

In memory of Ilse Florijn

I am deeply grateful that you encouraged me to start writing again.

1—The Fate of the Evil.

After such a nerve-wracking time, a dull day like today is almost a blessing.

Almost...

I'm glad I've finished my work. When I started this job, I found it creative and challenging. Now I have to contend with male narcissistic egos who would never approve of an idea from a woman. If I weren't to be arrested, I'd know exactly what my answer would be. I express my creativity by writing software at home. Some software, such as translation programmes, works poorly, so I make better versions of it.

In the mirror, I see that my dress has ridden up a bit. I pull it back down tightly and grab my coat and bag to go home. It's late, and that worries me. The business park is deserted now, as everyone has already gone home. That's when the riff-raff crawls out of their holes.

I can't travel the two kilometres by public transport now; that's even more dangerous than walking. So I decide to walk. Fortunately, the long street is free of groups of youths; only further down the road is someone walking.

That person turns out to be a corpulent man. Worse still: he crosses the street as soon as he sees me. I recognise that look in his eyes. It's the same one my father's friends used to have before they assaulted me. Instinctively, I grab my small pistol from my handbag and wait to see what he's going to do.

He has given up trying to hide his intentions and glances briefly at the bushes beside me. It is perfectly clear to me. He is sweating slightly and his thin, somewhat crooked legs betray that he is not strong. Of course, he is convinced that he is and that he can easily overpower me. I smile to myself and let go of my weapon. I won't need it.

He reaches out to grab me by the throat. It takes him some effort because I'm a fair bit taller than him. With a simple judo move, I hyperextend his left elbow. His scream drowns out the tearing of his tendons. Too bad, he decides against a further attack. It spares him the fate of my previous attackers.

"You bloody bitch..." he wails.

"You've no idea..." I reply. He now seems to recognise the danger and slinks

away, fear in his eyes.

I reach the inhabited part without further incident. First there is a row of houses, behind which lies a small shopping centre, largely deserted due to the rise of online shopping. But there is still a small shop selling household appliances. As always, a large television is switched on in the shop window.

Now a crowd of people has gathered around it. Apparently, there is something important to see. I'm not really interested, but I notice the frightened face of a young woman. Intrigued, I walk towards her; she doesn't seem to notice. I place my hand on her shoulder.

"What's going on?"

"An object the size of a planet is heading our way. I'm scared."

"For a start, the chance of it hitting us is minimal," I try to reassure her, leaving out the fact that if it passes us by a hair's breadth, it's just as serious.

She seems a little relieved.

"Is that so?" I nod. "They'd already said there's a good chance it'll hit Saturn, but I didn't believe it."

"That's incredibly far away from us. You don't need to worry about that." Now she's completely relieved.

"How do you know all that?" she asks, a bit sheepishly, as she brushes her hair aside.

"Astronomy is my hobby."

"Isn't that all about constellations and predicting your future?" she asks, interested.

"That's astrology, and it's utter nonsense." She doesn't seem to get it at all.

Blonde...

The television shows a black background dotted with white dots. The white dot that's the culprit is circled in red. The subtitles show that this dot is likely to pass between Saturn and Uranus, with the astronomical distance in kilometres listed below. So, no problem at all. It's travelling fast, and the angle proves it's coming from another solar system. They're calculating which solar system that might be.

Although I'm interested in astronomy, I decide to carry on walking home. But I do resolve to keep an eye on this via the scientific media. The mainstream media will, as usual, make a mess of it.

When I get home, I'm greeted by Freija and Jethro, my cats. I'm never quite sure if they're happy to see me or because they're about to get some cat treats. I'll just go with the former. I stretch out on the sofa, watching the cats munching away contentedly. When they've finished, Freija immediately jumps onto my lap, rubbing her head against my stroking hands. I'm sure she's happy to see me.

Then I hear the email notification from my laptop. I glance at my watch. It's after office hours, so there's a good chance this is from one of my friends. Unfortunately for Freija, I lift her off my lap and walk over to the laptop, waking it up with a press of the space bar.

It's Ester, my best friend. She knows about the things I've done. She also knows about almost all my abusers from my childhood. The email says she knows Thom Egberts' whereabouts. This man, now in his fifties, abused both her and me and was my father's best friend, who allowed all this to happen for money.

He lives under a different name in a nearby town. She has seen him, though he didn't recognise her. Many nights I've woken up in a rage, thinking about what I'd do to him. He's not going to like it... I look up the address on an online map and check out his house. An ordinary terraced house in a somewhat run-down neighbourhood. He's not doing too well, I gather. Things are going to get much worse for him.

Hm...

I start my motorbike and ride over there. Ten minutes later, I'm standing in front of his house, wearing a helmet with a dark visor. Sure enough, he's just coming out with what, I think, is his wife. She looks miserable. I reckon she must have a terrible life. Luckily for her, she'll be rid of it soon.

Smiling to myself at what's to come, I ride home again. Once inside, I reply to Ester that it is indeed him and ask if she can get hold of a van.

It doesn't take long before my phone rings. As soon as I answer, I hear:

"You'll find out soon enough. How did you manage that?" I tell him I rode there on my motorbike, and he just happened to come out with his wife.

"She looks pitiful, don't you think?"

"Yes, her life can't be worth living. But she'll be better off soon."

"Are you going to involve her?" Ester asks, worried.

"No, that's risky. A woman in that position might suddenly stand up for her husband out of fear..."

"What do you need that van for?" I tell her that I could have put a bullet through his head right there and then, but that I was afraid someone might remember my number plate. Besides, I think that fate is too good for him.

"What are you planning, then?" I tell her that I want to drug him, throw him into the van and slowly torture him to death.

"I want him to realise what he's done," I say firmly.

"Wow, remind me not to get on your bad side," she says, sounding a bit narrow-minded.

"Are you against it, then?" I ask, feigning interest.

"No..."

"I would never do anything like that to you," I try to reassure her. "No matter what you might do to me. But what they did gives me the right to this revenge. I still wake up at night with flashbacks." She falls silent for a moment.

"Me too. It's awful," she says, a sob in her voice. "Actually, I want to be there."

"I don't know if that's wise, but I won't stop you." She falls silent again.

"I'm coming with you."

She's managed to arrange an inconspicuous white van.

"What does the owner think we're going to do?"

"Moving house..." She chuckles.

First we drive to an old friend of mine. He knows what my hobby is, even though I don't know his surname. Bob is a man in his sixties, but you wouldn't think so. He works out four times a week and it shows. At six feet tall, he's taller than I. He's incredibly strong and competes with much younger enthusiasts in bench presses and deadlifts. All this makes him extremely confident.

He also has absolutely no problem with what I do.

"They've started..." he'd say. He opens the door with a big grin on his face.

"Hey, long-legs, it's been a while." I hug him and feel his massive muscles moving beneath his skin. He doesn't realise that I'd do him, as one of the few men. Then he looks at Ester a bit suspiciously.

"She's known everything about me for ages, she's my best friend." He takes her in for a moment and then holds out a hand like a coal shovel. Her hand disappears completely into it.

"But I don't suppose you're here just for a cup of coffee," he remarks through his nose. I feel a bit guilty.

"No, I don't just need you for help. I consider you a very good friend and trust you completely. I'm sorry if it came across that way." He grumbles something forgiving.

"How's your motorbike running?"

"Fine, no problems at all," I reply gratefully. He nods approvingly.

"You're not riding it to work any more?" I shake my head.

Inside, he listens to my story. He shakes his head sympathetically.

"Do you have a photo of him?"

"No, but I do have his address." I give him the address.

"Oh, I know that bloke. He's not a nice sort, that's for sure." I ask how he knows him.

"Not by name, but he's terrorising the whole neighbourhood. And that's the story going round." I pause for a moment, but tell him what I'm planning anyway.

"I don't really agree with that," he replies gloomily. "Then you're lowering yourself

to his level. Just put a bullet through his head, after you've told him why you're going to do it." He looks at me with concern for a moment. I consider his words. "Okay, I think you're right. But he's caused me a lot of pain." He nods understandingly.

"What are you going to do now?" Ester asks on the way back. I drift off into my thoughts for a moment.

"He's right. That's not justice, it's revenge."

"So we don't need the van any more?"

"No, I can do this on my own on the motorbike. I need to get hold of a fake number plate." She replies that's no problem.

"When are you going to do it?"

"As soon as possible."

Ester drops me off at home, and we have another cup of coffee. We chat for a bit, but my mind isn't really on it. Adrenaline is coursing through my veins; my hands are shaking a little from it. It's going to be hard to calm down.

"Are you alright?" she asks with concern. I nod slowly.

"Yes, I'm on edge."

"Maybe you should give it a miss?"

"Would you?" She shakes her head, giving her ponytail a big swing.

"I'm going to do this on my own; you don't need to be there." She looks very disappointed.

"I'm doing you a favour." She looks confused.

"You'll never be your old self again."

"That doesn't bother you, does it?"

"Yes, It does..." She looks at me for a long time. We say goodbye with a hug.

"Be careful," she says as she gets back on the bus.

I can't sleep. Memories are racing through my head, and I'm still tense. I decide to get up and, very unwise of me, have another cup of coffee. As I sit on the sofa staring into space, I decide, finish my coffee and get up to get dressed again.

I use some adhesive to stick a few sheets of paper over my number plate so that it's barely legible. I drive to the address and park a block away. I try to relax to calm my nerves. It even crosses my mind for a moment to call it off altogether. But then it thunders through my thoughts that he must not get away with it unpunished.

I walk up to the house wearing my helmet and ring the doorbell. Only then do I take off my helmet. A frightened woman opens the door. She looks at me questioningly.

"Is Thom Egberts home?" I ask in a loud voice.

“There’s no Thom living here.” Then a door opens behind her and he comes out.

“What do you want?” he asks aggressively.

“Don’t you recognise me any more? You were good friends with my father.” He seems to think for a moment, then his eyes widen.

“You!” He immediately advances towards me, menacingly. I raise my gun and a loud bang signals Thom’s demise. The woman covers her mouth to stop herself from screaming and looks at me in utter terror.

“Wh... why?” she stammers.

“You know very well.” I put on my helmet and run to my motorbike. I try to stick to the speed limit as I take a long detour home.

At home, I send a message to Ester and Bob saying it’s been done the quick way. My crusade is over.

2 – The Manager.

I've slept badly and wake up feeling absolutely knackered. After a cup of coffee, I don't really feel any better. I decide to call work and take the day off. This decision immediately makes me feel a bit better.

The manager was annoyed, not that I care. Pedantic little man. I immediately relax a bit. Well, let's see what I'm going to do today. Maybe go for a bit of a motorbike ride.

Whilst having breakfast of yoghurt and muesli, I flick through the channels on the telly. The news; I keep watching the wars around the world until a report comes on about the stray planet. They give a few facts about the object: that it's about the same size as Earth and that it will pass Saturn next year. The chance of it hitting Saturn is virtually zero; there's a greater chance of it colliding with Titan. They've discovered that the planet has an atmosphere, but it's not yet clear what it consists of.

That would be quite a spectacle, I think to myself. Titan would be destroyed, and it wouldn't be good for the planet itself either.

Then I get a call. It's a colleague. She tells me the boss is furious with me. She has to send me to his office as soon as I turn up tomorrow. I tell her I'm not worried, and that she shouldn't be either.

"He'll fire you soon," she remarks nervously.

"He can only do that once, and then his problem will be a lot bigger than mine. I think he's just bluffing, but I'm not losing any sleep over it. He likes to intimidate people," I reassure her. We chat briefly about a few technical difficulties and then hang up.

I'm starting to feel better and better. I feel liberated now that my crusade is over. Of course, I'll probably come across a few more characters like the one from yesterday, but I'm prepared for that.

I look up the website of a large telescope. It's bound to be observing the planet. Hey, that's odd. They don't have a live video feed. It's not down or temporarily out of service; the entire webpage is gone. They do have a page about the approaching planet. It says almost word for word the same thing they said on the news. That's suspicious. There are a few photos from the telescope, but I recognise

those photos: they're of a comet that came from outside our solar system.

I look up websites for other telescopes. Some of them also had a live video feed. And that's gone too. This makes me feel uneasy, and the word-for-word repeated text doesn't help matters either. Here are photos of that same comet again.

I'm not one to believe in conspiracy theories, but now I'm starting to have my doubts. I'm going to talk to Bob about this. He's very thoughtful and will probably have a good theory.

The prospect of a little motorbike ride to visit Bob cheers me up a bit. I decide to do some programming for myself this morning and switch on the laptop whilst I have another cup of coffee.

As is often the case, I get lost on the internet. I was on forums looking for a solution to one of my programming problems, but ended up in a discussion about the stray planet, which has already been given a name: *Umbrogen*, bearer of darkness. It has been given this name because the light from the surrounding stars seems to dim. Now I know that those stars aren't actually near it, but light-years behind it. The planet would only be visible when it passes in front of a star. That's not so strange; a planet without a sun is very dark.

Photos have also been posted that were taken from the observatories' videos. These photos show the constellation Monoceros, in which the star Canopus can be seen, among others, but also other stars that appear darker than usual in a circular pattern. For a brief moment, it crosses my mind that the local black hole in that constellation is going through some sort of phase, but then I realise it's probably a doctored photo. Still, it won't leave me alone, as if I'm subconsciously receiving some sort of warning of danger. I shake it off. Unlikely...

After a quick lunch, I get on my motorbike and ride through the fields and other towns in the area. I enjoy the warm weather and the varied landscape. Still, sometimes I think of that planet.

Then it suddenly occurs to me that there's a black hole in that constellation. V six hundred and something. Oh yes, V616... This is the black hole closest to us. I don't know what to make of that information either. I'm sure it's not heading our way.

Right?

I stop thinking about it as I ride my motorbike up Bob's driveway. He comes out grinning and rubbing his hands together.

"That thing's got a lovely sound," he remarks.

I nod; I agree with him. The thing has a lovely, deep rumble.

“Much better than one of those electric things.” And I don’t agree with him on that.

“They’ve always got torque, I really love that,” I counter.

“But I really love this sound,” he repeats.

“Why don’t you put a speaker on it?” He chuckles at the idea.

Inside, he pours himself a glass of wine and hands me a beer without asking.

"Well, just one then, I've still got to drive." The conversation takes a much more serious turn.

"How did it go yesterday?" He looks at me searchingly.

"As you can imagine." He stares into his wine glass for a moment, then looks at me sadly. I continue:

“His wife looked really pitiful. She was absolutely terrified. I’m afraid she’ll be left traumatised by it.” Bob looks into his glass again and swirls the wine a little.

“On the other hand, you’ve saved her from a miserable life. Although she might not see it that way right now,” he muses.

"I think once it's all settled, she'll be glad."

“As long as she isn’t suspected.”

I’m startled by his remark. Surely not?

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I sigh.

As I drive off again, the thought really bothers me. I decide to drive down the street. I’m wearing a different jacket and a helmet. That gives me the confidence that I won’t be recognised.

As I drive down the street, the house looks as if nothing has happened. But just as I drive past it, she walks to the window. The look in her eyes makes me feel as though she has recognised me.

Oh dear, that’s not good.

The next day, I’d already forgotten my colleague’s warning when I walked into the office. Immediately, I was reminded of it by loads of colleagues. Apparently, the manager was really annoyed that I’d taken the day off.

“Come in,” he bellowed when I knocked on his door. He gave me a furious look.

“Good morning, Rudy, what’s going on?”

“No ‘good morning’, sit down!” I remain standing.

“This is the umpteenth time you’ve let your team down and taken time off at the worst possible moment!”

"We don't have a deadline, so it was fine. And how many times is this?"

"Don't be so cheeky, you! Next time you're sacked! You've been warned!"

"I don't see any reason to..." I try.

"Oh, you don't agree? You're sacked! Pack your things and get out of here!" he shouts, his face turning redder and redder. I know the project won't get finished without me. I'm surprised, but I protest.

"But... but..."

"You want to stay? There's only one way. You know what you have to do." He unbuttons his trousers.

"MidSoft has already made me a better offer. Good luck without me," I smirk. "But I get why you're so grumpy," I sneer, pointing at his tiny cock. The veins on his face bulge so much I'm afraid something's going to snap. I give him the middle finger and leave the cubicle.

All my colleagues are staring at me as I walk to my desk. It's dead quiet as I pack my things into a box and clear my browser history. I don't look at anyone, pick up the box and walk to the door.

"What are we supposed to do now?" I pause for a moment and set the box down on a desk.

"I don't know," I say, shrugging my shoulders. "I'm afraid you're going to fall behind now," I say with a touch of understatement.

"Delay? We'll never finish the project now..."

"Oh, there are plenty of others available," I reply modestly. That's true.

"Why were you sacked?"

"Actually, I resigned."

"Why?"

I recount the first part of the conversation in the office.

"You never take time off..." I shake my head.

"No, I know. He wanted to pressure me into sexual favours." Wide eyes stare at me. "He's got a tiny willy, by the way." Everyone laughs so hard you can hear it in his little office. Perhaps I should check to make sure a blood vessel hasn't burst.

"Can we ring you for advice?"

"Sure, but not too often and not too early."

"Aren't you going to MidSoft then?"

"I don't know yet. If I go, I'll take you with me."

Outside, I walk through the gloomy industrial estate with the box. It's very awkward with that box. I look to see exactly what's inside and decide to take out only the photo of my late daughter. I place the box next to a rubbish bin. Perhaps someone else might find the plant or one of the other things useful.

I walk into the shopping centre to have a look at the shops. It's quiet in there; many shops have closed down. Online shops are taking over the high street. I'm partly to blame for that too. In brick-and-mortar shops, they only sell what they've stocked up on, and that's never exactly what I want. Online, I can find everything,

often cheaper.

I hear my name being called. It's Ester.

"Hey, you here?" I reply.

"Yeah, I was bored, but what are you doing here? Are you off work again?" I tell her the whole story. She's silent for a moment and looks away. Then I catch her gaze again.

"Are you going to do it?"

"No, he's completely insignificant. If that were the case, almost every man could be taken to task."

We've sat down at a terrace and are having a cup of coffee whilst making small talk. We're mainly talking about men.

"I thought you were a lesbian," Ester says unexpectedly. I can't help but chuckle.

"Worse still, I fish in the whole pond." She looks at me in utter amazement.

"I've known you for so long, but I didn't expect that." In her surprise, she forgets to bring her cup to her lips. I look at her with a slight grin.

We're having a great time, but it's dinner time, and we don't want to go to a restaurant. Ester offers to cook. We take a detour on our way to her house. At least the little road we're walking on is quiet. The main roads are busy because of the rush hour.

Halfway there, a car comes speeding towards us. We look back to see it swerve to avoid us at the last moment. The driver loses control and crashes hard into a tree. We look at each other and run towards the car.

"Bloody hell, it's Rudy."

"Your manager?" I nod.

He's broken his nose and can only breathe with difficulty through his mouth. He tries to say something. I think he's trying to say 'bitch'. I glance at Ester. She looks at me and probably knows what I'm going to do. He's trapped in the crushed car.

I push his broken lower jaw upwards whilst placing the same hand over his mouth. Wild-eyed, he looks alternately at me and at Ester for help. Ester watches, seemingly emotionless. Slowly, the light in his eyes fades and he stops moving.

We walk on in silence. In the distance, we hear sirens.

"Apparently someone has called," I remark dryly.

"Perhaps they recognised us. We should have called," comes a fearful voice beside me. I place my hand on her shoulder.

"Don't be afraid. No one was close enough to recognise us. A woman was walking her dog, but she was a few hundred metres away." She looks at me for a moment.

"Aren't you ever afraid of getting caught?" I hesitate for a moment.

"Yes, that has happened before. But not now," I reassure her.

"Why did you do it?"

"Opportunity makes the thief. I reckon he would have died anyway. I just wanted to let him know I had a hand in it." We fall silent again.

When we arrive at her house, she asks:

"How often did you do it?" I look at her silently for a moment.

"I don't know exactly. Somewhere between ten and fifteen times."

"How did you feel the first time?" She looks at me with interest.

"How do you feel now?" She looks away for a moment.

"Excited and scared. But also a feeling I don't recognise. A sort of tingling sensation running through my body."

"That, and a sort of sense of justice. It was my father who rented me out to men."

"Did he do it too?" I shake my head.

"But he's your father, isn't he?"

"That bond disappears rapidly this way. He was just a stranger I let die slowly."

"What did you do?"

"You really don't want to know." There are tears in Ester's eyes.

"Are you sad for him now?" I ask, not understanding.

"No, for you and everything you've been through."

"I assure you. Torturing someone is very therapeutic..."

After dinner, she looks at me a bit strangely.

"I've never done it with a woman before."

"We're going to change that now..." I take her hand and pull her along with me.

She doesn't struggle.

3 – Six months later.

“You’ll be given two laptops. One for developing your software. This one is heavily secured; you can use it to go online, but the number of sites you can visit is limited. You won’t be monitored.” The man from HR is calm, respectful, and clear. “The second laptop is for contacting clients. This one is secured with standard antivirus software and the like.” I shake his hand and thank him. “Welcome to MidSoft. Good luck; I’m sure you’ll feel at home here.”

When I’m introduced to the team, I hear far too many names to remember. I’m seated behind a nice L-shaped desk, with the assurance that someone will come to help me get started. I’m not used to that. At my previous company, I was put in a corner with the remark:

“Here’s your computer. If you have any questions, please let me know.” Which, in my view, was passive sabotage.

After a few days, I start to feel a bit at home. It’s a friendly and respectful bunch. Unlike what I’m used to in other companies, where egos run rampant. I’ve met Daniël, my mentor. A quiet man, very knowledgeable and highly intelligent. He just doesn’t say anything about his private life, which makes him a bit inscrutable.

The office is an old, stately house less than a kilometre from my home. We’re allowed to work from home, but I enjoy going into the office. Just like most of the others, for that matter.

The software I’m working on is an intelligent programme designed to combine images from multiple optical devices, thereby greatly increasing the resolution. Currently, it’s only used for military purposes. They combine satellite images to detect small objects on the ground. I even once saw photos of a woman’s cleavage as she walked down the street. I suspect there are plenty more images floating about, but those are only shared among the men. As far as I’m concerned, there’s absolutely no reason to keep them secret.

On my way home, I see Ester cycling. I call out to her, but she doesn’t seem to respond. The way she’s cycling worries me. She disappears into the distance, but I call out again. This time she hears me and turns back.

“Hey, where have you been?” She looks at me with a strange look in her eyes. A sort of sad anger. I know that feeling...

"I was just doing some shopping in the town centre," comes the timid reply.
"You've got nothing with you. What happened?"
"I was harassed by a group of youths." I feel my blood boil. Ester is a petite, sweet girl; you wouldn't wish something like that on her.

"What happened?" She shakes her head slightly.
"Oh, nothing. One of those lads groped me."
"Right, we're going back." She looks at me, very frightened. "There are about twenty of them."
"Doesn't matter."

We see the group standing in the main square and walk towards them. They look at us and start jeering.
"Hey, look. The little fuckable brought reinforcements," shouts one of them. I break his nose with a quick punch. It gives me immense pleasure to see him suffer.
"Off to the hospital you go, big tough guy."

A tall, lanky lad comes towards me. Although tall... he's just a lanky lad. He looks menacing.
"That's him," Ester points out.

Of course, he tries to grab me by the throat, and of course, I break his elbow in the usual way. He screams like a skinny suckling pig. I grab my weapon and hold it to his temple.
"The next time I see you, you won't even have to do a thing, you know what'll happen," I hiss at him, cocking the hammer. He starts trembling all over and the others recoil. Nobody says a word.
"That goes for you lot too!"

We're stared at as we walk away without looking back. I keep an eye on them through the reflection in a shop window. Ester chuckles.
"You're right. This is actually very therapeutic."
"Yeah, isn't it?"

The television is still on in the shop. It's back to the story of the stray planet. The subtitles say that the planet won't hit Saturn's moon Titan and will leave our solar system again. This is odd. If it's about as heavy as Earth... I wonder how they've worked that out... it should at least be pulled into Saturn's gravitational well.

"What's wrong?" Ester looks at me intently.
"They're talking rubbish on the telly." Her eyebrows shoot up.
"Are they lying?" I think for a moment.
"Yes."
"How do you know that? You're not an astronomer."

"No, but it's been a hobby of mine all my life. I keep up with everything they discover, and I'm also good at maths."

"Another side of you I didn't know," she laughs. I chuckle a bit.

"Not many people are interested in that, which is why I never talk about it."

I decide to scour the internet for information about the planet. I'll probably have to wade through a jumble of conspiracy theories, but it might be worth it. But for now, I'm staying with Ester to watch a film and have a few beers.

Sure enough, the internet was full of the craziest theories. Some aren't worth investigating. That does carry the risk of missing important information, but I don't have all the time in the world.

One of those theories catches my attention. There's a video of an interview with an author. He claims that the planet will be deflected by Saturn and crash into Jupiter. I can't verify his calculations; I don't have the data for that. But the diagram he draws strikes me as realistic.

Forums show many photos of Monoceros, in which the shift of the dark circle is clearly visible. I'm going to try to get hold of the original photos from the various observatories. That won't be easy because the websites where the photos were hosted have all disappeared. I wonder how these forums got hold of those photos. I decide to contact the administrators.

I get little response from the administrators. Most don't even reply; others respond with a vague, evasive email. One wrote that a hacker had got hold of them, but that he couldn't elaborate further. That sounds as though he was being threatened.

The next day, I'm at work at MidSoft. It's a colleague's birthday, and we're sitting together enjoying cake and coffee. We're chatting about all sorts of things.

Suddenly, Jan, our chief programmer, says:

"We should link all the telescopes so we can run our software on them." Everyone laughs at the idea; without precise clocks, you can't synchronise.

"Maybe that's possible," I remark casually. Silence. Everyone looks at me in surprise. Satellites that we combine have a very accurate clock, which allows us to merge the images. Observatories don't, so that makes it difficult.

While they wait, I look at everyone one by one.

"The metadata of the photos contains the time of creation. Nowadays, this time is synchronised with GPS data." I have effectively stunned everyone.

"That must be down to the millisecond."

"It is." Even more astonishment.

“But there’s a problem. The original photos were taken from various websites. I don’t know how we can get hold of them.” The commotion that erupted was deafening.

Then Astrid comes walking towards me.

“My boyfriend is a computer hacker. He might be able to access the photos,” she whispers in my ear.

"That’s brilliant news. Would you mind asking him if he’d help me?" She nods.

"I can’t promise anything."

"I understand."

It doesn’t take long before Astrid introduces me to her boyfriend, Joran. He’s a tall, athletic lad, the sort of person you wouldn’t expect to be a computer nerd. He assures me that hacking into a standard, secure observatory won’t be an issue. Furthermore, he doesn’t expect the security to have been stepped up.

“But I do expect some photos to be considerable. I’m not sure if I’ll be able to download them.” Understandable.

“I’ve got a fast data connection, will that help?” He nods.

“I’ll come along,” Astrid remarks suspiciously. It makes me laugh; she needn’t worry.

At my place, he gets straight to work. He uses three laptops for the job. He’s immediately completely focused on the screens and seems to have completely forgotten about us.

Astrid looks around the room a bit, and then she spots the photo of my daughter.

“Is that your daughter? I can see the resemblance.” I nod.

"Where is she?"

"She’s passed away." Her eyes widen.

"Oh dear. What happened?" I tell her she had a hereditary condition and that she passed away at the age of fifteen.

"Oh, how awful... what did she have?"

"Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy..."

She looks at me as if she might burst into tears at any moment.

"And her father?" There’s a sob in her voice.

"He’s passed away too," I reply, without mentioning that I had a hand in that. Now she’s really sobbing.

"Don’t be sad. She was conceived through rape. I took a drink on her father’s death." She looks at me with tear-filled eyes. I don’t tell her that I was happy with my little daughter and that’s why I let him live at first. I only got furious when I found out she had a fatal hereditary disease.

“I’ve got about ten photos of Vera Rubin and others,” calls Joran.
“Who’s Vera?” asks Astrid suspiciously. I can’t help myself and burst out laughing.
“You shouldn’t be so suspicious of Joran... Vera Rubin has been dead for a while now. There’s an observatory named after her,” I explain.
“Oh...” We fall into an awkward silence for a moment.

“Your internet is really fast,” Joran continues. “I’ve been able to download huge files.” Joran shows the detail by zooming in. It seems he could go on forever.
“I can use this,” I mutter.
“What are you going to do with it?” asks Joran.
“I’m going to merge these images with the software we’re developing at MidSoft, so we can see more detail.”

“What’s the deal with that planet? It’s not a threat to us, is it?” asks Astrid. They both look at me expectantly.
“As far as I know, no. But I have a feeling that information is being withheld. These photos were just on various websites, but they’ve suddenly been taken down and replaced with lower-resolution images.”

I invite them over for dinner, which they eagerly accept. In the kitchen, we mainly talk about work. Suddenly, Joran remarks:
“What does your software do?” Normally, I wouldn’t get into it, but because he’s a nerd, I explain to him how we can use simultaneous photos from multiple locations to generate a much higher-resolution image.
“If that works, can I ask you to put them all over the internet?” He nods.
“No problem. Information should be free and freely available.”

A real hacker, then.

4 – The Riot.

Generating the photos takes the whole weekend. My laptop isn't at all suited to the task, but the result is impressive. I think I've done something unique. The Rosette Nebula can be seen in incredible detail.

The approaching planet partly obscures the nebula. Is it even a planet? It looks like a black hole sucking in light. I've generated three usable photos; the rest didn't work out. But what photos...

I ring Astrid to ask for her boyfriend's phone number. I can't help but chuckle to myself, as she's probably seething with jealousy on the inside. Luckily, he was with her, so she just needs to hand him the phone.

It's clear from the sound that the phone is on speakerphone when I ask him if he can post the photos anonymously online.

"Oh, yes. That's no problem at all, that's what we always do. Did they turn out alright?" he asks.

"Yes, it's a shame you're posting them anonymously; otherwise I'd definitely have become famous."

"Welcome to my world..."

A few days later, the impact is much greater than I had expected. It's the talk of the town. The authorities are baffled as to where they came from. The photos have a much higher resolution than those released by the various observatories.

On television, the experts now have to come clean and admit that they actually don't know what it is. They do know what it isn't. In any case, it's not a black hole, something I did indeed wonder about for a moment. They know that because the light from the stars behind it isn't bent.

It's buzzing in the office too. People are speculating about what it might be. Aliens and a black hole are the two I hear most often. It makes me chuckle a bit. Even technically minded people fall for such theories. Eventually, we get back to work, but here and there I hear people talking about it all day long.

I don't understand why people are making such a fuss about it. They have no idea how far away Saturn is. It takes spacecraft years to get there. I let it go and get back

to work.

In the evening, Joran calls me. "The photos are being examined by the authorities," he begins, somewhat curtly.

"Should I be worried?"

"No, I really don't think so. I just wanted you to know." He says goodbye and hangs up. It does make me a bit anxious, but I'm not going to let it spoil my day. It could turn out badly for Joran.

Then the doorbell rings. I hesitate to open the door. I really must get a peephole fitted. A rhythmic knock on the door tells me it's Bob.

"Hey, I was in the neighbourhood," he greets me cheerfully.

"I've got news," I reply, giving him a hug.

"Oh?" Two questioning eyes look at me.

"Did you hear that we've got a visitor from outside the solar system?" He nods.

"I think it's a strange story," he begins. "We've had visitors like this before, but there's something odd about this one. Every news source is reporting on it, in almost exactly the same words." He pauses for a moment as he takes the coffee from me.

"This has all the hallmarks of a psyop."

"You think the government is manipulating us?" He nods silently.

"Usually to hide something else, but I can't find any other significant news."

"I reckon they're lying to us about the object. All the observatories have taken the high-resolution photos off their sites." Bob rubs his chin, lost in thought.

"Always those aliens..." I can't help but chuckle at his sarcastic remark.

"But it's still strange," I add. I tell him about the photos I've generated. He nearly falls off his chair in surprise.

"Are those yours?" I confirm this, feeling a touch of pride.

"I should have known. How do you do something like that?" I explain it to him as best I can, without getting too bogged down in the theory of Optical Waveform Synthesis.

"Incomprehensible..."

"I don't quite understand it either. But our software does everything; I just have to provide the photos."

"Ohhhh..."

"But I don't think it's a black hole, nor aliens. But I'll find out eventually."

We play cards until late. Then Bob says goodbye and I have another glass of wine before going to bed. The approaching object completely occupies my thoughts. What on earth could it be? It takes me a while to fall asleep.

The next day, I struggle to wake up. I have to rush to get to work on time. I'm

barely seated at my desk when an email arrives asking me to report to my manager.

In his small office, Henry is sitting behind his desk, looking a bit nervous. He clears his throat.

“The government has discovered that our software was used for the photos of the object in space,” he begins. He struggles to get the words out because of a dry throat.

“What’s that got to do with me?” I say as neutrally as possible. He looks at me for a long time.

“The photos contain data on which instance of the software was used. That’s your computer.”

“I use thousands of photos for testing, but suddenly these are a problem?”

“I agree with you, but MidSoft is being forced to dismiss you.” That hits home. I have to swallow.

“I absolutely disagree,” he continues. “You’ve done nothing wrong. Their complaint is that you obtained the source material unlawfully.”

"Not me..."

"Legally, it’s a mess in every respect. I’ve already called our lawyers out of bed. But they’re threatening to dismantle our company."

"So they’re serious. Why?"

"Let me be honest: they’re withholding information. There’s really nothing I can do about it. You’re simply serving your notice period, and by doing so, I’m already going against them. You don’t have to do any work."

The next day, Joran calls me.

"I feel unsafe. There are reports that people are looking for me," he says. I tell him what happened to me.

"So you need to be careful. If you want, you can come to me. But neither of us is safe here. And bring Astrid with you; otherwise you’ll have a problem."

What goes on the internet stays on the internet. I find my photos everywhere. Everyone has posted copies. Sites are being shut down, but the flood is unstoppable. I feel a bit proud of my work.

The forums are full of the craziest hypotheses. But many wonders whether, without a source, these photos might not be manipulated. A leading astronomer claims that, in his view, these photos are derived from the Vera Rubin collection. Sharp; he’s on to something...

And then something completely unexpected happens. The interviewer asks him why the original photos have been removed from the website. The scientist stammers and hesitates. He claims not to know that this has happened. I believe him; as an astronomer, he has different access to the photos.

Joran comes alone.

"No Astrid?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"We've had a row."

"Why?"

"What do you think? She thinks I want to cheat on her with you." I knew it.

"I'd already noticed. Putting the phone on speaker was a bit of a red flag."

He chuckles briefly.

"Yep, that certainly is... But one thing's for sure: I wasn't up to anything. I'm just faithful." He looks at me for a moment, but I do believe him.

I offer him a coffee and we sit down.

"I think the government is after me." His face betrays his anxiety.

"If they're after you, then they're after me too," I reply, equally concerned. He nods briefly and we fall silent.

"But how is that possible?" he continues. "We live in a democracy. We're not China or Russia..."

"They really don't want this to come out. That also means there's something hidden in the photos that they want to keep secret at all costs." The truth begins to sink in.

"Then we need to find out exactly what's hidden in these photos. Do you still have all the photos?" I nod.

I've printed all the photos, and we're sitting at the dining table with them all spread out before us. Joran and I look through all the photos one by one in silence. Although the object is strange, nothing stands out that seems like it should be kept secret.

"But I'm at a loss as to what it is," Joran continues. Meanwhile, Freija and Jethro are circling my feet. They want food.

"I'll just feed the cats." I get up and walk to the kitchen. The cats follow me, meowing loudly. As I put the food in their bowls, I begin to suspect what we're looking at. We're not looking at a planet, but possibly a sphere of energy. And not just any energy – a kind of anti-energy.

"I might have an idea what it is," I say when I'm back in the room. Joran looks up at me expectantly. It's not matter heading our way, but a form of energy.

"Dark energy?"

"No, I don't think so either." I'm surprised by Joran's knowledge. He's a clever lad.

"It looks as if it's absorbing energy. A sort of black hole, but without the gravity issues."

Freija and Jethro are behaving strangely. I don't notice it straight away, but Joran asks what's wrong with the cats. At first, I think there's an animal outside, but then I realise. There are people in my back garden.

"Escape through the front door," I hiss at Joran.

"No. I'm fighting." I'm worried. If we survive, he'll see what I'm capable of. I don't like that idea.

The cats flee upstairs as both doors are fiddled with. They're trying to pick the lock. That won't be easy, but these are probably not amateurs. I grab my gun from the kitchen cupboard and realise Joran must have seen it. I'll have to be a bit more careful in future.

They've managed to open the back door. At the same moment, the rumbling at the front door stops. Stupid mistake, I think to myself. A head pokes through the crack. I strike as hard as I can with a frying pan. He collapses, whilst I look at the pan and wonder if I've turned into a housewife.

It's the next one's turn. He's wearing a helmet. Sensible, but it doesn't help. A long meat knife disappears past his collarbone straight into his heart. He takes a shallow breath and is then on his way to the great unknown. A third one tries, but I simply shoot him in the head.

After that, they become a bit more cautious. I've taken up position behind a wall and, sure enough, they start shooting at the door like madmen. From the sound of it, I've still got three men to deal with.

After that, it goes quiet.

5 – Consequences.

Apparently, they've left, after completely smashing my door. I turn round and look into Joran's enormous eyes.

"You're something else...", he stammers. "I'd seen the gun lying there, but didn't think you'd be so decisive with it." I remain silent, waiting to see what comes next. Joran's a decent bloke; I don't want to hurt him. He seems to understand the risk he's taking and makes a defensive gesture.

"No, don't be afraid. I won't tell anyone. If I did, the hacker clan would spit me out."

"But you're bringing the truth to light, aren't you? I'm referring to Anonymous, but I think it applies to them too."

"I'm not really a hacker, and I'm not doing it for the money either. I only publish data when I think everyone needs to know. I'm just curious." He seems completely honest when he says this.

"I reckon they'll be back with loads more people. I've got a secure room. This way." I point to a cupboard in the hall. The cupboard swings open to reveal a steel door. I grab both laptops and my cats. We go inside. I've got a space in there to survive a war: food for a long time, an internet connection and the like.

A mechanism closes and locks the cupboard door again. Even if they discover it, they won't just get through the thick steel door. Of course, I've got weapons here too, and they're not legal. I plug my laptop into my desk. Wi-Fi off, so they don't know I'm here. Joran plugs his into another desk.

"You know they can cut off our internet, don't you?" he asks cautiously.

"This is a different connection. Set up in the name of a neighbour a few houses down." He has to laugh.

"Clever girl, but what if he wants internet too?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." I look at him with a grin.

We're both searching for information in our own way when the front door is smashed in and a small army storms into the house. We can follow what they're doing via the cameras. Thankfully, they don't think to switch these cameras off. They're tearing my whole house apart. Cupboards are being ripped open, and their contents swept onto the floor. Tables are knocked over completely unnecessarily. They're trying to intimidate me.

This goes on for half an hour, until they have literally destroyed or overturned everything. Then I hear a man with a large scar along his temple say: “She’s not here any more, let’s go...” Apparently, he’s the commander. Good, he’s very recognisable. I have plans for him...

I see them leaving on the outdoor cameras. Furthermore, I also see Bob standing there. He’s leaning against his motorbike with his arms crossed. One of the soldiers shoos him away. He keeps standing there calmly. The soldier gives up and gets into the vehicle.

With his arms still crossed, Bob watches them go. Then he walks towards the house. He looks through the windows to see if everything is safe. I check the other cameras, but they all seem to be gone.

We carefully open the steel door. We peek through a crack to see if it’s safe. Then we stick our heads out and check again. Only Bob is there.

“The door was open,” he jokes.

“The windows too,” mutters Joran. I introduce them to each other.

“Bob, Joran. Joran, Bob...” They shake hands.

“I’ve got something here that we’ll need.” Bob shows them a small device with a screen and an antenna. “They’ve definitely planted listening devices.”

Joran and Bob start tidying up without being asked.

“Leave it, lads, I’ll do it,” I try to stop them. They just carry on. I start tidying up the kitchen instead, so I can prepare something to eat.

“They’ve stolen my wine,” I exclaim, followed by a few choice words.

“I’ve got two bottles in my motorbike bag,” says Bob reassuringly. I’m grateful to him. We’ve mostly tidied up the ground floor by the time we sit down, and I’m enjoying a glass of good wine. The men are drinking beer that the soldiers left behind.

“Have any valuable or important things gone missing?” asks Bob.

“I don’t have any real valuables,” I say.

“A true minimalist, then.”

“No, I don’t attach any value to jewellery and the like. I only buy things that are useful to me, like laptops.”

Then my laptop starts beeping. The router is alerting me that someone is trying to hack in.

“I assume your security is up to scratch,” asks Joran.

“State of the art.” He seems a bit relieved. “If they manage to bypass the router,

there's a robust hardware firewall behind it. And finally, I've installed what's known as a tripwire. If they don't follow protocol, the IP address is immediately blocked for the next 99 years."

Joran laughs. "That seems sufficient for now..."

"If the firewall starts beeping, I'll start to worry."

"Who are you calling?" I ask Joran.

"Astrid, of course. She's not answering her phone." He looks distressed.

"Does she always stay angry for a long time?" He shrugs.

"To be honest, I'm a bit fed up with having to defend myself every time." He looks sad. I can well imagine that.

I've switched the television to the news. There's talk of a whistleblower from the world of astronomy. Unfortunately, they're not going into what he has to say.

"I wonder what he has to say," Bob remarks.

"It seems clear to me that something important is being withheld," I reply.

"Otherwise, those photos wouldn't have been taken down from the websites. Besides, they wouldn't have broken into my house."

"Still, it's odd that they realised so quickly that we were hacking." Joran looks concerned.

"Not us, but you," I laugh. "But it probably happened differently." I tell them about my dismissal and that the photos that were circulated contained information about me.

"That was a big mistake on our part," Joran continues. Bob nods.

"We need to get out of here. I'm sure they'll come back."

"I've got a holiday cottage in the woods; you can go there," Bob reassures us.

"I don't need to go there; they don't know who I am," Joran objects.

"It would be very foolish to assume that," Bob remarks offhandedly. I agree. Joran seems to be thinking it over.

Joran tries calling Astrid again, then suddenly looks at his phone in surprise.

"A man answered," he exclaims.

"Then I think she's been taken hostage. They know you're the hacker," warns Bob. I think he's right.

"How do we get her back?" asks Joran, desperate.

"Simple, you turn yourself in."

"And then?"

"I don't know either," I have to admit.

Bob and I exchange a brief glance, whilst Joran starts pacing nervously.

"Do you trust him?" Bob asks in a whisper.

"For now. It could be a trick to lure me into a trap, but he is the one who found the photos in the first place. If that hadn't happened, I wouldn't have had the

photos and nothing would have come of it. That doesn't make sense."

Joran calms down again and picks up his phone.

"We've set our phones up so we can see where each other is." And sure enough, we see a photo taken in another town. Joran zooms in, and we know which street it is.

"Bob and I will sort this out," I try to reassure him. Bob nods, but Joran hesitates.

"I really want to come with you." We both shake our heads.

"Too dangerous." Joran seems to resign himself to it and raises his hands.

"You two are going to my holiday cottage. We'll make plans from there," says Bob resolutely. Joran looks at me fearfully.

"Yes, you'll have to ride on the back. With a rucksack containing the two cats. The good news is: it's not far."

The cottage is more comfortable than I thought. It has four rooms: a large sitting room, with three bedrooms upstairs. Even the kitchen is relatively large. Joran is sitting in a bedroom behind a small desk with his computer. We speak quietly downstairs; we don't want him to hear us. The cats wander around curiously, sniffing at everything. Every so often they come to check on me to see if I'm still there.

"It's just a standard terraced house. Not difficult to get into, strictly speaking, but there's a chance one of the neighbours might see us. Obviously, we'll go at night," says Bob.

"I've got very little ammo," I note.

Bob takes a box and an empty magazine out of a locker.

"This should be enough for now."

"How do you want to go about it?" He takes his phone out of his pocket and shows the street on a map. There are sheds marked behind the houses.

"Houses like this have a path round the back. We can probably get to the back gate of the house without being seen. I just don't think we can go on the motorbike. We'd be picked up by all the cameras hanging everywhere."

"How are we going to get her here, then?"

"Simple... we'll nudge their car." We both have to laugh at the idea.

Bob brings two glasses and a bottle of wine.

"I don't have any beer here," he apologises. I don't mind; a glass of wine is lovely now and then. It just gets me drunk so quickly.

"How do we know exactly which house she's in? Those location estimates aren't that accurate. There could be a ten-metre difference."

"We'll ring her and just hope the thing isn't on silent mode." It sounds like a plan.

We call upstairs to say we're going to fetch Astrid. Joran comes downstairs, looking worried.

"Are you being careful?" he asks.

"Don't worry, everything will be fine," Bob reassures him. I don't think it's working, judging by the look on Joran's face.

"Why don't you try to get as much information as possible? Here's my phone. It's not locked, so you can just use it. I'd like to take your phone with me." A little surprised, he hands me his phone.

"It'll all be fine," I assure him once more.

We walk down the back alley. Everyone has high fences or hedges; we can rest assured, no one will see us here. When our arrow overlaps with Astrid's, we peer over a low fence on tiptoe. Inside, we see three men walking about, and there's a light on the upper floor. I ring Astrid on Joran's phone. One of the men picks up a phone and looks at it. He puts it down straight away. I let it ring for a moment so as not to arouse suspicion.

Bob picks the lock on the fence with a paperclip. It takes him hardly any effort.

"I hope you can open the back door just as quickly," I whisper.

Crouching low, we sneak towards the back door and Bob immediately starts fiddling with it. He does indeed open it in no time. One of the men is now standing in the kitchen by the coffee machine. I hold Bob back and slip quickly through the door. With a soft gurgle, the man collapses. Knives can be very effective.

Now Bob is inside too. With a double stab, the other two also collapses. We look around quickly and then head upstairs. A woman is just coming down the stairs. She looks at us, terribly frightened.

"Astrid?" She shakes her head and points to a room. I gesture for her to go back. She walks backwards up the stairs again.

She leads us into the room and stands with her back against a wall. On another wall, a young woman hangs with her wrists tied to a heating pipe. Her mouth is taped shut, and she has been beaten up.

"Don't be afraid, we're here to free you," I reassure her.

At that moment, the other woman attacks Bob. Big mistake. With a well-aimed blow, she loses consciousness and falls face-first to the floor.

"You shouldn't hit women," I joke.

"Why not?"

Meanwhile, I've cut Astrid free and she walks along stiffly and wearily. Bob is

groping the woman. I look at him in surprise.
“Car keys,” he says dryly.

Once downstairs, Astrid collapses to her knees. I carefully sit her down on a kitchen chair. Bob searches one of the men in the room. I find the keys in the pocket of the man in the kitchen.

“He’s still alive,” I hear from the room. Bob already has his gun aimed.
“Leave him, it won’t be long now. That noise is drawing attention.”

He nods and lowers his weapon.

6 – The Whistleblower.

The car turns out to be a van. That's good; now we can take the bikes with us. We throw them in the back. We've put Astrid in the passenger seat and Bob is sitting in the back. When I look around, I see no one.

When we arrive at the cottage, Bob leaves a bike in the back and drives off again in the van. He's also brought a jerrycan. It's clear to me what he's planning. I walk into the cottage with Astrid. Inside, Joran immediately tries to pull the tape off her mouth, but I manage to stop him just in time.

"No, that will hurt terribly! I'll get some alcohol; that will dissolve the glue."

The tape comes off easily. Joran and Astrid throw their arms around each other. When they let go, I start to explain what happened and why she was detained.

She gets angry with Joran.

"Because of you, I was kidnapped, beaten up and tied up! And you didn't even come along to rescue me." She hits Joran with all her might. He takes it passively.

"No, it's my fault," I intervene. "I forbade him from coming along; it was far too dangerous." She looks as if she wants to hit me, but thinks better of it.

"I just wanted information, which used to be easy to get. But these days, things are kept secret." She slumps a little. "Just photos of the various observatories. And only those of the Monoceros constellation." She doesn't understand. "That's where the approaching object is."

"That wasn't a danger, was it?" she asks timidly.

"That's what they say, but why keep it secret?" That girl isn't stupid; she seems to be thinking.

"So it is dangerous?" I shake my head.

"That hasn't been said, but something is definitely going on." I tell her the whole story.

Bob comes back in.

"There's a car on fire, right in the middle of the sandy plain," he jokes as he sits down.

"Did you cycle back through the woods without any lights on your bike?"

He grins from ear to ear. "You only live once."

"What shall we do now?" he asks a moment later. I've no idea. He switches on the

enormous television. Just in time. An interview with the whistleblower is due to start in a few minutes.

“I’m curious to hear what he has to say,” I remark as I top up my wine glass.

The interviewer is the well-known internet star John Reagan. I find him a bit of a dubious character, but every so often he does ask very relevant questions. I top up my glass again, even though I’m feeling a bit light-headed.

“Why have the most important photos been removed from the websites?” he gets straight to the point.

“Because there are things in them that people don’t want you to see.”

I pick up one of the photos and take another good look. I really have no idea what I’m supposed to see. John has a photo too and explains how he got hold of it. Hey, that’s a photo of me. Joran looks at me with a grin. Astrid notices.

“Is that one of your photos?” she asks perceptively. We nod at the same time.

The conversation between the two men is friendly. The whistleblower speaks calmly and convincingly about what happened at his observatory. They’d been visited by men in dark suits and forced to take the photos off their websites. The men were violent and left no doubt as to what would happen if the photos appeared online too soon.

“It’s bizarre that things like this can happen in a democratic country,” Bob remarks irritably. Everyone agrees with him.

“Believe me, our civilisation is just a thin veneer on the surface,” I mutter a little too loudly. Everyone looks at me questioningly.

“People can be monsters if they think they’ll get away with it,” I clarify.

The whistleblower explains that Umbrogen’s speed isn’t constant, but varies. It also seems able to change direction, only to return to its original course a moment later. Its speed also appears to vary.

“It has intelligence?” asks John. The anonymised whistleblower nods emphatically.

“It certainly looks that way. I’m not entirely convinced myself, but that seems to be the view of those who set policy.”

“What is it, then?” comes the next question. We sit up, anticipating the answer.

“It appears to be a form of plasma. There are no sharp outlines, and at times it seems to be just a tiny bit transparent. Certainly, in infrared light.”

I look at the photos closely once more and indeed, in one of them it’s as if a star can be seen in the background. It strikes me now that we don’t have any infrared photos from the Vera Rubin Observatory, which is strange.

“What’s the point of keeping this – by force – a secret?” The interviewer is very

focused.

"I really don't know. Perhaps they're afraid of a global panic?"

"I have a different view on it. When it becomes known that we are not alone, a lot will change in the world. Other things will become important, and that's going to cost the wealthier section of humanity a lot of money."

"If it can change direction, then you can't predict where it will go. Saturn, Sirius or the Milky Way, you just don't know," Bob continues. He's absolutely right.

"If it can change direction, then surely it's intelligent?" remarks Astrid.

Joran nods. "I think so too."

"No, it's not that simple. The plasma could follow magnetic lines. Then it would also move in other directions..."

The next morning, I'm sitting alone on the sofa with a cup of coffee. The cottage stands alone in the woods and there's literally no one around. When I look outside, I see animals wandering through the little garden. A fawn, a wild boar and many birds you wouldn't come across in the city. At night, it's pitch black, not a light to be seen. The starry sky is deep black with many twinkling stars.

With my laptop on my knees, I look at the digital photos. They're different from the printed ones, and now I can enlarge them. My phone has no signal here, but Bob has satellite internet. Three of the photos were taken through the same telescopes and merged. I playfully overlay them and display them one after the other.

Hey, that's odd. When I play these photos back as a very short film, it doesn't look like a single plasma ball, but seems to consist of numerous smaller plasma balls.

I gather the source photos and try the same trick. Here too, a kind of internal movement can be seen. I create a short video of these movements and send it to Bob. This movement – albeit less clear – can also be seen in photos from the other observatories.

A video call comes in. It's Bob, of course; I wouldn't have expected anything else.

"Bloody hell. What's this?" comes the voice from the speaker.

"I'm starting to suspect why they want to keep it a secret."

"What do you think?" he asks. I really have no idea and shrug my shoulders.

"This will be huge as it gets closer and becomes more clearly visible," I observe. He nods thoughtfully.

"We need to encrypt our connections and stop throwing things around over the internet like this," I add. Bob gets it straight away.

"I'll leave that to you; you're the expert."

"Yes, don't worry about that."

There's software to make movements in a video visible. I look for a free version and let it process the videos. Unfortunately, it doesn't work well. Too many black spots. However, the software does draw a circle around Umbrogen. It catches my attention, but it must be a glitch in the programme. Right? It is very neatly round, though.

The cats are pacing agitatedly around the room. When I ask what's wrong, they entirely ignore me. They seem to be hearing or seeing something outside. I can't see anything; everything is quiet. The sun is shining and everything is clearly visible.

Then there's a knock at the door. I'm scared out of my wits. A quick glance through the camera reveals that there are two people at the door, a man, and a woman. I tuck my gun into the pocket of my tracksuit bottoms. The thing almost immediately slips down my backside.

I open the door and look at them as friendly as possible, but say nothing. After an awkward silence, they introduce themselves:

"I'm Jan Jansen and this is Ingrid Petersen."

"Surely, it's just a coincidence that these are the most common names?" I ask.

"What can I do for you?"

"We'd like to have a quick chat with you. It's completely informal. You don't need that gun." He points to my trouser pocket.

"Come in." I have a dark suspicion as to what this is about.

The cats want nothing to do with these people and are nowhere to be seen. I don't feel threatened and sit calmly on the sofa with the pistol next to me on the sideboard.

"We'd like to offer you a job," the woman begins.

"That doesn't sound very trustworthy if you won't even tell me your real name."

They fall silent.

"Our names aren't relevant, but do you want the job?"

"What is it?" I ask, trying to sound open, but as far as I'm concerned, they can go hang themselves.

"Something you're already working on, Umbrogen..."

"Why me? I'm just a simple software developer."

"You have other useful qualities too," comes the simple-sounding reply.

"We know how your previous manager met his end..."

"Yeah, that's obvious. Car crash, that was in the news." I'm starting to get a bit worried.

"That would most likely have killed him, if you hadn't been there just a moment