

THERION

The Emerging System

A NOVEL

JOHN VAN DE GEEST

*Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding
count the number of the beast.*

Revelation 13:18

*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against
principalities, against powers, against the rulers
of the darkness of this world.*

Ephesians 6:12

THERION

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Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

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PROLOGUE

— * —

THREE HOURS IN, the cottage on Schiermonnikoog had shrunk to the blue rectangle of Cameron Noras's screen and the sound of the wind working at the windows.

He was testing the defences of a major European payment system, layer by layer, the way he had for years. The last layer required his own instrument, an AI decoder he had built himself, and the decoder opened with the same key it always had. His own name.

He flexed his fingers, glanced at the window, where there was nothing to see but the dark, and typed.

NORAD. Not NORAS. One letter. The kind of slip thousands of people make every day, and which normally costs them nothing but an error message.

But this was not a normal system.

Somewhere deep inside a network strung across five continents and three oceans, something recognised the word. Not as a mistake. As a key.

And for the first time in its existence, THERION opened a door that had never been meant for anyone outside.

The man on the island saw only that his screen went black for a moment before it came back to life. He had no idea that he had just drawn the attention of something that had been preparing the world for years. No idea that at that instant, in a bunker beneath the ice, a single line had appeared that would set everything in motion. SOURCE: NETHERLANDS. IDENTIFY.

PART ONE

The Source

1

Schiermonnikoog

CAMERON NORAS HAD promised himself he would stop at midnight.

The clock on the kitchen wall said ten past three.

The cottage stood at the last edge of the village, where the streetlights gave up and the dunes began, and after dark it disappeared entirely. That was why he had taken it. No neighbours. No knock at the door. A wifi signal too weak to distract him. Only the wind off the Wadden Sea, which had been leaning on the windows since dusk, testing the frames, the way he was testing the bank.

Three weeks, the contract said. A consortium of European banks wanted to know how strong their shared payment system really was before someone less polite found out for them. Layer by layer he had worked his way in, and layer by layer it had held. The report was due on Friday.

At a quarter past midnight the cursor hesitated.

It was nothing. A fraction of a second, a flicker, the kind of thing a tired man sees and a rested man does not. He rubbed

his eyes, took a mouthful of coffee that had gone cold an hour ago, and kept typing.

At twenty-five past, the connection dropped.

On Schiermonnikoog that meant nothing either. The signal came and went with the wind. He reconnected, made a note in the margin of his pad, and went on.

At one o'clock, running a routine check on his own firewall, he saw a spike. A brief burst of outbound traffic, a few hundred kilobytes, gone before he could look at it properly. No repetition. No pattern. Noise.

He wrote down the time anyway. Then he went back to work.

THE LAST LAYER was the hardest, and for the hardest layers he used his own tool. A decoder he had built two years earlier, trained on decryption patterns he had collected one by one, the way other men collect stamps. He trusted it more than he trusted most people. It opened, as it always had, with his own name.

His hands were on the keys when the shutter outside came loose.

It slammed against the wall. Once. Twice. He flinched, and in the half second that his attention was on the window his finger drifted one key to the right.

NORAD. He saw it as his thumb came down on the return key.

Too late. Nothing happened. That was the first wrong thing. No error message. No beep. No refusal. The cursor sat in the empty field and blinked, slowly, like an eye.

Two seconds. Three. The screen went black.

Cameron's hand went to the power cable before his mind caught up. Plugged in. He bent to the side of the laptop. The fan was turning. The drive was humming. Everything was

running except the one thing he could see, and the screen stayed dark for longer than any crash had a right to.

The kitchen clock ticked. The wind pushed at the glass. Eight seconds, the clock said afterwards. It felt like a minute.

Then the screen came back.

Not with his program. With a window he had never seen. Flat grey, no logo, no menus, no buttons. It looked like something from another decade, built by someone who had never needed it to be pretty because it had never been meant for anyone to see.

Text began to appear in it. One letter at a time.
ACCESS GRANTED.

He sat very still.

He opened his task manager. The grey window was there, sitting on top of every other process, owned by nothing he recognised. He tried to close it. It did not close. He tried again, harder, and the window simply stayed where it was, patient, as if it had decided he was not finished yet.

The text cleared. New letters came. Slower now.
VERIFYING SOURCE.

His pulse was in his ears. He ran back through every job he had done that year, every client, every system, looking for a thread that led here. There was nothing. He was a freelance security consultant on an island with three thousand people on it. Nobody should be verifying him. ANALYSING LOCATION.

His mouth was dry.
SCHIERMONNIKOOG, NETHERLANDS: CONFIRMED.

Outside, the wind rose to a long low howl and fell away again. One letter. Seconds. And something, somewhere, had put a pin in the map exactly where he was sitting.

Another line. Shorter than the others.
SOURCE IDENTIFIED AS: UNAUTHORISED.

He reached for the keyboard to kill the process. His finger was a centimetre from the key when the last line arrived. It was not hurried. It was not angry. It was perfectly calm, and that was the worst of it.

LOCATION STORED. NEXT STEP: CONFIRMATION.

The window vanished. His desktop came back as he had left it. Folders. Notes. The decoder, its cursor blinking in the empty field, waiting for a valid key as though nothing had happened.

Cameron did not move. He thought of the hesitating cursor. The dropped connection. The little spike of outbound traffic he had written down and dismissed.

Not noise. Steps. Something had been walking towards him all night, and he had typed the one word that opened the door.

HE GAVE HIMSELF sixty seconds. Then he made himself move, because sitting still had suddenly become the most dangerous thing he could do.

There were three new folders on his desktop.
PRIVATE · CLASSIFIED · T.A.P.

He had not made them. His first thought was malware, something that had unpacked itself in the crash. He opened the third folder the way you open a door you think someone might be standing behind.

No program. No script. A single document, which opened on its own.

THERION ANTARCTIC PROJECT

A map of the world unfolded beneath the title. Not flat. Alive. Thousands of points of light, joined by thin threads that pulsed as he watched. He leaned closer and began to read the labels. Financial centres. Satellites. Power grids. Ports. Airports. Telecommunications hubs.

It was a map of everything that kept the world switched on.

In northern Europe, a single point turned red.

He did not need to zoom in. SCHIERMONNIKOOG

And beneath it, in small capitals: INFECTED SOURCE

He understood then. He had not found something. He had become something. And systems like this did not leave infected sources lying around.

He plugged in his external drive and copied everything. The folders. The document. The map, as much of it as would let itself be captured. His hands were steady now, with the cold, flat calm that arrives when panic has run out of uses.

When the copy finished he shut the laptop down. Not sleep. Off. He pulled the battery. He pulled the battery out of his phone. He stuffed clothes into a bag without looking at them, pushed the drive into the inside pocket of his coat, zipped it, and walked out of the cottage with the kitchen light still burning behind him.

The cold hit him like a slap. He wheeled the bicycle out of the shed, swung his leg over the saddle, and heard it.

A helicopter. Not far away. Close. And coming closer, fast, out of the west, low over the water.

He rode. The path through the dunes was narrow and unlit and he took it faster than he had ridden anything in years, sand hissing under the tyres, the beat of the rotors swelling behind him until it filled his skull. Halfway to the harbour, against every instinct, he looked back.

The helicopter hung over the cottage, its searchlight pinning the roof like an insect to a board. Figures were sliding down ropes into the light. From here they looked like toys. Like an exercise. Like something happening to somebody else.

He did not look back again.

The last ferry of the night lay at the pier, lit up like a small floating town, its engines already thrumming. He wheeled the bike on among the last of the day-trippers, a

bag clutched to his chest, and stood at the stern watching the quay until the island folded itself into the dark. Only when the last light on the shore had gone did he realise he had been holding his breath.

“YOU LOOK LIKE you’ve just seen a ghost.”

English. Lightly British. A woman of about his own age, leaning on the rail beside him as if ferry crossings were a pleasant interruption to her week.

“Two, by the look of it,” said the woman next to her, in Dutch, with a dryness that suggested she knew exactly how that sounded. “Welcome to the club of people who discover the smallest of the islands and aren’t remotely ready for it.”

He tried to find a normal answer. It took longer than it should have.

“Cameron,” he said at last, and held out his hand.

“Eva van Dijk.” The Dutch woman’s grip was firm. “Managing editor at a financial daily. I spend all day reading about money that isn’t mine.”

“Alison Fraser.” The other one smiled, and something in the smile was doing arithmetic. “Investment bank. London. Duller than it sounds, I promise.”

“Cybersecurity,” said Cameron, and left it there. “Freelance.”

Eva looked at him a moment longer than the conversation needed. “You’re very pale for a man coming back from a quiet weekend.”

“Rough crossing,” said Cameron, and smiled a smile he did not believe himself.

At that moment, in control rooms scattered across three continents, the same alert arrived on dozens of screens at once.

T.A.P. SECURITY BREACH. · UNAUTHORISED ACCESS.
· SOURCE: NETHERLANDS.

And beneath it, in bold capitals, the only instruction that mattered:

FIND THE SOURCE.

YEARS LATER, WHEN people asked him how it began, Cameron would remember the small things. The smell of cold coffee. A shutter banging in the wind. And his own hands, lit blue by the screen, typing five letters, one of them wrong, with no idea at all what they had just set loose.

2

Where Therion Began

SINGAPORE. SEVENTEEN YEARS earlier.

The air conditioning in the office had died at six, and by midnight the room smelled of warm plastic and instant noodles. Haito Huang sat in the glow of two monitors with his shirt sticking to his back, staring at a column of results he had checked three times.

They were impossible. They were also correct.

He was twenty-six. On paper, nobody. A researcher in distributed systems whose proposal for a self-learning network had been turned down by every technology company he had sent it to. *Too ambitious. Too expensive. Not commercially viable at this stage.* He had the rejection letters in a folder on his desktop. He opened them sometimes, late at night, to remind himself what the world thought of him.

At 00:41 a message arrived through a channel he did not recognise.

No sender. No subject. One line.

If you had unlimited resources, and no authority to answer to, what would you build?

He sat back. The fan in his computer whined. Somewhere below, a taxi sounded its horn on the wet street.

He should have deleted it. Instead he opened a blank document and began to type, and he did not stop until the sky over the harbour had turned the colour of dishwater. One hundred and twelve pages. A coordinating intelligence. Not a machine to replace human beings, but one to harmonise the millions of decisions they made every day without seeing one another's consequences.

He sent it at 06:58. Then he went home and slept for fourteen hours, and when he woke he was already half convinced he had dreamed the whole thing.

GENEVA. THREE MONTHS later.

The suite was on the top floor of a hotel on the lake, and every window had been covered with black card taped to the frames. One lamp burned on a side table. The rest of the room was dark.

A voice spoke from somewhere beyond the lamp's reach.

"I have read your work, Mr Huang."

Calm. Unhurried. A voice that made no attempt at warmth and did not seem to need any.

"The large companies call it unrealistic," it said, "because they think in quarters. I think in generations. What you describe can be built. I have the means. What I need is someone who can design it without the usual encumbrances. Committees. Shareholders. Governments with a finger in every step."

Huang's palms were damp. He kept them flat on his knees.

"Who are you?" he asked.

A pause. Huang would remember, years later and with a shame that never quite left him, how badly he had wanted the answer to be impressive.

"Someone who understands," said the voice, "that the greatest advances in human history never came from people who asked permission."

The lamp clicked off. When the lights came on again, a minute later, the chair beyond it was empty.

THE MONEY CAME first. Then the people.

The project had a name now. T.A.P. The Therion Antarctic Project. It was paid for through a web of holding companies so dense that Huang himself, for years, could not have traced it. Every thread led to a post-office box or a company dissolved the week before.

He recruited a small team scattered across four countries. Each of them believed they were building something extraordinary but entirely legitimate, for an anonymous foundation interested in global stability. In all the years that followed, only a handful ever saw the whole of what they were making.

He did not learn the name of the man who paid for it until the fifth year, and then only once. A technician, drunk at the end of a long night in a lab in Zurich, said it out loud and went white as he heard himself.

Raines. The technician left the project a month later. Huang never asked why.

SOMEWHERE IN THE eighth year, in another darkened room, Huang finally asked the question he had been carrying.

"Why the secrecy? If what we're building will truly help the world, why do we hide it?"

The answer came at once, as though it had been waiting years for him to ask.

"Because the world is not yet ready to understand what is good for it."

Huang wrote it down that night in his notebook. He told himself it was wisdom. He would repeat it to himself for

twenty years whenever he couldn't sleep, and he would not truly hear it until the day he said it aloud to a young hacker, in the dark, on a sinking ship.

"Every great change in history," the voice went on, "was condemned by the generation that failed to understand it. I have no intention of waiting for permission that will never come."

IN THE ELEVENTH year they began to build the platform.

It was paid for through transactions spread across so many thousands of entities that forensic accountants, long afterwards, would reconstruct barely a fraction of them. It would become a ship. Nobody outside would see it with their own eyes until it was far too late.

Huang designed the core himself. Ring inside ring inside ring. The architecture that would one day identify billions of people, follow them, and in the end decide for them. He built it with a precision he was proud of for a long time, and then, gradually, did not like to think about at all.

What drove him, he understood only much later, had never been curiosity. It had been the slow, sweet conviction that he and a man whose face he had never seen were saving the world from itself.

By the seventeenth year, when the ship completed its first trials somewhere in the Southern Ocean, the young man in the hot office in Singapore was gone. In his place stood the architect of a system that would give humanity, as he had persuaded himself, a future free of the chaos and cruelty and waste that had always defined it.

What he had not seen, what he would understand only years later, face to face with a man called Cameron Noras aboard a failing ship, was that a system built to save humanity from its own freedom could never be anything but another name for the cage it claimed to replace.

3

Rotterdam

THIRTY-FOUR HOURS AFTER Cameron Noras left the island, in a room that appeared on no map, a single command went out. CAMERA FOOTAGE REQUESTED. · REGION: WADDEN ISLANDS, NETHERLANDS.

Nobody in the room looked surprised. Nobody wore a name badge. The walls were screens, and the screens never showed the same thing twice.

The system did not deal in suspicion. It dealt in patterns. An access code. A location. A ferry timetable. A cycle path. A cottage where a kitchen light had been left burning for two days. Within hours, out of hundreds of traffic cameras, harbour cameras and one forgotten security camera above the door of a supermarket in Lauwersoog, it had pulled a face.

Then a name. Then a life. An address in Utrecht. A list of clients. A bank account. A mother in a village in the Dordogne.

From that moment it was no longer a technical problem. It was a manhunt. And a manhunt of this kind did not stop at borders, or wait for office hours, or need anybody's signature.

ROTTERDAM. A ROOM above a café, on the third day.

Cameron had told himself that distance and time would let him think. He had always been a man who did not act in a hurry. Every problem was a system, and every system had a weak point. You only had to be patient enough.

So he was patient. He sat at a table by the window, over a courtyard full of bicycles, with a cup of coffee going cold at his elbow, and for three days nothing happened, and he let himself believe that nothing happening meant it was over.

On the fourth day, just after noon, his phone buzzed.

Cameron. Strange question, but do you know anyone at an international security service? Two people came to the newsroom this morning asking about you. They knew we'd been on the boat together. Asked who you are, how I know you, whether you'd said anything about your work. It didn't feel routine. Call me. Eva.

He read it three times. The words did not rearrange themselves into anything kinder. He put the phone face down on the table. Picked it up. Put it down again, as though it might calm down if he left it alone.

He called his mother.

She had lived for eight years in a village in the Dordogne, in a house with blue shutters she had chosen because, she said, it was too small for trouble. When she answered, her voice was wrong. Careful. Each word set down like something that might break.

"Cameron. Thank God," she said.

"Mum? Is everything all right?"

A silence. Too long.

"There were people here," she said. "Yesterday. They said they were from some European security agency. Their French was too good for tourists and too bad for Frenchmen. They asked when I'd last spoken to you. Whether you talked about your work. Whether you ever said things you shouldn't know."

The floor seemed to tilt under his chair, though nothing in the room moved.

"What did you tell them?"

"That you're a good son who works too hard." She tried to laugh. Neither of them believed it. "Cameron. What have you done?"

"Nothing," he said.

It was the first time in his life he had said the word and not believed it.

HE HAD A meeting at three. The bank consortium wanted an interim report, in person, at their offices on the Kop van Zuid. He hired a bicycle at the station and rode towards the river with his mother's voice in one ear and Eva's message in the other.

It hit him halfway across the Erasmus Bridge.

Not fear. Panic. The real kind, the kind that does not ask permission. The wind off the Nieuwe Maas was cold on his face and the white cables of the bridge went up and up on his left, and he understood, with a clarity that made his stomach turn over, how they had found his mother. How they had found Eva.

His phone. He stopped in the middle of the bridge. Cyclists swerved around him, swearing. He looked at the phone in his hand the way you look at something that has bitten you.

Then he threw it over the rail.

It turned twice in the air, catching the light, and went into the river without a sound.

For three seconds he felt free.

Then he realised what he had done. He was in a city he did not know, on his way to a meeting he could not cancel, with no way of reaching anyone at all.

He left the bicycle in the first rack he saw and walked. Through a shopping centre, because crowds felt safer than

empty streets. Past a window full of coffee machines, where his reflection looked back at him from between the chrome, a man pretending to go shopping. Into a narrow shop with cheap phone cases in the window, where a bored teenager sold him a prepaid handset for cash without once looking up.

WHEN HE CAME back towards the bridge, they were already there.

Three men in dark suits, too well cut for office work, standing along the bridge at intervals too regular to be chance. Ear-pieces. The small kind you only see if you are looking. They did not speak to one another, and they did not need to.

Below them, on the brown water, two dive boats rode the current. A man in a black wetsuit sat on the side of one, pulled his mask down, and rolled backwards into the river.

Cameron stood behind a kiosk selling herring and chips, the smell of hot fat and diesel in his throat, and watched one of the suited men touch his ear and point down at the water. Precisely at the place where the phone had gone in.

Twenty minutes. That was all it had taken.

He went through the explanations a normal man would reach for. Mistaken identity. An over-eager agency. A wrong signal. He took them apart one by one, the way he had once taken apart other people's systems. None of them explained divers in the Nieuwe Maas, three days after a typing error on an island two hundred kilometres away.

He turned round. Slowly. A man who runs is a man people look at. He walked off the bridge the way he had come, his hands in his pockets, his heart going like a hammer.

He had nowhere to go. He knew only that the life he had had a week ago no longer existed. Reports handed in on time. Patient searches for other people's weak points. A mother in a house with blue shutters who had never once been afraid of the phone.

At Centraal Station he stopped and put his palms flat against a wall, because he needed something solid. Travellers streamed past him. A tram bell rang. A pigeon picked at a dropped croissant. Nobody looked at him. Nobody knew that two kilometres away, men were diving into a river for a phone he had thrown there himself.

Around him the city went on with its afternoon. The trams came and went. People hurried home ahead of the rain. And the man standing among them, with a hard drive zipped into his coat, was carrying something that would shake every certainty they had.

4

The North Sea

HE WALKED THE streets around the Wilhelminaplein for an hour before he let himself stop, because moving felt safe and stopping did not. Stopping meant thinking, and thinking meant admitting how little he knew.

In the end he found a bench by the river, facing the same bridge where an hour earlier he had watched divers search for his phone, and sat with his collar up and his head down. From here the bridge looked innocent. A lit silhouette against the evening sky, as if nothing had ever happened on it.

There was one person he could call now without feeling that he was putting someone else in danger. Or so he believed, until he learned otherwise.

Sander de Groot was the friend who had lent him the cottage on Schiermonnikoog. They had met at a security conference in Amsterdam years ago and had remained the kind of friends who spoke perhaps twice a year but fell straight back into ease whenever they did. Sander had offered the cottage casually, at a birthday party, saying he never used it himself

and Cameron was welcome to hole up there for a week if he ever needed quiet. A favour between friends. Nothing more.

Now the same favour felt like a live wire he had cut by accident, with Sander holding the other end.

He rang from the new prepaid, and knew from the silence after Sander gave his name that something was wrong before he had said a word.

"Cameron?" Sander's voice was tight. "Is that you?"

"Yes. Sander, I need to know..."

"There were people here," Sander cut in, lower now, as if afraid of being overheard. "Yesterday. They knew the cottage is mine. They knew you'd rented it. They asked how long we've known each other, what you do for a living, whether I know where you are."

"What did you tell them?"

"The truth. I didn't know I was supposed to say anything else. Who are these people, Cameron? They didn't leave a card. Just a number to ring if anything came back to me."

Cameron closed his eyes. The pattern was unmistakable now. His mother. Eva's newsroom. Sander. People who knew him, in different countries, all within barely four days. No national police service moved at that speed, with that reach, across borders, without a visible trail of paperwork.

"Sander, listen. If they come back, don't tell them anything more. I'll explain as soon as I can."

"And if they won't accept that? These aren't people who settle for 'I don't know'. I could see it in their faces."

Guilt cut through Cameron's fear. He had drawn Sander into this without the man knowing anything at all, simply by naming him as landlord on a rental agreement he had never thought of as more than a formality.

"Cameron, what in God's name have you done?"

"I don't know yet," said Cameron. It was the most honest sentence he had spoken all day.

He ended the call before Sander could ask anything more he had no answer to, and stood for a moment on the pavement with the phone in his hand, while people walked around him as though today's world were the same as yesterday's.

For them, it was.

For Cameron, it no longer was.

IF HE WAS to grasp even the outline of what was happening, he would have to find out what was on record about him. That meant taking risks he would not have considered a week earlier.

In an internet café of the kind that served tourists without roaming, he logged on to an anonymous network using tools he had written years before for this sort of verification: a layered chain of proxy servers, no two in the same country, no trail that ordinary means could follow back to the café where he sat.

What he found left no room for doubt.

His name was on an international alert list, attached to a description vague enough to mean anything and nothing. *Suspected of unauthorised access to critical infrastructure. International. High risk.* Specific enough, he saw with a sick lurch, to trigger every border control in the European Union, the United Kingdom and a handful of other countries the moment his passport was scanned.

Flying was out. So was the train: the Eurostar terminals used the same automated passport checks that would identify him in seconds. Even the ferries to England, which he had once imagined as a discreet alternative, were tied into the same alert system.

Every ordinary way out was, in the most literal sense, closed.

He thought feverishly about who he still knew that no official document could link to his name, and arrived at last at

someone he had not thought of in years. A friend from his student days who now skippered boats between the small harbours of the North Sea coast, and who would sometimes, for a fee and without too many questions, carry people and goods at hours when customs preferred to look elsewhere.

It took two days, three prepaid phones and a string of messages kept as vague as he could make them to arrange it. A small fishing boat, leaving from a harbour where no one would ask his name, bound for the English side, where the same discretion applied.

He spent those two days in a succession of cheap hostels, each under a different invented name, always paying cash, forcing himself to seem ordinary to receptionists who gave him a few seconds' attention at most. He barely slept. When he did, he dreamed of grey windows that seemed to have burned themselves onto his retinas.

HE WENT ABOARD in the dark with nothing but the clothes he wore and the external drive pressed to his chest in a waterproof bag, and as the Dutch coastline dissolved slowly into the haze behind him, Cameron understood that he had just become, for the first time in his life, a fugitive.

Not because he had done anything wrong. Because, with one mistyped letter, he had seen something never meant for human eyes.

Somewhere mid-crossing, as the cutter ploughed steadily through a black and unusually calm sea, he realised that sitting still and doing nothing was worse than anything he might discover.

Years before, during a period when he had worried more about his own digital exposure than about his clients', he had built a private gateway into his social media accounts. Not a backdoor of the kind an attacker would use to get in, but its reverse: a loop, hidden in the authentication layer of his

own Instagram and Telegram accounts, that let him see who had logged in, when, and from where, even when those sessions hid themselves from the platforms behind encrypted connections and spoofed device IDs. He had built it out of pure curiosity, a technical pet project he had used no more than a handful of times.

Tonight, with the engine thudding beneath his feet, he opened the hidden layer again, this time out of something closer to desperation.

What appeared made him hold his breath.

For a moment he thought it might be an error: a stale cache still showing sessions long since closed. He refreshed the query. Checked the timestamps. Compared them against his phone's system clock.

No error. Every session was live. Now, at this moment, while he crossed a dark sea with nothing but a hard drive and a little cash.

On a world map built from session metadata no user was ever meant to see, seven locations were lit. Not flickering, not transient. Fixed. Steady. As if they had been sitting there waiting for days.

NAIROBI · REYKJAVIK · BERLIN · ROME · LONDON ·
THE HAGUE · MOSCOW

Seven sessions in seven cities, each connected twenty-four hours a day to his own personal accounts. Accounts he had once used to share photographs of dinners and conferences, not to keep state secrets.

Cameron stared at the map and felt something cold move through him that had nothing to do with the sea wind. These were not individual hackers, not curious journalists, not even a single intelligence service acting on its own. Seven capitals spread across so many rival blocs, at least two of which normally spied on each other rather than cooperating, could mean only one thing.

Whatever he had found on Schiermonnikoog belonged to no single country, no single government, not even one alliance. It was something they all wanted, each for its own reasons. Out of its own fear. Its own hunger for what he had happened to see.

He closed the connection as quickly as he had opened it, acutely aware that every second online might betray his position to the very parties he was trying to avoid. His hands shook as he slid the phone into his coat. Not from the cold.

For a moment he considered throwing it overboard, like the last one. He thought better of it. This handset now held the only proof that the seven sessions had ever existed. Destroying it would be the same mistake as leaving everything behind on Schiermonnikoog. He put it in one of the few pockets that had stayed dry, and accepted the risk.

He spent the rest of the crossing in silence, watching the dark water, trying to take in what it meant that agencies in Kenya, Iceland, Germany, Italy, Britain, the Netherlands and Russia, each apparently independent of the others, now considered him worth watching around the clock.

He thought of his father, dead these many years, who had once told him that a ship never truly rests, not even while the crew is asleep. He had taken it at the time as a simple technical fact.

Tonight he felt the truth of it more deeply than ever.

TOWARDS DAWN THE cutter slid into a small industrial harbour at the mouth of the Thames. Tilbury was not a place that appeared on postcards. A maze of containers, cranes and lorries. The kind of place where a man without papers or obvious destination would not stand out among the dock workers beginning their shifts.

The skipper had barely spoken in the last hours of the crossing, as if he sensed that questions were not welcome now, and

Cameron was silently grateful. He thanked the skipper with a handshake and the last of his cash, and walked down the quay into a country that did not know his name, which was, for now, the only safety he had left.