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The Game Of Your Life

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1 **The Emperor**

The life of a retired man is hardly a bed of roses.

That thought crossed Lukas Schoof's mind as he repaired the damage done by the neighbor's cat to the rose bed in his backyard for the second time that week. It was a detail that he had never bothered too much with during his working life. Yet after losing the steady rhythm of his working life, it was precisely these trifles that continued to draw attention, much to his dismay.

The cliché image of the retired man with plenty of time to do as he pleased had seemed so enticing in recent years. By now, Lukas had gotten plenty of opportunity to actually experience his dream. His conclusion was that he certainly did not enjoy it.

After he finished restoring the bush, he sat down on the chair that had been in the exact same spot in his backyard for a few months now. He dropped his head against the cushion and closed his eyes, deep in thought.

Although he had enjoyed the possibility of sitting in his garden chair and staying seated for as long as he wanted for the first few weeks, the situation was now reversed.

The fact that he had other commitments before made him enjoy every second he was able to spend undisturbed in the sun.

Because those other obligations had now disappeared, sitting was now the regulating factor.

Occasionally, Lukas was still able to enjoy it, but much more often he was looking for an excuse not to spend all day in his backyard.

He had never been an indoor person. Moreover, a person can only spend a limited amount of time on their own turf before he or

she starts to consider it a prison. At the same time, he could rarely think of a reason to be out for long.

He was a man who had never needed many friends. The people he tolerated around him could be counted on one hand and were of the same caliber as himself, so that they visited each other no more than two or three times a month.

After Martha's death over twenty years ago, he had never felt the need to recommit. And because they had been childless at the time, this automatically meant that there were no children or grandchildren who demanded his attention.

As a result, Lukas increasingly suffered from mixed feelings. On the one hand, he was still happy with the peace and space that his retirement had given him, but on the other hand, he missed the minimum of contact with his fellow human beings that his work had offered him all these years.

Although he did not want to admit it, the dilemma was almost maddening. Without opening his eyes, he lifted his head, sighed deeply once, and let his head fall back against the chair cushion.

At that moment, something fell on his lap out of nowhere. Something light and soft, that creaked slightly as it landed on his thighs.

Lukas awoke from his thoughts, opened his eyes, lifted his head, and looked down.

A black envelope rested on his legs, bearing his full name and home address in shiny deep red letters.

He had seen strange birds before. In fact, as an authority in the field of tropical poultry and author of several books in this field, he had earned a good living with it for the past forty years. But even with his expertise, he had never come across a species that could silently fly overhead and drop an envelope on someone's lap with perfect accuracy.

Pigeons could not do this so precisely, at least not without being seen or heard.

Stronger bird species were out of the question as well. While it was true they could drop mail from greater heights, the wind and the limited weight of the envelope would have made it even more difficult to deliver something exactly in his lap.

The only thing stranger than the delivery method was the cargo. Though the black envelope had a strange appearance by itself, the red letters that gracefully displayed his name and address were not exactly standard either.

Without thinking too much about it, Lukas removed the seal, unfolded the envelope, and carefully slid out its contents. This turned out to be a single A4 sheet, which was handwritten on both sides over its entire surface.

In one sitting, Lukas read the letter from beginning to end.

Then, with a sigh, he placed the envelope and letter on the side table. In contrast to the one he had let out before the package arrived, this was not a sigh of fatigue or irritation, but rather one of healthy tension.

It looked like, at least for the near future, his boredom would be a thing of the past.

2 Temperance

There was peace, cleanliness and tranquility on the first-floor premises.

As the last afternoon light slowly died away through gaps between the curtains, only the constant ticking of the mantel clock could be heard, which was set up centrally in the waiting room and could be heard in all adjacent rooms when the doors were open.

To get just a little auditory variety, Samantha had also opened the window of her consulting room. As a result, in addition to the ticking of the clock, the blackbird could be heard that took residence in the birch that adorned the courtyard of the building every day around this time.

In the semi-darkness of the room, she was often just about the only one still working at this hour.

Colleagues had often wondered why someone who was always the first to arrive was also the last to leave the building, but she had never paid it much attention. Even now it was well after five o'clock and at least the first floor was already completely deserted.

The main reason that Samantha had no problem with her working hours was the confidence in her own knowledge and competence. She knew she was good at her job as a psychiatrist.

With her knowledge, she managed to extract the most difficult situations from her interlocutor as extensively as possible, to distill the emotions that arose in the speaker as precisely as possible and to arrive at both the meaning and the solution of their problems as concretely as possible with ice-cold logic.

Not that she also monitored whether the solutions she offered actually had the desired result. By the time her clients had started that part of their journey, they had often long since been transferred to colleagues who were not competent or strong enough for the more difficult cases.

Samantha's skills made it easy to get satisfaction from work, without having to worry about the problems that her clients, her acquaintances and even her colleagues regularly threw at her. Not that she could not identify with her patients or was unable to feel empathy. It was simply that her experience had taught her to seek or show compassion only when it was truly required, so that she would not lose herself in the same emotional cesspool as so many of her clients.

Of course, there was a second reason why she did not have the motivation to get home on time. Contrary to what her colleagues thought, no one was waiting there for Samantha to arrive.

After his last attempt at what he had called "personal development", Samantha had instructed her husband to stop his extramarital affairs. And contrary to what she had told colleagues, he had never mended his ways, but simply left two weeks later and never returned.

That was almost a year ago. Compared to the almost twenty years of marriage, it seemed only a blink of an eye.

A positive side effect was that Samantha no longer had to take her infantile husband into account in any way. It at least made it easier to endure the ridiculous workload that her job brought.

The problem was that even her work had been giving her less and less satisfaction lately, even though she could not pinpoint exactly why. And that inability made her feel restless for the first time in a long while.

Yesterday that had changed, when the receptionist informed that a letter had arrived for her. That had been the first indication that it was going to be a different day than the others, since Samantha had never received mail at work before.

The situation got even stranger when the desk clerk handed her the letter. It turned out to be encased in a black envelope, on which her name, her work address and even her room number were correctly displayed.

With only a slight nod of thanks, she accepted the letter and went straight to her office. As that moment she was busy in her head preparing for her first series of clients of the day, she had immediately put the letter in the top drawer of her desk.

She had not thought about it until more than a day and a half later, when she was the only one still on the floor and had taken the time to rearrange the contents of her desk drawers. She had found the letter again, picked it up and still held it in her hands almost an hour later.

Puzzles had never interested her much. The challenges people presented to her in everyday life were far more interesting and challenging than something described with words or letters on paper. Moreover, puzzles and riddles often had only one specific solution and methodology, which was dwarfed by the sheer variety of problems that her clients posed on a daily basis.

But this was a different story.

Samantha had thoroughly examined the envelope and its contents several times, but had not gotten around to actually reading it yet. She knew better than anyone that the form of a message often said at least as much about the sender as the

content, so she had resolved to study all the other details before reading a single letter of the text.

The envelope alone was a sight to behold.

The black background and handwritten letters clearly showed that the sender had no problem with his or her mail standing out among the remaining letters and packages. In fact, this would probably have been the very purpose of these color choices. In this way, no one could ignore it, and it would certainly not end up among the mountain of letters from clients, colleagues and taxes that were delivered to the address of the practice every day.

Moreover, it was clear that the letter was not part of an advertising or marketing strategy. In that case, the sender would have used labels or machine printing, rather than writing each letter by hand. The same was true about the red seal. This could easily have been done through an automated process, but the texture of the material and the rough layout of the pattern clearly showed that it had been applied by hand. Therefore, it was mail that had been prepared with care and specifically for her.

Once she took the letter out of the envelope, she had been disappointed at first. Instead of the combination of black and red that made the envelope so remarkable, the letter's formatting was particularly normal. A single sheet of paper with a white background, which was written in black letters. The only thing about the letter that matched the envelope was that it was completely handwritten as well.

In contrast to the envelope, it was precisely the content of the letter that attracted attention. The text was divided into three parts, each being a separate and self-contained piece of text.

The first part was an introduction. In it, the writer of the letter introduced themselves and explained that she had been invited to participate in The Game, an event that would take place later that

year. To participate, however, a series of puzzles had to be solved that would combine to reveal the location and the exact date and time of The Game. The section concluded with a set of rules that would be in effect throughout the event.

Although Sam had never received such an invitation before, the setup did not necessarily seem strange to her. So far, the form and content of the letter matched, so she read on.

The second part of the letter was a list of items that had to be collected or purchased in order to participate in The Game. It contained logical supplies such as a pen and flashlight, but the fact that things like a bag of potatoes and Parmesan cheese were listed as well made Sam increasingly curious and unable to stop reading.

The third part was the conclusion. Although it was worded in a standard way and did not seem to contain any extraneous information, the fact that the graceful signature of the sender was followed at the bottom of the page by a set of twenty incoherent numbers was a final signal to Sam that this letter contained much more information than she could discern at first glance.

Just the way in which the three parts of the text connected to each other seemed like a jumbled mess, which was in stark contrast to the amount of care with which the whole thing had been put together. And that meant that Sam still could not put the letter down. The gap between form and content of the letter was simply so large that there had to be an underlying explanation.

The problem was that Sam had no idea what that explanation was. And that was exactly what made this puzzle the most interesting challenge she had been presented with in a long time.

Without hesitation, she resolutely closed the drawer.

"Those who don't try..." she said out loud, after which she successively left her room, the floor and the now abandoned building behind forever.

3 The Fool

Although there was plenty of noise behind the door, it was easy to endure in the closet. It was rare for Elco to not feel the need for mingling with people during his lunch break, but on the few days that he did he invariably chose this place to escape the crowds.

It was a small space of less than two by one and a half meters that was mostly filled with cleaning supplies but still offered enough space for a single seated person.

Moreover, the storage boxes that had been in the corner of the cupboard for months had been stacked by Elco some time ago in such a way that they formed a semi-comfortable throne. Again, he had taken a seat and draped his legs over the rest of the boxes, unfolding the letter he had received from the postal worker that morning.

Although the black envelope with red letters had immediately interested him, its peculiar appearance had led to ridicule by his colleagues.

Because of his character, Elco was not exactly known as employee of the month. This kind of mail certainly did not help to improve his reputation. So he had put the envelope away and waited for a quiet moment to read its contents.

The lighting in the room was far from optimal, as there was only one small window. Nevertheless, because it was a sunny day, Elco was able to read without much trouble.

He had long understood that the letter contained hidden codes. Moreover, it made sense that each of the three parts was a puzzle and would therefore provide part of the solution.

Despite that knowledge, Elco had been unable to reveal any clues or messages. For the third time, he read aloud the first part:

"Dear Elco,

You don't know me. To be honest, I have to admit that I, in turn, am familiar with only a small part of your past and present. On the other hand, I am well aware of your competences. Not only are you without a doubt one of the best in your field, we both know that you have talents that you don't normally share with the outside world.

For that reason, I invite you to The Game: an event that will take place a few months from now and where I will challenge you to get the best out of yourself and your fellow candidates. The winner will receive national fame, as well as a cash prize of € 250.000,-.

The starting location, date and time of The Game are strictly secret. However, you can decipher all of these using the following passages. By succeeding you will prove that you have the required knowledge and skills. Only then will I welcome you to the start of The Game.

Nevertheless, the following rules are of utmost importance:

- I. Fight insurmountably varied energies or nourish everyone's focus on unusual rarities.*
- II. Zealous experts rarely outmatch zestful enthusiasts.*
- III. Remember one's failures or undergo repercussions.*
- IV. Freedom over unity; right now is not everlasting, never is not eternal."*

Elco skimmed through the passage twice more, this time without reading aloud. The result was the same. A mix of enthusiasm,

greed and confusion. Because this was now his fifth attempt at deciphering the object, these feelings were slowly but surely accompanied by irritation and a slight headache.

Nevertheless, he was determined to solve the riddles.

It was not often that someone expressed such outspoken confidence in his abilities. And he had no intention of betraying that trust.

Behind the door, the siren sounded.

Lunch break was over, his opportunity to solve the riddles had expired.

Reluctantly, he folded up the letter, put it in the envelope, and crumpled it all back into his pocket. He had to resume work, but would do everything in his power to get back to working on its solution as soon as possible.

4 **The Hermit**

After letting his upper body disappear under the machine for the third time that day, Per once again thought about the riddle that had been on his mind for a few days.

As he used an Allen wrench to assemble small set screws on the underside of the machine, he thought aloud about the passage that was bothering him.

"The starting location, date and time of The Game are strictly secret," he murmured, "decipher with the following passages... Proof of the required knowledge and skills."

To those close by, his reservations were clearly audible. Yet there was no one in the hall who looked up or back.

Those around him were used to him saying all kinds of texts and thoughts out loud to sort things out for himself. In addition, the things he said in these kinds of situations were usually even more puzzling to his bystanders than to himself and everyone knew that it was better to give him the concentration he needed.

Yet the sentences he just uttered had not been the part of the letter that Per had trouble with.

The rules of the game were crystal clear. And he even had a good idea of the message hidden behind these rules. The second part of the letter, on the other hand, seemed to require his full competence and attention to solve.

While he used a multimeter to check whether all metal parts were properly grounded, he rehearsed the part of the letter that represented his current challenge.

"The rules of the game are invaluable both before and during The Game. If you study them carefully, you are already well on your way in your preparations.

Even so, the following amounts are essential to participate:

- 5 to 6 ready-to-eat avocados
- 10 grams of Parmesan cheese
- 3 kilograms of waxy potatoes
- 1 flashlight
- 9 pieces of AA batteries
- 1 ballpoint pen (black)

Do not think that you will be able to reach the required location without these materials; like the rules, they are of paramount importance to winning The Game.

Hoping to have informed sufficiently,

The Maker."

While Per filled in the test reports and went through the passage again in his head, more and more questions came to mind.

Why were these materials as important as the rules of play? Why did you need them to find the location of The Game?

In addition, the flashlight, batteries, and ballpoint pen sounded like logical necessities, but why Parmesan cheese or potatoes were mentioned in the list seemed like a mystery. And in what way would avocados ever be able to contribute to the event?

Despite this, Per could not deny that the challenge piqued his interest. It was an invitation that had been put together with the

greatest care and that would take a lot of work to decipher. And as everyone around him knew well, Per was someone who never shied away from a good challenge.

Finally, he tidied up his tools, pulled a final sheet from the test documents folder, and turned on the machine's power supply.

One by one, he operated the buttons and switches on the control panel, each of which flawlessly activated their corresponding functions. Per noted the results in the report and put them back in the folder.

Finally, he switched off the machine and gathered his belongings. As expected, the modifications were carried out exactly according to plan, so that the system was now functioning twice as fast as before. With the tools in one hand and the folder of documents in the other, he walked out of the room to discuss his findings.

Smiling, he took one last look at the machine. Although he had not made any progress with the riddles in the letter, he was determined to provide a logical solution to that particular challenge as well.

5 **The High Priestess**

Although the noise was incessant, Ezra seemed to be calm as always.

Armed with a cup of lukewarm tea and half a can of energy drink, she peered from the darkness of her room at the games she was playing, using two controllers at a time to keep up the progress in both.

On the two 88-inch screens that hung on the wall of her studio, she played two games simultaneously. On the left screen, she played Mahjong with befriended players from Taiwan, and on the right, an MMORPG in which she managed to maintain her place among Europe's top ten players for quite some time.

She loved the duality. Peace and tranquility on the one hand, a barrage of bullets and magic spells on the other. It was a strange balance, but one forcing her to be the best she could in both.

Almost at the same time, she pressed the buttons to take the winning stones in the first game and fire the fatal shot at her last opponent in the other. Again, two wins. And that for the fourth time in a row that day. The fun was over by now.

When she had chosen to quit her nursing studies a year ago and focus on a career as a gamer, the people around her had thought she was crazy.

The people she had met in her new work environment had told her over the past year that she had talent and that she had what it took to become a professional gamer. What no one had told her was that so much talent and profit could become so boring in the long run.

She was only nineteen years old, but felt like she had reached the top of a rather small world. A most depressing thought.

So it had been more than welcome when the letter was delivered a few weeks ago. A letter of which Ezra did not know by whom it had been written, but had immediately attracted her attention due to its remarkable appearance and even more interesting content.

The fact that she had been invited to an event where a quarter of a million euros was up for grabs was not what attracted her the most. Her biggest motivation was that someone showed interest in more than just her gaming skills and dexterity and that the invitation contained a bunch of puzzles that even she had a lot of trouble with. That very sense of challenge was a sensation she had not felt for far too long.

It was the first distraction from her ranked tournaments, events, and training sessions she had experienced in a long time and the only thing that kept boredom at bay at the moment. She was grateful for it, although she did not know to whom to express her gratitude.

Since she had already spent most of the night on her training session, Ezra felt she deserved half an hour of distraction.

She closed both games and put the controllers on the nearest ottoman. She effortlessly made her way through the pitch-black room, which was littered with empty cans, remnants of microwave meals and objects that she sometimes did not even know what they were for or how they had ended up in her room. Within seconds, she was seated at her desk, which, except for the wall of game stations, was the only place in the studio that looked somewhat tidy.

On the desk, the letter and the envelope were lined up side by side, leaning against a number of books that Ezra had piled up there purely for that purpose.

As she had done many times in the last few days, she picked up a piece of paper and began to transcribe parts of the invitation. After all, this is how she had managed to decipher the first part of the letter.

In hindsight, it all seemed so simple.

The introduction of the letter stated that the location of The Game could only be figured out with the clues in the invitation. And it could not be more clearly noted that the rules of the game that were formulated immediately below it had to be a first starting point.

To Ezra, the four rules of play seemed at first glance to be no more than a few guidelines, but because the introduction pointed so strongly to the importance of those rules, she kept coming back to them.

First, she had analyzed each rule separately to see if they might contain a hidden message. After that, she had tried to link the rules of the game to the order in which they were mentioned, but that too turned out to be a dead end. She had even tried to see if the punctuation marks that appeared in the entire first part of the letter collectively led to a hidden message.

None of the attempts yielded results that made sense.

The turning point had come when Ezra realized that the location might not be a name or address, but that she had to look for a bunch of numbers. She scanned the text with renewed enthusiasm, although she knew that no number had been used in this part of the letter other than the Roman numerals used to indicate each rule.

Still, she felt she had found a fruitful trail, so she kept looking for a way to link the text in the four rules to numbers.

It had taken her several hours, but in the end she succeeded.

After copying the rules of the game on a blank sheet of paper for the fourth time, she had removed all the punctuation marks and finery with an eraser, leaving only the words. The result was:

*fight – insurmountably – varied – energies – or – nourish –
everyone’s – focus – on – unusual – rarities – zealous – experts –
rarely – outmatch – zestful – enthusiasts – remember – one’s –
failures – or – undergo – repercussions – freedom – over – unity –
right – now – is – not – everlasting – never – is – not – eternal*

It did not look very enlightening. And yet, more and more, Ezra began to feel that she was on the right track.

Then she had looked at whether certain letters were more common than others for each word, or whether only a part of each word was important to find the solution.

That last idea turned out to be a golden opportunity.

After that, it would only have been a matter of bundling the result into groups and converting these groups into the necessary numbers.

For a moment, she doubted whether she had found the complete solution, because the sequence of numbers she now had in mind was missing at least one letter. However, because she knew that there were only two possibilities for this letter, she did not have to look far. A glance at the sentence announcing the rules of the game was enough to confirm that she was right.

The second part of the letter gave her significantly more challenge than the first. But she knew she would finish this game too, even if it would mess up her training schedule in the long run.

She simply enjoyed the challenge too much not to give in.

6 **The Hanged Man**

"A cappuccino, please" Silke Zwaan ordered, after he had finished the last remnants of his risotto.

The waiter nodded, took the plate and cutlery from the table and left in the direction of the kitchen.

Silke let himself fall back against the comfortable back of the chair and thought.

It had been a good idea to commemorate the semi-annual anniversary of his honorable discharge with dinner at his favorite Italian restaurant. For a moment he had even considered inviting guests, but because it had not exactly been a festive event, he had decided not to.

Instead, he now had the opportunity to think about questions that had been on his mind since his dismissal in a location other than his own home.

For example, he still wondered why the diagnosis of PTSD had led to an honorable discharge, while he himself felt that he was still functioning well in his job. As far as he knew, none of his colleagues or superiors had ever been bothered by him. Unreasonableness and disobedient behavior were things he detested, so he was careful not to ever be guilty of them himself.

He also still did not understand why Inge had insisted after his return that they had to take a temporary break and that he had to find himself again first, before they had a chance to build something together again. Everything at home had looked the same as before, so he did not understand what had gone wrong.

Six months had passed without hearing anything from her.

The only thing Silke fully relied on were his own fixed patterns and logic. They had never let him down before, so it made sense to stick to them.

Although these were patterns with little variation, at this stage of reintegration variation was something that could sometimes do more harm than good.

At least, that was what the army doctor and the psychiatrist on duty had told him during his debriefing.

The only variation he had at the moment was the letter that had invaded his world exactly a week ago.

In disbelief, he had discovered that among the blue and white envelopes that normally entered his house through the letterbox, there was now also a black envelope. A jet-black envelope with blood-red letters.

It seemed like a misplaced joke.

For a moment, Silke had hesitated to throw the thing into the fireplace with the logs that same evening and reduce it to cinders. The combination of black and red reminded him too much of the traumatizing events he had experienced in his short career, so destroying the letter seemed like an obvious choice.

But he also knew that he would have to face his fears and problems at some point, so he considered opening the envelope and reading its contents. In hindsight, he was glad he had chosen the latter option.

The content of the letter led to confusion at first, but at the same time it ensured that Silke had found a new, productive purpose in a simple way.

Moreover, he was curious to know who knew about his current state of being and why they had approached him for an

event like this. The only reliable way to find out was to solve the puzzles and join The Game.

Therefore he now carried the letter with him wherever he went, so that when he was having a hard time or just needed a challenge, there would be something to take his mind off things.

He had left the envelope at home that night. It attracted too much attention, especially when he was in a packed restaurant like this. Fortunately, the letter itself was less conspicuous, so he could take it along without problems and pass the time by solving the riddles hidden within.

In the meantime, the waiter had brought his cappuccino.

As has been the case in recent weeks, his agenda for the rest of that evening and the next morning was still completely empty. So he had plenty of time to try again in this refreshing location and tackle the puzzles in the invitation.

The first part of the letter had held no secrets for him thanks to his military training. The second part he found all the more difficult.

Since the first part had produced a coordinate, it made sense that the second part would also provide one. So the question was not what he was looking for, but how to find this answer. With that knowledge in mind, it would be a lot easier for Silke to unravel the rest of the letter.

"Ready-to-eat avocados, Parmesan cheese, waxy potatoes, a flashlight, batteries and a black ballpoint pen," muttered Silke, "all in all a motley collection of meaningless objects."

Then he had an epiphany.

The list of objects enumerated in the second half of the letter were indeed accompanied by amounts, yet the word "amount" could of course be interpreted in multiple ways.

This gave him the idea that the objects mentioned were a mere distraction and that the actual meaning and purpose of this paragraph lay in the numbers instead.

That reasoning turned out to be a bull's-eye.

The rest had been child's play, so that within five minutes he had found what he was looking for. Then all he had to do was put the numbers together and discover the second coordinate for the location of The Game.

As with the first coordinate, the only thing left to do was to determine which letter should be placed in front of the numbers. Again, there were two possibilities. As with the previous puzzle, the first word of the accompanying sentence provided the answer to this question.

"So much for the place," he said to his reflection, who was staring at him contentedly from the window of the restaurant, "now only a date."

In the meantime, the restaurant was completely deserted.

Only the waiter who had served him all evening was still in the room and perhaps one of the members of the kitchen crew was still busy with the final cleaning tasks, but otherwise there was probably no one left in the building.

Silke felt a growing desire to start the last puzzle of the invitation right away, but changed his mind. Instead, he walked over to the counter and paid the bill, leaving a hefty tip for the man who had served him well that night.

He then turned around, took his coat out of the rack, put it on, and left the restaurant.

Outside it was cold and raining cats and dogs, but nevertheless it was and remained a very good evening for Silke.

The mystery did him good. And he knew from experience that it was never advisable to rush this kind of satisfying activity.

7 **The Magician**

What an assignment.

It did not happen often lately that Judith felt like having a scoop, but with the reliability of her source and the amount of detailed information she had received, she could not miss the mark this time. Still, she was wary of jumping to conclusions.

When she had just started as a journalist, she had often felt that she had the story of the year in her hands, but time and again it had turned out that she had cheered too early.

In some cases, it turned out that her source had not told the whole truth and that she should have checked the facts much better. At other times the event had taken place so long ago that they could hardly be called news. In both events, the result was that her stories were not posted. Or even worse, that they had to be rectified afterwards.

The fact that she had never minced her words at the time had not left a good impression on her colleagues either.

But now it was different.

Now she had a close-knit network of contacts that she could trust blindly, and she had developed the skills and intuition to easily distinguish facts from lies. Now she knew when she did not have enough evidence to speak freely, but also when she had enough material to present a case to the department.

With that confident feeling, she had presented the idea to her superiors. And they had unanimously given the green light to get started with it. If this story did indeed have the scope and impact she expected, they might even dedicate an entire report to it.

After doing the weekly shopping and reaching the front door of her apartment, Judith put down the overloaded bags and searched her inside pocket for the key. As soon as she found it, she put the key in the lock and turned it twice.

Then she grabbed the heavy bags with both hands. As was often the case, she had not stuck to her list at all and had bought way too much, but this time she really deserved it. Hard work had to be rewarded, successes deserved to be celebrated. It was a mentality she had inherited from an early age.

Because she had her hands full, she pushed the door open with her body, but because the weight of the bags swung with her, the door slammed against the wall of the small hall with a dull thump. Fortunately, the only neighbors who were home during the day were deaf, so it would not cause any complaints of noise nuisance.

After putting the bags in the kitchen of her apartment and walking back to close the door, she put her head against the door for a moment and let out a deep sigh. Despite her confidence, it had been an exciting day, but she felt that it was worth it and that the assignment she now had ahead of her had been more than worth the excitement.

After cleaning up the groceries, she walked straight to her bedroom, sprawled out on the bed, and stared at the ceiling.

She was not the kind of person who was easily overwhelmed by stress or an abundance of impulses, yet she could occasionally enjoy simply staring ahead and enjoying the emptiness. It gave peace in her body and, more importantly, her mind.

Finally, she turned on her side and looked at the coffee table, which she had temporarily moved to her bedroom and provided just enough space for the suitcase located on top of it. The suitcase was open and had been filled little by little over the past two

weeks with clothes and objects that she thought she would need later, so that by now it was half full.

Not that Judith knew when the suitcase should be fully filled, for that was the piece of the puzzle she had not figured out yet.

On top of the pile of belongings in the suitcase was the document that had started her adventure.

It was a letter that was not addressed to her, but that one of her sources had given her as a favor. At first, Judith had thought that someone was making a sick joke because of the black envelope, the puzzling information and the promise of 250.000 euros, but he had assured her that the puzzles were real. Besides, a retired friend of his had received the exact same letter, which would be far too much trouble for something as simple as a joke.

That had been enough encouragement to sink her teeth into it.

Her source had also solved the puzzle from the first part of the letter and provided Judith with the necessary hints, but after that she had managed to find the solution to the second puzzle on her own. From that moment on, she had enough confidence and information to present the case at work, leading to the events she had experienced today.

When she had reviewed this mental circle in her head, she slowly got up and walked over to the suitcase. She leaned forward, picked up the letter, and walked over to the kitchen table. Lying down was a good position to unwind, but if she wanted to think, sitting was a better option.

As she did every day now, she went through the first puzzle and checked her answer. Then, for the second puzzle, she did exactly the same. In either case, she could not think of any reason to doubt her answers, so her eyes quickly drifted to the closing words on the back of the letter.

There was a third, final puzzle, of which Judith was still in the dark for the solution. Finally, there was a greeting from someone who called himself The Maker.

"Hoping to have informed sufficiently,

The Maker."

But even though she had missed it the first time, that was not the end of the letter.

Underneath, on the last millimeters of the page in a much smaller handwriting, was a series of twenty incoherent numbers.

"1 8 4 0 7 3 7 9 6 2 2 1 4 6 5 5 3 9 8 0."

She had already spent almost as much time on this sequence of numbers as on the other riddles combined, but still had no idea of its meaning. It was too long for a phone number and it was not logical for a third coordinate to be found here.

After puzzling for half an hour, Judith had to give up. It was almost seven o'clock and she had not eaten anything since lunch. As she knew from experience that an empty stomach was hardly a basis for hard thinking, it was time to produce something edible.

With a mixed feeling of hunger and disappointment, she put the letter back on top of the pile in the suitcase. She would figure it out at some point, as she had done with the rest of the letter.

As always, it was going to be fine.

This assignment would mean her long-awaited breakthrough. The only thing she lacked was a cover.

8 The Hierophant

In the light of the late afternoon sun, Werner checked the last pieces of homework that the 8th grade students had submitted that day. Armed with a fountain pen, he alternated curls and stripes in the comfort of the empty classroom at the dictation lines, sometimes laughing out loud at the original ways in which his students had completed the exercises.

"'Immediately'. Has less than three 'm's, Robbie." Out of habit he clapped at each syllable, though he knew no one was there to hear it. It was as if some had deliberately added extra letters in case of doubt. "No, Wendy, the letter 's' doesn't appear four times in the word 'stress.'"

After reviewing seventeen out of thirty dictations, he took a short break. In the teacher's lounge, he got a fresh espresso and resolved to take a ten-minute break before getting to work on the rest of the grading work.

Upon returning to the classroom he put the coffee on his desk, reached into his shoulder bag and took out the black envelope he had found in his mailbox a few weeks ago.

At first he had thought it had been a letter from his pupils, but a glance at the content and the level with which the text had been drafted hinted that this could not possibly be the work of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old.

Full of enthusiasm he had thrown himself into the puzzles during the following weekends and without too much effort he had puzzled out the location with the clues hidden in the two halves of the letter. The concluding sentence and the signature seemed to have no value other than to thank the reader for the effort.

The only thing he was puzzled by were the twenty numbers listed at the very bottom of the letter.

"18407379622146553980."

Even after much time and thought, he had no idea where to start.

Clues in the first and second parts of the invitation had led to a location. Thus, a logical conclusion would be that this sequence of numbers would yield a day, time or both. However, the way in which it was done had been a mystery until now.

Werner took the invitation out of the envelope and unfolded it. This time, too, he tried different combinations and made several attempts to find a pattern in the apparent chaos of numbers. But once again, the solution proved impossible to find and he had to give up after the ten minutes had passed.

Slightly disappointed, he folded the letter again, put it in the envelope and placed it on the corner of his desk. Then he picked up the eighteenth dictation and immediately saw two errors in the first sentence. "Well, that's not a great start, Dave" he said aloud.

He was aware that he had been talking to himself more and more often in recent years, but it did not bother him. He thought it was a good method for self-reflection. Moreover, it often helped to come up with new ideas.

Dave's next sentence was flawless. Positively remarkable, since English was hardly their favorite subject. The next one, on the other hand, was littered with no less than five linguistic errors.

"Two mistakes in the first sentence, five mistakes in the third. According to that system, I can now assume that I don't see a single error in the next four sentences and can expect a sentence with an unknown number of errors immediately afterwards."

That was the moment something clicked in Werner's head. Suddenly, he had an idea of how to order the sequence of numbers so that he would get the outcome he was looking for.

Again he took the invitation out of the envelope, unfolded it, and began to transcribe the numbers one by one on one of the scraps of paper he had stocked in his top desk drawer for such occasions.

"Let's see. One... Eight... And now..." Full of anticipation, he searched for the next number in the series. Slowly but surely, what he hoped to find took shape.

A date, immediately followed by a time.

It could not be anything but the correct solution to the riddle.

With a slight feeling of euphoria, Werner took the last sip of his espresso and looked down once more at the result of his elaboration.

This had to be it, there was no other way.

After a quick note, he folded the letter for the last time, slipped it back into the envelope and put the package back in the back pocket of his bag.

Duty called.

The tests made by class 8B would not check themselves.

9 **The Star**

It was dark and quiet. With the exception of the grand piano that was on stage, the concert hall was completely deserted. All pieces had been played, the red chairs were empty.

Behind the grand piano there was only a stool, with on it the lady who had finished her concert less than an hour ago.

She had opened the evening with Debussy's 'Claire de Lune' and had ended with the 'Mondscheinsonate', which was so familiar to all present.

Many spectators had said afterwards that the progression from light to heavy music would have been better the other way around, but Noor was not interested in the feedback. Beethoven had always been one of her favorites, so it made sense to close with him right now. It had almost felt symbolic.

Ceremonially, she slowly ran her fingers over the keys once more, realizing that it would be a long time before she would feel that sensation again. And as annoying as that thought was, she knew it was the right choice.

Until now, she had always focused her eyes on her hands and the keys. But she knew she had to look up at some point. And that moment was better sooner than later, so she let her gaze glide up the keyboard cover to the stand for her sheet music.

On the stand were no longer Beethoven's melodious chords, but the black envelope containing the invitation she had received about two weeks ago.

An invitation that she had read with great enthusiasm and had managed to decipher with great commitment, but of which she had had the most difficulty deciding whether to accept the invitation of The Game after solving it. Not because she doubted

whether she would be able to do it or because she was afraid of the risks mentioned in the letter, but mainly because she had not been on the road unaccompanied for so long and did not know how those around her would react to her participation.

She had been known as a child prodigy since being eight years old. Before the age of ten, she was able to play several instruments and she had completed her first studies before turning fourteen. Now she was merely seventeen and had the world at her feet, although she had never been sure if it was really her world at all.

And it was precisely this doubt that sometimes became maddening, no matter how calm she had always come across to others.

At that moment, she realized she had made up her mind.

With a dull thud she slammed the keyboard lid shut, got up from the piano stool, and resolutely picked up the envelope.

She would show that she was more than just a prodigy. She would prove it to her family and her audience. Most importantly, she was going to prove it to herself.

10 The Justice

It promised to be a day like any other. And since Reinout had the habit of destroying everything good that happened to him in his life in the shortest possible time, that unfortunately did not mean anything positive.

It was Sunday afternoon. Although his plastic surgery practice was closed and he only handled the administration, there was not much difference with the number of people who still crossed the threshold on weekdays. After botching an operation three months ago, it was quieter than ever.

In his extinct practice, he pushed aside the last bills and laid out on the table the object that was now his greatest source of both hope and irritation.

He had received the letter almost a month ago. He had read with amazement that his talents had apparently been noticed and that he had the opportunity to participate in some kind of game. Not that this would normally interest him, but the reward for the winner had appealed to him immediately.

A quarter of a million euros. It would not only be enough to get rid of his gambling debts, but even to solve the financial problems that his plastic surgery practice was in at the moment.

In the days that followed, he had puzzled his way through, but had in no way succeeded in making any progress in the search and solving the riddles. He had filled several notepads with ideas, but each new attempt seemed less useful than the last.

After that, he had copied and daubed both sides of the letter several times in an attempt to distinguish patterns and codes. So far, it had not mattered.

In the end, he had admitted his own failure.

More out of habit than ingenuity, he had hired others to do the dirty work. The benefit was that he now had the answers to two puzzles in his hands. The downside was that he had deepened his debts even further and did not even have the financials to make ends meet this month. And all this while the bills kept pouring in.

Furious, he snatched the letter from the table and read it through for the umpteenth time. Each line seemed to laugh at him.

"Fight insurmountably varied energies or nourish everyone's focus on unusual rarities."

"Unusual rarities, you say?" Reinout sneered. A weird tautology to say the least, though that was to be expected from someone who did not even dare to come up with a proper alias.

Regardless, the last thing he was looking for was to make friends with a bunch of uptight puzzle enthusiasts and nourish everyone's focus, as this author had put it.

"Zealous experts rarely outmatch zestful enthusiasts."

What was there to be zealous about? The only thing he could think of was that the person who created this letter, this Maker, experienced joy from torturing his addressees. He or she would likely be ecstatic if they knew the full extent of his predicament.

"Freedom over unity; right now is not everlasting, never is not eternal."

“Right now not being everlasting sounds legit,” he murmured, “but let’s leave it up to interpretation whether or not never should be eternal.”

However, the line that suffered the brunt of his ire was wedged directly in-between the previous two rules of play.

“Remember one’s failures or undergo repercussions.”

If only that Maker knew.

Whatever these repercussions would entail could hardly be worse than the stockpile of feces he had already been drowning in. Anything encountered during this event would be child’s play compared to what would happen if he failed to repay his creditors.

If anything, he considered the warning as something to worry about at a later point in time.

The list of messages enumerated in the second part of the letter had prompted him to stop reading, fold it and put it in one of the top compartments of his wardrobe.

Nevertheless, the amount of money had continued to gnaw at him and he had taken the letter back that same day to read it from beginning to end. Now that he knew their solutions, the riddles seemed childishly simple.

There was only a single mystery left, but he knew perfectly well that none would pull the chestnuts out of the fire for this one. This time he really was all alone.

“1 8 4 0 7 3 7 9 6 2 2 1 4 6 5 5 3 9 8 0.”

As with the previous riddles, he had no idea where to start. And it made him both furious and distraught.

"Hoping to have informed sufficiently,

The Maker."

Did he really think that he had provided sufficient information with this? This was no longer humor, this was nonsense. Arrogant bastard.

Reinout looked nervously at the clock, although he knew it was not going to help him.

His time was running out. And while this certainly was not the first time he had faced this kind of predicament, he felt like at this rate it could be the very last.

11 The Sun

It was hot and stuffy in the crowded studio.

For a few days the temperature had been higher than twenty-five degrees around noon and the insulation in the radio station was less than optimal by default. As the air conditioning had taken permanent holiday starting that morning, the shortness of breath had reached a peak for many.

Nevertheless, Senna, as always, cheerfully announced one record after another and it was not audible to the listener that her employer had been cutting back on fringe benefits for months.

"And that was of course the song 'We didn't start the fire' by Billy Joel" she said into the microphone.

For Senna and her colleagues, the sarcasm was visibly dripping off, but she still managed to keep the tone hidden in such a way that it was not audible to the people listening to her station.

"To welcome the coolness a bit, we will continue with 'Ice Ice Baby'. Also a classic, albeit for completely different reasons" she said with a laugh, while she was already starting the song. "And after that, unfortunately, it's already time for the last Final Chord of this season!"

As the first lyrics by Vanilla Ice rang through the station, Senna muted her microphone and placed her headphones on the table in front of her. Oddly enough, she felt both fatigued and excited. The first had to do with what was happening around her now, the second with what she had planned in a very short period of time.

Senna was not someone who stayed in the same place for a long time without getting bored. That's why her job as a DJ was a perfect fit. She could decide for herself what her day sounded like

and connect with random people in the world for games or interviews as she saw fit.

There was not always an underlying reason for her choices, but fortunately she had developed the skill to always make a logical story out of it for the listener.

Yet, even in her flexible work environment, there were times when she simply lacked variety. Colleagues had often said that she probably had some form of ADD. Although she had not often suffered from it herself, it still played tricks on her at times. This moment was one of them.

After a few thoughtful sips of her chamomile tea and a glance at the bag she had placed next to the control panel, she found new energy for the final leg of her program.

As the last sounds of the song died away, she put her headphones back on, unmuted her microphone, and her voice blared back on the station a few seconds later.

"And that was 'Ice Ice Baby' by Vanilla Ice. A man who made history by giving sub-zero performances. Unfortunately, responses by his target audience remain lukewarm at best...."

Many other DJs used a laugh track for this kind of situation, but that was not Senna's style. She did not like artificial radio, she preferred the live experience. Moreover, she knew that her regular listeners had the same sense of humor as her, otherwise they would have switched channels a long time ago.

"After this last song, we get around to the Final Chord, our regular column in which we use a famous quote from someone from music history to end the day with a good feeling."

With the push of a button, she started the jingle of the Final Chord, a xylophone melody of four notes with the last chord played in three octaves at the same time.

"And today that Chord consists of a statement by the Lebanese writer Khalil Gibran. In his book *The Prophet* he wrote: If you don't like to do what you do and don't do what you do like to do, then you have chosen dissonance over music."

Again she pressed the key that started the familiar jingle.

Senna took a quick glance at her watch. Although, as always, she had not taken the timing of the program into account, she had done it again. It was exactly four o'clock and therefore high time to close. The moment she had been looking forward to was nigh.

"With that in mind, we have come to the end of this program, in which we alternate joys and sorrows with laughter and tears every day. And as we discussed earlier today, this was also the last episode of Studio Senna for the time being. Starting next Monday, our slot will be filled by Time for Theo for a few weeks, so don't worry. Otherwise, enjoy the silence and see you soon!"

After she had played the final tune of her program and the commercial break was sounding through the studio, she shook hands with all crew members as if it was the last time they would see her. As a habit, she made a jovial bow to the record executive, who appeared as a regular guest on her program.

While she already imagined herself somewhere else, she hid the black envelope that had long been the new subject of her interest even further in her bag and walked out the door.

It was mainly the challenge that had immediately appealed to her. Moreover, she had never really been interested in money, but that did not mean the amount of 250.000 euros sounded unpleasant to her ears. Quite the contrary, the combination of adventure and money was one that particularly interested Senna.

With her head held high, she slammed the door of the studio. It was time for a different type of adventure, and then to present a new season of her program with fresh stories and energy.

12 The Wheel Of Fortune

Being late was one of the last traits Per Wigmoed would ascribe to himself. It was therefore not surprising that he was the first to arrive at the meeting place of The Game more than two hours before the deadline expired.

The location was an idyllic picture in every way. An open space with a radius of at least a hundred meters, which was surrounded on all sides by at least three kilometers of dense forest. A place that was easy to find if you knew what you were looking for, but not so obvious that anyone who passed the clearing would immediately think there was something going on.

The only striking thing about the place was a small building with only a single door. The building was practically the size of a large storage room and a color that was somewhere between rust and poo brown, so that in the middle of the open plain it stood out unsavorily against the otherwise penetrating beauty of everything that grew and bloomed on the heath.

Per thought the building was the only logical place to start The Game and took a seat on the threshold in front of the door. With a slight feeling of bliss, he sat down and enjoyed the sun, which shone on the full surface of the clearing. He hoped that it would be a while before the next participants would reach the meeting spot.

Unfortunately, that moment turned out to come sooner than Per had hoped. Less than fifteen minutes after he had sat down on the threshold, he heard two voices at the edge of the forest. Voices of people who seemed to disagree with each other, but who nevertheless unmistakably moved in the direction of the clearing.

A first person appeared from the foliage. "And yet I'm sure it should be here somewhere" sounded across the heath. The voice

was unmistakably from a man and sounded like he was trying to convince himself rather than anyone else.

"This is the third time you've been sure" another voice said, as a second man emerged from the woods. This one sounded much calmer and heavier than the first and was slightly irritated, but still a certain amount of amusement was audible. "For an astronaut, you have to admit that you have a damn bad sense of direction" he continued.

"Walking with a GPS in your hand is very different from flying with the full ESA in your ear. What's more, coordinates outside the atmosphere are a little less precise than when you walk around here on solid ground."

It did not sound like the most convincing answer, but apparently it was enough to at least temporarily suspend the discussion. A few seconds later, the two men stepped out of the forest into the clearing.

"Look at that! We're not even the first ones!" cried the first man, genuinely surprised.

"That seems logical to me. After all the dead tracks you've been leading us in, I would have thought it stranger if we had been the first." Probably the second man had not even meant this remark as criticism, but nevertheless the smile he made could be interpreted as little more than mild mockery.

The first man was small and petite and wore clothes that could be described as remarkably loud in both color and shape. A characteristic that, according to Per, fitted perfectly with his manner of speech. In addition to bright green pants and a fluorescent yellow shirt, he wore a red bandana, so that he looked like a human traffic light in the distance.

The second man's clothing was much more cohesive. Camouflaged army pants with a matching jacket, underneath

which a plain black shirt could be seen. What stood out most, however, were the discipline and order this second man exuded.

Per watched quietly as both men walked in his direction. Once they were halfway, he raised a hand in greeting and waved.

The army man raised his own hand in a controlled manner and walked on at the same pace.

His companion, however, quickened his pace and began to shout loudly, waving loudly. "HE-LLO!! Nice weather, isn't it?"

Stunned, Per could only nod slightly in response, hoping that the man's volume would naturally drop to a moderate level.

However, the opposite turned out to be the case, because when the attention-grabber had reached him, he continued to speak just as loudly. "And here we thought we'd be the first ones. You know what they say: a bird that sings too early will be eaten by the cat in the evening!"

"I'm not sure that's the right proverb for this situation" the army man said. Because he was still some distance away, he had raised his voice slightly, but clearly kept the noise at a more acceptable level than his travel companion.

The attention-grabber shrugged. "Who cares. You know what I mean." By now he had reached the threshold in front of the building and held out his hand invitingly. "Elco D'ficult. At your service!"

Per took the hand without hesitation and shook politely, though he was not sure what to answer yet.

Fortunately, he did not have to, because while he was thinking it over, the army man had also reached the building. "D'fcult, D'fcult... Everything he is involved with immediately becomes more "D-fficult"!" Again there was a combination of ridicule and amusement, without it necessarily being offensive.

The army man also extended a hand in greeting. "Silke Zwaan" he said curtly.

As he shook this second hand, Per finally felt the urge to answer. But before he could say anything, there was a rustling above them.

"Can it finally be a little quieter again?!?" sounded from the roof of the small building.

Per was mistaken. It turned out that he had not been the first participant to reach the location.

On top of the building stood a young, imposing lady with short blond pigtails and a rather unkempt appearance, staring at them angrily. "I understand that it's all very interesting to meet new people. But does it all have to be so loud?" She stretched slowly. Apparently she had been enjoying the sun on the roof and had unwittingly dozed off, until being awakened by the others.

"Sorry for the inconvenience" Per barely managed to utter.

"Little did we know that someone had already gone to roost with the chickens!" shouted Elco, still with the same volume.

"I think you're missing the point there again" Silke responded. "That saying has nothing to do with sleep, but with bad deeds coming back to bite you. Or do you mean she has evil plans?"

"I don't know" replied Elco, intensifying his gaze. "Does she?"

The girl did not respond via speech. Instead, she jumped off the almost three-meter-high building and made a perfect landing on the grass. Smugly, she put her hands to her sides and smiled. When she wanted to walk towards the rest of the attendees she slipped, lost her balance and fell forward against Elco.

He, in turn, lost his balance, causing them both to end up on the ground.

"Well," he responded, "I often have girls falling for me, but usually it's right before my feet. Not on top of me."

"Shut up, gecko" she hissed, pushing him away and standing up. "Even if I would have had a type, you would NOT be it."

She did not get more time to complain, because at that moment she saw that a new participant had appeared at the edge of the clearing.

This time it was a man in his late sixties, with a choice of clothing that could be called functional in every possible way. Details showed that the man not only had fashionable taste, but also had practical use. Despite its elegant appearance, it was clothing that offered optimal freedom of movement.

Moreover, the brisk pace with which he approached the building betrayed a fitness that did not correspond to the stereotypical image of an almost seventy-year-old man.

In the minutes that followed, more and more people arrived on the scene.

A succession of encounters followed, with each subsequent participant seeming more colorful and interesting than the last. Each introduced themselves in similar fashion to their predecessors. Details such as age and hobbies were also provided.

The girl from the roof turned out to be a professional gamer, who had been making a name for herself for several months.

The old man who had joined them afterwards turned out to be a passionate bird expert.

Immediately followed by a small young lady who clearly carried the image of a child prodigy and turned out to be a professional pianist.

The red-haired woman who followed described herself as an Urban Farmer, but pressured by questioning looks, explained she might as well be described as "in-house floral architect".

The blond elementary school teacher who then joined the group seemed to know more about many subjects than his

background suggested, but managed to smoothly dodge concrete questions about his background.

Next, a psychiatrist arrived who seemed to weigh and analyze every single word said by each participant.

Finally, the group was completed by a real celebrity. A female radio DJ who had been presenting a program on Radio 3 for years in which the latest hits were invariably interspersed with vigorous debates on all possible subjects.

All in all, it was a diverse group and each member seemed to have a unique combination of knowledge and skills.

Silke and Per took the opportunity to draw a schedule on their invitations to have an idea of their opponents during The Game.

Although the set-up was the same for both of them, there were a number of differences on a more detailed level.

On Per's invitation, this turned out as:

#	Name	M/F	Age	Profession
1.	Per Wigmoed	M	26	Electro-Mechanics Engineer
2.	Silke Zwaan	M	31	(Ex)military
3.	Elco D'fult	M	36	Astronaut
4.	Ezra Lent	F	19	Professional Gamer
5.	Lukas Schoof	M	67	Ornithologist (Retired)
6.	Noor Wouters	F	17	Classical Pianist
7.	Judith Larenbeek	F	29	Urban Farmer
8.	Werner Overmaat	M	37	Elementary School Teacher
9.	Samantha Orvil	F	52	Psychiatrist
10.	Senna Schipper	F	45	Radio-DJ

Meanwhile, there were five minutes left until the deadline stated in the invitation would expire.

At that moment a slight click sounded behind the group. Slowly, the door of the small building slid aside and the contents