran flat. They were entering the Hague—not the English MP, but the Dutch’s second, or spare, capital. (So prudent are the Hollanders, and so much in love with a backup plan, that they even run two capitals—one for tourists and businessfolk, and another for protesters, parliament, and bureaucracy.)

Carl sat still, feeling a streak of cold sweat trickling down his temple. The driver was darting his beady, lively eyes straight at *him*. Carl was trying hard to cover up his abyssal, jittery fear. *Luckily he only heard about the brown hair and glasses*, he assumed.

The cat-and-mouse play between the woody-from-fright suspect and the strained-by-greed tipper came to a pinnacle as soon as the taxi slipped from the highway into the Hague's downtown. *Is this the shortest way to the beach?* Carl's muscles braced, instinctively, for a spurt. No, he wouldn't end up at a police station tonight; the five years behind bars were far too great a penalty for a mere striver for a just cause who'd erringly used slightly wrong means. He suddenly had a plan.

Alright, we're downtown where all the foreign embassies are, he thought, trying to pull a calm, content, touristy face. If only I could lure the cabbie to pull deeper into the old town before he tries to drop me off at the cops.

Where 's de crook hidin' his gun? mused the cabman, having heard from his best schoolpal, Selim, all about the exact looks and speech of the 'secret agent' duo. *T' cops say he's dangerous! I need to kip boff my hide whole and my wallet full... which isn't easy at de best of times for a poo Turk. And de mucky phone's dead...*

He chose to use the ignorance of the 'tourist'—or the absentmindedness of the crook—and dived into the capital's downtown in hopes of finding a street patrol. He'd stop behind them and blink his headlights three times to say "something's wrong over here"—a known signal throughout all of Holland.

There were, by universal Murphy's Law, no patrols to be seen. This smaller, more boring, and far less tourist-besieged second capital was a sleepy place on Saturdays (and the rest of the week as well, to be honest). Except for the busy strand, of course, which was, barring Parliament, the only trump the backup capital could boast over the first one.

The cabbie groaned, silently. Hopefully his luck would turn soon.

Carl smelled a rat, too. Like every normal Dutchman, he'd been a couple of summer afternoons on the renowned Dutch equivalent of Brighton, strolled along the half-mile long roofed pier, and waded in the cool seas and warm mini-lagoons created by the tide. The teetering, brown haired man knew for sure that there was a much more straightforward way to get to the seaside.

He's on the lookout for a police patrol! The thought stung the engineer like a wild wasp. He cringed, took out his smart phone, and sneakily surfed for the addresses of foreign consulates. *Alright, we're at the.... Mauritsade... the U.K. Embassy is only two streets further...*

He met the cabbie's eyes in the rear-view mirror just as the lights changed to red. *Dang it!*

Carl swung the rear door open and raced along the road in the early dusk, turning right and swerving into a narrow lane that crossed over a slim canal.

He was almost there.

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... His fare jumped out the back door just half a second before the cabbie could press the central lock lever in an attempt to barricade all the doors from inside. Watching as the bespectacled man raced through oncoming traffic, the taxi driver jerked at his inside door handle. It remained stuck, as the central locking device had switched into 'break-in prevention' mode, locking all doors for three long minutes. The driver lowered his window, cussing in two tongues, and

climbed out of the car slowly, touching the soiled cobbled street with his head.

“Poleece, catch de tiefl” bawled the cabman, jumping to his feet and feeling twice robbed—the ‘tourist’ hadn’t paid the fare, and the cops would now hand out the five thousand Euros to someone else. He returned to his car, snatched up his phone, and tapped 1-1-2. Dead. The driver hurled the useless plastic gadget into the bushes by the street and took up the chase, yelling in Turkish and Dutch. Luckily for the escapee, he dashed, first, to a phone booth in the opposite direction...

Carl, gasping and shaking profuse drops of sweat onto the road, reached the tall, green door of the red-brick classical building with a unicorn and a lion on its facade. His slippery, trembling fingers were failing to grapple with the large copper button on the intercom.

“Sir?” he finally heard come from the speaker.

“I’m an English subject in urgent need of consular assistance,” he whispered.

“Your name and birthday, please?” the same voice required. The man on the other side obviously wasn’t in a hurry.

“Charles Austin Cheesekop, born in Reading on the fourteenth of April, nineteen-seventy.”

“One moment, please.” Then, there was silence—from the intercom, that is. In the surrounding streets, however, the mood was quite opposite. Police sirens began to howl from far off, then moved closer, creeping along both nearby streets. In *his* direction.

Carl pressed his back against the cold metal bars, hoping that the delicate rose shrub around the gate would hide his bulky body. Many long—awfully long—siren-seasoned seconds crept by bathed in mercilessly flashing blue lights. *Hope Johnnie is faring better ...* the engineer thought briefly, trying to calm down.



Inside the serene, peaceful British Embassy, the weekend mood was usual, which is to say, between staid and boring. No one besides a duty officer was keeping watch. Holland was no Sudan, no Afghanistan, and even no Tunisia; there was no need to keep several armed guards inside or out.

The duty officer Archie Fletcher was just turning off the lights, preparing to go home. He wasn't alone in the building; an intelligence man who'd just finished an extra mission was waiting for his flight to leave the following day. The greying gent in a grey jacket, a narrow tie, and modest shoes was pacing the lobby on the main floor, getting some exercise and killing time.

That's when the entry bell rang.

"A madman," grumbled Fletcher a few minutes later following the brief intercom conversation. He walked to the inner chamber to check on the personal data. Why did ruffled chaps such as this one only ever arrive five minutes before the end of his shift?

The grey-clad fellow came closer and glanced at the outside video feeds. He chuckled, shook his head, looked again—then swiftly turned on his heel.

“Archie, I need that guy,” he said, appearing on the consular section threshold. The junior clerk raised both his head and his brows.

“For what reason?” he asked, barely able to believe his ears. The request to let a total stranger—even an English subject—inside an empty embassy was an extraordinary demand that normally required the Consul’s personal agreement. The times of dissidents being sheltered by diplomats had long since passed, at least in Europe.

“My *direct* business,” grinned the bland-faced man in a plain jacket, nodding assuredly. “I’ll contact the Consul and the Foreign Office myself if need be.”

“Alright,” Fletcher agreed, mostly out of curiosity. He closed down the citizen’s database and walked back into the lobby. “Would you please also sign him into the external visitors logbook?”

“O’ course,” he heard from behind. According to diplomatic protocols, an emergency visitor could only be let in by two Crown officers. Either luckily or unluckily, there were exactly that number present at the moment.

The heavy door unlocked with a click at the same moment that a police car’s bright lights shone across the lane. Carl, his heart ready to race out of his chest, pressed on, touching the cold wood with his sweaty nose. The door opened slowly. Two men, one in a white shirt and a black tie, another in a grey jacket, stood on both sides of it.

“Good afternoon, sir,” said the man in grey. “Nice to meet you again.”

Carl's jaw dropped. It was the Englishman they'd arrested a week ago in the Grand hotel restaurant—the one whose passport he'd smudged with a Turkish chocolate, whose pardon he'd wanted to beg for in the next ten years.

The gasping engineer blinked. *A mirage?* The guy in the mousy jacket didn't vapourize, however. It was indeed *he* who was now standing by the door; it was he who could give either the 'yes' or the 'no' for Carl's freedom and safety.

"Would you still like to come in?" Major Davis went on with a dry irony and a light grin.

"But... but... *but*— b-but-but-but?" Carl's hand lost its grip, and his heavy case thumped upon his small left toe. The poignant pain was offset by feelings of amazement, wild fear, and complete powerlessness. Almost losing his senses, he stumbled in...

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While John lurked about in a dark train corner, and while Carl shivered from fear in the taxi, one hundred and ninety-nine packs of green bank notes with the plump face of a smart, old-fashioned gentleman on them were floating, like an irregular algae island, along the Prinsengracht canal.

The presence of the money—the amount of which was not negligible even for a real prince, earl, or squire from either shore of the North Sea—hadn't been announced on TV, the Internet, or in a newspaper—yet. But within seven and a half minutes of its release, both banks of the second-widest canal in the capital were crowded with scores of anglers, folks with snooker sticks, wooden boards, tent poles, garden forks, water pipes, and even bamboo twigs.

The motley crowd was silent, concentrated, and very busy. Its quiet motivation was to scoop, catch, and angle out as much as possible before *they*—the cops—arrived. No one had any doubt that they'd appear on the scene sooner or later. After all, they were in Holland where the less-than-holy trinity of Tax Office, Police, and Mortgage Banks was turning around and marking any dime before the average Joe could meekly try to find, spend, or borrow one.

There was *a lot* to catch. Only eight packs had strong rubber bands to keep them together; the rest had been encircled with flimsy paper circles that had got wet, snapped, coiled up, and drowned upon contact with the water, leaving throngs of loose green papers suspended on the surface—or just under it.

“How many?” an angler in a bath robe asked. He was directing his question to a chap in tall waders armed with a plastic oar that had been extended by tying it to a snooker stick with lady's stockings.

“Seven,” returned the wader-clad money hunter, cramming the eleventh wet paper into his inside pocket. (When typical—that is, well-off—Dutch modesty meets the bare, naked, and as such useless truth, the former simply turns off the head of the latter.)

Several bulk grabbers who had been cheeky enough to arrive on boats or kayaks were chased away with the help of bricks, metal pipes, and fishing rods. Again, the brilliant Dutch solidarity in the face of danger showed its lovely face.

Soon, however, there came a graver test of unity as a shiny black motorcycle rumbled along to a stop nearby. The rider glared at the frenzy street pantomime, listening for a moment to the whistling of the cast fishing lines and the

splash of roving snooker cues. Then, he snatched a gun from his pocket and roared, "Stop, or I'll shoot! Get lost!"

To confirm his tough words with a rough deed, a shot blazed in the air. But the endless line of people with grabbing equipment didn't cease. Sure, a couple of men and one woman, who were all three within the gunman's reach, stopped their catch, but the rest held on with stern, martyr-like faces. (Don't believe that silly old joke about Dutch courage, for there are people there who are still ready to die—if not for high ideals, then at least for high-valued bank bills. Especially if they are *free*...)

The biker spat on the ground, tucked his pistol into his pocket, and roared along to fetch a machine-gun or a dozen of his cronies. The crowd became even more feverish, knowing that every second mattered... Twenty times twenty jeering smiles followed the receding back of the lonely Desperado whose cartridge had only six bullets—far too few for the five hundred or so folks who had crammed between the two bridges. The mood was immediately darkened as the low buzz of a tourist boat filled the space between the two old granite banks.

A deep sigh of all possible tones rose up—the boat would surely tear and drown and chop and plough so many precious green papers! Then a low, deep, desperate murmur crept over the dark green canal as several hundred throats bewailed the loss of a new fridge, an extra holiday on Mallorca, or maybe an early mortgage pay-off. For it seemed that neither the ship's skipper nor the guide had taken any notice of the cabbage leaf-coloured flotsam on the surface. But the tourists did.

"Kan keng, qian li-mian shui!" one short, black-haired chap in a baseball cap lowered his camera and nudged his

neighbour with his elbow. This meant, in Mandarin of course, “Holy cow! Look at money in the water!”

“Grab me by the feet, then!” returned his compatriot in their mother tongue. No further words were needed. The first two-strong human grabbing unit was formed, and the first five Ben Franklins caught. In less than three minutes, all other youngish males aboard the forty-eight strong tourist group were divided into pairs and trolling the canal.

“Stop! Back! Stop!” The trip’s leader skipped to the bow, where the captain and the tour guide were sitting, oblivious. “Go back!”

“Why?” The skipper frowned and glanced at the guide. “Is someone ill?”

“No sick, no sick,” the grey-haired leader said as he shook his head like a plush panda bear. “We want see bridge again, dat ancient bridge dar, nice, nice!” He pointed back to where a drab, graffiti-sprayed concrete construction loomed. It was not a day older than forty.

The captain, still in the dark over the real reason for the stop, lifted the sloping glass window over his head and stood up. At once, a stream of pleading clattered in his ears.

“Back, back! We wanna back dar!” chattered his passengers in frantic broken English.

“Man, keep going! On, on, on!” at least twenty Dutch voices boomed from the banks of the canals on all sides of him. “Let’s poor folks cadge a buck o’ two, eh?”

The baffled skipper in boiled shirt leaned over far enough to finally see the floating riches and his smart clients, who were artfully grabbing the sudden boon. He shook his

head and reluctantly snatched the microphone from the guide's hand.

"Everyone back to his seat!" he shouted in Dutch, forgetting that the tourists weren't apt in it. "Everyone back!" He cleared his throat and repeated the order in English.

The voyage leader chuckled and winked—first to the skipper, then to the tour guide. In his narrow hand were four long green papers of the same value as those floating on both sides of the ship.

Vacillating between Scylla and Charybdis, the skipper slowed the speed to almost a snail's pace. But he didn't stop the engine. Luckily for the man willing to satiate the wolves and keep the sheep, just then a blue-and-white striped boat appeared in the canal some fifty yards behind his ship. This time, no groan or open sigh rolled over the water. *They'd* come.

The Dutch public on both sides of the canal stopped, bred to be law abiding from the time they were in their mothers' wombs. As though by a hypnotic command, they stopped their hurling, spinning, scooping, and poking. The public watched as the striped boat pulled up to the bridge, upon which at least four large black undercover police cars were now parked, two of them crowned with flashing blue lights. The boat drifted there on double green waters as its crew surveyed the scene.

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"Sorry, sir, but do you call *this* an expert operation?" a fellow in a dark blue jacket with four stars on his chevron scolded a lean, plainclothes cop standing next to his bulky black auto.

“Pardon me?” the civvy-dressed man cockily raised his head. “Where was the promised monitoring? Any sensible reports? Or do you need a waiter to bring you the crook on a tray?”

“Keep your pre-school questions for your so-called officers!” returned visibly irked police general. “We’ve got eighteen reports so far, all of them *twice* as sensible as your babbling here!”

“Well, I’ve heard that a motorcycle following a suspect car was turned back. By whose order, may I ask?” the top spy asked as he pulled a file out from his briefcase.

“Since when has Inland Security overheard our internal conversations?”

“Since when? Since the invention of the radio, sir. In full accordance with the law, if you’ve ever studied any. And that’s why *we* know a thing or two about the connections your people have with *this*!” He pointed with his stumpy, carrot-like finger to the water where the soaked bank notes drifted, still being angled out, on the sneak, by some daring folks.

“With *this*?” echoed the uniformed man in an almost-shouting voice. “We have absolutely no connection with *this* or your whole daft operation!” He pulled a phone from his inside pocket, turned on his heel, and got into one of the large black cars, slamming the door closed behind him. After a short while, police boats began to *leave* the scene. Apart from some intelligence officers and city authorities who were sitting in the large black vehicles on the bridge, only two foot patrol cops remained on each side of the canal, doing nothing.

The modest, hopeful smiles began to lighten up on the jaded, wrinkled, unshaven, uncertain, uneasy, uncouth, and unwholesome faces all around the canal. In contrast the contrary, plump, well-shaven visages of the authorities still stuck on the bridge showed no shade of a grin.

The first of them, the city mayor, had a pocket-sized army of street- and parking-controllers within his grasp, but there were no parking delinquents or no street polluting to call them in for—in fact, those people on both banks and bridges were toiling hard to clean the canal, having angled out, by the way, some eighty shoes, two bicycles, and a zillion rusty beer cans from its bottom.

The man sitting beside the mayor, a garrison commander, had two regiments of marines and a regiment of infantry at his fingertips—yet the floating cash posed no direct threat to the capital's safety, so his men too were not needed. The last of the grim figures in the car, the Inland Security chief, had enough officers and plenty of cars for clandestine operations, yet just one boat small enough for operating in a canal as narrow as this. And everyone around him, including the police general, seemed to know that sad, stupid fact.

When that only intelligence boat arrived on the scene from another city a good two hours later, its five-strong crew was only able to salvage from the pitch-dark waters a pitiful five hundred dollars in very wet cash...

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FLIGHT

Swiveling his head as he walked, John lurked through the narrow corridors of Ede station. Unlike his older sibling, he didn't hear the radio warning about two armed and dangerous, brown-haired men. That only meant that he sensed less stress, not less danger. Luckily for the junior adventurer, the tall scaffolding over both perron and the only underground passage didn't just obstruct movement – it blinded CTV cameras as well, so the fair-haired escapee could pass the last monitored area on his way home, unnoticed.

He tripped, for a while, along a line of faceless, sheepishly-grumpy commuters. The snaky line split downstairs in two, leading to the right and left. John joined the sinister half – which turned out to be just that, in any sense of the word. He'd almost passed the entire long trench between two tall repair platforms when a rumble was heard two yards above his head, then soft bubbling and, finally, a splash. A tall metal can, brimful with dark-blue paint, toppled over, its half-fixed lid flipped off and rolled away. A couple pints of thick, acrid paint gushed down, mostly upon the motley metal pipes. A glassful poured on the marble floor, and a handful- upon the curled, blond hair of the short guy.

John stopped, wiping his hand at his concave hairline – a broad streak of deep-blue smear was left on his palm. He glanced upward, cross but too tired to yammer. It wasn't needed this time. Two construction guys were hurrying down, skipping two ladder steps at once.

“Sorry, sir, we're awfully sorry, here, please...” Two twenty-Euro notes appeared in the soiled hand of the first painter, “There's a good barber shop jus' two hundred yards 'way. Please, if that's not 'nough, jus' come back, we ...”

The other, younger guy, the one who didn't screw the lid well, stood by and blinked helplessly. The blue-headed passenger must be appeased asap, before his temper snapped. Such a silly gaffe could cost a workman his job – the security rules in Holland are ruthless, especially for the public places.

“Um, have ye got.. a piece of hanky or the like?” John frowned, feeling the sticky streak creeping under his collar. *'Now, I'm a blue-collar employee,'* John thought half-jokingly and grinned. His wry grimace was understood in a very different way by two troubled contractors – a large paper hanky appeared in the hand of one of them in no time. The first one pulled another twenty-Euro note.

“We're *so* sorry, sir,” the first man said, assuming the saddest face he could contrive. “Hope t' barber will get it right.”

John nodded briefly, wiping his flamboyant curls with the flimsy hanky, and noticing he was becoming a center of attention for the people entering the station from the other side – a squarely-clad guy with a half-blue head and a blue hand wasn't a common view in the more straight-laced Eastern Holland. “*What a tosh,*” he thought, feeling suddenly so tired that he couldn't even get mad at these clumsy chaps.

Luckily I have nix to do in the evening ... besides a visit to the barber's shop.

Once inside a small business with scissors and a comb roughly sketched upon the screechy entry door, John glanced in the mirror and finally understood why folks were turning their heads to stare. A balding gent with a 'Telegraaf' paper in his hands glanced at the 'Martian', too, gulped – and silently pointed to the inner door, letting John skip the queue. *'I must look really weird,'* the baffled clerk mused.

“Oh, what a fine dye.” The barber smiled as John took his place in the turnable chair, “From a theater?”

“Sort of,” the very tired and still-cringing man returned, “an absurd one ...”

“Uh-huh,” a Figaro's pupil took to work. “Wait a moment, that's ... an oil paint, I should use acetone to wash it away ...”

“Use it, then,” John raised his brows slightly, “what's the problem?”

“Oh, sir, y' know, with your hair colour ...” the barber began warily.

John lifted his head and frowned. *What now?*

“A ..say, noticeable tinge of blue would remain, sir, for some two weeks... is it a problem?”

“Rather, yes,” the clerk returned. “I'm to see a couple of white-collar delegations next week, “would it, um, disappear, in a while?”

“O' course, o' course,” the man in the white apron nodded several times, “your hair grows quick if I'm right.”

“It does,” replied John, with a distracted grin. Barbers always earned some good cash on him, at least before he got married and Sveta took charge of his curls.

“For the first month, say, I would propose you a paint...”

“A *what?*” The bank man, who'd never been from his first day on earth, anyone else than a fair-haired, blue-eyed male, peered at the hair specialist in awe.

“Well, I've got a lot of tinges, sir. I guess it's no problem, for your profession?” The barber pointed to a long shelf with colouring shampoos, “Chestnut, sorrel, wet straw, natural henna, natural basma, red, Napoleonic brown ...”

John still gazed at his reflection in the brightly-lit mirror and kept silent. *What would mom say?* he thought with a gnawing disgust, *On the other hand, I can't scare a new client away.*”

“Well,” he muttered slowly, “if there's no other way, paint it o'er. ”

“Alright,” the saloon owner nodded readily, “I'll try dark chestnut, it'd fit your brows and eyes. Well, another option is shaving your head ...” he added quickly, seeing his client still hesitate.

“No,” the man in the chair shook his two-coloured head, “not that sure.”

After an hour and a quarter, a lower-than-average time period, a vivid gentleman with very dark-brown, glittering, almost straight hair strolled back to his car. For the

first time ever, John turned the rear view mirror to check his own looks. *Dash, the guy painted my brows, too!* he noticed with displeasure. Yet, there was no alternative, apart from becoming a skinhead. The newly created brunette sighed and headed home.

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... at the same time, the taller-than average, originally dark-haired man sat on another chair peering at a sizeable mirror, into the small, attentive, increasingly glittering eyes of Her Majesty's officer.

“... so, we've agreed to try to check some... agents, if an occasion turns, and kill, so to say, two birds with one stone: get a brisant reportage material and do a good service for our fatherland.”

“But, sir, you've got two fatherlands, if I'm right.” The major grinned subtly.

“Um, yes, our fatherland is Holland, our motherland is Britain,” Carl corrected. “Indeed, it seemed that we were trying to rob Pete and to pay Paul – but,” he spread his bulky hands broadly.

“You finally robbed both!” Major Davis smiled openly. Now, all the invisible puzzle pieces began to fit into a vast, complex, three-dimensional picture. Even a chocolate-smeared passport was no longer a petty revenge: it was a classical, pure, funny bumbling which nearly wrecked a state-of-the-art MI6 operation. The officer noted the reply in the file and turned a page over.

“Question twenty-two. Was I the only serviceman checked with the help of the intelligence ID?”

“Yes,” Carl nodded firmly. The major knit his brow – too hasty 'yeses' are often used to cover up a deeper thing or two. He pressed on. “Was I the only *person* arrested?”

This time, the reply wasn't prompt. Carl hesitated, peering at the table-top. If he were to go on with being completely honest, he would leave John in the cold and, whatever the cost, he was trying to protect the younger man. If he didn't – he was simply afraid that two tired, albeit somehow amused, guys would show him the door or call the police. He opted for the first.

“No,” the engineer said, concisely. And felt a wave of relief rushing up his spine.

“That's right,” Davis nodded and reached for a phone or maybe a small video recorder. “I had the pleasure to watch this.”

With rounded eyes and racing heartbeat Carl gaped at the brief video displaying their last operation – the arrest of a German philosopher. *Darn, what would it turn into if I blurted out a 'no!* The bespectacled man trimmed his glasses and gulped. This reaction, too steep for just an emotional quirk, didn't pass unnoticed by the tidy, cool-headed man in the grey jacket.

“The arrestee was?” he put his pen down to the next line.

“A ... a ... a student,” Carl confessed, feeling that a blush wasn't miles away.

The military man at the other side of the table prepared the next question – but didn't ask it. He felt a sudden pity toward this through and through civvy, plump-

handed, short-sighted, homely chap with a cut finger and crushed toe, which he himself had bandaged a quarter of an hour ago. He suppressed a sigh – pity or no pity, he had to fill in the report and bring it to his department. Finally, they'd stop digging for a non-existent mole.

“The goal or goals of your actions?”

“Um,” Carl trimmed his tie again, “let's say ... curiosity... love for truth ...patriotism ... adventure,” he shrugged, glancing at the high ceiling, where a large fly was creeping in small circles, “Danger. Fun.”

“Indeed,” the major tilted his head, smiling almost as sincerely as he did in his bathroom. “I can tell you, beyond protocol, that it's a perfect set for a buccaneer or a soldier of fortune some four centuries ago! Danger and fun ... know what? If I'd have been a conquistador or a governor, or at least a Wild West bartender, I'd have taken you into service.”

“For the position of?” Carl asked, with a glint in his eye. *He'll say 'soldier' or 'spy' now*, the engineer mused, ready for a smug smile.

“A bouncer,” the officer returned, with a slightly teasing grin, “danger, fun, and a decent salary.”

Two glistening, oblong circles of tortoise-shell glasses had lost a bit of their shine – yet didn't quench completely. The examination was coming to an end.

“The last matter,” the major said, standing up and closing the file, “I, as just a man, as your friend, let's say, would advise you *not* to enter Britain for a couple of years.”

“W-w-why?” Carl nearly let his jaw drop - that was the least expected word at the worst possible time.

“You could spend some, um, two years behind bars,” Davis returned blandly but not maliciously, “or be delivered back here.”

“W-what for?” Carl clasped his chin with his hand. *'I've nowhere to go!'* his round eyes cried out.

“Your first action was, in legal terms, an illicit assault on an officer of the Crown while on active duty. Up to three years common jail in peace time, if I still remember well,” he waited a moment, then added, “and ... the folks from my office can share this protocol with Scotland Yard--such are t' procedures. I can't stop or change it.”

“And ... in war time?” the engineer blurted, not knowing why.

“A firing squad.” The military man shrugged lightly, “In an extreme case.”

The gentleman of adventure, born centuries too late, clasped his head with both his hands. Maybe – *maybe* – these chaps would permit him to spend a night in their safe cove. What then? Every street cop could round him up, and his car, now surely on the police parking lot, could be returned only after long hours of examination and legal torment. *Why did I call John for help, instead of throwing t' money briefcase straight into the anal?* he thought desperately, but then chased the thought away – the final outcome could be worse for him, without his vivid sibling he'd never have gotten rid of both bikers and cops, or come dry out of the deep. So far...

Major Davis, turning halfway to the window, watched the blue flashing in direct vicinity of his Embassy with light curiosity. His 'opponent' seemed to be deep

enough in hot water. Need he be examined any longer? Yet, the secret agent was now, volens nolens, in charge of both his 'detainee' and the building's security – and these two seemed to contradict each other. He came one closer and asked quietly, “Has *this* anything in common with you?” he nodded to the window.

Carl shook with his whole body, as though thumped with a baseball stick across his broad back. For almost half a minute, he kept silent. The serviceman waited. He was duly trained in all psychology workshops to know the reply before hearing it. He also knew that it was a wrong time to press the oppressed.

“Yes ...” Carl whispered, ready to cry, creep under the table, or to burrow a tunnel to the opposite side of the earth. He didn't look at Norman.

“Anything serious?” the officer came one more step closer.

“Yes ... that is ... no,” wheezed the despairing engineer, “I was .. I...we .. that is, me ... photographed with a gun that wasn't mine and ... so it was all a monstrous accident, sorry, I jus' can't ...!”

“I suggest no one had been killed or wounded with that gun, and no property damaged?” asked the military man, leaning over the table and knitting his brow.

“No ... absolutely,” Carl shook his head, timidly looking up.

“Do you *mean* it?” the major peered into two brown eyes pulsating with abysmal fear. “We're not a crooks' asylum.”

“I mean ... no one.” Carl nodded heavily, and a drop – maybe sweat or maybe a tear – plunked upon the tidy oakwood table-top, “please don't throw me out.”

The MI6 man trod a couple of times between the window and the table, thinking. The crystal-clear sincerity of his former arrester was surely boosted by those flashing lights and howling sirens just blocks away. *And, if the stakes are that high, he mused, the cops would bring along a ...*

He turned around, leaving the door open behind him and passing a couple of rooms. In a little storage closet, he found a large bathroom chlorine cleaner bottle and a pair of silicon gloves. Now, he was to venture out and do some dirty job. Or actually a cleaning one.

He glanced into all outside video feeds. The piece of Lange Voorhout Street directly outside the Embassy building was clear. The major opened a side door, not accessible for visitors, and walked noiselessly over the corner to the main entry.

There, holding the sprinkle container high over his head, he pumped the handle. The acrid odor, the pale-green cloud killed all other smells as it flowed through the air, settling upon thin steel rails which guarded both sides of the red-brick building. Davis half-emptied the large, three-pint bottle, releasing four white, poisonous chlorine clouds around the tall entry door and along the lane. Trying to step into his own unseen steps, he retreated to the side door, finishing up his own traces with the WC disinfectant.

The moment he shut the door, a remote barking of a dog sounded.

“You're quick, guys,” he said to himself, hastening to the bathroom to wash his hands and dispose of the stinking gloves, “I hope you're not quicker than old Norman.”

Next, Davis fetched a stool from the cantine and sat on it. He enjoyed some little comfort while watching a brief thriller outside. Within three minutes, the greyish screens showed two uniformed guys running behind a sniffing dog. The quadruped headed from the cross street toward his building. The major's pulse rose slightly. Did the liquid work at all? Or, was it expired and useless? Some twenty yards from the main entry, the dog halted and whined. Then, it whirled around and sneezed. It barked and yipped. It gazed helplessly at its guides, shook its large head and rubbed its nose with its paws.

'Poor thing,' the intelligence man thought with some pity, *You may lose not just this trail, but also your sense of smell for months now.'* The potent chlorine stench had stunned the delicate Alsatian's sniff power like a thump on the head or an electric discharge. Two capped, resolute but helpless men stood still, waving their flashlights. Next, pulling their yipping, squealing animal along, they wandered through the dusky street, never to come back again.

“Bye,” Major Davis said quietly, with a heavy conscience, pitying the animal much more than the people behind it, “Bye, folks.” He didn't cherish a grudge against Dutch cops after that annoying night they funded him a week ago – yet he also didn't like to serve the Crown's Foreign Office a pretty kettle of fish. A non-consular, searching for an armed offence 'refugee' in a serious Embassy, would be too much of a bad joke.

Walking upstairs, the officer thought for a moment about the sudden quirks of fate – in which he didn't believe too strongly, to be honest. The arrestee had turned into an arrester, the game into a hunter, and the wheel of fortune, if there was any, moved diametrically around. It was fascinating, maybe even thrilling – yet this fact, grand and noteworthy as it was, didn't make him a jot more at ease. Quite opposite – he had to figure out what to do with the sudden 'windfall'.

Norman stopped by the wooden rail on the first floor, polished by hands and tweeded sleeves of generations of British diplomats, spies and consular servants. Tomorrow he was to leave for a short airport meeting abroad and then fly home. '*What are the boot dimensions by our XJ?*' he thought briefly, as a vague plan began to dawn upon his mind. Then he went back downstairs to get a measure.

... Carl spent the night half-asleep, half-awake, shivering not just from gripping fright but also from crippling cold – the thin army blanket provided by Archie was too short and only covered legs or shoulders, never both together. Before the first bleak sunrise, fingers dabbed the top of a tall sea lantern three miles to the west, even this cat nap was cut short. Major Davis, ready from top to toe, walked in and switched the light on.

“Yes ...” Carl sat up, rubbing his eyes and grappling with his feet for his shoes – the only part of his garderobe he risked taking off.

“We're to go,” the officer said drily, “first, downstairs, for a little snack.”

“A-ha,” the engineer nodded, squeezing his feet into his flattened shoes and scowling: the left little toe was

still too painful to tolerate the fresh torture. He grabbed his shoes by his left hand, his box by his right – and noiselessly followed his taciturn guide. At the little canteen or eating corner at the consular half, he gobbled up a piece of warm toast with jam and looked around, expecting a glass of juice or cup of coffee on the table. There were none. 'Ouch' ... Carl thought dismally, *'I'm already feeling like a dried-up sea horse.'*

"Sorry, sirs, can I ... drink something?" he asked politely, first glancing at the tablecloth, then – at the sleeves or tie-knots of both Englishmen. He still felt too guilty to bump into anyone's eyes.

"No," the MI6 man said firmly, "please don't forget to visit the bathroom when you finish eating." Then there was silence. Carl was afraid to ask more; the chewing men didn't add a word. After a fleeting minute, Norman stood up. Carl hastily swallowed the toast and headed to the bathroom. The officer waited.

"Follow me," he said and walked, not looking back, to a narrow door. A short flight of stairs led them to a dark place that smelled of gasoline, where a long, dark-green car stretched its elaborate body almost from the front door to the rear wall. Davis came by and swung the boot lid open. "Hope you don't have an allergy to wool," he uttered, half-asking half-stating.

"No, absolutely not!" the engineer grinned, almost feeling the cosy, warm, woolly upholstery comforting his poor bottom, still aching after the night on a hard bank. The smile, however, began to wane rapidly off his tired face: a blanket, much the same as that under which he quivered the night through, appeared in the hands of his arrester-cum-deliverer. He wasn't placing it on the comfy rear seat of the vehicle. Instead, in two precise flips, he spread the khaki-

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coloured object inside the finely curved boot with the 'CD' label on it.

“Please,” the polite agent ordered the gentleman of fortune, nodding to the cramped, albeit not cold, dark space inside the boot, “take a place.”

Carl, for the first time baffled and bold enough to look Norman in the face, did as asked. Two small, triangular eyes didn't carry the slightest shade of a joke, teasing or jeer. They looked straight ahead, that is, at Carl de Cheesekop, the big man in big trouble, now fully at the grace or disgrace of this mid-sized gent in the grey jacket.

Next, the engineer, who never in his life, real, soporific or imaginary, made a trip in a car's boot, began to make his Spartan-like lair ready. First, his box went in on the right side. Then...

“I'd advise that you place your head on the other side of the fuel inlet.” The dry, though rather friendly voice, made him shudder. Alright, the chest went on the other side, his shoes – on the opposite. Now he, umm. Clumsily, slowly, the bulky man in tortoise-shell glasses struggled into the rather narrow 'hole' and lay there, still peering anxiously at Norman.

“We won't stop or slow down no matter how much noise you make,” the intelligence man said quietly, “keeping peace is for your own safety.”

“Yes ...” nodded Carl, catching his glasses at the last moment from slipping off his nose, “um, eh ...”

“So far,” were the last words of the grey-clad man. The thick boot lid flopped close, the last question – ‘Where

are we going to?' remained both unsaid and unanswered. It was completely dark...

The dark-green vehicle's shiny chrome fenders displayed the same wildcat's muzzle on its bonnet as adorned the boot of Carl's own car. It whizzed along the south-bound highway. Two neat, well-shaven, reserved men in broad front seats didn't talk. Davis didn't want to, Archie, at the steer, wouldn't bother the older – and higher ranked colleague.

This time, Norman silently enjoyed the seldom recalled fact of being English. The unique upbringing and inborn intuition regarding when to talk and when not to were the thing he now loved the most. He clearly wasn't in a talkative mood, and his compatriot felt it without being told. Who else, save maybe cold-blooded Scandinavians (who're *never* in a talking mood, except when heavily drunk), would do the same?

The miles, or how they profanely called it here, kilometres were rolling under the rubber paws of the steel cat of prey. Davis' thoughts, also unleashed for the time being, began to switch to his Dutch 'enemy' languishing at his feet. *It had always been so, he mused, in Transvaal a hundred or so years ago, during the New Amsterdam siege still earlier, in sea wars in the seventeenth century. The Dutch were giving up, time and again, sooner or later. We never...*

This time, a live example of Dutch softness and English bullshiness lay behind his back. The big man, a week earlier able to toy with him, Her Majesty's cadre military, had himself become a toy in the hands of others; the officer's honour was vindicated and all points set over i's. The major could now vaunt over his sudden victory and gloat over his enemy's takedown. He didn't. The greying agent felt a bit fortified by all these bygone facts yet – the rich baggage of

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English history, the hard-won victories and few tactical defeats, including his own, were now looming in his memory like a group of cold, bulky tall monuments. They didn't evoke any mirth, any cheer, any emotion at all save some pride: Britain was still great, able to win wars and retain even its far-off territories, such as the Falklands, as the last example.

Meanwhile, his twice as young civilian fellow traveler, for the first time in his life unhappy of being English (all that stiffy upbringing and stuffy Victorian manners), was keeping back at least his eleventh yawn. Waking up at four in the morning and driving along unbeatably boring, southern Holland highways for almost an hour without a word or an eyewink shared were taking their toll on him.

"May I turn t' radio on?" Archie asked, half-turning to Davis.

"Please," the major replied readily. He had nothing against some music or news to fill the silence and monotonous wind noise.

"The latest news on BBC..." the stereo speakers woke up with one touch on the silver button, a melodious lady's voice began to flow in, "the scandal over the sale of British arms to Argentina, supposedly by the Russians, is increasing its pace. The Cabinet has taken, according to the Foreign Ministry's unnamed sources, all necessary diplomatic steps to clear out the situation. Still, it remains unclear, tense and fairly embarrassing. Our correspondent Andy Baldwin reports from Moscow."

After a short pause, a man's voice took the lead, "Good morning, I'm Andy Baldwin, direct from Moscow. The Russian Defence Ministry declines, so far, any comments on the secret arms deal with a group of Latin American

states. There are no publicly accessible records on arms and other government-controlled deals in this mysterious country. What is sure is that it bought, in twenty-nil two, an amount of middle-range, anti-aircraft and air-to-surface missiles from BAA and two other British producers. Without the pictures, sent to an English newspaper by a certain Dutch witness, John C., the deal would surely never see daylight, either in Russia, where very few people seem to care, or in Britain, where both the Cabinet and the public care a lot. The Dutch government also denies accepting any arms ship in their waters.”

The men in front seats glanced at one another. The home news was anything but easy sailing, and Major Davis felt he was falling back into a hot cauldron – fingers could be pointed at him for not rewarding the double-agent on time, for not contacting some 'sleeping' agents in Holland earlier, and even for the blunders made by others. The vessel had obviously got through. She wasn't just carrying missiles to the only country which has a possible clause for invading a Crown territory enshrined in its constitution – she moved there UK-made arms, months before the Faulklands' victory third decentennial. What a sheer mockery...

Norman grappled in his side pocket and fetched a piece of chewing gum to clean his teeth, breath, and thoughts and to make do for the absent moisture. His detainee told him yesterday over executing all 'operations' together with his younger brother, John. Of course, he remembered, the second 'agent'-- certainly wouldn't forget him until his last day... *Do I have the phone number of that blondhead in my file?* Davis mused quietly, opening his briefcase for a double-check. Yes, that wasn't omitted – even though it was, mostly, useless. Britain had as yet no agreement with the Netherlands for suspects' phone tapping. And, trying to nab someone who'd

be surely hailed by all possible medias as a 'hero of honesty?' That would be touchy.

Still, the bosses could perhaps try to lure him onto our side, the officer thought distractedly, flopping his briefcase closed.

At the same time, the older brother of John C., feeling nausea from the continual wobbling and swaying inside the pitch-dark, crammed, smelly boot, also thought. He wasn't mulling over affairs as broad or deep as British sovereignty, but over matters heavy and bitter on their own.

'We Dutch had always been shivering behind someone's back, carried in someone's boot or shining someone's shoes – be it France, England or America,' he mused, also hearing the BBC news from rear speakers right over his head. *With no one's back to sneak behind, we're stashing under a fig leaf of lies a flimsy dome of silence, and showing our compulsory white feather. What a dwarf parody we stage, able to fight for our belly alone ... and even that till the first gripe.*

He turned a bit, trying to find a better position, and maybe to induce more pleasant thoughts. Still, there was no space for movement - his head almost bumped against the right, his shoeless feet rested on the left wall of the close, dusty baggage compartment. Carl sighed for the twentieth time and suddenly bumped into an optimistic thought. *At least there're some folks like my John - brave and honest and not prostituting their conscience to be 'the same as others' at all cost.'* After this reflection, he felt too tired even to think, and yawned broadly. In a minute, a light snorting was detected from behind, making the two men in front seats knit their brows, grin and shake their heads.

When the lean minute hand revolved three times around its pivot, the dark-green consular “Jaguar” came to a

soft standstill. Norman climbed out and hurried to the rear. He didn't open the boot cover – even though the car stood in a half-empty, dusky underground parking space, and the place had no monitoring cameras. *He* wished to monitor it first. Everything was quiet. After a while, he lifted the boot lid - the snoring subsided, the uncertain shape inside began to move. Norman stretched his hand, helping the third traveler to climb out. For a full minute, Carl stood still, unable to straighten up, with his hand upon his aching hip. Then he pulled his shoes and box out and glanced at Norman, rubbing his aching neck.

“Is everything well?” Davis asked quietly.

“I'm f-fine,” Carl croaked out, feeling pain in at least eight places, “which, um, city is this?”

“Brussels. We're near a main railway station. The exit's to the left, then third lane, right. Have a good trip.”

A short, energetic handshake followed. Then the man in the grey jacket trod back to front and took his seat; no more looking back. The motor growled. The long green body rushed to the exit. Carl followed it with his short-sighted eyes, took his glasses off and cleaned them. Then he slowly tripped through the dusty, dark lobby smelling of urine, and hurried toward the exit for pedestrians. He felt a bit better...

The rest of the morning had flown away as though in half-sleep, so tired was the limping, rumpled man with a large box in his hand. Few people spoke English or so many pretended they didn't grasp it. And the Belgian travel facilities were both spacious and chaotic.

I'm in Brussels, Carl thought, trying to concentrate on his route, and I have to get to ... to ... to northern Spain. Yes. Sure. There folks finish their pilgrimage to Santiago Campostella on the Atlantic coast. I can join a group and ramble slowly, staying in cheap village quarters or cloisters for a couple of months... Yeah, it's perhaps the only safe place for the time being. I can call Helen and John from a phone booth ... or better not?

Gradually, a plan formed in his mind, a bit flattened and battered, as was his whole body, by the harrowing ride. He wouldn't risk taking a plane or a TGV speed train – too many cops and cameras around. Umm ... what's left? – a taxi (too pricey), a bus (there're none going that far) or ... a ferry. He used one in France, a couple of decades before. Very few formalities, still fewer, if any, cameras-- and no gendarmes on board.

With a short sigh, he switched his smartphone off and took the simcard out. Now, he was unreachable by his family, yet also untraceable for Dutch cops, if they were so smart as to identify him with the help of just one photo. The solid citizen shook his head – what a nutty turn of fate! He must flee his second homeland, but can't enter the first. He must arrange a sabbatical leave in his work all of a sudden... Yet, such a flight is better than surrender to the police, endless examinations, and perhaps a court case which would traumatize his adolescent kids for a lifetime. Also, he wouldn't see those burly bikers, very quick to shoot, less quick to listen to lengthy explanations for a good, very good while. For the time being, the cops wouldn't protect him, the bikers wouldn't spare him. He must go. Alas.

The ferry to northern Spain, Santander or La Coruna, he still recalled vaguely, departed from Le Havre. The engineer pulled a thin atlas of Europe from his box,

flopped on a shaky street bench and opened the booklet at 'Normandy' section. He must get to Lille, if he was to avoid the noisy, hectic Paris, which teemed with pickpockets. And thence to the coast.

Finding a suitable bus platform took him another half hour – but he was rewarded with a coach heading further, for Amiens – halfway to his goal.

“Bon jar, where can I buy la ticket to Amen's?” he asked the driver, changing the cathedral city's name by the way. There was no time to search for the ticket office, if the schedule was right.

“Par moi,” the easygoing chap in a not-too-fresh shirt and a greasy tie said, patting his breast pocket. The message was taken, a fifty-Euro note slipped from Carl's hand into the driver's wallet, the doors closed. *'This way of doing business I like,'* Carl thought, with a back feeling that it was so flagrantly un-Dutch. Yet, he was abroad, like a bird suddenly escaped from the Dutch golden cage. And ... even happy with it. So far.

Once in the ancient city, Carl began to feel anxiety. He still hadn't a clue when the ferry should depart. The Internet browser on his phone wouldn't work without a simcard, that he knew for sure. *Alright – I can buy another card in a market or shop here, but ... but I speak very limited French!* He trudged on, trying to decipher street signs and billboards.

“Oh, a tourism bureau,” the bone-tired man muttered, reading the advert over a narrow, glassy door, “they should speak some English!”

“Bon jar, can I please book a ferry ticket from Le Havre to Santander or Coruna?” he asked anxiously. It was

almost noon, and such a long-distance ferry should certainly depart in the evening but – how late?

The little lady at the reception desk pulled a wry smile. “Sorry, sire,” she scrolled down a database, “dere are naw direc connesions to Spain anymaw. You shoul first gaw to Cherbourg, instead of Le Havre, travel to Portsmouf, au Plymouf, and changer to Santander or Bilbao dere. May I 'elp?”

“Moment, moment.” Carl knit his both brows, stretching his overheated and very low-energy brain. Portsmouth? It's in England ... and ... and ... The lady understood his hesitation from a very different point of view.

“Jou can of cour selec le route jourself, and print la ticket out by us,” she crooned, smiling in a half-warm, half-official way. Carl raised his head a bit. He was dying from hunger, sleeplessness and fatigue, and would readily give the whole process over. Yet ... what if she copied his Dutch ID, and what if ... what if he was already being searched for abroad? Internationally? The law-abiding engineer gulped, imagining his photos dangling in the 'wanted' vitrines by the police stations from Greece to Iceland and from Finland to Portugal. Oh, man ...

“I can try myself,” he nodded.

“ 'ere, pleass,” the lady switched a PC on and pointed to a chair by a small round table in the corner, “T'll swish la menu overt pour Anglais.”

Craving to sit down, the engineer stood by. With gloomy impatience he watched the brightly-varnished fingernails tormenting the innocent plastic mouse, over and

over again trying to reset the complex database into English. It refused.

"I can try in French, ma'am," Carl blurted, afraid that he'd finally fall in a hunger-and-thirst swoon and end up in a hospital, instead on a ferry deck.

"Gratt." The less computer-wise lady readily stood up. "S' il vous plaît."

In half an hour, a still more exhausted man walked out with a ticket in his sweaty hand. He entered in the database his English address, which was ok, and his expired English passport number, which wasn't ok, but A bit startled at how rapidly he learned cheating, conspiracy and clandestine actions, or just discovered them deep inside his nature, he wandered to the first corner cafe for a snack. There wasn't much time left, and he must still find a taxi to Cherbourg.

While the drowsy engineer bobbed his head with every bump on the road to Amiens, a professionally alert major was leaving, too – heading for the low building with the large letters 'Charleroi Airporte' on it. He was going home. He'd see his family a week later than assumed, (better late than never) and would have to sit in a couple more heated-up meetings in his office than planned. Before walking away, he tapped at the green car's roof the departure message, in an open Morse code: GBTQ. Archie, who also knew this abbreviation, smiled and lifted his hand in a farewell gesture. The tapped letters meant: God Bless the Queen, and some MI6 officers of Norman's generation and mindset were still using it. The new offspring seemed in no need of blessing – or giving a tinker's damn for anyone.

The silent major walked through the noisy airport, in thought about the words whose first letters he'd just tapped – what is God for in that sentence? Who is that Being, if he at all exists, where can He be found? In books, in nature? Surely not in books on theology, that was the only thing sure. *Do such accidents as yesterday happen only by chance?* he mused, *the normal probability for such a rendezvous is one in ten million ...*

... The modest April sun was preparing to dive, as was its wont, into the cool Channel waters, when a tall man stumbled, dragging his legs upon the brightly lit embankment in Cherbourg haven. The sun halted and gaped (risking its heat to slurp up half an ocean in the process): it seldom saw so dog-tired, staggering a chap on those laid-back, sans-souci Normandy shores.

The man stopped, swaying and peering at the pier: there were two large white ferryboats moored, but he saw *four* of them. He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. Saddled his glasses back on. Alright, there were again two ferries, and two, not four, sailors at the first vessel were coiling up some loose ropes on a large winch. The ship was ready to sail. Carl sped up, entering the narrow stairway for pedestrians at the moment it started to be hoisted up. He didn't look at the destination board.

“Sans les chaussures? Pour sante, pourquoi-pas!” asked a Frenchman at the check, darting his eyes to Carl's bare feet. The engineer, too distracted to react to foreign words, nodded a couple of times, like a Japanese household robot. Then he placed the ticket onto the desk. The stamp knocked drily, slightly risen brows returned back to their usual place, two dark eyes didn't read much on the creased, folded paper. There have always been different-than-average, queer tourists, entering the deck without shoes or bottoms or

leaving it, at times, without their pets, baggage or cars. One gets used to all.

“S'il vous plaît!” the drab words dropped drily upon the dark deck. The bone-tired, brown-haired man grabbed his ticket and suitcase and trudged along, leaving behind him the white board with large, hastily scribbled letters 'Cork, Irlande,' paying no attention to it.

The nondescript, once-blue carpet muffled sharp sounds from beneath, where some late cars still rumbled over the rusty deck in search for a place. Carl found his cabin, number nine, only after a while - something was still reeling and wobbling in his head. He was very hungry and weak. *Yet, I'm incognito and free, no taxi driver could squeal on me, I'll soon be still further south - and, when all the bubble and hassle subsides, I'll be back. Maybe in a month, or even sooner,* he thought, finding even planning to be difficult, *Now, I need rest. Loads of it ...*

With a tremendous pleasure Carl stretched his crimped limbs upon the bunk, only hastily spreading a clean sheet over the dusty smelly mattress. He finally noticed that there were no shoes on his numb, cold, wet feet - and, by a sudden whim, enjoyed it. So awfully tired was he that even taking them off would have seemed an unbearable toil now. Pulling a blanket over his body, he closed his eyes - and in two minutes, a deep, hearty snorting was adding a couple of decibels to the rumbling of the engine.

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Where am I? A long, broad, cold road spreading under my feet like an ice-rink. It's smooth, at times slippery, at times swampy. What on earth city is this city?

Where? In Holland, Belgium, further abroad? Let me see ... it's a strange place, noisy, draughty, shimmery. I hear a cold, strong, wailing wind whistle high in the unseen wires, or maybe in the tackle of unseen ships further away ... a brass orchestra is playing a hackneyed, dull, oompah melody – let me see, I'm coming closer, I see a long, almost endless line of men clothed in red, their faces pale, their eyes glassy, cold, sparkles. They're playing trombones or trumpets or tubas pressing, mechanically the valves, swaying their instruments as they play ...

'dit is zak van Sinterklaas, Sinterklaas, Sinterklaas,
dit is zak van Sinterklaas, en hij is zo'n grote baas.'

... they're playing this silly, childish melody, which I barely remember as a child, it's Dutch, it's played there in the Christmas time, is it winter, then? Sirs?

I'm pulling some by sleeves, waving my hands just in front of their glossy eyes. They don't reply; they should be alive, are they? "Sirs!" I holler in English, then in Dutch, "You hear me? Where am I? What city is this? What street is this?"

'It's Broad Street,' somebody suddenly answers – the voice is colourless, cold, indifferent ... I'm turning 'round; who's speaking? They don't look at me; they're gazing straight ahead, their fake white beards sway and skip, flop and flutter in the freezing wind, they don't stop playing, maybe ... they *cannot*? I look along the line of red-clad people, it goes far, very far, maybe to another city, maybe to another country ... to another continent ... I'm getting mad about this, repeated over and over, this silly and stupifying chant... I shall-

On the left side of the street some houses, or shops, or barracks, are standing. There're shades of people lurching, or maybe shades of shades? I come over there, I'm plugging my ears – it brings no relief. The cruel, mechanic, malicious beat is piercing the air. The icy wind is dashing the square, steely, sharp sounds through my head; there should be perhaps a hole in it ... I touch it ... it aches ... I must find a mirror ... a mirror in ...

A door is half-open in one of those shacks on the left side, it's a weird hut, without a foundation, the shingled, cracked walls are set upon gutted, rotting fish, a couple of dusty books and sooty bricks ... the door is hanging crazily on one hinge, it's charred on one side and mouldy on the other. I'm afraid to knock at it ... I'm afraid to ... not to knock ... I -

I'm cautious about touching the walls, either – they can collapse inside, crumble, they're wobbling in the wailing wind, they're shaking with every clank and bang, thump and whop of large cymbals played incessantly by the orchestra on the other side. How could one speak or listen or sleep or think or eat or ... I ...?

“... if there is such a noise... I can't think smoothly, either – I shall plug, I shall glue'em over, shall screw my ears shut, I ...”

There is a shade passing the door, a being in grey, smudged, soiled, sticky rags, he or she? What's the name? I open my mouth, my lips move, they move, they open and close, they touch each other, yet ... there's no sound. I ... can't hear myself. How strong is this wind, is it ... blowing from those endless trumpets. It is like endless, countless, merciless brass pipes. How ...?

Sir, d' you hear ... me, I'm Carl. I'm from Holland. I'm ...I'm walking to... which city .. this? I'm walking with ... no against the wind, no, with ... no ...”

Why is this blindfolded being so scrawny, why such dirty rags? Why do you try to ... dance to the music? ... Sir? ... Madam? Whose hut is... why's the orchestra, who ...

... two sticky, cold, decaying, tottering hands are touching my face. Why? I'm not a ..a corpse ... why d'you? ... who're you? ... I'm ... just for a while ... why do you grab ... my hands, I'm not- I'm just on the way, please, let me in ... no, let me go ... argh, plea-

Two chilly, decomposing hands push my face away, my cheeks sear with a scarlet pain. I'm slowly falling to the ground. I shall try to rise, but the wind is pulling me along, the wind- Now there're more bony people around me, grasping my head, claspng my limbs, their long, long, arched nails are pointed, are sharp ... they're stabbing my jacket, my skin ... No, don't, don't hoop this ... band over my eyes, bring me earplugs, the ... best earplugs, the ... I-

I'm opening my mouth wide, it ... now as great and ... wide and tall and wry as the door o' ... hut in front. I shriek-

“You shallll wear this, to lllive amo...ng us,” someone creaks into my ears. The drum, cymbals and trumpets continue their mindless syncopation, they've never stopped it. The strap is broad and sticky, the strap is broad, sticky and pitch-dark, the strap is strong, it's a ... very strong, very strong snake skin, it would fit my face like ... like hand and glove, I feel it, I know it, I loathe it, I need my eyes, I ... shove it away, I'm-

-standing up with a violent swing, my rucksack opens. A flask with water is falling out, it opens. I hear ... a sigh of horror, a groan of agony, a howl like a shot-through wolf. The water is rolling, in small drops around the scraggy shades. They trample the drops with the soles of their blackened feet, they bend and stretch their hands---those fleshless, those rooty, those gaunt hands, they ... they touch the pearly drops, groan and push them away, they ... push water away, push away, on... a safe distance, the water drops skip and plunk and whirl on the icy surface, I see...

And one hand is ... touching ... I see as though one hand taking on the sneak. Why ... why ... why; if no one here has eyes, why? It takes, it grapples, it searches, it pats the ... hard, lifeless, surface, it ...

“Why??” I ask, in a roaring, bitter, swaying, violent whisper, “Why ... afraid, it's ... water- drink -”

“Because,” I hear a voice hissing at me. I don't feel my ears. I've perhaps no more. “Becau-au-se- ... we're to fear and h-h-hate ... we'rre to h-hate ... y-y-ou, ... we're to h-hate lightt-t-t ... we're to h-h-hate ... ourselv-v-ves h-h-hhate water ... we on-n-nlydrink tearr-r-s”

Quick, quick, I'm dragging my twenty-ton heavy legs behind me. I ... leave, the eight water drops skip-pin-g beh-in-d me. They fear no wind, they...

I look up, and I shall ... up, this ... rasping wind is whipping me with its invisible feelers, they are ... barbed wire lashes, I can't lift up my head, I can't ...look, the teeming, poisonous hail, a ... swarm of vampire bats ... thrashing me ... still-I- stand-and look- up ...wh-

Again and again I try, again and again I fail to ... raise my head. Why can't I? The water drops chase me, they jump, they skip upon my ragged jack .. et, one is ... one is rolling up to my face ... take ...take me ... take ... drink... I open my mouth. It's dry, heavy; it's suddenly shut like a frightful clam, a petrified trilobite. I ... need pillows to open it, I must pull my jaw with both hands ... I ...the drop of water springs in, the wind subsides, I lift my... head?

Suddenly, I can see far, very far away; suddenly a warm ray of light is seemingly patting my, still aching, cheek. It's warm like the first sun ray touching the face of a sleeping child. I can raise my head, I can, I can -

I also can hear something else, besides that deadening brass hilarity. There are soft songs and serene melodies played from those colourful, green tall-grass hills far, endlessly far off. Round trees and vines are dotting those hills, brooks warble and flow between them -

"Hi, there!" I hear, looking and listening, eating those hills with my eyes, as though they're pastries fresh from my granny's oven. "We're your friends, our wings are broad, our eyes're green, our voices fresh, our hands clap- d' you hear?"

"Hi, friend, we're waiting, we are seventy hills of colour. We smile and sing, our light never fails, our grapes never fall, our flowers never fade and our rivers never dry. We're waiting for your heels to drum upon on our round backs and..."

"Come, run, bounce, every dew drop is a diamond by us, every cloud is a cushion – take, catch, coil, fold, take rest, even though you won't need any – by us.

“Every step's rest and fun, you can drink up just one drop and walk days without stopping – and we've forgotten where the night is. We haven't met it for centuries; do you still need one. Do you, do you?”

“Come, friend, our words aren't empty, we mean each and every one of them. There are tables set by the brooks, there are cups on them with fruits or grapes, call it whatever way, take and taste, one, ten or a thousand. Here a drop contains an ocean and inside a fruit, freshly picked, a planet whirls – enlarge it and walk upon it, then fold and put it back, alright?”

I watch, I consume with my sight, regretting I only have two eyes, not fifty-four, the far-off, the endlessly remote, so close and so real a place. I can... can I? Can I ask anything?

“It's here, friend,” the answer to my unspoken question sounds in my head or ears, which seem to be back in place, “Here's your cosy hut, your immovable palace, your eternal mansion. Look, look, the one with the vineyard at the left side – see? The manor your dreams hadn't finished, your imagination failed to adorn, the one your inner eyes craved to see, but never could – it ...”

“It's real, it is, it is!!” I shout so loudly that seven sooty walls quaver, I skip in the air. Maybe I'll fly up, up and away toward that place filled with the irresistible, invincible, unquenchable, eternal, golden-white light with no shadows, with that living, indescribable light, can I perhaps ... fly? ... eh?

... My feet get caught in the cold, icy, whirling wind. My long hands are stretched out, high up, as though trying to grab, to snap, to scoop, to pinch one tiny portion of the light,

one drop from those brooks – real, warbling, transparent, clear, joyful, refreshing, deep and billowy; my body is stretched, strained, like a dashing arrow, like the body of a panther jumping over a gorge.

I'm falling down, back to the shadowy, flat iceberg dotted with sooty shacks and swept with the ruthless wind, why? – I cry without words, I shout with unspoken words, I widen my eyes – why, I... it's the place I was bound to, my -

My feet are touching the ground, my ears hear the oompahs. I stoop, I straighten up, I gaze up again. The sight is still there, the blizzard and low creeping purple clouds can't hide it, why ... can't I? ...get over there? .. it's-

“Sir?” I hear from behind, “ple-ase ... a ... drop ... of ... a ..I don't r'member t'name of, don't know if ... if ... it still exists, I've... heard fr'm someone who'd heard fr'm ... someone that someone had... that it, ... it's such a round, round ... y'know? Such a ... such a ... round and small ... such a-” the croaky voice fades, fails, faints, fizzles, the gaunt figure behind my back founders, bogs down, the blindfold is ripped over one eye.

I look in that thirsty, begging, poignant eye peering at me from the scorched face, from the wrinkled, furrowed, frost-bitten, darkened, callous, atrociously scrawny face.

“You ... seek water?” I grapple for my flask, it's still open, there are some ... drops. Strange they didn't spill away or vapourize, strange ... I

“Sir?” a queue of cachexic, bowed down, ragged shapes line up behind the first, behind the first man, behind the first man with the ripped blindfold. They move, or try to move their stick-thick feet; they ... try to open their seared,

sooty, singed mouths. Why, why such a ... people ...what were they doing, eating fire... and drinking tears?

“That's why.” I hear all of a sudden a warm, a familiar, a human, a caring voice ... I turn around ... Who's this? Where from? From that hill country, bathed in light? From? I'm turning my head, it seems it can turn around and around and still a..

The engineer opened his eyes and sat up on his bunk. His head whirled. There were sunrays reeling and dancing upon the bright-lit water behind a half-curtained window.

“Unbelievable,” he muttered, his mind still fluttering between the blizzard and the emerald hills, “What a dream, old Charlie...”

10

LIMELIGHT

While two adventurers whizzed along a short, backwater Dutch river, another vessel darted across the longest ocean on our planet. HMS 'Invincible' lurked over the rolling waves of the Atlantic, its pointed bow set westward where, some fifty miles away, a rusty hulk was whopping along the same route.

Eight SAS servicemen sat in silence on three banks in the crammed quarterdeck of the darting destroyer. They knew they should discharge the adrenaline overflow in their veins by talking, joking, or changing the position of their limbs. They didn't do any of these, however – chatting was sissy, joking normally took place *after* the action, and the room was simply too close even for stretching one's legs.

Some little head movement took place only after the op-commander, Navy Lieutenant Gary Small, climbed in. With his six-foot-five inch height and square shoulders, he didn't resemble anything small or frail.

"The goal is on our radar," he announced, "reaching point within fifteen minutes." Then he was gone.

Eight serious, long faces exchanged looks. Tonight, the special unit soldiers were to launch in the dusk on two wobbly RIBs, or rigid inflated boats, unarmed. They carried 'soft ammo' -- eighteen high-pressure sleep gas flasks. The tasteless, colourless and non-lethal vapour was to keep the crew of the arms-filled ship in the state of blissful slumber for a good four days. Where the vessel would ramble in the meantime was another problem...

It was exactly nine in the evening, when the first of the RIBs plunged, without a single splatter, into the ink-dark ocean water. Four SAS men glided on ropes inside. There wasn't much gear to take along, apart from the gas flasks weighing some little two hundred pounds. The other boat had a five-strong crew, which included Lieutenant Small. He, the only mariner aboard, had to take care of the tub's helm -- not because the SAS guys couldn't, but simply because it was so agreed. The course should be set and the helm blocked by Southwest-by-west, fifteen grades.

The cold, very salty water splashed upon the soldiers' waterproof jackets, trying to wash away camouflage tint from their faces or to swamp their rocking boats. The steermen of both miniature vessels were getting nervous as the wind suddenly switched to the contrary. The heavily laden boats could only with great strain keep pace with the unexpectedly swift ship.

“Sheeps,” grumbled a private at the helm of the first RIB, “at this tempo we'd first catch 'er up by Bahamas.” He took the moist radio mike to his mouth and spoke, “Naiad, here Dolly, tempo screw up, receive.”

The reply came at once – and the boats, forgetting their planned, noiseless tempo, clattered with their motors, adding two white, foamy paths to the restless billows. The wind blew stronger, switching from a fresh breeze to a strong one. *We should act pronto*, Lieutenant Small thought, watching the white crests grow, *if we're not to end up between the devil and the deep black sea*.

In some ten, very wet and foam-splashed minutes, the first boat reached the goal and bobbed along the almost invisible, rusty wall of the ship's board. There was very little chance of hurling a looped ladder upon the slippery deck by hand. Luckily, the special units were for years equipped with rope-shooting pistols. A thin steel rope is shot upwards, a lightweight soldier climbs up first, then pulls up a more solid, steel-stitched ladder and fixes it. Ready.

The first team used all its rope cartridges before a thin steel line finally anchored itself at the desk. Two boats dancing on crested waves huddled together at the leeward side of the swaying vessel – any attempt to board from the windward side would be a suicide. Lieutenant Small, the first one to whose mind this unwittingly rhymed thought came, tightened his lips. He, more than his comrades-in-arms, knew that they didn't have more than an hour for the whole show, if they were to see anything better and drier than sea bottom. A gale, or maybe even a full storm, was clearly approaching from the north.

“We've got forty minutes,” he warned, pressing the 'alarm message' button on his radio. One after another, double-peeps reported the team's assent.

Once on the deck, nine hunched, masked figures, only noticeable by their luminescent sleeve badges, lurked to the port side of the bridge. Cracking a door bolted from inside was a much smaller problem than making sure that the whole crew got their 'pills'. There were ten people on board, that much was known. Or that little.

Each had to be found, awake or drowsy, and put asleep. Each cabin had to be provided with at least one gas container. After finishing their clandestine job, the smart red 'bottles' should resemble nothing more than harmless, discarded fire-extinguishers. For a ship which just had experienced a fire, not so conspicuous...

The captain's cabin, controlled as the first, offered a good catch. There were six men busily playing cards – the whole Filipino part of the crew. The first four gloved hands opened two red bottles' nozzles into the noiselessly cut ventilation duct. The result appeared in four and a half minutes: one after another, the short chaps around the long table succumbed to longer and broader yawns, their heads leaning against the headrests of their chaise lounges. In ten minutes, a half of the task seemed to be done – sooner than expected. Yet, it could be the 'smaller' half – four remaining Russians were less gregarious, less predictable and more pugnacious. Not that the elite combat troops were suddenly shy to fight – there had to be no 'noise' made and no limbs broken, let alone any breathless bodies left.

While the special-ops soldiers rushed through the poorly-lit, sooty, slippery lobbies of the engine compartment, bridge and crew cabins, Lieutenant Small was crouching by

the helm. He had a precise task to do-- fit under it a faux rug. The intelligent, battery-powered 'carpet' would be able to receive through a built-in USW antenna signals from the coded Navy emitter and correct the course, 'creeping' to the right or left up to twelve inches and pulling the helm along. The officer switched the outdated autopilot off, and set the course, with correction for trade winds, Gulfstream current, and earth's rotation aberration, to the British Virgin Islands. There, a visiting RN cruiser would intern the ship and take care, on the sneak, of its perilous cargo.

Next, he stood up and crossed his hands on his breast. The hapless tub, her engine running smoothly, had to travel, without a helmsman, more than two and a half thousand miles like a Flying Dutchman: dark, unmanned, uncanny. Lt. Small shook his head. He didn't like the idea and was leery about the security of other vessels which the 'Marguerita' could ram at the speed of twenty knots. She should somehow creep between the two groups of Azores islands without beaching any of them. Thirdly, the seamen would surely cry foul after waking up in British waters-- but that was the Foreign Office' and maybe the Cabinet's problem. Or, perhaps, the headache of still someone else -- the smart rug makers had left on its underside several hieroglyphs.

"Ready?" the mariner was asked by the sergeant keeping watch by the bridge. Together they launched downstairs, the lieutenant not touching the rails, the sergeant doing so. There was the meeting-point concerted by the exit; five soldiers waited close by.

"Who's absent?" Gary Small demanded anxiously.

"Private Cooper and Sergeant Collins," someone replied, "were examining a cabin down..." The words were

yet in the mouth of the speaker, when the last strike team members struggled up the narrow, rusty stairs. They were sweaty and gasping. The first of the two had, as it seemed in the dark, suffered a swollen eye and scratched cheek.

“Afloat?” the seaman asked.

“All-fired,” returned the sergeant, walking as the last. The soldier kept mum.

... On return to Portsmouth, the combat team filled in a routine 'personnel losses and matériel expenditure' form.

There stood:

Matériel used:

Missiles and shells:	0
Bullets:	0
Hand grenades:	0
Special gear (gas flasks):	18

Combat team losses:

Killed:	0
Critically wounded:	0
Light wounded:	1
In need of hospitalization:	0

Private Cooper, his left eye still encircled with a deep-blue 'smudge', added a couple of lines at the end of the report. Yes, he was 'suddenly hit on his brow with an

unknown, resilient, middle-long, rod-like object'. That the rest of the 'object' looked very much like an ordinary cucumber wasn't written down. It remained a little private mystery – as were the words 'yob tvoyu mat!' yelled by the engineer, Vasya Deryugin, when he saw two black-clad guys in gas masks by his hammock...

... John spent the whole weekend inside of doors – aware how much and how long and how phantastic village gossip could grow about his sudden hair colour change. Not that *he* cared – he hoped Sveta would soon cool down, stop rejecting his phone calls, and welcome him back home – yet, one more perennial gossip wasn't the sort of 'present' he'd like to leave his parents.

On Monday morning, most bank folks were in a strangely funny mood. They either queued up to see the 'new' employee, at once nicknamed John de Brunette, or were sharing the news with the still-ignorant latecomers. The Boss was absent, which made the thrill of being the One-who-brings-new-chitchat-first abate to the level of a trifle. Which the new hair tinge, indeed, was.

The 'new employee' himself didn't care too much. His thoughts whirled anxiously around his older brother, much more so after he read a police spot on the teletext. Carl's photograph was there, too – a distorted, blurred picture taken from a moving boat or maybe from the air. The younger adventurer shook his head. The whole Saturday wallop had already waned away, like a remote storm. The intrepid crook-basher caught himself several times tiptoeing to the window and peering out. He shivered at the clatter of every heavy motorcycle down the road..

John's mobile phones, both business and private, rubbed their shiny sides against his laptop. Both had their

ring volumes screwed up to 'max', both travelled with their owner to the lunchroom, bathroom and even to the water cooler just five yards away. There were no calls, no sms--- nothing, except dull business emails and silly software updates.

Quarter over four, however, his wired phone rang. The Boss?

"IND, branch seventeen, presales, with John, can I help you?" he read out the usual litany, a bit abashed that a direct outside call came through. Normally, the ladies beneath intercepted all such 'meddling'.

"Hi, Johnnie!" the familiar, croaky voice boomed on the other side, "have you called Helen?"

"O course, oldie!" John sprang from his chair, dragging both the receiver and the phone along, "Where are you ... on the moon? The line's so weak--"

"I'm a bit closer at hand, in Ireland," Carl chuckled hilariously, "imagine, mistook a ferry... but, that's peanuts. Know what, I've just been on a job interview t'day. Spoke with two Shanghai guys, one of 'em knows no English at all!"

"Cool," John smiled, "but, old man, what're you planning? Why a job... can't you simply come back? Our justice is t' most just in the world, y' know? ... they never find fault without a reason. I'd bet they understand us--"

"Man, what' re you talking about?" Carl's voice turned a bit sour,

"The stuff we were using, the card, that ... thing," the engineer was still so wary that he avoided even

mentioning word 'gun' in their talk, “aren't these enough? For us both.”

“Alright,” John stopped his patriotic tirade, recalling that a criminal court case, won or lost, means in censorious Holland a sure end of one's career. “And, the job over there ... anything serious?”

“I guess, yes,” the older brother's tone warmed up, “industrial journalism, so they call it. I'll have to provide 'em with learned reviews on the newest electrics technology; they'll translate it in Mandarin. Such stuff.”

“Your dream job, then.” Now it was John's turn to chuckle. “Think they'll hire you?”

“Not impossible,” Carl returned, modestly but self-assuredly, “I know a couple of languages, have that Ph.D. on electronics and t' journalism course almost done ... only the final essays aren't ready.” He sighed deeply.

“About the Dutch and the English,” John grinned, “how would ye finish 'em now, poor oldie?”

“Well,” the would-be columnist said weightily, “I guess I'll cope. Would make a couple of interviews through Skype ... know what? Business aside, are you still staying with our parents?”

“Yep,” John said concisely.

“Can you ask mom to call Helen to come over to 'em?”

“Yep, o' course,” John snapped his fingers, “but ... man, why so complex, I can drop 'em a visit ... or ring up.”

“Don't.” the older brother was still too scared, too conspiratorial, “don't forget - 'twas *my* car with that darn shot hole in t' window-”

“Alright.” John knit his brow. Indeed, the hole, plus clotted blood stains all around, and their stunt actions thereafter were more than enough reason for bugging Carl's phones, all of them.

“Listen, man,” Carl sped up, “it's now spring holiday at schools. My Marianne sent papers to Oxford a while ago. Can you let Helen know that I'm waiting for her, with the kids, in-”

“In England?” John cut him short, “but, man, you're not there!”

“No, in Dublin or Cork,” Carl said impatiently, “then, if Marianne got through, she'll fly to London, and we'll discuss here what's next. You get it?”

“Seems I do,” John shrugged, again ready to take up a dispute on the impeccability of Dutch justice. But he didn't – after all, Carl had to know what he was doing. He had mulled, for years, over a “more challenging job in a less boring abroad.” Maybe he's just grabbing his winning lottery ticket?

“So far, then,” the older brother seemed to hurry up. Needlessly – if John's phone was already bugged by the impeccable Justice, he already babbled out too much. If not – he'd said too little.

“Bye,” John said, just before the first long tone peeped in the receiver.

He glanced at the wall clock. *Moses' pants, it's half past five! Time to leave before the swarm of curious colleagues rumbled downstairs, passing jokes, gibes or dubious remarks on his new hair color.* He grabbed his peeping laptop, tucked it into his briefcase, and launched downstairs, hopping three stairs at one go.

Once outside, John wearily staggered along. He suddenly felt tired after the hectic talk and the day's battle over his bank's portfolio and his own wallet.

The pristine, glittering water in the canal twinkled at him, friendly and sincerely. She, Madame l'Eau, was an old friend of all bone-tired bank and office folk. She let them enjoy her company and gaze at her ever-changeable, unaging, subtle, eternally feminine face with curiosity, admiration and undisturbed love - and smiled back. She was never crass, never too noisy, ever-ready to listen to any story, accept any plea or complaint; she would let your tears fall on her broad green raincoat - and simply keep smiling, with both her face and heart. Maybe, she was the only such being in a city full of rubbery faces, burned-out eyes and petrified souls.

John, also an admirer of M-me l'Eau, stopped on a bridge, in a narrow gap between two chained bikes. He closed his eyes and relaxed, while Mr. Wind, the page and brother-in-law of Madame l'Eau, stroked his hair with his subtle fingers.

On the opposite side of the canal, two very prosaic, down-to-earth, dark-clad city officers lurked, checking cars' license plates and parking cards, tucked behind windscreens. There was no one to fine, a very sad and rare accident. Two uniformed chaps, their faces long and sour, nodded between themselves and paced toward the bridge where their last

possible victim stood. They peered at him with sinister curiosity.

At first, they just watched. Then they looked more attentively and barked a couple of charades into their radio devices and mobiles. After a while, both came closer and gazed at him from a stretched hand's distance, as two falcons would observe a silly bug creeping between them.

John, who finally opened his eyes and noticed the city clerks, didn't even budge to escape. He wasn't drunk or high, didn't just finish pissing or puking into the canal, had no car parked on the bridge, was shaven and even wore a decent tie. A perfectly law-abiding bourgeois, valued and cherished by any minion of the law.

He was wrong.

"Good afternoon, sir," growled the first, "what're you doing here?"

"Nothin'." John shrugged, attempting to smile. He told them the naked truth - or something that seemed truth-like. The officers didn't jump at the bait. To them, it apparently sounded like short-tailed, inconsistent and evasive blabber. *Why don't you tell us the whole truth, you petty and potentially lawless office mouse?* their stern faces read.

For almost a minute, which seemed to last half a century, they waited and watched-- heavily and suspiciously. John felt his heart beating wilder and wilder. Stark fear flushed through his stomach, cold sweat moistened his forehead and cool goosebumps gripped his back. He ... he was not doing anything ... maybe that's also wrong? .. eh? does he? Are there any instructions ... on the bridge ... which he failed to notice? Sirs?

"You're *standing*, sir," finally announced one of them, condescendingly, with a teacher's pity for a silly, spoiled pupil.

"That's ... right," John peeped naively, ready to sigh with relief. But it was a false dawn. Two capped faces turned longer and sterner. *So, matey, you're not a babe in the woods, you're aware of your misdeed. Un- huh...*

"You're standing in a *wrong* way," was the next phrase, which sounded like a final prison sentence. John shook, as though scourged across his back.

"I ... me ... I'm stan .. standing on my legs, I ... just can't otherwise, sirs." The victim of impeccable lawmen was at his wits' end. The sweat on his forehead began to moisten his eyes; now he saw things as though through a misty veil.

"We must call the Officer of Justice," uttered the city servant, with a professional indifference in his cold-as-ice voice, Your documents, please."

"Here," John grappled for his passport, which he carried, law-abidingly and patriotically in his buttoned-up inside pocket, and handed it over to the guardian angels of the State. The first officer tapped his phone.

"Good afternoon, a male person checked, age thirty-two, violating the article two hundred and seventy-nine of the Law of the Roads and Ways, article sixty-three of the Law of Order of the Public Space, and the two-thousand-eighty-ninth article of the Sixth book of Civil Code." He paused for a brief second and switched the loudspeaker on. Then he shook his head, in sheer disbelief. How could a mere mortal manage to break three weighty laws in one go?

“A *serious* matter,” orated the croaky voice of the invisible law enforcer, “two hundred Euro fine or a week confinement, if it's a recidive case.”

“You can get as little as two hundred Euro fine, sir, for an infringement of State's property.” The uniformed man took a block of tickets and began to scribble. His colleague tapped on the worn touchscreen of his clunky palmtop, trying to churn out John's criminal past. The clerk's heart sank – what if they... if they...

“W-w-which p-p-property?” the culprit, unable to believe his ears, blurted. His eyes didn't see well either from behind the curtain of sweat.

“You're abusing the bridge, sir, and the Nature,” the officer said, bored. obviously tired from repeating the same words over the years, and still more weary with the 'freezing' citizens' database which only worked when it had a whim to, “Look where your left foot stands.”

John glanced at the foot, which was now able to pull its owner to a jug. This part of his slim, not oversized, economical body was the wrongdoer: it blatantly stood on a mossy stone, on which some skimpy grass grew. Both the precious moss and flimsy grass were suffering from the weight of his shoe. That was his misdeed. He *must* have known no one could walk, stand, sit or lie on the grass, except in special areas prescribed in the appropriate civil codes. Such was the law - and the Dutch law is, of course, blind, like Justice itself. And impeccable.

“Yes, I think you're smart enough to understand,” pronounced the city clerk gravely, and added, with a bit lighter air, “this fine is, in fact, very light. You're destroying Nature, sir. And our city is investing millions in ecology!

Here,” he handed out the ticket, with a sour, sad, disdainful smile of too-merciful-a-prince who has granted too hasty and too great a pardon to a burly villain who's bound up twenty-one men while they slept, set three villages ablaze and butchered forty-three kine, drove penniless widows and orphans away in the cold, and insulted the elderly sheriff in both word and deed.

John grabbed the flimsy paper, not knowing if he should say 'thank you' or not, and read it. He shook his head, and read it again. Two hundred Euro, stood on it, in both ciphers and words, 'a fine to be paid at the account nr 376.993.000.0000.0.00100, with the sanction number 79740394-a-Ufoofoo-RnO-QQJj, within two weeks, don't forget to write down your sanction number.' The next instruction, in bold, read: **'pay in time - avoid the 40 % fine rise or a week a jail!'**

The baffled office officer followed the cheery law officers with his misty, sheepish eyes and pinched his arm to make sure he was not hallucinating. Well, there was a lot of work today, and he was tired - but not to the level of insanity!

John stood still, watching the clerks sauntering jauntily off. He was both scared and relieved. They just fined him, instead of throwing in jail. The younger Cheesekop was now a bit less sure if he'd still wrangle with the real Carl over legal matters. He disputed in his thoughts with the far-off Carl instead.

“And yet, brother, I'm right. Our law officers exceed in what they do,” he muttered, respectfully placing the ticket inside his passport, and noticing in his agenda, in capitals, 'DO NOT FORGET PAYING THE FINE', “I just stood wrong...”

The fidgety adventurer took his usual train home and peered in strained thoughtlessness through the window where one pancake-flat green field chased another. To tell the truth, he was getting more and more jittery. What if the cops bugged the phones of all Cheesekops in Holland? Carl's, his, their mom and pop's, and even aunt Betsy's ... no, she's in Sheffield. Luckily. What if he bumped into secret police agents in front of his parents' house? What if? ...

His mobile suddenly rang. John shuddered, claspings the phone with his right hand and slowly pulling it out. Who? The cops? So soon? Or...

The handy rang on. John pulled it, finally, from his pocket and gazed at the broad screen. The number calling was from abroad. Huh? Slowly, cautiously, frightfully he pressed the green receiver. Then, set the device to his ear.

"John here..." he stopped, unable to squeeze any more words out.

"Good afternoon, sir." A lively voice on the other side spoke in English, not in Dutch. "I'm Sandy Johnson, chief editor of the 'West Sussex Herald'. We've got the article and the photos you emailed to our sister newspaper. Would you, perhaps, consider visiting us?"

"Um, haw, eh..." John gulped, not knowing what to say. Which paper? What news and photos? "Yes?" he said, very warily.

The agile person on the other side sensed the mood.

"We'd be obliged if you visit our office in Portsmouth, sir," the newsman said, trying to sound as encouraging as he could. "Our readers swamp us with calls and emails ... well,

maybe you know, the arms deal you reported is a great event in Britain.”

“Uh-huh,” John muttered, slowly getting in sync with the subject. He still couldn't gabble up anything coherent – three shocks one after another were too much. First Carl, next that daft fine, and now a sudden call from a total stranger.

“Um, sir, if I'm calling at a wrong time, please feel free to say ... I'll phone when it's convenient.”

“No, it's a good time,” John finally regained a portion of his eloquence. “It's no problem. You say, your readers like ... t' see me?”

“Exactly,” the press man enlivened again, “we're a compact community, with a lot of young audiences. They – well, not only they – still can't believe there were English-made arms shipped to Latinos, just so easily. If it isn't a great trouble...”

“Trouble?” John nearly giggled. His nerves were frazzled by too many colliding emotions, set too near to each other. “No, it's not a trouble at all! Not at all...when d' you plan, um, the meeting?”

“It's up to you, in fact,” the editor returned, “this Saturday at three in the afternoon? We'll pay your hotel bills for two nights. And-” he made a very subtle pause.

“And I'll pay all travel fare myself,” John cut in, not waiting for more hints. He knew first-hand the English were as thrifty as the Dutch, just less notoriously so.

“Let me know the address, please.”

“It's in Portsmouth, fourty-five Edgewood lane, Albatros hotel. I'll drop you a call on Saturday at noon. Can on this number, too?”

“O' course,” John grinned broadly, “would be fine to meet you.”

“Equally so. Till Saturday, Mister Cheesekop.”

“You can just call me John,” the clerk chuckled, “see you.”

He tucked the device into his pocket, whistled quietly and shook his head. As usual, after a barrage of dull office days or boring weeks, several crazy events heaped up as if from nowhere. '*Now, I'm to stage a hero ...*' he thought sadly. But then he shook his head again – he wouldn't play or pretend anyone, he'd remain himself, always, here or over there. Remain himself. Don't prostitute your conscience. No matter what odds are against you.

&

There were some unseen odds, indeed. While he talked with the English editor, two men in civil stood by the door of a one-in-a-row house in Utrecht. One checked the address for the last time. Another pressed the doorbell. A middle high, dark-haired Hindu woman appeared on the threshold.

“Yes?” she said uncertainly.

“Good afternoon. Police. Could we speak to Mr. John Cheesekop?”

“With my husband?” the lady asked anxiously, “what's wrong with 'im?”

“That's what we want to find out,” said the first man. “Can we see him?” Not asking anything more, the two rumbled inside, uninvited.

“He's away,” Sveta turned around, following the gents who were busily tripping around the cramped living-room and tiny kitchen.

“Where?” the first one inquired. The second pulled a stern face.

“Haven't a clue.” She shrugged, already fed up with their cheekiness.

“Don't you?” the second man asked sarcastically, “*you* haven't a clue where your husband is? Since when is he absent?”

“Roughly a week.” Sveta shrugged. “We've had a big quarrel and he left. You can rummage the house. Including the rest rooms.”

The men stood still for a moment. Next, the first one nodded to the second and sauntered upstairs. After five minutes of tense silence and busy heels tapping, the duo came back by the table. The first pulled out a paper slip and sat down.

“Sign here, please,” he demanded, “you *must* get in touch with us as soon as you hear from your husband. You're carrying the legal responsibility for the course of investigation.”

“For *what?*” she shook her head, signing the slip, “what... has he done?”

“According to our data, he could be possibly involved in an armed hold-up,” the first cop said concisely. The second one nodded.

“Armed? My John? Never!” Sveta gasped and widened her deep eyes, “are you crazy?” She tripped to the other side of the living-room, flopped into the chair and buried her face in her hands. Then, she cried – loudly, abundantly and wretchedly. She could now forget all the stupid pink magazines and still more stupid sex manuals, and forgive anything else John had ever done to her, to finally see him alive and well. Not cringing on a court bench.

The guys in civil felt they were losing costly time (they also felt some fleeting pity on the wailing lady but that wasn't for the protocol). They chuckled, fidgeted, mumbled clumsy goodbyes. And left.

...The next morning, on his way to work, John felt three moods at once. It was new and dizzying, he wasn't used to such an array: thrilling anticipation of the Saturday performance, jitters of a possible police ambush set for him at his bank, plus fleeting sadness and feelings of guilt. Yesterday he had a long evening talk with his parents. Aunt Betsy called them, yammering, pleading and complaining. She's lonely. She's sad. She's sick. And she'll die of all that, maybe yet this week. Such calls were nothing new – after the loss of her only son in a car accident she had very few people on earth to talk to besides John's parents, his brother and himself, at times.

“Maybe you'll go to visit her?” dad asked John. “This Friday is a public holiday in Holland, if I'm right. If it's indeed *that* bad, we'll come along, too. You know, I only slowly wade with a walking stick, and Mom won't go alone.” John nodded. It could be too much, he pondered silently, to

cram both visits, in Sheffield and Portsmouth, in just two days. And he would be there without a car.

Or, by chance, I'll get a couple of days off? he thought briefly. The Boss promised him, maybe half-jokingly, that for the marine insurance 'stunt' he'd done last week he'll get a couple of days off instead of a raise in salary, John supposed tacitly. Yet, as it was a century-old custom in Holland, unspoken and 'sacred' subjects like salary raises couldn't be even mentioned by the well-bred employee without a hint 'from on high'.

By some accident, which happens twice a leap year, the director was in a sunny mood. With three secured days off, instead of two, John ambled to his office. His laptop was on. John sat on the edge of his chair and glanced through the plane, train and bus ticket offers to England. Today was the last day of Eurotunnel price hit: an express to London for just thirty Euros. *'I shall grab it,'* he thought with inborn Dutch thriftiness. *It'll take plenty of hours to travel via Paris, though.* He leaned back, calculating the time. *But it's always so – if you don't lose time, you lose money. Or, you lose both. C' est la vie.* After this erudite conclusion, he leaned over the screen, tapping and ordering an electronic ticket – one of the last, it appeared.

Next, the happy and jittery brunette pulled out his mobile to call his parents and gladden them by the fact he was already leaving. Yet, nothing but long rings were the reply – his mom and dad were perhaps on the veranda, enjoying the sunshine and not hearing the ring. The word 'cell phone' was known to them only from the newspapers and TV. *I'll ring up later,* John thought and stretched his legs under the chair. He didn't want to call Aunt Betsy, either – a phone conversation with her meant at least forty-five

minutes of listening to one great monologue, learning very little concrete facts in the end. *I'll see on the spot*, he thought, folding up his laptop. He galloped out to catch a tram to the train station. There were only forty-three minutes left.

More or less at the same time as the TGV shuttle, feeling the magnet of the massive Eifel tower and running quicker, crossed the invisible Belgian border, John's business phone twinkled its last and switched off. John did the same. Feeling suddenly sleepy, he closed his eyes, even though he didn't yet want to slumber. A cat nap was planned later, when the next Paris-London train leg would plunge under the bottom of the Channel and there would be nix to see for long hours.

Back in his bank, no one was at ease. Two somber men in plain clothes stood behind John's empty, still-warm chair. The Boss milled about anxiously.

"Yes, Mr. de Cheesekop was today at work," he said, trimming his large glasses.

"Until?" a taller, clean-shaven man asked coldly.

"Um, ten thirty or so," the manager returned.

"You also claim that he asked for a leave to visit a sick family member abroad."

"Yes, sir," obediently said the banker.

"Where exactly?" The second plain-clad chap entered the conversation, making the first one scowl.

"Umm, hmm, as far as I remember, (The Boss has never been a geography expert), "in Stuttgart or Strasbourg. Something like that." He spread his hands.

“Did he file a written holiday application?” came the next question, one of the last, it seemed.

“No.” The bespectacled man in a costly, baggy suit shrugged. “We trust one another here.”

“Thank you, sir,” summed up the first policeman, professionally distrusting everyone, “and don't forget to contact us when Mr. Cheesekop is back. Goodbye.” He nodded sternly and walked out, followed by his associate.

... The same evening, while John peacefully chewed a chunk of baguette with Camembert cheese on his way to Dover, the police commissaries in French Alzace and German Baden got the same fax from the Amsterdam police office. It was written in poor English, and contained a weird demand:

Urgent.

Holland police appears: check de possibl where-aboots

of awl Dutch residens in yore city. A mail purson called John, fair-hairy, middle-hi, is assuming coming to hiz relatives there.

The suspect in question could be armed with a caliber none automatic gun. Has no proven criminal recor. Photograaf: availabl within tree days.

The French gendarme glanced through the perforated paper and fed it into the shredder. “L' idiots,” he muttered enraged, “I've got tojour four robberees and une dozen break-ins to solve, and non free personnell! Comme 'ere and catch your crook, wifout even la photo, yourselves. S' il vous plaît!”

Der Polizmeister, on the other side of the same river, read the fax more substantially, with the help of a thickset dictionary (like himself). Then, he flipped the paper onto the desk of a street patrol officer in the next room.

“How many Dutch have we got here in Stuttgart?” he asked.

“Some two hundred,” the colleague shrugged, “why?”

“One more is coming, they say,” grinned the police chief of the Mercedes-city, “with a 'caliber none gun'. Any idea on what could this mean?”

The other German reached for the faxed paper and read it three times. “To be honest, none,” he shook his head, “maybe a sort of air gun? 'No criminal recor' at that. Isn't today, by accident, April the first?”

“No, today's the tenth of April,” the Polizmeister chuckled. “Let's ask 'em for information.” He sat down by his worn PC and began to type, point by point and paragraph by paragraph, a long, meticulous letter. Thirty-two questions total, in German.

Meanwhile, the unsuspecting 'crook' with no criminal record, no gun and not a single blond hair sat in the London express second-class seat, trying to fall asleep. Now, the attempt failed - maybe because the first nap on the way to the French capital was enough. John also couldn't get rid of the obtrusive melody he heard in the train's bar. It swirled and repeated itself in his ears, time and again. The melody itself was fine, even beautiful:

'I am the dreamer, I dream my life away'

Yet John would rather stop the looping tune. He couldn't. A more philosophical line passed through his mind, 'your higher power comes from God or Jesus Christ; it doesn't matter anything to me,' then again the more light-minded refrain and, at the end, a call 'to find serenity'.

John shook his head four times – yet the melody still whirled, still spread its magic wings over him. *Maybe because its beat fits the train's lilting run?* the former adventurer thought, closing his eyes and renewing his fight against Osborne's charming lyric. Finally, he gave up and peered thoughtlessly at the drab seat's back rectangle in front of him, letting the melody whirl and his muscles relax.

While most travelers drowsed or killed time by solving crossword puzzles, the long, bordeaux-coloured TGV multipede crept under the water which it called La Manche. It sneaked through the moist chalk tunnels and dove out among the green fields of Kent. Heads turned to windows, like magnetic needles to an iron hill. John glanced eagerly at his watch – he still had to change a train for Sheffield, and it was getting late.

The caring nephew pulled his phone from his briefcase, only to find it was off, battery flat. He sighed and tucked the device back. There was still some way to go, some time to fill, and the nervous man couldn't calculate how much. Maybe ten minutes, maybe just two. He didn't like such uncertainty.

Within minutes, the express whizzed through sprawling London suburbs, dotted with blatantly un-Dutch, plastered houses and pocket-sized orchards.

Suddenly, cautious but sure steps tapped from behind. Bored, John reached for his breast pocket, for the

crammed slip of his ticket. But it wasn't a tardy conductor or a stray customs officer. A tall man in white raincoat strolled between two double-seats rows. For a brief moment, he halted behind John's chair. The fugitive clerk felt a warm palm on his left shoulder.

"Do I matter anything to *you*?" the man asked in a quiet but strangely passionate tone. His English was plain, his voice deep, his presence electrifying. John shuddered as though from the strike of a direct thunderbolt, for a while unable to speak or move. *Who are you?* his heart yearned to say, *are you th' same person I saw in ...* But before the hot-blooded thought clothed itself with enough words, the sudden visitor passed further. John gazed at the back of a common, slightly shimmering, seamless raincoat until its owner passed through the exit. Then, he shook off the stupor and jumped to his feet.

"Wait a mo!" he waved his hand. The train jerked, skipping on numerous switches, and the inquirer flopped back into his seat. He recoiled in a couple of seconds yet, in that brief time, at least a dozen other passengers bounced up and rushed, as if by an unheard command, to the door. A long queue lined up, clogging the narrow passage.

"Dashry!" John muttered, squeezing between two corpulent guys with bulky backpacks in their hands and coining a new, impossible word from 'dash' and 'sorry'. He succeeded, at one point, to catch sight of the tall figure, moving with poise and suave self-possession through the next car. The person looked back – two rays of fine, barely palpable energy flashed through the close, stuffy air, over bent-down heads and sweaty necks. John could swear on his mortgage deed that he felt a cheery, lively, genuine light beaming from those deep wells of the unknown's eyes.

Then, he got stuck for good, as a still thicker crowd from the opposite doorway blocked his last endeavours to press on. John panted and wriggled but stood still, his foot jammed between a hundred-pound heavy leather bag and a folding seat. His heart was burning with the question impossible to answer. It was, as far as he could tell, the same tall person who set him free from that icy, pitch-dark, ghastly place he found himself in when his heart stopped. *'Who are you?'* now pulsed in his veins, panted through his nostrils, coursed through his brain.

... The loquacious, hot French wheels rumbled upon the iron ribs of the reticent, cool-minded, English rails. The express screeched to a halt, gaped its wide ports and let loose four hundred yawning, grinning, babbling, silent, bored, excited or absent-minded people. Only one of these, glittering with his raven-black hair and glaring with bright blue eyes, hurried along the platform, instead of across it. He almost ran along the beet-coloured train set, peering in the lonesome, numb, dim faces of folks in windows and reaching, finally, the train's sweltering engine. Two engineers, standing next to it, raised their brows. "Monsieur?" one of them asked with cold politeness.

John sighed. The tall man in a raincoat, man of warm eyes, of expressive voice, had vanished without a single trace. John smiled and touched his left shoulder. It felt warm, as though under his shirt a large mustard plaster was stuck. The warmth still remained, despite the chilling wind outside.

John shook his head and turned around. His heart blinked and smiled as well. The answer to his burning, unspoken question began to slowly dawn on him – it waited *inside*, glowed from inside, spoke from inside. Without words, it communicated in a subtle, sincere, sure way.

The comforting visitor spent only two days by Aunt Betsy – she wasn't really dying, just as he thought. Melancholic and self-pitying, she could no longer discern between a sickly mood and a real malady. Of course, she was very much assuaged and cheered up. John hadn't planned to stay too long by her, however, – he knew from a couple of previous visits that three days later, as if by an unseen mood roster, her bliss would tumble into an abysmal grief. She'd begin comparing John to her late son, Max, and the whole next week would be soaked with tears. It was wise to depart earlier.

That's why the lively, raven-haired man arrived to Portsmouth one day before the time appointed. He checked in at the Albatros Hotel about two in the afternoon and sauntered to the beach. He seldom visited the English side of the sea which washed the shores of his second homeland – maybe because it was very much the same: windswept, drab and cold. What was different in nature was the little round pebbles, instead of the sticky sand on Dutch beaches.

Another thing, still more different, was a large, uneasy crowd milling around. It consisted of roughly two hundred men, a few of them wearing seaman's uniforms, most in plain clothes, and a few women. The folks in Amsterdam or any other Dutch city never cluster together in such numbers unless there is an open-air rock concert (gratis, of course, loads of cheap booze provided) or the Queen makes her birthday's public appearance, for a smile's price.

'What're you about to do?' John mused, watching with his keen eyes a long billboard laid on the ground and dabbed over. The words hastily written were far from him and upside-down, thus unreadable. Yet, they were understandable by some sixth-sense. The crowd seethed with anger. John felt

the mood looming in the moist sea air like a long, heavy yard on which someone had to be hanged. The gravity of the scene was stressed by at least a dozen bobbies in their checked caps, tripping at a safe distance.

“Well, folks, you're rather not the youths I'm to meet t'morrow,” John said to himself, both curious to find out what was up and respectful enough not to meddle in someone else's matters. He felt, however, that the affair these folks were busy with had been caused, at least in part, by him. *Let me see th' next day*, he thought, a bit timidly, and went on, passing between a capped man with a TV camera on his shoulder and two others who were busily unwinding cables. Another gent, in a striped jacket, was coming closer to that little group.

After a brief sightseeing of the port and the winding tower next to it, the industrious clerk, intrepid spy-basher, and tame husband set his steps toward the first bar which carried a 'warm meals' board on its wall. Taking a seat by the window and ordering a clam soup and fried cod with mashed potatoes, John grabbed a newspaper from a stand.

On its front page, right under the title, he spotted a picture of a strangely familiar hull.

Dash, that's Marguerita! John leaned over the table and spread the paper over its surface. The headline article was titled, poignantly: 'Would this ship sink the Cabinet?'

“*Fine game,*” the younger Cheesekop said softly, scanning through the lines. He read roughly half of the column, knitting his brows more and more. A waiter came along and turned a wide-screen TV on. John raised his head. The aired news were mirroring printed ones like shop windows in Brighton mimicked those in the West End.

' BBC news hour. London and Portsmouth today.

The scandal over the clandestine sale of British arms to Argentine moves forward. The Cabinet hasn't briefed the media over its plans to come dry out of the murky waters. The only explanation from the Admiralty has been: 'the situation is under control'. How Admiral Larry could 'control' a vessel out and away in high seas remains a puzzle. (a weighty pause ensued)

Meanwhile, the Faulkland Veterans Bond in Portsmouth has announced what they call a 'decisive action'. Our correspondent George Peary reports from West Sussex.' A concerned fellow in a striped jacket appeared on screen.

John gulped and wriggled on his chair, craning his neck to look through the window and catch sight of the same people he saw from a hand's distance minutes ago. *'My bind, it's th' same guy I saw over there!'* he thought with a mix of thrill and paralyzing fear.

'Hello, I'm George Peary, live from Portsmouth. The billboard you see being set up isn't a temporary tool for a brief manifestation. It's a movable platform, which the organizers plan to haul from city to city and from shire to county, gathering one million signatures. Here, they gather, group by group, in 'Green Eagle' cafe and proceed to the square. I'm standing next to Graig Taylor, the chairman of Number Second Faulkland War? action. What' re the goals of your movement?" he turned to a greying man in seaman's uniform and set the microphone to the man's mouth.

"I've lost my two mates back in nineteen eighty-two, was wounded myself. We fought for that little piece of Britain on the other end of the globe. We shed our sweat and blood for it. Now we' re trampled and hoofed by this arrogant government which only smells cash. Money doesn't stink, they say with their actions. Fine, what stinks is then p'haps th' Cabinet itself. We' re to gather one million – or more – signatures, and present it to th' minor

coalition party. Let 'em do a vote or something, an' finish th' parody. We don't trust those guys any jot .”

“So you don't plan any, say, extreme actions?”

“Sur'ly no. We're not rioters or rooks. We' re retired or active Navy and Army servicemen. We've always been told: 'Britain first, questions later'. Now, we're Britain, and we've got questions. We 're kicked from pillar to post by those cheeky guys from London. We, plus maybe lots of other British people, have very few, if any, in common with 'em. So let's toss 'em overboard before they drown th' whole boat.”

“Thank you.”

The fellow in the striped jacket stepped back and half-turned to let his cameraman catch a more panoramic view. The crowd had increased by at least three times since John strolled through it. The immense human mass wasn't chaotic – people streamed through a corridor marked with red parking cones. They were passing next to billboard and bowing over a table upon which a single, thick, oversized copybook lay.

A short stop, a bow, a brief mark on paper – and on went the petitionary, pushed and pressed by others. Those who set their signatures had, apparently, nothing more to do and milled about, circling the square or sprawling into the embankment and lanes next to it. A couple had open beer bottles in their hands.

“Like sheep without a shepherd,” John commented, very quietly. He didn't remember in which book or where the old text was written. Yet, he felt a sudden rush of compassion, pain, sympathy. He felt, unexpectedly soon, very much at home in his first homeland. The lively man glanced

around and spotted the waiter ambling back from delivering an order. Stuck his index finger up.

“What bar’ s this?” he asked after the waiter halted and turned his head.

“Green Eagle” the table servant said with an appeasing kind smile. “Please make no worries, sir. They say on ‘TV that th’ folks gather here. But they won’t bother you, sir. They come, drink a cup o’ tea t’ warm up and go. We seat ‘em on the other side.”

John nodded, too wound up to listen closely. Those guys simply knew nothing, or not enough. They were seriously thinking that the hapless arms were sold by British authorities first-hand. Or something like this. *‘Tosh, I must do a thing or two,’* he thought, claspig his face with his hands, *‘they’re acting blind. And I’ve brewed that beer.’*

The green entry door creaked and knocked. A company of a dozen or so men lumbered in, rubbing hands, chuckling or blowing their noses, not waiting for a non-existent usher. They flopped into chairs by the tables on the same side as John’s. A burly man in a checked cap and a khaki-coloured jacket nodded to him.

“Ay up duck!” he rumbled in a deep bass, “wher’ yow bin till nar?”

“Hello, matey,” John smiled back. He only was in Nottingham once, yet recalled the familiar greeting as soon as it shook the windowpane by his table.

“C’m on, Bill, he’s not of aiurs!” said another fellow, without a headgear.

“Realleh?” the capped guy pulled an excusing face, “sorry, yooth!”

A waiter showed up. The chilled chums asked for a 'pint o' tea with a drop o' rum in. They seemed to be leaving the square John had just watched live on TV, or making a break. While their bodies took some rest from the biting wind and light drizzle which had begun to fall, their minds didn't take any. They still bubbled, debated, decided between right and wrong – or between two wrongs, as it seemed. They were still baffled, angry or sad.

“Imagine, scores of o'r missiles on board,” still another gent shook his head. “How many, d'ya r'member?”

“Half a hundred,” someone returned from a couple of tables away, “an', mate, each as po'erful as th' old Exocet which sunk o'r destroyers like they were kittens.”

John listened to the heated words, feeling his reserved, aloof, pent-up mood bursting up. He could no longer just sit back and pretend to be a silly tourist. *He* was aboard 'Marguerita' and his email created all this havoc and rage.

He stood up.

“Thirty-two missiles, if I can add a word,” he said simply, “and forty torpedoes.”

Twenty-four keen, puzzled, sceptical eyes peered up at him. A couple of jaws dropped, several brows rose. A slender-built, dark-haired 'yooth' was, for sure, none of the first Faulkland War veterans. He didn't look like an Army of Royal Navy serviceman. He didn't even sound convincingly English.

“Who're you, boyo?” finally asked the bareheaded man. “I'm John,” the 'boyo' replied, “born here in England. I've been aboard the ship with arms. Have all the photos.” he reached for his mobile and stretched his hand out.

Several men seated next to John's table stood up cautiously. The fellow from Nottingham glanced at the plastic screen.

“Gizza glegg?” he asked, uncertainly, stretching his bulky hand out.

“Sur'ly,” John handed the phone over. The question was too murky to grasp, yet John sensed the meaning: the guy wanted a closer look.

The capped man huddled the suddenly flimsy apparatus in his pudgy palms and tapped, with the clumsy care of an elephant in a china shop at the touchscreen. His brows rose up, visible sweat streaked down his forehead.

“Ooworryewee?” he breathed, gazing John in the eye. The brunette who only spoke Received Standard spread his hands. “Ya speauk no Nottnum, yooth, sorry.” He shook his head. “Who were you with?”

“Alone,” returned the clerk, heavy in thought whether he should tell them about the spy he almost nabbed. But, recalling that 'almost' never killed a fly, he let the single word remain single.

“Why have you been there, then?” another man said, in faded seaman's uniform. He jumped up. “A ship with military load ain't a shopping mall for civvies!”

“The cargo had fake papers, folks,” John replied, as weightily as he could, “I was there as an insurance clerk. They tried to lock th' cargo holds off from me. Really!”

There was a murmur around the table. One of the visitors grabbed a paper from the stall. “They didn’t write a word over it, folks! All they scribble about is that a boatful of UK-made arms sailed off to the Argies. Direct from Britain, we grasp. Or via Holland, eh?”

“Wrong,” John shook his head, “I had all cargo papers in my hands. They loaded weapons in Russia, added some stuff in Germany. The ship's engine conked out, and they had a small fire off the Dutch shore. That's why I was sent to check the damage. And found arms instead of diesel engines. That's all!”

“What a tripe they write, then!” The tall guy two tables away thumped his fist at the table, “I guess *you* know what you’re talking about, at least!”

“I do,” John nodded, as strongly as he could, “the newsmen simply don't know much, I guess. Or can't get more data.”

“Bullsh...” the newspaper flew on the table, opened in full and showed up several photos. John came closer and picked it up. There were the very photographs he emailed to 'Daily Warbler' days ago. Only printed out in large format.

Four or five men ringed him from three sides. “See, mate, th' problem isn't over *where* th' arms are shipped from,” the man in the seaman's uniform gesticulated widely. “That's a second-rate stuff. What we're so mad at is th' fact the arms are British and that they sail to Buenos Aires. See?” he poked his index finger to the corner of a photo so hard that paper

tore, “here's the brand name and symbol. I was launching such babes while in th' Army. I'm not blind, ain't I?”

John nodded mechanically, feeling like another Frankenstein – the gale he unwound, the monster he let out of the bottle was about to overpower and bite him. *What shall I do with this bunch of jumbled, blustery ex-soldiers?* he mused with a heavy heart.

The discussion went on, gaining more heat, colour and tempo.

“But, men, wait a mo,” one more chap squeezed closer to the 'epicenter' of the tight ring of people around John's table, “why didn't th' authorities just let us know that th' arms weren't sold to t' Latinos by 'em? That someone else's playing foul?”

“Haven't a clue,” the seaman shrugged, “maybe they think whatee'r they say, no-body would b' lieve anyways.”

“Bumpkins,” boomed someone behind.

A bout of bitter or maybe sardonic laughter followed. John felt someone pulling his elbow. He turned his head. The Nottingham guy in chequed cap gestured to the door.

“Ay, yooth, whataboot telling us over dere d' whole storeh?” he said loudly in John's ear. “Yow bin dere, aboard, we warn't. Gudarn?”

John nodded, not grasping the last word but deciphering it as 'go there?' Yes, he would. He never spoke in front of more than eighty people, and the square seemed to have ten times more when he yet watched TV. *How many are*

there now? he mused, following his 'guide' and passing a double police cordon with the man's help.

Soon they were on the spot, that is, in front of a makeshift platform of ten or so pallets stacked upon each other. A chap in his forties, with white-and-red scarf dangling from his sturdy neck was speaking.

“ ... the question remains open – who? Who on earth can tell us why the Cabinet turned to lies again, why they’re playing hide-and-seek with their own people? Where's the darn ship really from, where's she now; why didn't anyone raise a finger to stop it?”

The words reverberated in the air and died out. A small guy in seaman's blouse but plain clothes, standing behind John and his guide, said quietly: “I know where she is. Can't tell.” The capped man and John turned around, their eyes wide. At once, the small seaman sighed and walked away, squeezing his way through the crowd. He clearly didn't want any questions. The ardent, avid, anxious speech was coming to its end. A couple more showy, rhetorical questions rumbled through the air like empty barrels.

“What, if not money, was all that fishy play for? Right, greed's good, and authorities sell arms to each other like fresh muffins. But, folks, why are we – *we* – we treated over and over again like the rabble, like cheap cannon fodder? What if our kids and brothers would again become targets for Latino guns and missiles, as our fathers and uncles were? British-made missiles at that! Or, are they *planning* a new Falkland war? What for? Fun? Can *anyone* on this planet clear up what's passed over in silence?”

The orator stopped, hanging a weighty pause over the murmuring sea of heads. In the next ten seconds, he'd

answer the hot, provocative questions himself, and the listeners would be led to the point prepared. Yet, despite all his plans and skills, a strange thing happened. A middle-high, black-haired man stepped forward and lifted his hand.

"I can," he said, loudly and firmly enough to get attention.

The speaker glanced down. *What?* his wrinkled face and beady eyes asked. Who's this rash newcomer? A quickie zealot? A charlatan or an opportunist? The meeting could be a bit spontaneous, but not to the point of farce. The orator clambered down, coming closer to John and the burly capped guy, who was obviously his aide.

"A farnd imm up Green Eagle pub," the Nottinghamer said, flopping his hand at John's shoulder, "a yooth' ll speauk o'er de ship, 'e was dar last Mondeh."

"Hi, I'm Graig," the speaker stretched his sinewy hand out.

"Bill," Robin Hood's compatriot did the same.

"John." The clerk shook both men's vice-like, heavy hands.

"Have you .. um, really been there?" Graig asked, measuring the slender figure with a testing gaze.

"I did," John patted his pockets in search of the phone. Bill took the device from his worn Army jacket and shoved it into John's palm.

"ere, duck," he said, "yow forgottet it up a table." John grinned, winked thankfully and passed the device to the speaker.

The man glanced through a couple of photos and passed the phone back to John. Then, he took his wireless microphone from his neck and placed the device on John's. "Take the podium, then," he said, "introduce yourself, alright?"

The new speaker began to climb up. His shallow shoes, unlike the sturgy boots of his new pals, had no sole grooves and kept sliding down. Bill came closer and squatted next to the pallet's heap. Without questions, John set his knee onto the tawny-dyed shoulder and mounted up the platform. He looked around. The murmuring, warbling, chatting 'lake' of roughly two thousand people spread out on all sides. John lifted his hand high and waved it.

"Hello, I'm John, from Holland. I'm English, if it matters. I'm no soldier or mariner. Just myself. You asked if someone can clear up the mist. Fine. I'll try."

The murmur had calmed down a bit, more heads rose again. John went on, turning to the left to see those at his side better.

"This much *I* know: the ship with arms sailed from Russia, not from here. She halted in Germany, then in Holland. Unexpectedly, in fact. I had to underwrite it .. no, not undertake!" John grinned, hearing a remote gibe from his right side, "so I went to inspect it. Th' cargo was a load of death with false civil papers. That's not something I could stand, so I sent th' photos of it to a newspaper here. So much I could do alone, folks. I remained myself, listened to my conscience ... is it wrong? I didn't prostitute it for a caseful of cash or a cozy convenience. I didn't close my eyes or fold my hands. Don't you, too?"

A cautious no was the reply with much head-shaking.

“Hand on heart - I haven't a clue how to stop it now. I've heard many of you lost your dads or brothers in the Faulkland War. No one wants another one. No one knows how to prevent it, either.” John paused, even though he hadn't studied rhetoric, he felt more and more 'in his skin' on this makeshift tribune. The suave clerk suddenly found out he could speak to a crowd without a written summary and make those rowdy folks listen. He liked it.

“Yet, we're not helpless. We're not blind – and I'm happy I could lend you a hand, with the photos. We can take affairs in our own hands, not waiting for the eggheads to spew a ready, chewed solution into you. Especially when they don't have any!”

An applause, not wild but unanimous, forced him to halt for a few moments.

“Still,” John went on in a lower tone, “we can't disarm Britain. Most of you would lose your jobs in the process! What we *can* do is to demand a referendum on arms sales laws, to prevent such a flop as now. Am I right?”

John turned his head broadly around. Most people stopped talking and listened. It was almost a pin-drop silence. He went on, encouraged.

“We see governments come and go. Labour, Tory, or Liberal, they babble a lot and do less than little. They shake hands with murderers and knaves. They tell lies and never blush. They squander and embezzle. They pile up debts to pay 'em with the taxes of our yet unborn children. We're hostages of our own politicians. Friends, I'll tell you

one thing, whether you like it or not. If *we'd* form a new, a responsible, as-clean-as-a-tear Cabinet in the morning, it'd decay down to the same swamp in five years, if not sooner. *We* are not better than *they*. Still, we can *act* in a better way. In this very situation.”

He stopped to catch his breath and glanced down. Both Graig and Bill stood in their places, listening. Bill lifted both his thumbs up. Craig nodded, encouragingly. John grinned back, briefly, then, continued.

“We don't have to draft another Bill of Rights or rewrite history. Paper bills never made anyone a saint! We – Bills, Geffs, Johns, Marthas and others – *we* can keep ourselves informed, honest, and responsible. We can take pointed, legal actions *before* the bell tolls. I simply don't know any other way to prevent needless deaths – if there're any inevitable ones!”

The last words were met with cheers and applause.

“Folks, to sum it up: we won't stand here forever, and we're not planning any violent actions here or in London, I heard. That's wise. Are there any lawyers or at least law students present?” John popped his hand up, “Lift your hands, please!”

A couple of hands rose up from different directions.

“Great. Would you please come closer, we'll discuss what's next? Thank you! Listen, what *concrete* step could we take, at this very moment? Let's create a committee and set the lawyers at work. Let's find out which legal steps can be done – a referendum, an emergency vote in Westminster or

anything else. Who can set up a website and a blog to monitor the process?"

This time, at least a dozen hands popped up from all directions.

"Do it today, guys! Would you also come closer for a mo? You're great. Can all present please leave their email addresses next to their signatures? Those who didn't sign yet, please!"

John glanced down again, to find that a person wearing headphones, with a large TV camera on his shoulder stood five yards away. The large white letters 'BBC' stood on the side of his device. *'Holy mackerel,'* he thought, *'surely it's not live on air!'*

He was wrong.

At the moment he began to climb down from the platform to talk with the first group of volunteers, it was already five o'clock in Britain. It was, logically, six in the afternoon on the Continent. Cable TV users sat down to lunch and switched their boxes on. Those whose plates were already empty, flipped through news channels, boringly or keenly.

One of those viewers, both bored and unexpectedly excited, was a lonely, black-haired, sad lady in an ochre-coloured sari. There were no *real* news on Dutch or Flemish channels, she went on through German and English ones. ABC ... nothing interesting. WDR ... the same. BBC... there would again be cricket news for half an hour.

And then ...

“...today, guys! Would you also come closer for a mo? You're great-”

The woman dropped the remote control on the floor. It crashed onto the hard parquet and broke in five pieces. The lady, magnetized by the news, gaped at the screen for a good three minutes. Then she dashed to the desk in the corner and snatched the receiver. Her sweaty hands missed the little buttons...

... Several hundred miles away, John was finishing a busy talk with the group of web- and blog wizards. He was, all of a sudden, in the thick of the action, the rest of people rotated and swiveled around him. His phone rang. "The last thing I need now!" he frowned. But he pulled the device from his pocket.

“John, where' re you?” he heard in the receiver. *Sveta?* Light almost dimmed in his eyes.

“Hi, love, I'm in ... um, in England.” he said cautiously.

“Is all fine with you? Are you well?” she kept asking, anxiously.

“Yeah, all is fine ... I miss you awfully, honey. I tried to call, but.”

“Then, I'm coming, b'cause ...” she stopped. No, she wouldn't tell him about the cops. She wanted to be with him, with her man, even if he were in New Zealand or in the outer space.

“Great,” she heard. Turning again to the broadview TV, she caught sight of her John, with a strangely dark hair dye and a phone at his ear. Is it ... live on air?

“John,” she asked, coming closer to the screen, “are there... cameras?”

“Um, there are ... some,” he returned in a woody voice, as though still unaware of the event's scale, “d’ you ... see me, maybe?” He waved his hand.

“I do ... you're waving y'r hand! Oh, Johnnie, there're so many people around, what's up? Some ... festival?”

“No, it's ... an affair with an arms sale, honey, I'm helping folks here to sort it out. Such-.”

“I'm coming *now*, tell me where?” she cut in.

“It's Albatros Hotel in Portsmouth ... I hope to be there at midnight ... not earlier ... honey, I love you. I love you more than all this -” he made a gesture around.

“Oh...” Sveta smiled, feeling hot, joyous, abundant tears bursting out, “wait for me, please, my ... prince ... I'm -”

Unable to squeeze out a word more, she staggered back to the table and flung the receiver on the dark-brown surface. Her John, a tame desk critter, in the middle of a thick crowd, on air at BBC? If she hadn't talked to him over the phone she could have thought she was raving mad— so much was the contrast between the insipid past and the limelight present. She snatched the first large bag, crammed her nightgown, basic cosmetics, a pair of slippers in and fluttered out of her empty, frigid house.

...The same live evening news were watched, with quite a different mood, by a couple of deadpan-faced, suited-up gentlemen in their London offices. Their words and thoughts weren't as ardent as Sveta's. They weren't as eloquent as John's. They were *expecting* – the small, lively man

from the other side of the sea was *doing*, as it seemed, something new.

Maybe it would turn out to be a lesser evil than what tired British spies and nervous top brass had lumbered through in the last weeks.

By and large, MI6 had seldom performed below the expectations of Downing Street, the English public or even its enemies. The agency calculated its strengths well and hid its weaknesses even better. There were bitter flips and painful detections, of course. Yet, since the smart MI cadre began wrecking their foes' plans during WWII, there was seldom such a padlock operation as 'Deep Fire'.

First, Moscow resident spies and visiting 'rotating' agents failed to sniff out the sly plan to ship British arms to Argentina. When a – *a* shipment of missiles and warheads was finally detected and 'steps taken' to derail it, Major Davis, a veteran without a single flop for a decade, was nabbed by two pranking amateurs.

As though two first mishaps weren't enough, the igniters, which did cost the poor taxpayer a trifle over a million sterling, failed to ignite even themselves. The fourth, uproarious injury after all silent insults was the wretched information leakage. It threw both MI6 and MI5 to the jitters, and required a last-ditch SAS action to save the Establishment's weary face.

Still, it wasn't the end of the misery.

Barely one day after the report that 'Marguerita' passed the Azore islands unscathed and landed on Lord Evans' massive desk, a thick swarm of bad news chased the lean flock of good ones.

“The vessel in question has lost her course, sir,” the voice of the emergency duty officer was raspy, his tone excusing, as though the next flop was to be blamed as his own personal fault.

The wrinkled face of the greying gentleman turned red, then purple, then grey.

“Thousand thunders!!” he roared, for the moment shedding all his Eton upbringing and highbred etiquette. Then he thumped his clenched fists upon the table-top, making the phone apparatus shake and wobble. The wireless receiver of one of them flipped on the parquet floor, bounced up, also turning grey from fear and losing its battery. “Where does she now ramble? Surely not towards the U.S.?” Evans finally squeezed out.

“The ship'd passed Bermuda by a two mile margin, skewed northwards by forty grades and beelined for Virginia Beach, sir,” the officer said, still quieter, “she's now five hundred and eight miles away from the States' east coast.”

“Why did no one pay any attention earlier?” Evans asked, despairingly, “Did the Americans notice?”

“I'm afraid they did,” the officer cleared his throat, omitting answer to the first half. “We have just received and decoded an FBI fax. They're asking why the ship is deserted, is swerving like a top and returning no radio calls. If we know anything...”

“Darn,” sir Malcolm shook his head, “is this all?”

“Um,” the officer hesitated, “they mention an escort destroyer, if-”

“Enough!” the MI6 boss cut in, “bring me the fax, please.”

Having read a three-page request, wordy by British standards, Sir Malcolm hid his burning face in his sweaty hands. “What a shame,” he mumbled dismally, ready to grab his hat, walk away and never see his office again, “A freighter stuffed with torpedoes en route to the world's largest naval base...and we haven't a clue what's up on her deck!”

The littered, slippery deck of 'Marguerita' was, indeed, empty. So were her galleys, her engine room, and her caboose. The crew still snored or panted heavily on their chairs or in hammocks. Yet, there was a brisk helmsperson. He didn't wear a jacket or listen to coarse radio requests booming from the bridge loudspeaker.

He couldn't read cards or speak. But he could very well run, sniff, and bark. And he couldn't care less when some laymen called him just a 'fox terrier'. His name was Boldy, and it fit him like a hand to glove.

“Rr-uff!” barked the only crew member on duty, creeping again through a booby hatch his master, Skipper Raul, had left open. There was no one on the bridge, all crew cabins were bolted up. A new, repulsive odour crept from under the doors. Boldy heard the snoring of his owner, mixed with the panting of five other guys, and scratched the rusty metal door until his paws grew sore. Then he wailed and yipped until he nearly lost his voice. For the first time in his two-and-a-half-year life, the brave, outgoing, gregarious dog felt so alone, baffled, and dejected. *'Where's everyone?'* his lackluster, beady eyes demanded, *'rr-uff, I loathe being so lonely!'*

Luckily, there still were plenty of those long-tailed, peeping beasts around, whom he caught and ate for the lack of anything else. There was, too, some rainwater in the puddles under the side doors, which he slurped up. And there were few – very few – things he could play with. First, there was a strange, creeping rug. Boldy saw it moving, sniffed and hunted it from under the helm, pulled out and flipped up. 'Then, the short-tailed dog growled. *'Move!'* he tried to tell the rug, *'I'll catch you and flip and jostle and whirl. Well?'*

At first, the rug was tardy. Maybe its unseen ears were stuffed with dust. Yet, as the sun drowned in the sea and rose again, it turned zappier. Boldy was as happy as a Punch. The rug crept to right and left, issuing funny, humming sounds. Boldy chased it, snapped it, rolled it and tossed it up and around. At times, when it landed upside-down, it lay still, purring helplessly. *'Fine,'* the fun-loving quadruped tilted his muzzle, *'I'll flop you over.'* He did, and the play went on.

When the rug was teased and bitten enough, Boldy growled and tried to catch his stubby, short tail. This went on, mostly without success. The third, a bit grating fun source was another dog, very much like himself, who was peering at him from a silver-tinged glass set over a sink.

Boldy always tried to scare the other fox terrier away, but he never turned up elsewhere and was leaving no trail. Maybe his competitor had a hole behind the reflecting glass? He'd ferret him out later, for sure.

The last thing the ever-busy doggy did to kill the awful hordes of time was a turning wheel. It was large, round, glossy and, with no rugs under it anymore, easy to whirl. Up it went, under the weight of two paws and a bearded muzzle

– down it whirled, after a blitzy snap of eight sharp, pointed teeth. Rr-uff! Rr-uff! Ff-fun!

&

“FBI director on line for you, sir,” the duty officer appeared in the doorway with a sat-phone in his hand. The shoulders of the top British spy sagged. Not looking at the door, he stretched out his hand. It shivered.

“Good afternoon, Chris,” he said, trying to begin the heavy talk in a slightly informal way. Chris Allen, his American colleague, was a good twenty-five years younger and ran a cadetship under his direct tutorage.

“Good morning, Sir Evans,” the reply didn't carry a trace of any joviality or ease, “I'm calling from an emergency meeting at the Hampton Roads. The Navy and National Guard brass keep asking me what on earth's going on with that nutty Panama ship. If she won't stop or change its course, in twenty-six hours she'll ram, with almost eighty per cent probability, the 'Eisenhower' aircraft carrier. Can you clear it up?”

“We've taken steps,” Lord Malcolm croaked out, his head dropping lower with every word, “to divert this vessel to-” he halted. *What can I say to my pupil now?* He thought, clenching his teeth in a twinge of shame.

“To?” the voice on the other side urged.

“To the British Virgin Islands.”

“To *where?*” Evans could nearly hear a pent-up giggle from the other side of the Atlantic.

“To Virgin Islands,” humbly said the grey-headed gentleman, feeling nausea about all the intelligence games. “We’re trying to regain control over the vessel.”

“This means, the ship had been within... your scope?” said the FBI boss, a little more diplomatically. Maybe he recalled his cadet years in London.

“Yes,” breathed out Evans.

“Her cargo is?” the most loathed question rang in like a punch in the face.

“Military.” The lord ground his teeth. He was now ready to fall through the floor, maybe also through the earth, and pop up in a cave in Australia, to escape this dishonour.

“In concrete terms?”

“Thirty-two middle-range conventional ground-to-air missiles, eighty-six separate warheads, an undisclosed number of crewless submarine parts and seventeen tons of fuel cells. At least forty long-range torpedoes. That’s what *we* know.”

There fell a silence across the line. Seconds dropped like smelted lead - hot, grey, heavy.

“I must report this to the President,” Chris’ voice had turned dry and curt again, “he’s to decide if such a ship’d be sunk, captured, or left to proceed. In the last case, we’d have to evacuate both Norfolk and Virginia Beach.”

“Understood,” Evans muttered somberly, “please ... assure the President that we’re taking all efforts to-” his voice broke. The pressure was almost unbearable.

"I will," the puzzled student promised his powerless teacher. "I'll phone or fax you in four hours time. Goodbye."

"Bye" the British spy chief uttered into already dumb handset. Next, he pressed the bell on the side of his table. The duty officer appeared. Evans passed the phone to the man, without a word. He hated words, disgusted himself and, most of all, loathed that crazy ship which always evaded his grasp.

The old general, now feeling just a worn, aged, empty, useless shade of his former self, stood up and walked across his spacious office. It was empty, and he wouldn't call anyone for help, council or the forging of a new plan. All his plans, diligently drawn and perfectly implemented, weren't worth an eggshell.

Am I getting old? he thought, gazing blankly through the bullet-proof glass, *old and useless. A scrap.*

Malcolm Evans stood still for a while. He knew the whole intelligence 'kitchen' through and through, well enough to grasp what was going on right now. The FBI boss had surely hurried to Washington, to report the matter to the President. The President would, perhaps, hot-line the British Prime Minister. The Downing Street man could summon him. And what could *he* offer – empty-handed, and rather empty-headed as well?

His mind, still keen despite all stress and exhaustion, tried to foresee all moves on both sides of the transatlantic chessboard. Luckily, he was dealing with a rough ally, not striving against a wily adversary. The Americans surely wouldn't sink the ship. They wouldn't be fond of capturing it, either – that would mean extra trouble with the Latinos, Russians and Germans, only to please Britain, which in every

case would stick by the United State's side. This in mind, there was still some hope ... but what on earth happened to that smart rug? That remained his headache – first figurative, then literal.

Lord Evans turned around, walked out of his office, took the lift to the parking floor and drove home. He'd be back in four hours. Right now, he couldn't stand his desk, office or even his polite, deadpan-faced staff any longer. His head was bursting.

When General Evans stumbled back into his office in four endless hours, all was clear. A four-page decoded fax from Pennsylvania Avenue waited in the middle of his desk. The U.S. Navy wouldn't be deployed at all. A merchantman with snoring crew is no worthy goal for SEALs or a usual commando troop, either. The only vessel to intercept 'Marguerita' would be a speedy Coast Guard tugboat. The CG ship should push the stray freighter's bow until she veered to a new course. The tugboat would, then, follow the ship for the next twenty-four hours, to secure the fact that she was outside the five hundred miles 'quarantine' distance from the U.S. coast, and was following a new course.

The last paragraph mauled Lord Evans like a sledgehammer: that new course would be set to an immense, thousand-mile wide span between the Outer Hebrides and Iceland. It was more realistic and safe. The baffled spy boss read the dry lines over and over, until they began to skip and sway like a bunch of drunken seamen. No southern route, the fax read. There, two Brazilian cruisers had been noted near Haiti. And, last but not least, this was the idea of the President himself. No discussion. Full stop.

'That's my end,' the greyheaded aristocrat thought dismally, *'but not the end of the scandal.'* The smart President

kept his hands off a military action, to hold the Royal Navy a sole scapegoat *when* (rather than if) things would go wrong. Within two days, the aimless ship could ram one of rugged Faeroe Islands, run ashore or sink there. The Germans and Russians would surely smell a rat and deploy a deep-sea bathyscath or a search sub. They could find the empty gas flasks and the rug and cry foul. So, a wreck was the first choice. Thirty-three percent.

If 'Marguerita' would soon run out of fuel (and the sleep gas), the crew'd wake up and call Portuguese Azores, not English Bermuda for help. That was as clear as the sun. With Brazil- and Argentine-destined cargo, this would be like letting a pike back into the pond. The second option was, then, the total flop. Twenty per cent.

'Or, a SAS action replay?' the general mused. Where should a commando platoon set the course? Or, where to steer the ship? To Inverness in Scotland? To the Shetlands? By which law? Where to unload the cargo, what to tell the Germans, Britain's NATO allies, at least on paper? The endless, crooked question marks encircled the lonely gentleman like a prickly hedge teeming with snakes. If – a *big* if – the SAS boss would agree, a meagre ten per cent could be allotted to this solution. The rest, roughly one-third, was one great unknown.

Sir Malcolm shuddered at the dark thought that the Marguerita, with no ice resistant fore, could become another 'Titanic'. If the media sniffed the ship's whereabouts, the hapless tub would drag down the whole UK cabinet, a half of its top military brass - and him, for sure. She'd drown in an icy grave the remainder of respect the world still had for Britain.

Malcolm Evans flipped, with a weary disgust, the guiltless paper on his large desk and thumped it with his fist. He felt like a zombie, like an ancient mummy, with no spark or hope or will for life. This botched 'operation', if it's at all worthy of such a name, was the last nail for his bumpy career by the Military Intelligence. *Better I had sat quietly in the House of Lords*, he mused bitterly, recalling the times when Margaret 'Thatcher' 'awarded' a group of Navy officers by assigning them to MI6. Without asking, mostly. He was, however, summoned to Downing Street 10 *and* asked. He agreed. "What a fool I was," he whispered.

The spy chief slowly stood up and stumbled to the built-in safe hidden in the paneled wall. There, under several files with old, discarded documents a pistol lay. Never used, apart from a shooting-range, a small silver-black 'Beretta' was his personal firearm.

Sir Malcolm fetched a bunch of keys from a bottom drawer and opened the cold metal door. His office was the only one in the pyramid-shaped building without CTV monitoring. This exclusivity first hyped him up, later snuggled his ego, then was taken for granted. Now, it tempted. The cool metal flickered with weak light reflected from tall windows, from square, lifeless daylight ceiling lamps. The grey metal pledged peace, rest, escape from all misery and shame— a way out, quick and final, albeit cowardly.

'What's better, pine away in ignominy or die in the saddle?' the steely thought, like the gun's barrel, rolled quietly through his inflamed mind. He placed, without a rustle, the gun into his jacket pocket and pushed the safe's door closed. There was a secluded closet just over Thames which washed the south side of MI6 pyramid. Evans shuffled, in petrified silence to

his desk. *'Should I leave a last letter?'* the life peer thought for a moment. Then he turned around and walked toward the door. He wasn't sure that, once starting to scribble his last message to his adult kids and much-loved grandchildren tykes, he wouldn't turn soupy and change his mind.

“Man proposes, God disposes,” he suddenly heard from behind. It was an audible voice, or at least a very 'loud' thought. Ghosts? Is it so bad with him, then? Evans turned around. There was nobody in his office – of course there couldn't be. His phone answering machine or his mobile had no pre-programmed calls or pranks. And the pragmatic general didn't believe in mysteries.

Just out of curiosity, Evans moved close to the window. He looked through it and raised his brows: high in the sky, crossed with thin, feathery swaths of cloud, a bright object whirled. It was half-white, half gold in colour. And it resembled a small, snowy peak of a round mountain. Or, an old-fashioned sugar loaf. The outer, slowly rotating rim of the object had, as it seemed, a line or a wide strap dotted with eyes.

'What on earth?' Evans thought weakly, *'a fata morgana? I really should do what I planned ... I'm only good for a madhouse!'*

Suddenly, a still louder voice, surely from outside, sounded, sending both windows to rattling, and Evans' heart raced at a feverish pace.

“Put your gun back and look out again!”

This time, the red eyes of the grey-faced old man rounded, his salt-and-pepper hair began standing on end. Which force or what beings, from which planet, had arrived

to London? Why did they land exactly here, why did they talk to *him*? What was it all about?

There were no more words of whatever sort, so Evans, frightened, baffled, excited and strangely cheered up, tripped to his safe and placed the pistol back under the dusty files. What a strange experiment; he still couldn't grasp it at all. Then, he shook his head. Rubbed his eyes. Came closer to the window. And drew back in awe.

Upon the pale, mousy field of English sky, a broad spiral of dazzling clouds wound up, drawing them from all directions, ripping, coiling, stacking. Lightnings flashed and fire oozed, as it seemed, from the center of the violent, untamable whirlwind. Through the narrow, bullet-proof windows came a whizzing, wailing, whining sound of a storm. Not a common, short spring shower peppered here and there with a thunderbolt or two. An impetuous, grim, fulminating 'whirlpool' hung over the City. Its rim was turning dark.

"A *hurricane* in London?" mumbled Malcolm Evans, barely able to believe his senses. He hurried to his desk, picked up a receiver and dialed the Navy weather service.

That should be something sober and serious, not prone to illusions or whims.

"Hi, anything special on the warning list today?" he asked.

"Nothing special," the familiar voice of duty officer replied, in a rather jovial tone, "save that both Heathrow and Stansted are closed, as is the haven in Dover. A sudden storm formed over Thames estuary, literally out of nothing. It's passed Greater London and is now flurrying toward

Somerset, current speed thirty-six miles an hour, growing. Have you got someone stuck at an airport?"

"Actually, not," Evans turned his head and eyed the window, upon which sizable hailstones rattled like large-caliber bullets, "what is the prognosis for the next two or three days?"

"For Britain?"

"No, for mid- and north Atlantic," the general said, in a bit livelier tone.

"Alright," the weather guru cleared his throat, "the storm I mentioned is expected to pile up hurricane strength between Azores and Newfoundland. It could, as my weather models show, follow a boomerang-shaped path, edging along the East Canadian coast and possibly dissolving there. If you need more data, call us at any moment."

"Thank you." Down went the receiver, up went the drooped chin.

The director of the second most powerful spy agency in the world, minutes ago broken and crushed almost to a muckworm level, ready to peer into the dark eye of his gun, felt as though a tiny ray of hope had touched his cheek. The old English proverb he last heard years ago suddenly took on weight, flesh and sense.

"Hmm," Evans shook his head, "hmm. Perhaps there's a point to it ..."

The Navy weatherman was right to the last letter. The sudden, totally abnormal eastern storm, which originated through an ineffable command of the whirling object with many eyes, swept over greenish-lead Atlantic waves.

Within the next ten hours, it almost stopped warm Gulfstream waters from flowing northward. A flashing whirlwind above was mirrored by a shimmering whirlpool beneath. The frenzied rotating spiral of wind, clouds, and waves had caught a couple of ships which missed the storm warning. A Coast Guard tugboat, chugging ahead of a tall rusty hulk managed to escape the gale – within a hair's breadth.

The tugboat's skipper heard, all of a sudden, in his earphone: "Storm, hurricane power, Beaufort scale twelve, approach from the east, task stop, return reserve Maine base, over." That sounded like a bad joke told out of time – or, worse, an enemy sabotage attempt. But which smart enemy could crack the double-coded CG radio connection?

"Repeat, over!" the skipper barked into the microphone. Waters around were serene, sky clear, visibility good, southwest breeze moderate. Which 'storm from the east'? He spent half of his life on the deck, knew Chesapeake Bay like his own pocket, and a good chunk of the north Atlantic not much less. Storms slip from the south in summer. They drift from the northwest in winter. They thunder in from the southwest in the fall. They *never* come from the east.

The order was, however, repeated loudly and nervously. The captain shrugged, shook his head, but swung the helm west. The Coast Guard Central was no parrot, to repeat its orders three times.

The same storm warnings boomed, in vain from the speakers on the bridge of the aimlessly rambling 'Marguerita'. The helmsperson, Boldy, couldn't grasp any of it – he didn't know a word in English, French, or even Spanish. The endless orders irked the fox terrier so much that he began,

again, catching his own tail, then yawned and sneaked out of the bridge to have a nap.

The ruffled doggy woke up in the total darkness. Something was different, and it was all wrong. The whole hull was shaking, creaking, rattling. Some invisible hammers or giants' fists whopped against both boards, some tons-heavy feet thumped over the deck, some endless whips lashed at the windows. Boldy barked, yipped and bayed. He tried to sneak out but so much junk was rolling along the passageways that he retreated back to his hole.

“Wow-wow-wow!” howled the fox terrier.

“Crunch-crunch-creech-screech-scrooch!” repeated the bow, boards and the bottom of the ship.

“Splash-smash-splotch-whoosh-whizz!” the freaky, twelve yards high waves added up to an insane weather choir.

The junk rumbling, clanking, and rolling along the corridors were eleven red 'fire-extinguishers' which had fallen off the rusty steel walls. Any waft of sleep gas was now gone from captain's cabin. Six small, heavy-headed, swollen-eyed men began to turn and wriggle on their easy chairs. Still, they were too weak, too woozy, and too weary to stand up. One guy, whose chair toppled over, struggled up and squatted, gazing around in lethargic stupor. It was Rodriguez, the electrician without a generator, radio man without a spare battery, the faithful German agent without a mission.

“Where on earth are we?” he gasped, his mind half awake, his mouth parched with thirst, his eyes inflamed. The emergency lamps barely twinkled in the thick dusk. They couldn't light up even the walls, let alone the roaring space outside. Rodriguez grappled for the handle, unlocked the

door but couldn't open it – something was jammed between the door and the other side of the walk. He slammed against it again and again – until his hands flabbed down, his head drooped. Running out of breath, he fell on his side and closed his eyes.

The wild rocking and swaying stopped hours later, after a couple of potent bumps, as though the ship had run up on the back of a giant whale. Weak light began, finally, seeping in through the dim, round windows.

Vasya Deruygin, the dauntless engineer, woke up with the last of the bumps, climbed down from his hammock, and looked out through the window. The ship lay still. Too still. Too stable. It listed at a steep angle and wasn't rocking as a healthy sea vessel should.

Vasya chuckled. Apparently, the ship *stood* – as though it was a diesel train stalled at a station or a Jumbo plane in an airport. Cussing, grunting and hiccupping, Vasya found, first, a plastic bottle with water and guzzled it. Then, he opened his door and clambered along the galley, leaning against the rough wall. He didn't hear the muffled shouting and rumble from inside the captain's cabin.

In three long minutes, shivering from cold and expectation, the engineer pushed the outside door open, sliding back down the wet, sloping deck. Next, he caught hold of a handle, regained his balance, rubbed his eyes. An endless rugged coastline, dotted with jack pines and fir trees spread before him as far as the low horizon. A strong, cold, resin-scented wind teased his striped blouse and tousled his hair.

“Tvoyu mat', mates, we're in Siberia!” the half-drowsy guy grinned widely and waved his hand. A group of capped,

helmeted or uniformed people stood some forty yards off the beached ship's stern on the windswept shore. A bright-yellow chopper, its blades still rotating, completed the scene. "Hi dar! Hallo! You spik Russian?"

"Bienvenu au Canada!" one of the men returned, bringing a loudspeaker to his mouth. The elegant, albeit decisive French words reverberated over the endless sandy and reechoed in the ears of the amazed seaman.

"Eh?" Vasya gasped, dropping his jaw loose and nearly diving into the shallow water himself. One after another, baffled, silent men began to climb out of the gaping doorway.

SECRET

Duplication forbidden

Copy 1 of three

CSIS Canadian Intelligence Services, Ottawa ON

To: SIS, 85 Albert Emb., Vauxhall Cross, London UK

To: FBI, 935 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington DC USA

Subject: Interning and demolishing of illegal dangerous cargo

Date: 10.20 Eastern Time 15th April 2012

By officer courier

On April 14th, 05.40 Eastern Time, a freight ship flying a Pamanian flag and carrying the name 'La Bonita Marguerita' was located ashore near Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. A nine-yard-long, one-yard-wide hull breach was detected on port side. In compliance with Article 47c of National Security Regulation of Canada, the lading had been removed to lighten the vessel, which was rendered unseaworthy.

The ship's cargo posed a direct threat to Canadian security and was subsequently interned by a special decree of the governor of Nova Scotia, Mr. Jack Perry. The ship's captain was placed in custody and interrogated. There are no crew losses confirmed.

The cargo does not possess any documents justifying its presence on Canadian territory. It consists of a number (refer to Appendix I for specification) of self-aiming torpedoes, anti-aircraft missiles, multiple warheads and other ammunition, forty-two percent damaged. The seized arms have been moved to Canadian Forces ammunition Depot in Bedford (NS).

By no reaction from either of this file's recipients, the cargo will be disposed of within twenty-four hours from the above registered time.

Howard O'Connolly, Lt. Gen., CSIS

Next day, two taciturn officers left London and Washington for Ottawa. Their thin, fireproof briefcases, fixed to their stainless wristbands by a short kevlar chain, were empty ...

Epilogue

“Say 'Djong Gooaw'!

“John, go” returned the tall, squarely built man in dark-brown suit and tortoise-shell glasses.

“No 'John gaw', but 'Djong Goo-aw'.”

“Dj-jo-ng oo-wow” the middle-aged 'pupil' repeated obediently.

“Dat's betta-”

At this moment, a paneled side door opened and a small, dark-haired, modestly smiling man in dark suit and glossy shoes came out. He glanced at the exercising men and lightly bowed his head and shoulders.

“Sir consul is available for a talk,” he said in soft, purring English, “Mrs. Hu, Ho and Cheesekop are invited in.”

Carl stood up and followed two short, guys along the crammed hall of the Chinese Embassy in Dublin. *Still can't believe it myself*, he mused, *I'm not just accepted for a job, but made an overseas director of a Shanghai electric equipment company. And I'm to leave for a three month stay in China in no time. Quite a quirk of fate, old Charlie ...*

“And?” the lady trimmed her hair and came closer to the leather sofa. The low table in front of it was laden with a dozen open letters, files and faxes, “what do they all say?”

“Well,” the short, lively man leaned back on the sofa and set his deep-blue eyes on her caring face, “they're about t' begin a new political party here, from scratch, y'know? They'd call it JNP – or Just Normal People or the like, a no-socialist and no-rightist player. Some three million signatures are ready. And know what? - they asked *me* to chair their first convention. What d' you think, dear?”

The lady smiled – warmly and admiringly, and sat at the hand rest. Now she lived by the side of a different man, one able to charm the crowds, not losing his own head. A man who loved *her* more than those three million people.

“I'd follow you even to an uninhabited island, Johnnie.” She skidded down and swung her glistening, warm hands around his neck.

A long, deep, sensuous kiss was the answer. Four swan's necks of hands plaited together; the shy, reddish sail of blouse and the subtle bra-butterfly fluttered away, nestling upon the amazed chandelier; the heated whiffs of breath kindled four eyes, the pliable, slender coco palm's waist swerved and bowed; the invisible, sparkling wine flowed like a waterfall, flooding the close hotel chamber from floor to gable, flushing two faces and four billion neurons with a volcanic passion; the manly root found and plunged into the so ready and embracing garden of thrills and shills; two throats crooned in unison, two hearts and souls groaned, uniting like a river and the sea. A triumphant roar catapulted through time and eternity, high over cosy, ruffled, curious roofs, the hushed Portsmouth haven, the shivering clouds and the shimmering, bleak evening stars.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Roysh, a descendant of a famous Cossack (cavalry) military family, was born in 1966 in the country that was, and still is, a headache for the CIA, British MI5, Israel's Mossad and German BND: Russia. In those totalitarian, slowly changing times, the air was still filled with fear and suspicion. Neighbours and work colleagues informed on each other, and the heavy hand of the State was on everything and everyone.

As a power-hungry, secretive, non-drinking (a big rarity in Russia) and smart young man, Alex eyed the intelligence carriere. He wanted to be in the thick of an unseen battle, tried *himself* to become a secret agent, not just watch movies about the Soviet spies – best in the world.

The opportunity came two years later. During compulsory Army service, he filed an application for the Special Service Academy. It remained unanswered, but not unnoticed. Soon after his discharge, he was summoned, for no apparent reason, to a Militia (Soviet police) station. A middle-aged gent with a characteristic deadpan face sat by the table. *A KGB man!*

Then, in the late-Gorbachov era, times became tough for the Soviets in general, and the KGB in particular. An internal counter-intelligence school in Kiev was about to close in the wake of expected Ukrainian independence. At the same time, demand for exacting counter-intelligence staff surged. They had to be recruited in some way from zealous volunteers.

The brief affair with secret service was soon over. With a passport in hand and twenty dollars in the pocket, Alex crossed Soviet border. His pilgrimage began in Poland, went on in Ireland and Holland.

His outstanding feeling of humour helped him to survive cold, loneliness, accidental absence of food (save a mushroom picked in a forest) and several assaults by the crooks. This invincible optimism oozes from the book you keep before your eyes. Despite padlocks, Murphy 's laws and all odds, there 's still a song to sing, a rock to climb – and a life to live.

About the Book

The novel 'My Brother's a Spy' is based on an insiders' knowledge and, in part, on the author's own experience. It's not a typical suspense pulp novel, pipe-dreamed by a person who's never been on a secret mission himself. It's not a typical 'former spy memoir', either. It's something else, more unique than the former. More colorful than the latter. And more amusing than both taken together.

Alex Roysh is currently living in Europe, with his wife and two children.