

Aeolus

The Robois Elections

René Jean-Paul Dewil

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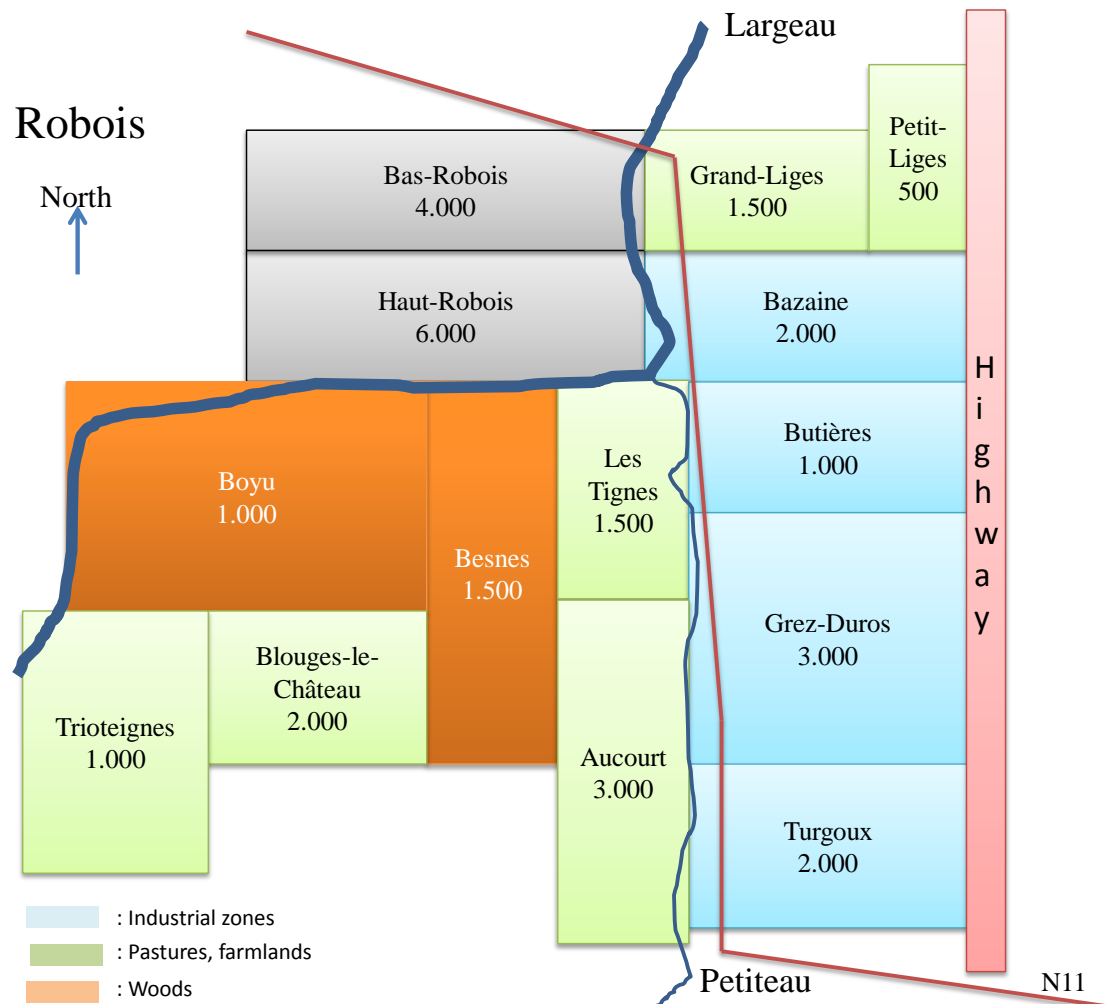
‘Aeolus. The Robois Elections’ is a work of fiction. Therefore, all the names and the figures of the novel are purely the product of the author’s imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, or to places of interest, is completely coincidental. The characters and events are totally fictional.

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Introduction - Robois



Note: The numbers indicate the number of inhabitants in the village.

The Characters

The Robois Executive Councillors, the Cabinet

IC: Group *Intérêts Communaux*, Communal Interests

L: Liberal Party

Bourgmestre: Robert Jacquet (IC, 38). Police, Register Office, Ceremonies.

Executive Councillor 1: Eliane Collado (L, 49). First Échevin. Finances, Commerce, Economy, Rural Development, Agriculture.

Executive Councillor 2: Jean Sauvent (IC, 62). Later Yves Govin (IC, 35). Public Works, Urbanism, Territorial Policy.

Executive Councillor 3: Gustave Tillard (L, 65). Buildings, Housing, Properties Patrimony, Woods, Energy.

Executive Councillor 4: André Bacca (IC, 48). Culture, Tourism, Religious Cults.

Executive Councillor 5: Nadine Dumortier (IC, 38). Associations, Sister Towns, Feasts, Elderly, Pensions.

Executive Councillor 6: Marc Thoran (IC, 39). Commune Personnel, Roads Security, Justice.

Executive Councillor 7: Simone Ash (L, 30). Social Care, Infancy, Health, Handicapped People, Social Housing.

Executive Councillor 8: Pierre Gasson (IC, 42). Sports, Mobility.

Executive Councillor 9: Albertine Dewez (IC, 47). Schools, Public Education, Youth, Holiday Sites.

Director of the PISC: Marie Delatisse (44). PISC is the 'Public Institution for Social Care'.

Commune Secretary: Alberte Hersalle (49).

Commune Treasurer: Michel Collebert (47).

Police Zone Superintendent: Paolo Timario (52). *Chef de Corps* or head of the Division, *Commissaire Divisionnaire* or Police Superintendent.

Deputy Police Superintendent: Youssouf Bikri (34). Called Joseph Bikri. *Chef de Service*, *Commissaire* or Service Head and Superintendent.

Other Characters – alphabetically by name

Simone Ash: age 32, Échevin of Social Care, and President of the Public Institution for Social Care (PISC). Unmarried. She is a medical doctor in Robois.

Magda Balin: age 48. A prostitute of Robois.

Samia Bennani: age 24. Moroccan illegal immigrant woman who lives for a while at the house of Robert Jacquet.

Youssef Bikri: age 35. Called Joseph Bikri. *Chef de Service. Commissaire. Service Head.* Police Officer. He has studied Criminology at University and has followed the courses of the Police School to become an Officer in the Police Corps. He is of Moroccan descent.

Annette Bivois: age 56. A cleaning woman at the Hotel ‘Horse Bayard’.

Max Blandis: age 38. Leader of a gang of four hired by Gauthier de Buisseyre.

Gauthier de Buisseyre: age 45, a financier and entrepreneur, owner of Aeolfast, a company that installs wind turbines.

Dominique Bussy: age 26. Female police officer. Bikri uses her as his assistant. She knows how to use a personal computer and the Internet better than the other officers.

Christine Candriber-Labi: age 53. Resident of Turgoux. Married to Victor Candriber.

Victor Candriber: age 56. Resident of Turgoux. Married to Christine Labi.

Jean Castelle: age 47. Socialist Party Member of the Council of Robois. Member of Parliament and Minister of the Federal Government.

David Danlois: age 35. Inspector at the SER, *Service d’Enquête et de Recherche* of the Province of Namur

Paul Degambe: age 58. Director of the Society for Social Housing of Robois.

Albert Desjardins: age 52. President of the political *Intérêts Communaux* Group, Communal Interests or IC Group of Robois. He is also a Councillor of Robois.

Hubert Dusarme: age 27. Assistant to Max Blandis.

Marcel Georgis: age 48. A banker of Robois.

Monique Ghijsen: age 46. Countess Trioteignes and mother of Diego and Laura.

Yves Govin: age 35. *Échevin* of Commune Works. He was appointed when an older échevin suddenly resigned. He was ordered to become *Échevin* (Executive Cabinet Councillor) by the United Democratic Party headquarters in Brussels.

Michel Guichand: age 46. A farmer who wants to expand his enterprise into a large industrial pig farm.

Robert Jacquet: age 38. Mayor or Bourgmestre of Robois. Divorced, with a handicapped daughter. Owner of a construction enterprise.

Rose Jacquet: age 12, daughter of Robert Jacquet.

Monsieur François: age 51, owner of the hotel 'Horse Bayard'.

Richard Mordine: age 26. Assistant to Max Blandis.

Andrée de Porinthe: age 36, former wife of Robert Jacquet.

Christelle Romas: age 38, a representative of the Ecological Party of Robois.

Jean Sauvent: age 62, elder Échevin of Public Works. He yields his function to Yves Govin.

Jean Segers: age 36. President of the local Soccer Club of Robois.

Marianne Tamin: age 53. Resident of Turgoux.

Thomas Terhave: age 13. A boy who lives with his mother, father and sister on a farm of Aucourt.

Charles de Trioteignes: age 48, owner of Castle Trioteignes and financier.

Jean Vantandt: age 23. Assistant to Max Blandis.

Eric Vrankaert: age 25. Assistant to Max Blandis.

Chapter 1. November and December

Robois. Youssouf Bikri

My name is Youssouf Bikri. I have quite a story to tell, a story that happened in a small town of Wallony. I must begin far, and I have a lot of explaining to do. So, bear with me.

I am the *Commissaire de Police* or Superintendent of the Belgian Commune of Robois, a community of fourteen beautiful villages of Wallony, the French-speaking Region of Belgium. Being the *Commissaire* does not make of me the highest representative of the police forces around. I have a superior, Paolo Timario, the *Chef de Corps* and *Commissaire Divisionnaire* of the zone of three towns, among which Robois. My function is therefore merely to serve as the very local head of fifteen officers covering the sole territory of Robois, a peaceful rural community of thirty thousand souls. Let me, dear reader, introduce you to my less than spectacular world.

I am thirty-four years of age. My friends call me Joseph. My not so good friends call me the Moroccan, and the men who envy me or fear me or hate me gave me the nickname of ‘the Marlouf’, a dirty French name for an immigrant from the North-African Maghreb. I don’t mind, for I was not born at all in Morocco. I have even never set a foot in that land. I promise myself each year to travel by airplane to visit the land of my forefathers, but the promise has so far remained vain. I was born in Anderlecht, a suburb town of Brussels, the capital of Belgium, and I have no other nationality than the Belgian one.

My parents did originate from the land called al-Maghrib, the West, from the plains and mountains of Morocco, but they left their home region when they were still very young and newly-wed. They fled in the 1950’s from the town of Oujda in eastern Morocco, when the uprisings began against Mohammed Ben Aarafa. My parents sympathized with the French colonists, so they had to flee from the Liberation Army and arrived in Brussels via Spain. They lived illegally in Belgium for a while, of course, but they applied for and received the statute of political refugee and later gained the Belgian nationality. It seemed French benevolent contacts were involved in that.

I was the youngest son of my parents, after an elder son and a daughter, probably the result of a mishap, a moment of uncalculated passion, and hence the most neglected of their children. Nevertheless, I thrived, and my mother loved me. Since nobody cared much for me I had to be smarter than the rest of the family and use more cunning than the other people around me. Such can be the lever of survival and of success. My cousins and nieces and aunts and uncles came to visit us in Brussels and occasionally stayed for months at my father’s expense. I do have some notion of Moroccan traditions, but do not share all customs!

I studied as best as I could, worked harder and more. I studied easily, passed my lower grades with many tears and bruises, scraped myself through the higher grades of the *Athenaeum*, took the courses of a Koran school at the same time, and made it to the Brussels University.

My parents had brought some money from Oujda. With these funds, they opened a small groceries shop in Brussels and built it out to a larger mini-mart distribution hall. My brother and sister still keep that shop open today, but two persons were quite sufficient to manage the shop. My parents realised with delight I had no inkling and no talent for commerce, so they let

me study what I liked. I studied Criminology. I was twenty-four before my parents understood what I had been doing. And then it was too late for them to change anything.

After my university term I disappeared for a year to London, pretending to find out what the possibilities were for opening a shop in England, but I worked at ten odd jobs, most of them in warehouses. I survived barely, but I added a very decent knowledge of English to Moroccan Arabic, written standard Arabic, French and Dutch. I returned humbled and chastised from my London adventure and stopped my father's invectives by entering immediately into the Police School of Brussels.

From then on I followed my own course. I became a Police Officer, worked myself up in the ranks, and grabbed any specialised study of Criminology of the Police Schools I could get, until I was loaded like a donkey with all the necessary brevets to vie for the highest positions in the Belgian Police. I have now enough certificates to be a *Chef de Corps* myself. I am one of the youngest Superintendents of the country, and I bide my time to reach upwards.

My superiors wanted to keep me in Brussels, for they did not have many Arabic speaking officers of Moroccan descent in the ranks, and Islamic educated scholar-type policemen are very rare. Still, after eight years of working in the Brussels quarters of Molenbeek and Anderlecht, I wanted ardently to shake off the eternal image of the immigrant, which I was not. I had my belly full of the interminable conflicts between races of the capital. I hated being considered always as one of the enemy collaborating with another enemy, so I applied and applied and applied for a function in the provinces, until everybody in the Force got tired of my letters. I was shipped out, probably to stop the administrative work my pleas caused to the Superintendents of Brussels. I had not asked for a position in another large town such as Liège or Charleroi. I hoped for Namur or Tournai, but I was sent to Robois as some form of punishment or revenge. Robois signified oblivion. I loved it!

Robois was a God-forgotten or maybe therefore a God-loved rural community of the Hesbaye Region between Brussels and Namur. I had never served and never lived in such a small commune. Because I had wisely learnt to accept from the Belgian Police whatever was granted to me, I nodded gratefully when my boss threw the transfer papers at me, and I set out with a light heart for the soft core of Wallony.

I met only friendly people at Robois. I feared not a little arriving as a supposed immigrant Moroccan, but my grinning Italian-descent boss introduced me the same day to an odd mix of half-bred Polish, Flemish, Sicilian, Greek, Asturian and French colleagues, for whom a supposed Moroccan represented only an interesting, somewhat more exotic distraction. The few truly native Walloons did not seem to care anymore what kind of guy was sent to them this time, as long as a new presence eased their life.

Who were these Walloons of Robois by the way? Certainly not the descendants of the ancient Belgae of Julius Caesar, who had moved to Kent in Great-Britain! They too were the grandchildren of a mixture of indigenous people from before the ninth century and the Germanic Franks, as well as from who knows how many other Slavic tribes that overran the country during the Great Migration of Peoples of pre-medieval times.

When my less nice colleagues called me the Moroccan, I felt that was not nastier than when they called our boss the Sicilian, though Paolo had been born like all of us in Belgium.

I have to say a nice word about Paolo. He was a small man in knowledge, but huge in experience and wisdom. I learnt to respect him very much for what he was, also because after

one year already he had held his protective hand over me more than once. Timario had big hands! He covered for me.

Paolo Timario was our *Chef de Corps*, the head of our Police Division, our Commissaire Divisionnaire, and my boss. His Police Force covered a zone of several communes, among which Robois. He held his headquarters in another town. It was Timario who had delegated me to Robois, to serve as the *Commissaire* of a small contingent of officers. Timario forgot instantly about me, and that lasted for as long as I caused him no problems and for as long as I had no issues I could not solve myself. Therefore, as Paolo told me, I could call me the Superintendent of Robois!

Timario first warned me for the gang of the Judicial Police of the Province of Namur, the Police Force that was added to the *Procureur du Roi* or the Royal Prosecutor, the highest judicial authority in the province, and also for that man's group of assistants or *Substituts*, former lawyers and now members of the apparatus of the Justice Courts. Between us and them also worked the SER, the *Service d'Enquête et de Recherche*, the Investigative Service, yet another specialised Police Force of the Provincial and Regional Capital of Namur. These men formed the investigative power in our province, and we were supposed to serve them as their obedient slaves. We more or less had to assist them in solving crimes, and to execute their orders to the last letter, although, like in Brussels, we took those orders in consideration only whenever we could not otherwise avoid them. We regarded the demands of the SER as often unjustified, uninspired, and considered what they meant as orders as merely pleas to collaborate. We ignored the orders for as long as we could. In other words, the work and atmosphere in Robois were not very different from those in Brussels, except that I was a lot more at ease and a lot happier in Robois.

I had lived in Robois for an entire year, now, and I had come to love this peaceful commune. Robois is not a town. It never received the honour being called a town, not in the far past since it simply never existed in older times as such, and not today, although the Bourgmestre, the Mayor, has sent papers to the Government asking for the denomination.

Robois had been constituted rather artificially during the Belgian fusion of villages and towns in the late 1970's, from a dozen of villages forcefully conglomerated around a centre somewhat larger than the others, bearing the name of Robois. Before that administrative fusion, every village had its independent status, its Bourgmestre or Master of the Village, his *Collège des Échevins* or Executive Cabinet, and its elected Council. The Cabinet and the Bourgmestre of the new entity called Robois were chosen by the Council, by the political parties represented in the Council, according to the majority of the moment.

When one party did not have absolute majority of representatives, a majority coalition had to be formed, and that was also the case at Robois, where a group called *Intérêts Communaux* or Communal Interests, in brief IC, was allied to the Liberal Party to constitute a majority in the Town Council. The Council counted twenty-six Councillors, of which thirteen from the list IC, four from the Liberal Party, six Socialists and three Ecologists. IC Group was a mix of people of diverse opinions, all rather conservative, people who wanted the best for their community rather than political power, and of which most did not really want to be labelled with the tag of one or other Federal political party. The rather apolitical list of the Bourgmestre, IC Group, had been formed by members of the United Democratic Party plus about as many independent candidates.

The elected Council was chosen for six years. It appointed its Executive Cabinet and its Bourgmestre by majority vote during the first Council session. Robois had nine Executive Councillors or *Échevins* forming the *Collège* or Executive Cabinet, plus the Bourgmestre. The IC Group had six Executive Councillors or *Échevins*. Three additional *Échevins* came from the Liberal Party, who were allied to the six ICs.

To return to Robois itself, the commune was formed artificially by the combination of very different villages of rural, urban and industrial character, brought to fusion because none of the surrounding towns really desired either to hamper their political majority with people known to vote for other parties or because their territories lay too far from their urban centres, which meant high cost of maintenance of roads and communications and communal services.

The name of Robois belonged to two villages that had already been forced together to form one entity before the 1970's, from Haut-Robois and Bas-Robois. Haut-Robois lay on higher ground around the Abbey of Saint Adelbert, whereas Bas-Robois had developed in the valley to the north and east. These two villages lay west and north of a river, the *Largeau*, ironically called the Wide Water though it was a very small river, really. The people who lived higher up on the plateau had once looked down on the valley dwellers, but that spirit had disappeared in the vagaries of time. The Largeau ran first from west to east, south of Haut-Robois, and then suddenly it turned north to the eastern border of Bas-Robois. Where the river broke north, halted by a rock promontory on which stood the ancient Castle Bazaine, emerged a yet smaller river, the *Petiteau* or Small Water, not more than a brooklet, which in fact flowed south to north straight into the Largeau at the confluence below the promontory.

To the east of the Largeau and the Petiteau lay the villages of Grand-Liges and Petit-Liges, Bazaine, Butières, Grez-Duros and Turgoux, one neatly to the south of the other. These villages were delimited in the east by the highway of Brussels to Namur, which ran for a short stretch north to south instead of its more natural west to east direction. These villages formed the industrial areas, for the industrial zones of Greater Robois were situated around their cores. The industrial zones had been created between the newer highway and the older National Road Eleven. With time, the commercial centre of Robois and environs died off, and the larger commercial sites and the supermarkets, the important garages and other small enterprises, developed along the National Road N11, served also by fast accesses to the highway north of Ligés and south of Turgoux. The wealth and dynamism of greater Robois was generated by these zones, so, understandably, quite a healthy competition raged between the administrative centre of Robois with its dense population core and the richer industrial zones centred on Grez-Duros and Turgoux. The population in this zone was, however, only about half the population of the Haut-Robois and Bas-Robois centres together. I liked the diversity of the landscapes, the intimacy of the cores of the villages centred around their churches, and the rich, animated feasts of the associations to which I was invariably invited.

To the west of the Petiteau and to the south of the Largeau I discovered the truly rural communities, the wooded landscapes of Boyu and Besnes, and the low-sloping pastures and grain fields of Les Tignes, Aucourt, Blouges-le-Château and Trioteignes. These last two villages, and also Bazaine, had been assembled around their castles, like the centre of Robois around its medieval abbey. The village most remote from the centre of Robois was Trioteignes, one of the smallest entities also, lying next to another wood into which still

stands the mysterious, very old Castle Trioteignes. The six villages in this group were small. The farms and houses were more spread out than the cores of the other entities.

Robois was therefore formed out of three distinct groups of villages. One group was Robois, the centres of Haut-Robois and Bas-Robois. Another group was the eastern villages spread along the highway and the N11, affectionately called the 'Eastern Territories' by the Roboisians, and the west-southern truly rural communities somewhat condescendingly called the 'Peasant Villages'. These three groups harboured their own feelings and susceptibilities, their culture, feasts and traditions, and despite much work of trying to form them into one mentality, the various communities preserved their separate identities.

I am a very bad driver! I do own a car, an old Renault, a driver's licence, and I master the basic abilities to drive, but I am not a very good driver. I also drive a police car, but I am a man too easily distracted when driving, I'm afraid, to be an attentive and hence a truly good chauffeur. I drove very little in Brussels. I often had another police officer drive me through the capital. When I arrived at Robois, I made a habit of driving a lot, driving for practice. My work is mainly administrative during the day, but since I am still single, I drive each day for a couple of hours after my regular work in the villages of Robois. I learnt to know and love the commune that way.

I like to drive in the Peasant Villages because the roads there are tortuous, beautifully winding through dense green woods in summer and through majestically wide, ochre-coloured fields in autumn. I trained my attention while driving, setting to peace the internal furies that had accumulated in my mind in Brussels.

The landscapes of the Peasant villages are wide and open or closed and protective in a very appealing alternating change. The people here are friendly. I can park my car along a field or in the church square of the centre of a village or a borough, and linger. Somebody will always come up to me and seek to exchange a few words with me, to complain about an ailment or to explain what happened to their older father and mother, and ending with a heart-felt joke. The people greet me respectfully when I'm in uniform, but they don't shy away. Nobody ever told me in Brussels what the weather would be tomorrow. The weather is a great opening topic for non-committing conversation in the Peasant villages, and one word leads to another. Agriculture depends on the weather, and in the villas the people like to see the sun shining through their large bay windows, rather than the rain pelting down on their terraces. I can train nicely in this region, driving carefully, and I learnt to know every corner of the territory I am supposed to preventively secure, which of course we cannot really, for we are far too few officers to cover this large territory.

I like a lot less driving through the Eastern Territories, though the roads there are straight and broader. My car always advances more rapidly through the industrial zones. You will find no smoke-belching old brick-made factories here, though, no cokes ovens and no blast furnaces. The industries of Robois are of the newer, cleaner type, high-technology types, with printing shops, shining commercial sites, supermarkets and luxury garages. The people here remain a little more aloof of police cars. They fear being watched, and I meet frowned fronts when I drive around and roam. Some of the professional managers nevertheless also do like to remark the police circulating on their roads, and around their buildings. The people of the Peasant Villages take security for granted and seem not to need it. In the industry zones, the grey-suited managers are very security-conscious. They have to, for most of the larger-scale robberies happen here, so there can never be enough police cars patrolling in this area. I feel

more under stress and naturally attentive of what occurs here than in the villages that lie peacefully in the meadows. Moreover, many of the low blocks of the industries do not even have windows to the side of the streets, so you drive past concrete block after concrete block, often surrounded by weeds, in a rather desolate view.

Roaming by car through Haut-Robois and Bas-Robois was even less a pleasure. It is the best exercise and nightmare for bad drivers. The streets are narrow, tortuous, medieval in design, never longer than a few tens or hundreds of metres, always going up or down, always encumbered to left and right by parked cars and lorries, never open. You have to remain very alert for bicycles and motorbikes in this crowded centre, and pedestrians do not hesitate to dart right before you in the middle of the street. Driving here is a fine exercise, worse driving does not exist, but I come here only for the exercise or when I really have to for the job. Otherwise, I walk on foot in the centre, stopping frequently to talk to a vagrant man or to a group of too boisterous youngsters. I let the wanderers and loiterers feel some surveillance is on in mid-town!

Little crime happens in greater Robois. None of my officers can remember a major crime scene with one or more deaths in the villages. We do have burglaries, the occasional fraud case, some drug dealing along the N11 in the two dance-halls, a little disturbance of the peace around the night-shops in central Robois, occasional hooliganism at the football club of Grez-Duros, and we have a few wife-beaters, but Robois is nothing like the constant crime pool of Brussels. The Peasant Villages are left alone by the organised gangs of Charleroi and Liège, for they are too less dense in houses, and the villas are protected by anti-burglary alarm systems, many of them connected by phone to security call centres. Burglars concentrate on the eastern Territories, but also the industries are guarded by private companies, which, I presume, have access to defence weapons.

We, the Police Force, reign in Robois high and low. We have our local headquarters there in the middle of the town, in a side-building of the ancient abbey, near the Town Hall. We are situated close to the political power in our town, and form with them the Authority, in a large complex of ancient buildings. Authority still has a decent meaning in Robois, unlike in Brussels.

When I arrived at Robois, I first found a small apartment above the bakery of Haut-Robois, at two paces from our offices. A few months later I actually bought me a house, a small house-in-the-row, in the outskirts of Haut-Robois but at a ten minutes' walk from my office, because paying off the mortgage loan amounted to less than paying rent. My garage is easy to drive into, and sufficiently wide for me not to bump against the two walls each time I bring my car in.

Yes, I have come to like Robois. The people are friendly and they appreciate having us, police, around. The pace of living is quite agreeable, crime astonishingly low. I intend to live my life here for the rest of my days. I am not particularly ambitious, though I may hope eventually for the function of the head of the Police Zone, of a group of more towns like Robois. I obtained sufficient starched degrees stating I am fully qualified for such a job, of which there are less than a hundred in Wallony. Few candidates will want to get buried in Robois and the neighbouring small towns, whereas I delight in their peace and calm. I do not intend to return to Brussels or to another of the larger cities.

I felt perfectly happy at Robois, began making the acquaintance of many people in the local sport clubs, hiding in a cosy group of agreeable no-nonsense colleagues and in a growing circle of friends in the social associations and feast committees of the villages. I had only one major issue. I felt very lonely despite the company!

Loneliness had never been an issue for me up to that moment, for I had to study and experience so much, had remained very tense in Brussels. Lately, however, in the peace of Robois, I became strangely subjected to bouts of panic in the middle of the night and even sometimes in the light of the day. I felt awfully alone and abandoned. I missed a wife, children, a family. I knew I was experiencing the primeval fears of lack of procreation, of lack of the continuity of my egoistic genes. However much I tried to rationalise these fears, they returned when I expected them least and in the oddest of places. They left me soaked in sweat when I dozed off in the late afternoon. At night, they pushed me from my bedroom downstairs to my drawing room, to my television set, to my personal computer and the Internet, and often also to wine, whiskey or cognac. No beer. I disliked beer.

I could apply to my family in Brussels. My parents would be too willing to arrange a traditional marriage for me to a girl with all the credentials for having the potential to become a caring housewife, but I have this obsession in my mind for the romantic, consuming love of which the French poets sing.

I was educated as a Muslim by my parents. Yet, I know of no mosque fifty kilometres around Robois and I have certainly not entered one for the last five years. There must be a mosque in Robois, but I deliberately avoided looking for it. My father took me to a mosque when I had come of the age, but even he attended seldom to the lectures of the Imams. I continued in principle to pray five times a day, but I prayed when I could, and I never turned south to Mecca. I prayed by thinking about a God, or I spoke in my mind to a God, to Allah, but the Allah of my prayers was something very different from the Allah of the Imams.

My God was something immaterial, without image whatsoever, something unfathomable for humans, something totally alien to our race and to anything we could perceive in the universe. God was for me the something that either called the cosmos to life in the Big Bang or that had formed the universe as a pulsating continuum of energy, expanding, contracting, finding oblivion in a singular point and then exploding in a new Big Bang to start the sequence all over again. My God was much more the Aristotelian cause of all action than the tangible image of a great father. I also doubted very much by reason that the something that caused the universe to oscillate would bother with me, less than an earthworm, even though my entire being desired not to be alone in the void, desired to be comforted and redeemed. I prayed with my heart, not with my mind, and I suppose that made me a bad Muslim. I was certainly all but the sanctimonious type, too, although I avoided drinking alcohol in public, and I ate no pork meat. I did not find in the Koran any restriction on drinking, except the command not to be drunk while praying. I also admired too much the good poet Omar Khayyam, who sang so lyrically about wine and women. I did not drink in public, but I did drink brandy in private, though moderately. My main issue remained with women.

Mind you, I am not, definitely not, a homosexual. I am also not an obdurate bachelor. I just could not find a woman I wanted or dared give my love to. I wanted a very intelligent lady and a very beautiful one. I had little respect for the girls and ladies of Moroccan-descent or for the other Muslim women I met in Brussels. I refused the entreaties of my parents to take wife, for I waited for love. But true love and admiration for a female did not come, and I grew more desperate ever to marry. Was it because I believed in a more terrible, incomprehensible Allah

that I was bereaved of love? Maybe this was my punishment for being more of a philosopher than of a zealot.

I knew of no Muslim girls in the Robois villages, though I saw occasionally a woman with a shawl on her head in the marketplace. I despised the comfort of prostitutes. I left aside the native Robois women that did seem to want to accost me, for I found them stupid and not worthy of much respect. Maybe I was simply arrogant towards women. The ones I did find interesting hesitated, frowned and drew back from my darker skin and curly black hair. I considered suicide several times, for life seemed to lack further interest, but I was too rational a person to yield to such thoughts for longer than a few seconds. I remained Joseph the Moroccan, Joseph the loner.

I did not shy away from having female friends. One of our younger officers, Dominique Bussy, served as my driver and partner in Robois on days when I really did not feel for driving and touring on my own at all. I am sure she found me cute, and she told me so once although I was her superior, but she was definitely off limits, dating a nice, promising boy of Turgoux I had not yet met and who, so she told me once, was a Police inspector in Namur. She intended to marry him though nothing had been decided yet. I was not in love with her. Nevertheless, I rather teamed up with her than with my male colleagues, not in the least because she knew a lot better how to find information in the various police software programs and data bases than I. I knew how to Google, but I lacked the patience to learn all the functions of the police applications. Dominique taught me whenever we had some time. It was strange that I, the scholar, lacked the interest for the databases of the Belgian Government, whereas Dominique, who had barely made it to a local police officer, played with the keyboard of her personal computer linked to the police network as if she were composing a Mozartean symphony. I did make some progress, though, with her patient help.

I thought of myself with some complacency as of a fine policeman, as good as they could be made. My track record in Brussels contained a few solved cases that had bought me some fame in the press of the capital. Many more hushed appeasements in the various cultural communities had given me a reputation of a guardian of the peace. I had gained no medals for jumping alone in between belligerent groups, no fame and no appreciation from my bosses. I was merely a boy of the immigration for the Police Force, useful in hot situations but otherwise not really belonging entirely to the Brussels closed teams of officers.

I was therefore rather unprepared for what was to happen in the coming election year at Robois, the more so as my only good friend was involved. Until that year, Robois was my heaven on earth. Then, things changed, some for the worse, some for the better.

You may have understood by now that I didn't make many friends in Robois. Colleagues and acquaintances I have by the dozens, friends no. I remained the odd-man-out. I do have one very good friend here. He is a man who in many ways resembles me, though his family had assuredly also immigrated to these regions, all be it many centuries before me. He is a very successful businessman and a person highly appreciated in the commune. We fell together because we had a common craving for honesty and justice. We also both suffered from scar tissue on our souls. Almost nobody in Robois knows we are friends and we tend to keep it quiet. His name is Robert Jacquet, and he is the Bourgmestre of Robois. We meet in his house for a drink or an occasional supper. He is a good friend. We have fun together. We often meet in his villa, because it is much larger and brighter than my Robois home. We feel more free in his lodge in the woods.

The Bourgmestre

On a bleak evening of early November, while Superintendent Youssouf Bikri was roaming the countryside in search of something he didn't know himself, nor knew where to look for it, Robert Jacquet was driving from his house in the village of Boyu to the Town Hall of Haut-Robois.

The Bourgmestre drove to a Town Council session. He drove through a wide lane in the forest of Boyu, headlights blindingly blazing on the cobbled road and on the large trunks of century-old oaks trees and beeches. Robert drove also lost in thoughts, but contrary to Superintendent Bikri, Robert was an excellent car driver, so he sped rapidly while day-dreaming. He looked nevertheless at his environment with relish. He remained alert for any potential danger such as an animal sprinting in his lights over the road, not an infrequent hazard in the woods of Boyu. He sped, for he was late.

Robert Jacquet was thirty-eight, but he still thought of himself as a sportive young man. His years had flown so fast! He led a construction enterprise, not a large one, but one with enough new customers to allow him to hire and pay excellent managers, a few older but experienced workers, and a lesser qualified workforce of over twenty masons and carpenters who could be told what to do and yet conveniently, continuously be replenished from people of all sorts and nationalities, as long as they were eager to work. Robert had made a partner out of his best manager, a man who had worked with his father. This man had thought him the business better than his father could have done. Robert offered his teacher a stake in the company by co-leadership. Robert occupied himself with receiving the customers, finding new customers, preparing the offers, and his older partner managed the works on site. His partner also had proved loyal in the past, so that Robert could leave much of the running of the business to him. Robert had therefore more time dabbling in more mundane functions, such as being a member of the Rotary and other clubs, where he gathered new customers, and such as being the Bourgmestre of Robois. These functions had helped much the reputation of his company, so that Jacquet and Duchâtel S.A., a *Société Anonyme* of Belgian Law, a private limited company, could grow and become quite prosperous the last years. Robert was expanding to ever more and larger construction works, also outside Robois.

Robert Jacquet, the businessman and entrepreneur, had not actively sought to enter politics. Politics had sought him. His father had left him the construction firm. When his father died, Robert was only twenty-five. Robert had to take over the firm at a moment he was not really prepared to do so, but he had thrown himself head first into it, and he had succeeded in salvaging it and then expanding the business. He had also worked a lot on the construction of public buildings. The money won on public works was low and it took long in the getting, but it always came and if late, with interest. That was a more reliable result than for some of his private works. After he stepped into politics, Robert stopped abruptly introducing offers for the construction of public building sites, but by then he had enough reserves to lose money on a few works. He had taken on more private business, which was more profitable even when occasionally an architect or a contractor failed.

Robert had built himself a strange kind of lodge as house on a large piece of land lying on the border between the villages of Boyu and Trioteignes, on land his father had owned since ages. His lodge had become a mansion, standing proudly on a hill at the end of the forest of Boyu, amidst majestic trees. Robert's rear terrace and his very wide bay windows faced the

meadows and the grain fields that sloped below towards another wood from which emerged the high, slated tower-roofs of Castle Trioteignes. The house of Robert resembled a lodge, a log cabin, but it was a huge cabin, in fact a set of separate cabins interconnected by corridors. Its architecture in blocks was complex. It stood entirely a metre above the ground, and in the rear part it hung above an abyss that steeply sloped downwards towards the low pastures. It lurked high above the hillside, allowing for a wide and marvellous view of the green and brown landscape. The blocks were built on a platform of wood, but in the middle also caves had been dug into the rock of the hill. Huge dark, wooden beams stuck out at all angles in an architecture that today would have been prohibited by the Walloon Region, but which had been begun to be built by his grandfather and to which the two generations of Jacquets had been allowed to add to. Robert had indeed added his own many rooms. He had enlarged considerably the dining-room and the parlour, modernised and enlarged also the kitchen area, added up garages and guest-rooms, as well as comfortable bathrooms. The lodge or house was now so large Robert sometimes thought he might open a hotel in it!

The truth was that Robert had added to the wooden villa when he could not provide enough work for his labour force in his enterprise. When work was low, he refused to dismiss his best skilled men, and so he put them to work on a new wing or a new room of his lodge. Robert grinned in the dark evening, for whereas everybody saw his villa as the obvious sign of success, only Robert and his workmen knew that each new room had meant a lost job, a failure of Robert. The house was a result of his shortcomings, of his inability to find enough work for his workmen. The lodge meant a chastisement, a constant reminder of humility. The result was a very odd-shaped, one-storey wooden lodge that crouched low and wide as a complex of independent but interconnected blocks, with rooms and corridors sometimes built around age-old oaks that were permitted to continue to grow their roots under the house.

One entered Robert's land by a gravel road that turned away in meanders from the main road, the lodge hidden from view at first, and then one stood in awe in front of the expanse of the low, one-storey building, which turned on both sides of the entrance towards the viewer and which looked as dark brown as the forest, blending with the forest, and hidden everywhere from the view in most of its parts. The look of the lodge in the glade was indeed sombre, also from the inside. It was only the back side, the side that faced south and that looked out high over the open landscape of meadows and fields, which let the light flood in. The architects Robert had put to the task and to the challenge had skilfully directed that ample light further inside, even into long corridors. The wooden panels everywhere dampened the light, but also gave every visitor a very cosy feeling.

The vast lodge was also a passive building for energy consumption. The house could be warmed with a minimum of oil and gas. The outer walls were very thick and filled with isolation materials. The blocks of the various pavilions were also independent of each other, separated by thick walls and corridors, not only to keep in the warmth, but also to provide for privacy of sounds. Frank Lloyd Wright might have been proud of the structure, and the nice aspect of it was that Robert could continue adding pavilions to it, expand in width and length.

Robert Jacquet was a friendly, jovial man, a tall man with a handsome, rough-hewn, boyish face that always seemed to be smiling or grinning, eyes devoid of malign cunning. He had dark brown hair, a clean-shaven square chin, broad shoulders and an almost athletic body. He looked like a congenial logger, who remained in harmony of soul with the forest and with his lodge. One of his blocks held a fairly large and well-equipped gym room, in which he

exercised regularly, often with his friend Youssouf Bikri. Robert also liked to jog or to mountain-bike in the forest of Boyu.

Robert owned a fine villa and successful enterprise. He was intelligent and could prove that with a university diploma in economics, but he also had suffered from the vagaries of fate, which had left him a loner like Youssouf Bikri.

Robert Jacquet had married after his father died. Her name was Andrée de Porinthe, a young woman born in Brussels and brought up among the wealthy jet set of the capital. She was tall, slim, very stylish. She threw a striking figure with a long, pale face in which shone full red lips and amethyst eyes. Her face was of an extraordinarily, perfectly shaped beauty. Luxurious blond hair crowned her head and fell to her shoulders, framing her face of finely boned lines, small but long eyes, a forehead covered with reluctant curls. She was perfectly proportioned in breasts, waist and hips. Her body screamed sex, her dress clung to her skin, moulded it, revealed her smooth curves and generous forms that were impossible not to notice. When Andrée moved, the fluid motion of her small, bulging stomach and long legs accentuated the rhythm of her perfection.

Why had Andrée felt attracted to the young bear from the deep Walloon countryside? Had she wanted to try something new and alien? Robert had been dazzled by her manners, her demeanour and her passion.

They met at a dinner party organised by mutual acquaintances. About twenty persons had been present at the noisy gathering, and he had not felt at ease among the cultivated lot of Corporate Executive Officers, financiers and leaders of Belgian commerce. Andrée sat on the other side of the table to his left, obviously amused by his awkwardness in this company. After the dinner, she had come to sit next to him. They talked. She shook her wonderful, thick hair, and had flashed at him with her deep blue eyes. He managed a few light jokes, and he got inexorably caught in her web of charm. When they left, he asked almost stammering whether he could see her again. She had smiled, already certain of her triumph, and offered him a card from her silver purse. Later, they went out together several times in Brussels, and she had invited him into her apartment. They became lovers. Robert offered her an outrageously expensive engagement ring, and they married less than a year after their first meeting. The marriage reception staged by Andrée, who had a large fortune of her own, was regarded as one of the grandest of Brussels, organised in a castle south of the capital. Robert brought his wife to his lodge of Robois, which he had then only begun to build and which was still a small house, not larger than a few rooms. Then, the trouble started.

Andrée forcefully loathed the countryside. Robert refused to live in Brussels. They had rows which ended in very nasty exchange of insults, then in passionate but exhausting reconciliations. Andrée drove on and off to Brussels in a sort of armistice of heated exchanges. She stayed in her apartment and attended theatre performances and concerts. She continued to seek out parties and diners, like she had done before her marriage. She could not give up her flamboyant life in the capital, of which she had been a much admired queen. She told Robert the quietness of the cabin in the wood stultified her senses and her mind. Robois was a cultural void, uninteresting and uncultivated. She had made no friends in Robois, sought nothing to occupy her mind with. She started to drink, became fickle in mood, acidic in conversations. She despised the people of Robois.

Robert suspected she had lovers when she did not return to the villa. She spent ever oftener her nights in Brussels, and she did not return to Boyu for several days, then she disappeared without contacting Robert for weeks and refusing to answer on her mobile telephone.

One evening, Robert found her dead-drunk on the sofa in his parlour. He woke her and dragged her half-conscious to her bedroom, but she screamed at him and hit him with her fists. When he asked what the matter was, she called him a dumbass and a no-good, a stupid little loser and a country-rat. The next moment, she vomited all over the bathroom and confessed she was pregnant. She did not want to be pregnant, but she was too late for an abortion.

Andrée stayed with Robert until two months after the birth of their daughter. Then she disappeared and left the child with her husband. Robert found out from acquaintances she subsequently lived with one lover after the other in Brussels. He hired a detective, compiled a dossier on her whereabouts, on the men she invited to her apartment at night, on the hotels she frequented with lovers, and had his lawyer file a divorce. The divorce was concluded with mutual consent before Robert had to make public the information he had assembled. Andrée granted Robert full guardianship of their daughter. She never afterwards asked to see her child. Since then, Robert Jacquet lived alone in the large house in the wood, now with a daughter of twelve.

Robert buried himself in work. He devoted his energy entirely to his enterprise and to his daughter. He sought to be involved in the groups and associations of Robois. He attended to the village feasts, drove in the mountain-bike races, organised the barbecue of the soccer team, and he dismissed none of his workers even when business went slower.

Six years ago, the former Bourgmestre of Robois, Jean Trussogne, had contacted him asking whether he might be interested in politics. Robert Jacquet knew very little of politics, and even less of the political landscape in Robois.

Jacquet and Trussogne met in the Bourgmestre's office in the Commune Hall. Trussogne explained to Robert the political situation of the villages. The United Democratic Party or UDP had abandoned its name in order to rule better and more, through an election list of *Intérêts Communaux*, of IC, of Communal Interests, in which also non-UDP-ers and non-party-members found a place. Trussogne had initiated that more modern evolution, which was better suited to a countryside commune. The group of IC had not gained a majority of votes in the last election, but nearly so. A new election was on next year. Trussogne reckoned the IC list would do well once more, but he explained slowly to Robert that he was terminally ill with cancer. He might still live a year, maybe a little longer, but he did not have the energy left to lead an election list to victory. He had discussed the issue with trusted advisers, with party members, with the Échevins of the commune, but none of these esteemed they were popular and strong enough to lead the list of IC. Jean Sauvent thought he was too old, André Bacca could not spend more of his time and attention to politics and he was unwilling to shoulder the responsibility of a Cabinet Leader. Nadine Dumortier was not a heavy-weight politician, a good manager, but lacking the charisma to lead a major campaign, so she hesitated and then refused, realising she did not possess sufficient leadership qualities to head a commune of thirty-thousand.

Bourgmestre Trussogne proposed Robert to lead the list IC at the next elections. Robert would have the full support of Trussogne and of the main members of the Cabinet. Sauvent and Bacca offered their help.

At first, Robert refused categorically. He too tried to dodge the charge of the responsibilities in a domain he knew nothing of, but Trussogne insisted. He argued Robert was popular, loved, a well-known figure already in Robois, a decent man and a fine manager. Many people of Robois had their houses built or restored by Jacquet&Duchâtel and fared well with the cooperation. Robert knew a lot of people in the villages. His wit and friendliness were appreciated. Trussogne, Sauvent and Bacca would help Robert with the elections campaign and learn him the tricks of their experience. They had teams of young people to glue posters in the villages, to distribute publicity folders, to talk well about him. The group of IC knew where the folders could be printed cheaply. A long list of sympathisers was available, and people would come together to put the folders with publicity for Jacquet in envelopes and distribute them in the village streets. The campaign force of IC would be at his disposal.

Trussogne assured patiently that Robois could be managed like an enterprise. The administration could use a stricter hand than his own. Jacquet was good-looking, tall, friendly, warm and gifted with a talent for putting people at ease with him. Robert listened with grace and sympathy to the troubles of the people, he helped where he could. He was naturally consoling and comforting, a jovial, decent man. There was only one snag, laughed Trussogne: Jacquet did not drink enough beer. He was not a bibulous politician. Times were changing, however, and beer flowed less with the people that counted than in the good old days. In short, many citizens of Robois and of the IC Group in particular, regarded Robert Jacquet, a man born in their commune, as a man of substance on whom they could rely to lead the villages well.

Robert Jacquet remained astonished and puzzled by the proposal, asked for a week to think it over and talk to a few persons. In that week he got called on the telephone by so many IC members, assuring him of their support, that he yielded to their plea. Together with the main IC members, he campaigned during the entire year that followed.

He did not receive help from everybody. Marc Thoran, Pierre Gasson and Albertine Dewez accepted him with grace but coolly. These prepared their own campaigns, kept aloof, and were probably a little jealous of the rapid success of Robert.

The IC Group won the elections gloriously, augmenting their score, and Robert Jacquet received a nice personal success. The IC group added two councillors to their number. Subsequently, Robert Jacquet was voted for by the Commune Council to the function of Bourgmestre, majority votes against minority votes. The majority that was formed continued with the same allied party as six years before, with the Liberal party. That was the general wish of IC members, and Robert had not objected.

With Robert Jacquet as Bourgmestre, Eliane Collado of the Liberal Party was appointed for Finances and Commerce. She was the most prominent member of the Liberal Party. That party proposed also the elder but very experienced and wise Gustave Tillard for Construction Works and Housing. Collado pushed forward a protégée of hers, a young female doctor, Simone Ash, for Social Care, Infancy and Social Housing. Executive Cabinet Councillors or Échevins for IC were Jean Sauvent for Public Works and Urbanism, but Sauvent immediately spoke of being replaced sometime during his term by another Councillor who would take part in the next elections for IC. He gave no name as yet. Still, Robert desired Sauvent's advice and urged the old man to hold on. André Bacca wanted the lighter items of Tourism and Culture. Marc Thoran agreed to take on all Personnel issues, Roads Security and all judicial

matters. Gasson obtained Sports and Mobility. Dewez wanted Education, Youth Care and the management of the commune's holiday sites.

Robert Jacquet would have to hold his team together, lead the Council sessions and the Police and Fire Brigade.

The commune was run smoothly and efficiently under Robert Jacquet. Robois seemed pleased with its new Bourgmestre. Trussogne died one year after the elections, and Robert Jacquet staged a moving ceremony of commemoration. He had liked the gentle Trussogne who had taught him so much about his villages.

Robert's popularity increased when the commune administration asked to be called a town and was granted that privilege. Henceforth the people of Robois could call their assembly of villages a town, the town of Robois.

Robert Jacquet was friendly and helpful to all in Robois, but intimate with only one other man, and that only since recently. He had met Youssouf Bikri, presented to him as Joseph Bikri, about eight months ago at a meeting of the Bourgmestres of the Police Zone covered by the division of Superintendent Paolo Timario. Bikri was the new main Superintendent whose team was assigned to Robois, but Robert had not met or heard of the man in the very first months of his function period. Bikri was still young, a newcomer to Robois, born in the largest city of Belgium, and a newcomer also to the countryside Police Zone of the neighbouring towns of Robois. Robert liked to hold frequent contacts with his Superintendent, for he was also, as Bourgmestre of Robois, responsible for the local police. It was money of Robois and of the adjacent communes that paid for the police force.

After that first, casual meeting, Bikri and Robert had met more often, first in Robert's office at the Town Hall, and then Robert had invited Joseph to his villa. Youssouf was a somewhat disoriented man in Robois, Robert judged. He kept aloof, shy even, at first, but then his quick wit, soft irony and underlying quiet cynicism appealed to Robert's own feelings. After a while, Youssouf could drive at any time into Robert's gravel entry to say hello and he was always warmly welcomed. Robert's daughter liked the strange man. Youssouf got invited to suppers, to TV football matches and even to video sessions Robert organised for himself and his daughter. These became regular evenings with snacks and wine. Youssouf had much to explain about his life. The two men saw and invited each other at feasts and parties, they became a well-known group that arrived together at commune dinners and balls and barbecues.

Bikri learnt much about the commune from Jacquet, and Jacquet asked Bikri's advice for police support at events. The men discussed together on how to handle the rising percentage of burglaries, drug dealing, juvenile delinquency, house disputes and other police issues for Robois.

Bikri had been appointed to Robois for over a year, and it was mainly by Robert Jacquet's constant help that Bikri got well introduced to the citizens of the country town. Robert had become Bikri's better friend for six months now. The two men licked their wounds, the ever-present Muslim immigrant image that Bikri drew behind him like a prisoner's burden, and the divorce plus daughter for Jacquet. Both men were single, desperately longing for female company, yet apparently unable and unwilling to engage easily in relations with women. Both felt a need for at least one confident.

Robert Jacquet pondered about all this while he drove on to his session of the Council of Robois. He was obliged by law to organise one such session by month, each session being held in the evening at eight o'clock and lasting usually about three hours. Robert also had to

hold Executive Cabinet meetings once a week. Each of these sessions lasted from four to seven hours, starting at one o'clock in the afternoon on Thursdays.

It was November, dark, wet and cold, and the rain drizzled down on Robert's car as he sped through the evening. Within one year from now, in October of next year, new elections would take place for the Councils of the Belgian communes. Robert would have to constitute a new list of candidates for the elections, though that was foremost the task of the President of the IC Group, of Albert Desjardins. Desjardins was not much in Robert's favour, a somewhat paunchy, cantankerous man who played too obviously the elderly statesman taking it for granted to be obeyed, but Robert did not believe his own position would be challenged. Robert wanted to serve for six years more as Bourgmestre of Robois. He had discovered with considerable surprise that he liked being Bourgmestre. He currently served his fifth year as Bourgmestre of the town of Robois, and he enjoyed it. He did not think much about the future, and took it for granted he would lead the next list of IC at the coming elections.

He was still recalling the faces of the men and women he wanted on the election list when he arrived in the centre of Haut-Robois, pulled over, and parked his car in front of the Town Hall, inside the former Abbey of Saint Adelbert.

A Robois Council Session

Robert Jacquet touched the electronic key securing absent-mindedly his black BMW car, and went over to the courtyard of the former abbey that housed the Town Hall of Robois. He stepped cautiously around the lawn on the cobble-stoned, slippery path, noted the electric lanterns had been lighted for the occasion of the Council Session this evening as he had asked. He went to the middle wing, but he heard a noise of talking people behind him, turned and noticed André Bacca and Nadine Dumortier approaching. He waited to greet them with a smile and a firm handshake. They walked along the left wing which housed part of the town's administration. A little farther Robert also greeted Pierre Gasson, and then he walked through the monumental, colonnaded Palladian porch to step into the Town Council Room. Many councillors had arrived early and sat now, chatting behind the narrow table placed in U-form. Robert noted paper, pencils and water stood on the fine red linen that covered the table. The administration had prepared the session well, as should be.

Robert walked resolutely to the centre seat, placed his thick pack of folders on the table and then went round to greet the other Councillors present. He threw a sign of welcome with his hand to people in the public he knew, among which Youssouf Bikri, who sat dressed in civil clothes in the middle of the last row. The Councillors of the majority parties, IC and Liberals, greeted Robert with a quick smile. Some opposition members appreciated him too, and these shook his hand warmly, others offered the end of their cold fingers. Robert ignored their frowning fronts and evading eyes, giving a jovial hello. In his own majority he had a special smile for Simone Ash, the Liberal Échevin.

Simone Ash was much of a puzzle for Robert Jacquet. He had met her for the first time when the new Cabinet had been installed, now five years ago, but she had remained an enigma for him. She was unmarried and Belgian, but she must have had English connections, for she possessed both nationalities. That was about all Robert had found out about her private life. She had been brought in rather suddenly by the Liberal party from nowhere, a shining star in

their firmament. Few people seemed to know her well, but she was a doctor with a fine clientele of patients and that had been the basis of her votes. She had come quite high in votes for the Liberal Party.

Simone lived in a hunters' lodge of the domain of castle Trioteignes. The small house had been transformed into a comfortable little house, but Robert had never set foot in there. She lived alone, seemed to have no steady companion and no lovers. She practised as a medical doctor in the centre of Robois, where she rented part of the lower floor of an apartment building, and she also worked in a hospital of Brussels. She hardly ever smiled openly, never responded to a warm smile from anybody, and formed a rather taciturn, stern figure in the Executive Cabinet meetings. She seldom proffered unsolicited opinions or comments, but she presented her items clearly, in short and professionally constructed phrases, and she managed all matters assigned to her to general satisfaction. Robert had nothing to add, nothing to ask her for her domain; everything he could think of she had already foreseen. Simone held a distance from all Councillors and Échevins, and that was a distance from here to China. The roads must have been paved with men who squired around her and who had tried and failed to get intimate with Miss Ash. When men and women who knew each other met in Wallony, they kissed. Robert, nor anybody else, had ever dared to give Simone even a chaste peck on the cheek. People only shook hands with Miss Ash.

Robert never met Doctor Simone Ash at communal events, dinners and feasts. Her popularity was based obviously only on her practice. He interrogated Youssouf Bikri about her, but also Youssouf could not offer new information on Simone Ash. Still, Simone Ash was probably the most attractive woman Robert Jacquet had ever met in Robois. The more he looked at her, the more he found her stylish to the utmost, dignified, fine and pretty, more beautiful even than his former wife Andrée. Robert feared he felt a little if not very much taken in love by Simone Ash, but he slapped against his cheek when he caught himself thinking along those lines, saying he was a stupid adolescent who would never learn. Moreover, Simone Ash was a member of the Liberal Party, although she was part of his majority group, and therefore somewhat of an enemy, and member of a party he did not trust entirely as an ally. Robert had to admit he had never, never once, caught her at being untrustworthy or failing to the majority spirit, but he stood on a very awkward footing with Simone Ash indeed, because of the lack of any communication that sliced deeper into her skin than a millimetre. When Robert engaged a conversation with any person, it took him generally not more than a few minutes to have that person reveal his or her character, yearnings and life issues. Robert was the proper image of the natural confidant, even if he seldom yielded much of his own feelings. He was a man who asked and did not talk of himself. Despite his natural easiness with people, he did not succeed in penetrating Simone Ash's defences!

Simone was a tall, slim, elegant, blond-haired, blue-eyed cool beauty with a perfectly symmetrical fair face featuring full, somewhat short but rounded full scarlet lips that seemed at all time to remain moist. She had elongated, narrow eyes and a thin, pert nose. Robert sometimes admired even her small rosy ears and the way she constantly drew her luxurious blond hair behind them. She preferred lively colours on her, he remarked, hue combinations such as red and white, blue and white, often a blouse and dress in lively flower patterns. Her shoes in Council and Cabinet sessions showed rather high heels. Her dress was never very long, but limited to on or just beneath the knees, and she showed a neat figure of long, perfectly shaped legs, a thin waist and an ample bust. She made a superb feminine, curvaceous figure! When she got excited, which did happen when she presented her topics in the Executive Cabinet, her fine breasts heaved against her usually tight blouse, so that Robert had then really to divert his eyes to the wall behind her to not stare. Stare and drool over

Simone Ash was what Robert should certainly not indulge in at Council sessions, in front of the assembled Councillors and of the public, among which he remarked today several journalists. Even the team of the local television company was present this evening, and a huge video camera was planted on high legs next to the wall. The cameraman adjusted his lenses to focus sharply on the Bourgmestre. That lens would follow his glance to the pretty Liberal, and could be shown with relish the next day to all Robois.

When everybody had found a seat and the animated humming of the welcoming was finished, Robert Jacquet opened the Council session a few minutes after eight o'clock.

In the session sat twenty-eight people for the town, the Échevins or Executive Councillors, the Secretary and the Councillors, and in front of them about thirty people of Robois and the journalists, forming the public. At Robert's right hand, at the head of the table, sat Alberte Hersalle, the Commune Secretary, the head of Robert's administration. To his left sat his First Échevin, Eliane Collado, the winner of the most votes for the Liberal Party and his loyal supporter, although member of another party group. Jean Sauvent of the IC Group sat next to Alberte Hersalle.

The first item on the agenda was the replacement of this Cabinet Councillor Jean Sauvent by Yves Govin, a younger IC Councillor. Robert thought he change would not raise a controversy with the Liberals, and draw no acidic remarks of most of the opposition members. The replacement was an internal matter of IC only. Jean Sauvent was close to sixty-three years old and he had announced repeatedly he desired to step down. The minority groups in the Council could not care much for who served as what in the majority. The item carried the most apprehensions for Robert Jacquet himself, for when it was announced to him only as of one month ago, it had come as a complete surprise to him.

About one month ago Yves Govin had stood up in an internal meeting of the members of the IC Group, weasel-faced, greased black hair sparingly curved backwards over his skull. Govin was a Councillor, but until that moment he had been one of the quieter majority Councillors and he had even missed several sessions. The IC Group President had to call Govin to ask him to be present at more sessions, for in each Council session the votes counted, the more so because IC plus the Liberals did not have a large majority. At the political gathering, Govin came out of the blue to announce his candidature for the replacement of Sauvent. Robert Jacquet had remarked that even Sauvent had been surprised at first that evening. Sauvent had not lately repeated his wish to leave, despite his earlier pronounced preference. Robert thought Sauvent had let the idea pass.

It seemed Govin had now assembled a strong support, for the Cabinet Councillors Gasson and Dewez spoke immediately forcefully in his favour. The IC President, Albert Desjardins, sought to win time. He also knew nothing about Govin's sudden cocksure claim. He argued there was an issue, for Govin stood not directly well in line when it came to numbers of votes cast to him in the last elections. The candidates on the IC list had signed a charter before the elections, stipulating that Executive Cabinet Councillors of IC would be appointed in order of numbers of votes. Four IC Councillors between the last Échevin, Albertine Dewez, and Govin, had received more votes than Govin! If one of these four people wanted to become Échevin, Govin's candidature was sent to oblivion. The three women and one man were present at the meeting. They declared one by one, as by miracle, they withdrew their claim for becoming a member of the Cabinet, in favour of Govin. The IC President, the Cabinet members André Bacca and Nadine Dumortier, as well as Robert Jacquet, were totally surprised.

The arrangement, the negotiations for Govin, had been going on silently behind their backs. So much was clear. Robert Jacquet's mind raged. He tried to understand why this had happened. He would not have presented Yves Govin to replace Jean Sauvent. Desjardins also would have chosen another person from the Council. Why had the candidature of Govin been forced through? Robert and Albert Desjardins looked at each other with the same apprehensions in mind. Robert asked for a week of reflection, but a vote had been forced and cast that same evening, urged by Govin and his supporters. Govin suddenly showed much eloquence. During the votes, most of the IC Councillors voted for Govin. The hand of the IC President and of Robert Jacquet had been twisted.

Robert understood a few days later only what had been going on. Yves Govin had changed jobs. He had quite surreptitiously received a function as Political Undersecretary to the Party President of the United Democrats in the Brussels headquarters of that party. Telephone calls had immediately been sent from the headquarters building down the echelons, from regional to agglomeration to local commune levels. The Agglomeration President of the UD Party had intervened personally to put pressure on the IC Councillors of Robois to force them by menace and promises to abandon their place in the Cabinet for Govin. A post of teacher was promised to the son of one of the Councillors; another Councillor was offered a promotion in the Ministry administration in which he worked. A regional subsidy was promised to the sports club of the third Councillor. A fourth Councillor, a woman, explained in tears to Robert Jacquet and to the IC President Desjardins that people from the UD Party had threatened her to be blocked in everything she did afterwards if she did not yield her place to Govin. The promises and threats amounted to outright blackmail, and both Desjardins and Jacquet were outraged but powerless. In the next Council session, Jean Sauvent would be replaced as Échevin by Yves Govin. Robert and Albert crept nearer to each other, both looking suspiciously at the newcomer who had challenged them and won a small victory without notifying them.

Several people came to know by which means Govin had grabbed power, and many promised a hard time to Govin, but they faced established facts. They clenched their fists but remained silent. Govin could be refused if four other Councillors at least voted with the minority parties in the Council against him, and Robert Jacquet could have arranged that still, but that would have meant a public dissent within the IC Group and within the ruling majority. The dispute would grow into a serious scandal in the press and in the town, and the IC Group would be weakened. The IC President and Robert Jacquet could neither allow nor afford a scandal at one year of the elections. They let go. Yves Govin would be voted in at the next Council session as Échevin of Robois.

The worm was in the apple, regretted Jacquet. The easy days of a group of friends working in harmony towards a common goal for the benefit of the people of Robois was past history. Brussels had spotted the opportunity of a town with a firmly established majority of a political group that should be controlled by the Party. The Brussels power games had reached Robois.

Robert Jacquet was not sure he wanted a part of that game. The thought of resignation entered his mind. He might not want to be a pawn on the chess board of Brussels. A hue of sombre disappointment hung over him. He realised, however, that resigning meant delivering the Council to Yves Govin. Robert would probably also have a challenger for the function of next Bourgmestre of Robois for the elections of the next year. Robert tasted sour in the mouth, realising the bile was Govin. Had he reinforced the political group in Robois only to see the

IC Group be taken over by the old political guard controlled out of a building in Brussels?
Would Govin represent the dagger protruding from his back?

In the Council meeting that evening, one of the Socialist opposition members could not let the occasion pass to shout his sarcastic comments. The man stated it was an outrageous denial of the democracy principle and cheating on the voters of Robois to appoint to the Executive Cabinet somebody who had stood as third last on the IC election list of highest votes. The Councillor who spoke out thus was Jean Castelle, who was also a Member of Parliament and a future Federal Minister if Robert Jacquet's information was right. Robert expected Castelle to become more and more vocal during the next Council sessions, for the man would dash into the election year with the aura of MP and Minister, and go for the jugular of the IC Group whenever he saw an occasion. Castelle would be wielding a lot of influence and power in the election period, and promise much to attract more Robois voters. Robert's weakness would be Castelle's strength. Robois votes were vital for Castelle's career and position in his party. Robert Jacquet had to answer reluctantly IC wanted to serve the community best by giving the function of Échevin to a talented, intelligent person who had enough time to dedicate his effort to the good of the people. The IC Group had therefore agreed internally to propose Govin to the Council. Robert added the other Councillors had expressed their wish not to become Échevin. That short explanation had to suffice, but many eyebrows went up, fronts frowned and the opposition grinned. When Jacquet glimpsed rapidly in the direction of Govin, he saw also Govin grinning openly at the table, sure of his newly found power, and well aware the Bourgmestre has spoken against his own convictions. Jean Sauvent received a smattering of applause when he exchanged his seat with Govin.

The remaining items on the agenda proved to be less controversial. The repair of several roads in the village was voted for unanimously, as were the works inside the swimming pool of Bas-Robois and an extension of the sports complex.

There was an issue with the house of the parish priest of Grand-Liges. Simone Ash had concluded an agreement with the Church Committee to exchange the large, old mansion for a smaller but more modern and more comfortable apartment for the priest in the village. The Bishopric had accepted too, but the priest now asked for a supplementary meeting place where the Church Committee could assemble. Simone Ash proposed a large room in the village meeting hall, and the priest had accepted this. The transfer had to be voted in the Council. The issue was also that Simone Ash desired to restore the former parish priest house to install social apartments in the old building. The restoration would be handled and paid for by the Adelbert Social Housing Company, the ASHC, a company that was in theory independent of the town's administration but nevertheless an instrument of the administration, serving to provide Robois with housing for the poor at low rents. The Town Council had also to vote for the transfer of the house to the private ASBL, the *Association sans But Lucratif* that was the ASHC. Several people who lived in the neighbourhood objected to the project. Around the parish office lived mainly well-to-do people in fine villa's, who feared the arrival of several poorer families in the quiet village centre. Ash and Jacquet knew the wealthy mansion owners of Grand-Liges objected only on these grounds, but many other arguments had been called in. Ash had met and overcome some resistance in her own Liberal Party. In the Council session, the Socialist Party and the IC Group supported her in block to reach a comfortable majority. Two Councillors of the Liberal Party voted against, against their own Échevin. Jean Castelle stood up again, saying he found it very strange the Liberal Échevin had apparently lost the confidence of a substantial fraction of her own party. Robert Jacquet let that remark unanswered. He saw how Simone reddened in the face when she came under attack. The vote against her had been open and public. She would have once more to take up

the issue within her party. Robert Jacquet thought this had not been the nicest session, neither for him nor for Simone Ash.

Robert Jacquet continued imperturbably to introduce item after item to vote upon in the Council session. Few objections were raised on matters of daily management. The necessary credits for a series of works were voted.

Another minor issue set the Council in sympathetic laughter. On a side road of the N11, on a communal road with heavy traffic, the Échevin of Public Works, Jean Sauvent, had drawn an uninterrupted full white line in the middle of the road so that cars could not pass each other anymore. On that stretch, the cars would have to remain driving one after the other. Passing cars were the frequent cause of accidents on that winding road.

Sauvent had forgotten that on one side of that stretch stood a garage, belonging to Eric and Nicole Doms-Berlé, and that garage also served petrol. Since there lay now a full white line in front of their fuel station, cars coming from the right side of the road were not allowed to drive across that line into the station to take on petrol. Also, cars that drove out from the station could not turn to the left. The couple Doms-Berlé had seen their revenue diminish by fifty per cent. They screamed out loud to transform the uninterrupted white line by an interrupted one right in front of their station, so that cars could once more cross the road and get the fuel they needed without having to drive to the next bifurcation. Jean Sauvent, Échevin no longer, called out from the public he did not object to breaking up part of the line, and Govin nodded. The change came at a slight cost, but Marc Thoran, who was responsible for the security of the roads, accepted the change graciously, as well as the cost. This point also was rapidly and unanimously accepted.

Robert Jacquet presented a new sports centre for Aucourt, on which the opposition objected with a few words, criticising the lateness of the proposal for an old need, and then also this, last agenda item, was voted.

Robert closed the Council session at ten o'clock in the evening.

Many Councillors continued chatting in the Council Room, but the public and the reporters left immediately.

Robert Jacquet was still gathering his papers when Simone Ash came up to him from behind the backs of the remaining Councillors, asking to see him for a few minutes in private afterwards. Jacquet proposed to meet her the next day, but she insisted on a short talk that same evening. Robert supposed Simone wanted to tell him about what had happened with the parish priest office. Robert told he would wait in the Bourgmestre's office of the Town Hall within fifteen minutes. Ash did not thank him with a smile; she headed straight for the exit.

Robert Jacquet was the very last man to leave the Council Room. He had tarried for that moment. At the door, he found Jean Sauvent waiting for him.

Jacquet took Sauvent's arm and drew him to the wall, saying, 'Jean, this was our last meeting together. I'm truly sorry. You should not have abandoned us this way and so suddenly. We shall feast you by the IC Group at the next Council session, so we will invite you once more to a session. You did a good job for many, many years, and you might have stayed on. You still master the issues in your domain, so I regret having to see you go before the end of your term. I'll also miss you personally very much in the Cabinet. I would like to ask your opinion on matters in the future, so I hope you will allow me to come to you once every while and discuss things over with you.'

The older man sighed, 'I appreciate how you feel, Robert, and my door will always be open for you. Thank you for your kind words. I did feel a little burnt out, you know, already five years ago. It is true I had found lately a new taste for the town politics. You made the atmosphere relax in the Cabinet and that gave me hope and courage. But Yves Govin insisted very hard for me to leave! He said I had grown old and inadequate. He argued it was time I passed serious matters to a younger guy.'

'Just how much did he insist, Jean? Why did you not come to me?'

'He insisted very hard. I can tell you now, for I am out of further reach. Party leaders of Brussels phoned me. They made me understand it was in the interest of my elder daughter's husband that I let go at Robois. My son-in-law had a tough period in the Finance Ministry these last months, which has put a strain on my daughter's marriage and on her family. The men from Brussels told me in covert terms my son-in-law might be transferred with a nice promotion out of the Brussels offices to closer to Robois, to a function in Namur, to a less stressful job, if I handed over my Cabinet place without objections to Govin. Had I refused, my son-in-law would be put under more pressure in the Ministry. I complied.'

'That is simple blackmail, Jean!'

'Oh, it was presented in very sweet, honey-tongued words, Robert, but in clear, simple terms that cut like a butcher's knife.'

Jean Sauvent sounded bitter. He bowed his head under the piercing eyes of Robert Jacquet.

'I am too old to resist, Robert,' Sauvent continued, 'and I could not win this fight. I want my daughter to be happy. The matter over Yves Govin was decided in a few hours. Govin himself also came to plead, or rather to threaten me some more.'

Robert stepped up closer to Sauvent. 'I do not like this way of settling arrangements, Jean. I will not have this go so easily.'

'Neither do I like what happened. I wanted to warn you. Govin is scheming behind your back and behind the backs of many people of our IC Group. He is a party-man now. Brussels wants to tighten control over the votes of IC, making of IC again a more complete United Democratic list, though benefiting from the name and reputation of IC. Govin will seek control over IC. He certainly has the backing of the UD Party heads of Brussels, and with them he can wield a lot of power over our group.'

'Have you told this to André Bacca, to Nadine Dumortier, to Marc Thoran? Are they even remotely aware of what is at stake?'

'No, I haven't, and I rather wouldn't. They are not stupid. They are politicians with experience. They know things like this can happen. They will have understood something nasty is cooking inside IC. You must talk to them. They still support you in IC and they like you, but the Brussels party may reach them too.'

'I shall talk to them, then,' Robert replied.

Jean Sauvent's eyes suddenly passed along Robert's, and Robert followed the glance to see Yves Govin standing outside, waiting, watching them with a smirk on his face. Sauvent nodded a goodbye with his head and walked on. Robert followed him to say still a few words to the people who had been present at the Council session. A journalist asked him for comments on the public works that had been voted. Robert saw Yves Govin turn and speed along through the abbey's courtyard, into the night.

The Liberal Party. Robert Jacquet

I walked through the now drizzling rain to my office of the Bourgmestre on the other side of the honorary courtyard. My office lay in the left wing of the abbey, in what had once been the office of the Abbot. The room was long and L-shaped. My table, a number of chairs and a filing cabinet stood at the far end, hidden, behind the corner of the L. When I sat behind my desk I had a fine side view on the courtyard, an eye on the green lawn, on the fountain and even on the huge oak tree that was the pride of Robois and was supposed to be over a hundred and fifty years of age. Parts of the abbey dated from the fourteenth century and earlier, and that was certainly the case for the rounded, brick vaults in the other branch of my room, which I used as a meeting room. I had recuperated a long, sturdy table with nicely carved legs. That table must surely have come from the abbey too, but surfaced in the cellars of the PISC. I remarked it in time, had it cleaned and placed in my longer section. The table must have dated from the eighteenth century when one of the wealthier abbots had also restored and added a long branch to his office. The space I had now was worthy of a prince, but I sat there only to receive visitors with some pomp. I was more of a man with a flying office. I worked on the road, in my car, or at home, mobile telephones helping.

I decided to wait for Miss Ash seated near the entry, at my long table. I thought that might be less formal and imposing for her than me sitting behind my solid desk and she in the smaller chair on the other side. I turned a chair to the door, placed another in front of me and waited patiently. Yes, it would be cosier to receive her thus for a quick chat, seated close to each other, rather than being separated by a hundred kilogrammes of heavy oak.

I felt tired. I sighed and looked at my watch. I wanted to return home, though the house would be desolate and enormous for one person. I did not want to talk politics at this late hour! Why had I accepted?

The door creaked, opened, and Simone Ash ran into my office. She panted when she arrived, for obviously she had been talking to other persons in the abbey's courtyard and gotten late, before coming to me.

'I won't keep you long, I'm sorry,' she began. 'I ran into a few people still. I wanted just a few words on the appointment of Councillor Govin to Cabinet Member.'

I sighed again. I had not expected her to talk about Govin this evening. I had heard quite enough about Govin. The choice of that guy to the Collège des Échevins, to the Cabinet, was entirely an internal affair for the IC Group. We choose from among the IC Councillors whoever we wanted to sit in the Cabinet. The Liberal Party did not have to bother about Govin.

Ash continued while I studied her finely chiselled face, her small but exquisite features, her boyish face, her delicately moving lips, 'we are worried. Can the choice of Govin by IC mean any change in our relations?'

'First of all I would like to know who you mean by 'we'? I replied, 'and then I should answer you that no, I don't see how anything should change the Cabinet. We have a new man on board, but our work continues as before. Govin is IC as Sauvent was IC.'

'Yes, of course,' Ash hesitated. 'By 'we' I mean the Liberal Party Members. I was sent to you by Eliane Collado and also by the Cabinet Members and the Councillors of the Liberal Party.'

'That means by many people,' I chided a little.

I considered Eliane Collado a friend and confident of long standing. I had worked at adding and restoring her villa. Why had not Eliane come to me herself, as she always did? Eliane was also the acting President of the Liberal Party of Robois. Was she withdrawing from me

already, keeping a distance between me and her for the next elections, being more circumspect in her support of the Bourgmestre by sending Simone Ash as the Hermes of service, the non-committing envoy? How quickly does one lose friends in politics, I thought. Eliane was already letting me feel the support of the Liberal Party in the coming election year would be cautious, reserved, and subject to revision.

Simone Ash read my feelings immediately from my face. A glance of melancholy, maybe of pity hung suddenly as a veil in her eyes, and I resented that look. I did not want her to see me weak, castigated.

‘We would like to continue our alliance with IC after the next elections,’ Ash explained.

‘Eliane wanted you to know that already now. We, the Liberal Party, cannot openly declare that at this moment, because such a public statement would be regarded by the population as if elections were not necessary, as if matters had been arranged beforehand. Nevertheless, we would want you and IC to know we are willing to conduct a new alliance with IC for the next Cabinet. We would like to know your opinion on this proposal.’

‘Your proposal seems fine to me,’ I replied. ‘I’ll convey the message to the IC President and to a few trusted people in our group. We shall indeed have to keep the agreement quiet. However, I cannot today speak for IC in this matter. I must let the IC Group Office decide on our alliances, but you can tell Eliane I too prefer continuing the good work with our friends in the Liberal Party of Robois, as long as your current leaders and Councillors remain in power. You can give Eliane my word on that. Please tell her I am slightly disappointed she did not speak to me about these matters herself.’

I kept looking steadfastly and a bit hard and cold at Ash, so that she could convey my disillusion to Eliane Collado. Simone and Eliane had to understand Eliane had not come forward enough by a long way. The confirmation of an alliance was something the President of the Liberal Party had to bring to me, not a messenger.

Simone Ash hesitated.

‘To come back to the second part of my message,’ Simone continued, ‘we wonder what role Yves Govin might play in IC.’

I kept my silence. Ash had vexed me a little by now. If Eliane kept her distance, I was not going to give the Liberal Party, Eliane or Simone, more than they deserved at this stage. I withheld my unconditional confidence, and regretted it immediately.

Simone continued, ‘I don’t know how to say this the right way. We heard Yves Govin is a high-ranking Party Official in the office of the Federal President of the United Democratic Party. He is ambitious and well supported in Brussels. We fear he might become a heavy-weight in IC and force his ideas upon IC at Robois. We fear also he might try to force a coalition with Castelle and the Socialists in our town.’

‘He might try that,’ I agreed gruffly. ‘Castelle and the Socialist Party will exert pressure on the United Democrats of Brussels. They may together want to have IC change alliances. I am aware the Socialist Party wants Castelle in power here, as an Échevin in the Executive Cabinet, possibly even as Bourgmestre. Govin may be the instrument of the Party leaders of Brussels who desire to accommodate the Socialists to gain their goodwill and a few nice posts elsewhere, maybe to obtain a Ministry post. I know of all that, though only since recently. Those people may have forgotten the mathematics of the voting. I had ten times more votes on my name than Yves Govin. That also has a weight of power. Politics is a power game, and the ultimate power lies with the votes. If I have to lock horns with Govin, I’ll do so! Will the IC Party of Robois and the UD Party of Brussels risk losing my votes, and thereby lose their majority? What holds me from coming to the elections with yet another group than IC, with

my own group, and rely on my friends and my popularity? No, I have absolutely do not have to pander to Govin's wishes! I am also unprepossessing when he is concerned.'

Simone Ash watched me sharply. She sat in awe. She should know I could play hardball too. I added, 'you are well informed. Eliane is well informed. Still, I repeat, why did she not come to ask for this herself?'

I stopped speaking, waiting for an answer that was difficult to come.

'No doubt,' Simone reflected, 'you know as much as, or more than we do. Eliane would have told you this herself, but Eliane is considering leaving politics after the elections. She may not even represent her candidature on the list for the Liberal Party!'

That was real and hot news! This was a day for surprises, indeed.

I reacted rather quickly, 'Eliane is the generally accepted leader of the Liberal Party. Why does she want to quit now?'

'Eliane's husband is much older than she. He intends to retire within two years. Eliane and Paul have discussed moving to the vicinity of their two children, who live both with their families in the South of France. They shall leave Robois. The information is extremely confidential, Monsieur Jacquet. Only you and I know of her intentions and Eliane wants the fact to be kept silent for at least until the next elections, at least until the moment the list of the Liberal party will be made public. If she has to remain on that list, she shall not announce her leaving until after the elections. You must understand what is at stake.'

'And she is handing over her prestige and leadership to Simone Ash,' I concluded.

Ash sent me a quick, angry, annoyed look of defiance, but also of pride.

'Not necessarily,' she shot back. 'Who becomes the new leader of the Liberal Party will be decided by the Party Committee!'

'Of course,' I conceded, grinning.

'Of course,' Simone Ash repeated.

A silence fell.

Simone Ash waited a few seconds, looked at her fingernails, bowed her head and continued then in a lower tone, 'I am not sure yet whether I want to get involved more and deeper in politics. Party Leadership involves more responsibilities than I may be willing to take on. I remain first and foremost a doctor! I have not made up my mind yet. Still, you must know I would appreciate more to be your ally than the ally of any other politician of Robois.'

Ash reddened when she spoke these words, which might be interpreted in different ways, and her words surprised me once more on that memorable day. I noticed the nuances in what she said. She would welcome a political alliance with me personally, not necessarily with the IC Group, which meant not necessarily with Govin.

Again, I did not say anything for a few moments. I studied Simone's pearl necklace. Had Simone merely been imprudently candid, or were her words an overture to stronger personal relations between us? An experienced politician would not have said something like this. Eliane would never have uttered her personal preference openly. Why also had Eliane sent Simone to me? Did Eliane want me to regard Simone as her crown princess, as her successor, and had she wanted to offer Simone to me so that I would give her the same confidence as I had given her, Eliane? Had Eliane remarked in the Council how I stared at Simone at times? More than one game was being played, I surmised.

I said, 'I appreciate what you just told me. I'll summarise the situation as follows. At this moment, I still definitely want to be the next Bourgmestre of Robois, and I want to lead the IC list of candidates for the coming elections. I am aware that Govin, backed by Brussels, may become a challenger. I would appreciate hearing any new information your party can bring

me on him and on his position within the headquarters of the UD Party in Brussels. I shall have my own sources, of course, but anything interesting learnt from within the Government, for instance, might interest me. My intentions are to continue and strengthen our alliance. Of all this I will not speak one word in public, except with the IC President and with very few friends I can trust totally. Nevertheless, I don't know what the future will bring us. Please tell Eliane also I shall fight for my intentions.'

'We were sure you would,' Simone confirmed rapidly. 'Eliane wanted you to know that whatever happened in the Liberal Party and especially with her, you could have confidence in her and in me. I also will now summarise. We silently but firmly support you as our next Bourgmestre in a preferred alliance. This feeling is strong with Eliane, with me and with our closest friends in the Liberal Party of Robois. We shall support any new alliance with you, with IC or with any other party led by you, to be concluded officially only in the night of the elections, after the voting results have become public. We ask you formally to be the first party to be contacted by you to form the new *Collège des Échevins*, the Executive Cabinet, for Robois. We also will try to contact you as soon as possible in the night. We ask you not to conclude any alliance until you have heard of us.'

'That is conforming to my intentions, and thus we shall agree,' I promised.

I added, 'if anything changes to these views, I shall let you know immediately.'

Simone threw me again a quick glance, for of course my last words made the future again less predictable and stable than she might have wished. It was the best I could grant, however.

At that point, Simone made a gesture as if she wanted to get up from her chair. Our conversation was at an end. Almost. I could not hold out any longer, then.

I wished all prudence and patience to hell, threw myself head first into disaster asking, begging softly, 'Simone, can we meet somewhere else than in this office? May I invite you to have supper with me on another evening? We could go to the *Lady of the Lake*?'

The *Lady of the Lake*, was a two star restaurant in Besnes, not far from where Simone lived and also not far from my own house. The choice was bad, I reflected too late, for if anybody of a village of Robois saw us there together, the news of much more than a political alliance would run like fire through the town. When the words were out, I realised how blunt they must have sounded, so it as my turn to redden. I should have found an excuse and a smile, saying something like that I wanted to hear a little more about the new leader of the Liberals, or I might have told her I wanted to find out where her English sounding name came from. But I didn't do any of that, and I blamed myself instantly for the bluntness, stupidity and damned impatience. Any other proposal would have sounded worse, however. I was a clumsy idiot. I was an engineer, not a diplomat, and probably also a very bad politician.

Simone Ash's answer was thrown back quickly and dryly. 'I cannot do that, Monsieur Jacquet. We cannot flaunt our political relations in the open, not now.'

Of course we could not, but her refusal was on another level too. I felt sadly disappointed with the rebuke, the so manieth setback of the day. I had received one more vestigial wound to my pride. Nobody was to approach Miss Ash, and certainly not Robert Jacquet! So much sounded very clearly in her voice. I felt like a libidinous leprechaun! Ash continued to get up, she pushed her chair decidedly under the table, did glimpse at my face for a fraction of a second, saw what she probably expected, and turned her back to me. She hurried to the door, flung one panel wide open and left me sitting at the imposing table for the fool I very much was. What woman in her true mind would want to mess with me, with an uninteresting chap who would probably not survive the coming elections, who lived like a solitary hermit in the woods, had a nasty divorce behind him and a handicapped daughter at home?

I looked at the six stern faces on the portraits of former Abbots that decorated my walls. Then too I had saved from oblivion in the cellars of the Abbey.

‘I chuckled, ‘you guys haven’t been of much help this evening!’

But then, they too probably didn’t understand much about the strange nature of womanhood. Well, there was no point in whimpering about it. I had better lick these wounds too, and march on.

The months of November and December of that year came and went bleak and wet and windy. It rained days long because the Jetstream flew over France instead of over the North of Scotland, holding the low pressure zones over England, sending us rain showers from over the ocean for weeks. The atmosphere was nevertheless not extremely cold. We had our normal Belgian autumn weather.

Nothing much worth mentioning happened. I was the Bourgmestre and I handled matters of the town as efficiently as I could. We prepared the festivities of the spring and summer, among which the important and famous March of Saint Adelbert. This brought a note of gaiety in what we were thinking of. I heard very little of Yves Govin, to tell the truth, in that period. The man attended only one Cabinet meeting out of the eight we had to organise, giving as excuses he was withheld in Brussels. This might have satisfied the minds of the United Democrats of the IC Group, but I found the fact unacceptable. Govin had to comply with his duties and responsibilities. The majority IC wielded in the Cabinet was precious. We needed every vote and voice. December was only half a month. I decided to call Govin to order in January, but I wondered how much real pressure I would be able to exert on him. Simone Ash avoided my eyes, and I too spoke to her only in syllables and as a professional manager during the weekly Cabinet meetings.

We had not a difficult time to draw up a new budget for the coming year. This took me a few additional meetings and as many headaches in meetings with Eliane Collado. Eliane never mentioned the name of Simone Ash. Additional meetings took place at the Town hall to guarantee the votes of each Cabinet member. The accounts of the past year also showed no issues. We would end the year with green figures.

Christmas Eve and New Year’s Day came. We frittered away that time. I feasted them alone with my daughter and I was very pleased Youssouf Bikri spent the evenings with us at my home. We formed the association of lonely bachelors. We watched the end-of-year TV programmes, drank our Cognacs and ate the good food of delicatessen we ordered from a caterer.

On New Year’s Day, several people dropped in to wish us a Happy New Year. I was a little surprised at the marks of sympathy, and my house filled with friends in the afternoon, Joseph Bikri once more among them.

I held a New Year’s reception in the middle of January for the personnel of the administration of Robois. Many people smiled when they expressed their wishes of luck for the year, referring to the coming elections. I even spoke a little with Jean Castelle, the Socialist Party Member and now the proud Minister of Pensions, and the man addressed me in the warmest of tones. Maybe I had made a devil out of a man who was merely and adversary but not a dishonest politician. Life dragged on with the usual bore.

Chapter 2. January and February

A session of the *Collège des Échevins*. Robert Jacquet

On the fifth of January I organised the first Cabinet Meeting of the year. We had not had a session of the *Collège des Échevins* for two weeks, so many items had accumulated on the agenda. I spent a few days preparing the points.

The day before the session, Paul Degambe rang at my home.

I was alone that day, musing for an hour or so over the plans of my house. I wondered whether it was possible to add a horse stable on my grounds. My daughter had asked me for a pony, and I thought working with a horse might be an interesting therapy for her. I would have to work with her, of course, but I had not only my days to work in, but also my nights, and I thought I could cope with the added hours I would have to spend with her. Should I add a stable next to my villa, or should I let a pony or nice horse remain at a nearby farm? My bell rang, interrupting brusquely my thoughts, and Paul burst in. He indeed burst in, for when I opened the door he ran past me, straight to my living-room and threw himself seemingly exhausted in a leather sofa.

Paul was another friend of mine, more a colleague than an intimate friend, but he had been invited several times before to my villa and knew the outlay of the rooms. He had helped me organise feasts in Robois and we had drunk many a glass of wine together in the summer tents of the Robois festivities. Today, he seemed extremely nervous. He raked his fingers constantly through his scraggy hair, had bloodshot eyes in an ugly, tired, red face, and he continuously moved his arms and legs as if he were pursued by a detachment of bloodthirsty hussars. Degambe was also the Director of the Society for Social Housing of Robois, an ASBL called *Adelbert Housing*, of which Simone Ash was the President of the Management Board.

Adelbert Housing was a company that worked entirely independently from the town administration and from the Council of Robois, but the company had been created by the Council. It received subsidies from Robois, worked mainly with subsidies of the Walloon Region, and we occasionally voted in the Cabinet to grant terrains and houses to it in order for the company to build social houses and apartments for us. By tradition, the Échevin of Public Housing served also as the President of Adelbert Housing, and that was Simone Ash. Robois had no other means, no specific administration to build social dwellings by. The company had invested heavily, using its subsidy money and the revenues of the rents, to install an ambitious program of new buildings. We wanted to double the number of social apartments in Robois from one hundred to two hundred in two years! We had to do that, for immigration moved tens of poor newcomers southwards from Brussels to Robois, so that we had urgent needs and many new demands to lodge these new poor in.

I granted Degambe some time to blow off steam. He kept wiping off the sweat from his forehead with a dirty handkerchief although the radiators were not switched on inside my rooms. I usually stopped the central heating to the strict minimum for the night and I had not yet turned the temperature higher. I preferred coolness over warmth. Finally, I asked Paul what was the matter.

‘Several ugly things fell upon my head,’ cried Degambe.

I offered him a coffee. He pointed to the brandy bar however, and after some hesitation and a glimpse at the clock for the early hour I poured him a hefty Cognac and handed him the glass disapprovingly. I knew his wife; she would not have agreed with him drinking in the morning. ‘Thank you, he nodded,’ and I saw he meant it. ‘You’ll never guess what befell on me this time.’

I responded, but not before pouring also my first coffee of the day. I was not entirely awoke yet, not before that coffee, I had worried a part of the night about the horse stable, and I remained slightly irritated at Paul’s eruption.

‘Tell me,’ I said.

‘I am being attacked in court for sexual harassment, me, Paul Degambe,’ he began, ‘and that is only the first matter. A Socialist member of the Management Board of Adelbert Housing has launched rumours against me for having fraudulently assigned contracts to a company for the maintenance of the central heating in our social apartments. If that was not enough, the woman also accused me of having used the credit card of Adelbert Housing for personal purchases. Imagine, me, Paul Degambe!’

He had twice used his own name. He could not allow somebody believing he was dishonest, I thought. That was a good sign.

‘Wait, wait,’ I remarked. ‘Let’s handle one issue at the time. What about the sexual harassment?’

‘You know I am not a bad guy, Robert! I do not harass the ladies,’ Paul wailed unnerved.

‘Yes, I place my hands on women and on men to be friendly-like, but that is only because I am a nice guy. I want to be jovial, caring, amiable, gentle and loving. We have that Zumurud woman in our personnel. She cleans our premises. She is a Muslim, which she hid when we hired her. She came in with her hair visible, but now she works with a shawl on her head. Everybody who comes in our building thinks he or she has arrived at Mecca. We tolerated her attitude. We do not want to be accused of racism or discrimination. She told women of my staff that it is not allowed at all for men to stare at her or to touch her, or to tell her what she must do. That is not allowed by her religion. Now she accuses me of urging her repeatedly to take off her shawl, which is true, for people stare at her precisely because she has a chador on her head. She also claims I touched her back and shoulders. That also is true, but I did that only to point out to her how superficially she works. Yes, I yelled at her. I want the cleaning to be done a lot better. She calls that harassment! Am I to let her do as she pleases? I want a well-run institution! I told her I would dismiss her if she did not work better, but she put all her remarks in writing and went to the police and then to the Judge of Namur with a complaint for harassment! I bet she is out for my money!’

‘That is annoying, but necessarily not very bad,’ I reflected. ‘You can explain yourself with decent arguments. You have good reasons for what you did. I don’t think the police or a judge would refuse your reasoning and your defence. You have no record for sexual assault; people know you as a jovial type. The Judge will take all that into account. The complaint will turn against Zumurud. By the way, who is that woman? I saw her get into a big Jaguar the other day when she had finished her job. Why does she work as a cleaning woman when a Jaguar comes to fetch her?’

‘I don’t know, but of course I have remarked that too. Her husband drives a Jag. They live in a village adjacent to Robois. I bet the guy handles drugs or something like that. I would not be surprised if they had a cannabis farm in their cellar.’

I grinned.

‘Did you have had trouble with sexual harassment before?’ I wondered.

‘No, of course not,’ Paul shrieked.

I added quickly, 'we can ask Simone Ash to talk to the woman. Maybe this Zumurud can be brought to withdraw her complaint. Zumurud needs to understand this is Belgium, not Morocco. We do things differently. I could also ask Youssef Bikri to have a talk with her in Arabic and explain things to her. He may learn more. No, sexual harassment by you seems highly improbable. What woman would want to be involved with a hairy bear like you?' Paul Degambe had a thick, straggly black beard and quite some facial hair which he never shaved. Paul looked at me angrily.

I continued, 'come on, Paul, I joked! This will sort itself out. This is nothing serious.'

'Tell that to my wife,' Paul grumbled.

'I'll do that,' I promised. 'What about the other rumours?'

'One of the two Socialist Party members of the Management Board accuses me of having allocated contracts for the maintenance of the central heating systems in the apartment buildings, big contracts, to always the same company. I do know the boss of that company, a man from Robois, by the way. He has been a friend of many years, but he won the contracts simply because his offers were the best and priced the lowest. Since the company is situated in Robois, his mechanics arrive very fast in our houses when defects happen. Speed is essential, for when in winter the temperature is low, we do not want heating to be failing for more than an hour or so. The people who live in our apartments are often young. They have little children. The Socialist woman accuses me of giving the contracts always to the same company. She claims I received money for that. She also says the company maintains the sites insufficiently, so that defects happen. Both allegations are untrue, unfounded, almost slander!'

'Did the Management Board of Adelbert Housing agree with the contracts?' I asked.

'Of course. I bring contracts each time to the Board for approval. I explained why I preferred the offers, which were lowest in price, and the board accepted the arguments. Even the Socialist woman who accuses me now voted in favour.'

'Is all that written down in the official reports of the Board meetings?' I insisted.

'Yes it is!' Paul brightened.

'Then I don't understand why you worry. What you could do from now on is to constitute a committee for assigning contracts after calls for submission of prices. Three people would do. I am sure Simone Ash would agree to become a member of such a committee. The committee will quench any further such rumours. Take a Socialist in it. You must have one Socialist member of the Board who does not hate you?'

'Most of them agreed well with how I led the institution so far. I can ask the other Socialist, a man, how he feels.'

'Well then, allegations of fraud can be easily refuted, too. What was the next issue?'

Degambe sighed.

'I would have abused of the Housing Company's credit card for my own purchases!'

'Did you?'

'No! I used the credit card to fill my car's tank with petrol, but only because I travel a lot, in Robois and outside Robois. I do that only when I drive a lot for the company. I drive a lot to Namur and to Charleroi to discuss matters with the guys of the Walloon Region. I do pay tools and small items necessary for the company with the credit card, but I bring in tickets and invoices to justify the expenses. Our accountant keeps those justifications together.'

'Then nobody can accuse you of cheating, Paul. Have you told me the whole truth and nothing but the truth? If not, I'd like to hear about it. I can only help you if I know the truth, and the whole truth! I am quite willing to stand by you, Paul, and convince your President to do the same, but listen very attentively to me, now. At the first minor untruth from you, we

shall both have to drop you like a stone in the ocean. We like you, but this is an election year. Do you understand clearly what I say?’

‘You hurt my feelings, Robert. You have lost confidence in me. I thought you were a better friend. My wife also has begun to doubt. She reproaches me for touching other women. She called me a whoremonger and a thief! She called me that, me, Paul Degambe! I have never stolen anything, never touched another woman. I did accept a bottle of Champagne at the end of each year, but many companies bring us something around that time. I am an honest man!’ Paul Degambe sank in the cushions on the sofa and bowed his back like a daunted man.

‘I also always thought of you as an honest man, Paul. I never caught you on any fraudulent practice and your colleagues speak well of you. I observed you at feasts and meetings and never remarked something untowardly. You have to admit I don’t know you intimately, so I have the right to some caution. I also believe you are a bit too jovial with women, but I never saw you getting more than friendly with females. I even envied you for your physical gentleness with people. I hold some more distance than you. I do trust you. It seems to me you are in no great danger. There is nothing to be truly upset about. This too will sort itself out. It is merely a nuisance. For the affair of the Muslim woman, you’ll have to take on a lawyer. Take somebody who is very respected at the Court. You might expect the press to blow up the affairs. This is an election year. Very many leftist or anarchist boys seek out any small incident to cry for racism and fraud, but the more decent Socialist will be prudent. Things like this can happen to anybody. Through you, the shouting guys may try to harm me and Simone Ash, a rather conservative and a liberal. I’ll discuss the matter immediately with Simone, and it would be good if she had a word with that Zumurud. It may all be a misunderstanding. As for the rest, you speak of rumours. Have you talked yourself to the Socialist woman in your Board?’

‘What good would that do?’

‘People sometimes launch rumours without realising that without proof they can be attacked for slander. Why don’t you invite the woman for a drink or for a short meeting and ask her, eye to eye, why she has spread those rumours? Ask her what evidence she has. If she has merely doubts, you might aim for a reconciliation and take her on in your attribution committee for the contracts. Maybe she aims for something like that to get more visibility in her own party. You can give her that and make friends with her. Use charm instead of being upset. Her proof of fraud must be thin. You can explain to her the procedure for the credit card, show her the tickets and invoices. Have her talk openly to your accountant.’

‘Her brother-in-law also does the maintenance of central heating systems. I bet she wants that man to win the contracts, even though he lives two towns farther.’

‘Explain her why that other company cannot have the contracts. But tell her she cannot give the offers, the prices, to her brother-in-law. If she did that, she would be the one caught in fraud. Tell her it would not be good publicity for her to receive contracts for her family. Who knows, the woman may not even stand her brother-in-law! Talk to her! Be assertive, but confront her! And for God’s sake, don’t get excited at the first word. Keep cool.’

Paul Degambe shook his head, sipped at his brandy, then pushed the glass away. He seemed much less nervous than before. Robert saw him think, and that was probably the first time Paul had taken a few seconds to reflect with a calmer head on his affairs this morning.

I also thought. Suddenly I had a hunch. An improbable idea shot through my mind.

‘Paul, tell me, who told you the Socialist woman spread those rumours about you?’

‘I met Yves Govin and Pierre Gasson in a bar, yesterday evening. They told me they had heard rumours. They thought the rumours must have come from her.’

Govin had also replaced Sauvent in the Management Board of Adelbert Housing.

‘Suppose the Socialists did not at all, do you hear me, not at all spread the rumours? Do you know a Socialist you can rely on in the Management Board, a friendly person?’

‘I thought they were all my friends until now!’

‘Then interrogate them about the rumours. First ask the woman whether she was at the source. Confront them. Do it smoothly, gently, smear honey on your tongue. The story may be a hoax to sow trouble between you and me and Miss Ash and the Socialists. Find out more about the stories first before acting like a bull, charging forward with your horns down.’

‘My horns? I have no horns! My Amélie never frolicked with another man!’ he snapped.

I patted Paul on the shoulder.

‘You and I know that. I’d better serve you a couple of coffees before your Amélie suspects you of going the visit the girls in bars, already early in the morning.’

Degambe could laugh at that. He swallowed two large black coffees I served him very hot. He calmed down.

I phoned Simone Ash in front of him, explained what had happened and asked her help. She promised to speak to Zumurud, but she promised no result. I then phoned Youssouf. He too promised he might have a talk with the woman. He sounded the most dubious at first, but later on I could convince him. He told me one item more in the puzzle. He knew the husband of Zumurud, but wouldn’t tell me from what.

Paul Degambe stayed another hour with me. He drank another coffee. He calmed considerably. He left with an action plan to handle the allegations. I once more assured him I would go the depth of the stories and ask help from Ash and Bikri.

I had a Cabinet Meeting in the early afternoon, so I had to spend my last hour well. I prepared the meeting, ran a last time through the papers, ran through the delicate items that had to be decided upon or deferred, and then I cooked myself a light meal of a small steak with a salad. I dressed up and drove to Robois.

The Échevins sat around the table, waiting for me. Even Yves Govin was present. The Communal Secretary, Alberte Hersalle, read item after item and asked solemnly for the decision of the Cabinet. She noted the answer for the official report of the session. Most of the points were immediately accepted or refused by common consent.

Some discussion ensued over a problem with the antennas for mobile phone transmission. Simone Ash was Échevin for Health matters. She and Jean Sauvent, who had been the real instigator of the issue, had ordered a quite expensive, comprehensive study of the levels of radiation emitted by masts of antennas in the territory of Robois. Upper limits for the energy levels of the radiation emitted by the masts had been fixed by the Walloon Region. The cabinet members were convinced that the mobile operators that had first installed the masts, or gained the permission for sites to place their antennas on, such as in church towers, had respected the allowed standards. But the companies had by law to allow competitors to use the same masts or sites. Sauvent, the most ecology minded of our Cabinet Members, had wanted to know whether the compound levels were still below the defined limits. The study showed that was not the case! In the vicinity of more than ten sites out of the thirty that covered the territory of Robois, the total emissions amounted to much higher levels than allowed.

Ash had sent a letter to the mobile phone companies, asking them for measures to conform to the regulations, but the town had received a letter stating that the mobile phone companies did not accept figures calculated and measured by the private company the town had hired. The telecommunication companies accepted only the data from the institution used by the regulator, and the latest figures from that institution pointed out there were no problems with

the energy levels. Ash and Sauvent had not yet contacted that institution. Neither had Govin, who had replaced Sauvent. The Cabinet decided for Ash to contact the Region and the regulatory institution, show them the independent results, interrogate the engineers on how they measured energy levels around the masts, and then come back to the Cabinet with the results of those discussions. There was some urgency to this, for the worst figures came from masts that stood near schools and sports terrains. Ash noted that the Ecologist Party had gotten wind of the results of the study through leaks in the administration; She asked once more the Communal Secretary to insist on confidentiality of studies until they were final, but I knew one could not avoid leaks. The town personnel had its own convictions, which were not all for IC or for the Liberal Party, so leaks were practically unavoidable. Nevertheless one had to insist always. Insisting in a very tough way would only worsen the cases, however. Ash concluded by stating the Ecologists would probably bring up the item at one of the next Council sessions. The Cabinet decided to do nothing with that information, but thanked Ash for remaining vigilant. The Bourgmestre or Simone Ash would have to answer in that Council meeting what the Cabinet had decided, for that was the most reasonable manner to handle this topic.

Another potentially controversial item on the agenda of the Cabinet went about a letter received already a few weeks ago at the administration. A private company wanted to install wind turbines in Robois and asked for the opinion, advice and agreement of the Cabinet. Robois lay for a large part of its territory on a plateau, quite higher than at least two of its neighbouring conglomerations of villages. Robois caught much wind! Wind turbines created electricity from the energy of the wind. They were sophisticated windmills. The electricity was fed into the national grid, and since the energy produced was green energy, it was heavily subsidised.

The company Aeolfast proposed us a project to install a large number of wind turbines for electricity generation behind the N11, in the villages of Grand-Liges, Bazaine, Butières, Grez-Duros and Turgoux. The issue was that the wind turbines sat on towers of thirty to eighty metres high. The towers would have to be installed between the houses and villas built along the N11, and also behind most of the warehouses, supermarkets and industries there. Some of the farmers of Butières and Bazaine had already sent us a letter stating they were in favour of the project, but we knew they were handsomely paid for the use of their lands. Some of the industrialists that had their factories along the highway did not object.

The Ecologist Party would surely be in favour, because Aeolfast allowed an investment schema by which the population of Robois could take a stake in the project, so that some of the benefits would flow back to the people of Robois.

Most of the people who lived in the adjacent villages, however, were expected to protest very vocally and to refuse the project. This would be the case especially for the men and women who lived close to where the towers would be built, even though a distance of five hundred metres between them and the towers was the norm of the Walloon Region, and that distance had been respected.

The people of Les Tignes and Aucourt would violently protest. These would have the wind turbine towers right in their landscape to the east and to the south. They feared stroboscopic effects from the turning of the enormous blades. They feared strident noise. They feared turbulence around the towers. A part of the wood of Besnes would have to be cut down, which made even the staunchest ecology-mined militant frown, and the wind turbines would soar to eighty metres above the ground there.

The project would have to pass several regulating committees before it could be discussed and officially accepted or refused by the Executive Cabinet of Échevins, but an early opinion

of the Cabinet had been asked now by Aeolfast. I grasped that Aeolfast wanted to hear and know who in Robois was in favour of the project and who was against, in order to target their marketing. I wondered who from the Cabinet and from the Council had been contacted by Aeolfast to play the informer on our reactions.

In general, the Cabinet Members of the IC Group were not immediately in favour. They hesitated. The Liberal Party representatives were not outspokenly against the project, but they too hesitated. It was hard in an election year to declare oneself openly for or against. Many wealthy villa owners who would have the new towers in front of their windows voted for the Liberals. In the Council, the Ecologists would be in favour, and probably also the Socialists who smelled employment in each project. After a short discussion, it seemed the IC Échevins were inclined to vote against.

I stated I was very dubious about the installation of so many towers. The wealth of our villages was not merely economic. It was nice to help generate green energy, but our pastures, woods and fields were green too. The high towers formed a sad intrusion in our landscape. Our views were our main resource, the pride and joy of a rural community like Robois. I did not like to see cranes of steel above my head, not even in the industrial neighbourhoods. Yves Govin spoke out strongly in favour, arguing Robois should not remain the ancient, conservative sleeping beauty it had been in the past. Modern times stood finally at our doors! This was an age of industrialisation, he shouted, and industries needed clean energy. We would be helping the climate issue. The windmills were beautiful, slim machines. The sites might even attract tourists if only Robois dared courageously to set the example. Govin mentioned the responsibility of citizens for the economy and the climate change. He thought not only the Ecologist Party would staunchly support the project, but also the Socialists would hit us at the next elections if we refused such fine projects.

Eliane Collado, though a Liberal, and in general supportive of industrial initiatives, stated she joined my opinion. She wanted to preserve the rural character of Robois. The project was too sudden and too huge, she said. She thought the Walloon Region should first study and decide in which regions wind turbines might be placed, preserving rural habits. The density of the towers was too high for a town like Robois, the noise and traffic of the maintenance works would disturb our communities, our peaceful villages. She drew our attention on how many fine Robois families had built villas in Aucourt precisely for the fine views and the quietness of the environs. She ensured us the representatives of the Liberal Party in the Council would vote against Aeolfast. Simone Ash and Gustave Tillard confirmed this view.

Yves Govin became very angry, then. An impish smirk showed on his face. He accused the Liberals of being wealthy vampires who built sumptuous villas in the countryside and who refused to create opportunities for the poor and for green energy. I had to call Govin to order, saying he could state an opinion but not insult Cabinet members. His anger then flashed at me, but I did not waver. The other Cabinet Members of IC joined in my opinion. Govin then proposed to invite Aeolfast to present its project to the public of Robois during an evening meeting. I agreed to such a presentation, but said Aeolfast did not need our invitation for that. I supposed Aeolfast would anyway organise such a meeting of her own initiative, as other companies had done in towns I knew. The Cabinet agreed with me, and Govin fulminated his anger.

After we had discussed a few points more, we came to a point in which Robois was asked to hand over a house we owned to Adelbert Housing. Nobody objected to the transfer, but Govin

used the point as a dreamt occasion to tell rumours had come to him about possible corruption and sexual harassment of the Director of the housing company.

Simone Ash sprang in before I could say a word. The issue was an internal matter of Adelbert Housing, she stated, and it would be handled by the Board. Nobody should act on rumours, she pleaded. One should act on proofs, and so far she had seen no proofs of any wrongdoing. The matter was under study with the accountant of Adelbert Housing. Simone Ash promised to report on progress.

Govin insisted. Although the Adelbert Board was the overseeing organisation of the company, the Cabinet too was deeply involved with Adelbert. Of course, retorted Ash, that was why the Board of Adelbert was constituted of Councillors and politicians of the town. The Board was quite capable of handling the possible issue.

I then stretched my neck, said we still had quite a few points to discuss, and proceeded on. The Cabinet Members understood that in the future there would be not so many confrontations of IC to Liberals, as confrontations between Robert Jacquet and Yves Govin. A struggle for supremacy was now clearly on inside the IC Group.

When I concluded the Cabinet meeting, Alberte Hersalle stood up and hurried off. Other Cabinet Échevins also left. Simone Ash came to sit next to me and she whispered a few words on Adelbert Housing and Paul Degambe. She had already contacted Zumurud and would have a short talk with her the day after. She told me she did not believe Degambe capable of sexual harassment, though indeed the man was a little too familiar with the women of his staff. She told me she followed closely all files of pricing offers, and she was fairly certain contracts were being assigned according to best practices, in particular also the contracts for the central heating systems. She had looked at the credit card results of Degambe and not found them exaggerated.

Then she said something which made once more my hairs rise. The rumours, she claimed, definitely had not been spread by Socialists or Liberals or Ecologists. The rumours came from within the IC Group. The aim might be to discredit me and some of the Liberals in the Cabinet who supported me. That could only be Simone and Eliane, I realised.

Simone Ash almost threatened me then. She said the atmosphere within IC was growing sour. The Liberal Party wanted the controversy between me and Govin to stop. The Liberals wanted definitely not become the bones on which two fighting dogs would eat.

What Simone said angered me very much, but I forced my irritation down.

‘Simone,’ I said, hissing like a snake, ‘I try to remain positive all the way, to remain true and composed, calm and just. I do not fight Govin. Govin may fight me, but I will not participate in his game. Get the Liberals off my back. I shall keep to our taciturn agreement. Please do the same. I’ll handle Govin, but if I cannot bring him to order, please have some faith in me and do not do anything rash that could make the situation worse. Have patience.’

I hated talking like that to Simone, but I would not push my own nose in the ground for any woman, not anymore. I stood up from my chair, let Simone sitting without one word more, and left the meeting room. When I reached the door I looked surreptitiously back, and saw her still sitting on Alberte’s chair with very red cheeks. I had hurt her, and I hated myself even more. Why did I always hurt the people I liked most? I wanted to go back to Simone, but two Échevins of IC caught my sleeve. They wanted to discuss a few more items with me, outside.

A presentation of Aeolfast. Simone Ash

I was not very much interested in modern machines like wind turbines, and I thought I had read sufficiently in the newspapers about the many possible objections against this new technology. I was a doctor, no engineer. My interests lay elsewhere. This was an election year, however, a year in which it was particularly rewarding to hook as many people as possible for a personal conversation and have your name and face be remembered. So I decided to confront the dread of a crowded, excited hall filled mainly with shouting men. Yes I, Simone Ash, medical doctor and local politician, would set myself on my way to do what I had entered politics for in Robois: to throw me head first among people, brushing away my bad memories of other times and other places. I went nevertheless with heavy, dreary feet to the presentation of Aeolfast's project to install a number of modern, sleek windmills in our villages. I did not at all like one bit of those behemoths of steel with their huge, threatening turning blades and with their twinkling, disturbing red lights at night. I had seen many of them in England already, and I did not fancy finding them once more lurking in my sky view. I imagined hundreds of magnificent little birds crushed against the whirling iron wings among which they might have sought protection. I wondered what would happen when one of those huge blades hurled down after a defect. How many storms and even hurricanes could these towers stand?

I also feared meeting once more with that man, Robert Jacquet, who pursued me with his penetrating blue eyes since months, and who had looked at me like a beaten dog when I refused to have supper with him alone. I was so surprised I drew back to a far distance then, although a few minutes later I wondered whether I had done the right thing. Had I been the fool and not him? He is a handsome man, our Bourgmestre, oddly attractive. Also, as far as I know him from the five years we worked in the Cabinet and Council meetings, he seems to be honest, hard-working, funny at times but a really serious man at most issues, composed, of a calm, quiet force. He was not a deceitful man, not pernicious and not scurrilous. I discovered he could be witty and very intelligent. He always thought in unexpected but interesting directions. I heard he was a self-made man, sagacious in his decisions, and I was neither astonished nor disappointed hearing his business went its steady, successful way. A few clients of him spoke with gratitude of his suggestions and of how reasonable his prices were. Maybe I should have him work at that additional dining room, bathroom and bedrooms I wanted to add to invite friends at home.

How did I really feel about Robert Jacquet? Be honest with yourself, old girl. Would I bury myself in a very little countryside town for the rest of my years with a local entrepreneur called Robert Jacquet, have children and everything but an exciting life with a divorced engineer? How would I like to feel his weight on me? Would I be able to make love to him? Did I want to return to Brussels or London or to the wonderful life in the medieval towns of Oxford or Cambridge I had loved so much? Men had hurt me. I had wanted to escape from the cities I liked most. I sought peace and oblivion in a small, foreign town, so why not be logical and seek the conclusion of what I wanted here, in Robois? Were the gentlemen of London more interesting than this Robert Jacquet? They sure were a lot more arrogant, self-indulgent and predatory than Robert Jacquet! It must be refreshing, warm, happy, to rest in the arms of a truly decent man who cherished me honestly. How would that feel, girl? Could you do without such feelings?

The issue was I was still chasing after that elusive, heavenly image and after the sweet feelings of the ideal love, the romantic yearning for adoration of my humble person by another being, the feeling that someone else could not possibly want to live even one minute with another person but dear small and humble me, Simone Ash. What I really wanted was to be hurled in the raging fire of a consuming passion both sexually and spiritually, and be drawn into that ordeal inexorably, and abandon myself totally. Women are such illogical hearts! One the one side, I hated to be dominated by a man, by a woman also, and certainly to be tamed by a non-interesting, unintelligent, haughty hulk. On the other side, I longed desperately to stretch out like an Odalisque at the feet of a man who would protect me and cherish me and solve all my problems. I would kiss his toes!

The truth is, I was a bag of contradictions, I, Simone Ash, the smart doctor who could earn fortunes in the larger towns, and yet who hid here in the woods and lived like a female hermit. I felt strangely, strongly attracted to the Bourgmestre of Robois, so much so that sometimes I feared I only accepted to serve the Liberal party in politics to swirl around that man. I wanted to observe him from close by.

I admit I also liked the power politics give me over other men. I realised I seemed to relish in that power, probably as the antidote for the way the London gentlemen treated me.

Why did I allow them treating me like that? When I was young and naïve I thought that was the way of the world, that was how things stood between men and women. I complied with the wishes of the male race, and thought nature had created me and all women like that. Nevermore! Nevermore!

How would Robert Jacquet treat me? He hissed a warning the other day that shot to me like a lightning bolt thrown by Jupiter. I saw the sudden violence in his eyes at that Council Meeting, but his eyes softened less than a second later. He then took on again that beaten air of a discarded, aspiring lover I have come to recognise in him. I saw the power of the male, then! He is a handsome man, and I would love to feel his arms around me at night, but who is he really, this Robert Jacquet? Would he respect me? Would he cherish me?

I parked my car and entered the city hall where Aeolfast would present its project to the public of Robois. The city hall had been built in a part of the former abbey, as practically all communal facilities of Robois. The abbey stables showed unending brick walls, large, imposing structures of oak on the ceiling, beams centuries old that intertwined to hold the roof. The wooden structure was admired and looked at in awe by everybody who entered the long and yet also wide space. The administration of Robois had the stables cleaned, restored, renewed, and then installed a dais at the far end. It had been transformed into a wonderful meeting hall.

The room had been filled with chairs, but these could also be taken out and re-installed, so that the rectangular hall, a huge volume, could be used for any presentation, conference, or the town's festivities. The only issue with the hall was that the ceiling could not be isolated to keep the warmth better in. In full winter, as today, either the town spent fortunes to heat the hall decently, or having to let the audience freeze from top to toe. This evening, some balance had been found between the two extremes, but most of the women kept their coats on. Why were women always cold and men warm? Was that so that women would be lured into the hot arms against the warm breast of the men? I hated these dirty tricks of nature!

I walked to the front row. I had not expected many people to have come to the centre of Robois, but despite the cold the hall was filled to the brim with people! The front row would have been kept open, reserved for the political notables of the town, so I hoped to find a free seat there. I was not at all certain I would find an empty chair when I saw this crowd. While

advancing to the front, I shook hands to left and right and waved a greeting to many others with a generous hand, to the people I knew but who sat in the middle of the rows. A happy buzzing of low voices could be heard, the sounds of hundreds of men and women chatting. I was genuinely surprised at how many people had come to hear about the project. I had done well to attend this evening.

I eventually reached the first row, where Eliane Collado already sat. She had kept a chair for me. She withdrew her shawl from the chair and winked at me to sit next to her. Eliane played the mother role to me in Robois. Did I want to have a mother? I dutifully sat.

A few minutes later, five people came on to the dais and chose a place behind a table that had been prepared for them. A large, white screen hung behind and above them, against the rear wall. These men were the Directors of Aeolfast. The lights in the hall got dimmed, but the Directors did not entirely darken the space. I looked over my shoulder but did not find Robert Jacquet in the first rows. I craned my neck to look far behind, and noted that so many people had arrived that not only all the chairs were occupied, but many men and women leaned against the walls, standing at the sides and at the far end. There, finally, I spotted, leaning in a corner, my Bourgmestre Robert Jacquet. Next to him stood of course his police officer friend Joseph Bikri. Bikri was a policeman, but he wore no uniform this evening. He chatted animatedly with Robert.

The presentation started in earnest. The main Director of Aeolfast, the man who throned in the middle of the table, stood and went to the side. He held a device in his hand, which I knew was the wireless control by which the slide projector advanced its images. The man illustrated his speech with a series of PowerPoint drawings of the consortium of Aeolfast. The Director spoke, introduced himself, and showed splendid slides in bright colours about his company. He even had a video played with epic moments of the realisations of Aeolfast. The company had been founded a few years ago, together with a number of other companies all active in the recycling and disposal of waste, and in the generation of electricity such as by wind turbines and photovoltaic panels. Aeolfast proposed a winning strategy in environmental technologies. For the generation of electricity, the Director began to explain what the green certificates were that Aeolfast exploited.

Each Megawatt-hour of energy produced by photovoltaic cells or by wind turbines was compared for the emission of carbon dioxide by a gas and water vapour power station. Such a station emitted four hundred fifty-six kilograms of carbon dioxide per Megawatt-hour of electricity generated. Therefore, as much carbon dioxide was saved when electricity was generated by wind turbines. A green certificate issued by the *Commission Wallonne pour l'Énergie*, the CWaPE, corresponded to this economy. Moreover, the Walloon Region, had ordained that a certain percentage of the electricity sold by the electricity suppliers had to be produced in Wallony from renewable energy sources. That percentage amounted presently to twelve per cent. The suppliers of electricity were obliged to present to the CWaPE a certain number of green certificates, to avoid heavy fines. If an electricity supplier had sold a hundred Megawatt-hours to its final clients, it had to present twelve green certificates minimum. The aim of Aeolfast was to assist the electricity suppliers to arrive at their quota of green energy. The Walloon Government guaranteed a minimum price per certificate. This price fluctuated, but was currently situated between sixty-five and a hundred Euro. The green certificates represented of course an additional charge for the producers of electricity, so they charged their clients higher prices for energy. The European Union had decided to produce twenty per cent of its electricity from renewable methods by 2020. The Walloon Region had to comply

with these regulations. Wind turbines were of course very expensive to install, but they generated electricity without burning precious resources such as oil or gas, and the energy was subsidised by the green certificates. The electricity distributors were still eager to obtain green energy, for the fines amounted to quite more than the hundred Euros per Megawatt-hour of the green certificates.

At that moment of the presentation a man came to sit next to me. He had found the only chair open on the first and following rows. He was not a politician and I didn't know him. He formed a striking figure, so I stared. He exuded pretence, self-confidence and arrogance. He was tall and slender, dressed in a pin-striped suit of the best Italian faction, a silk tie in discreet colours, tie knotted impeccably on a light-blue shirt with a distinguished white collar. He looked as distinguished as a Milanese fashion seller and I had to admire the man for that taste. I also found him finely handsome in features. His face was long and thin, chiselled in sharp lines. His nose was straight, his eyes set deep under thin eyebrows. He was closely shaved, smelled of an expensive, delicate after-shave perfume. He had no beard and wore no glasses. His eyes were very light, almost transparent, cold and yet fiery. His entire being radiated elegance and self-assuredness, as found only among members of old and wealthy aristocratic families. He was everything the man I would once have admired, but now loathed. I involuntarily compared him with Robert Jacquet who wore also costumes all the time, but which often became creased and hung somewhat shabbily around him, always in need of a pressing. If Robert looked the careless sportsman, this man resembled the sophisticated scholar. He must have felt I stared, for he suddenly looked at me, straight in the eyes, somewhat mockingly, and I inched farther away from him on my seat. I directed my eyes back and exclusively to the slides. I nevertheless remarked with some astonishment that Yves Govin, who also sat in the first row but on the left side, hurried to the man at the corner of the row and whispered a few words in his ear. I saw from the angle of my left eye that the man devised me once more. Was he considering making a pass at me? I dedicated all my attention to the speech of the Director of Aeolfast and ignored the brief stare of the elegant man next to me. I felt nevertheless pleased with the attention. What woman would not indulge in the admiration of a distinguished man? Yet, I also felt irritated by the attention. He must have sensed I stared from a corner of my eyes, for he suddenly and again looked straight at me. I directed my gaze entirely to the slides.

The Director of Aeolfast was still lauding the production of electrical energy by wind turbines. Wind turbines produced no harmful by-products. No carbon dioxide, no fine particles in the air, no sulphur dioxide, no radioactive waste, no air pollution and no water pollution, and no thermic pollution. They needed only a small footprint in agricultural land, and no pesticides. While the Director droned on, me and everybody present in the city hall had to be convinced that wind turbines represented the nirvana of energy generation. We all wondered why nobody had thought of this means already tens of years ago. There followed a series of bucolic, magnificent slides of the slim towers with the windmills on top of them, photographed in all sorts of weather, from blazing sun to carpets of snow.

The last slides explained some of the possible drawbacks of wind turbines in the environment. The nuisances were summarily dismissed. The sound produced by the turning blades was minimal, the impact on birds, the magnetic fields created and the light effects of the turning wings were minimalized. The risk of accidents with second-generation turbines was zero. Finally, statistics were shown stating that in France, more than sixty per cent of the people accepted the placement of wind turbines at less than a kilometre from their home. The citizens of Robois could not do less. Then, the Director proposed a pause of ten minutes, after which

the panel of Aeolfast specialists would answer questions from the audience. That would form the second part of the presentation of the project. Until that moment I had not seen projected any map with the exact placements of the towers. I had nevertheless briefly looked at such a plan at the town administration, and remained appalled at the number of installations.

I remained seated during those ten minutes, though I was for some annoying reason quite anxious to go and say hello to Robert Jacquet. I should not go to him! He should come to me! I half hoped he would come forward to greet me, but I waited in vain. I suppose too many people held back the Bourgmestre.

The man who sat next to me turned and turned on his seat, observing the people in the hall. He frowned when he saw the faces of scepticism. The Director of Aeolfast who had held the presentation walked down to talk to him, but they whispered so low I could not hear one word from what they said. For that, the Director had to kneel next to the chair of my neighbour, so I supposed the elegant man was a member of the higher management of Aeolfast.

A little later, the man turned closer to me, saying what Yves Govin had probably notified to him, 'please excuse me, but you are Simone Ash, an Échevin of Robois, aren't you? I must present myself. My name is Jean-Gauthier Buisseyre. I am one of the investors for Aeolfast. I hope our directors have convinced you of the advantages of our horizontal-axis wind turbines. We are very eager to realise this wonderful project, which could be very beneficial also to the town of Robois and to its citizens. We remain open for alternative means of financing, involving participation of citizen groups.'

'Yes, I am Simone Ash,' I confirmed. 'The presentation was very convincing, indeed. I wonder how our population shall react in a few minutes.'

'Are there any topics you would like me to clarify for you?'

'Yes. Who actually builds the turbines? Do you have manufacturing facilities in Belgium?'

'We principally work with two Chinese manufacturers. We impose strict quality standards on our suppliers, of course. That is in our interest! We want to hold maintenance costs as low as possible.'

'Of course,' I smartly replied. 'Can you tell me what your expected return on investment is for this project?'

'We count on five to seven per cent, all costs taken into account. Our costs are in the equipment, the foundations, the electrical installations, the connection to the national grid, the control rooms and systems, the engineering consultancy, personnel costs, the necessary training, sometimes the new roads, the maintenance, and so on.'

'That is a very reasonable return,' I concluded.

Buisseyre then expressed his admiration on what a beautiful little town Robois was, how friendly the people were, how well the project had been received by the industrialists of Robois. He told me he had held similar presentations for the service associations of Robois, how Aeolfast had reached out to the most dynamic layers of the population. He spoke in very enthusiastic terms, very agreeably, about similar successful projects Aeolfast had initiated. Buisseyre proved a very fine conversationalist, reserved and warm, polite and courteous, and unobtrusive. I was quite impressed.

I began to find Buisseyre a very agreeable and interesting man, when the Director of Aeolfast called for the second part of the meeting of the evening. I looked over my shoulder and saw Robert Jacquet still stand, leaning against the wall at the back, talking to Joseph Bikri, but his eyes were riveted at me. I quickly turned back.

The question-and-answer part of the meeting started slowly and innocently with non-committing, nice questions and even less committing answers. The preamble seemed laborious, the first questions came shyly, but then the atmosphere loosened and heated up considerably. The men got more excited, sarcastic, and also a few female voices intervened.

The fear of infrasounds and flickering effects of the shadows of the turning blades surfaced. A man stated that the noise levels had been grossly underestimated. He cited reports of men living in the neighbourhood of wind turbine towers complaining about headaches. Another man claimed the numbers of people living in the vicinity of the line of the towers were wrong. The numbers cited by Aeolfast were grossly underestimated. Somebody mentioned Robois had a small airport for parachutists at less than one kilometre of the last towers, in the south. The airport might have to be closed. Yet another man warned that forests could not be cut back by ruling of the Walloon Region, and other regulations existed forcing all buildings to remain at far larger distances from the forests than planned by Aeolfast. Aeolfast had put such regulations aside. A woman shouted Aeolfast had also not taken into account sufficient distances for their towers from houses and villas of the people of Robois. She showed who she was, a villa owner of Aucourt, known to me as a bank clerk. The woman asserted that according to the plans of Aeolfast, which she had consulted in the town hall, some of the towers would be situated at less than five hundred metres from living quarters. Towers had to be placed there, the woman claimed, because otherwise the wind turbines had to be built too close to the N11 road. She stated that because of existing regulation, distances from dwellings should be at least one kilometre or more, as such distances were demanded in other European countries. A man did not let the Aeolfast director answer. He immediately continued on the objections of the previous speaker of the audience, warning that with such greater distances applied, only one fifth of the original project of Aeolfast would be realised, making the project totally uneconomic.

Other arguments were thrown in from the audience in favour of the project, from people I did not know. These men, three or four, applauded the benefits to the environment of wind turbines. Would you want a nuclear reactor in the midst of Robois, they asked. Would you like a gas turbine installation in your back garden? One man even lauded the beautiful elegance of the towers, but jeers and derisive laughter from the main audience silenced this voice.

More people stood up from their chairs, then, brandishing fists in the air. Other men and women gesticulated and cried loudly. A few ecologists mentioned once more the advantages of the turbines, but were shouted down. A farmer with a very red, beefy face and a huge paunch complained that townsfolk always refused a little contribution to poor farmers, whose revenues from milk, cattle and grain dwindled. Farmers could not hold their heads out of failure nowadays. He obviously wanted to recuperate some money from the towers on his lands.

Then, another man mentioned the fine monuments, castles and churches that littered the villages of Robois and which would be put into the shadows of the huge towers.

‘Who wants our beautiful rural landscapes to be polluted, obstructed, vilified by cranes of steel?’ he cried.

Hands, arms and fists continued to be held up, more and more, and a few people began to launch insults at the Aeolfast Directors. To us the towers in front of our noses, to you the big benefits so that you can go on a vacation in countries without steel towers, they shouted. Many people railed bitterly at the blood-sucking vampires of finance that had landed at Robois to destroy the fine landscapes of the countryside. They called these entrepreneurs

unscrupulous liars and cheaters. The shouts sounded harder and harder, sharper and sharper. The main Director of Aeolfast stood on the podium entirely discomfited, his mouth open, arms open, shouting, trying to stem the flow of shouts and insults, but the crowd would not stop. The situation in the hall became very heated. I wondered whether I should call the police, but that was a job of the Bourgmestre, and stood also Joseph Bikri, our Superintendent, not at the end of the hall? I smiled too, because I expected eggs and tomatoes being thrown forward any second now. My distinguished neighbour remained seated imperturbably, looking to the front only, not to the people in the hall. I surmised he heard sufficiently what happened behind his back.

Suddenly, I heard a deep, strong voice sound from the back of the hall. The voice shouted commandingly and louder than the other people. I looked surreptitiously behind me, and I saw with some pride Robert Jacquet step through the middle corridor that was left between the chairs, arms wide open, tall and imposing.

Robert cried, 'friends, friends of Robois, please remain seated! This is enough! Enough! Calm down!'

The Bourgmestre continued to slowly stride forward, hushing people to left and right. Finally, he jumped on the podium, went to stand in front of the table but with his face toward the people of Robois. The crowd stopped shouting.

Robert Jacquet cried, 'I am the Bourgmestre of Robois. Calm down, friends! We have heard the arguments and the description of the project from the technicians of Aeolfast. We also heard how you feel about the project. I heard sufficient objections to call this project controversial to say the least. As you know, the proposal will be studied by the *Conseil Consultatif d'Aménagement du Territoire Communal*, the CCATM. This committee has representatives of you all and it will initiate a public consultation. The committee has to deliver an advice on the impact of such projects on our environment. The project must also be evaluated properly at regional levels. I heard a Citizen Committee, a committee to be called *Sauvez Robois*, Save Robois, will be founded soon and that committee will surely produce a paper with objections. Perhaps alternative scenarios may be proposed. Much work remains still to be done by the Authorities. Also, the Town Cabinet of Échevins will propose its view. I promise that will come soon. Friends, our democratic institutions allow us to formulate our opinions. I call this meeting now to an end. Nothing much can still be said at this moment. Please continue discussing the issues outside, but I ask everybody to leave the City Hall in peace.'

Robert Jacquet let his arms drop, and he stepped from the podium and took a few steps as if he wanted to leave. Most of the people pushed their chairs back and began to walk through the completely open panels of the stables. Robert had succeeded in cooling the atmosphere from overheated to calmness. The shouting had stopped, but more and more people continued discussing the issues, while stepping through the doors.

My distinguished neighbour stood from his chair, rigid as a broom. He nodded goodbye with a weary smile, mixed in the crowd and disappeared rather suddenly. I believed his evening had been spoilt. Buisseyre granted the Directors of Aeolfast no glance. These remained seated with pale faces at the table on the podium. They too did not at all seemed pleased with the sudden explosion of emotions against their project. They gathered their papers and Joseph Bikri appeared on the podium, ushering the men out by the emergency exit aside. Bikri and Jacquet looked at each other, and I understood they had agreed on this stratagem to separate the representatives of Aeolfast from the crowd.

The hall emptied slowly. I left together with the last people. Eliane Collado said little. She had been impressed by the hostility of the people of Robois. Men spoke to me, offering their opinion on how little they had liked what they had heard about the project. It was impossible to shear through the tangle. I saw Buisseyre exchange a few words with Robert Jacquet. They stood at the wall and let the stream of people pass. Then, Buisseyre hurried off. When I walked through the door, I saw Buisseyre run to a black Mercedes with darkened windows, and take place in the back. The car drove off immediately. Buisseyre had his car and driver, I noted, waiting for him inside the abbey grounds. Had Jacquet allowed that?

I went up to Robert Jacquet. I gave him a hand to say hello. He charmed me with a large smile, self-assured from having saved the situation from having been able to dominate the assembly at a moment of chaos, when worse might have threatened.

He asked, 'may I ask for your impressions, Miss Ash?'

So, Miss Ash it would be, I thought, not Simone.

'An interesting meeting this was, Monsieur le Bourgmestre. Despite many sound arguments, Aeolfast has not been able to convince this audience, I believe.'

'Odd, isn't it,' Robert responded. 'So many economic and climatic indicators are going bad, and yet our good people of Robois seem to cherish beauty over money. They cling to the undisturbed serenity of the land. If I were a philosopher, I would say that proof has once more been given that beauty, that very emotional quality, is part of our nature more strongly than money, wealth and industrial progress.'

'Aeolfast is going to have it very difficult to realise its project in Robois,' I tried.

'I cannot say I am sad about that evolution. I, myself, would not like to have a wind turbine tower of thirty metre high with soaring blades in front of my window!'

'My, my, our Bourgmestre has grown into a sentimental man! How many of those are there in Belgium? Have you become soft?'

Robert grinned.

'Tell me,' he said, 'would you like the forest of Trioteignes being cut down and replaced by a forest of steel trees?'

I might have chuckled and let that question remain unanswered, but I felt in the right mood to grant him something this evening, his evening, to step a little closer to him, so I confessed, 'certainly not, I wouldn't! You are right. My Liberal colleagues seem to prefer their landscapes, too. We can fight together. Thank you for having held the reins tight in there. I feared some people were losing their temper. You did well.'

For just one moment Robert looked gratefully and a little astonished at me, as if he hadn't expected a nice word from me.

'Click, turn the lights on and click, turn the lights off,' I thought. 'The guy has no idea he has fallen for a really nasty girl.'

I found that quite remarkable. Men can be so naïve, too.

Then, other people tugged at his arm, took possession of him, and he had to engage in yet more heated conversations in the courtyard of the abbey. Still other people tried to grab me, and I did say a few words, but then I rapidly broke loose from them and hurried to my own car. I was tired, I had a beginning headache, maybe from having very conflicting feelings towards the Bourgmestre, and I was still expected at Castle Trioteignes.

A Plot

The Aeolfast Director who had delivered the presentation of the project to install wind turbines in Robois, drove out of the town centre in his company car. His colleagues would return to Brussels, and he too rode south at first, as if he would catch the closest exit and entry from Robois to the highway. He drove on the N11, but only as far as the village of Turgoux, where the industrial zone of Robois had its end. He left the N11 and swung on the nearby newly laid roads of long, straight tarmac lined by the low, rectangular, windowless buildings that housed the various production enterprises. He noted that Robois had no real manufactories. He saw printing companies, warehouses, laboratories, a pharmaceutical research centre, information technology companies, a data centre, large carpentries, a kitchen installation firm, the regional warehouse of a supermarket chain, a biotechnology institute, large garages, and so on, mainly service companies. The Director directed his car to one of the longest one-storey buildings, a flat rectangular structure consisting mainly of large halls that were used as concentration sites for recycling materials, of a company called Recycfast. The name of the company stood in large, red but unlighted letters painted on the immaculate walls.

The Director parked his car in front of the administrative part of the building. A few windows at the far corner of a two-storey section were lighted. He stepped out, closed his car, took a few steps to the entry, and was welcomed there by a uniformed guard who opened the door for him. The guard did not say one word, but brought the Director to a meeting room at the end of a long corridor. He also opened that door respectfully, smiling encouragingly, which the Director sternly had chosen to ignore.

Only one man sat at a table, sipping coffee. The Director wanted a beer and the guard showed a small side table on which coffee, tea, a few cans of beer and a bottle of whiskey had been prepared. The Director did not greet the man at the table. He went straight for the whiskey and poured half a glass, drank, sighed, then turned.

‘Tough meeting,’ remarked the man who sat at the table.

The Director found the words to answer. ‘It was. I saw you in the hall. You must be Max Blandis.’

‘I know you too,’ the man replied. ‘Sorry to have not been of more help. We tried to turn the mood of the audience, but the emotions ran too strong. Robois seems not to want the project, definitely not! Too many opposers of the turbine towers had gathered this evening.’

The Director did not answer immediately. Blandis had stated the obvious. The Director thought he had been lucky to have gotten out of the hall unscathed. He looked with more attention at the man who sat calmly a few metres from him. He leaned against the wall, did not sit right away.

Max Blandis was a short, squat man with broad shoulders and a rectangular, sharp face. The eyes sparked intelligence above a hooked nose and tight lips. His hair was cropped short, and Blandis wore only a black T-shirt, a dark pullover and a leather jacket on dark blue denims. The Director knew Blandis only by reputation. Blandis was a man who got called in by the President when matters were going tough. The man headed a small security company, but the Director had no idea just how many people worked in that unit. He also did not know the status of the man in the series of companies headed by the President. He thought Blandis had probably no status at all, might have been officially not even on the payroll of Aeolfast, but could command everybody through the President.

The door opened rather brutally, and Yves Govin entered. Govin was very nervous. He nodded a greeting, went also for the coffee table and the whiskey. A little later, the President entered. The four men sat nonchalantly around the table, sipping their drinks. Govin was anxious, turned and shifted positions on his chair every second. The Director looked beaten, Blandis remained very calm but cynical. The President looked at how each behaved. The men waited for the President to speak first. He too needed a few moments, it seemed, to absorb the shock of the meeting with the people of Robois.

The President said, 'we are facing a serious issue. That was not unexpected. It seems clear the people here shall resist the project. I have not met a more adverse assembly before. We may expect opposing groups of citizens to be formed. One group, called *Sauvez Robois*, a sufficiently clear name, exists already. Other groups may follow. Such groups have proven effective in other towns, raising a lot of trouble against wind turbine projects. They are organised in committees that handle the various subjects separately and expertly, gathering information from all sorts of sources, bring many brains together and act wide. They can be very vocal to any organisation that has to advice. They address Ministers, Members of Parliament, Provincial Councils, Advisory Committees, Town Councils, you name it.' The President stopped and drank. Nobody said a word. The men understood their President faced a major crisis.

The President continued.

'We must develop a strategy to counter the influence of the citizen committees. Our strategy must have three directions of actions. One political, one of marketing and one of direct influence.

Govin, you shall lead the political actions. I will personally intervene in that domain too, out of Brussels. In the political sphere, I shall work on the headquarters of the United Democratic, Liberal and Socialist Parties. I shall lobby continuously for energy generated by wind turbines, and more specifically for the project at Robois. You have received already a free hand here from your Party, Govin. The President and Political Secretary of the United Democrats shall not object to your taking over control of the IC Group. Quite on the contrary, they desire that. They want to do away the IC Group and control the majority of votes as IC did in the past. Dump the current Bourgmestre and his friends in the Town Cabinet, replace them by people you can rely on. There is a chance you may not succeed in getting the current Cabinet behind you. You must control the next one and control the Council. We can wait one year, for the procedures of acceptance of our project will take so long. We cannot wait longer. If you need help, refer to me. You must take on the local actions, without bungling.

Director, you will head the marketing part. Your marketing plan and your lobbying plan is launched. You must involve more people at Robois. Target the Robois Cabinet, the Town Council, the Provincial Council, the Members of Parliament, and the members of all the advisory committees that have to build reports on the project. Target them with renewed publicity, swamp them. Send them the brochures on the advantages of wind turbines. Send the reports that make the counter-arguments sound ridiculous. Place publicity in the local papers. Explain how many employees will be hired. Target journalists. Continue meeting one-to-one with the farmers and the entrepreneurs in the industrial zones. If needed, offer more money to the farmers and ask them to be more vocal. We should not lose these men from our cause. Blandis, you should handle the direct influence. You will take part in the publicity campaign, but at yet another level. I want you to address the simple-minded population, the labourers, the clerks and secretaries, the salesmen, the housewives. Spread rumours. Spread rumours to discredit the opposers to our project.

You three have a free hand in what you do and how you do it. If you need additional funds, tell me. I want results and quickly.'

'One man is not enough for direct influencing,' Max Blandis remarked. 'I need more men if you want me to talk in bars and feasts, in meetings.'

'I know. You have two assistants already. Hire two more, but get men with the profile you need. Present them with one-year contracts only. Hire men who do not fear a little toughness. You know what I mean. This can become rough.'

'I do,' Blandis grinned. 'I know exactly the right guys. The current ones have to go. The men must have some legitimacy for being here at Robois, though. We don't want them to run loose in town. The men shall come from Brussels. I cannot hire local guys. The men will need living quarters. It would be best to keep them together.'

'Director, do you have a suggestion?' the President asked.

'We can put them on the payroll as normal workers of Recycfast, here, in Robois. We can offer them a one-year contract to work in the factory. They can actually work a little, but be free to come and go. There is a hangar that can easily be transformed into basic living quarters. I suppose that will be satisfactory.'

'It will,' Blandis assured. 'It will all depend on how much their bonuses will amount to, above their normal Recycfast salary. The men will need sleeping places, separate rooms, a shower, a kitchen, toilets, a living room with a television set, mobile telephones, portable personal computers with Internet Wi-Fi access for each.'

'That can be arranged for,' the Director replied.

'I want all these items ready within the week,' the President stated. 'By the end of February our teams and plans must be operational. Put the men in a hotel until their quarters are ready.' The Director and Blandis nodded. Govin merely followed the conversation, surprised at how professional the command sounded.

'You must think and be smart,' the President emphasised.

He looked at the three men in turn.

'You must find and exploit the weak points of your opponents. Use the soft points unscrupulously. You must eliminate vocal opposers by discrediting them in the population and with the institutions. What I essentially want is a kind of brainwashing in favour of wind turbines for the people of this rural community. Seek more and better arguments, the arguments that reach them. You may expect some support within the Socialist and Ecologist parties, with the guys that are already more or less inclined to be in favour of the project.' A silence fell in the room.

'Just how important is this project for you,' Blandis dared to ask bluntly.

The President hesitated. His very clear eyes flashed angrily at Blandis. Nevertheless, he answered.

'The project at Robois is as important to me as a matter of life and death. I want to drop here thirty wind turbines at least, forty if possible. You see, when the turbines are installed here, we have a solid basis for similar projects south and north and west of Robois, for a park of a hundred and twenty towers, some of which will go as high as two hundred metres! One of those will generate more power than any other such tower in Belgium. If the plan fails at Robois, we fail everywhere, and our entire business may collapse. You will be fired, of course, and with that you shall lose your excellent salary, bonuses, company cars and additional fees paid. If the project succeeds here, your bonuses will be doubled and then doubled again with the next projects. You will be rich men, and powerful men, too. You Govin, shall be Bourgmestre, Member of Parliament and Minister within a few years. That

shall fortify your position here and in the Province. We can do great things together. If Robois fails, your aspirations will be blown away like smoke.'

The President made a gesture with his fingers and his mouth as if he blew at smoke and dispersed it.

'I have already begun to take control,' Govin confirmed. 'The pressure is on the current Cabinet Members and supporters of the current Bourgmestre. A first train of rumours is on its way. The rumours will destabilize him.'

'Fine,' the President nodded. 'Remember, I want results fast. Each of you shall get phone calls from me once a week at least. The telephone calls will come from different numbers, not from my private phone, not from my office phone. I want no electronic mails sent, nothing in writing. Except for the telephone calls, you don't know me, and I don't know you. I don't want to know what you do and how you do it. I only want to know the results. Just act, swiftly and efficiently. No one else but the four of us must know about what we decided and what is bound to happen. You are not to communicate together. You must not be seen in group. Director, I want you here as little as possible. The people know you too well. You must mainly act from out of Brussels. None of you is to be seen working as a team. Ignore each other in streets and events. You are to communicate only through me. Is that understood?' The three men nodded.

The President looked at last time around the table. The Director and Yves Govin sat with bowed heads, Max Blandis still grinned.

The President concluded, 'the meeting is over. Nothing more needs to be said.'

The men stood, the President first, and they began to leave the building. The conversation had lasted less than an hour. The men left the room, then the hangar of Recycfast. Max Blandis lit a cigarette at the door. The President came back to him.

He said, 'Max, things may get tough. Hire men that can roughen up a few people here. I want no unnecessary violence, but if some violence is needed, don't shy away from it.'

'Just how desperate are you with this project, President?'

The President hesitated again, then he acknowledged. 'I am very serious about this, Max. The company fails or lives with this project.'

'I shall be ready,' Blandis assured. 'Please keep in mind that violence may backfire. Also, the men and the actions, however many diversions you use, will always be able to be traced back to you. With all respect, your head may well come to lie on the chopping block too.'

'Your job is to make sure it doesn't. Teach me,' the President said.

He added nothing further, nodded a goodbye to Blandis and his Mercedes drove to the entry.

The President got in, now also a little more tired than usual, it seemed to Blandis.

Max Blandis thought of how much money he could extort from the President while walking to his old BMW parked in a dark spot. He lived in the Horse Bayard Hotel of Robois, the only three-star hotel in town. He would have to look for an apartment or for a studio, courtesy of Aeolfast. He drove back to Robois in the cold night. The first snow of the year started to fall.

The Rose of Robois. Robert Jacquet

Fate, chance and nature combined to bring sadness to my home. Either in my sperm cells or in Andrée de Porinthe's, my wife's egg cells, an extra copy of the chromosome twenty-one was formed right before the two joined. The embryo that resulted had forty-seven chromosomes,

including three copies of the chromosome twenty-one instead of the usual two. You might expect that it was better to have an extra chromosome than to have less, but not in the case of mother nature. Trisomy twenty-one causes the Down syndrome in children born with them.

Andrée remarked late she was pregnant and we were at the time so extraordinarily happy with the pregnancy, that we asked for no special prenatal screening. Had we done so, the trisomy twenty-one would have been detected, and Andrée would almost certainly have terminated the pregnancy.

The baby that was born, a girl, presented all the signs of Down syndrome: an abnormally small chin, heavy skin folds on the eyes, a broad and rather flat face, peculiarly round eyes, a flat nose, short hands, broad forehead, and low-set little ears. The doctor who delivered the child announced us what was the matter with our child two hours after birth. Andrée lay exhausted in her bed in the hospital, already depressed, so the news simply devastated her. She never was the same woman afterwards. She had a delicate nature. She broke down. We knew our baby daughter named Rose would be mentally retarded, remain at risk suffering from several disorders, and never lead an ordinary life like other, normal children. Andrée thought instantly of the energy and dedication she would have to concede to care for her daughter, so she screamed and screamed and wept. She realised she would never be able to bring such effort to what she said was an inferior being, a baby better not born.

I, Robert Jacquet, wondered why such a tragedy had fallen on my head. God could not have punished me more for my careless life so far, for my total lack of anxiety over whatever happened to me. Still, I felt the love and the obligation to care for my child. I wanted to make her life worth living. The doctor told us Down syndrome babies and children were sweet and loving and how they also could lead a fine, pleasant life if well cared for and feeling the love of their parents.

When Andrée left the hospital, we returned to the lodge in the woods of Robois. The depression of Andrée racked her for months. One day, three months after her having given birth to Rose, she announced me quite coldly she could not cope. She could not envisage a life of solitude in a countryside, uninteresting town, caring for a retarded child. She could not and would not endure the pitiful looks of the people she met with her Down child at her hand. She told me she wanted a divorce and she prepared to place baby Rose in an appropriate institution. She was very much relieved when I vehemently refused to give Rose out of hands. I accepted the divorce, but held Rose with me, in the lodge.

As the years passed, I hired nurses to care for Rose, especially when I was not at home. I had my work and continued to spend a lot of time at my enterprise, but I never travelled far, did not go on holidays, stayed with Rose at Robois. Few people of Robois knew I had a Down syndrome daughter. Few people even knew I had a daughter. I did not seek particularly to hide her, but I also did not want to expose her too much to the general attention in a town in which almost everybody knew me. We went for long walks in the woods of the Ardennes, I could show her Bruges and Namur, but she knew little of Robois.

I found the correct schools in the nearby city of Namur, and Rose proved to be a lot less mentally retarded than I had feared at first. Her intelligence quotient stood at seventy-five. Rose was a very nice, loving, joyful child. She was sweet to have at home. With time, she learned to make orange juice, set coffee or tea. She could fry eggs and bacon without putting the house on fire. She prepared spaghetti and Bolognese sauce, and the Bolognese was the

real thing she cooked with the right ingredients, tomatoes and a little onion, salt, pepper and basil. She could read and write, although all intellectual progress came painstakingly slow. Currently, she had to attend a private boarding school in France, where she followed the courses of her middle school education. Rose had it not too difficult to learn most branches of art or of languages, but she had it more difficult to express herself clearly, and much of the complex thinking necessary for mathematics and sciences was above her. She was, however, a witty child, who adored and clung to her father. No man received so much attention and affection as I. There can be no love without tenderness, the poet sang, and the tenderness I had craved for but never received from Andrée, Rose poured onto me with all her heart.

This past year, I brought my daughter home every weekend and every holiday. I had to drive for three-and-a-half hours to reach her school, and I did that usually on Friday afternoon, to bring her back late at Sundays. It was a minor effort to have my daughter understand plainly she had a loving father, even if she did not have a mother.

Rose liked her present school. She had made many new friends in France. It happened she brought friends of her over for the weekend, mainly other girls, so that my car on certain Friday evenings resembled a bird's cage of squeaking little darlings. The friends stayed with us at Robois, in the lodge I had called 'The Rose of Robois'.

On the second Friday of February, Rose and I sat in our living-room, playing at draughts with Joseph Bikri. Rose knew Joseph Bikri quite well. She called him Uncle Joseph since a few months, loved to play with him, and he didn't mind. Joseph had an easy-going way, very relaxed and gentle, with Rose. There lay never any embarrassment between them. Joseph looked at her simply as another human being, not as anybody special. I was extremely grateful for that, and not a little surprised detecting that quality in our Superintendent of Police! Rose had developed cunning for the game and we let her win often. When she lost she could become angry and difficult to handle. We, Joseph and I, learnt to cope with such bouts too.

Late in the evening, Rose got bored with the game and wanted to see a movie on television. I chose a light love story and the three of us settled in the sofa. Rose crept on Joseph's lap and curled in his arms. I went to the kitchen to prepare snacks and asked whether Joseph wanted something to drink. Joseph preferred a sweet white wine, which, he said, reminded him of the poet Omar Khayyam. Wine was my choice too. I was opening the bottle with the Laguiole corkscrew I was proud of, when the telephone rang through the house. I had installed telephones in practically every room, so I passed the bottle to Joseph to finish the job, and Rose shuffled next to him on the sofa. I went to the telephone on the small side-table.

A social worker of the PISC, the Social Care Institution of Robois, phoned me. I knew the woman. The woman called the Bourgmestre of Robois because she had a serious issue she could no longer cope with alone.

'I am on guard at the PISC,' she explained, 'and I have a very urgent case on my hands. I don't know what to do. I could reach none of the Directors of the PISC and also not Simone Ash, the President. I am feeling quite desperate.'

'What is happening, how can I help?' I asked, a little irritated by the late hour at which the woman called.

'A few days ago the Immigration Centre expelled a woman who had been asking for asylum in Belgium. The Immigration Office told her Morocco was a land at peace. Morocco did not persecute its citizens, was not at war, had a Parliament, a King who seemed to want a moderate policy. The Immigration Office said she would have to return to Morocco and they refused the asylum. In her case, for reasons I do not entirely comprehend, the Immigration

Centre plainly told her she was an undesired visitor, illegally walking around in Belgium. They also told her very clearly they would always refuse to grant her asylum. They refused for her to stay indefinitely in Belgium, wouldn't give her a paper allowing her to remain a little time more, and also to work in our country. Their message to the woman was: leave Belgium! And that was that! The Immigration Office showed the Moroccan woman gently but firmly to the door, pushing a train ticket for Brussels in her hands, telling her she could get a bus to Morocco from the North Railway Station and giving her the address of the Immigration Office of Brussels if she needed shelter in the capital. They put her on the street in the middle of winter, and closed the gates behind her. It snowed and at night it froze.'

'And then?' I asked, for the Immigration Office and Centre the PISC woman talked about lay in a neighbouring town.

'Then nothing,' the woman continued. 'Only, the Moroccan woman didn't take a train for Brussels. She had no money, so she could not pay a bus back to Morocco, and she definitely did not want to go back. She says she may be killed in Morocco. I hardly believe that, but she walked on foot northwards and stranded at Robois, in the centre of our town.'

'Where did she spend her nights?'

'She only told me about her last night at Robois. She slept in a hangar of an industrial site of Grez-Duros, the site of that enterprise that made glass verandas and that went broke six months ago'.

'Duros Veranda Beauty,' I recalled. 'I know the place.'

'I don't know where she spent her other nights, but she spoke of a shack in the wood. I suppose she was south of Grez-Duros then. Today, she was walking around in Robois with shabby clothes, dark eyes, and stinking like an alley rat. A man remarked her wandering about aimlessly, later hiding in a porch of the abbey, in the darkness and in the cold. He brought her to the PISC, to me.'

'Does she speak French?' I wondered.

'Oh yes, she does! She speaks better French than I and you. She has a delightful Parisian accent, too, and her passport seems fine, a Moroccan passport, of course.'

'What is the issue?'

'The problem is that I cannot throw her back into the street. The refuge apartments of the PISC are filled with people! We had to find a place for the two families who lived in that house of Butières that burnt down last Wednesday, the chimney fire.'

'I know about that fire,' I answered. 'I was there. Can't you put the woman temporarily in a hotel? Robois shall pay for the room.'

'The two hotels of Robois have no rooms free and also not the bed-and-breakfasts. There is a motorbike race in the neighbouring town. The hotels and bed-and-breakfasts refused on me. The hotels, hostels and houses have bikers in all of their rooms. I phoned five of them. I am desperate. I cannot send this woman out in the snow and cold. She may well freeze to death in the porch of the abbey, but I can find no bed for her. The only solution I have for the moment is to let her sleep in a sleeping-bag on a table of the PISC offices!'

I looked around. I brought my eyes to the ceiling and thought. I too was exasperated. How could I find a solution if this woman had been phoning the entire evening?

I had an idea.

I said, in hope, 'have you phoned the PISC of Namur, of Jambes, of Bouges, of the surrounding towns?'

'I did, monsieur Jacquet! They did not answer on their phones, or they refused to help, stated they had already too many problems with immigrants on their hands themselves. They had no

solution either. They told me what I knew already. Then I phoned priests and even the Bishopric. All places in homes are occupied. The Bishopric wanted to help but couldn't.' I made a quick decision, at that moment, the one the PISC woman had probably already had in mind. She knew I had a large house.

'All right,' I concluded rapidly. 'I have a spare bedroom. I'll take the woman in my house for a few days. I'll drive to the PISC. I'll be with you in half an hour or so. Wait for me!'

'Fine! Thank you, Monsieur le Bourgmestre, I was really out of solutions and desperate. I knew I could count on you as last resort. Thank you!'

I hung up, drew my fingers through my hair, and sighed. I had done it again. Why was it always me who had to solve everything and pay with my own self?

'Well, my boy, that is why you are the Bourgmestre,' I consoled myself.

I explained to Joseph Bikri I had to drive to Robois and why.

'Wait a minute,' Youssouf grinned. 'You are actually asking me, a Superintendent of the Belgian Police, to remain a while longer with your daughter Rose in order for you to fetch and to give shelter to an illegal immigrant? I should lock the woman up in our prison cell! You are lucky. We have only one cell in Robois, and that is occupied by a systemic drunk. I'll wait for you here.'

'I was certain you would understand the situation perfectly well,' I replied mockingly. 'You can do better than merely wait for me!'

Joseph grinned and brought his eyes to the ceiling in his turn.

He said. 'I thought so. I suppose the woman will be hungry. You want me to prepare a couscous. Do you have lamb in the fridge?'

'No,' I cried while I ran to get my overcoat and car keys, 'but I have a chunk of veal left in the upper drawer, and you will find carrots, onions, leeks, parsley in the lower ones. Rose knows where the rest of the ingredients are. Prepare us a couscous for four, will you? I feel hungry too, and I'll be more hungry still after I come driving back in that cold weather outside.'

I ran to the garage, opened the door and drove into the white blanket of the snow on my path. I heard the snow crack under my wheels. The white tapestry was frozen hard to ice. I would have to drive very carefully indeed. Luckily, I had not yet opened that bottle of white wine that would be waiting for me in the living-room. I took the road to Robois.

When I arrived at the PISC offices in the Adelbert Abbey, the lights at the porch turned on. I ran out of my car, felt the biting cold and damned me for not having grabbed a heavier coat and a second one for the Moroccan woman. I entered the building on the run.

The social worker waited for me in the entry hall. She opened the front door, let me in, and pointed to a small woman who sat with hanging head and shoulders on a chair against the wall. The Moroccan wore a chador, a Muslim shawl on her thick hair. She was only dressed in a thin coat, which opened on a thicker robe and a brown pullover. I could not see her face. I guessed the woman was half asleep.

The social worker spoilt no words on me, she must have known I was a man of few words. She went to the Moroccan and said, 'Samia, this is our Bourgmestre, the Mayor of our town, Monsieur Jacquet. He has a warm room for you tonight. You can stay at his house for a while. In the meantime, we will seek a solution for you. Now, please, go with Monsieur Jacquet, you needn't be afraid.'

The woman nodded, stood from the chair, kept her head bowed. The social worker took her by the shoulders, brought her to the door. I opened the door for them and showed my car to the social worker. She led the Moroccan woman to the car, opened the rear door, and shuffled

her in. She said goodbye to the Moroccan, and then she turned to me, thanking me profusely for taking the woman off her hands. It was extremely cold outside, so she darted back to the PISC entry hall.

I turned the ignition key and drove out of Robois, back to my lodge.

The Moroccan woman sat in the back seat, but I could watch her by my rear mirror. I didn't see much. She kept her head bowed, her thick shawl drawn over her forehead. I sped on the roads that had been cleared of snow, maybe a little too fast than allowed in this weather, but I knew these roads eyes closed. I supposed it might be a traumatic experience for a woman to be driven in a car alone with a man, through a deep and black forest of dense trees, over roads no streetlamp lightened. The woman was not very garrulous, to say the least.

I tried, 'please, don't be afraid. I won't harm you in any way. My house is a lodge in the woods, but my daughter is at home and also a friend. He is the Superintendent of the town. His family is also of Moroccan descent. He is my friend. There is no reason to be afraid of him. If humanly possible, we will help you. What is your name if I may ask?'

A weak voice from behind came, 'Samia!'

I was a little surprised, for the voice sounded young. I had rather expected to find an older woman, but I had forgotten to ask more details to the PISC woman. I realised I had been naïve once more. I knew nothing of the woman.

I drove on in the dark. We exchanged no words. I reached my house, opened the garage door electronically and brought the car to stop in front of the rear wall. I closed the garage door behind us. I suspected the Moroccan woman might then have thought I had her imprisoned. I opened the car, clicked on the main lights in the garage, and opened the rear door of the car for Samia to come out. She hesitated, but followed.

She suffered one more surprise when Rose burst in from the living quarters. Rose looked with the piercing eyes of a very curious girl at the Moroccan woman. I saw the woman hesitate again when she remarked the obvious, the characteristics of Down's syndrome on the child, but she did not react in words. She held her head higher and looked at me, and only then did I see how young she really was, in her early twenties. I ushered Rose and Samia out of the garage, into the house. Rose immediately grabbed Samia's hand, and the Moroccan followed the girl.

When we stepped into the corridor that led to the living-room, Joseph Bikri stood as a very curious giraffe with craned neck and interested eyes, holding the door open.

I said, 'please hang your overcoat here. We have prepared supper for you if you're hungry. We will join you, Rose and I, and Youssouf too, for we are all hungry. Youssouf prepared the diner. He is a decent cook, his couscous is marvellous.'

Samia took off her overcoat slowly, and to our astonishment she also hung her shawl on the hooks of the coat stand. Samia was not a traditional Muslim. We also looked a few seconds in amazement at her, then, for Samia was a very beautiful young woman. She had a fine, delicate face, ample black hair and a nice figure. She was rather tall for someone so young. Her cheekbones stood out finely in a somewhat drawn and tired face, but she had pretty, dark eyes, a thin nose, a little mouth of thick, full lips. Her skin was very light for a Moroccan, although I had no idea what skin a Moroccan should have. I instantly thought of her as of an exotic photo model. I could not find one wrinkle on her face, not one darker spot. I also saw how Youssouf was instantly smitten with the girl, and that surprised me even more, for I had given up finding my friend interested in any girl. He continued staring at her formidable curled dark hair, and for a few moments Samia pushed her curls shyly from her face. There was still much sadness and shyness in her eyes. She wore a heavy dress in subdued colours, a

brown woollen dress, a thick red pullover on a green shirt. I would have to find other clothes for her.

I presented, 'Samia, this is my friend, Superintendent Youssouf Bikri. He looks formidable, and he can be very threatening, but he is actually a very nice guy to people who are not criminals. He prepared us something to eat. By the way, what is your full name?'

'Samia Bennani,' the girl answered, a little more at ease than at the PISC.

'Go inside then, Samia. Youssouf and Rose, it would be best to eat in the kitchen.'

Rose still kept Samia's hand, but she had been sniffing at Samia like a puppy. She looked at me, now, and drew up her nose.

'Yes, I know, darling,' I thought.

I nodded to Rose, notifying I had understood her message. We smiled.

'Samia smells. She hasn't washed for days, had no hygienic bags. We shall have to send her into the bath before we show her the bedroom. Where can I find clothes for her? I can lend her one of my pyjamas.'

We stepped inside, Youssouf leading the way. He showed the kitchen to Samia as if it was his own, and placed her on one side of the table in front of Rose, who continued devising Samia with her round, large eyes, head a little oblique. Rose lost not a single movement of the newcomer. Joseph sat next to Rose, also in front of Samia, and I went to sit next to the girl. Samia said nothing, continued to look at Rose and then at Youssouf.

Joseph tried to say light words presenting the plate. 'Couscous à la Youssouf, with garden legumes and veal. We drink white wine, Samia. Do you want a glass of wine or plain water?' Samia was still a little shy, and maybe a traditional Muslim, after all, despite the fact she had laid off her head shawl. She replied in perfect French water was fine for her.

Joseph served her a filled plate, and Samia did not say that was too much. She did not have the patience to wait for us. She plunged her fork and spoon in the couscous and cut the veal. Rose made large eyes seeing how the girl gorged on the couscous like a glutton. I had not educated Rose like that. Rose smiled and looked at me, and then at Joseph, and we smiled back, only seeing again a bowed head of Samia putting spoon after spoon in her mouth. She sensed we looked at her, for she stopped eating, and Joseph and I hastily began eating of the couscous too.

'From what part of Morocco do you come from, if I may ask?' Joseph began, entering a conversation with Samia.

Samia frowned. I made a sore eye at Joseph and said, 'don't mind our Youssouf, Samia. He is a policeman in heart and kidneys. He can't help himself. He is a very curious man always, and he keeps asking questions.'

'That is all right,' Samia murmured. 'I can see he is an honest man. My home town was Marrakesh. Where do you come from?'

She looked at Joseph when she put that question back, so Joseph was thrown a little on one leg, but he nevertheless answered straight away, 'Brussels! I was born in Brussels. But my parents originated from Oujda in the northeast of Morocco. I am Belgian. I've never yet set foot in Morocco! I would like to travel there, though, for holidays.'

A flash of surprise appeared on Samia's face. She did not say anything, kept silent. Joseph continued to serve us more couscous. I served the wine and water. Samia did accept a glass of wine, now.

'She is definitely not a traditional Islamist,' I thought, serving half a glass of wine to Rose too.

‘To which school do you go? My school is in France,’ Rose introduced.

‘I don’t go to school anymore,’ Samia replied softly, eyeing greedily the rest of the couscous. Joseph hurried to serve her the last.

‘I studied at Marrakesh.’

‘What did you study?’ Joseph continued prying. ‘Sorry if I am embarrassing you. I really cannot help it. You do not have to answer to all my questions.’

‘I studied Islamic law at the University of Marrakesh. I graduated to what you would call in Europe a Master’s Degree in Law.’

I watched a fork full of couscous and veal stay poised before Joseph’s open mouth and not go in. This was indeed the evening of all surprises!

Joseph put the fork down and said, ‘you’re a Master at Law, almost the same studies as mine! I’m a Master in Criminology. Robert is a university-degree engineer. How and why does a Moroccan Master ends up in Belgium? You could have a wonderful job in your country! What happened?’

‘I was a militant for women’s rights and for the Rights of all Men at the university. We formed an association. The university went along with us and supported us. The authorities tolerated us and kept an eye on us, but they too did not intervene. Morocco is rapidly evolving to modern ideas of equality between men and women, but we had issues with radical Islamist groups. The women of our association refused to wear the chador. We said that nothing in the Koran forced us to do so. We drank alcohol, more as a sign of defiance than because of convictions. My friends got beaten up as a warning to our group. That happened several times. We received death-threats. We, girls, were harassed in the streets. Two of my friends were beaten so badly they ended in hospital. The police wrote reports stating my friends got wounded by accident, which in a way might be called the truth, but we were openly threatened. We waited for our first death. A friend advised me to flee to Belgium, where she had other friends that would help me. She told me I might even continue my studies in Brussels. I liked that. I had an address. When I arrived in Brussels, no Moroccans lived anymore at the address. My friend in Morocco had been negligent. She did not know where her friends had moved to, but she gave me another address of people that would help me get back to Morocco. From that moment on, I did not know anymore what to do.’

‘So?’ Joseph prodded her on, ‘how did you get stranded at Robois?’

‘I wandered through Brussels for three days. I slept under a bridge, in a railway station and in a porch of a skyscraper. Then, I went to the Immigration Centre, asked for asylum, and was sent to a Centre near Robois. The camp was insane! Many Muslim single men lived at that camp, Islamists from Pakistan and Afghanistan. They seemed to claim me. They forced me to wear the niqab. I don’t want to wear any niqab! The Koran also nowhere tells we, women, have to cover us. The Koran tells us to be humble, that is all! Me and my friends at Marrakesh, refused to wear shawls. In the camp, men threatened to beat me if I did not dress as a zealous woman. After a few weeks, the Belgian authorities of the camp said my plea for asylum was refused. They showed me the door, put me in the street, and closed the door behind me. I walked and walked. It was cold, but the walking kept me warm. I had nothing to eat, and no money left. I passed fields and villages. I walked up the hill at Robois, to the abbey. Then a man remarked me and brought me to the woman, who phoned the Mayor.’

‘Well, he is the Mayor, indeed,’ Joseph pointed to me, ‘and his name is Robert. I am his Superintendent of Police. You are safe here. What do you intend to do?’

‘I would like to stay in Belgium. I looked around in Brussels and I liked what I saw. The streets are rather dirty, but women are not harassed by men. They walk in fine clothes and I actually saw women giving orders to men. Belgium seems to be a fine country to live in and have a family. The countryside also is beautiful, and Belgium is an awfully rich country. You

don't know what richness you have with all the rain that falls here. Allah has blessed you with such rain.'

'We don't like rain too much,' Rose remarked.

'And also not snow,' I added.

Samia continued, 'I would like to stay in Belgium, find a job, work, anything I can find. Then I would like continue studying, maybe get a degree at law here, and become a lawyer. But the Immigration Centre people told me I remained illegally in Belgium. They gave me a paper and told me to leave the territory. Are you going to put me in jail?'

Joseph's eyes twinkled and he smiled broadly, 'no, no, I wouldn't do that! Of course not! I don't think you are a criminal. Are you a criminal?'

'No, I'm not!' Samia cried.

We saw tears welling up in her eyes. 'I don't know where to go to!'

'Don't worry,' I intervened. 'You can stay here for a while. I am sure Rose won't mind. Do you mind, Rose?'

'I don't mind. Samia can stay with me. I'll show her our wood and the animals.'

'There is a nice idea,' I exclaimed. 'Rose in in holidays for a week. I wondered how I should do when I need to go to town. I thought of having Rose accompanying me, but that might be boring for her. If you want, Samia, you can keep her company, here. I'll give you some money for guarding the house. That may help you out a little.'

'And that gives me time to arrange things for Samia,' Joseph added. 'We can arrange for a lawyer to take on your cause. You have been under threat in Morocco, maybe not to the full extent as required by Belgian law, but you can bring forward good arguments a lawyer may take advantage of. With the right lawyer, you may win the right to remain in Belgium, to receive asylum as yet. The PISC of Robois must help you survive and provide you with lodging. Friends can help you. Robert will help, Simone Ash too. She is the head of the PISC. We can find you funding to study, maybe even with some help of the Moroccan Embassy. We'll sort this out!'

Samia Bennani looked from me to Joseph and back. She was considering what we said.

'Why would you help me? I am a stranger to you. What would I have to do in exchange for your help?' Samia exclaimed desperately.

Joseph reddened. 'You should do nothing. You are no stranger to us anymore. We would be glad to have you as our friend. Won't we, Rose?'

'Samia is my friend!' Rose shouted.

'She sure is,' I agreed. 'You will have to show her the bedroom in the other wing, Rose.

Samia will need a bath before going to sleep. You can bring her soap, toothbrush, salts, shampoo. You know where they are.'

Rose stood.

'The real issue is to find you other clothes,' I said. 'You cannot go on wearing those. Rose can give you one of my pyjamas for the night. I may have to go into town tomorrow to find you new clothes.'

'Mamma's robes,' Rose proposed.

I hesitated.

'Yes. Some of mamma's clothes are still here. Would you like Samia to wear mamma's clothes for a while, Rose?'

'Yes. I'll show Samia.'

'Fine. Take her to the pantry, then. Mamma's clothes are in the cupboards, in cartons.

Nevertheless, I'll go shopping tomorrow and buy Samia new clothes.'

'I'll go with you,' Joseph hastily proposed.

‘Youssef knows I have not the least practical sense of women’s clothes,’ I sighed. I thought, ‘Joseph is also a little too eager to dress up this girl.’

‘I have a better idea,’ I countered. I wanted to cast a net into the sea and catch a fish. ‘Why don’t you and Samia go shopping in the morning? I’ll give you my credit card, Youssef. Samia cannot go alone, and a Superintendent with her shall quieten any resistance.’

‘I want to come to,’ Rose cried. ‘Dress Samia!’

‘But I, I, ...’ Joseph stammered.

‘That is settled then,’ I concluded. ‘I count on you in the morning, Youssef! Be here at ten o’clock!’

‘I cannot possibly accept wearing your wife’s clothes!’ Samia objected.

‘I am afraid my wife’s clothing is out of fashion. I divorced her about ten years ago and I haven’t seen her since. The clothes she left, she discarded. I kept them, never had the courage to destroy them. It is quite all right to wear them for a few days. Rose doesn’t mind. Joseph will take you to town and help you buy new ones.’

Joseph reddened deeper. He was fretting about something.

We finished our supper. Samia and Rose went to the other wing, and we heard their laughter pearl in the house. Samia explained Rose about Morocco. I cried to Rose to bring Samia to the clothes of mamma first, to let Samia choose, and then to take her to the bathroom and her bedroom. We heard Rose and Samia chat until they closed the doors of the guest wing.

Joseph and I cleaned the table in the kitchen and dropped the dishes in the sink. We took our wine bottle to the living-room, and finished it.

‘I have a few issues,’ Joseph said softly, almost whispering. ‘What do I know more of women’s clothes than you? If I go shopping in Robois, I shall be the laughing stock of the entire police force! Imagine, my trying on a brazier on this Samia!’

I laughed very much. ‘Quite a challenge indeed, my friend! I suggest you drive with her to Namur. There are many nice shops in the main street there! I am sure you will do fine. Let her choose. Don’t worry about the money. What is my money good for if not to help out friends?’

‘That is not all,’ Joseph said more seriously. ‘Samia is a young woman, and a beautiful young woman. She is not much of a traditionalist Islamist woman, but she will remain alone with a man who isn’t family in an isolated house in the woods.’

‘I swear you I will not touch her,’ I assured.

‘I know that,’ Joseph insisted, ‘but will others know that? You’re the most famous politician of Robois. What will your opposers do when they hear you live here with an illegal immigrant and an exotic beauty at that? Rumours are spread rapidly.’

‘Well, you know the truth. If necessary I’ll appeal to you as witness.’

‘You put my head at the stake as well as your own!’

‘Isn’t Samia worth that?’ I asked.

Joseph didn’t reply to that statement!

We continued talking for another hour in the living-room, until Rose opened the door and pushed Samia back in. Samia entered, dressed in a white silk shirt, light green pullover, a light robe and shoes with high heels. My former wife had put on those shoes only a couple of times. Samia’s hair still glistened a little from the water of the shower, and the shampoo had made it twice as soft and voluminous. She was splendid. Joseph Bikri stood up from his sofa as if a princess had entered the room. I laughed. Samia was transformed into a stunning beauty that evening, as she stood there, shyly, in her new clothes, a woman of extraordinary elegance and distinction. Joseph gave her his hand as if he introduced her to the house, to the

Rose of Robois. Samia, still shy, had to turn twice, Joseph at one hand and Rose at the other. We admired her and made her turn until her head spun.

That was how Samia Bennani came to live in the Rose of Robois, in my house. I remarked Joseph's looks and I thought Samia might easily find a quick solution to remain in Belgium, for Youssouf Bikri would do his utmost to keep her not only in the country, but very close to him, at Robois. I was not surprised at that when I looked at the grace that Samia was, but still amazed at seeing Joseph so happy, so full of hope, he who had not shown any interest in girls for as long as I had known him. Yes, Samia Bennani was welcome in my house and I surmised she might well never leave Belgium and even never Robois.

The following morning, at ten o'clock, Joseph Bikri rang at my door. He stood there, as nervous as a weasel. Rose and Samia were ready, so I simply pushed them out of the door and handed them and my credit card to Joseph. Joseph at first refused the card, but I insisted, saying the card was a company card and I could subtract anything paid by that card from my taxes. Joseph frowned, but he took the credit card. I gave him the PIN code. The three of them ran off.

They only returned late in the afternoon, laughing and joking, plenty of bags in their hands. Joseph held a protecting hand on the back of Samia, and she didn't seem to mind. Maybe my net had caught a fish after all.

Chapter 3. March and April

Issues for the Bourgmestre. Robert Jacquet

The spring of the election year revived Robois spectacularly. Winter had lingered long, but the transition from snow-covered lands to the radiating sun over the countryside happened abruptly that year, so that the villages suddenly emerged from the snow to a pandemonium of colours bursting out of the earth. People dispatched their heavy overcoats to their attics from one day to the other. Women put on bright robes, humming songs, and they looked for their multi-coloured earrings and bracelets. They sang songs while they worked. The younger girls ran through town in the first mini-skirts.

I found the rigmarole a little too early, too optimistic, for March and April might yet bring dark days of showers of rain and hailstones, but even I could not but be glad that Hades had once more released Persephone from the underworld to create new life and joy on earth. Who was I to dampen the hope in the hearts of my good people of Robois? We burned the giant witch of winter together.

I did expect a tough spring for myself. I did not really look forward to the season, but I too decided rather to drink the half-filled cup than loom over the cup half empty. My first joy came from Samia and Rose. Samia Bennani stayed on, of course. She cared for Rose during the spring holidays and on weekends, and she began to study Belgian law with the help of Joseph Bikri. She could only follow courses at the university from October of the year on, but she could grab some advance knowledge in the meantime. Joseph brought her his law books and explained Belgian law principles to her. We also secured a good lawyer for her immigration case. Joseph summed up her arguments for remaining in Belgium, and we thought her case might be won with a little luck and persuasion. Samia wrote to her friends in Morocco to gather background material and even proofs of their persecution. She received a little allowance from the PISC, and she had no expenses of rent because she continued to live with us.

Good news also was that we succeeded in quenching the case against Paul Degambe. Simone Ash and also Joseph Bikri talked to Zumurud. Ash explained patiently to the Muslim woman that the Director of Social Housing had meant no harm when he touched her. Joseph Bikri, in his normal, direct style, began asking strange questions, such as who owned the Jaguar that brought her to work, what her fiancé did for a living, where she lived and how many rooms her house counted, how many people lived with her, and so on. Zumurud understood quickly the police would keep a very close watch on her fiancé, who was in fact merely her lover. Zumurud was not married, though she had claimed the contrary. Joseph exposed her for what she was. Bikri was convinced the Jaguar had been bought with black money from drug dealing. He alerted the police in the neighbouring town where Zumurud lived in a sumptuous villa. Bikri also asked her who had urged her to file a complaint against Paul Degambe, and the names he heard were people close to Yves Govin. The idea had not come from her originally.

Zumurud withdrew her complaint, Paul Degambe apologised, and the matter was covered up with the blanket of peace. After that episode, Degambe's conduct evolved to being a lot more careful with his hands and with his tongue when women were concerned.

The rumours concerning Degambe's supposedly having fraudulently used a credit card also stopped abruptly after a two-hour presentation in pithy detail, with accompanying jokes, of the justification of each of Paul's expenses by the accountant of Adelbert Housing to the Board of the institution. Item after item of the expenses was checked and exposed during the memorable Board session. Paul Degambe came out of that meeting with white, shining angel's wings on his back and a round Saint's golden aura dangling around his balding head. The accountant declared he had not had so much pleasure since long.

Degambe was cleared of all suspicion.

Nevertheless, both he and I knew our fine co-citizens of Robois. It was common wisdom that where smoke could be smelled, there lurked a fire somewhere. Suspicions therefore remained lingering in the air, and I expected more of that. It seemed, of course, the rumours had been spread from out of the circle of friends of Yves Govin, and not, as we had thought at the beginning, from the opposing political parties of Robois.

A new corruption scandal then rocked Robois, and once more it concerned someone who might have been close to me.

Jean Segers was the President of the local soccer club. The club did not amount to much. It played only in the provincial soccer division, and it had not reached higher for at least two decades, but Segers was a well-known figure in Robois and in the villages. He moved in the circles of the IC Group and he exerted some influence during the party meetings. He also hung around me, sought me up at all kinds of events. He clung to any important person of the commune, of course important in his own limited perception. I did not particularly like this amoeba-like, glue-type of person. Segers always knew things better than anybody else around, and brought his arguments forward with some force nobody bothered or wished to challenge. He sought the high and last word in discussions, stating often not more than the obvious, but kept at trying having everybody believe he only had uncovered the deep truth. He loved dropping the names of the powerful he hobnobbed with. I generally avoided him as best as I could, but never seemed to succeed in that. He stood on all the photographs of me and my closer friends in the local newspaper.

Rumours now went he had dipped his greedy hands in the treasury of the soccer club. As much as I was certain of the honesty of Paul Degambe, I suspected this rumour might have sounder justification. The Board of the club checked and re-checked, and finally confirmed the rumours. It alerted the police, filed an official complaint. Joseph Bikri told me in confidence the accountant of the club had known of the fraud all along. The accountant equally had let money of the club disappear in his own pockets by forging fraudulently dark accounts in double booking. The Board of the club immediately dismissed Segers, appointed a new Manager and Coach, and accused Segers and the accountant openly of theft.

Segers was supposed to be an influential member of the IC Group. He was also supposed to be my friend. Yves Govin began to tell more than one person close to me was involved in a fraud scandal. He spread smoke around me and I felt the cloak of vague doubts and suspicions rise in the minds of the people.

End of March I had an uncomfortable meeting with representatives of the Immigration Centre that was located in the neighbouring town. Simone Ash sat at the same side of the table as I in that meeting, which took place in my office in the Abbey. I wonder whether the case of Samia Bennani had alerted this administration on the possibilities of Robois.

The Immigration people wanted talk to me because they wanted to handle the immigration problem a little more sympathetically, they said. When an immigrant received asylum in Belgium, the man or woman was put out on the streets and not further bothered with. The Immigration Centre had of course advised the person to run immediately to the City Hall of

the commune to obtain official papers of residence. One could see each day a few Congolese, Pakistani, Afghani, Albanese, Moroccan, Algerian, Libyan men and women waiting in line at the town counters to be inscribed in the registers of the population. With that paper in hand, the immigrants often took the first train for Brussels, where they might end up with friends or family or in the mob circuits of illegal workers in the construction industry, in the transport or cleaning businesses of the capital. Another, larger part of the immigrants, however, knew not where to go to, but they knew very well the way to the local PISC, to the offices of the Public Institution for Social Care. There, they could ask for a living allowance and even for a social apartment to live in. The PISC was not allowed to refuse, even though the immigrants would probably have to wait for years until they received an apartment, and that for the simple reason that no commune in Belgium had built more than one tenth of the apartments needed to answer the demands of the immigrants. The representatives of the Immigration Centre told me their town could not handle anymore the growing demands for inscriptions and more so not the funds necessary for the immigrants at the PISC.

Henceforth, the Immigration Centre would direct immigrants not only to the town they were established in, but also to the neighbouring towns. Robois would have to receive and pay for one-fourth of the new immigrants the Centre pushed out of its gates.

Politically, the demand placed me in a difficult situation. I could not refuse, for the Federal Authorities of Belgium forced the repartition on Robois, and refusing to help the poor and destitute was a despicable act. On the other hand, the citizens of Robois grumbled about immigrants, especially about Muslims and gypsies. The good citizens feared thefts, harassment, and they generally found the Government spent way too much supporting the immigrants. Was Belgium not a country racked by the economic world-wide crisis, by the crisis of the Euro, and by high levels of unemployment? My fellow citizens were out seeking scapegoats for their issues. They found them all too readily in the massive arrivals from African, Asian and East-European Islamist countries.

‘Oh sure, we want to help,’ I heard. ‘Our Government spends a decent amount of millions each year to send to the developing countries, and we give money to charity institutions to dig wells in the Sahara. We support *Caritas Catholica* and a dozen other charity funds. But how would we be able taking on our shoulders all the sorrows of the world? We should limit the number of people allowed to enter our country! The current flow of immigration had to be stopped!’

So now, these people from the Immigration Centre came to tell me Robois had to support immigrants even more than before. I would have to announce the news in the Town Council. The Council would ask how much that would cost to the community, meaning to their own pockets. The Council would of course react as if I, personally, demanded that money. It would be bad news to bring. How many times in ancient times had the populace killed a herald announcing bad news? All too often, I surmised. Bad news meant fewer votes in the October elections!

I managed to tell the Immigration Service that Robois was a rural community and not a large, wealthy town, and therefore it should take on a lower percentage of immigrants. The Immigration guys had done their homework, though, and they proved to me by statistics I also happened to have in my drawer, that the yearly income of the inhabitants of Robois amounted to fifteen per cent higher than the national income. Robois could easily pay more, they stated. I kept my silence then, for Robois was indeed such a beautiful commune it had attracted in luxurious villas many well-to-do people from the surrounding conglomerations. Robois would have to contribute more.

I started to wonder who had suggested to the Immigration Service spreading the burden of the inscriptions. When I asked that question, I received no answer, but the men and women told me their suggestion was merely common justice. I needed no lessons in charity and justice from these civil servants. They had not come to ask. They merely imposed and informed. When they left our abbey, the atmosphere was very cold and formal. Simone Ash sighed and looked gravely at me, but our hands were tied. We would have to ask the Council for more money to fund the PISC.

A little later, still in March, the Cabinet obtained another difficult file to handle. A rich farmer of Blouges, Michel Guichand, wanted to install a very large, industrial-size pigsty, one sufficiently large to compete with the Flemish stables of the lands of Ypres. There were a number of issues with large pigsties. They smelled. Animals were held in dire conditions, and one had to dispose of the masses of urine and faecal matter. In the Flemish Polders near the North Sea, the urine was spread over vast lands, and even that had brought issues of environmental pollution, for the nitrates accumulated in the ground and polluted the subsurface water. Wallony had fewer such farms, the urine problem was not as acute, and one had remarked already Flemish farms concluding contracts with Walloon farmers to spread their surplus of refuse on Walloon soil.

The neighbours of farmer Guichand refused his plans. They refused the excesses of Flemish intensive farming and they feared the noise of the transports of animals, of the smells of the stables, of the smells of the spreading of urine, the insects attracted, and other nuisances. Every Town Commission, among which the Commission of Spatial Ordinance, also refused the permits to exploit such farms. We did not need to vote in the Cabinet, for we were unanimously of the same opinion, being in favour for small-scale farming in our villages, not for the scale proposed by Michel Guichand. We heard his project had been inspired by a consortium of Flemish farmers whose ambitions to expand had been thwarted in Flanders and who therefore sought new outlets in our countryside. We notified Guichand of our decision. Guichand took the news very badly. The next days he shouted in bars and restaurants I was playing the lewd town dictator. The Tyrant of Robois he called me, the Hitler of the villages. He wanted a new Bourgmestre after the elections, a person who fell more in line with modern times. He meant Yves Govin as my successor. Govin had not said a word during our deliberation in the Cabinet, but he was now inclined in street discussions to grant the permit to Guichand. He said that to Guichand, not to the farmer's neighbours. Guichand promised to teach me a lesson in citizenship. Guichand was a short-tempered man who could become violent. His chest looked like a tree-trunk. I did not want to excite him more than necessary, so I did not react on his invectives.

The issues I had to cope with in that spring were harder and more numerous than anything I had experienced in the five years I had been Bourgmestre of Robois. It was only now, I thought, that I began to learn how tough the job might be. The smiles faded from my face and I felt irritated.

Another very strange claim surfaced a little later. The story took me by surprise. Rumours went I was the offspring of a Nazi family. I was accused of sympathies for the extreme rightist causes. German National Socialism dated from before and in the Second World War. I had been born long after that period, but the rumours ran my family had helped Nazi spies in the war. We had nurtured the memory of Nazism and we sympathised with the racist right. My grandfather was supposed to have helped German spies at the outbreak of the last War, helped them uncovering a Belgian plot to hide special aeroplanes in a castle of the

neighbourhood. I had not the slightest idea what the rumours were about, and I could neither ask my grandfather, who had died relatively young, nor my father who had also died quite young. I had lost my grandmother and mother. How could I have been a Nazi sympathiser when I had been born long after the facts, and how could my grandfather and father have assisted the Germans when they never left their villages? My father had been a very soft-hearted, gentle, hard-working man, who had never uttered a word of support for the belligerent parties of the last War. He could not have been a member of any extremist party. The rumours also ran we were anti-Semitic, pro-Muslim, and we harboured ideas of the Fundamentalist Christianity and Muslim Brotherhoods.

The claims were contradictory, of course, and utterly absurd. I dismissed these rumours as being ridiculous when my friends Bacca and Collado mentioned them to me. Joseph Bikri told me an evening he had heard the rumours too, and he urged me to take action. He wanted me to file a complaint at the police. I waved the absurdity away.

In the following week my house stood empty for a few days. I attended a congress of the Construction Business Association in Namur, Rose was at her school in France, and Samia had decided to look for fellow-Moroccans in Brussels. When I returned, I found huge black Swastika crosses painted in black pitch on three walls of my house. My wood lodge stood isolated, so the man or men who had done the painting job had taken all their time to draw the crosses. We found two empty buckets of pitch between the trees, nothing else. I called Joseph Bikri the same evening to formulate an official complaint, but he advised me this time to think it over. He told me journalists had access to the complaints, and spreading the news of the pitch Swastikas in the press would make matters worse. He was certain he would never be able to catch the men who had worked on my walls. I suspected Guichand, maybe even Govin, but I could accuse nobody without proof.

I felt like Hamlet then, always hesitating for action, looking for more proof and not reacting. I realised the events would inexorable lead to an explosion on my part. What could I do to counter the rumours and refute publicly the accusations that were launched behind my back? Confronting Govin would lead to nothing. The man would laugh and continue spreading his nasty slander. I was not a person like Govin. I would never be able using his dirty methods. Doing so was not in my character, but a gentle man – as I tried to remain – was also defenceless against people like Govin, who acted deviously, never in the open. My mood grew sombre. I was sad, easily irritated, nervous, and maybe a little in a depression. I bit on my lips and decided not to give Govin the worried look and sombre eyes he was no doubt waiting for. I entered the Abbey with a wink and a smile, threw cheered-up good mornings to all the people I met.

I did enjoy help from unexpected quarters. Jean Castelle, the Socialist Member of Parliament, called me by telephone after the Swastika incident. He told me he was sorry such a thing had happened at Robois. He considered the act a shame for the citizens of our nice town. He assured me no member of the Socialist Party had drawn the Nazi crosses, and also that if ever he found out who had done that miserable farce, he would severely reprimand the person and turn the criminal over to the police. He furthermore added he had heard from his grandparents, family farmers of Trioteignes, what my family had done during the war, of which nothing whatsoever had been pro-Nazi, all to the contrary. If necessary, he would testify so in a Court of Justice. I was quite astonished to hear so much from a political opposer, so astonished I forgot to ask the man about things I didn't even know of myself. I thanked him, however, and we hung up. I had discovered a tough but honest man in the Robois opposition!

The Swastika episode ended by me having immediately sandblasted my walls, but the paint had entered too deep in the wood of the planks. We replaced those parts of the walls. The crosses had deeply impressed Rose. The results could be seen for an entire weekend, so I could not avoid her standing in front of them and asking what they meant. My explanation was necessarily long, truthful, and it upset Rose visibly. My story of war and hatred made her shrink from the world and wonder what other violence lurked around us. This made me truly hate the men who had so polluted my walls.

I installed a sophisticated alarm system thereafter. Cameras covered my outside walls and brought signals back to a small additional PC in my office room. The cameras would record all movements along my walls, triggered by electronic movement-sensitive devices. I watched the recordings closely for a few months, but the only movements detected were either made by me or my friends visiting us, or triggered by foxes, stray dogs and cats, and large birds. I also installed an intrusion detection system. The alarms of this system were sent to a call centre that would immediately alert the police if I did not respond within a few seconds with the right code to a telephone call. The system worked, for I once clumsily banged with a hook against a detector, and when the telephone rang I could not immediately find the right code. Within ten minutes, a police car stood at my door with the policemen having their holsters open and one hand on their revolvers, and I had a difficult time explaining them the alarm had been a mishap of mine.

The pressure on my person did not end with the Swastikas in that early spring. The next rumour to be spread was to be expected! I employed a modern slave in my house, a Muslim woman, an illegal immigrant, to clean my house and guard my child. I abused of the woman and she also had to serve my demented son. I got wind of the rumours once more by my better-thinking colleagues of the Council Cabinet. I told everybody I had no son, but I also told nothing about Rose. I offered the name of the woman who came three days a week to clean my house, told I paid Social Security for her as was normal. Again I dismissed the rumour.

The last weeks of April passed quietly.

In the very last week of April I organised a diner on a Saturday evening for my closest friends. It would be my thanksgiving for Easter. I had the best caterer of Robois supply me his finest menu, for I did not want to prepare the dinner myself. Samia Bennani sat in my living-room next to Rose, and also Superintendent Bikri was present. Paul Degambe and his wife had come. We were six.

I warmed up the dishes of the caterer, and we had just begun to serve our aperitif when my doorbell rang. I expected nobody. Before I could react, Rose darted to the corridor and to the front door. I ran after her, but Rose already threw the door wide open. She stood before the adorable Simone Ash.

I was still hurrying through the corridor when I saw Simone's eyes widen and her face blemish. I had never told her I had a daughter, let alone a daughter with Down's syndrome. Simone suffered quite a surprise, I saw. She looked from Rose to me, back to Rose, could not speak a word, and then I stood behind Rose, my hands on her shoulder.

Simone eventually recovered from her surprise, shook her hair, and said, 'hi! I'm truly sorry, I did not want to disturb you. You asked me for these files on the PISC by phone, and I was in the neighbourhood, so I thought to bring them to you myself. I intended to deposit them in

your letter box, but I saw the light in your house, so I rang. I'm really sorry to have disturbed you!

'You don't disturb us,' Rose replied instantly, before I could intervene. 'You are a beautiful lady! Who are you?'

'This is my daughter Rose,' I introduced. 'You indeed do not disturb us. Thank you for the papers. Yes, I needed them with some urgency. Rose, this is Miss Simone Ash, who works at the Town Council with me. Simone, we are having a small dinner party with a few friends. You know my friends too. Were you planning on doing something special this evening? There is food for six, so we have food for seven too. We would be delighted to have you with us.'

'No, no,' Simone shook her head. 'I couldn't possibly! I don't want to intrude on you! I thought you were alone in the house. I'm so sorry!'

'Come in,' I insisted. 'We are just having a simple dinner, nothing special, and we are in the company of good friends. Please come in, we would like that very much!'

'You are pretty,' Rose added. 'You can come in. Are you a friend of my father?'

Simone hesitated. Her awkwardness was solved by Rose, who grabbed Simone's hand and drew her in.

Simone continued, 'I really did not want to disturb!'

'I do not doubt you,' I replied, 'but we are glad to have you. I would not have dared to invite you, but now you're here I'm not letting you go, and Rose neither.'

I closed the door and saw the two cars of my invitees on the path. Simone must have remarked the two cars that stood there already, too. Had she been curious nevertheless? I had a much warmer feeling in my body, suddenly. Simone might as yet be interested in me.

I took off Simone's coat and hung it in the corridor. Rose drew Simone on into the living-room. Simone was happily surprised to see her Director of Social Housing and his wife sitting in the sofa. She smiled when Paul Degambe stood in front of her. She was even more surprised when Joseph Bikri came out of the kitchen with two plates of zakouski in his hands, followed by the extremely lovely black-haired Samia Bennani holding a very precious bottle of my best Champagne. Their eyes too widened when they saw Simone Ash. They of course glanced at me, wondering why I had not told them about the additional guest.

Joseph Bikri looked at me as if he were asking, 'is this your girlfriend? Why did you hide her? Why did you not tell us you had invited her?'

Simone gave them a hand. I presented Samia, and had some explaining to do to both sides. Simone Ash remained a little shy at first, but we pushed her in the sofa next to Paul's wife, and the Champagne did the rest in relaxing the atmosphere.

I shouted, 'the first who talks about the town affairs washes the dishes!'

We talked therefore about our families, and about the usual evening gossip of people we knew.

I had an explanation to provide to Simone Ash about Samia Bennani, for I was sure the rumours must have reached her too. I even suspected that might be the reason why Simone had rang my doorbell. So I told who Samia was and how she had come to live with me. It turned out Simone, though the head of the PISC, did not know about her. I tried turning my tongue three times in my mouth and I used my gentlest words, for Samia listened intently to each syllable I pronounced. Simone could not but notice the protective attitude Joseph exercised over Samia, so she relaxed when she heard my story. Samia added her version, then, and she had to tell about her home town and about the Morocco she knew, also about her studies. I thought Joseph would have his hands full with this modern African suffragette, but Simone seemed to admire what Samia had fought for, nodding in agreement. Samia had

proved to be a sweet, gentle and very intelligent person the time she lived with us. She now had her own study room in the wing, so she almost lived independently from us. She often took her breakfasts and meals alone in the morning and at noon, for I was usually out, but we ate something together in the evening. I am afraid my friends also noticed I had only eyes for Simone Ash.

When we had finished talking about Samia, Joseph Bikri wanted to know how an English-named doctor had arrived at Robois. Joseph always asked the questions I was too shy to ask. Paul Degambe and I now watched Simone with expecting eyes, for we had never dared to probe into Simone's life. Simone waited a little as if she considered not answering that direct question, but then she told us.

'My grandfather was an English pilot who stayed for a mission at Castle Trioteignes during the Twilight War of the Second World War. He met my grandmother there as the daughter of the best friend of the owner of Castle Trioteignes. My grandmother was a medical doctor, a Trahty by name. She had studied at Oxford, where she had already met my grandfather the pilot. They had both been somewhat adventurous, a trait that runs wide in my family, but they fell in love. The rest of the story is simple. They fled back, both, to England, and married. My grandfather was a pilot in the Royal Air Force. We always kept contact with the Belgian side of our family, and also with the Vresele family of Flanders. I was educated partly in Belgium when I was a young girl. That is why I speak French. My mother was Belgian, too. I studied medicine at Oxford like my grandfather and my father, and I also continued studies in medicine later, in Belgium. I practised as a doctor in England first. I returned to Belgium I suppose, as an escape. I had a few unhappy relationships with English guys. I was young and naïve and I met the wrong men. I wanted to change air to forget and construct me a new, stronger character before maybe returning to England. I am not sure now I shall ever return to our lands, by the way. I may well remain at Robois and continue practising here. I specialised in radiology after general practice, however, and I do like medical research. I may try that domain again after a while. So, that is me, dear Simone Ash!'

We kept a respectful silence when she had finished talking, for I had frowned when she spoke about her past experiences with men. I understood now why she was so careful with new relations. I should not brusque Simone Ash, not break again her mending angel's wings.

Joseph Bikri chased the silence by announcing that the hors d'oeuvre bits, the first dish, was ready in the ovens. Joseph would be once more our chef cook for the evening, though we all helped in the kitchen. We also had not much to do but warm up what the caterer had brought. We went to the dining-room with the rest of the Champagne in our glasses. Simone Ash got a seat right in front of me. Rose sat next to her, and then Samia and Joseph. Paul Degambe's wife sat next to me, and next to her sat Paul. Joseph and Paul began a long conversation about the poor of Robois and their quarters, but we decided to clean the dishes together and forgave them. We spent the evening pleasantly together. Simone chatted also with Rose.

It was very late in the night when my guests left. Simone went out at the same time as Paul and his wife. I helped Simone in her coat, and just for a few tenths of a second she leaned on to me. I wanted so much to touch her shoulders and her long, pale neck, but I refrained from doing so.

When Simone stepped out of the door, she turned, looked straight at me, held her gaze to my eyes, and said softly, 'thank you for wonderful evening. You have a fine daughter. Samia and Joseph are nice, too. I owe you one!'

I added, 'yes you do! We were delighted to have you. We must do this again,' and I dared to put my hand on her back, even though I was immediately sure I should not have gone so far.

I did not want to brusque Simone. I would give her the time she needed. I had the feeling that if I was indeed in love with her, I was not at all sure about how she felt. A strange sadness overcame me, for love should come quickly and be recognised instantly. Other love was imperfect. I wondered whether that had happened to her, and thought rather not.

Simone sighed, turned, went to her car, and waved before getting in. Rose stood beside me at that moment, and Rose waved back. I watched Simone's car disappear. I lingered at the door, alone in the night of Robois.

The Georgis Case. Joseph Bikri

In the beginning of the month of April I was driving in Bas-Robois when I received a call from our head office of police. Something had happened at the Georgis family home in Aucourt, the most southern village of our town. I did not wait for more information at that moment, told I would immediately drive to Aucourt and I asked for Dominique Bussy, my usual assistant, to join me there. I got the complete address, although I vaguely remembered where the Georgis lived. I drove on to Aucourt.

When I arrived at the house, several people stood gathered at the villa. Dominique had arrived only an instant ago. She was already busy pushing the people away. It was a nice afternoon of a sunny day, I felt rather relaxed. What could possibly have gone wrong on a fine day like this? When I remarked the faces of some of the people in the street however, closed and stern, I realised something serious had happened.

The villa looked like a fine, modern building, built in the rustic architecture of the Flemish style with sharply inclining high, dark-tiled roofs above walls in red brick. The villa stood a little back from the street, showing a fine, well-tended garden in front and a large lawn spreading out behind. The Georgis seems to be well-to-do people, though I did not remember what they did for a living. I parked my car a little farther in the street and went up to Dominique, helping her sending the people away. She told me she knew not more than I on what had happened, but the people were blocking the entry to the house. The bystanders did not speak to each other. They were respectful when they let us both through, and they remained standing at a distance from the villa, but they didn't disperse. We stepped into the garden on the path that led to the door, and saw that the windows on the two sides of the main entrance had been smashed in. The glass debris lay not very much outside, so whatever had caused the shattering of the glass must have come from the front. Was that what had happened?

The door of the Georgis Villa was closed. We rang the bell. Marcel Georgis opened the door, and I remembered him clearly now. He was dressed in a fine, grey suit, wore a blue tie. He was the bank director of one of the agencies of Robois, a man of some notoriety in the town. I had met him occasionally in the past. He was always neatly dressed, and I only knew him as a decent man without a history. He was tall, slim, authoritative, a greying man with a small, dignified, yet somewhat puffy face, the archetype of the banker. Why would somebody want to smash his windows?

'Monsieur Georgis, you called the police, I believe. Can you tell us what has happened?' I began. 'I am Superintendent Bikri and this is my assistant, officer Bussy.'

'I know who you are. Please come inside, Superintendent. We met in Robois, didn't we?'

‘Yes indeed. I think we did. What is the matter?’

‘A case of rape, Superintendent. Please step inside. We’ll explain what happened.’

Robois was a very quiet town. I didn’t recall when we had a serious crime such as rape or murder, so I was quite astonished when I followed Georgis to his living-room. Dominique and I glanced at each other. We continued to follow Georgis. The man seemed calm. In the living-room we noticed the broken window panes, the debris still spread all over the place. We saw also smashed furniture. Somebody had wanted to do evil to the Georgis! I remarked three bricks on the ground and on the table. These bricks seemed to have been thrown through the window, but we didn’t jump too early to conclusions. We remained silent and preferred Georgis to do the talking.

‘I was not at home today when this happened,’ the bank director explained. ‘I was at work at the agency. My wife and daughter were alone in the house. My wife is upstairs, resting a while on her bed. Her sister, a neighbour of ours, is at her side. My daughter of twenty is also upstairs. If you want to speak to them, I guess they could come down although they are in shock. You see, around two o’clock this afternoon, three men rang at our doorbell. My wife opened the door, believing a neighbour or her sister rang, and two men with ski-masks over their faces pushed her roughly inside the house and closed the door behind her. They hit my wife at the head with their fists so that she bled, her lip burst. The third man seemed to have remained outside, but later he too entered, also wearing a ski-mask over his face, coming through the backdoor. That door is generally open when we are in. My daughter came running down the stairs because she had heard my wife scream, but one of the men caught her from behind and held her arms tightly on her back. My daughter screamed too, so the other man threw my wife to the floor and he pushed a piece of cloth in my daughter’s mouth. My wife then lost conscience, she has weak nerves, you see. It seemed that what happened took only a few minutes. The men bound the hands of my wife, and her legs, with large, brown cellophane tape. They also glued the tape over her mouth. The two men dragged my daughter upstairs to a bedroom, while the third man remained downstairs, probably to guard my wife, but also to smash the furniture in our living-room and dining-room. He used a chair for that. Our daughter was thrown on a bed. The two men tore her clothes off. Then, they touched my daughter’s body with their dirty hands, touched her everywhere, also at her intimate parts. They did not physically rape her, but they kept telling her that if I did not mind my own business they would come back and finish the job. They went downstairs again, leaving my daughter in tears and in shock. My wife had regained conscience by then, but she could see nothing of the men for they still had their ski-masks on. The two men went outside, smashed our windows first by throwing bricks at them and, when that did not help much, by hitting the panes with an iron pipe. They threw the bricks in when the windows were already partly broken. My window panes are triple panes, Superintendent, so the hoodlums really had a hard time breaking the glass. I forgot to tell you we have an alarm system installed, but since my wife and daughter were at home, the system was not activated. When the gangsters had finished the breakage, my wife saw the men run away through the backdoor. It must have been half an hour later that my daughter phoned the police, and then me. I hurried home and found my wife still lying on the floor in the corridor, my daughter in total shock. I can tell not much more, but one other thing. The attackers fled by the back of our house. At the end of our garden lies an earthen road, a path really. My wife told me she heard a powerful car drive off on that side. My guess is that the bandits had a car there waiting for them.’

‘That is very sad, Monsieur Georgis,’ I sighed. ‘I truly feel with you and your family. We are both very sorry hearing what awfully happened to you. We shall do our utmost best to catch the criminals. We are going to have to ask you a lot more questions, but believe me, you can

answer at your own time and rhythm. For us, it is important to have witness accounts of as close to the time of the crime as possible. Dominique, can you phone for three more agents to come over?’

I turned back to Georgis.

‘Do you know, Monsieur Georgis, whether the men with the ski-masks also wore gloves?’

‘Yes, they did! My wife explicitly told me so, too. I forgot to mention that.’

‘That is OK. I must ask you nevertheless to touch as few items as possible in your house.

Dominique, please ask for the specialised team of Namur to come here for fingerprints, will you?’

Dominique went a few steps back into the corridor to make her phone calls.

I cried after her, ‘Dominique, please be as discreet as possible, will you? We don’t want the entire town to know what happened here!’

Dominique stuck her head back in the living-room, fixed her eyes on the ceiling and nodded as if I had no need to tell her that. She was right, but I was a little shocked myself by then. I also realised I pushed Dominique round as if she was my slave. I would excuse later for that. I waited for a while to give Georgis some time to gather his wits.

I continued, ‘Monsieur Georgis, I shall have to ask your wife and daughter a few questions too, but I shall have that done today by Dominique. She is a quite capable officer, and I think a woman would be better indicated to talk to your wife and daughter at this moment. Do you need a doctor for your wife and daughter?’

‘No, I don’t think so. My daughter is not hurt except in her mind. My wife got hurt, but she is only bruised.’

‘I you want to I can call in a psychological team, two women psychologists to assist you to cope with what happened here. It would really be better if a doctor made an official examination of how badly your wife was attacked. The doctor’s report can be used later on against the aggressors.’

‘I can phone our house doctor. He is a friend.’

‘Do that, Monsieur Georgis. Please do not give too many details to your doctor.’

Marcel Georgis called his doctor on his cell phone. He told me the man would arrive in an hour or so.

‘Fine,’ I nodded. ‘My men will take note of the damage done to your house. They will take photographs. Our report can also be used for your insurance, so we shall need as many details as possible. Has anything been stolen that you are aware of? How are you? I can see you are pretty much shocked, too. Do you want something to drink? Will you be able to talk to my officers?’

‘I will do,’ Georgis answered, and I believed him. ‘Nothing really seems to have been stolen. We don’t have much money or jewels or other precious objects in our house.’

‘Monsieur Georgis,’ I asked my most important question, ‘might you know who the three men were that attacked your wife and daughter?’

‘I haven’t seen the men, I was not at home,’ Georgis reminded me.

‘Of course. We will need to ask your wife and daughter a description, as far as they can give to us. Would somebody want to harm you or your family?’

‘No, absolutely not! I am a banker, and I had to refuse loans at times, but I have refused loans often in my career, and that was never associated with any violence. I have no idea why someone would want to harm me or my family.’

‘You should mind your own business, the gangsters stated. What might they mean by that?’

‘I don’t know,’ Georgis replied hesitatingly. ‘I generally mind my own business, I try to be discreet as a banker.’

‘Have you noticed any violent or excited behaviour towards you in any of your clients?’

‘None whatsoever, no,’ Georgis shook his head. ‘My business relations these last months have been anything but abnormal.’

‘Would somebody want to hurt you for any other, maybe private, reason?’

‘Not that I can think of.’

‘Do you know of any relations of your daughter who might want to hurt her?’

‘No. My daughter has no boyfriend currently. She had a boyfriend, several months ago, but that relation ended. She is a serious girl, a quiet, gentle and polite girl. She studies at the university. I cannot imagine who might be our enemy.’

I remained at a loss. Georgis must have made himself one or more enemies. It was clear to me he did not speak the whole truth. He was a clever man. He would tell the truth on everything, just not the entire truth. In what unsavoury business was he involved? I had handled a few cases of violence and blackmail in Brussels, and in all these cases enemies had acted rapidly. If Georgis had suffered this violence, it was for something or his family were involved in now, not a long time ago. The message had been intended for him too, not for his wife or daughter. Men wanted to intimidate him, to warn him. The attackers could have been a lot more violent, the expedition was not one of vengeance but of warning.

‘Fine,’ I continued. ‘I shall need the name of the last boyfriend of your daughter. Officer Bussy, here, can ask her that. I shall also need from you a list of the last clients of the past months, but only of clients you refused transactions to. You should also ask similar names of people your personnel at the bank refused something too, or had issues with. I do not ask for any figures, only names. Could you provide us such a list?’

Marcel Georgis thought for a few moments.

He objected, ‘we have a privacy policy at the bank. I also would not want our clients to be harassed by your questions. We might lose customers. Nevertheless, I suppose that when merely a list of names suffices, we could constitute such a list.’

‘Thank you. We would appreciate that. Somebody, somewhere, wishes you harm. I repeat, what might the criminals have suggested by telling you to mind your own business? You must realise these men are dangerous, and you must be involved in something they don’t like.’

‘I have not the slightest idea,’ Georgis once more replied with a whispering, failing voice.

‘Maybe the criminals caught the wrong man. As I said, I do not really have enemies.’

‘Excuse me for asking, and please take no offence. In the private sphere then, have you or your wife had any extra-marital relations for which somebody might have wanted to take revenge on you out of spite?’

Georgis reddened, but it was the red of anger.

‘No,’ he cried. ‘We have no lovers, if that is what you mean. We are no sadomasochists, no sexual deviants, we do not exchange our couple. We are just a normal couple, with normal friends, who live a normal life. What you people dare to suggest!’

‘Thank you, Monsieur Georgis.’

I let Georgis think a while, but I did not see him hesitate. He did not come up with any suggestion.

Three other police officers entered the house, but they were stopped by Dominique in the corridor.

I stood from my chair, saying as last, ‘Monsieur Georgis, this will be all I wanted to ask you today. My officers have arrived. I would like officer Dominique Bussy to ask a few questions to your wife and daughter. One officer will write a report on the damage to your house. That report will be made available to you. Another officer will interrogate your neighbours. Maybe somebody else has seen or heard anything. I shall take a look at the back of your house, if I

may. Oh yes, I forgot. One officer will guard your house for the rest of the day, if only to keep curious people at a distance. A patrol car with two officers will remain in your street this night and watch your house. I suggest you activate your alarm system. If ever new information, something we might have missed just now, comes to your mind, anything that might interest us, a detail overlooked, anything, please call me at this number. We will want you to come to our offices to state your complaint officially, in writing. Tomorrow at ten at the Abbey would do.'

I handed over my card to Georgis, who looked at it and then placed it on top of a low cupboard.

I left, but I went first to my officers and gave them my orders. Then I opened the back door, passed the garden, looked around, searched for footprints but found none in the soft grass, and arrived at the end. Georgis' back garden had a high, iron-wired fence that ran the entire circumference. There was a door in the fence leading out, but that door could only be opened from the inside, and its lock had not been damaged. Any man could easily climb over this fence and door, though. I saw no mud on the fence, no damage there too. The men must have entered first from the road in front of the house. That probably meant a fourth man had driven the car that had brought the hoodlums to the villa. That chauffeur had then driven to the back of the house and waited there. Or there had been two cars. No, I thought, that would have been too large an operation. In any case, this had been a well-prepared organisation. The men must have first reconnoitred the environs, devised a plan, and only then attacked the villa. That learned me a lot. This was not really a crime of passion, but a coldly planned operation. It was not an attack by passionate, excited men who had lost their heads. The operation had been planned beforehand, studied, and coldly executed, swiftly and professionally. The word profession stuck in my mind. The aim had been to impress Marcel Georgis, and the leader had his men well in hand, for the girl might have been done violence and worse. Nothing of that had happened. For what reason? Georgis had definitely not told me what he was involved in, most probably in a matter of much money. He had omitted part of the truth.

I went onto the back path, but the road there was not really an earthen path. It was a gravel road, large enough to let one car pass. Beyond the road lay pastures and grain fields, as far as the horizon. Cars would not come here, usually. The path was destined to be used by bicycles, horses maybe, and people walking for pleasure. No tracks would be left in the red gravel. Cars on this path would be suspect, but all the villas along it had the end of their gardens lined by fences, and behind their fences grew trees and high bushes. A car would have waited here, undetected, better hidden than in the street in front of the villa. It would be a miracle for somebody to have remarked a car here, but miracles did happen. I phoned Dominique Bussy with my cell phone and asked her to interrogate the neighbours on a car passing behind the houses.

I did not try to go back to the Georgis villa. I followed the gravel path on foot, saw tracks nowhere, arrived at a side road and turned left to reach again the road in which stood the villa of Georgis and my own car. I then remembered Georgis had told me the attackers wore gloves. That was one element more to strengthen my belief the aggression had been planned by experienced men. Where could I find such a gang in Robois? What of the gang was not of Robois but had been commanded from out of any other city?

I had not asked too much about how the men had been dressed, but Dominique and the other officers would have gotten that information.

I sighed, stepped in my car, felt a hundred eyes from the street on me, and drove back to my office. I considered calling the special services of Namur, but felt that not necessary, since we

had already called their fingerprint group. They would know by now about what had happened in Robois.

I sat in my office. I reflected quite a while, thinking about the aggression. I leant back in my chair with my hands behind my head. Anybody who would have seen me would have thought badly about me, a Superintendent who let all the hard work be done by his men and who relaxed in his chair meanwhile, doing nothing but sipping his afternoon tea. It was good policy, however. Have confidence in your men, let them work on their own, make remarks afterwards so that the next time they do not make the same mistakes. I thought my men and Dominique were trained well. Dominique could be a fine Superintendent one day. I had to encourage her to take courses.

I went over the quarters of Robois in my mind. I knew most of the people in Robois and in the villages by sight. I knew the houses, villas, farms, castles. I knew of no suspicious groups of men in the villages who might have attacked Georgis. The gang could, of course, come from outside Robois.

I stood from my chair, grabbed my keys, and went back to my car. I felt refreshed by my tea, so I wanted to do now what I should maybe have done earlier. I drove away and rode to the industrial zone of the eastern villages along the N11. I started at Bazaine and drove slowly through the lanes of the warehouses, garages, and other buildings. I remarked nothing out of the ordinary, nothing suspicious. I drove on to Butières and from there to Grez-Duros, but noticed nothing new. I passed cluster after cluster of dreary buildings. I saw only trucks and normal family cars on the roads, slow traffic, few people. I sighed. What had I expected? I arrived at Turgoux, near Recycfast, stopped and watched. Again I saw nothing special and wanted to drive into the last stretches of roads of Turgoux, when I saw a movement at the hangars of Recycfast. I saw a large four-wheel drive BMW station car arrive, drive to the parking lot, and stop. Three men stepped out of the vehicle. The men were almost of the same height, men with broad shoulders and square, dark faces. They looked like squat, combative fellows. Two of the men ran immediately to a hangar of Recycfast. Two more men, among whom the driver, lingered near the car. I was still in uniform. The men had seen me spying around, I was sure of that, but they had only seen me late. I drove to near them, stepped out of my car.

The men acted as if they had not remarked me. They ignored at first the policeman that walked up to them. The driver said something to the second man, and that one too hurried inside. By then I stood next to the driver and looked into the opened back door of the BMW. I saw nothing special there, a few tools on a dirty blanket spread out. I looked at the chauffeur, and thought I had seen that man already somewhere, but I could not recall where that had been.

I said with a relaxed voice, 'hello! I am Superintendent Bikri of Robois! Nice car you have here.'

'Yes,' the man said, avoiding my eyes. He did not add anything.

'A BMW X5M four-wheel drive,' I insisted, walking around the dark blue vehicle. 'That is one powerful car you have here, a very fine car. Do you guys live in the neighbourhood?'

'We do,' the driver answered.

'Where would that be?' I asked. 'There are no houses or hotels near.'

'We live in the buildings of Recycfast. We work here. We have apartments in the building. Is anything wrong, Superintendent?'

‘No, no, not at all! I did not know people also lived on these premises. I like to know and have a friendly chat with the people in my territory. What is your name, please?’

‘I am called Max Blandis,’ the other gave.

‘And what would be the name of your friends? May I have the papers of the BMW?’

‘Is this an interrogation, Superintendent? Have we been driving too fast just now?’

‘No, no,’ I answered. ‘Just a routine control. Can you tell me where you came from?’

I received the papers, read slowly but found the papers in order. The BMW was registered by Recycfast and it was brand new. The vehicle was well insured, all taxes paid.

‘We arrived from Brussels,’ Blandis granted. ‘Is that an issue?’

I heard the man’s nerves came under some more strain. I sensed the man rather aggressive in his defence, though sufficiently polite. The more Blandis would get nervous, the calmer I would become.

‘No, not at all,’ I replied. ‘Nevertheless, what are the names of your companions?’

The man hesitated. He looked at the hangars, then back to me. He came to a decision.

He said, ‘they are called Vantandt, Dusarme, and Vrankaert. They too work in the factory.’

‘Thank you,’ I continued, memorising the names.

I continued to look suspiciously at the BMW in order to discomfit Blandis some more, looked from the car to the buildings of Recycfast, looked back to the BMW. I handed the papers to him, I then walked slowly with a grunt of appreciation around the car. I saw no marks of red gravel on the tires, no mud or dust from having driven on countryside roads on the coach-work. Blandis kept staying beside the car. I went back up to him.

‘From where in Brussels do you come from?’ I asked. ‘What have you been doing in Brussels?’

‘I must ask again, is this an interrogation, Superintendent?’ Blandis threw back.

I refrained from answering this time, and I also did not insist. Many men would have liked a little chat with me. Not this Blandis.

I had nothing in hand to doubt him or suspect him and his pals of anything, and I knew I had to be careful for not being accused of abusing of my authority without any proof. Yet, my instincts were on full alert. Call it the intuition of the hunter for the prey, immediate antipathy for these men, or whatever you want, but I felt these were dangerous men and maybe the men I should be looking for. I had to find out more about them. Still, I could not just enter their apartments without any decent clue. I had no search warrant. If I entered the apartments merely on a hunch, this Blandis objecting, my boss Timario and the Judge of Namur would nail me to the wall.

I went to my car, wished Blandis a fine evening, and rode on at ease. I felt my hands damp around the steering wheel.

The next morning, we held an early briefing with the officers who had been on the crime scene. Dominique and the others had interrogated the neighbours, and of course also the wife and daughter of banker Georgis. Not much new was added to what I already knew, except that a car had indeed been seen driving on the path behind the villas, a little time before the attack. The car had been a grey Toyota pickup, maybe a Tundra CrewMax model, not a BMW. None of the neighbours had seen or heard anything up until the moment of the shattering of the glass windows. I said I was pleased with what and how the officers had done. I saw the pride for that in their faces.

‘We have no description of the men, for they wore ski-masks,’ an officer began, reading from his notes. ‘Two of the men wore black, thick, woollen pullovers without distinctive marks printed on the clothes. They wore common blue jeans, dark brown caps, dark leather jackets.

The other two wore black jeans and brownish pullovers. They wore boots at their feet. Two neighbours noticed the men getting out of a car some distance from the house, and their description of the clothes fits with the description of the daughter and wife of Georgis. The neighbours saw no faces, for the men had their faces turned to the other side. They wore no ski-masks at that time. The men wore the same brown caps, no letters or images printed on the caps either. One of the men wore also a thick shawl around his neck. The men were white, stocky men with broad chests. That is all we know.'

'This must definitely have been a punitive expedition against banker Georgis,' I concluded. 'The banker, however, does not know why the act was perpetrated, at least, that is what he told us. I don't believe him. The man, and probably also his wife, must know more. They lie, or rather, they do not tell the entire truth. We must understand that. Georgis feels threatened. Nevertheless, call the three in here, and tell them we need to see them again to make a proper report signed by them. Ask the same questions again. Miss Bussy, you take charge of that, will you? You did well, yesterday. I won't interrogate them personally. Dominique, take whoever you need to help you with the interrogations. The other officers, try to find out as much as you can about the bank director. Has he been involved in any recent doubtful affair? Have a talk with his boss in Namur, but please do that very respectfully. We don't want any mean complaints from one of Belgium's main banks. I want to know everything the bank director is involved in, of what clubs is he a member, is he the owner of any real estate, does he gamble, and so on. Put everything together for the briefing, same time tomorrow.'

I hesitated, then continued, 'I almost forgot. I saw a few men driving into the buildings of the company called Recycfast of Turgoux, yesterday evening. They drove a big BMW X5M, not a grey Toyota, but I wonder. Don't bother with the men directly, but try to find out more about them. They are called Max Blandis, who appears to be their boss, Vrankaert, Vantandt and Dusarme. I have no surnames for these. Find out since when they have been working for Recycfast. If they ask why we want that information at Recycfast, just tell them we check all options. If Recycfast refuses to give you any information, do not insist. Find out at the Commune whether Recycfast has asked authorisation to install apartments in its premises, for the men live there.'

'Boss, it is funny you mention Recycfast,' an officer muttered.

'Why is that?' I asked.

'Georgis, the banker, he is one of the people involved in the citizen action committee that has been set up to oppose the Aeolfast wind turbine project. In fact, he is the man who organised the committee, and several meetings of the committee have been held at his home. The committee has no leader, no president. It is simply a group of people that meet and plan actions against the wind turbine project.'

'So what?' I didn't catch where the officer was leading me to.

'Recycfast, Aeolfast, same consortium. We heard that during the presentation of the wind turbine project in the Abbey. Aeolfast is but one company of several, working on the same type of environmental issues and activities.'

I suddenly also remembered where I had seen Blandis. He too had been present at that presentation, and two of the guys I had seen at Recycfast too. They had cried support for the project. I must be growing old. The young officer had better listened than I.

'How do you know all that?' I sneered.

The officer reddened. 'My wife is a member of the citizen group, Sir. You see, we have our house in Butières, near the N11, and we may have a couple of those towers not far off. My wife doesn't like that at all! Neither do our neighbours, so they delegated her to the action committee of Save Robois, the committee Georgis led. My wife went to the meetings

organised at the banker's villa. Georgis is one of the people that are most vocal during the discussions because he too, as many other people, will have towers not far from their home.'

I kept silence a while, feeling in my bones that the officer had found the right connection. I never believed in coincidences.

I brought my arm horizontal, pointed at the young officer with a long finger, saying, 'you just found the connection, boy! You found the motive of the crime!'

I kept saying, 'good work, good work!' until my young men got red from pride to behind their ears.

'Dominique,' I asked, 'when you interrogate the banker, ask him straightforwardly at a moment he is comfortable whether this affair had anything to do with his opposition to Aeolfast, will you? Do the same with his wife. Do not insist, but watch their reaction closely.'

Dominique took notes. I was satisfied with how professional my men and Dominique had been. I repeated that loudly, and saw the team was biting into this crime like a bulldog.

I concluded, 'okay, you guys and dolls. We have a lot of work to do today. Get on with it!'

'Should we not involve the Procureur du Roi, the Prosecutor, in this case?' another officer asked.

'Not yet,' I retorted. 'Not if the banker does not file an official complaint. I don't think he will do that. This looks like a classic example of intimidation, and I believe it has been delivered efficiently. If no complaint is filed, our actions will have to remain limited. Get on with it!'

The policemen left my office. I remained thinking. Aeolfast, yes, there lay a motive! Aeolfast might be wanting to eliminate opposition. Still, measures of intimidation such as rape, for rape had technically happened for the law in this case, were pretty drastic. Stuff like this happened in television series about the police of Los Angeles or New York, not in Robois! Industrial enterprises were not known to use such measures. Maybe somebody had transgressed orders. The thought was revolting, and far-sought.

'This sounds too much like cowboy-and-Indian stuff to be true, Youssouf,' I grumbled to myself. 'Don't overreact, you too. Your imagination is galloping. There must be something simpler and more tangible behind this attack.'

That same evening I drove to the Bourgmestre's lodge, to Robert Jacquet, but I admit I may have done so more to see and talk to Samia Bennani than to Robert. That woman had bewitched me. She made me long for a family, for holding her in my arms for entire days, and also at nights.

Robert listened patiently to me. He too found my hypothesis of Aeolfast intimidation very far-fetched.

'Unbelievable,' Robert judged. 'Aeolfast is launching an expensive publicity campaign in favour of wind turbines in Robois. They have printed folders and have those distributed to each letter box of the town. There are articles on wind turbines in every local newspaper. They are spending a lot of money in publicity, but why then would they go so far as to use violence on an activist? That would be unheard of!'

I didn't stay long at the house. Robert seemed tense and tired, and Samia had other things such as her studies on her mind. This was not an evening for a smile and a flirt. I felt very much disappointed, but women can be like that to you.

The next morning, we had a new briefing. I let Dominique Bussy speak out first.

She came with a surprise, 'the Georgis came with a lawyer, Salduz regulations obliging, they said. I told them this was not a formal interrogation, but the banker insisted his lawyer to be

present. The daughter could not come because she was too much in shock. The lawyer presented a doctor's certificate declaring her unfit to drive to the police offices. I wrote a formal report but learned nothing new. The banker, the wife, and also the daughter, refused to file an official complaint. I chatted for a time and then suddenly asked whether what the gangsters had shouted when they told Georgis to mind his own business had something to do with Aeolfast. Had I thrown a bomb on the table, both Georgis and his wife would have had the same reaction. I watched them closely, and the banker reddened very much. He started trembling like a reed. The wife almost fainted and grasped her heart. Something, I could tell, was not right! I saw Georgis hesitate as if he wanted to confess something, but he replied with no, he didn't think the raid had anything to do with the wind turbines. The wife said the same. There is nothing further to mention, really. No complaint, no case! We can close our books.'

I addressed the other officers. 'And you, have you found something interesting?' The older of the three began, 'we spoke again to a few neighbours, also to ones who live father off. Nothing new. Nobody has seen anything nor heard anything. Georgis is a well-to-do, quiet, polite man. He had no police file. The man hasn't even ever had a speeding ticket! He is an angel with wings. His boss at the regional centre of Namur also described him in the best of terms. He laughed when we asked whether Georgis might be involved in any affair of blackmail or extortion. Georgis was not a man to have such affairs, he said. Robois was as quiet in finances as the centre of a typhoon. We also sent two men to Recycfast. We asked for the personnel records for the names you gave us. The men are called Max Blandis, age forty-eight, Hubert Dusarme, age twenty-seven, Eric Vrankaert, aged twenty-five, and Jean Vantandt, age twenty-three. There is a fifth one, one Richard Mordine, aged twenty-six. Pretty young guys, I would say. They were, the four of them, hired by Recycfast a month ago, so fairly recently. Maybe that is why we don't know them yet. Max Blandis is something of an exception. Yes, he works also at Recycfast, but he is something of a Security Director for the companies of the consortium. He does not work directly for the company here, but he lives with the other men in apartments that seem to have been built especially for them. Blandis is a guy high up in the consortium, so it struck us as odd that he lived in the same kind of lodging as the others, who are inscribed as common labourers. Why would Recycfast need a security boss? Are the before mentioned men his security team? Why then the cover-up? Recycfast is a decent enterprise that makes correct profits. It is not an ailing company. We found that in brochures that laid around in the entry hall, including a brochure with their balance-sheet. The people at Recycfast were collaborative up to a point. We had the impression they had received directions. More than the names of the guys and acknowledging they worked at Recycfast they would not grant us. For more they told us they would have to appeal to their Managing Directors. We did not insist.'

'Really nothing from the neighbours?' I asked.

'To come back to the neighbours,' the officer turned a few pages in his notebook. 'No, nobody seems to believe something is wrong with Georgis. He is a fine neighbour, cooks at the local feast. He is a gentle, polite, helpful man. He keeps to his own business. His garden is well kept. The man does that work himself. No excessive style of living. He has only a company car. The neighbours heard of no problems with the wife or the daughter. The daughter has no boyfriend for the moment. We thought it better at this stage not to probe too deeply, not to suggest anything. We did not go to the girl's school-friends or to her school. We are waiting for results of the fingerprints, but the daughter and wife of Georgis confirmed the aggressors wore gloves.'

‘Fine. Or should I say bad?’ I consented. ‘We are at a dead end for the moment. Make your reports of what you have so far. The groups of Namur or Brussels could not have done better. We’ll leave the case as it is, for the moment. Tell me if you learn anything new or when you have a new idea. Next points ...’

We did not advance much more in the following days and weeks on what we called the Georgis Rape case. The fingerprints yielded no results, as expected. I did not want to harass the Georgis family more. I knew all hope for progress was lost, but the case kept gnawing away at me.

Two weeks later, however, I asked to the officer whose wife went to the meetings of the citizen action committee of Save Robois, the committee that opposed the wind turbine project, how things stood by then. The officer spoke to his wife and he told me a few days later still the committee had temporarily stopped working. The most active member, the organiser, Marcel Georgis, had withdrawn from the committee. No further meetings had been organised in his villa. That was quite normal, everybody thought, after what had happened to the Georgis family. The family was still in shock and needed quietness and rest. The committee members talked individually about seeing each other again in another place, but nobody had volunteered to call together another meeting. The wife had probed a little deeper, and found that many citizens seemed to be afraid of continuing the committee. The Georgis affair had turned into a rumour that one had better not oppose the wind turbines project openly. The woman thought a new committee would be constituted, but that meant waiting for a new leader. In the meantime, nothing happened. Nevertheless, the people continued to gather information about the nuisance of wind turbines and about regulations of the towers in other countries, and those data might be sent to the advisory committees of the Region and of Robois.

I supposed that if Aeolfast really had wanted to halt the committee’s work abruptly, it could not have been more successful. The committee remained headless also the following weeks. I talked about that to the Bourgmestre, but he was as powerless as I was. The Georgis Rape case continued to hang about in my mind, for it remained an unsolved case for me. I drove more than normal around in Turgoux, and especially in the environs of Recycfast, but I remarked nothing out of the ordinary. I saw occasionally the men of Blandis in town, but they behaved and went about their ways as any other inhabitants. They talked a lot in bars about the wind turbines project, always in favour, but they were also labourers for Recycfast.

The Election List of the IC Group. Robert Jacquet

I was very much concerned by the installation of a line of wind turbines in our town, the more so because I realised the construction companies would use Robois as an example for the development of similar projects in other Walloon countryside towns. The Robois project seemed important in that aspect to me, so I had scruples to oppose the project, but my decision was made and firmly made, and when a decision based on sound arguments and opinions was set in my mind, I usually stuck to it. I did not like to see our countryside lined by thirty metre high towers. I loved our landscapes. I would rather have preferred one large gas turbine site in Turgoux or in another of the industrial zones, rather than the behemoths of steel obstructing our clear vistas of the sky from everywhere. I loathed therefore the publicity

of Aeolfast that inundated Robois, and I was tempted to believe the far-fetched hypothesis of Joseph Bikri on a plot to add violence to persuasion by the company. The wind turbines project was not the most urgent on my mind, though. The proposal would find its way through the various committees of advice and through the Ministerial Cabinets before it was sent back to the Councillors' Cabinet of Robois, and that could be a few months off.

The more urgent issue I had to solve was of gathering a list of candidates for the next election. The IC Group should now start bringing together a list of fine candidates to represent our ideas. IC liked to present candidates from out of all the villages, and we also had to look for fifty per cent of our candidates to be women. We would place a man, a woman, and so on, in strict order. If it proved always quite a task to find popular and decent man from each village for the list, it was even more difficult to find enough enthusiastic women, and the right women. I also wanted no idiot or scoundrel on the list, however popular the man or woman might be, for if by chance that person received votes so that he had to become a Cabinet Échevin, then I had a big problem on my hands!

Finally, the most difficult and most delicate task was to place the candidates in the right sequence, a sequence they could live with. Of course, everybody wanted the first place, or as high up as possible! The only other place but the first that would be hotly coveted, was the very last, the red lantern. At the start of my political career I had wondered why that was the case, and the answer was double. People who voted found easily the name at the head of the list. They found the name at the very end as easily, however, and that mattered, especially for the elderly voters. Traditionally also, the person at the end of the list was considered as being the challenger, the man or woman who dared challenge the head of the list. It could also be the man or woman who would be leaving politics and therefore pushed the list.

I, Robert Jacquet, should head the list. I would be followed by a woman, and so on. I saw Yves Govin at the end. Tradition wanted also that the Bourgmestre did not propose and decide on the IC list. That task has to be given to a Committee of Wise men and women, brought together specifically for the task of searching for candidates and who would propose the list for acceptance by the General Assembly of the IC Group.

My first step was therefore to ask formally to the President of IC to assemble such a Committee of Wise. The President of IC was Albert Desjardins. I organised a meeting with him. Desjardins was a man who had liked to dabble in politics, but who could not and would not dedicate sufficient of his time to be a candidate himself and maybe become elected as Cabinet Échevin. He was a dignified, tall, greying man of fifty-two, ideally suited also to head the Committee of Wise.

We discussed who would be the best members of the committee. Jean Sauvent was a must. The Town Secretary, Alberte Hersalle should be a non-politician, but she belonged to our group, so she could be another fine name. We accepted Gustave Blanchard, who ran a respected clothing shop in Robois, and Bertrand Thirion, a manager in a company that built plastic garage doors. These men and the woman were in their fifties, or almost. They were honest, reasonable and honourable persons. Our Committee of Wise was thus constituted, even if the General Assembly would have to vote on the names.

Desjardins asked me whether I still wanted to lead the list, to which question I answered in the affirmative. He then wanted to know my earliest opinion on the rest of the names, and I replied I found the current Cabinet Councillors, the *Échevins*, had done a fine job in the past years and should be given the chance, if they chose, to continue their good work. I saw therefore in all logic me as number one, Nadine Dumortier as number two, André Bacca as

three, Albertine Dewez as four, Marc Thoran as five, a woman still to be found as six, Pierre Gasson as seven, another woman as eight, Yves Govin as nine. If Govin wanted a role as challenger, he could take the last place on the list. Desjardins did not comment on my preferred list, but I had the impression he approved. He kept looking at me, wondering. I asked Desjardins therefore whether my list was logical or whether he had other ideas. He replied immediately Yves Govin might want to be placed higher on the list. To that claim I answered either the Committee of Wise could formulate a proposal of appeasement, or the matter could be voted upon in the General Assembly of IC militants. I remarked nevertheless that Govin had only recently taken place in the Cabinet, whereas others had worked for several years in it.

Desjardins remained pensive.

He said, 'suppose the Committee of Wise or the General Assembly of IC vote you out of the leadership place for the next elections. What would your reaction be?'

I was much surprised by even having to consider this eventuality. I had not asked for the last elections to be a candidate, even less to lead it. IC had practically begged me to lead the list, and we had won brilliantly! I had worked hard. So, I had taken it for granted IC would place me again at the head of the list. Disavowing a Bourgmestre of my age by taking him from the first position, was about the same as the Republicans or the Democrats in the United States of America refusing the nomination of their President in function for a second term at the next elections. I said so to Desjardins.

I added, 'Albert, if IC pushes me to a lower position, any lower place, I shall have to consider that as a severe insult, a public affront. I and my team, the Cabinet, have worked as the best management group Robois has had these last decades. We modernised this town and transformed it to a dynamic entity. I led an ailing group at the last elections and brought it to victory. I have given much of myself. If IC shuffles me along, downwards, I shall have to feel disavowed, as if I delivered a bad job. I would find that not only a fundamental injustice done to my person, but also a personal insult. In that case, I would reserve my response. I might accept a place on the IC list still, or I might leave IC. Anyhow, I feel that for becoming Bourgmestre or a member of the future Cabinet, the votes should decide. The man or woman with the most personal votes at the elections should be the future Bourgmestre and the future Executive Cabinet members.'

'People can vote on a name and also on the list as a whole. The list votes, the votes at the head of the list, the non-personal votes, are added to the names on the list in decreasing position on the list to decide on the Councillors. If the leader of the list therefore has not enough votes to become Councillor immediately, he or she gets some of those list votes until the number necessary to elect him for the Council is reached, and so on for the ones following. Would you accept these added, list votes, to be added to the personal votes in order to decide on who would get into the Cabinet?'

Desjardins looked at me expectantly, but I disappointed him.

'No, definitely not,' I said. 'We agreed also for the last elections only to take into consideration votes brought directly on a name. List votes are added legally to decide on who may become Councillor, but for the functions of Bourgmestre and the Cabinet, personal votes only should count. The paper we signed for the last elections mentioned this clearly. I would want each candidate on the list to sign such a paper once more, agree to a contract. It was a good paper with sound rules. It weighed as a contract. We must avoid endless disputes during or after the election night. Matters must be clear to everybody. The Executive Cabinet members must be known in the night of the elections. Which affairs they will have to manage can be determined later, of course.'

‘I fully agree with you,’ Desjardins nodded. ‘Have you given the matter some thought with which party we would form a coalition?’

‘I think we should form a coalition in any case,’ I replied, ‘even when we reach absolute majority of votes. We need some form and degree of internal control in the Cabinet, so I feel we must in any case add a few members of one or other party. I remain in favour of continuing with the people elected in the Liberal Party. That party has worked loyally with us in the past five years. However, we do not know what the results will be of the voting. If the Liberal Party gets to be outvoted and heavily punished for having been part of the current majority, we may have to seek another partner to rule with. Therefore, I propose not to sign a coalition contract before the elections. The party we join our fate with for the next six years should be decided upon in the night of the elections, once the tendency of the voting becomes clear. We did the same the last time, didn’t we?’

‘Yes,’ Desjardins agreed again. ‘We should put all of this in our election contract. Would it be the new Bourgmestre, plus for instance the three names with the highest votes who decide on the partner in the election night?’

‘That seems fine to me. I might also agree with the future Bourgmestre, the man or woman with the most personal votes, plus the IC President to choose a new partner.’

‘Right! Why not? I’ll discuss this in the Committee of Wise. I would have no issue of discussing with you on our next partner during the election night,’ Desjardins smiled.

‘I never sell the hide of the bear before the animal is shot,’ I grumbled.

‘A lot must happen, Robert, before somebody else on the IC list gets more votes than you. You are extremely popular in Robois. The people like you. My expectation is that you will gather fifteen hundred to two thousand five hundred more votes than the second highest score on our list. I heard the people talk about you, you know!’

‘Thank you. You flatter me.’

‘No, I don’t,’ Desjardins replied.

He drifted into silence for a while, searching for other points to discuss. He laid down his pen and notebook.

‘Well, I think we have agreed on the most important items I needed to talk you about. With that, I can start working. I’ll contact the other, future committee members. When they agree with the job, which is less easy than you think, we shall hold a General Assembly or a session of the IC Office. In the meantime, we can already start looking for candidates, of course.’

‘That would be fine,’ I said. ‘I appreciate your work, and I know it is not an easy job. You shall make yourself a few enemies, but also a few friends.’

We shook hands.

Life continued. I was very busy with my construction company. New orders streamed in for my enterprise. We would have a very good year.

I rarely met Simone Ash outside the Cabinet meetings, and I regretted that very much. She looked so lovely in that spring, always dressed up in the finest, colourful clothes, always elegant, using but a little make-up accentuating the delicate features of her face. I admired her very much, and I was in pain each time I saw her. She moved like a model. She was too dignified and distant to be considered a vamp, but she appealed also to some of my darker urges. Men came instantly under the impression of her grace, but few dared to approach her, and when I thought about that possibility, I felt the pangs of jealousy strongly. Simone Ash was beyond rumours.

I also wondered what I should do about Samia and Joseph. It was more than obvious to me they had a crush on each other, but neither Samia nor Joseph reached out for the other. They danced around each other like Argentinian tango dancers, but they did not fall in each other’s

arms. Was that a culture matter? Should I take up the role of go-between, of match-maker? I decidedly remained the Hamlet in all matters of life, it seemed!

Albert Desjardins did a quick and a good job, a better one than I had thought possible. He organised a meeting of the Office of the IC Group, consisting of the current Councillors and Cabinet members, as well as a few well-known, authoritative persons, and he proposed the Committee of Wise as we had discussed. He did not feel it necessary to have that committee be agreed upon by the complete General Assembly. The committee was unanimously voted for by the IC Office, so it could begin its work on the list for the election candidates formally. In fact, that work was already done for three quarters by Desjardins himself.

I heard that the members of the previously almost extinct United Democratic Party had also suddenly decided to rejuvenate their party and to hold a few meetings, independently of the IC Group. Desjardins was no paying member of that party, and I also was not an adherent. I wondered why the party held its meetings separately from IC, although they were integrated and the basis of the IC Group. I felt some curiosity for what was said in the leading group of the party, but nothing leaked out.

Desjardins needed several weeks to find the right candidates. By mid-April he phoned me for a meeting just between the two of us. We met in my office in the Abbey. He presented me a complete list, so his task was practically finished. The first names on the list were as we had agreed upon a few weeks earlier. It contained also new names, in a good balance between candidates of the villages. He also brought me the contract to be signed by all candidates, and that too had been written in line with what we had discussed when I had asked him to form the committee. He even produced a paper with the strategic directions for the next Cabinet and Councillors, as well as a ten-point plan for concrete actions and projects. These plans formed a fine discussion paper for our campaign, and I thought it could be published as such as the campaign paper of the IC Group for the coming elections. The paper stated for instance that the IC Group refused any massive park of wind turbine towers along the N11. Our actions were very ecologically oriented, and I found that very suited for a countryside town like Robois, but we refused the steel windmill towers. We would also contend the progress of the Ecological Party at Robois.

I laid down the papers in front of me, on my desk, quite satisfied, and asked Desjardins whether he had already let the candidates read the texts and whether he had talked over the list with them. I rather expected a negative answer, for the work of the committee had been very quick indeed, but Desjardins assured me the list and the papers were not entirely his work, and quite some discussion had already taken place concerning them. The other member of the Wise had agreed on the list and on the papers. The candidates had seen the order in which they were placed, and most had agreed after the reasons had been explained to them. A few candidates had reserved their formal answer, among whom Yves Govin. Govin had told Desjardins he waited for the official presentation of the list to the IC Office, to the broader organ of the leaders of the IC Group.

Desjardins and I fixed a date for such a crucial meeting. The final form of the list and the IC programme would be accepted there. I asked Desjardins why the United Democratic Party leaders of Robois had met separately. He replied he had asked that question too, but nobody of the party members had wanted to give him a straightforward answer. He only received as excuse that the UD Party needed to pull their members together and had to renew its structure before the elections. Desjardins admitted the UD meetings were the only worry he had, for he

wondered what UD was concocting, but the Wise, even the UD Party members among them, showed no objections to the papers that lay in front of me.

By the end of April, Desjardins organised therefore the meeting of the IC Office enlarged with the future candidates, about thirty-five people. The meeting was to be held in the back hall of the finest hotel of Robois. We met usually there for our more formal gatherings of IC Group. The hall was known as our party hall. No other political party used that hall, as each party had its own habitual meeting place.

Desjardins arrived early. He sat in the middle of a long table facing his audience. The Wise sat next to him, and Desjardins also wanted me to sit at the table, since I was the Bourgmestre of Robois and the moral leader of IC. I was rather late to arrive in the modern-style hall with its white-washed walls, a hall decorated only by our table and the comfortable chairs. People were still streaming in. We would have a full audience, all the persons we contacted would attend.

Albert Desjardins, as President of IC, opened the meeting. He explained in a few words that the IC Group Office had gathered today to agree formally on a list of candidates for the next elections. All these candidates were present in the room. He wanted us to agree on a candidates' contract, and on a campaign paper. Desjardins then began to project on a large screen behind him a computer presentation of the list, and later of the papers. He dimmed the hall somewhat for the presentation.

The room remained quiet when the names and the places of the candidates were shown. Desjardins called the names and the candidates stood when they heard their name. Desjardins explained in much detail why each candidate had received his or her place. He added a few jokes on the candidates, which made the audience relax. The presentation of the list alone took more than an hour.

After the list, Desjardins projected the candidates' contract, explaining the rationale for the most important rules. After that, he showed the campaign plan. The meeting had lasted well over two hours when Desjardins had all the lights of the hall switched back on. So far, he had received very few questions. We had the impression the audience agreed generally with what had been presented.

The presentation part of the evening was finished.

Desjardins asked for comments. The Wise would answer questions. Desjardins already announced then he would ask in a few moments for the unanimous approval of the modes of operation for the coming elections, and for the list of candidates. No pause would be held, and Desjardins proposed to limit the questions to half an hour. We felt that long enough. No objections had been shouted from out of the audience, the meeting had passed very calmly.

The people present sat and waited. We expected few questions, for the contract and the campaign paper were entirely in the line of what had been expected, the continuation of our previous policy. We had worked along these principles also for the past five years, and the candidates of the new list had seen the papers.

The first man to speak was an old militant of IC Group. He congratulated the Wise for their excellent work. He also asked for applause for the current Executive Cabinet, for the *Échevins* of Robois, and for the IC councillors. He told that the men and women of IC had worked splendidly in the interest of the citizens of the town. He named some of the best known accomplishments. The man's speech was followed by a warm applause.

After the applause, a woman held up her arm, and Albert Desjardins asked her what she wanted to share with the audience. I had seen the woman before, but I didn't know her. I also didn't know what she was doing in this meeting, in which official function of IC. She stood in the third row with a paper in her hand, which she now unfolded. She said she had been elected President of the United Democratic Party of Robois, the party that had also founded the IC Group. She would read a manifesto of the party.

The woman read, 'we, the UD Party members of Robois, would like to make the following demands and amendments to the papers presented by the Committee of Wise of IC. First, as for the list of IC candidates. We would like to state that the large majority of IC Group members is constituted by members of the UD Party. Therefore, we demand a more important place for our candidates on the list. In particular, we propose to have the candidate Albertine Dewez be placed in second. Albertine has been elected Political Secretary of our Party, has been a very fine Échevin, and we feel she is best positioned by her work in the Cabinet and by her recognised capabilities to occupy a better place. We also demand that our leading party member Yves Govin be assigned to lead the IC list. We propose to have the last place on the list be occupied by Robert Jacquet. We have heard the current Bourgmestre has been involved in various corruption scandals during these last months, which although not entirely centring on his person, have touched people that are either his direct friends or people very close to him. We believe the people of Robois will refuse their votes to us if we do not address the scandals by a strong measure. Third, we also do not agree to refuse the Aeolfast project as categorically as the campaign paper states and as Robert Jacquet has done publicly so far. The United Democratic Party feels the project will bring higher employment and more economic development to Robois, to the benefit of all, conducive to innovation. We believe the corruption scandals and the opposition to the only large-scale project that could help us develop our town is detrimental to Robois and to our candidates' list. We strongly are of the opinion that the current Bourgmestre should not lead the next election list for IC. We accept the rest of the list, as proposed by the Committee of Wise. We would like the two first amendments to the list, one for Albertine and one in favour of Yves, to be voted upon here and now. As to the election contract, we feel the Councillors should be chosen according to the place on the list, whatever the votes brought on their names. After all, the candidates have been placed in a certain order according to their abilities and importance for the IC Group. The United Democratic Party of Robois is the largest political party of Robois. We confirm hereby the confidence we have in the continuance of the IC Group, as far as the proposed amendments are acted upon by IC.'

The woman sat again. Everybody understood she merely acted as a puppet in the hands of Yves Govin, who clearly dominated the UD Party by his position in the UD Party of Wallony, in its headquarters. I wondered how the audience would react. Allegiance to UD was still strong!

The hall erupted in instant pandemonium. The IC Group members who were not UD, who had no party card, cried out their indignation. They shouted they were members of IC, not of UD, and they wanted not UD to dominate IC. They were independent candidates, not bought by the United Democratic Party. The others, the most militant UD members, shouted them down.

I must have turned very pale in the face. Yes, a plot had been prepared against me and also against Nadine Dumortier, in silence, behind our backs. I remarked how appalled also Albert Desjardins looked at this development. I tried to keep calm despite a raging heart, but I was too deeply shocked by this putsch, this taking over of the power in IC by the UD Party. Albert Desjardins stood from his chair. He asked silence from the audience. He had to shout several times before the voices stooped. He said the United Democratic Party of Robois had

been losing votes at every election in the past. Because of that debacle, the IC Group had been founded and independently-minded candidates called in. The force of IC Group, he stated, had indeed remained the ideology of the Christian faith, which had been forfeited by the United Democrats. Most of the present candidates adhered to those principles, and not all desired to work within the framework of strict party discipline. These candidates did not wish to be branded as UD Party members. IC guaranteed being open to people that were part of no political family. Albert warned against the overt leadership of IC by any political party. He shouted he feared many candidates might withdraw from the proposed list.

During the speech of Albert Desjardins, angry voices tried to make him stop talking. Yves Govin was among the people who shouted the loudest. Albertine Dewez also cried her vociferations at the address of Desjardins.

Finally, one man from the audience, a man with a stentor voice that dominated the crowd, asked what I had to say to my defence. I stood from my chair, and the hall slowly silenced to the silence of death. I waited until all eyes were settled on me, and only then did I speak. I wanted to speak loudly and slowly, and I showed my returning calmness.

I said, 'I must first answer the allegations launched against my person. I very vehemently contest the charges brought against me in the rumours. I have been involved in no corruption scandal. There have been too many rumours of scandals in the last months. I wondered where these rumours originated. Now I know. One case involved a close friend of mine indeed, but that case has been entirely dismissed as unfounded slander and nonsense. The second case involved a person who may have wanted to be close to me but is no friend of mine at all. The man presented himself as such, but I never acknowledged that. I have taken and take still total distance from that man and his actions. Anybody who associates my name to his shall have to justify him or her in a Court of Justice for slander.'

I let that threat, which I repeated twice, slowly sink in.

I continued, 'the demands of the United Democratic Party, if the for this occasion newly elected leadership organisation, must of course be addressed. If you send my name to the end of the list, the citizens of Robois shall consider that fact a clear disavowing of my person and of the actions of the last five years by the IC Group. Not only shall I be disavowed, but also the entire Cabinet. It shall mean a large, ominous blemish on the work of the present Échevins and on the work of the current Councillors of IC, which shall lead to massive loss of votes.

You will have to face a monstrous political error! As for me personally, I shall have to consider my demotion as such and as a personal insult perpetrated by IC Group. If therefore you place me at the end of the list, I reserve my reaction until the very last moment before the list must be legally published and made public. I immediately consider myself a politically free man, tied to no party and also to no group. For the campaign paper, I continue to feel the Aeolfast project to be detrimental to our environment, to destroy our marvellous landscapes and to bring various annoyances to our citizens. I remain openly and decisively opposed to the project, as I believe a large majority of the people of Robois do, especially in the Peasant villages. Accepting this project by IC Group, therefore, shall also scare votes away from IC. Lastly, in my opinion, IC Group should honour the decisions of the voting of the citizens of Robois. Councillors and Cabinet Échevins should be the candidates with the most votes. I am afraid that acting otherwise means abandoning the democratic principles of IC and for sure killing the word Democracy in the name of the UD Party!'

Out of the corner where many UD members had gathered, came angry shouts of, 'he has betrayed our cause! Traitor! He must go!'

Albert Desjardins asked for Yves Govin to speak.

Govin, who had until then sat unmoved with an obsequious smile on his face, stood, faced the audience, but he muttered only very few words.

He said, 'I support the manifesto established by the UD Party, read out a few moments ago. I have nothing to add. One point, though. I believe Robert Jacquet has been involved in too many dubious affairs for him to remain acceptable still for leading our IC list to the coming elections. The proposed changes have been discussed and accepted officially by the UD Party leaders of Brussels, worried by the developments in our town. If Robois IC does not accept our amendments, the party leadership of Brussels may withdraw its confidence in IC. That would be disastrous for our town, because we would have to fight uphill for the least Euro of subsidy from the Regional and Federal Governments, and face much doubt and fear not only from the UD members in these governments but also of the members of the partners of UD in power.'

Govin thus blackmailed the IC representatives in the meeting. Govin sat again, next to Albertine Dewez, who congratulated him and nodded her agreement. Govin had said what she would have said.

Albert Desjardins spoke for a few moments against the threats of Govin. Would the UD Party thus act against the interests of their town? Then, Desjardins called for the inevitable vote on the amendments. The opinion of the majority of IC Office had to be asked formally. He called the first vote on the switch of Yves Govin to first place on the IC election list and of me to the end. The voting took place by a show of hands. A very close majority of seventeen votes for fifteen against concluded my fate. My world crashed.

Of the Executive Cabinet members, only Albertine Dewez and Pierre Gasson voted for. The Wise at the table voted against in block.

Desjardins then called the vote to replace Nadine Dumortier by Albertine Dewez and vice versa, and that change was adopted by the same margin. Clearly, UD Party discipline was at work in the voting.

A surprise came nevertheless with the vote on the contract to be signed by the candidates on the list. A few of the most disciplined UD Party members voted against the amendment!

Govin and Dewez had lost one battle.

This vote provided me with one more chance. Although I had been relegated to the last place on the list, if I gained more personal votes than Govin, it would be me who would have to be the new Bourgmestre, and not him. Govin would also have to sign this contract, or his name would not come on the list. I knew therefore what to expect: a denigration campaign before the elections to blacken my name, directed from within IC Group. The refusal of the point left me nevertheless a glimpse of hope in IC.

The next vote went on the Aeolfast project. A hotly fought-over debate ensued. Most of the people present were opposed to the wind turbine project, but the men who remained loyal to the UD Party discipline, the men and women we could by now give a name to, wanted the project to be completed. In the end, a consensus was reached which proposed to let the matter rest until the various technical committees had given their opinion. The item would not be presented as such as the campaign plan of IC. In other words, it was decided not to decide. That position won the vote.

Albert Desjardins broke off the meeting after the last vote.

He whispered to me, 'I'm truly sorry, Robert. This meeting will not remain in my best memories of the politics of Robois and of IC. There was a time we didn't like each other too much, but I didn't wish on you what has happened this evening. I find it disgraceful. I can understand you may want to withdraw yourself from the IC list, and that will mean a very

great loss of votes for IC. If ever you would envisage founding a new kind of IC with you heading that list, please count me in. I believe many people in this hall will follow you. Many UD Party members will think differently about this tomorrow. I'm very, very sorry for what happened.'

I thanked Desjardins, but felt not like wanting to speak to anybody anymore this evening. I left the hall by the side door close to the table of the Wise, at our end of the hall. I heard high voices shriek behind me, but I left, and let the rest of the audience continue their controversy. I left, but my leaving was an escape in disgust.

When I clicked my electronic car key to open the door, Nadine Dumortier burst out of the hall. She ran after me, and that spectacle was quite extraordinary too, for Nadine leapt in a very tight robe and on high heels.

She cried, 'I had to get out of there or I would have asphyxiated! That crowd steals my breath! It is a scandal! I'm disgusted! You are not giving up, aren't you, Robert? We are going to fight this, you and me! We have friends. We cannot let the others get away with such injustice!'

'The cards have been played, the votes have been cast, Nadine,' I replied stiffly. 'The decisions have been made this evening. You know as well as I the General Assembly merely exists to accept what the Office of IC presents to them.'

'But a vote cast lasts only as long as the next vote,' Nadine threw back. 'In the General Assembly, we too can propose amendments to have the vote of this evening be turned. We must fight this development. We are not going to let IC and its ideas be raped by a few self-appointed UD Party dictators! We can also leave the present IC and found a new group. We can let the UD people stew in their own sauce. I'll follow you, and I bet three quarters of the current Cabinet of Échevins will follow you too, and more than half of the current IC Councillors too! If necessary, we shall finish off the United Democratic Party in Robois once and for all. If we found a new group, UD shall not be the largest party in votes. The largest party will have the Bourgmestre. There is a very good chance the new IC shall become the largest group. And if we do not win the majority of votes, it may not be you, Robert, who will be the new Bourgmestre, but it will also not be that perfidious Govin. We can be back in business as Échevins, and better, who knows, we may as yet win the coming elections!'

'I don't know yet whether I want that, Nadine. I have to think about what to do next!'

'Of course, of course, we all have to reconsider. But keep in mind what I have said. The people of IC who are not UD Party members must convene soon and take a decision. I'm going to start an anti-rumour campaign.'

Nadine continued, 'they shall not get away with this! They don't know yet what a really angry Walloon woman is capable of doing! They don't know yet who Nadine Dumortier is, the scoundrels!'

It was true I rather preferred an angry, insulted Walloon woman like Nadine to be in my camp than having her pitted against me.

Would I go to battle? I thought probably yes, but I feared the battle that would tear our fine town apart and form rancour for years to come. Tomorrow already, the citizens of Robois would look at me with a mixture of pity and of suspicions. What did the IC Group that had demoted me, they would ask, know more about the frauds and corruptions than they did? The rumours must have had some consistence, for why otherwise would IC have relegated me to the last place? Yves Govin would be considered as a white knight, of course. How could I address the damaged image and denounce a man who belonged to my own political group, without destroying that group in the act? True, Govin had not hesitated to start the movement,

and he too had risked a catastrophe. He could count on the fact that I was a decent person, I obviously could not do the same with Govin.

I also wondered what the upheaval would do to my construction business, and to Rose. Lastly, I wondered what Simone Ash would think of me, and Joseph Bikri.

I drove my car out of the street and saw in my rear mirror the men and women filling the place in front of the hotel, still gesticulating and shouting. Robois was in uproar.

The Lady of the Lake. Simone Ash

I heard from the revolution in the IC Group of Robois from Eliane Collado. Eliane had received the news from several people of IC in the morning after a special meeting on the election list of IC, held in the main hotel of Robois. I do not precisely know which contacts Eliane harboured inside the IC Group, but the international chain of gossip among women linked by friendship, schools and all kinds of meeting circles had been efficiently at work. I should construct such sources of information too, but so far I had not dedicated sufficient time to surround me with such a network of benevolent spies. Eliane told me she had cross-checked the information, so what she came up with sounded trustworthy.

What had happened in IC produced the effect of a bomb explosion on her, for she sounded quite excited on the phone. Robois was in uproar, she said. A putsch, nothing less, had taken place within the leadership of IC. The United Democrats, which we though had been almost a derelict parry, had risen from its ashes and taken absolute control over the IC Group. They had pushed the current Bourgmestre, Robert Jacquet, to the last place on the IC election list, and also preferred Albertine Dewez to Nadine Dumortier at the top of the list. Had IC known more about the affairs in which Robert Jacquet was mentioned? Was Robert Jacquet less clean and innocent than we had supposed until now? The new political leader of IC seemed to be Yves Govin, who would become the next Bourgmestre of Robois. What did I think of that?

I did not think much of the information, and said so rather dryly on the phone to Eliane. We would have to learn a lot more about the events of the evening and the real nature of the decisions taken by IC before we could envisage to react. We should certainly hear the reaction of Robert Jacquet. Yes, I understood very well we might have to reconsider our election programme and our views on the situation, reconsider which party might be the best partner for the next elections, but I did not want us to rush too soon to conclusions.

Eliane continued talking, and I couldn't stop her. How many people would be on the phone in Robois, discussing the topic at this very moment?

Eliane offered one scenario after the other, some of them really outrageous, but I had come out of my bath to grab the phone and I needed urgently to get back in. I had had a very long and strenuous night and gotten up late. I had bags under my eyes and drooping lips.

Do not do anything rash, Eliane, don't get over-excited too soon. I know this is a bombshell. Robois is always so calm, don't over-react at the first exciting news you hear. Yes, I'll phone Robert Jacquet and hear what he says, if he wants to let something of last evening loose in the open. Yes, you can ask more people of IC about what is the matter with IC and Jacquet. Yes, why not propose new alliances?

I dropped my DECT phone and returned to my bath, head bowed and shoulders hanging. I saw it was ten thirty on the clock in the corridor, and my head banged. I slumbered back in the

oily water, smelled the fresh perfumes of my bath salts, and tried creating a void in my mind. I could not but give Robert Jacquet more thoughts, however. I was too nervous, like Eliane, to be able to find nirvana, the relaxing quietude of feelings and thoughts I needed really badly this morning. Damn Robert Jacquet! Why did that man always popped up, haunting my mind?

I regained control of my being slowly, and withheld my body from running to the phone naked and all wet to call Robert Jacquet. I did not have to drive to Brussels today. I had worked until two o'clock in the night, and returned home only after. It had been three o'clock in the night when I fell on my bed, totally exhausted. I had enjoyed a good night's sleep, but I felt still extremely spent and tired. The bath had brought me only a little solace.

I dressed like a sleepwalker, went to my kitchen, set ultra-strong coffee and had my breakfast, which was to be also my midday dinner, and reflected more logically on what Eliane had told me. Had Robert Jacquet really been involved in corruption cases? The most innocent-looking people could kill their neighbour over a trifle, of course, but I refused to believe Robert Jacquet might have embezzled funds. He never, never, never once fell out of his role of saintly guardian angel in the Robois Cabinet meetings. He was radical and ruthless if need be, but I had never caught him at even considering dishonesty or a devious act.

If I had to conclude without doubt our Bourgmestre was an honest and decent man, then Govin of IC must have scandalously abused of Robert's credulity and naiveté. Poor man, Robert, then. Jacquet was a fine Bourgmestre for Robois. He did not deserve being deceived and dragged in the mud by somebody like Govin.

I did not like Govin at all. He too often made me think of a weasel. Govin kept staring at me in the Cabinet meetings as if he wanted me for breakfast. I hated the open lust in his eyes when his glance lowered from my face to my chest. I had whipped him back into his seat a few times with words sharp like daggers, but he didn't get the picture. I loathed such men.

I should call Robert. Damn it! Should I, Simone Ash, play the mother part and console the little boy with a few comforting words? Should I let him cry on my shoulder? Would he not hate me because I took pity on him? Men are so simple and yet so complicated! I had better gain the calmness and serenity of a Buddhist nun before I phoned him! How to remain neutral and rational? Remember sense and sensibility, girl, I said to myself. Gather your usual good, calm, Anglo-Saxon sense. Be careful, girl, I thought. You are a little too eager to hear that guy out. Why do you want to talk to him so early? Why do you want so fervently to console him? Why is that?

I sighed a lot, took my time, delayed and delayed, so that the clock stroke near one in the afternoon. High noon time! I took a glass of water and limped to my living-room. I slumped comfortably in the sofa, pushed two cushions behind my back, placed the glass of water on a small table in reach of my hand, a notebook and a pen on my knees, and I dialled for Robert Jacquet. I half hoped he wasn't in.

It lasted a few rings before Robert came on the phone.

He said, 'hi! This is Robert Jacquet. Hello!'

'This is Simone Ash speaking, your Échevin,' I replied, shouting into the phone. 'Can I talk to you for a few moments?'

'Sure you can,' Robert returned promptly.

His tongue sounded a little thick. I guessed he had slept long, like me, or maybe not at all.

'How are you?' I tried.

I heard him grin. 'You must be phoning to hear what happened yesterday evening, don't you?' he guessed rightly.

'I do!'

'Are you concerned about me, Miss Simone Ash?'

For heaven's sake! Men! I snorted. Men always draw entire, complex situations onto their simple person. Men are such egocentric creatures!

'I don't know yet,' I answered. 'I would have to know how you are, medically speaking.'

'Medically speaking I'm fine, and psychologically too. Thank you for your concern. What can I do for you?'

Good. He had switched to business-mode. I could do that too. He was all right. He could absorb a punch or two.

I said, 'I would like to talk to you about what has happened. It may sound a bit early to do that, but I received excited calls from Liberal Party members who are calculating on all sorts of weird developments. They seem worried. They would like to exploit the opportunities, of course, and estimate the threats. I would like to hear your own words, your analysis, opinions and intentions, at least if you are apt and willing to share those with me. It may be too early for you to talk this over with a perfect stranger, but if you feel up to it I'd like a conversation with you, though not on the telephone. Can we meet on that subject?'

He dodged, 'am I a perfect stranger to you?'

I sighed. 'No, no, of course you're not, Robert. You know that! Can we talk? In your office maybe?'

'Nope. I'm not showing my face in my office today. How about supper this evening?'

I had to think about that for a few seconds. He had already invited me once and I had refused. He had refused me too much, that time. I had scared off. He was clever. He was drawing me on. If I accepted now, the mother part would be delivered. I astonished myself by answering way too rapidly than was my intention, 'sure! Where?'

'On neutral ground. Where would you like to go to?' he asked innocently.

'How about the Lady of the Lake? I can be ready by seven o'clock.'

'The Lady of the Lake? The finest restaurant of Robois, the place where we shall be noticed most when recognised together? Believe me, an hour later one half of Robois will think I am transferring to the Liberal Party and the other half will gossip about us being lovers. I can imagine a lot of other combinations.'

I thought one second on. My answer to this was crucial.

I said, 'well, I don't care much about the first half, and, frankly, I might not object to the other half.'

There, the dies started rolling. I wondered, fingers crossed, how he would take that.

I heard a dead silence on the other end of the line, if line there still was. I kind of liked the idea of a line linking us. I waited. I began to worry, the waiting lasted too long. He was not fast, this Robert.

'Robert, are you still there? You haven't fainted or something on me, haven't you?'

'No, I haven't,' he grumbled. 'There seem to be aspects of you that baffle me and that I know very little about. We definitely should meet. You needn't worry about me. I'm not a baby!'

Oh yes he was! I loved babies. And there it was! Oh, he was clever indeed! He sensed people's feelings from the far. I had overdone it.

He continued, 'let's have fun, then, and go to the Lady of the Lake this evening. I'll make the reservation. If the reservation doesn't work out, I'll phone you back. Shall we meet there?'

'No, no,' I laughed. 'We'll make a more dramatic appearance by striding in together, Robert Jacquet. Why don't you come and get me by car and do this in the proper way?'

I heard one more ominous silence.

Then he said, 'I'll bring you a white camellia, Simone.'

'Do that,' I gave him back. I'll put on something to match the flower.'

And I hung up.

Good Jesus and Sweet Mary, I thought. Girl, what have you done? What expectations have you unleashed? You jump from one bed into the other. Why haven't you acted like you intended?

I should have cursed myself, but I was already thinking about what dress I should choose for the evening, and I was wondering in which dress he would desire me most.

At five to seven the same evening, I heard a car honking at my house. Who did he think he was? A college boy? One doesn't honk at a lady! Half a second later, however, my doorbell rang.

I'm a doctor of medicine. I'm not one of those girls who are always late and who panic over their dress until half an hour over time. I was ready. I ran to the door, yanked it open, and there he stood. He had something on that resembled a black tuxedo, a long box in his hand. He made wide eyes, and that satisfied me more than anything he might have said. I had put on a broken white dress that fell to under my knees but was short enough to give me an air of youth. I wore high-heeled shoes in which he had never seen me, and I had pulled my dress down and down so that my décolleté hung a couple of centimetres lower than I would usually have allowed. A white pearl necklace hung low around my neck. I wore also pearls on my ears. I had stood a long time turning before my mirror. I was also glad his box contained no white camellia but a gorgeous light pink orchid. I could pitch that on my left shoulder, which I did, on the side of my heart, and which made him smile.

'You are ravishing, Simone,' he dared.

His luminous eyes flashed devastatingly at me.

'Oh my,' I thought. 'I have gone too far. Now I'll have to spend my entire evening keeping him at a distance.'

But I was very, very pleased with the effect I had on him, and slowly, slowly, my resolutions faded in his grin.

He gave me an arm and I took it graciously, but I shut the door with my key first. Then he led me to his car and helped me get in before he went to the steering side.

He climbed in the BMW and said, 'I'm sorry for the horn when I arrived. The horn of this car is pretty sensitive. It's a new car, I'm not used to it yet.'

'As long as you don't drive us off the road,' I gave him. 'Do we indeed go to the Lady of the Lake?'

'Yes we do,' he replied. 'We are expected. I have reserved a table for two.'

The Lady of the Lake was actually a restaurant on an island in the middle of an artificial lake. It was a two-star restaurant of Besnes, and many well-to-do people from as far as Brussels or Liège came to it because its food was among the very best of the country. The restaurant also had a romantic tang to it, because you had to park your car on one side of the lake, and then a flat platform served as a ferry to bring you over a stretch of water to the island. The ferry was linked to both shores by steel cables, an electric motor pulled, and we passed only about fifty metres of water, but I thought we passed an ocean and landed at a fairy world. In the evenings, a path illuminated by electric lights sunk in the ground led you to the restaurant that stood on a hill among high trees. The setting was too romantic to be true, and I had to laugh at

the melodrama of the scene as we walked over the gravel. The lakeside tallows rustled their thick, green foliage. I held Robert's arm, for as much as he had not been used to his new car, I was unsure of myself on the high heels of my new shoes. The path was a little slick from the past rain. He made me a compliment on those shoes, but he must have seen that in one or other American movie, for I did not believe him to be capable of such attention. My glib London admirers would have mentioned my shoes, not guys like Robert Jacquet. We walked solemnly to the villa that had been transformed to receive guests. Madame Butterfly walked at the arm of her Lieutenant Pinkerton! Had I not once promised to smash the guy? This was not a schoolboy walking with his mother, rather a schoolgirl being led by her first lover.

A waiter held the door open for us, and Robert let me go in front of him, as the waiter also opened the door to the restaurant at the end of the corridor. The room was a large place, walls lined with oak, a log fire burning in an open hearth. The room was discreetly lit with lamps on each table. The tables held white cloth, shining glasses, red napkins, and coloured Limoges plates. On each table flickered a red candle in a silver holder. Several couples already sat. Three tables held more than four people. It was a dream!

We made an absolute sensation when we strode slowly in, perfectly at ease in this high-brow environment. Robert, the perfect gentleman, held my chair, let me sit, and moved the chair at the right moment under my bottom. I had not expected such elegance in him! While he sat, he nodded to right and left, and surprised faces of men and women nodded back. I recognised a few faces as belonging to Rotary Club people Eliane had introduced me to. Yes, Robois would hum with new rumours tomorrow!

The waiter asked, 'would you like something to drink first, Monsieur Jacquet and Madame Ash?'

'Could we have a bottle of Champagne instead of the usual cocktails?' Robert asked me, and I nodded finely, without showing how pleased I was.

Yes, we needed bubbles to blow away the bad omen. The rumours in Robois would spread we had cared not a dime for Robert's setback. He had done well to propose us to throw money and glamour in the eyes of our good citizens this evening! The women I saw would spread gossip as any fisherwoman. Nobody would report they had seen an affected, depressed Bourgmestre tonight!

Robert asked for a bottle of Pommery Louise. I bet he had looked that up on the Internet before coming here. The sommelier merely blinked his eyes in consent of an excellent choice. Off went the sommelier. He came back after quite a while and opened the bottle with a soft pop, poured the Champagne in one glass, asked for Robert to taste. Robert nodded, the sommelier continued pouring two high glasses, and we clank our sparkling wine together.

'Do you know Pommery Champagne?' I tried to trap him.

'Oh yes,' he replied. 'It is my favourite brand. I visited the cellars in Rheims. The cellars are decorated with art works, and they are quite impressive. The Pommery castle and domain is, too, somewhat outside the centre of the city. Have you been to Rheims?'

'I have, but I have not visited any wine cellar.'

It served me well. I had received the lid on my pot.

Many eyes followed our every movement. Heads leaned closer together, people whispered. We took the menu card and ordered a four-course gastronomic supper. We decided for a Champagne supper, so Robert did not have to choose a white and a red wine. A Champagne supper! Yes, we were the sensation of the evening at the Lady of the Lake and the waiters hurried to us as if we had won the Lotto millions.

We began by chatting over inconsequential matters until after the hors d'oeuvre.

Waiting for our main dish, Robert suddenly asked, 'all right, Miss Ash, shoot! You must have many questions for me. Give me number one!'

'Great,' I responded to his challenge. 'Monsieur Jacquet, how do you feel having been kicked out by IC as next Bourgmestre candidate?'

His mouth did drop a little at the sides. Maybe I had been too rough. I wanted to know first how much he could take. He did not look particularly crestfallen to me.

'I shall be candidate Bourgmestre if I remain on the IC elections list. The candidate with the most votes of that list will be the next Bourgmestre. For that of course, the IC list must have the most votes of all the lists presented and remain master in the coalition negotiations. I shall only remain on the IC list, however, if I can be reasonably sure I can obtain the highest score.' That was crystal clear. He had it all thought out.

'You have been cheated once. You may be cheated twice.'

'The candidates have to sign a contract. I'll make sure everybody signs. I will make sure everybody signs before I sign. A contract can be forced in a Court of Justice. When a contract is not honoured afterwards, the pecuniary claims may amount to very high. I shall have fine lawyers.'

'You spoke of reasonably sure. What does that word mean?'

'It means I shall have to feel a real inclination in the population of Robois to want me as their elected Mayor.'

'That isn't a very mathematical exact notion,' I remarked.

'Indeed it isn't, but it will have to do. If I fail, I shall have only myself to blame.'

'How come you didn't know what was going on in your backyard, in your own political group?'

'That is a good question. I wondered about that, too. I made some enquiries, a few phone calls to several people, this afternoon. It seems not only I have been surprised and tricked. Only five people of the so-called United Democratic party of Robois assembled before our meeting of last evening. These were all former hard-core militants. In fact, the UD Party did not really exist anymore, not formally, in Robois. The five re-established the party. They elected among them a President, a Secretary and a Board of three, among which their candidate for Bourgmestre. Then they made that Board be accepted by the federal institutions of the UD Party in Brussels. That all went smoothly because Yves Govin is Political Undersecretary of the VDP in Brussels. They held no General Assembly or anything resembling it. Then they wrote a manifesto claiming the first place on the IC list. They also downgraded Nadine Dumortier, wanted to change the concept of having the elected persons with the most votes obtain a place in the Cabinet, and they also wanted to agree on the Aeolfast project. The manifesto was read in our IC elections meeting with some pomp, so that the people inclined to the old UD Party were as much surprised as the independent IC members. Each former UD member assumed a large number of UD people had met, but that was not the true! The vote on the manifesto was forced so rapidly and so unexpectedly, that the former UD members could not but have the reaction to vote for party discipline, as they had many years ago. They also thought the UD Party had gotten wind of new information about me being involved in corruption, which was not true, of course. We all fell victim of surprise and assumptions, most untrue. The majority, the great majority of former UD members are realising, like we, they were tricked. I have brought the independent IC members together. We are going to organise a formal meeting in the evening, two days from now. We are also phoning the former UD Party members, explaining how they have been abused of. The situation in IC is evolving by the minute. Of course, the new UD Party is also rallying its forces, its formerly most loyal members.'

‘So a battle for power is on inside the IC Group!’

‘Yes, indeed. I regret that, but I didn’t start it and I cannot avoid it. I could simply quit, but many independent IC people gave me their support and want me to fight. I shall not accept my fate with equanimity!’

‘You could indeed avoid the battle by leaving IC, you and your friends.’

‘Every opposition party of Robois would like that! It would mean a fractioning of IC, the breaking of the majority the current IC had obtained. We also don’t want that, not at this stage.’

‘A new, strong IC might obtain as many votes. I have a proposal to offer to you. Eliane and me, we ask you formally to consider forming a new IC with the Liberal Party at its core.’

Robert was astonished again. We had started our main course, the lobster. He put down his fork and knife.

He answered me rather quickly, signifying to me he had already given such a scenario some thought.

‘Would you, Liberals, really consider allying yourselves with a man accused of fraud and corruption.’

‘You are accused of nothing, and you remain the Bourgmestre. Only rumours circulate, which we know to be untrue. Your defection to us will mean reasonable and decent people of Robois, an entire political formation, believe you are innocent of any wrong-doing. It will re-establish your notoriety without a doubt. We shall so declare publicly!’

‘It will probably, yes, but the new IC will still be ruled by a political party that is organised regionally and federally, and that shall tell us what to do and how to do it. We, the independents of IC, want exactly the contrary. The people of Robois who are members of no political party and who do not desire to link their fate and name to any political party, will not like to forge an alliance with a federally organised group such as the Liberals. It is a good idea, especially for the Liberal Party, but it simply will not work for us.’

‘The current IC is controlled by the federally organised UD Party. That is the same thing!’

‘Well, you have a point, I grant you that. But whether the current IC is really controlled and remains controlled until at the end remains to be seen. At this moment, I believe the direction of the current can still be turned. The water is currently not running to the ocean, you see. It is running uphill, and that cannot last.’

‘So you reject our offer.’

‘I promise to keep it in mind, and I thank you for it. I rather think I have several options open, today. I may win back control of IC for the independents of IC. I may as yet found my own, independent, IC Group, or I may simply join your own list, the list of the Liberal Party. That last option is only feasible, of course, if you’ll want to have me. I sense this last option is implicit in what you just offered, but there will be conditions.’

‘It is. Conditions can be discussed. We would love to have you on our list. We may even propose you to lead it.’

‘You told me some time ago that Eliane Collado might leave Robois. Collado herself told me she had no desire anymore to lead the Liberals much longer. Are you the Princess of the Queen?’

It was my turn to blink. How did he know that? Collado already did not lead the Liberals anymore today. How close was Robert to Eliane? Was something going on between those two, over party boundaries?

I replied, chastened a little, ‘I might be, but nothing has been fixed definitely yet. The leader of our election list has not yet been assigned.’

‘You would leave your place to me?’

‘If I thought that would benefit the list, I might, yes.’

I had quite something else in mind, but I was not going to tell him that, not now. I would control the party together with him, out of the same home. Was he ready for that? I astonished myself with that thought, but it stood firmly in my mind. I suddenly went very warm, and I am sure I reddened at the table over my lobster, my throat went dry, but he could not have guessed what I was thinking of.

We kept a silence for a few moments, the time to finish our lobster and its Thermidor sauce, and our Champagne. Then, we waited for desert, both lost in thoughts.

‘Well,’ Robert broke the silence, ‘we should not talk exclusively about politics this evening. How are you doing? Do you enjoy living in Robois?’

‘I like the environs of Trioteignes,’ I replied. ‘I began to do some jogging in the woods. Would you care to join me one of these days?’

‘I would like that very much,’ Robert replied. ‘I need the exercise. In the weekends I have Rose, though. She is not a good runner, I am afraid. But I can ask Samia to keep an eye on her.’

He had to bring Rose into the equation. That was logical. Rose did not really bother me. I had seen and treated many handicapped children in the hospitals. Did he think I could not bring up any sympathy for handicapped people? They did not scare me off, not as they might have pushed back many other people. I found Rose endearing, no burden at all.

I came back to politics.

‘You have been very candid with me,’ I began. ‘You seem not to fear we might use the information you gave us. We could direct our most negative election campaign messages at the internal strife in IC.’

‘You could do that,’ Robert whispered. ‘I wouldn’t even mind if you did. The only effect would be that the people of Robois came to regard me more as the insulted, innocent victim who is fighting back, and Govin as the bad wolf. Many people vote for the underdog, you know. All the more votes for me! That is, at least, if your publications remain conforming to the truth. I don’t want to be a Calimero, though. I shall not remain whining over the bad things that happen to me. I shall fight back!’

‘We will not spread any unconfirmed and untrue messages,’ I assured him defensively.

I asked, ‘why did you enter politics in the first place? You do not need that for the money. Did you look for power?’

‘To start answering that question, I did not look out for politics. Politics asked me in. I did not seek power. Besides, as Bourgmestre, you cannot wield much power anyway; we have become more and more the slaves of an increasing number of regulations that tie us down everywhere. No. I think I felt lonely. Man is a social animal, you know. I did it for the honour, for the honour to feel beloved by my fellow men and women. I sought appreciation, love, and the affection of the people of Robois. You may call that vanity.’

I surmised that was a quite innocent form of vanity. He spoke quite frankly with me.

‘What are your plans now, in politics and in life?’ Robert wanted to know.

‘I would like to be an Échevin again. I liked the last five years. We did a good job. I don’t think I would want to renew my mandate with other partners, though. As for my private life, I like the clinic in Brussels I work in currently, though my hours are getting longer and longer, too long for me. I have a small practice here. I shall probably stay in Robois. I like it here, for

the moment. I own a fine cottage in the Cotswolds, in the UK, too. I rent that out, now, but I can go back whenever I want.'

'I would like to stay here,' Robert mentioned offhandedly. 'I would like to take more time to travel, though.'

'Where would you like to travel to? To the fine beaches of the Caribbean, to the isle of Djerba, to the sites of the Turkish Ionian coast?'

He laughed, 'no, not so far away! I also don't like holidays of lying on my belly in the sand near a beach. I would travel in France and Germany, visit Vaux-le-Vicomte and Versailles, the abbeys and castles around Paris, visit Chantilly and Sens, or the Loire castles. In Germany, I would like to see Nürnberg and Regensburg.'

'Great! I would like that too!'

'I would love to show you!'

I didn't answer on that offer.

We ordered coffee.

Half an hour later, the first guests began to leave the restaurant, and I too was tired. I should return home, for I had to get up early for work in Brussels.

Robert asked for the bill and paid with a credit card. Then, he brought his hand on his chair to push it back.

I whispered, before he could stand, 'now, for the people of Robois' sake, you should give me a kiss to thank me for a fine evening.'

He gave me a ravishing glance, reddened but nodded, murmuring, 'of course, for the people's sake.'

He stood, came to behind my chair, helped me get away from the table, and when I stood too, he kissed me on the cheek.

'That was not a proper kiss, Robert Jacquet' I whispered.

I kissed him on the lips and put an arm around his shoulder. That was how lovers kiss.

Robert held the kiss for only four seconds. I counted them. Then he withdrew, glanced once more straight in my eyes, but he offered me his arm and we went to the corridor to get our coats. We saw many heads follow us.

We got our coats and we walked back in the night over the illuminated path to the ferry. The road bent behind flower bushes. We could not be seen there from out of the restaurant. We stopped at the same time, embraced and kissed interminably. I withdrew, breathless, but I said nothing. Robert directed us to the ferry, then we were drawn over the lake and we stepped back to his car. He drove in silence to my house in Trioteignes.

When Robert stopped the car, I said, 'I won't invite you in, Robert. I really have to get up early and I have a strenuous day tomorrow. I am a doctor. I cannot afford to make mistakes because I'm tired.'

'Sure, I understand,' was all he said.

He opened the door of his car, let me out, but did not accompany me to under my porch. That was a good, sensible thing to do, for had he done that I would have dragged him straight to my bedroom, work tomorrow or no work tomorrow.

Chapter 4. May and June

Storms over Robois

The days after Robert Jacquet's supper with Simone Ash proved hectic and tiresome for the Bourgmestre. He could not leave his telephones, for the damn devices kept ringing every minute. Robert left them often ringing, hearing only the messages afterwards, and answering the calls only if he felt them urgent or important. Later, he even switched off his mobile phone entirely, not after having giving a call to Simone he was obliged to cut off mobile communications for a while.

People from IC called incessantly to prove their support and wish courage to their Bourgmestre. People from the United Democratic Party called him to tell they felt they had been tricked and surprised the other evening. Others told friends they were ashamed and dared not to call Robert Jacquet, for they knew they had wronged him by their vote. It seemed a hearty few words would be said during the next General Assembly of the UD Party, but such a meeting had not been organised for several years and Robert did also not expect Govin, Dewez and their conspirators to stage such a meeting soon in Robois. A General Assembly of the UDP would not be held for a long time to come!

Albert Desjardins, the President of IC, phoned Robert to tell he would rather resign than order to print election lists with Govin in first place. Never would he proclaim Govin to be the candidate Bourgmestre of IC. Events were heading towards a schism in the IC Group.

Robert Jacquet also received threats, anonymous calls commanding him to comply with the new candidates list, or to face violent consequences. Robert had never suspected that so much violence might lurk under the surface of the good citizens of his quiet town, but the ferocity was present indeed, and had been unleashed by the Govin controversy. Robert also received calls urging him to agree with the wind turbine project.

Guichand, the pig farmer, expressed openly his delight at hearing Robert had been dumped by his party.

Sycophants and hypocrites phoned him, reproached him for his dissolute life, abandoned ship, and urged Robert to do the same.

In the afternoon and in the evening, calls came in asking Robert whether it was true he was planning to leave IC for the Liberal Party. An anonymous caller croaked Robert would not much longer be drinking Champagne with his mistress at the Lady of the Lake.

Joseph Bikri called, too. He had heard the Bourgmestre had a new girlfriend, an elegant lady from Brussels. Bikri laughed when he told that to Robert. The woman was a doctor, the rumours went, and Joseph therefore knew immediately who the woman was. He explained that even the police station buzzed with rumours about the mistresses of their Bourgmestre. People, mainly journalists, had called him, the Superintendent, asking what kind of allegations had officially been filed to the police against the Bourgmestre. Was the Bourgmestre involved in fraud and corruption cases? Joseph usually slammed down the phone on such calls, now he answered Robert Jacquet was involved in no case whatsoever, but was considering filing complaints for slander against anyone involved in spreading rumours. That stopped a few men and women from exaggerating the rumours, something the provincial journalists, Bikri knew, were good at.

Robert Jacquet organised a meeting of the independents of IC. Only the people invited by telephone by Albert Desjardins or Robert Jacquet were allowed to attend. At the meeting, Robert confirmed he did not envisage yet to leave the IC Group. He would not found his own group for the moment, though he held the thought in reserve. He would not join the Liberal Party. He proposed to continue working within IC for the time being, and to work on the mind of the more party-oriented people of the UD Party, explain to them what he wanted, which was to serve the interests of the people of Robois, and not necessarily the interests of the men in the federal headquarters of a political party somewhere in Brussels. In time, maybe a month or so from now, he would ask to organise a General Assembly of IC. In that meeting, he would propose new amendments to the vote cast in the Office the other day. He did not answer the question as to whether he would go to the elections in the last position on the candidates list.

Some of Robert's friends in IC asked him with more insistence about his relations with the Liberal Party, and also about his relations with Simone Ash. He had been seen with Miss Ash on the best of terms. Robert heard the undertone suggesting he was Ash's lover. He stated merely he had every right meeting with an Executive Cabinet member to talk over matters of the commune, even if the setting was nice. He answered in a tantrum. His relations with Simone Ash were of a private nature and of a management nature. He only commented on the last.

Robert Jacquet did not meet with Simone Ash in the next three weeks except in the Cabinet. They glanced at each other, sometimes with a smile or a grin, but by a strange mutual consent they did not exchange one word about their behaviour after the supper at the Lady of the Lake. They both needed time to absorb the experience, to reflect on the consequences. Nevertheless, after a few days already, Robert Jacquet knew what he wanted to do, and he hoped Simone Ash had the same intentions. Robert would have married Simone in that same beautiful month of May, whatever the consequences were for him or her, for Rose, for the political parties and for the citizens of Robois. If necessary he wished everybody to hell, everybody but Simone and Rose. He was wildly in love, truly in love, with strong and tender feelings, and his former wife, Rose's mother, did not enter the equation. Robert realised how the generosity of Simone had saved him from a profound depression. She had come to him, offered her to him. She had kissed him, so now he could handle the world, however ugly that world was, with a laugh and a joke!

The events in Robois were swung even more in turmoil. Robois was once more swamped by a publicity campaign of Aeolfast in favour of wind turbines. Even more than before, flyers were distributed by post to all the citizens, and new articles appeared in the local press and in the national press. The articles discussed the advantages of electricity generation by using the natural force of the winds, and the journalists applauded the advanced technological prowess of the Aeolfast project in Robois. Robert began to wonder what would happen when the wind gusts stopped, when the windmills stopped to turn. The total amount of needed energy had then to be delivered by traditional power stations. How much more expensive would that make electricity, when twice the needed power had to be foreseen by electrical generators? Was everybody ready to pay for that additional cost? Were all electrical grids interconnected on a European scale?

Aeolfast also organised new meetings to explain their project. Technologists came to Robois to explain in detail how wind turbines worked, and how ecologically brilliant the machines

were, as compared to polluting generators of electricity. The presentations were cleverly targeted to specific audiences.

The presentations for militants of the Ecological Party members of Robois showed the advantages of wind energy in magnificent slide shows with epic images of marvellous windmills photographed against wonderful blue skies.

The presentations for farmers detailed the financial profits a tower in the midst of a pasture might mean, and disadvantages were systematically named but dismissed with statistics and witness reports of similar projects in Germany and France.

The presentations to the higher intellectual classes of doctors, notaries, directors of companies, members of the Economic Club of Robois, emphasized the scientific justifications of the project, the mechanical prowess, the beauty of the slender towers in the landscape, and the amounts of green electricity brought to our new industries.

This campaign lasted throughout the entire month of May in an outburst of enthusiastic activity. The meetings were followed by drinks and snacks. Expensive Champagne was served to the better classes, and many men and women were delighted by the gentle persuasion of the directors of Aeolfast who proved to be men of the world, who spread the names of the politicians and influential men they seemed to be very familiar with.

Robert Jacquet was stopped more than once in the streets, now, by people who explained him, notwithstanding some drawbacks for the environment, how interesting they found the Aeolfast project for the common good of Robois. Most of these people lived in the urban environment of Bas-Robois and Haut-Robois, though. Jacquet still sensed much reticence against the project in the villages.

At that time also, a series of strange events of various natures racked Robois. Only one man seemed to be able to form a general overview, a synthesis of the events, and that was Superintendent Bikri. The events did not shake the newspaper press beyond small articles without photographs.

In the Peasant villages and in the area around the N11 lived still many farmers who had remained very sceptical about allowing wind towers to be built on their terrains, despite personal visits by middle management directors of Aeolfast, and despite the money promised to them in compensation for the towers. The farmers feared the effects of the shadows and of the turbulence of the turning winds on their crops. They feared the effects of the sounds and possibly of magnetic fields on their animals in the pastures beneath. They feared the destruction of their grass made by the huge trucks and tractors bringing the concrete base and the steel elements of the towers. These farmers were stubborn, and they listened only to their own impressions. They opposed sane scepticism to people from Brussels telling them there was no danger in nothing related to wind turbines.

In the farms of the most vocal opposers to the wind turbine project, animals got fiercely wounded. Cows got slashed in their bellies by long knives. Horses were beaten with wooden bats and left with broken legs and bashed snouts in the fields. Poultry got shot by hunting rifles in the night. Enclosures were demolished and animals chased on the countryside roads. Joseph Bikri and his men were called in to witness the ravages. The aggressions had been perpetrated during the night, when police patrols were at a minimum. Joseph Bikri augmented those patrols, but the territory of Robois was immense compared to his small police force. Joseph Bikri remained for a long time at a loss as to what was happening. He interrogated neighbours of the farmers, and family, looking for family feuds. He interrogated supposed enemies of the farmers, but found nothing. With time a pattern emerged, however, and by the time Bikri thought he understood what was happening, the aggressions stopped. By then too, no farmer wanted to talk about his or her suspicions to the police. Bikri sensed the farmers

knew very well what had happened and why their farms had been attacked. The law of silence prevailed, however.

A little later, country-houses, caravans and mobile homes of a domain around the castle of Les Tignes were burnt down, one after the other. Many people objected to caravans in the countryside, to large camping sites and tents in the fine landscapes of Wallony. Many of the mobile homes had been arranged as permanent residences, and they were indeed not a beautiful sight, as the people living in them were poor, often amassed rust iron and old tires and the sort. Robois had tolerated two camping sites on its territory. It had housed already several people in more comfortable social lodgings, but a number of people truly liked their site and dwellings and refused to move despite insistent persuasion. In the neighbouring towns too, sites for caravans and mobile homes had been the victims of excited neighbours who hated the sight of these camping sites around their villas and residences. The burning of caravans was a plague in all these territories.

Joseph Bikri and his officers were called in to the fires of the Robois territory, but they could do little more than write reports at the burnt-out remains. He began to wonder why suddenly a wave of fires racked the site, whereas before people had grumbled, but had not reacted violently.

Bikri could do little more than write his *procès-verbaux*, his official reports, and watch the charred remains smoking the ruins to the ground. Yes, the firemen of Robois had tried to extinct the fires, but a caravan soaked inside and outside with gasoline burnt in a few minutes. The firemen found only the blackened remains of exploded jerry-cans that had been thrown through the windows. None of the people living in the neighbourhood had seen anything during the night, not even heard the slightest noise. Again, Bikri understood the law of silence was at work. Luckily, these attacks made no victims; It seemed the hoodlums who had put the flame to the caravans knew which caravans were temporarily empty of people.

Joseph Bikri sent his night patrols also to drive around the two camping sites of Robois, but the fires were lit only at one site.

Then, Joseph Bikri placed a large map of Robois on his wall and he pinned red dots on the map for every aggression of the month of May, not only for the attacks on caravans, but also on farms. He did not remark at pattern at first, until he thought about the plans he had seen in the City Hall of the Aeolfast towers. He had Dominique Bussy ask for a copy of that plan, and then he saw the red dots laid all along the line of the green dots of the projected wind turbine towers. The farms were to receive wind towers. The farmers that had been victims of vandalism had to accept the towers in their fields. The camping site lay on the line and might object to towers a few hundred metres from their site. The owner of the camping site was the owner of the castle of Les Tignes, and that man too got visited by hoodlums who smashed out his windows and attacked his farm. The castle owner had a steady income from the camping site. He did not want to lose that money, but he admitted to Joseph Bikri he might close the site in the near future. When Bikri pressed the man for the reasons, he got hesitating answers that meant nothing.

Joseph Bikri paced helplessly in front of his map. He brought his officers in his office and explained what he feared. The men and Dominique nodded. They agreed with their boss. But they too did not know what to do. Bikri could only formulate suspicions, he had not a single proof, no witness report of any value. He knew an organised gang was at work. The farms in which animals were wounded, crops destroyed, as well as the burnt-out caravans had only one point in common. They all belonged to people who opposed the Aeolfast project by their presence and their desire to be left alone.

Bikri discussed a scheme with his officers to patrol only at night along the line of the projected wind turbine installations, but the criminal acts stopped as abruptly as they had begun. In fact, that campaign too seemed to have its desired effect. Most of the caravan owners moved their cars and vans and homes to other camping sites in neighbouring towns. The owner of Castle les Tignes closed the camping site. The farmers seemed not to object anymore to the Aeolfast project. When Superintendent Bikri tried to talk to them, the men gritted their teeth and grumbled there was nothing to discuss. Everybody kept his or her mouth closed.

The crimes would have been considered petty crimes by any Superintendent, simple crimes of revenge among neighbours and competitors, but Bikri was shocked by the atrocity of the acts. He stood mesmerised at the feral violence that suddenly surfaced from below the veneer of bourgeois elegance, the peacefulness and quiet of rural Robois, or that was brought to Robois from outside their world by barbarians, by unscrupulous criminals. Joseph was born and educated in Brussels, in a large city in which crime lurked everywhere. Here, he saw the tears in the eyes of the farmers who looked at their mutilated animals, and he saw the desperation in the eyes of the poorest of men and women who lived in the caravans and who did not have the money to buy a decent brick house, and who therefore had to live in the one room of their aluminium and wooden mobile homes. These people Bikri saw standing before the ashes of their homes, their meagre possessions lost. The town of Robois could help only two owners of the mobile homes with social lodging. Two other families were temporarily housed in cheap hotels. The farmers received nothing for their lost animals.

Joseph Bikri tore the map in his office from the wall, rolled it up and drove to the house of Robert Jacquet. He entered through the always open door, shouted he was in, and went to the dining-room. He took the Val-Saint-Lambert vases from the table, placed them on a buffet cupboard, and deployed his map. When Robert entered the room, he showed him the map and explained everything he knew and suspected.

Robert did not believe what Joseph Bikri was suggesting. Multi-nationals, conglomerations and modern enterprises were highly aggressive, highly competitive, but they did not use violence. They did not fight with arms, with blackmail and threats by which they hurt people or animals. Sure, a massive publicity campaign had been launched by Aeolfast, involving person-to-person marketing, but were such violent measures being ordered by Aeolfast? Robert, despite all the arguments, could not believe what Joseph Bikri was suggesting. If enterprises exerted physical violence, the Government would stop them rapidly. How would Governments do that, exclaimed Joseph, and what if the companies controlled the Government to a large extent? In the end, yes, companies would be stopped from using violence, but what in the meantime? What could withhold unscrupulous leaders from using violence? They had the means! Had there not been examples enough in other countries, such as in Italy? Did not the Italian mafias rule by fear over large parts of the country? Sure, said Robert Jacquet, Aeolfast has been aggressive in marketing, but were such extreme measures as Joseph explained really being forced on people who opposed the project? Unbelievable! Robert thought the imagination of Joseph was running amok. Companies did not apply such extreme measures, nowhere, and not in Belgium. Robert asked Joseph to look for other, perhaps more diverse causes, for local feuds, but Joseph insisted. Bikri pointed to the red dots where the crimes had been committed, as well as to the green dots of where the wind turbine towers were foreseen, but Robert told Joseph to reconsider. Yes, the dots covered the same areas, but what proofs had Joseph beyond dots on a map that might also be the result of chance?

‘It is simply not possible,’ Robert argued, ‘not in Robois! You have absorbed too many detective stories.’

Robert saw Joseph wince at that remark, and he remembered he had always taken his friend for an intelligent, reasonable man. He also did not want to hurt Joseph’s feelings.

He conceded the evidence that lay in front of him, on the table, and maybe he was merely convincing himself that such acts were impossible.

‘We need to have tangible proof of some sort,’ he suggested.

‘I know that,’ Joseph Bikri replied, very frustrated. ‘Proof is not what I have. What proofs can I bring? We, the police, are too few to be everywhere at the same time. We don’t know who these criminals are, but they know us. We do not have many inconspicuous cars, our cars with police painted all over them can be spotted from far. They can track us, whereas we wouldn’t know where to look. If we place patrols in ambush somewhere, they plan an aggression elsewhere. We find nothing but wounded animals, ravaged farms, and the charred remains of burnt caravans in which no clues are left. Moreover, they stopped. My guess is they reached their objectives. When we talk to the people, mouths stay shut. They have understood! They do not need hard proof like we do. It is so frustrating!’

‘Companies may have ordered the crimes,’ Robert continued, ‘but real people of flesh and blood attacked the farms and caravans. What kind of people might do this?’

‘I have no clue! I know only one thing: these guys are not people of Robois. There simply are no people in Robois violent, tough and ruthless to do such things. Even our butchers would not do this! The highway is close. Teams from any score of large towns lay within an hour’s drive from Robois. With fast cars and a minimum of tools, they can perpetrate the acts in hit-and-run operations. It is all very plausible and feasible. They may even have prepared a hideout shack somewhere in Robois with tools and petrol. They come by the highway in a normal car, drive to the shack, and fetch what they need for their attacks, including four-wheel drives. Afterwards they dump the tools in the shack and off they go. If ever the police stops them on the highway or on the N11, they have nothing in their car that points to an aggression. It is not even necessary each time to have the same men in the same car! The operations may have been planned tens of kilometres from Robois, planned with maps of the region and images of the environs even a child can nowadays find on the Internet. In any case, they have one and the same brain behind the attacks. I believe the same men have done the violent acts. The attacks are executed seemingly at random, now in the north, then in the south, then somewhere in between, but the men are systematically eliminating resistance to the Aeolfast project by crime and blackmail. Even the Georgis Rape fits in the pattern! The crimes remain relatively small, not important enough to catch the attention of the larger newspapers. One or more professionals are at work here. I can smell that!’

Robert Jacquet remained sceptical, but he did not contradict his friend anymore. Robert and Joseph could not think of anything they could do to find the people who had used the violence in Robois.

At that time also, the report from the first federal advisory commission was sent to Robois. The commission accepted the wind turbine project, and found the objections formulated by the Bourgmestre and Cabinet of Robois insufficient to stop the installations. Also the objections and the letters of the citizen committee were not strong enough to consider the Aeolfast project in breach with the laws and regulations. The project was economically feasible and even desirable. The Federal Government had issues with the global production of carbon dioxide in the country. Projects such as Aeolfast’s could alleviate the figures that had to be presented by the Walloon Region to the administration of the European Community. Robert Jacquet was losing one more battle.

Aeolus. Robert Jacquet

After three weeks and as many Cabinet meetings in which we discussed the matters of the commune, deciding over investments and the problems of the elderly and the very youngest, Simone Ash and I looked at each other interrogatingly to probe our feelings, but we did not much more. In the Cabinet I explained the suspicions the Superintendent and I had about the misdeeds that had happened in Robois, but I explained we sought for hard evidences. I did not think somebody believed me.

On an evening, not long thereafter, quite out of the blue, Simone phoned me. She asked me whether she could invite me to supper the next day. I was delighted with her call, for I was very eager to continue our relations and to intensify them. I had not wanted to brusque her, however, so I waited until she was ready to talk things over and to make the next move. I wondered what I would have done had she never phoned me. I asked her in a joke whether she invited me to the Lady of the Lake, but she remained very cold and calm, and she did not even react on those references. She told me that no, we would not have supper at the Lady of the Lake, and also not at her home. I had to dress in a normal suit, but casually, and she would come in her car at eight in the evening. She would drive me this time, and where we would go to would have to remain a surprise until tomorrow. I had been used to surprises the last month, so I did not ask more. I was a fool, but being together with Simone Ash was sufficient reward. That woman had the knack of turning all my resolutions to jelly.

The next day was a Thursday. I put on a decent but not posh brown jacket and trousers, a light blue shirt, but no tie, and I waited anxiously for Simone half an hour to eight. She was a little over time, not much. I heard her drive to my door but I did not get up until she rang. When I opened and said hello, she gave me a hand and not her cheek. She looked tense, and nervous. She looked me over and said, 'I would prefer if you did wear a tie. I'm sorry, a discreet, simple tie will do, no harsh colours, but where I'm taking you to, for a first visit, people do prefer a little decorum.'

Such phrases throw a bucket of ice-cold water over you, but I complied. I offered Simone a seat in my living-room, went back to my rooms and sought a silk, brick-red tie of a light but not too aggressive colour, and presented my figure again to Miss Simone Ash for acceptance of decorum. She nodded approvingly, but still did not present her cheek for a kiss. She had thoroughly cooled me down with her formalities, so I expected her to give me the sack this evening rather than open, moist lips.

I followed her to her car, trying, 'where are you taking me, if I may ask?'

'Friends invited us,' she replied, 'you'll see.'

Simone did not seem inclined to say much more. I had learned from my business contacts to remain silent when that was demanded, so I asked no more. I had hoped for a gentle, loving supper, just the two of us, at her home. Would I get a lot less than that? I expected nothing anymore. I never would understand anything about women!

Simone drove very fast. Maybe she was late at an appointment. She remained very tense, and she wanted no conversation. We drove in the direction of Trioteignes. I thought we would drive to her house, but she drove past it, through narrow roads in the woods, until in the dark we arrived in the village of Trioteignes proper. She passed the massive iron gates of Castle Trioteignes, into the lane that led directly into the domain. I did not know of any restaurant there. She brought us to Castle Trioteignes!

Trioteignes was a very old, medieval castle of grey stones. Simone stopped her car at the bridge over the ditch around the castle. The bridge led to the gatehouse. Castle Trioteignes was something of a mystery to me. It was one of the last truly, authentic medieval castles of the plains of Belgium, many centuries old, but as I recalled, well restored. The castle was entirely surrounded by high and very thick stone walls, protected by five sturdy barbican, round towers.

It was the first time I had been inside the domain of Castle Trioteignes. The building was enormous, a huge mass of stones of thick walls, squat towers and dark, grey-shale roofs. The ditch around the castle was now, early in the season, overgrown with bushes, some of which were blooming. Only a little, brackish water ran beneath.

The gatehouse was on every picture of the castle I had ever seen in books and magazines. It consisted of four huge, massive towers, interconnected above by a stone corridor. On two sides, the entry towers were flanked by high stone walls, and high above I saw crenelated embattlements. The castle was a fortress of the plains, built in the middle of swamps. The swamps had dried out, of course, since ages, but the castle had retained its medieval ferocity and air of defiance.

We walked fast over the bridge. Simone did not take my arm, and she hurried a little ahead of me. I remarked she was definitely more nervous than I had thought possible for her. I longed for a nice word from her mouth and her heart, but that would have to wait, for she didn't turn, here. At the end of the four towers, between the two last ones, stood a huge oak door the panels of which were closed. In that gate a small door stood open, however, and we entered a cobblestoned courtyard. I would not have been surprised to have seen vampires flying out of the towers, but nothing of the sort happened. It was quite dark in the castle, but we were expected, for all the lights on the bridge, in the gatehouse and also in this courtyard, had been turned on. The lights were of no torches, but of remote-controlled mercury white lamps. How many guests would be present for a macabre gathering?

I looked to right and left. I had never been inside Castle Trioteignes. The castle was not open to the public. I had only seen photographs of the exterior. The town administration had asked several times in the past to open at least the park and the gardens and the forest around the castle at certain days to the public, but these proposals had each time been turned down, politely but firmly. The owners of Castle Trioteignes kept jealously to their privacy. The proprietors, the ancient family of the same name, did not want to be disturbed. The family also never participated in any event organised by the town or by our associations.

Simone and I passed the courtyard, Simone almost running, me in tow. She headed briskly on. We reached the castle proper, the mansion where Count Trioteignes lived. The living quarters of the castle had been built against two end walls of the pentagon-shaped courtyard. Simone Ash still rushed in front of me, opened the door of the main entry, and beckoned me to follow, never answering my stare. I was a little surprised to find the door of the castle open, and also to remark how Simone was familiar enough with the place to not hesitate entering it without knocking or ringing. We stood in the brightly lit entry hall, in which monumental stairs led to the upper floors. I looked around, but Simone barely offered me the time for that.

Simone shouted, 'Charles, we have arrived!'

Another voice came from the rooms to our left, from a Gothic arch-shaped door, 'come in, Simone. Close the door behind you, will you?'

Simone pushed a bar at the door. Then, she rapidly sprang before me, opened the door at her left, and we stepped into a large living-room. The room was splendidly decorated with new, comfortable and fine furniture. I saw a few oil paintings on the walls before me. The living-room was huge, long but rather narrow. It had remained much in the style of the previous centuries, with bare stones on the walls, oak beams apparent on the ceiling, large paintings of landscapes covering the left wall as I entered. The couches and seats brought vivid colours of nice flower patterns in the stern lines. The place looked bright therefore, fresh, warm, joyful even. Logs crackled in the open fireplace. I saw also a dining-room through the open door at the end, a large table set with white porcelain dishes, coloured crystal glasses and silver cutlery.

The room was empty of people, but a not very tall, slim, greying man, dressed in a brown suit not very unlike my own, wearing no tie, emerged from the opening to another room at the end. He came forward with outstretched hands to me, and he kissed Simone on the cheeks. He shook hands with me. I assumed this man was Count Trioteignes. He was a man in his forties, slim, meagre even, with a gentle but square face, thick black eyebrows, a short jaw and also thin but very vivid grey eyes. The Count did not let go quickly of my hands. Charles de Trioteignes came to me with long, black hair greying at the sides, combed backwards. He made me think of the actor Stewart Granger, but in a smaller version. He had the pale complexion of a man who did not much walk outdoors. He wore no tie on a white shirt open at the neck. Simone had over-dressed me, I realised.

He said, 'welcome to Castle Trioteignes! I am Charles Trioteignes. I am glad to receive you here. I should have done that much earlier. We are hermits, I am afraid, my wife and I. I am really very glad to welcome our Bourgmestre, and honoured. Pleased to meet you! Simone has told us many fine things about you. Please sit down, I'll serve us a drink to start. How about a sweet Jurançon for changes?'

I said thank you, a white wine would be fine. Yes, I acquiesced, I was Robert Jacquet, and Simone Ash had brought me here as a surprise. Charles glanced beyond me at Simone, and grinned.

A woman came from the dining-room to us. She was tall and stout, taller than Count Charles, and she laughed with a healthy, sun-tanned, round face in which shone large, green eyes. She looked like a strong woman of the country. Her lips were thick and sensuous, her hips generous, maybe a little overweight. She wore a large apron over plain clothes.

She began to speak before Charles could introduce her, 'welcome, welcome! I'm Monique Ghysen, wife to Charles. We have two children Diego and Laura, but they shall not be with us tonight. They are studying both at the university of Louvain-la Neuve, and it's exam time for them!'

She sat on a sofa next to Count Charles. Charles served the wine in fine, white crystal glasses.

I still did not quite understand why Simone had brought me to Trioteignes, but I did feel the familiarity between her and Count Charles. Had Simone wanted to present me to a former lover? I should have showed more defiance, but the warmth with which both the Count and his wife received me forced me to abandon some of my usual reserve. We chatted quite openly about the landscapes of Robois and about the affairs of the town. Charles and Monique seemed to know everything that happened in the town.

'We should have invited to meet you sooner,' Count Charles repeated, as if he were genuinely ashamed, 'but I am afraid we are a strange pair of loners, Monique and I. When Simone told

us she knew you well, we thought it appropriate to invite you. Simone is dear to us. We see ourselves a little as her parents in Belgium! We are enchanted to make your acquaintance.'

The conversation went on until Monique Ghysen called us to the table of the dining-room. She explained she had prepared the dinner herself, with products of her farm.

'I have not yet told you,' Count Charles said while he served us a Vosne-Romanée Burgundy wine. 'Monique has her own business, a farm, in the village of Trioteignes. The farm thrives. She is a fine manager, and when we married, she wanted to continue her farm.'

We had a perfectly enjoyable supper, a first dish of smoked trout and a main dish of stewed wild rabbit, stewed in dark beer of which Monique told it was Trappist of West-Vleteren. Charles served his fine wine, and Monique brought in a large plate of cheese afterwards. We would have our coffee in the living-room. Count Charles also proposed us a glass of Cognac. I had kept glancing at Simone, glances Monique and Charles must have remarked, but they didn't comment. Simone never reacted when I stared at her, never answered my looks.

After the coffee, Charles suddenly said, 'you must ask yourself why we invited you here; I admire your patience. We did not just wanted to spend a nice evening with you and show you the interior of our Castle Trioteignes. We owe you a little explanation.'

I did not answer, no answer was required. I merely waited for what was to come, but I was curious indeed.

Count Charles leaned back in the sofa and asked me, 'how much do you know about your grandfather, Alain Jacquet?'

The question surprised me.

I said, 'very little. He died young. I remember him vaguely, not much more. My father also told me very little about him.'

Count Charles continued, 'your grandfather was part of this castle once. The Trioteignes, me too, are part of these walls, and your grandfather was, too. Alain Jacquet was once a stable boy here! I know that because the Trioteignes keep family archives in which the Counts note everything important that mattered concerning our domain. Your grandfather was a stable boy, the only one, when the Second World War broke out. We hid experimental aeroplanes of Belgian construction in our castle during the Twilight war. A man from the British Secret Service, a pilot, was sent to us to assess the machines for the British war industry, and we helped him bring the aeroplanes to Great-Britain. That man was Simone's grandfather, and he married a Trahty daughter. The Barons of Trahty have always been our dearest friends. A Trahty lived here in the castle during the war, the best friend, confident and business associate of my own grandfather, who was also called Charles de Trioteignes. Your grandfather, Alain Jacquet, helped us defeat German spies who wanted to fly the aeroplanes to Germany before the outbreak of the war. We have three German tombs in our woods on account of the attack on our hangars. In our archives, it is stated that Alain Jacquet patrolled in our domain next to Baron Trahty and Count Charles, double-barrelled hunting shotguns in their hands. He was substantial in helping us to hide the cars in which the Germans arrived. We, the Trioteignes and the Trahties, never forget the people who protect us. Alain Jacquet later became a close confident of the family, and also a business partner. He was intelligent and helpful, and we taught him to buy and to sell, how and why and where. He developed his own fortune in the diamond business of Antwerp, mainly with Baron Trahty, Simone's grandfather. We and him housed and hid Jewish families during the war. We have papers and medals to confirm that. We think of your grandfather with affection as something of a hero'

Count Charles paused, sipped from his brandy, looked at my astonished face, smiled, and resumed.

‘We heard Swastikas were painted on your walls. The men who did that had the story all wrong. No man of Trioteignes would have put those crosses on your walls, for they know. Your grandfather was a hero of the resistance afterwards, during the war, together with the Trioteignes, the Trahties, and a group of former pilots of the Belgian Aéronautique. So, you should not worry about the Swastikas. Those were the results of ugly minds, of uninformed or misinformed people who did not really know what had happened at Trioteignes during the Twilight War and the Second World War. You do not have to believe me. I allow you to come and consult our archives. The story is written down. I must ask your discretion, of course, for parts of the story are still state secrets. Just phone me, and you can read the books an afternoon in our library.’

‘I have no reason to doubt your words, Count’ I managed saying with a very dry throat. I guess I was more affected than I wanted to show. Somehow a hand found mine on the sofa, and I remarked it was Simone’s.

‘Forget the titles. For a Jacquet we are Charles and Monique!’ Count Charles continued. ‘We lost sight and touch of the Jacquets, but your family name remained in our minds and hearts. We are a large family, linked by more than blood. We count as family also our friends, the men and women that are intimately connected to our history. We have family in the United Kingdom, among whom the Ashes and the Clarksons, owners of large warehouses and distribution chains. We are related to the Strattens and the von Schillersberg in Germany, who own a vast imperium of mechanical industry factories in Stuttgart, Munich and Frankfurt. We are related to the Vresele family in Flanders. Together, we formed a conglomeration of diversified companies. We control high-technology factories in Germany, large distribution warehouses and hospitals in the United Kingdom, textile factories in Flanders and China, and we own participations in the diamond industry of Antwerp through the Sinnagel family. We would like to bring your construction firm into that consortium, without you giving up control of it, but helping you to expand it internationally. We can offer you entry to the Arabian Emirates. That may seem far-fetched, but it is more feasible than you can imagine.’

My mouth fell open. I also did not know the Ash family owned vast wealth in the United Kingdom. Was I after a rich heiress? I only knew Simone Ash as a medical doctor.

‘Yet, all that is not the main reason why I wanted to talk to you,’ Charles de Trioteignes said.

‘How much do you know of Aeolfast?’

‘I know very little of it,’ I admitted, taken on the wrong leg, for Charles jumped from one subject to an entirely different one. ‘It is a company that plans to install wind turbine towers in Robois.’

‘Do you intend to let them proceed with that project?’

‘No,’ I stated, very determined. ‘I shall fight that project as long as I can. The Town Cabinet can appeal to the State Council if necessary. Higher than that we cannot go.’

‘I don’t like the project,’ Count Charles observed in distaste, ‘and I heard, yes, that you don’t like it either. The towers shall pollute our landscapes, also the views Monique and I have from out of our windows, though the towers will be at some distance from Trioteignes. None of our farmers like the project. Do you know who leads Aeolfast?’

‘We met its Managing Directors during a presentation in the City Hall,’ I replied.

‘Yes. But you don’t seem to know who owns Aeolfast.’

‘I don’t, not really.’

‘Aeolfast and a series of other companies have been founded with the funds of a man called Count Jean-Gauthier de Buisseyre Thomassin d’Entray,’ Charles told solemnly. ‘Much

enmity lies between the Trioteignes and the Buisseyres. We clashed several times in the past. We loathe Buisseyre. He is a devious, ruthless, unscrupulous business dealer. We call him by the other names of thief and even murderer. You may be astounded at such words that speak even of hatred between us, but, believe me, I would rather hold Buisseyre with red-hot pangs at a considerable distance from me and my family than ever consider dealing with him.'

We waited. I looked at Simone. She still did not react.

'Buisseyre has currently an issue with his enterprises,' Count Charles resumed. 'His businesses are not doing well. He has grown too fast. He is in dire need of cash money. He has only one company that brings him reasonable profits, the company Recycfast of Robois. His other initiatives bring him only losses, and he wants to grow much faster. He needs even more cash for that. Buisseyre is not much of a true businessman. He is good at creating intrigues and schemes, not at managing. He got rich mainly from being the Chief Executive Officer of Travtelio, but that episode of his life also ended in disaster. He founded Aeolfast, and the Aeolfast project in Robois is in fact his very first in the business of wind turbines. Have you any idea what the return on investment of a wind turbine project represents?'

'That must amount to around ten per cent,' I responded.

'It is rather fifteen per cent,' Charles corrected, 'but that is only if the project is brought to full conclusion, including the dismantling costs at the end. Originally, the project foresaw in German-built wind turbines, but Buisseyre cancelled that contract and now he intends to install cheaper Chinese turbines. The German motors are tried-out machines, the Chinese ones are still experimental, but he gains the goodwill of the Chinese industry. We expect those turbines to break down earlier than the German ones and to need more repairs, but that is not a worry for Buisseyre if he can sell his project rapidly. What Buisseyre actually aims to do is to build the towers, or having them built, and then sell the project immediately to Qatari or Chinese investment funds. He will show huge profits to those funds, and if he can pull a sale off, his profit on a one to two year basis may be as high as thirty per cent. That percentage is instant money in his pockets, after having paid off his loans and all other expenses. Buisseyre is going to win around fifteen million Euro in less than two years. If he is lucky.'

I believe my mouth fell open a second time. I needed a drink from my Cognac.

'If Buisseyre succeeds in Robois, he can gain the same amount of money with much less resistance from projects in the adjacent countryside towns,' Charles explained on, 'so you must understand what is at stake here. At stake is either the construction of a new imperium, or bankruptcy, for Buisseyre, and that all within one to two years. Buisseyre is quite capable and quite willing to walk over dead bodies to realise his wind turbine projects. You see, he is not unlike the mythical god Aeolus who unleashes the winds. What ravages the winds cause when they become storms, how much violence and hatred Aeolus throws over the heads of people, he does not want to know. He merely sets things in motion, like Aeolus.'

Charles de Trioteignes held silence for a while, then he continued, 'we, the Trioteignes, and our associated families, we want to stop Aeolus if it is not already too late. Therefore we want to help you, because you stand like a huge rock in his path.'

'What do you mean by helping me?' I asked. 'Why should I need help?'

'Aeolus, Buisseyre, unleashes violence and hatred and pain and distress. He does that everywhere he appears. He is a formidable schemer. He uses natural charm and solemn dignity around him. He has nurtured excellent relations with the current leaders of the United Democratic Party. The Échevin of Robois and National Undersecretary of that political party, Yves Govin, is part of that influence. We are taking action in Brussels, through some of our friends who are Members of Parliament of that same party to stop the influence of Buisseyre

and of his cronies over the Democrats. You will say we use the same means as Buisseyre, and I regret you are right, but we keep to our objectives of the common good, whereas Buisseyre seeks only his own enrichment. Changing the winds of fortune will take time, however. You are a Jacquet and we believe you are part of our larger family, as the Ashes are. We believe you are honest and dedicated to the good, not to the bad. Simone is directly related to us, more closely than you are, but like I said, the Jacquet family is related in mind and feelings to the Trioteignes. So we appeal to you. We care for our own. You oppose the Aeolfast project. So do we. You oppose Govin and the current leaders of the UD Party in Brussels and Robois. So do we. You are honest in business. So are we, and that is our pride. You hate dishonesty and violence in commercial dealings. So do we. That is why we want and need to help you.'

'How do you propose to do that,' I asked. 'Do you seek to control my actions, to tell me what I have to do?'

'No, no,' Charles refused. 'Nothing of that kind. We can and will act in Brussels, in the headquarters of the UD Party. We shall break the influence of Buisseyre there. That will weaken his influence on Govin in Robois. We may come too late, however, to realise that aim before the next communal elections. We can help you win those elections, for we want you to win, and we propose help in two ways.'

Count Charles stopped.

I said, 'I am still listening, Count!'

'We can help you financially if necessary, but I don't think that will be needed or allowed, for the law restricts the amounts that can be spent on publicity campaigns and you are sufficiently wealthy to invest those funds by yourself. We can help in other ways. We have many loyal friends among the farmers and villagers of Trioteignes. With them, we shall start a campaign against the incredible, slanderous rumours that have been launched against you. Also, in the costs of a publicity campaign for elections, the costs of manpower run high. Most candidates use benevolent help. We intend to furnish you that help.'

I sat flabbergasted in my chair.

'You might have some issue finding people to help you with your campaign. My daughter Laura is something of a political activist herself, and although I myself state it, a genius in management and organisation. She has inherited that from her mother,' Charles smiled. 'She has assembled a team of fifteen young people from Trioteignes and the Peasant villages. Consider them as your campaign team. They can design your election tracts, for they have graphists among them, and computer specialists. They can distribute your flyers. They can put your panels on the lands owed by friends of the Trioteignes, throughout Robois. You pay for the posters, we care for the rest. We can even print your tracts and distribute them in every letter box of Robois at no cost.'

I must have looked stupid when Count Charles utterly baffled me, for the issue of a campaign team had crossed my mind more than once these last days. For the previous elections I had received the group team of IC. This time, I was practically on my own, and alone. The issue was now solved in one stroke!

'There is only one additional problem,' Charles said. 'The campaign team of Laura is also the campaign team of Simone, here. Laura considers it as a major joke to work for two different political parties at the same time, but you will have to share her time and resources together.'

I looked even more astonished at Simone Ash, and I saw her throw her head in her neck and then let go a pearly laughter when she saw my eyes.

'Oh darling, you should see your eyes, now!' she cried, and she brought her arms around my shoulders and kissed me on the mouth.

That astonished Charles de Trioteignes so much he spilled his Cognac, and for that, Monique Ghysen first scolded him and then she laughed even harder than Simone.

We stayed until late in the night plotting as old conspirators. I explained to Charles and Simone also the suspicions of Joseph Bikri. Charles found Bikri's intuition totally justified. 'You must present that Superintendent Bikri to us,' Monique proposed. 'Charles is going to like him very much!'

After we had said goodbye, Simone drove me back. In the car she told me she had dreaded the meeting with Charles. It was important for her, she said, knowing the Trioteignes family approved of me. She was so glad Charles had liked me at first sight. Charles had a sixth sense for people. When she lived in London, she was losing herself there, wallowing in disgrace and wanton luxury. Charles had come. He had whipped her out of her senseless mode of living. He had forced her to follow him, forced her with hard words that cut like knives. Charles had been her brother, her father. It was important for her to know Charles approved of her current choice.

I remained silent while she talked. It was good for her to talk and to tell me. Simone drove to her house, but she did not pass it to drive on to my lodge. She said nothing, but stopped her car at her door. She still did not say a word when she urged me to get out. We kissed passionately, but oh so tenderly, from the moment I had turned around her car until we arrived at her bedroom. I stayed the rest of the night at her place. After that, all was right between us, or so I thought.

The Balin Murder. Joseph Bikri

The month of May and the first weeks of June are not written in my book as the happiest of my life. May was characterised by many aggressions against people of Robois, and that distressed me very much because I felt I had failed in my duty of protecting my town. The aggressions stopped abruptly at the beginning of June, which was a good thing, but it also blew away my hope of ever finding the criminals. I cursed myself for days on end for not having found the gang that had done its cruel work.

I posted patrols at the north and south exits to the highway, but my men reported nothing special in that period. It was true I could not place my men exactly at the exits, for these were on the territory of other towns, but near enough to catch any suspect car. My men controlled many cars. No team could report anything special. I thought on about the cases, and my attention was once more drawn to the men I had seen at the end of the Georgis Rape. In more than one aspect they satisfied the profiles I had formed of a group of men who might have perpetrated the crimes.

The men I had seen then lived at Recycfast, a company related to Aeolfast. They were men that had been hired recently, that had not resided since very long in Robois, and they had come from Brussels and beyond. They were strangers to Robois. Maybe my reaction of assigning the misdeeds to people who did not live since long at Robois was pure chauvinism, but my intuition was stronger than ever on that point. Their leader seemed to be a man high up in the hierarchy of Aeolfast, and a security specialist, a man who knew how operations could be planned professionally. Why was such a man residing in a simple, plain village, far from Brussels?

I had more or less given up on the idea of various teams of hoodlums being sent to Robois. That kind of operation seemed too complex and too expensive. The leader of the gang would have to know his soldiers well to assign them to tasks each man was best suited for, on difficult terrain of countryside roads and paths. The hoodlums seemed to know the environs too well, as if they had had all the time to reconnoitre our villages and sites. They disappeared rapidly on the right tracks, after each deed. They were also professionals indeed, for they wore ski-masks and gloves, which amounted to elementary protection very effective for the most basic of identifications were thereby made impossible. They used false names among them, something like that had been mentioned to me, names such as Mickey, Donald, Pluto. The same names had been used at various sites, strengthening my impression the same gang had been at work. The men seemed to have rehearsed those names, for they reacted quickly to them and never once used other names.

I positioned a patrol car during several nights near Recycfast, but nothing even widely suspicious had been noted. I suspected them to drive in several cars, maybe in another car every attack. We did not spot one, same car out of the ordinary, circulating in Robois. I began to drive more intensively in the industrial zone around Recycfast, but my proverbial luck and intuition ran dry on me in that period. I too could not detect the same four-by-four wheel-drive standing at the hangars of Recycfast. If the gang of Aeolfast hid inside the hangars, they changed vehicles every odd week. Maybe they spied on me from their hideout, but I saw no special movement at the windows.

Was I really qualified for my assignment, for my job at Robois? Why could I not solve the enigma? I ran around with gloomy eyes and an absent head. I was irritated, and what was worse was that my boys and girls at the police station paid me with the same. This was our town and somebody was turning us into impotent, ridiculous children. We wanted to see these men hanging from the highest tree of Robois and we wanted to hit, but we didn't know where to hit.

Also my private life was as barren as my professional one.

Something was definitely happening between Robert Jacquet and Simone Ash. I had seen it in their awkward glances, in their grins, and in the mellow looks they gave each other, the occasional furtive touching of hands and the electric reaction when that happened. I tried to spend a few evenings with Robert, but he was not in a couple of times and I did not dare impose on Samia. The other times when Robert was alone, he remained pensive, but happy. For a man burdened with rumours and in threat of losing his job of Bourgmestre, he seemed very happy and light-hearted indeed. He whistled a lot, smoked no cigarettes anymore as if he were changing his life for the better. Even Rose looked interrogatingly at me, her nose in the air, meaning something was up, but I could only chuckle. Robert was always the loner, the introvert type of guy where his feelings and private matters were concerned.

I suppose that if someone watched or spied at Samia and me, he or she might have remarked the same spark as lingered between Robert and Simone. How might I approach Samia? In my family, traditions had been respected for the most important events of life such as births, death and marriages. I would not have liked my family to have chosen a bride for me, but I began to believe the idea of an official go-between of some sorts had its merit. I was a coward, really, in the matters of the heart. I simply didn't know how to get closer to Samia beyond a handshake.

Help came from an unexpected corner. One evening, when I had dared remaining an hour at Robert's lodge, having supper with him, Samia and Rose in their kitchen, I had to leave and wish them goodbye. I said so, but I still had a mouthful of bread on my plate.

Rose asked suddenly, while I was finishing, 'Joseph, do you think Samia is beautiful?'

Robert stopped chewing at his last sandwich for a moment.

'Sure, Samia is a very beautiful woman,' I answered, avoiding looking directly at her.

'You never give Samia a goodbye kiss,' Rose continued. 'Do men like you not give a kiss to a girl they like?'

'Of course they do, I give a kiss to you,' I replied, but I didn't find a way out of the dilemma of what would be Rose's next question.

'When you like people, you can also just shake hands,' Robert intervened luckily. 'That is what I do!'

I devoured the rest of my bread in a second and stood up from my chair, saying I had to get back to the police station. I was aware of Rose and Samia staring at me. I shook hands with Robert, kissed Rose on the cheek, and pushed my hand forward to Samia.

'You can kiss Samia too, you know, Joseph,' came the high-pitched and insistent voice of Rose.

Samia answered for me, 'of course we can, Rose,' and she inclined her head to me.

I bent forward to brush Samia lightly on the cheek, but Samia brought her lips in the way of mine, and we kissed on the mouth. I must have reddened in the face as much as an overripe tomato. I was surprised and embarrassed, but Samia did not redden at all and only grinned, looking at me with her very large, dark eyes that shone as naughty as a child of six that had caught a dumb boy.

Her eyes blinked, 'got you, my little Superintendent!'

From out of a corner of my eyes I saw how Robert was as stunned as I. He forgot to chew, then he grinned too, and he continued to grin when I mumbled something incomprehensible. I stumbled over my chair and left the kitchen in a hurry.

I surmised girls do not kiss on mouths by accident. Samia had given me a sign she wanted me. My next move should probably be to invite her at supper one evening, or to ask her out for a walk somewhere. Would take her out to the movies or to the theatre be a good idea? No, that was a trick for youngsters, not for a Superintendent and a future lawyer! Also, there would be far too many people around, assuming the worse for their police. Why, our Superintendent frolics around with immigrant girls, while we are being battered by criminals! Invite Samia out to supper in a discreet environment would be the best thing to do. I pondered over this while I walked through Robert's corridor and escaped from the house.

My gloom and the dire situation at Robois worsened if possible. While I was eating my breakfast on a fine morning of June and pondering over Samia Bennani, without daring to reach a conclusion as to what I should do about her, my mobile phone rang. Only few people knew my number, one among them my assistant, officer Dominique Bussy.

Dominique called me. She said a murder had been committed near the Horse Bayard hotel. A woman had been found dead, stabbed. I told Dominique I would be right there. Dominique explained, before I could hang up, someone had called the emergency number of the police. Dominique was already at the site. Other officers converged to the scene, Dominique had called her colleagues.

I drove to Bazaine, where the hotel was situated, near the N11. The hotel lay in a small park. It was a low, modern-style building that looked more like an American motel than a Western-European classic hotel. When I arrived and skidded at speed into the parking lot, I saw several policemen and Dominique standing not outside the hotel, but near a row of houses on the

other side. They were unrolling white-and-blue tape to block the street at that point. I went up to them, asking what had happened.

Dominique Bussy left the pack, came up to me, saying, 'we have a murder case, Superintendent. A woman has been stabbed to death. Her name is Magda Balin. She lives in the first house, here. The house belongs to the hotel owner, and the woman pays the hotel boss to have his cleaning women also do the cleaning of her house. At nine o'clock this morning, one of the cleaning women entered the house and found Mrs Balin dead on her bed. She called the emergency number of the police. We have just arrived. We are blocking parts of the street.'

'Show her to me,' I asked.

'It is not a pretty sight, boss,' Dominique whispered. 'I had my bowels inside out a few moments ago.'

Dominique went nevertheless in with me.

The house was old. In the corridor, plaster and paint fell from the walls in blisters of humidity, but the rooms downstairs looked clean. From the corridor behind the door I could see a living-room and a small kitchen. The house was narrow, as many houses of a row were in Robois, but deep. Halfway the corridor began the stairs that led to the second storey.

Dominique went up the stairs, and brought me to a bedroom. Sprawled over the bed, naked, her belly down, lay a woman who seemed to be covered entirely in blood. The sheets around her were soaked in red. The bed was a simple, plywood warehouse-bought contraption of no elegance, undecorated, but probably very functional. The woman was stout, her buttocks large, her breasts compressed under her. She had been stabbed in the back.

When I forced myself to look closer, I detected and counted at least six stab wounds. Two knife wounds dribbled blood around her spine. She had two knife-wounds in her buttocks, which struck me as strange for these could hardly have caused death, two others in her calves, all quite symmetrical, and when I looked up I saw what had really probably killed her. Her throat was cut, quite deeply and expertly in a long, wide sweep. Her main carotid artery had been cut, and that done would have brought death in a few moments. Most of the blood around her, on the sheets and on her head-cushion, would have come from that one wound. I felt getting sick. I was not used at all to seeing blood-soaked corpses, not of men and not of women, and the mellow smell reached my nostrils and made the disgust grow in my mind. It was the gory, sinister, sordid scene of a callous act, perpetrated in squalid conditions.

I tried to keep strong and unmoved, but Dominique must have seen me go pale, so she drew me out of the bedroom. She held my arm a few steps down the stairs again. We went out of the house for we needed both to catch our breath in a little fresh air.

I cursed a few times and kept standing there, at the door, with Dominique.

Dominique looked as pale as I. She said awkwardly, grinning, 'funny! I thought I was the only one to be impressed. I needed a lot of fresh air after having seen her the first time. What bastard did such a thing? I cannot even look at her and not feel revulsion. The guy that killed her could not only stab down several times, he must have looked at the blood actually spurting out.'

I have always been convinced that women are much stronger in these things than men, but Dominique was adding a little too much to it. I brought up my hand, urging Dominique to say not much more, bent double a while.

Then I said to her, my dizziness gone, 'all right! All right! I'm fine! We cannot handle murders on our own. We need people from a forensic lab in here. Dominique, would you call the *Service d'Enquête et de Recherche*, the SER of Namur, the Service of Criminal

Investigations of the zone, and ask them to come over here? Can you phone them, please, Dominique? I must call the Procureur du Roi, the Royal Prosecutor, and tell him about the murder. He'll confirm to have the SER handle the case. Please explain to the SER what kind of a murder we have here. Ask them to bring their fingerprint kits with them, but they'll probably know that too. They'll want to take ADN samples too. Tell them to not shit on us. We know it's a murder!'

'I think they'll know what to do, boss. I'll phone them immediately. I haven't phoned an ambulance yet. Should I do that too?'

'Yes, but tell them they have to transport a dead woman to the morgue of Namur for an autopsy. Don't let them take the corpse until after the SER has arrived!'

I knew who the murdered woman was. She was a prostitute called Magda Balin, a loner. She worked without a pimp, without extortion, but also without protection. She worked on her own. I guessed she received her clients at home, but I had seen her often late in the evening walking down the main streets of Robois, a mobile phone in her hand. She was not one to have a seat in one of the bars along the N11. She probably had a number of loyal clients who came to her for sexual relief since many years. She was an ageing prostitute, nearing fifty, with a body growing to opulence despite her trade, a nice, round face, usually a blond wig on her head. I had seen her often in the same two or three streets of Robois when I walked them too because I could not catch sleep and needed a fresh think in the evening air. She knew me, so she would never accost me. She merely smiled at me and gave me a low, 'good evening, Superintendent!', to which I had nodded back each time with a grin. She had become in an odd way as normal and familiar to me as the trees near the park.

Magda Balin had worked in Robois for more than fifteen years. I knew that because I had asked one of our elder officers about her. There had been no justified reason why I or my predecessors would have harassed her. I had wondered each time I saw her why she kept at her occupation at that ripe age, whereas she had an intelligent face, still a good figure, and could easily have gotten a job as a cashier or something like that in our town. Maybe she was too well known by too many men in Robois. Maybe she was ashamed of being constantly recognised in her new job.

A prostitute was murdered. Savagery, death and aggression lurked always in the shadow of Magda Balin's occupation, of course. She must have invited a lot of strange, sick men to her bedroom. For so long, she had been able to control the passions and surges of violence in men. One of her customers had not reacted to her fragile female and sensuous authority. She had had bad luck, in the end.

My work was largely finished at the murder site. My officers knew what to do. We had rehearsed this before. Soon, the SER guys of Namur would arrive, and these people would start their investigation. We had not much more to do than block off the road, keep the most curious people of Robois at a distance.

Nevertheless, I had to return to the house! This was my town! Nobody killed in this town. I went back into the house. Dominique followed me with her eyes, but I waved her out. I went back in alone.

I should not disturb anything and I should not touch anything. I took a pair of transparent, plastic gloves out of my pocket, and went on. I wanted to have a look around, watch sharply out for clues.

I began in the living-room. A few modern chairs stood against the wall. I saw a sofa of nice, thick leather before a television set, two small tables in between, a large black cupboard against the other wall.

Magda Balin seemed to have liked small porcelain statues, for a collection of those stood in another cupboard with large, glass doors I had not seen at first, at the wall, behind the entry to the living-room. I looked at the statues with interest. I would have sworn some of the statuettes were real Meissen porcelain, and some looked ancient. The man who had killed Magda Balin had either been no thief, or he had known nothing about the value of porcelain. The door that led to the kitchen stood open. In fact, I remembered, every door in the house stood open! Balin was a woman who liked air.

Everything was arranged neatly in the kitchen. No dirty dishes lay in the sink and the glasses, mugs and cutlery, stood stacked in the appropriate places. Everything consumable was placed in cupboards or in the refrigerator, a large American-style device that also held a small freezer compartment and a machine for making ice. I opened the fridge, found only milk and water bottles in there, no alcohol. There had been no fight in the kitchen. The table was clean, a nice, unstained flower-pattern cloth lay on it. Not one knife found itself in a place it should not be. Magda Balin had one of those large, wooden blocks with meat knives in it, but not one knife was missing from the block. I saw a small garden behind the house. The door leading to that garden had not been forced, and it was also unlocked, as I found out rapidly when I tried the clench. Balin had definitely received a client, no burglar.

I went back up the stairs, I admit with leaden feet. I detected no bloodstains on the walls leading upstairs, and also not on the stairs themselves. Despite the atrocity of the act, the murderer or murderers had meticulously avoided the blood from Magda's body. I stepped into the bedroom. Almost no blood had trickled on the ground, only a very little on the other side of the bed. I looked around, but found no knife or other object capable of procuring stab wounds. The murderer had used his own knife, or taken the murder weapon with him. That was smart, this murderer had kept his wits throughout the act. The murder had not happened in the spur of a moment of passion. He or she must have waited until Magda had undressed, laid herself on the bed buttocks up, turned her back to him or her, and then the assassin had stabbed, plunged a knife down on her almost vertically. Had he slit her throat first or last? The wounds on her back looked deep, but not wide. The knife had been a thin one, not much more than one or a centimetre and a half broad. The murderer had slit the throat, but otherwise he had not slashed, not cut, but simply stabbed, powerfully, straight from above the body. My guess was he had first cut her throat and only then stabbed her, for otherwise she would have surged. None of the stabs could have brought her death immediately. She might have been drugged, but I saw no glass with water or any other liquid beside her bed. The autopsy would have to determine whether she had been drugged, and just how deep the stabs had gone. Had one reached her heart or her lungs?

I opened the cupboard in the room. I found not additional traces of blood, and also not on the two chairs in the room. Magda's clothes hung over one of those chairs. I saw not one piece of textile that might have belonged to a man. Her make-up bottles and pots stood undisturbed in front of her mirror on a dressing-table. None of the drawers hung open. If they had been opened, the murderer had taken care to close them again. I saw her purse lay there too, plainly in sight, unopened. I saw no evidence of a fight. I crouched and looked under the bed, but found nothing else but dust. I had hoped to find one or other object belonging to the murderer, but such miracles only happened in novels.

I went on to the adjoining bathroom and found there also a neatly arranged space, well-cleaned, things in order. I opened the white closet in which one keeps medicines and toothpaste and perfumes, but I found nothing more suspicious than a box of aspirins.

I went to the adjacent room. That was a second bedroom, but Balin had arranged it as a kind of office, or as a reading room. One had a nice view at the garden from out of the window, and a chair stood close to the window. One long wall was covered entirely by racks on which stood rows of books. Balin had lots of books, also expensive hardbacks, most of them of love stories. A few newspapers laid on a table. She owned a personal computer with a modem and an Internet connection. Balin was not out of touch with the world. I didn't dare to start up her computer. That should be the work of the SER, but she might maybe have an address book of her clients in there. That would be very interesting information. I regretted that such information was for the SER to find. Again, nothing seemed disturbed. I had found no drugs in obvious places in Balin's bedroom or bathroom, but drugs might still lay somewhere well-hidden in her cupboards. If there were drugs in here, that would be the delight of the SER guys to find.

I had seen what I wanted. I had finished. I went back down the stairs, to the front door, and met there the first investigators of the SER.

The SER officers never wore a uniform. I showed them in, warned them for the sight, and told them to go upstairs. They were three, and they had also brought kits for taking fingerprints with them.

'A violent murder?' asked the Superintendent who went up first.

'Not a beautiful sight,' I remarked, 'but nothing seems to have been disturbed. Maybe she was drugged. You'll see.'

I left the men to their job and went out. The ambulance had arrived and two men in white overalls were waiting until the corpse could be released.

I asked sideways to Dominique, 'didn't you say it was a cleaning woman who phoned the police?'

'Yes,' Dominique replied, and then she said softly so that the SER could not hear, 'I checked on her. She is at the hotel at this very moment.'

I grinned.

'Come with me,' I whispered.

We went both to the Hotel Horse Bayard. Dominique was proud when she could thus walk with me. It gave her a standing among our officers. She was worth that additional dignity. I never recognised in public, in the police station, she was smarter than the rest of the bunch, but she was.

The man who stood behind the counter of the entry hall was the hotel owner. He was a short, slim man with a long face and clearly defined features. He had thick wrinkles around his eyes, though, and his skin looked to me like old parchment. He wore the vestiges of strain on his face.

He recognised me and shouted immediately, 'ah, Superintendent Bikri, I'm so glad to see you! We are in safe hands. What an awful mess! You will want to talk to Annette, I presume?'

The man was very nervous, his hands trembled and I saw little drops of perspiration on his forehead. I have that effect on certain people.

'Yes, to Annette, if Annette is the housemaid who phoned the police after she found the corpse,' I replied. 'I also want to talk briefly to you, of course. How much do you know about Magda Balin?'

'Magda was a prostitute, Superintendent, but one of the old kind,' said the man. 'She lived in that house of mine since many, many years. I owe the house, but she paid rent always on time. I cannot remember once in the last ten years she was overdue with her rent! She was a nice

person, Superintendent. She never did any harm to anybody. She had mostly regular clients of old. I told her to stop being a prostitute. I said she had stacked away enough money by now. I even once offered her a job as waitress in our restaurant, but she refused. I cannot imagine somebody wanting to harm her.'

'Have you seen anything special yesterday evening, heard any strange sounds?'

'Nothing, Superintendent, nothing at all, but her house is on the other side of the street.'

'Have you seen a car driving up to her house?'

'No I haven't, but her customers usually park next to my hotel, in the parking behind. From there, the men walk to her house. If somebody spots their car, you see, they can always tell they had a drink in the Horse Bayard.'

'Have you by chance remarked any unusual cars in your parking lot yesterday?'

'I did see a heavy dark blue BMW yesterday evening, and those cars are rather uncommon among my guests. This one sparkled like a very new one, but I saw nothing else out of the ordinary. I'm sorry now, but I took no note of the licence plate.'

'Have you seen anyone entering the house with Magda Balin yesterday?'

'No I haven't, Superintendent, but then, as I said, I also do not watch her house every second! I look the other way, and I watch my lobby, and I watch my personnel!'

'So there is nothing special you can tell me about Mrs Balin and also not about her customers? You have noticed nothing unusual, yesterday?'

'No, nothing special. I did see the doctor visit her in the afternoon, though.'

'What doctor?'

'Her doctor! Her doctor came to see Mrs Balin regularly, Superintendent. I think that is required by the law. Her doctor is the Échevin of Robois, Miss Ash.'

'Miss Ash follows up on Mrs Balin?'

'Yes, she does. She arrived yesterday at about four o'clock in the afternoon, her usual hour. She always comes around that time. The two have lunch sometimes in my restaurant, but they seldom take more than one dish.'

'Did they eat in your restaurant yesterday too?'

'No, Superintendent, they didn't. I also did not see Miss Ash come out of the house, but I saw her car was not in the parking lot anymore around six o'clock. At what time she drove off, I have no idea.'

'How do you know Miss Ash drove on?'

'I know her car pretty well. I went out of my hotel around that time. Miss Ash always parks at approximately the same spot, a spot where cars cannot park, but I allow her to stop there. After all, she is a doctor, isn't she? Her car wasn't there anymore when I went out.'

'Fine! We may have to ask you some more questions afterwards, and people from the Criminal investigation Service of Namur, the SER, may call you to their offices for an interrogation. If you remember anything out of the ordinary, please call me. Could I talk to Annette, now?'

'I'll call her. Would you please wait here, in the lobby? Can I bring you a drink?'

'Yes please, I'll have a tea, please. Officer Bussy, what would you like to drink?'

'A tea would be fine, thank you.'

Dominique and I went to sit in two huge chairs in a corner of the lobby. We saw the hotel owner take his phone and we heard him asking for Annette. A little later, the hotel owner disappeared from his lobby and a few moments later he stood beside us with a tray and two cups of porcelain and a pot of tea. I took a sip, found the tea quite refreshing, a jasmine scented Chinese blend, no doubt, and thanked the owner. Dominique drank, then stood up and had a look at the garden. She looked through the window of the lobby in the direction of the house.

‘The SER seems to be leaving,’ she told me.
‘Not everybody will,’ I said. ‘They will start interrogating the neighbours.’
‘Shouldn’t we do that too?’ Dominique asked.
‘No,’ I said. ‘I doubt that will provide us with interesting information.’
‘Anyway,’ I grinned, ‘we shall have the SER reports within a few days won’t we?’
‘Who would refuse you, Superintendent?’ Dominique replied meekly.

When we had drank half a cup of tea, a small, corpulent woman of close to sixty years of age, dressed in some sort of uniform consisting of a blue shirt and a white blouse, as well as an oversized apron on her, came out of the lift and stepped like an old penguin into the lobby. The hotel owner pointed to me.

The woman came closer but kept standing.

She asked, ‘did you ask for me, officer?’

‘If you are Annette, I did,’ I replied. ‘Please sit down. We have a few questions to ask you, nothing that should worry you, though. I am Superintendent Joseph Bikri and this officer Dominique Bussy, my assistant.’

‘Yes I am Annette Bivois, and I know you too. You want to know what happened with Mrs Balin, I suppose. Well, I came as usual to Magda’s house to clean up at nine in the morning. I do that twice in the week, always on Tuesday and Friday. Mrs Balin pays me with the rent, always a month in advance, and I receive my money from Monsieur François, the hotel owner.’

That made of the cleaning maybe an illegal act, but I let that pass. How many cleaning women worked in black in Robois? Hundreds, I would presume.

‘I rang at the door,’ Annette continued, ‘but Magda did not come. I tried the door knob, and her door was open, Superintendent, which was quite unusual. I supposed she had done that this time to let me in. I shouted her name, but Magda didn’t answer. She was not downstairs, not in the kitchen, so I shouted again and went upstairs. I did so because I always begin to clean upstairs, and that is also where she keeps the vacuum cleaner, in her office. When I arrived at the top of the stairs I had a look in her bedroom, the door stood open. And then I saw Magda was still in her bed. I went closer and I saw all that blood, Superintendent! I screamed and screamed, and I can hear my screams still now! It was horrible! The poor woman! I ran downstairs and then I rang the emergency number. Magda always kept that number on a piece of paper next to her telephone, you see!’

Annette began to cry and at first dried her eyes with a corner of her apron, then she found a handkerchief and dabbed that at her eyes.

Dominique did not say a thing, drank her tea, and I waited a while.

‘You found her lying on the bed in her blood.’

‘Yes, the poor, poor woman,’ Annette repeated. ‘She was a really nice woman, Magda! She would never say a wrong word to me. She never complained. We had a coffee sometimes, you know. Prostitutes are human beings too, aren’t they? She did not deserve to die like that!’

‘Mrs Annette, have you noticed anything unusual yesterday or the previous days? Have you seen only her in the house?’

‘I saw nothing unusual, Superintendent. Except maybe one thing. The lights were on in her room and in the bathroom. Magda never keeps the lights on in the morning. She looks carefully after her money, she is not a spender.’

‘Is it possible those lights had been burning the entire night?’

‘Oh yes, that is possible, if Annette has been murdered yesterday evening. Her room and the bathroom have windows only on the garden. One cannot see the windows of her bedroom from the street. Her office has a window on the street, but the lights were not on in that room.’

‘So you noticed nothing strange yesterday?’ I insisted.

‘I do not come here on Mondays, Superintendent, and I work in the hotel too. I only go clean Magda’s rooms two half days a week. Otherwise I do not especially keep an eye on Magda’s house.’

‘Have you noticed anything unusual when you arrived here in the morning?’

‘No, really nothing, except that her door was not closed and that the lights were on upstairs.’

‘Well then, thank you, Mrs Bivois. Can you please give your address to the officer here, and explain how we can reach you if we have further questions?’

‘Of course, Superintendent! I want to say how awful I find what happened to Magda.

Whoever could do such a thing? She was a prostitute, but she was a gentle soul, and not a bitter woman at all. She had money of course, but whoever entered her house to steal from her would have to leave with empty hands! That suits him well!’

‘What do you mean, Mrs Bivois?’

‘Magda had money, of course, a good deal of money, Superintendent, and she saved, but she told me she kept no money in the house. Her money was on bank accounts, she said, and I did believe her! I also met her once when I had to go to the bank agency of Robois. She seemed to be a regular customer, there.’

‘Did she have a car?’

‘No, no, she didn’t! She did not travel a lot. She had a bicycle. She kept her bicycle in a shack in the garden. She walked a lot.’

‘Yes, I suppose she would,’ I remarked, and Dominique made eyes at me. ‘All right, thank you, Mrs Bivois. You have been very helpful.’

‘Anything I can do to catch that murderer, Superintendent!’

The woman said goodbye and went back to the lift. The hotel owner looked at us and so I simply nodded in guise of goodbye. Dominique Bussy and I left the hotel, to see one of the SER Inspectors come to the hotel. He came for the same business as we. We did not speak to each other, but I waved a goodbye.

The Warrior Gene. Joseph Bikri

It was afternoon when I drove home from the Balin murder site. I should have looked for a light dinner, but the sight of the blood on the bed had coloured my eyes red for the day and strung my stomach in a tight knot. I would not have been able to push something comestible in my mouth.

At home, I dragged myself upstairs and threw me on my bed. I tried to sleep for an hour or two. I needed to think, however. I could not catch sleep, of course, so after an hour I went back downstairs, sat at my table, drew a sheet of paper before me, and I began to write. The words came automatically. I wrote a title on the top of the page, in the middle, ‘the Balin murder’. Then I wrote the following.

Assumption A. Magda Balin knew her assassin. She was familiar with him as the man was a regular customer. She undressed and laid herself docilely on the bed, waiting to receive her

client. The man did not undress. He stabbed Magda several times, but first he slit her throat. Arguments against the assumption: this was a crime of passion, the vindictive act of an irascible man, yet very coldly executed, very much premeditated. The man wore gloves. He slit her throat expertly, then stabbed her almost ritually. He held her back after having cut her throat. That is very uncommon. There should have been some exchange of arguments, a dispute with shouts, and a fight. A cold-headed aggression as happened here is incompatible with the nature of the people of Robois. One might kill for money, for power or for passion, here. The two first reasons must be excluded. In a murder out of passion, the murderer would have left traces, and even surrendered himself to the police. The use of drugs is highly improbable. The murderer must have been a man, for the power of the stabs was high and the murder too coldly executed.

Assumption B. Magda Balin met this client for the first time, or he was not in any case a regular of her. The man had special desires or feigned something in that order. He asked Balin to undress, to lay on the bed, and then he killed her without any apparent motive but the pleasure of killing. The last means the man is very dangerous and may kill more. He may be a serial killer at work.

Arguments against this assumption: none. The assumption is very plausible, except for the fact that a pleasure-killer or a serial killer is at work in Robois. The man must have inspired confidence in Balin, so she may have known him at least some from before. He may have drugged Balin.

My two assumptions might not exactly be the right ones. The facts seemed to point to assumption B, but assumption A was not to be ruled out. Was there any connection with the previous assaults on farmers and caravan owners, with the Georgis Rape? No, I didn't think so. Still, Robois had entered a phase of violence, a phase of sinister violence, and I hated that as much as cold pudding. Why had this escalation of violence happened to Robois? Were all the odd, negative events that had happened in Robois these last months purely the effect of fate, of random coincidence? Had a dark veil of evil been hung over Robois? I rather believed God, Allah, ordained all matters on earth, but why God could call in such bad deeds on a peaceful town I could not comprehend. My mind was too small and too constricted for being able to imagine an answer to such a question. It was better for my sanity not to continue thinking in this line. I was not a theologian, even not a philosopher.

I decided to return to the hotel Horse Bayard to hear whether anything interesting had been heard from the SER inspectors. I also had to check on my officers posted around the Balin house. I drove slowly back to the Horse Bayard and parked my car. I saw the Balin house, where three of my officers still waited at the door and at the white-and-blue tapes that blocked the passage of that part of the street. I was quite satisfied to see my men doing their duty. They looked quite alert, not weary, and they were not surrounded by journalists and photographers. I guessed the murder of a prostitute was interesting news, but not world shattering enough to send every journalist of the national press to Robois. My men spotted me from the far and I saw them stiffen.

While I walked past the hotel, I looked along the walls on my right and I saw a man shovelling in a flower bed at the end of the longer façade of the building. I would normally not have noticed a gardener working there, but I suppose my senses had been sharpened by the light doze at home and by my notes. Something did make me notice the gardener, stop and look. The man was old and a little bent, but he had short-cut curly dark hair, the hair of a Maghreb man like myself. His skin was also darker than of the usual men of Robois.

I strolled up to him and felt the eyes of my officers on my back. They must have wondered about what I was up to now. The gardener wore a blue overall in which he floated, and the overall was soiled with grease and with green patches of crushed grass and plant leaves. He must have been way over sixty, yet he was still working here, tall and lean, skin over bones, and his short beard was stumpy and grey and patched with white. The man looked at me when I was still quite a few steps away from him, and he stood straight, leaning on his shovel.

When I had only two steps to go, the gardener said, 'Superintendent Bikri! Something told me you would come to me, sooner or later. How are you doing?'

'I'm fine, thank you,' I nodded politely. 'Do we know each other?'

'Well, I know you. Who wouldn't know Superintendent Bikri in Robois?'

'You seemed to expect me?'

'I work the lawn and the flower beds, here, outside the hotel. I have a pretty good sight on what goes on around here. I surmised somebody of the police would ask me what I had seen of the murder of Magda Balin.'

The man spoke slowly, like an old man. His accent in the French language was awful. I switched to Arabic.

'Tell me, what did you see?'

'You must be Moroccan,' the man continued. 'I can't say I quite like Moroccans. I'm Algerian from the western side of the country, but I'm also a naturalised Belgian. My papers are in my closet at the hotel.'

'That's fine for you,' I replied calmly. 'We may as yet read those. Has somebody already interrogated you this morning or afternoon about the murder?'

'Nope,' the gardener said.

We continued in Arabic.

'Why not?'

'For three reasons, I guess,' the man gave me. 'First, I don't think the Inspectors of Namur were smart enough to bother with the gardener. And second, I don't work in the morning. I have less than a half-time job at the hotel. I work here only in the afternoon. The Inspectors, I heard from the hotel owner, only stayed till noon. Third, they asked questions to neighbours, a few people only, and then they returned quite satisfied to their offices. I'm no neighbour of Magda Balin's!'

'Nobody interrogated you, but you have interesting things to tell to the police,' I suggested.

'Yep,' the man nodded, quite proud of his person.

'Well, go ahead!'

'Yesterday, I worked here from three o'clock in the afternoon till seven o'clock. I first saw the doctor woman arrive around four o'clock. She came back out of the Balin house less than an hour later. A little after that, Mrs Balin came out of her house for her evening walk.'

'Evening walk?'

'Well, you know her trade, Superintendent. She went out for her evening walk or some other unholy business,' the gardener grinned.

I merely coughed.

'Somewhat before seven, when I was cleaning my tools before returning home, a dark blue, heavy BMW brought Mrs Balin home. She got out and entered her house. The car parked behind the hotel and a man got out, went up to the Balin house and pushed against the door. The door was open.'

'Did you by any chance have a look at the licence plate of the car?'

‘I’m afraid I didn’t, Superintendent.’

‘How did the man look like?’

‘That too is the difficult part, Superintendent. I stood way at the other end of the hotel’s walls, you see. I stood there, behind that panel. I told you I was cleaning my tools there, because the shed where I keep them is just behind the corner. I only saw the man get out of the car and pass the street, but from where I stood I only saw the man’s back. He also made pretty sure he stepped with his back turned to me, and I found that a bit strange at the moment. I was pretty sure I had seen that man before, though, but I couldn’t remember when or where. I recognise men rapidly when I see them a few times, also from behind, but this one I did not recall. I have seen quite a few men enter that house of Mrs Balin. I know a few men you would be surprised of to hear their names, but that man I was rather sure he had never yet been to Mrs Balin’s house, at least not during my working hours here. I can’t remember where I might have seen his profile.’

‘How did he look like from behind?’

‘Tall, slim, a man with prominent muscles, long head, short-cut dark hair, very close cropped, broad chest or back. He had the profile of a boxer or of a construction worker, quite suntanned, a big man in bones and flesh, yet lean and fast. I believe he was much younger than Mrs Balin, maybe in his thirties I would guess. He wore a silver or steel ring in his ear, a black T-shirt, black pullover, black leather jacket, blue jeans.’

‘How did he walk?’

‘Like a man with much confidence in himself, a little arrogantly, like a cowboy in one of those American films. He walked slowly but steadily. He didn’t run and didn’t look around. He kept his hands in his pockets, swayed a little with his shoulders. He was a white man, not a black man, no Maghreb man. His skin was very white, but very darkened by the sun in places. His neck remained very suntanned. He wore boots.’

‘Did that man notice you?’

‘He might have seen me from out of the car when he arrived, but not afterwards. He turned his back to me when he went to the house. When he was in, he could not have seen me anymore, because by then I was in my shed, stacking my tools. Five minutes later I went out of the hotel on the other side. He couldn’t have watched on me from Mrs Balin’s windows. I gave no further attention.’

‘Thank you. You’ve been very helpful. We may call you in for more information, later. An officer will come by tomorrow to get your full name and address. That may be a female officer!’

‘That is fine, Superintendent. Remember, I’m only here in the afternoon!’

‘Yes, I understood so. Thank you. Please have my card. Would you remember something more, please feel free to call me.’

I handed over my card and said goodbye.

I went to the Balin house on the other side of the street. I spoke a while with my officers. It seemed not many journalists had come in the morning, and even less in the afternoon. The officers assured me they had provided no details about what had happened in the house. I considered entering the house again, but that would have meant breaking the seals of the SER. I decided against that. I sauntered along the house and tried to put as many details as possible into my mind. Then, I strolled along the hotel. Finally, I went over to a path that bent to the back of the houses of the street of the Balin house. I followed the path behind the little gardens. I looked at the Balin house from behind. I walked until I had a good idea of the surroundings of the murder site.

What had I learnt so far, I asked myself. If I were to believe literally the words of the gardener, I could drop my assumption A. The man was maybe not very new to Robois, but he was no regular customer of Mrs Balin. How had he known her?

Assumption B1 was that the killer had simply picked the woman from the streets that evening. The man might simply have been prowling around, looking for a victim. He was a compulsive killer, then.

Assumption B2 was that he knew Balin all right, at least some. How was that? The hotel, I thought. A man foreign to Robois might have stayed in a hotel, in this hotel, in the Horse Bayard. Then, the murderer might have seen or heard of Mrs Balin, known she was a loner. That might also have been why the gardener knew the man, a former guest at the hotel remarked only casually a few times.

At that point, I got quite excited. My hypothesis looked plausible. It was so simple, a guest at the hotel knew a prostitute lived on the other side of the street. He drove slowly through Robois in search of a victim, moved by the compulsive desire to kill. He saw a sole woman walking in the centre of Robois, and recognised the Balin prostitute. Maybe he was looking for her. He took her with him. The simplest assumptions are the best!

I was still sauntering behind the Balin house at that moment. I stopped abruptly and ran rapidly back, back to the Horse Bayard. My officers at the Balin door looked at me astonishingly. They must have wondered what had happened, seeing me run like a devil over the street and into the hotel in a hurry, as if I had the devil on my heels.

The hotel owner, Monsieur François, stood again behind his counter. I stopped running only in front of him, panting like a rhinoceros that had run a marathon. I panted so much the man made big eyes. I needed a handkerchief to wipe the sweat off my forehead.

I said, 'I need the names of all your guests of the last six months. I need your guest book.'

'I have no guest book, Superintendent!'

'You must have one,' I shouted desperately.

'Don't get excited, please, Superintendent,' assured François, holding his arms and hands forward as if to ward me off. 'I meant to say I had no paper book. Everything is in my computer, here. I can copy an extract from the guest file for you. What data would you like to have? I have nothing done wrong, Superintendent, my accounts are in order, I have committed no fraud!'

'I am sure you haven't,' I consoled the man, not without an undertone of sarcasm. 'I just want the names and the dates of the people that have stayed in your hotel. Yes, I also would like to know who paid for the room and who reserved the room, at what date. I want all the names, from out of your most complete file.'

'Fine, fine,' the owner recapitulated. 'I give you the reservation data, the name of the person who reserved when I have that. The name of the guest I always have, also the date of the beginning of his or her stay and until when he or she stayed, what the means of payments were, which are in cash or with a credit card, or invoice sent, and in the last cases I'll give you the credit card numbers and the names on the card, and the addresses of the invoices if invoices there have been. Would that be all?'

'Wonderful,' I cried. 'How long will that take you?'

'Why don't you have a nice drink in our bar, Superintendent? I'll put the file on a memory stick for you. I have a program to make extracts as you want, from our booking application, but I have never tried doing something like you asked. I have really no idea how long it may take. If I'm still not ready in half an hour, I'll come and tell you in the bar how much longer it will take.'

'I really would appreciate that,' I said.

‘Remember,’ I threatened, ‘I want all the names. Do not erase one name!’

‘You can trust me, Superintendent. You shall get the full file. I am pleased to be of assistance. This has something to do with the Balin murder, hasn’t it?’ Monsieur François asked. ‘You think the murderer may have been a client of my hotel!’

I grinned, ‘monsieur François, if you want to remain friends with me, then you had better not mention ever you gave me that information! I want the lot! And don’t jump to conclusions. Nevertheless, I’ll sign you a paper stating you handed me a memory stick with the data you proposed a second ago. That should cover you, whatever happened.’

‘That would certainly be nice, Superintendent. My, my, a murderer in my hotel! I don’t dare to think about it!’

Monsieur François hung half over the counter and whispered to me as if we were old conspirators.

The hotel owner smiled, ‘now that we are friends, Superintendent, may I ask you a favour?’

‘Don’t tell me you have been speeding on the N11,’ I said.

‘No, no, no, nothing of the sort. You see, Superintendent, I try to run a decent hotel. It’s not first class or four stars, but my hotel is OK. Lately, it happened that loud-mouthed gangs of youngsters shouted and brawled in my bar, late in the evening. I would appreciate it if once every while a police car patrolled around the hotel. If your officers could come in and say hello to me, in my bar or restaurant, drinks and something to eat would be on the house.’

‘Monsieur François,’ I exclaimed, genuinely surprised, ‘you are a quite remarkable man! Few bar owners would like to see a uniform come closer than a kilometre from their premises!’

‘I believe in law and order and in the protection of the innocent citizen, Superintendent,’

Monsieur François added with a now calm, noncommittal face, avoiding my gaze.

I said, ‘my officers will patrol more often here, I promise. They may come in, but I cannot have it you bribe them with food and drink. They have to pay for their own.’

‘I you say so, Superintendent!’ Monsieur François nodded meekly. By then, he was already hitting the keys on his personal computer.

I went to the bar. I ordered a large glass of white wine. I thought I had deserved that, even if it would have marked me as a very bad Muslim.

Not twenty minutes later, the hotel owner hurried into the bar, a smile of triumph on his face. He came to sit near me and slipped me a small memory stick under the table in my right hand. We felt like old conspirators.

‘You have it all in spreadsheet format,’ François whispered. ‘If something is not right, I’ll try again. It should work, though.’

‘I thank you so much,’ I replied.

Monsieur François closed his eyes for a moment, sniffed, and left. I drank my glass of wine, the memory stick already burning a hole in my pocket. I went to the barkeeper to pay for my drink, but the man told me the drink was on the house. I nevertheless threw a fiver on the counter.

From the Horse Bayard I drove immediately to the villa of Robert Jacquet. I felt suddenly so exhilarated that I owned the world and wanted to see Samia Bennani. I was going to invite her out, now or never! I rang at Robert’s door to announce my presence, but once more the door was open and I pushed it to enter.

Rose was still at her school, but Robert and Samia were in.

I heard a car skid on the gravel behind me, then come to a halt. I turned, and saw the car of Simone Ash arrive. I waited for her. We went in together.

‘Joseph! What good augurs bring you to our house?’ Robert laughed, shaking my hand.

‘No good augurs, I’m afraid,’ I replied, ‘but I’m glad to have found you at home, all of you together. I have to talk to you.’

‘Come in, come in! Let’s have supper together. Are you hungry? I can make you a pizza or a quiche. Which do you prefer?’

‘Quiche,’ I and Simone cried at the same time, and Robert smiled.

I suddenly remembered I had not eaten anything today but my breakfast. I was ravenous.

‘Quiche with leeks and lard *à la Picarde*,’ Robert gave. ‘Everybody in the kitchen!’

We followed him. Robert put on an apron that said ‘my dad is the best cook’. He began breaking eggs. He stirred in the bowl.

‘What was it you wanted to tell us?’

‘I’m sorry to announce you this, but we found a murder this morning in Robois,’ I started. ‘A prostitute was killed in her house. She died from knife wounds, nasty knife wounds. It was not a murder perpetrated by a burglar, rather a compulsive murder, a killing for pleasure. Her name was Magda Balin.’

Robert continued beating his eggs, but I watched Simone Ash, saw her grow pale and bring a hand at her mouth. She had kept standing next to Robert and the oven, now she came over and sat at the kitchen table. Samia Bennani came in the kitchen at that moment; she had heard my last sentence.

I asked softly to Simone, ‘you were her doctor, weren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Simone confirmed. ‘I even saw her yesterday afternoon!’

Her voice trembled.

Simone asked, ‘when was she killed?’

I replied calmly, ‘yesterday afternoon.’

Simone Ash grew paler yet. Robert stopped beating the eggs. Samia looked from the one to the other.

‘Poor, poor woman,’ Simone muttered.

‘Why did you go to Balin’s house yesterday afternoon?’ I asked.

‘Wait a minute! What are you doing, Joseph, is this an interrogation?’ Robert intervened.

I had to smile, for Robert was playing too obviously the protective male, the great grizzly bear of the woods.

I said, ‘calm, calm, Robert! I’m just asking a few friendly questions! Somebody saw Simone enter the Balin house yesterday. I’m not supposed to do anything in the murder case but close off the perimeter of the Balin house, but the same kind of questions will be asked to her by the Inspectors of the SER of Namur in a day or two.’

‘It’s all right, Robert,’ Simone began.

‘Yes, I’m Magda Balin’s doctor. About three years ago, Balin asked for an appointment with me as President of Adelbert Housing. She wanted to know whether she could appeal for a social apartment. I spoke to her. She could enter her candidature for a social apartment, but I explained to her why there would be little chance she would be granted an apartment within the next ten years. All our apartments go to people with children, not to women living alone, with incomes of their own. Most of our houses go to families with many children, and then mostly to immigrant, poor families. The immigration pressure in Belgium is extremely high, also in Robois. We cannot give apartments to whom we like. We are tied by regulations, by criteria from the Walloon Region that provides us with the subsidies. Afterwards, she asked me whether I could be her doctor. I answered I was not a house practice doctor, for I worked in a hospital. She gave me tens of reasons why she did not want the house practice doctors of Robois anymore, and one reason was all the doctors of Robois were male. She kept nagging at me, insisted I should accept, so I said yes in the end.’

‘Have you been her regular doctor since three years?’

‘Yes, I have been that. I saw her once every two weeks. She didn’t have a car, so I drove to her home. She was a prostitute. Medical examinations of prostitutes are adamant, and law. I checked her on venereal diseases and on HIV, of course.’

‘Of course! What kind of a woman was she, Magda Balin?’

Simone Ah wrung her hands, looked down, then said, ‘Magda Balin could have stopped being a prostitute years ago. She told me she had very loyal customers. She said to me once she lived like a woman with many lovers, not as a prostitute. She picked up less and less men from the street. She used condoms, or at least that was what she told me, and I tend to believe her, for she was really clean. I never found her positive on diseases. She was careful. She was a nice, polite woman. She did not have a protector, no pimp, she was a loner. I think she was also a very lonely woman who liked some of her customers as frequent friends. She told me she began prostitution at a very young age to pay for the cancer treatment of her father. Her family was very poor at that time. She lost her mother too, and then she did not know any other profession. She said she would only have been capable of cleaning offices, and she did not want to do that. I rather think she was an intelligent woman, but she had to leave school when she was fourteen. She read books! It is so awful! How was she killed? Did she suffer?’ ‘She suffered from knife wounds,’ I said. ‘Somebody also cut her throat.’

‘Oh my god,’ Simone and Samia exclaimed.

We did not say much more for a while.

‘Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary, lately,’ I asked Simone, ‘something that might have struck you as odd? Was she more nervous than usually? Did you have the impression something bothered her?’

‘No, no, nothing of the sort! She was entirely her normal self, yesterday, not particularly nervous. She was always quite happy to see me. We used to talk. Sometimes we had a light supper together at the hotel restaurant of the Horse Bayard, in front of her house.’

‘Yes,’ I confirmed, ‘I know of that.’

The remark made Simone Ash glance at me once more, but she did not ask how I had gotten that information. I believe she knew. What she told me was in line with my assumption B. The murder had come as a total surprise to Balin too.

Simone Ash asked, ‘when was she killed, exactly?’

‘I believe she was killed in the evening, a few hours after you left. A client must have picked her up. I cannot really talk much about the details of murder cases until they have been solved. Sorry!’

‘I understand. Will I be called in for interrogation and testimony?’

‘I don’t think so. A couple of policemen, probably in civilian clothes, may ring at your door and ask you the same questions. Please don’t mention by yourself you talked to me, but if the Inspectors ask that question too, do not feel the need to lie about it. We know each other, we talked casually.’

Robert continued with his eggs.

He said, ‘I can’t comprehend how one would be able to kill for pleasure.’

‘Hunters kill for pleasure,’ Simone remarked. ‘Aren’t you a hunter?’

Robert turned. ‘You saw the double-barrelled hunting shotgun hanging on the wall in my study! No, I don’t hunt. That gun belonged to my grandfather, and it is about the only thing I inherited from him, beside his money. No, I don’t hunt. I participate in a clay shooting once a

year to the benefit of the primary school of Boyu. I clean the gun every month, but I don't use it. I hold it in honour not to inflict unnecessary pain to animal or man.'

Simone remained silent.

'Hunters do kill for pleasure, at least, quite a few of them do,' I said. 'Not all people are like you, Robert! We always tend to believe everybody else in the world is quite like us, but that is not so. All kinds of people exist, also perverts, and killers! Persons who can kill in cold blood or hurt other people without wincing, without feelings of aversion, do exist.'

Simone Ash shuddered.

'There is something like a warrior gene,' she told.

'What is that?' Robert asked while he prepared his dough for the quiche in a large, round form.

He continued working with his back to us. Samia also looked questioningly at Simone.

'The warrior gene was discovered by investigators in the USA,' Simone continued.

'Researchers were looking for genetic similitudes among serial killers. To their amazement they found what they sought. All serial killers had a gene in common, a gene known to code for the enzyme monoamine oxidase variant A, or MAO-A. The gene was called after the enzyme it created. The gene is also linked to a less active prefrontal cortex. That area is key to the brain in inhibiting antisocial impulses. The gene seems to be expressed only in white European Americans when they were also abused as children, so psychological factors entered the process of leading to serial killers. The strange thing is that about thirty per cent of Europeans have that gene in their genome, not only serial killers, and homicide is very rare, much less than one person in every hundred committing violent acts overall during their lives. MAO-A or monoamine oxidase A is an enzyme that degrades amine neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin, which play a role in our pleasure-reward reactions of the brain. They are substances that make us feel good when we act socially, when we perform social acts such as the scout helping an old woman to cross the street. Serotonin makes us feel good when we feel sympathy for other people. It is a reward to the brain for doing social acts, acts that we consider good. A dysfunctional MAO-A gene has been correlate with increased aggression levels in humans. Low activity MAO-A seems to be more frequent in populations that had a history of warfare, so MAO-A has been dubbed as the warrior gene, or killer gene. Boys who carry the MAO-A gene are more likely to form gangs in urban environments and be among the most violent members, the first to use weapons.'

Robert stopped a while moving his hands, the quiche had to wait.

Simone continued.

'A strange, later finding I read, stated that the MAO-A gene was found in higher proportions among enterprise leaders, among board members and Chief Executive Officers of large enterprises. The men with MAO-A were found to be strongly ambitious, very charming in social gatherings. They seem to win general consensus in board meetings, but they prove also to be very bad performers in the end, so they switch jobs frequently from one company to the next. They can also be very violent in private, and they totally lack empathy in decisions concerning personnel, such as for lay-offs. People with dysfunctional MAO-A seem to have no empathy or less empathy for other people. Maybe that is exactly why they are hired in large enterprises and given important positions in corporations. They are the ruthless mercenaries acting without scruples, pitiless, without sympathy for other persons.'

'That sounds as if they were psychopaths,' Robert remarked.

'Psychopathy is a mental disorder,' Simone observed. 'It is a related notion. Psychopaths have shallow emotions, almost no fear for nothing, high stress tolerance. They are callous; they

lack empathy and feelings of guilt. They are impulsive, egocentric, rather irresponsible when pushed to actions, and they are generally display antisocial behaviour. Psychopaths are not necessarily violent and rarely psychotic. The interesting thing is, typically there are four times more people that truly have the profile of psychopaths in corporate management than in other functions. That is because they are extremely ambitious. You can recognise them because half of their colleagues admire them and half of them detest them. Such persons are manipulators, charming at will, and utterly ruthless because they have no notion of how other people feel.’ ‘That explains all,’ I concluded. ‘We have one psychopath leading a gang of other psychopaths in Robois. My friends, we have a den of vampires in our villages!’

Robert had stopped working entirely at his quiche. He turned back to his dough, however. ‘How do you know all that, Simone?’ he inquired. ‘You seem to have studied that subject pretty much.’

Simone didn’t answer straight away. She crossed her arms over her chest as if she had cold. Seeing her embarrassment, I stepped in, ‘I have read about that gene too. I had a course on serial killers. The results of these studies in medical, biological and psychological results are still very controversial.’

‘That they are,’ Simone acknowledged.

‘Do you actually mean to say that people with that warrior gene MAO-A may be predestined to become killers or aggressive managers who care not for inflicting pain and misery on other persons, without them feeling any aversion for their acts, even taking pleasure at them?’

Robert insisted.

‘I don’t know,’ Simone replied. ‘Psychological factors added to the gene and things that happened to us when children add powerfully to the effect of the gene. As Joseph mentioned, all that research and its conclusions remain highly controversial. Cause and effects are always very difficult to prove with humans.’

‘Holy Jesus,’ Robert exclaimed.

He poured the eggs, the leeks and the pieces of lard into the large, flat form and pushed it into the oven.

‘The quiche will be ready in ten minutes. I’ll open a bottle of wine. We need that to blow away our gloomy mood. You know, the discovery of such genes is really formidable. Imagine! Suppose we find a way to eliminate the wrong coding of that MOA-A gene. That would mean we could introduce propensity for empathy in people and thus eliminate giving birth to humans who kill for pleasure or are violently aggressive. Why, we would be bettering God’s creation! The philosophical implications of such eugenics are mind-staggering! We could also test the members of corporate boards on psychopathic behaviour and prevent them from entering management levels where they can harm.’

We laughed.

‘Then we would be at ‘A Clockwork Orange’ or in ‘Brave New World’,’ I remarked.

Robert chuckled, ‘maybe. But in the meantime we must suffer, and fight those guys.’

‘Indeed, as we have always done,’ I concluded, ‘and we have currently a serious problem of that sort to deal with in Robois.’

Simone remained rather sad. She spoke less than usual the rest of the evening. I wondered what was the matter with her, and I believe Robert remarked her unease also. Was Simone a more sensitive woman than I had thought?

We ate our quiche. I’m ashamed to tell I ate the largest part, for which Samia made big eyes at me. She was already at work bettering my manners, something women take strongly to heart. Maybe I had less empathy for other people when it came to *quiche Picarde*. The wine helped

bringing us into a better mood. Afterwards, Robert chased us out of his kitchen. Simone remained with him to clean up a little, but I bet they wanted to be together and would probably be embracing behind the closed door. I didn't mind, on the contrary, for I went with Samia alone to the living-room.

I dropped into the sofa. I sensed how exhausted I was on this day. I had drunk too much wine, and eaten too much quiche. Samia sat in a chair in front of me.

I asked, 'Samia, I would like to invite you to a supper one of these evenings. Just you and me. Would you like that?'

'Why Youssouf,' Samia smiled naughtily, 'are you asking me out for a date?'

That evening, I did not hesitate. I threw my dice, come what might, and if the dice fell on bad luck, then at least I knew where I stood.

'Yes, absolutely,' I declared, shaking my head up and down. 'Yes, I also would like to date you.'

If Samia said no now, I would commit suicide.

'I thought you would never ask,' Samia whispered. 'You are not a very lyrical man, aren't you?'

Samia stood from her chair, came over to the sofa and sat close next to me on the sofa. Our bodies touched. Her hazel eyes flashed.

'You might want to kiss me then,' she proposed softly.

We kissed, a long, hard and passionate kiss on the mouth. Samia held her head to a side and I caressed her neck with one hand. The thick, fragrant locks of her hair fell over me. We held the kiss. I think we embraced too, until we heard a cough and Robert came into the living-room with Simone after him. Simone grinned a lot.

Samia and I shot away from each other to the farthest sides of the sofa. I had lost my wits temporarily and Samia panted. Robert did as if he had noticed nothing, but he too kept grinning and smiling at us for the rest of the evening. We drank another bottle of wine.

Quite late, not so sure on my legs, I stood from the sofa, saying, 'I should not linger and I should not drive. If my men organise a road control against alcohol-imbibed drivers this evening, I shall cause a major scandal in the press tomorrow! But I really must go home. No, no coffee for me! The first drunken Muslim Superintendent of Belgium drives off!'

Robert and Simone chided me, Samia frowned, but I had not drunk that much wine at all!

I left the room, waving goodbye to Robert and Simone. Samia followed me to the door and in the corridor I told her softly I would call her to make arrangements for supper, to which she nodded. We kissed at the door.

I did not feel inebriated when the cold evening wind tore at my clothes, but I might have flown to heaven that very moment of that night.

Chapter 5. July and August

The Civil Protection Find. Joseph Bikri

I handed over the memory stick of Monsieur François to Dominique Bussy, asking her to display the list on her screen. I wondered what she would make of it. I preferred for Dominique to blunt her teeth on the file rather than put it in my computer and declare myself defeated. I felt like a Chinese fearing to lose face. Dominique rang me five minutes later she was ready, so I walked not too proudly from my office to her desk, not having lost face but being considered a very busy boss only, and she showed me with a broad smile the data nicely presented on her screen. Women always see through you as if you were transparent! Dominique was indeed a whizz-kid with personal computers and communication networks. I too can read data from a screen and manipulate a file, but not nearly as well and as fast as Dominique does, and she had proven that fact true many times. The format on this memory stick was simple, however, she told me. Did I want a copy on paper? How many pages would that be, I asked. About a hundred and twenty, she said, and that was too much even for me. I asked her to make me a copy of the file and to come to my personal computer to show me how I could look at the electronic data myself. Dominique smiled triumphantly, my composure definitely in shambles, making me feel an ignorant baby, opened the spreadsheet for me, and I had to acknowledge I too would have been able to do such a simple thing. Another five minutes later I was diligently looking at the data, scrolling down screen after screen.

I began to look in the month of June, for the file presented the guests in reverse order of time. I remained an hour riveted to the screen until I had blue eyes, but all the names that paraded before me were alien. I recognised not one name! I was quite surprised to see how many total strangers had passed through Robois by this humble hotel alone, representatives, businessmen and tourists. They all used the Hotel Bayard to stay for a few days as guests of Monsieur François, and I declared much respect for Monsieur François, who I began to consider as a benefactor of humanity. A few names returned several times. I was tempted into asking Dominique a list of the names that recurred in the list at least two times, but I was generally quite disappointed at what I saw. What had I expected? A name with the comments in the second column of 'killed Magda Balin'? Yes, my intuition told me one of these men on my screen had been a murderer, but which of the names was the right one? I scrolled and kept scrolling through the hundreds of names, until I almost got at the beginning of the file, at the names of the month of January. Then, I almost fell from my seat, stood up and danced a jig, which made my colleagues watch me wide-eyed through the glass windows as if I had gone mad.

I encountered a breakthrough! At the beginning of the month of January, I found entries for the names of Blandis, Vantandt, Vrankaert, Mordine and Dusarme. These were the men hired by Recycfast, the men I had met right after the Georgis Rape. Their names were in the list, and the words and the figures almost trembled on the screen. The order for their rooms had been placed by the company Aeolfast from Brussels. The men had stayed at the Horse Bayard for a month and a half. The invoices had been paid monthly by Recycfast. Why would a company pay expensive hotel room bills for simple labourers, for four labourers and a director? I found the name of Aeolfast in the reservation of the rooms and the name of

Recycfast only in the payment bill. Did the men really work for Recycfast? Why had the director been lodged in the same kind of room as the workmen? The Horse Bayard was a relatively small hotel, but not a cheap one. The men had stayed on until a date in February, and then they had disappeared from the hotel, never to return. Well, never to return was a little harsh to state. They knew the bar and the restaurant of the Horse Bayard. Maybe they had returned there. The food and the drinks were fine, the bar cosy. Maybe they had returned indeed. They were five men alone in a countryside town. They might have used prostitutes. Yes, I surmised, but why would they have used a woman such as Magda Balin? There were quite a few younger and prettier, more exciting prostitutes in the bars along the N11, though most of these bars lay south of Robois, south of Turgoux, on the territory of our neighbouring villages.

Was I also not using a hammer to find nails? I suspected the group of Recycfast men to be raiders, professional criminals, but was I right? Suspensions were not enough. I might be too focused on these men. I passed once more through the entire list, but I came back to the entries with the names of the Blandis gang. I highlighted them in yellow in the spreadsheet.

I phoned Dominique Bussy and called her to my office. When she came in, I sat still bickering over the names on my screen.

‘Dominique,’ I began, ‘can you phone the *Service d’Enquête et de Recherche* of Namur, the SER, and ask whether they have any clue on the murderer of Magda Balin? Ask them about the fingerprints and the DNA samples. Can you tell them we are of Robois and we would like to hear some news. After all, this happened on our turf.’

Dominique hesitated. ‘Boss, the SER will not share information about a murder case with us. They cannot do that!’

‘Didn’t you have a nice boyfriend in the SER? Is he past history already?’

‘I’ll ask, boss,’ Dominique reddened, ‘but please, don’t ask where and how I got it. Never tell the information you got to any SER officer.’

‘Of course,’ I replied, winking at her, which she did not really appreciate.

Still, Dominique winked back. She was a more wicked girl than I had expected. I would have to remember that. If I knew what the SER was doing, the SER might also know the same of me!

I passed a very pleasant evening with Samia Bennani, thereafter. We went to a restaurant called the Lady of the Lake, a restaurant recommended to me by my friend Robert Jacquet. The setting was very romantic, the food excellent, our conversation very nice and agreeable, never ending, never wanting for subjects. We talked of our families. Samia explained what she had done in Morocco and why she did not want to return. I might as well have asked her there and then to marry me, but I thought it more decent to advance slowly and give her some time to get used to me.

Robert had explained all to me about the Lady of the Lake, so that I could act as if I were a frequent customer of the place. The waiters did not look at me as if I was shit. They actually served me as if I were a wealthy Belgian of Robois. Maybe they knew me. They were all smiles and very helpful to point out the finest dishes on the menu. Afterwards, when we had to lean backwards because our bellies were too large to tuck in straight figures, the bill cut a black hole in my budget of the month. Robert had warned me about that too, so when the waiter presented the small paper to me I glanced at it critically and unperturbed to look whether there were no errors printed on it, and then I definitely impressed Samia by presenting my credit card on the silver plate.

We left late as prince and princess, me offering her my arm to steady her, for she had sipped a little too much Champagne. We had dined with Champagne, by the way, which had made more than one head turn our way in the restaurant. Samia resembled the most seductive, dark Scheherazade of the Orient; many admiring and envious eyes followed us when we went to the exit. We returned by the ferry, and I drove Samia back to her temporary home. I knew where her next home would be!

Samia lived alone in Robert's lodge villa. Robert was on a two week vacation with Rose. We kissed passionately, and had I insisted I think I might have drawn Samia inside and on to her bed, but I wanted not to abuse of Robert's hospitality for Samia. We said goodnight gently at the door, and she promised to see me again soon. I hoped not really once more at the Lady of the Lake, for then I would have needed delving into my savings account, but I would have granted Samia everything she wanted from me at that time. What would a man not do to catch a bird?

Robert Jacquet was on a vacation with his daughter Rose for two weeks from mid-July on. They first went a week to Euro Disney in France, in Marne-la-Vallée. Robert wanted to spend some time alone with his daughter. He nevertheless also would not stay away from Simone Ash for long, so he and Simone had agreed that after Euro Disney they would come together at a hotel of Melun and from there they would visit the Castle of Vaux-le-Vicomte. Afterwards, they would drive to the Abbey of Fontevraud and stay the rest of their vacation there to visit the vast premises of the abbey and later a few Loire River castles around Chinon. Robert also wanted to visit the Cadre Noir at Saumur, the famous school for horse riding. He hoped to show Rose what could be done with the finest horses and the finest horse riders of France. Rose loved horses. They had reserved tickets for a wonderful evening show at Saumur. Samia had their addresses with the telephone numbers of the hotels, and Robert's mobile phone number. I was convinced the trip was a kind of test for Robert and Simone to find out how well Rose might get along with Simone. I crossed my fingers for them. Robert phoned me a couple of times all was going well, and I assured him that nothing much was happening in Robois. Samia also phoned them, but we understated the events in Robois. We didn't want to spoil their vacation.

New rumours of corruption and neglect of the interests of the town circulated in Robois, the rumours once more involving primarily Robert Jacquet, the Bourgmestre. Robert did not care well for his commune. He was often absent, meddling with all sorts of women. He threw the town's money out of the window. The roads were not maintained as they should, the industry dwindled, the Bourgmestre neglected the interests of the farmers of Robois. Together with these rumours, a nervous anti-campaign began, lauding the management of Jacquet, telling in detail how much had been accomplished by the current Cabinet. Samia and I watched the rumours and the anti-rumours from the far, we dismissed the bad rumours as slanderous, and I told who might listen to what I said I was more than happy with an energetic, honest Bourgmestre like Robert. We could do little to stop the rumours. We refuted the slanders when we heard them. Finally, I noted them on a piece of paper, collected them all, and we decided to show the list to Robert when he and Simone and Rose returned home. That would be early enough for them to begin worrying.

About that time also, I had to deal with another murder case in Robois!

The Belgian *Service de Protection Civile* is a security service depending from the Public Federal Service of the Interior, with headquarters in Brussels. The operational units of the service intervene during catastrophes and calamities. By calamities they mean events of nature, such as large inundations or earthquakes. Catastrophes are defined as events due to human actions, such as chemical or nuclear accidents, train and aeroplane accidents, and so on. The Civil Protection Service is activated at the demand of the Governor of the Province, of the Bourgmestre of a town, of the local Fire Brigades or even of the Superintendent of Police. The operational unit for Robois was situated in the town of Crisnée, one of the three operational units of the region of Namur. These three operational units comprise about two hundred professionals, and these could be reinforced by about one hundred and fifty additional volunteers. I had few contacts with the Civil Protection units but for the occasional meetings we had with their Officers. Robois was never inundated, even during the heaviest storm rain of mid-summer, and earthquakes of any magnitude are practically non-existent in our territory. In the vast industrial zone of Robois no manufacturing chemical plants had been established, we had no nuclear reactors, not even an electrical power station, and also no other manufacturing premises in which major disasters might happen. We had no deep grottoes in which speleologists might have lost too reckless divers, no streams or rivers that might have given us major trouble. Our disasters had been successfully contained by our fire brigades. The Civil Protection Service had therefore almost never operated on our territory.

At the southern end of Turgoux, where the Petiteau suddenly turned east, lay an ancient open-air stone quarry. The exploitation of the quarry had terminated twenty years ago. The site was left to nature, but it was still dangerous in its steep declivities, the flanks slippery and unstable. The site was therefore closed off by a high fence. The Civil Protection exercised once every while in the quarry without warning us beforehand, because the site was wild, left to nature, and the site blocked to the public. Robert Jacquet had a project in mind to transform the site to a natural park, but the works to that end would be costly, so he had not yet launched that initiative.

At the end of July, the Civil Protection men decided to use the site for training their dogs on the recuperation of victims of natural disasters. Despite the vacation period, they assembled about twenty Officers and volunteers to hold an exercise in the quarry. The day before their training, a few Officers hid three puppets representing two men and a woman at various places in the quarry. The next day the trainers and their dogs would come in. The trainers and the dogs didn't know where the puppets were hidden. Pieces of cloth of the puppets were given to the dogs to sniff at, and the trainers hoped the dogs would find in an afternoon all the supposed corpses. The men came with a barbecue set and dozens of bottles of beer, hoping to organise a nice supper in the open afterwards.

The exercise was a complete success. The three puppet corpses had all been found after two hours of intensive and extensive searches of dogs and men throughout the quarry. The exercise had even been such a success that not three but four corpses had been discovered! The last corpse was not a puppet, but the real corpse of a dead man. The body lay under a bush in a state of advanced putrefaction. When he saw the corpse, one Civil Protection volunteer immediately gasped and grabbed his heart, and another man got so violently sick he fainted. Both men were transported to a hospital, and the corpse to the morgue in a third ambulance. The rest of the brigade forgot about their barbecue, the men too shocked to think of sausages and beer.

The quarry was situated mostly on the territory of Turgoux and only for a very small part in the territory of our southern neighbouring town, but since that town was quite larger than

ours, the police of that town was called in to close off the perimeter of where the body was found. This was not really necessary, for anyhow the entire site was surrounded by a two-metre high fence and a sturdy gate. The gate had not been forced. The gate was locked by a large padlock for which the key could not be found, so the police had to cut the chains. The first impression was that the found dead man had climbed over the fence and then he either fell to his death in the quarry, or he had a cardiac arrest there, or he had committed suicide. I only heard of the corpse the following day, when the Superintendent of our neighbouring town called. He wanted to throw the corpse back at me, arguing rightly the quarry lay on the territory of Robois. He and I knew that since the corpse had already been transported to the morgue of Namur, both of us had nothing further to do for the case. My friendly neighbour Superintendent merely pushed most of the administrative paperwork back into my basket. I decided also to do nothing physically that same day, for it was already late, and it was raining so much we would have been completely drenched in no time.

The next day, I drove with Dominique Bussy to the site. The gate to the quarry was closed, but no new padlock had been hung. We could enter the quarry. I cursed a lot for that, for in the morning paper journalists had already mentioned how the Civil Protection had found more cadavers than they had sowed. People curious of the news might endeavour entering the quarry. We had a security issue!

Dominique and I cautiously advanced into the quarry, and we remarked immediately how dangerous it was here, for the rains had transformed the paths into slippery mud tracks. We followed what we thought were such natural paths, but we slid more than we stepped. We saw on the other side of the flanks of the quarry the white-and-blue tapes of the police waving in the wind, so on peril of our lives we skidded to that place, which took us quite some time, of course to find ... nothing.

We merely saw a rectangular space delineated by the white-and-blue tapes, the place where the corpse had been found, and that was all. I hoped the SER inspectors of Namur that had been called in had found something more interesting, for we could not but see how many feet had trampled over the environs. Any previous trace had been erased in the mud since long. The rain had done its work. We found no rests of nothing. We could only look at the desolate surroundings of the quarry, overgrown with bushes and grasses and thistles, weeds and beginning trees. We did roam a little around, but there was no point in lingering on the site. We backtracked the way we had come.

When we arrived at the gate, I phoned for a policeman to come to the gate with two sturdy padlocks and chains. Then, still accompanied by Dominique, I walked along the fence to the left and followed the fence for about ten minutes, or one kilometre. We turned, walked back to the gate, not sure of what we were looking for, and walked for ten minutes along the other, the right, side. On this side, a path ran along the fence, and a path that became soon large enough for a car or even a truck to pass. At the end of our walk we came on somewhat harder ground, and there we found what looked like very faint impressions of the tires of a car. The traces seemed fairly recent, so I supposed the traces had been made by the Civil Protection trucks during one of their earlier exercises, rather than by any other car. We found no hidden, abandoned car.

What we did find, barely visible, was a part of the fence twisted up from the ground. A man could have done that to get to the other side of the fence. The fence was not cut, but drawn upwards over a little distance so that one could make a hole of about a metre high between two pickets. A man could have slid under the fence here, but was that the dead man? I knew geologists dared to look for crystals in quarries, so one of those men too might have done this. Maybe the dead man discovered two days ago had walked on foot to this point, which was at

least a one-hour walk from the village of Turgoux and even longer from the neighbouring village. Knowing the propensity for cars of my people of Robois, and assuming the persons of the neighbouring town were equally lazy and used to the large distances in our villages, I found it more than strange no abandoned car stood somewhere along the fence. If the man hadn't arrived by car, why then had he not forced a hole in the fence closer to the gate? We went back to our car at the gate, and then we followed the fence by car. We drove almost the entire circumference of the fence, but we saw no trace of a car. We returned to our offices in Robois.

In the Abbey, I took off my muddy boots and asked Dominique whether she had been able to call the SER for news on the Magda Balin case.

'I have called,' Dominique replied, 'but the man I know there said he preferred to speak to you directly, though in confidence. You can trust him. I promised him all hell if he did not help us. His name is David Danlois. He is an Inspector of the SER. Here is his phone number.'

I phoned the SER a little later, at the number Dominique gave me. I heard the voice of the Inspector who had treated the case of the corpse found in the quarry of Turgoux. I had double good luck.

'I expected your call,' the Inspector said. 'I am going to put down the horn, go to a more private place and call you back.'

The line was cancelled. Five minutes later, my phone rang.

'This is better,' said the same voice. 'You wanted information about our Balin case, and also about the corpse found in the quarry?'

'Yes, of course,' I hastened to reply. 'I was disappointed we were not called in. The quarry is on our territory.'

'That was a mistake, but the Civil Protection guys did not really know on which territory the quarry was situated. Anyhow, there was not much to be done on site!'

'What can you share with me?'

'In theory, nothing at all,' I heard the Inspector grin. 'We already found out who the dead man was. His wallet had disappeared, or maybe he had taken no wallet with him, but in a small side pocket of his jeans we found a little plastic card tugged in deep. That was a member card of a warehouse of Turgoux. His name was printed on the card. The man seems to have been missing since five or six months from the village south of Turgoux, so we could situate the case as not for Robois but for the town south of you. That period of five to six months is consistent with the state of decomposition of the corpse. It has rained a lot in our region this spring and summer, so that made it difficult for the doctors to determine around what date the man has been murdered. We found no traces, which is also not surprising in view of the time passed.'

The Inspector paused.

'Did I hear you use the word 'murdered'?'

'Yes, you heard me right. The autopsy has been done, but also any officer of our team could have noticed that the head of the man had been smashed in savagely from behind by a heavy piece of metal or wood, a baseball bat or something like that, maybe a golf club. Yes, the man was murdered. We found no traces of any sort, as I mentioned already. The corpse has been lying there for too long, so we don't know whether the man has been killed in situ or killed at another place and then been dragged into the quarry. My opinion is the last.'

I interjected a question, 'have you found an abandoned car in the vicinity?'

‘No, we didn’t. We looked for that, but we found no abandoned car. That strengthens me in the belief there was a second man, the murderer probably, or more than one other man, who went with the dead man into the quarry, or who dragged the corpse to that place.’

‘Anything else interesting? Do you have any clue whatsoever?’

‘Well, we heard of course that the man had been declared missing in the town next to Robois, but not much was made of that because the guy could just have disappeared, gone on a vacation, or whatever. He rented a room, but the owner cleared out his things, burned or sold them a few months ago and rented the rooms to somebody else, so we could get no clues from that room either. The only maybe interesting item we learned was that the man was known as a homosexual. He frequented a gay men’s bar in the towns south of Robois. He was born in Brussels, worked in a construction firm, but he went from job to job and roamed the country. We have sent a couple of men to interview his former boss and his colleagues. We took a DNA sample of him, but fingerprints on the fence must have been deleted by time or polluted by so many Civil Protection guys, that we decided to abandon the search for fingerprints.’

‘I walked along the fence today,’ I explained, ‘and I found a place where somebody had tinkered with the fence. One could draw the fence a metre from the ground, about one kilometre to the right of the gate.’

‘We found that opening too, but no traces of somebody being dragged under the fence. The rain deleted all traces.’

‘A murder has been committed on Magda Balin, a prostitute of Robois,’ I began another subject. ‘Now you have a murder on a homosexual man. That is two murders in possibly sexual crimes in the last six months, one not so far from the other. Might that ring a bell to you?’

The Inspector hesitated. ‘It might. We also thought of the possibility of those two murders being linked, Superintendent. It might also be a coincidence, of course. We asked for a list of other unsolved murders or missing persons in the region and in the cities of Brussels, Liège, Charleroi and Namur. We are now assembling such a list.’

‘Could I have the results of those enquiries?’ I asked.

I added, ‘after all, both of those murders have been perpetrated on or near my territory. I think I have a right to know what the people of Robois may be exposed to. If these murders are linked, we may have a very dangerous person roaming in our town, scanning for more killings.’

‘The homosexual may have been killed for all we know anywhere, in Brussels, Liège, Houtsi-Plout, and then have been brought to your quarry by car. We don’t jump too rashly to conclusions.’

‘Neither do I,’ I objected, ‘but I do would like to hear what you have found about this case. I know the terrain, I know my people, I know the town of Robois and its villages best. I might be of help. Have you found out anything special about the Balin case?’

The Inspector waited. I heard him turn pages.

He sighed and said, ‘we might as well tell you, Superintendent. Like you mentioned, that murder did happen in your town. No, we found nothing. The fingerprints in the Balin house gave us no new clue, and also not any DNA analysis. The woman had no sexual relations immediately prior to the murder, which struck us as odd. We have no description of a man entering the house, though we know somebody went in there. The neighbours gave us nothing of use. We found no list of clients in the personal computer of the woman. We have nothing.’ I did not want to withhold information, so I asked, ‘have you interviewed the gardener of the hotel in front of Balin’s house?’

‘The gardener? We don’t know of any gardener. No, I don’t think we have spoken to a gardener,’ the Inspector said. ‘What is this, have you been interfering with our investigations?’

‘Not at all,’ I hastened to reply. ‘I merely spoke to the gardener. You talk to him, but be patient, gentle and polite, for he is an old man. He has seen a man enter the Balin house late in the afternoon of the day of the murder.’

There was silence on the line.

‘The murderer of Magda Balin was not someone of her regular clients. Did you ask the list of the hotel guests?’

Once more, there was no reaction on the telephone connection.

‘I’ll send you a file of the guests of the hotel Horse Bayard of the last six months,’ I continued. ‘In that file you will find a series of names highlighted in yellow, a group of men who resided in the hotel in the months of January and February. This group arrived in Robois in January of this year. They work in a company called Recycfast, a company situated in Turgoux. Yes, in Turgoux, the village of the quarry. One of the guys, a man called Blandis, seems to be the leader. He is a security specialist. I don’t know exactly what that man is doing in Robois, but we have been the victims lately of a series of misdeeds, a near rape, caravans put to fire, farms harassed, all sites that were either in the way of a project of installing a large number of wind turbines or where people lived who opposed the project. The turbines are to be installed by a company called Aeolfast, and Recycfast is one of its parent companies. What I give you is only my intimate intuition, but the information coincides. My intuition yells at me those guys are dangerous. One of them may be linked to the murders, even though I doubt the murders have anything to do with the companies involved in the turbine project. I have nothing tangible to go on, though, but my sixth sense. If ever you approach or interview or seriously suspect these men, I would like to hear of the result.’

The voice on the line became active again.

The Inspector of the SER said, ‘I heard from colleagues in Brussels you were a damned good policeman, Superintendent Bikri, so I am going to take your hints as valuable. I don’t know how my bosses might react on your intuition, but whatever happens, I’ll try to keep in touch with you. What you just told me will find its place in a report. I have your telephone number. Let’s share our information.’

The Inspector gave me his electronic mail address to where I could send the file.

‘I appreciate your openness and your willingness to cooperate,’ I remarked.

I smiled at the phone. It was good to hear a friend, not a competitor. ‘Inspector Danlois, I’ll keep you abreast of any new findings I can gather in Robois. Please do the same. Putting our information together might really help. Please check on that Blandis guy of the file.’

‘I’ll do that,’ the voice said, but then the SER Inspector hung up abruptly.

August defeat. Robert Jacquet

I returned from France to Robois in the beginning of August. My vacation was actually also a period of work, for I was very anxious to find out how Rose, who grew up rapidly, would react to me accompanying her in a place of very many people, and to know how she would react to Simone Ash and Simone to her. Could they become confidants or would they be competitors? All went well, as I had dearly hoped, almost idyllic, but I never let my attention wander. Rose cared not that people gaped at her in the Euro Disney amusement park. She was

also not the only trisomic child who walked around in the various attractions. She began to take note of her difference, I remarked, and I saw her first distress when she looked at children like her among the others. It seemed she had taken less notice of this in her schools. She took delight in the many, nice attractions in the park, so she remained more in wonder and marvel and enchantment at the magic world she entered rather than brooding over her difference.

After Euro Disney, we drove a little south to Melun, where Simone waited for us in a modern hotel that lay in a large, green area. The real challenge began. The next day, we visited Vaux-le-Vicomte, where we walked in a sunny day through the gardens, and visited the castle. For the rest of our vacation, Rose seemed to have found a sister, for more than once the two women formed an alliance to visit what they wanted, not what I had planned. In the two hotels we stayed, in Melun and in the abbey hotel of Fontevraud, I had reserved three separate but contingent rooms. Rose had her own room for herself, but she kept a tight order and did not roam outside without us knowing where she was. We arrived late in the afternoon at Fontevraud, had supper in the hotel restaurant, a fine place in the ancient cloister, and then we went straight to our rooms.

Afterwards, Simone's room was not used much at night. Simone and I delighted in sleeping in each other's arms, the first time we could do that unencumbered by worries. Paradise felt like that. Rose did not seem to notice. Simone left early, but Rose one day did sniff up the air loudly in my room, remarking Simone's perfume was so persistent it had even invaded my place.

Rose and Simone got along well. After the first days, Simone came to take my hand, whereupon Rose would grab my other one, but she never complained. She was not jealous and referred to Simone even more than to me. A few days later, I dared to put my arm around Simone's waist in the middle of the day. Rose frowned at that, but didn't mind, and seemed to have understood. Later still, Simone and I kissed in her presence, but Simone hugged Rose more often than me.

On the last day of our vacation, Rose asked me straightforwardly, 'is Simone going to be my new mother?'

My heart beat faster when I answered, 'that may happen, Rose, but it is not for soon. If it happens, nothing changes between the two of us. I love you as much as ever. I guess Simone loves you a lot too.'

'Oh, I know she does. I like her. I would love to have a mother.'

Rose said that off-handily, but her words constricted my breast. Yes, Rose should have had a mother around her. She said she lacked a mother as if it were the most natural way of events, without pain or reproach.

When we drove back to Robois, I was very happy with Rose next to me in the car. I drove to Chantilly, whereas Simone drove immediately on to Robois in her own car. I wanted to show Rose the horse tracks, the horse show and the horse museum of Chantilly, and also the bucolic village beyond the castle. Simone arrived therefore a couple of days earlier than we in Robois. We did not want the town to know we had been on a holiday together.

In the days after my return I was thrown in burning hell. In my absence, many rumours had once more been spread about me. I heard of them by the accounts of Joseph Bikri, who had even noted them one by one on a sheet of paper. He had much to tell me, also about his investigations. A battle of rumours, good and bad, waged in Robois. I could tell the source of

the rumours lay with Yves Govin and his cronies. My days as Hamlet were over. I had to take action. I took an entire day to remain pondering in my study. I walked for hours in the forest of Boyu, thinking, reflecting and deciding on what I had to do and how. At a certain moment, late in the afternoon of the day, I must have had that look in my eyes I had seen in black cats the moment they jumped on a bird, the sudden look of determination in the tiger before he breaks for his killing run.

I called Yves Govin to my office in the Abbey, using as an excuse I wanted to talk over a few points concerning the commune.

I sat in my Bourgmestre's office when Govin walked in with a dirty smirk on his face. I sat in my Bourgmestre's chair behind my Bourgmestre's desk and I had placed a lower chair on the other side of that table. I watched with a happy smile how he went over to take the seat, and then remark how low he sat. He was also a rather small man. I noted how much he hated sitting a head lower than me.

He grumbled immediately, 'we are in the month of August. It became time we had the general Assembly of the IC Group to accept the decisions of the IC Office formally. If you do not call the meeting I shall have to do that.'

'Calling together the General Assembly of IC is not the job of the Bourgmestre,' I threw back. 'That is the privilege of the President of IC. Govin, have a good look around you. This is the Bourgmestre's office. Don't you think it is a nice office, bearing the weight of the ages?'

I pointed with wide open arms at the fine wooden panelling of the Bishop's reception room, at the painted ceiling, the impressive old oak beams. The room inspired dignity.

I continued, 'have a good look, Govin, for I am going to make sure that you shall never, never, as long as I live, sit in this chair, behind this desk, or even ever still have a seat in this office. I am going to squash you under my boot to mashed potatoes, like the dirty, little, slimy snail you are that gets flattened in the mud of a path.'

Govin blemished and he shot a head straighter in his chair. He grabbed the arms of his chair as if he wanted to stand higher.

'I know of all the rumours you are spreading in Robois about me,' I told him in the same threatening tone, staring straight at him with flaring eyes, hands flat on the desk.

'You are going to stop spreading those slanderous stories, you and your self-appointed leaders of a non-existent party, which is not IC, or I shall drag you to a Court of Justice for slander in no time. Don't dare to believe I would hesitate at that. I won't. I have gathered enough evidence from witnesses to prove that you and your three miserable slaves are at the basis of the rumours. So, Govin, either you stop that, or I am delivering the evidence to the police, who will love putting you first in our local jail for a few days and then hand you over in handcuffs to the judges of Namur. You can look up for yourself in the Belgian penal code how many months in prison you risk for slander, and what charges, but in the present circumstances of the communal elections, I am sure the judges will understand how you aggravated your cause and condemn you with even more pleasure. I will also throw the best lawyers of the country against you and report daily on the advance of your trial in the press.'

'You are wrong,' Govin hissed, 'the rumours have not been launched by me. You have drawn them out yourself by your behaviour.'

'Liar! Coward!' I thundered.

I shouted so hard Govin shrunk back, half a head lower once more. He thought I was going to hit him.

'I have your name and the names of your faithful followers on paper, Govin. I have the witness accounts taken by a notary under oath. Stop pretending you don't know about where the rumours originated. They originated from your sick mind!'

Govin said nothing. His mind was raging, calculating whether my assertions might be true, thinking about who might have betrayed him, and how much he risked. I did not let him catch his breath or come to a conclusion. I kept him on one leg.

‘I also know about your connections to Aeolfast, to the Sieur Buisseyre, and I know of the publicity campaign Aeolfast began quite a while ago. I know about the terror campaign you are an accomplice of, and I shall see to it that you get condemned for indulging in those acts. I have gathered sufficient evidence to squash you flat with your relations to that company, but my official accusations will have to wait until after the elections. I shall have gathered enough evidence to chase that project of turbines forever from Robois, and you will disappear with it. To remain brief today, Govin, if I can still trace one more slander back to you or to your cronies in the following days, I shall be going straight to the police, and my reasons for doing so will be published on an entire page in the local and federal newspapers of this region, whether that brings a major scandal or not to your political party. Have you understood me, you slimy insect?’

Govin drew his mouth to a thin line of smirk.

‘You have nothing against me. You are bluffing and lying,’ he shouted back. ‘You are envious because you know very well nobody else but me shall be the next Bourgmestre of Robois!’

‘And how do you intend to achieve that?’ I asked, smiling.

I saw Govin hesitate, his confidence dwindling. ‘I am the head of the election list of IC. I am the candidate Bourgmestre of that list.’

‘Candidate to whatever, you may be,’ I snorted back, ‘but so can anybody else on that list. Bourgmestre shall be the man or woman who receives most of the votes on his or her name. Your publicity campaign shall disappear in the shadows of what I and we can throw at you, Govin. For every poster you put up in Robois, I shall put up four, and my posters will stand in front of yours and be thrice as large as yours. Do you really think I cannot wage war, Govin? Which farmer, all friends of mine, will allow you to place a poster on their fields? For every man or woman you can speak to in person in Robois, I shall have four people to speak for me. You seek war, Govin? You will have one, one with battles as Robois has not seen yet! You may also tell your friends of Aeolfast that despite their actions of intimidation, I shall never allow their project of defilement of this beautiful town to happen, not as long as I live. Tell them it will take them ten years of appeals in the commissions and in the Courts of Justice to receive a definite no on their project, and they will never get a yes! There exist so many possibilities of appeals in this country, up and onto the Council of State, so many you haven’t even heard of them all, and I will use them all, Govin! You dare challenge me? Beware of my wrath!’

I stood up from my chair and shouted so hard at Govin that anybody in the Abbey could have heard me.

‘Now,’ I shouted, pointing with an outstretched arm and hand and finger at the door, ‘get out of here! I never want to see you again in this room for as long as it is my office, you miserable worm! Do you really think you can rule Robois by extortion, terror, violence and blackmail, you and your criminals from the company and the party you conspire with? Never! I’ll put you to the stake, Govin!’

Govin stood. He left through the door of the office of the Bourgmestre. I still stood behind my desk, trembling in anger, until Govin disappeared. He slammed the door, but I didn’t mind. I broke out in hysterical laughter and I sat down. I had no evidence of nothing, but Govin didn’t know that. My words had been calculated and precise, my anger feigned. I slowly regained my calmness of mind. My wrath and the outburst of anger had been planned. I had wanted to

inspire Govin with fear and doubt. I had wanted him to lose his self-confidence, shatter the belief that he could get away with his slander campaign, to make him take more care and therefore become much slower. Whether that would last longer than a few days, I was not sure of. I thought it would, for Govin was not a very courageous man, not a very intelligent one either!

My conscience then began to gnaw at me. A few moments ago, I had done and said a lot that went against my deepest and better convictions. I did not want to use violence and hatred and humiliation, not even against my worst enemy, yet I had done just that! When would the retribution come? I had pushed Govin in a corner, like a wild animal. How would he emerge from that corner? I should expect now even more insidious revenge. Proffer threats were always a sign of weakness. Had I shown myself strong and convincing enough for Govin not to understand my anger as a loss of self-control? How would Govin react? What would he do? Would he keep quiet until the elections?

I took a few papers and began to read them to divert my attention from the miserable human that Yves Govin was, to more agreeable items.

My second action was to ask for a meeting with Albert Desjardins, the President of the Communal Interests Group. For IC Group too, the time of High Noon had arrived! I had to come to a decision about the list of candidates for the elections. Desjardins drove to my villa in Boyu the next evening. We sat in my living-room, discussing over a beer.

‘Albert, I began, ‘we have to come to a conclusion on the subject of the election list. You know that, and I know that, however much we both would like to forget the entire mess. We cannot but call together soon a General Assembly of the IC members.’

‘Yep, we have to do that soon,’ Desjardins agreed. ‘The three other parties have already published their lists. The populace are beginning to wonder why we wait. We should come to a decision. I suppose, however, you will want to change the list as it stands today. I too am not satisfied with the current list. IC would be much better off with the names in the sequence as determined by the Committee of the Wise. The question is how we are going to bring about the change in the General Assembly. There is always a risk at a voting.’

‘We will have to bite the bullet,’ I sighed. ‘I shall have to bring a new motion to the Assembly to push back Govin to the last place. For that, I merely have to ask the General Assembly to vote for the list the Committee of the Wise has originally constituted. I propose to do just that. The issue is of course whether I can win that vote.’

‘There is always a risk,’ Desjardins gave me the bad news. ‘I believe honestly most of the people will vote for you, not for Govin, despite the latest slander campaign against your person. We have done what we could to quench the rumours, to refute them, and to demonstrate how wrong they are. It remains always difficult, however, to ascertain what direction a vote takes. Overall, I believe a majority will vote for what you ask and show confidence in you. When that vote is established, Yves Govin and his so-called leaders of the UD Party will have lost definitely. I don’t think they will leave the IC Group, their putsch ending in disaster, but Yves Govin may leave as yet. Good riddance! I don’t like that man.’

‘One name more or less on our list will not change the global vote much in the elections.’

‘My fundamental issue with the votes of the General Assembly of IC has to do with the fact that IC is a group, a movement, not a political party. *Intérêts Communaux* has no official membership, no paying members, and hence no official list of members. That has not been a real issue so far, but it will be one at the next Assembly. Anybody who is inside the hall shall have a vote. Even if we take note of the names of the people present, which would be quite a job, we will not be able to refuse entry. I expect Yves Govin and the VDP to use that weakness fully. Govin will muster people from anywhere, even from adjacent towns, pay

them for their presence if he has to, have them come to the hall and have them vote for him. We cannot refuse people, for IC has no statutes, no paper says that voters have to reside in our town, not even that. We have nothing. It is too late to decide on any statute rules now.'

'We can do two things to avoid such a scenario,' Desjardins consoled me. 'It seems obvious to me that people who do not reside in Robois cannot attend to our General Assembly. Statutes or no statutes, I shall post a few people at the doors and ask for the names of the people that enter the hall. We shall take note of their names on paper. They will thereby be known as sympathisers of IC, avoiding members of other parties in our hall. We shall ask for some piece of identity of the men and women who try to enter. People we know we can simply let walk through. People we don't know shall have to prove they reside in Robois. If they cannot do that, we'll refuse them. The announcement of our General Assembly is made by publication in our local newspapers. That announcement will mention only citizens of Robois can enter the hall to vote.

Second, if Govin can muster people for the voting, so can we. We shall phone all our sympathisers, and urge them to attend. The rest will be up to fate, chance, luck, and the Lord!'

'Suppose you lose, despite our hopes,' Desjardins stated. 'What will you then do?'

'Then I shall do something I am going to tell you in confidence, Albert, but which I do not allow you to spread as news before and during the vote of the General Assembly. If you swear not to divulge what I am now going to say, then you can hear it.'

'I swear to secrecy,' Desjardins laughed.

'If I do not get the confidence of the Assembly of the IC Group, I shall leave the group. I have had my belly full of the games, setbacks and political intrigues of schemers and liars. I seek the confidence of the people. If I don't get that, then I'd better draw the line, conclude, and leave. It will be sad. It will hurt to stop a six-year term like that, but I'll leave. My decision is firm.'

'I understand entirely your reaction. I expected something like that. But you forget that you face layer upon layer of confidence, Robert! You got the confidence of the Committee of the Wise. You did not get the confidence of the Office of IC, but the Office had been manipulated and was surprised. You may yet gain the confidence of the General Assembly of IC. There is still the confidence of the voters of Robois to win. Ultimately, theirs is the only confidence that counts! With sufficient votes, only one more vote than Govin, Govin shall have to acknowledge his defeat at the elections and let you become our next Bourgmestre.'

'I expect Govin to propose to change that point in the Assembly. He will propose to be declared the only candidate Bourgmestre of IC, whatever the results of the votes. Tactically, we must let that vote be cast first. If Govin wins that vote, our proposal to revert to the list of the Wise makes no sense anymore. I shall know I lost the confidence of the Assembly by then. I will only have to announce my withdrawal from the list, and IC will have to go to the elections without me. If however, that vote in favour of Govin is rejected, I may expect to win the vote in favour of the proposal to re-instate the list of the Committee of the Wise. That is how we should do. But even if we win the first vote and lose the second, I will have to leave the IC Group.'

'That would truly be a disaster for IC,' Desjardins exclaimed.

'Maybe,' I said. 'I am not indispensable, and the world will continue to turn on its axis. IC shall then harvest what it sowed. It should not mourn or regret if as a result IC loses votes.'

'In that case, will you leave politics forever?' Desjardin asked, but his question sounded like a conclusion.

'Probably not,' I announced. 'I'll grieve for you, my friend, but I'm afraid I will have to oppose the IC Group at the elections in that case, for the IC Group headed by Govin, even

weakened, will be an abomination. I cannot ever accept Govin in power over Robois. I shall do whatever it takes to keep Govin from power over this town. I shall probably have to support the Liberal Party, and I will support a coalition of all the other parties against IC.'

'You would prefer a Socialist or a Liberal Bourgmestre rather than Govin?'

'I would! I am very open and straight with you in that statement.'

'You know,' Desjardins said, eyes half closed, 'I will not be President of the IC Group anymore by then. I shall resign before the elections, before the old clan of the United Democrats come back to power in IC. Many friends will want to follow me. We will have a bleeding heart, for we will also not know for which other list to vote. The number of blank votes may get very high at the next elections. We may even help you.'

'So be it,' I said.

'But such a disastrous scenario need not happen!' Desjardins wanted to conclude on a happier note. 'I'll except a glass of something stronger than this beer now. We shall win, my friend! We must talk to a lot of people until the General Assembly! There is much work to do. How does one call this? The trumpet call to the battle?'

We laughed, and drank our Cognacs. We also scheduled the General Assembly for the twentieth of August.

The General Assembly of the IC Group of Robois, the group in power in the Cabinet and in the Council, was to be held in the large hall of the Adelbert Abbey. No other hall in Robois was large enough to hold the four hundred to five hundred people expected. It would be a meeting of the utmost importance for the future of Robois, for the survival of the IC Group, and also for the United Democratic Party. The people of Robois sensed the tension and the significance of the assembly, the value of what was at stake. They expected a fight, and so we thought not only the members of IC would turn up but also a lot of people in search of sensation, or simply the curious.

The people indeed showed up in great numbers. I arrived rather late at the Abbey, and I was very lucky to have a reserved parking place as Bourgmestre near my office, for otherwise I would have lost much additional time to look for a place in one of the side streets around the Abbey. Many people were still streaming into the inner court of the Abbey when I walked to the hall. Many people smiled sympathetically when they saw me come, nodded, waved, cried a slogan in favour of me, and they pushed me literally in front of them through the open door. That welcome surprised me much, and cheered me up completely. No reticent faces showed, no faces turned away from me. I thought we had won a big part of the battle with that atmosphere. Was I right in that first, positive impression?

President Desjardins had organised a team of about ten people at the doors to note the names of everybody who entered. There happened some discussion at the doors, and people were refused entry once every while. Desjardins had also placed a few IC militants who were also members of the local judo, jiu-jitsu and boxing clubs of Robois at the doors. Desjardins grinned mischievously when he called on these men to step forward, to come a little closer to the doors. The man or woman who tried to force entry the quickly receded back into the courtyard, seeing that internal security force. A little farther in the courtyard walked two policemen in uniform, a third sat in a car at a mobile phone, and Joseph Bikri walked as lord and master, stick in hand, in the abbey courtyard.

I walked to the front rows, shaking hands and proposing a few nice words to the people I knew well. Seats had been reserved for the Cabinet Members and for the Councillors. I found a chair and sat. Albert Desjardins nodded at me. He went to sit in the middle of the table in

front, with around him the Secretary and the Treasurer of IC Group. Further to his side sat the members of the Committee of the Wise. I turned my head after a while and noticed the crowd of people that had come to our hall. The hall had filled. All the chairs and benches were occupied, and many men stood, leaning against the walls. Yet more men and women entered.

Desjardins, the President, obvious proud of the success, waited way beyond the announced starting hour. He waited a full twenty minutes over time before he opened the session officially by tapping on the microphone at his table. When he began to speak, the hall became as silent as a grave, whereas before the noise had been deafening. We all sensed the solemnity of what was bound to be said and happen.

Desjardins combed his last black hair backwards with his fingers, and he began by explaining how a list of candidates for the elections had been prepared by the Committee of the Wise of IC, and how that list had been changed during the meeting of the Leading Office. He also reminded everybody of the founding principles of IC, and he recalled the realisations of the current Cabinet of Échevins and of the IC Councillors. He emphasised the good work that had been accomplished by IC for Robois. His speech handled many subjects. Each subject was presented briefly as reminders, but what Desjardins said lasted well over half an hour, a long introduction, with everybody waiting anxiously for the rest. Then, Desjardins announced the crux of the evening.

‘We are gathered here,’ he shouted in the microphone, ‘to vote on the list of candidates for the elections and on the election program of our movement called Communal Interests. Three amendments have been proposed. We have to vote on these amendments.

The first point has been proposed by the Secretary of the United Democratic party. I remind you that the IC Group has been founded out of the bad results of the elections of that party. It is proposed to change the name of IC Group back to United Democrats Party or UDP.

The second point has been introduced by Cabinet Échevin Yves Govin. That point needs some explanation. The last IC Office meeting decided to place Govin at the head of the list. Monsieur Govin argues that as head of the list he should also be entitled to be our appointed candidate Bourgmestre, notwithstanding an article in the election contract to which we also agreed during the last Committee meeting, to not call any candidate of our list for Bourgmestre before the night of the elections proper. Our principle is that the candidate with the highest score of the list should become Bourgmestre. Yves Govin desires IC Group to accept him as our candidate Bourgmestre, excluding all other candidates, and even in the event he does not attain the highest number of votes of our list.

The third point to vote on has been entered to me by our honourable Jean Sauvent. Jean was a member of our Committee of the Wise. He proposes to revert as final election list to the list prepared by the Committee of the Wise, which places Robert Jacquet, our current Bourgmestre, back at the head of the list instead of Échevin Govin.

The voting will be held by show of hands, unless we are obliged to count, in which case we will distribute special papers to that intent.’

Albert Desjardins paused a few seconds to let his words sink in.

Then he continued, ‘I call now the Secretary of the UD Party to say a few words in favour of the first amendment, after which we will hear some reactions against, and then proceed to the voting of the point.’

The Secretary spoke briefly. She said the name of IC had been useful to renew the enthusiasm of the UD Party militants. IC Group had reached that objective, so that now the group could revert to its old name. The advantages of that, she claimed, were that the IC members would

once more be incorporated in a large, national political structure with an administration of study groups, events, and access to national and regional political organisations. She called on all the UDP militants to vote for the proposal. She concluded her speech by telling that for the independents of IC nothing would change. These persons would find a place on the list, as before.

When she finished, Desjardins asked whether there were opposing opinions in the audience. A few men asked to speak by bringing up their arms, quite rapidly. They expressed largely the same idea all, merely in other terms, saying the UD Party had been in shambles because of neglect by the national structures when IC had been created by dynamic persons who wanted to help Robois with more than mere words. Communal Interests was a name for which the other parties envied us, because it was a group whose only aim was to serve the benefit of the citizens of Robois exclusively. The name of IC also signified an open attitude to various opinions, though remaining in respect of Christian ideology.

Albert Desjardins then proposed to vote on the point, asking the persons in favour to show their hands.

I guessed about one person in four or five only brought his or her hand up. Then, Desjardins prompted the persons who wanted to stick to the name and the structure and principles of IC to show hands. Four-fifths of the audience brought up their hands in an overwhelming majority, and the point was rejected. Communal Interests would remain Communal Interests. IC would not be incorporated into the UD Party structure.

The vote should have made a bell ring for Yves Govin, the tolling of the death bell, but he did not withdraw his other point. Had he been a fine politician he would have seen the sign on the walls and stopped there and then.

Albert Desjardins therefore asked Govin to comment on his own proposed point. Govin rose. Maybe he thought he could convince the audience as yet of what he was certain of to be his good right. Govin sat on the other side of the central alley, but in the first row like I. He argued the IC Office had decided with a large majority to place him at the head of the election list. The electorate would expect the first person also to be the next Bourgmestre. The list would win in credibility if he could in his own tracts and in the tracts of the IC Group, be presented as the effective leader of the group. Such a declaration would be clear, simple, and attract more votes to the list. Had not IC chosen for the best man to head its election candidates list?

Govin did of course not mention his point had already been rejected by the Office of leaders of IC. Already while he spoke, I felt the resentment in the hall, the tension against Govin. The audience had not appreciated the coup of the UD Party officials to put their hooks back in the successful IC Group. The atmosphere had turned against Govin in the assembly, but Govin seemed oblivious of that mood.

When Govin finished, Albert Desjardins asked insistently whether I wanted to say a few words against his point. I rose and the crowd quieted. The people listened in silence to me. The third amendment, I argued, aimed at reversing the role and place of Yves Govin, for the proposal was to place him back at the last place, the place of challenger. I heard laughter in the hall. I reminded that the point proposed by Govin had already been rejected by the IC Office. I expressed the opinion that it was a very democratic principle to have the man or woman given confidence by the voters to be appointed Bourgmestre, whatever the group leaders had as preference. Therefore, the choice of Bourgmestre had to be left to the voters. The voters would not understand why the person they thought most capable would have to step aside for a man designated by a few party leaders. I continued by saying it was strange to talk already at this stage of the function of Bourgmestre when the other parties of Robois

could form a coalition and throw IC back into the opposition. In that case, I said, IC would be the laughing stock of the Robois community for having sold the hide of the bear before the animal was slain. One had to face the voting community humbly and not make claims to functions the voters had a right to give, no one else. Moreover, if Monsieur Govin was the best man on the list, he should not be afraid of the friendly confrontation with the other candidates on the list. That last statement drew a grin on many faces.

The vote was cast once more by show of hands, and again only about a fifth in the Abbey Hall showed it was in favour of denoting the Bourgmestre before the elections. Govin could of course present himself in his personal tracts as candidate for the function of Bourgmestre, but he could not claim he was the best man of IC, the man assigned by IC to become the next Bourgmestre. If IC could form a majority after the next elections, the man from that list with the most votes would be the Bourgmestre.

Desjardins reminded everyone of that result and told again that this principle would be an article in the election contract all candidates of the list of IC would have to sign.

The last vote was on the election list as presented by the Committee of the Wise. Albert Desjardins presented the amendment and its consequences. He asked me to say a few words in favour of the change. I was very brief. I only mentioned the people of Robois would not understand why a Bourgmestre in function and a very good Échevin, my colleague Nadine Dumortier, would be demoted to the last place by the Assembly of IC, whereas it was already widely known in Robois the Committee of the Wise had attributed us the place we claimed for the work done. The people of Robois might believe the IC members were dissatisfied with their own team of Cabinet Échevins. That fact would be detrimental to the IC Group during the elections. Disavowing people designated for the Cabinet by a political group meant acknowledging one's lack of discerning, the failing of judgment of IC in choosing excellent candidates.

Albert Desjardins then asked Yves Govin to plead his cause and to tell why he believed he was a better candidate than the present Bourgmestre to lead the IC list. Govin did not stand up. He let the Secretary of the UD Party speak in his stead. She looked at him with scorning eyes, then she mentioned one by one all the rumours that had been spread about me and Nadine Dumortier. She spoke of the suspicions of fraud and corruption, the preference for extremist, racist and even fascist groups hanging above my head, and she told the realisations of the present Cabinet could have been a lot better, due to my and Nadine's inactivity.

A few, angry shouts accompanied her when she brought forward her allegations of fraud. I seethed, but Nadine Dumortier sprang up on her chair before I could open my mouth, and she shouted the Secretary was a liar. She yelled without restraint that the rumours spread about her and the Bourgmestre had only Govin and UD leaders as source, which was a dirty scandal aimed to disgrace us to the voters. Nadine did not let the Secretary continue. She screamed higher, and she enumerated all the fine realisations of the Cabinet, which she counted on the fingers of both hands. She over-shouted the Secretary, so that the woman could not continue her slanderous speech. For a moment I considered drawing the Secretary to a Court of Justice for slander in public, but I remained calm, impassive, and admired how with justified anger Nadine Dumortier demolished the UDP Secretary. After Nadine Dumortier, Jean Sauvent rose from the audience. He also shouted his outrage at the allegations. He was a member of the Committee of the Wise, he argued, and never would that Committee have assigned Robert Jacquet had they for one second believed in the rumours.

I waved at Sauvent to stop, but he cried, 'no, Robert, no, I shall definitely not stop shouting how deeply hurt I feel having to listen to how the front figures of our group are thus slandered, an honest man and woman, and thereby a Cabinet that has worked so hard and so conscientiously these last years in so many fine initiatives for our town. I cry shame on you, members of IC and UDP, who do not fight to refute these allegations against our own best representatives. You are sawing the tree branch on which you are sitting! Don't you realise how stupid it would be to discredit our finest aces for the elections?' Sauvent became very red in the face, and I feared the man would collapse in his place, but he spoke to the end and then sank down, visibly exhausted. The words of Nadine and Jean were met by an awkward silence.

Albert Desjardins proposed then to vote for the list as prepared by the Committee of the Wise. The proposal was accepted by a very large majority of votes. More than four-fifths of the audience wanted me back at the head of the election list of the IC Group and Nadine come in second.

At that final verdict, their cause defeated, Yves Govin and a few members of the UD Party stood up from their chairs and left the Abbey Hall. They had totally lost face and authority in IC.

The General Assembly continued. A beaming Albert Desjardins explained the major campaign actions and the organisation of the campaign. The IC Group would form a team to elaborate tracts, and these tracts would show a group photo of the candidates. The tracts would be distributed in all the letter boxes of Robois. IC disposed of sufficient funds to place advertisements in the local newspapers. Desjardins would lead the campaign effort. He presented also the election contract to be signed by all candidates, stating that the signatures had to be presented to him, the President of IC, within a fortnight, so that the list of candidates could be presented officially to the press somewhere at the beginning of September. Candidates who refused to sign the contract would be excluded from the list. The audience agreed with a thundering applause.

When the session was declared terminated by Albert Desjardins, tens of people sprang to me, congratulating me with the result of the voting. As by miracle, Nadine Dumortier stood by my side, and we were considered the heroes of the evening. Yes, I said, Nadine and I would campaign together, for I thought her a fine Cabinet Échevin, and I meant that. Nadine showed her largest smile and nodded. We shook hands, kissed our friends the Walloon way, and made our exit under cheers.

I lingered in the Abbey courtyard afterwards, taking finally a good grasp of fresh air, looking at the stars of fortune high above, thanking the saints for our victory, Albert Desjardins came up to me. We were accompanied by a very enthusiastic bunch of sympathisers.

I shook Desjardins' hand.

'I must thank you, Albert, for the expert way you handled this meeting. Thank you also for your perpetual support,' I began. 'Without you, I might have abandoned the fight. You inspired me with the courage to hold on. I don't understand how fate can change so rapidly and totally in so short a time. That too is a lesson for me. How can the General Assembly have made decisions so different from the Office of Leaders?'

'There are two items,' Desjardins replied. 'First, the opinions of the activists and intellectuals of a group can be entirely different from the opinions of the common people. Leaders and intellectuals think, and in the thinking they can become confused. Not so with the down-to-earth common views. I always respected the views of the people, rather than those of the elite,

also in our party. Our leaders got caught by surprise the last time. They had time to hear the common people, the largest opinion. That made them think more, and change their views. They are not too proud of themselves, now, but they did the right thing in the end, for they set matters straight. Govin has been exposed for what he is worth, and that is not much. Second, your tract was a masterpiece of timing!’

‘What tract are you talking about?’ I asked.

‘What tract? This tract!’

Desjardins drew out of his pocket a single sheet of paper printed on both sides in black, no colour. The paper looked as if it had been printed with a laser printer of a personal computer. I took the sheet, plied it open, and saw on one side a refutation of all the slanders of fraud brought against me, the truth explained about each act. That paragraph was followed by a list of the fine realisations of the present Cabinet of Robois, assigned to my excellent management of the administration of Robois. On the other side of the paper stood a stylised drawing of the Castle of Trioteignes, and an extract from the archives of the castle of the year 1940, a text calling Alain Jacquet a hero of Trioteignes. I read in old words how my grandfather had helped to protect Trioteignes against German threats, and how he had helped Jewish people hide in the village during the war. The rest of the paper was an enthusiastically written eulogy of my person, character and deeds.

Albert Desjardins noticed my surprise as I read the paper.

‘Don’t tell me you haven’t seen this!’ he exclaimed.

‘I assure you I didn’t, Albert! This is the first time I set eyes on this tract. Look, the responsible editor is not me, but a name I don’t recognise, signed by the ‘Trioteignes Collective’, whatever that is, and the address printed is that of the castle.’

‘The Trioteignes obviously like you and trust you,’ Desjardins went on. ‘That paper was distributed by hand in all the letter boxes of the members of IC. I wonder how that collective laid its hands on a list of militants of ours. Even I don’t have such a comprehensive list! I know the young people of Trioteignes distributed the paper, the farmers’ sons and daughters of the villages of Trioteignes and Blouges, for my friends have seen them while they were doing it. The Trioteignes have money in three-fourths of the companies with buildings in the industrial zone of Robois. The Trioteignes are quiet people, but considered very solid. The people of Robois have concluded that Trioteignes and Blouges support you. And when those families support you, you have a considerable power behind you. You cannot but be an honest man, for otherwise you would not have received the confidence of the Trioteignes. The arguments of Govin and his cronies have been discredited, rejected, proven wrong, and his arguments have backlashed at him this evening. He deserves no better. You have won!’

I was more surprised than Albert Desjardins, and Albert laughed and grinned at my discomfiture. Yes, Trioteignes could prepare a few surprises of its own. I had not been alone in my battle. I too laughed then, and we embraced. We shouted that who loved us would have to follow us, and we drove to the bar of the Horse Bayard. I didn’t know that bar particularly well, but Joseph Bikri recommended it to me. We celebrated our victory there.

Monsieur François in person ordered the bar to be held open to deep in the night, as long as we didn’t cry our pleasure out too loudly. He served the drinks himself when his barmen went home. I guess somebody called the police for the noise in the bar, but the only policeman that came was Joseph Bikri in normal costume, not in uniform, and he was received with jeers of joy rather than with fear. He sang our songs of victory as loudly as we. He joined us and we continued till very late in the night.

At the end of the improvised feast, we sat only Desjardins, Joseph, Monsieur François and I at a table, utterly exhausted, but happy. We needed a catharsis for the tension of that memorable evening.

The Turgoux Case. Joseph Bikri

I could not be present at the great victory of my friend and confident Robert Jacquet in the hall of the Adelbert Abbey, but I feasted with him in the Horse Bayard. The orgy lasted until very late in the night, early in the morning, and I suffered from a very heavy head afterwards. Monsieur François, who assured us he had remained sober, a statement which I chose to believe, drove me and Robert to our homes. Our cars remained on the parking of the hotel. A terrible headache racked me in the morning and my stomach decided to send the wine and snacks to the contrary direction of the natural one. I needed the walk on foot to my office. I was still not thoroughly the normal alert man when Dominique Bussy ran into my office in the early afternoon.

‘Boss!’ she cried, making all the bells of Notre-Dame sound in my brain, ‘we have another murder on our hands! A woman has been killed in Turgoux. The emergency call centre passed the message to us.’

‘Then we have to go,’ I said reluctantly, ‘you drive! Call the team to follow us.’

Dominique was already at her phone, giving instructions in my name. It is interesting to have somebody who knows you better than yourself in your vicinity. How would I survive without Dominique? Why did I not marry her instead of that dark Samia who had enchanted me?

‘Should I phone the SER?’ Dominique asked.

‘Not yet,’ I shot back to her. ‘We must first find out what has really happened. The message may have been a joke.’

I hoped for the best, that morning.

We drove to Turgoux. Dominique followed the instructions of the GPS system in her car. I should have such a system installed in my car too, I thought. I did not like, though, a metallic female voice from a computer telling me what to do with my life. Too many women in flesh already told me that.

The murder or accident had happened in a street of fine, luxurious, grand, shining white villas in a green zone not far from the N11. I forbade Dominique to blast a siren. We arrived with flaring blue lights on our car, Dominique always liking some decorum, and we drove into a gravelled path past a high fence gate, to the front of a villa where about five people waited for us. Several people tried to console a small woman who shook with weeping. Her weeping sadly augmented when our police car drove by.

We got out of our car, Dominique elegantly and quickly, I rather laboriously. Dominique immediately jumped on to the weeping woman.

She said softly, ‘hi, Madame, I am Officer Dominique Bussy. Can somebody tell me what happened?’

An elderly man in a white shirt, who supported the weeping woman, a man with a big paunch that hung over his trousers and with a very red face of puffy cheeks, answered, ‘I am a neighbour, the neighbour to the right, there. My wife is a friend of the woman who lives in the

villa next doors, this villa, here. My wife wanted to pay a visit to her friend. The husband of our neighbour died a few months ago, so my wife comes over to talk to our neighbour almost once every day. My wife found the door of the villa half open and she went inside. She shouted the name of our neighbour, but heard nothing, so she went on. She found our neighbour lying in the living-room in a large pool of blood. It is a horrible sight, officer, all that blood! My wife screamed and screamed and ran out of the house gripped by panic. I heard the screaming and came to here. My wife told me what had happened, so I too went in to have a look. Then, I called the emergency service from my mobile phone. I always have my mobile phone with me.'

I had drawn myself with much courage to next to the man, and asked, nodding to the weeping woman, 'is this your wife? My name, by the way, is Superintendent Joseph Bikri.'

'Yes, Superintendent. I'm afraid she is still much in shock from what she has seen!'

'So much is obvious, and that is quite understandable. Look, why don't you all go home, we'll take over from here. Have a nice cup of tea or coffee, eat something, maybe just a little thing, rest awhile, try to relax, and within half an hour we will come to your house and hear your story at your ease. Try to remember everything you saw. Does that suit you? We are grateful for your help, but now we have to block this house off and start our investigation. I would only like to know your names for now, and the name of the victim, please.'

'My name is Victor Candribert, Superintendent, and my wife's name is Christine, Christine Labi, and the woman in the house is called Marianne Tamin.'

'Thank you so much,' I said, taking the man gently at the shoulders and drawing him into the path out of the villa.

'Now, please, you all,' I begged, 'let the police do its work! Please go home! We are going to take over from here. If somebody of you has seen or heard anything in or around this villa, please give your names to officer Dominique, here. Otherwise, please go home! Thank you for your cooperation! We appreciated your coming and your help.'

The people began to leave, and apparently nobody had seen anything of value, for they all left. The people remained talking in the street.

'Boss,' Dominique whispered, 'your tie hangs to starboard, your shirt is still open at the neck by two buttons, and your shirt drops out of your pants. Draw your jacket tight, and you forgot your cap in the car. Also, your stomach grumbles like a steam engine. Didn't your mama give you something to eat today?'

'Dominique, thank you. I'm sorry. We feasted the victory of the Bourgmestre a bit too long yesterday.'

'Yes, I know,' Dominique replied. 'The night team told me. They considered intervening, because you made so much noise the entire town of Robois could hear you. They supposed it was the Bourgmestre. They heard of the IC meeting too! Yves Govin got licked by Robert Jacquet. If you were among that lot in the Horse Bayard, I'd say you and they were lucky they did not intervene. You would have been forced to invite them to join you. A fine image you give of the police to the good people of Robois.'

'We intimately share the sorrows and joys of our citizens, Dominique! Robert Jacquet is my best friend,' I dared to propose as an excuse.

'I know. Fine friends you have, Superintendent,' Dominique commented.

'You women don't know what it is to have friends,' I sneered.

'Oh but we do, we do, Superintendent. My dad had friends. Same story!'

'Your dad was a police officer, and a fine one,' I protested vehemently. 'He recommended me to take special care of you. You should respect your dad!'

'Ha!' sniffed Dominique Bussy, and she hurried out in front of me.

While I brought order in my accoutrement, two police cars with my men in it arrived. I appreciated the reinforcements. I asked them to block the villa and to direct the people farther away. Then, accompanied by Dominique, I entered the house. The walls of the villa were pure white, spotlessly whitewashed on the outside, and the garden in front was well maintained. I could discover no weeds, but then, there exist weeds I often confuse with real useful plants, and vice versa. In the corridor behind the door we found fine, old furniture, expensive vases which I made a mental note of to avoid, and nice paintings on the walls, no reproductions, the real stuff. Wealthy people lived in this villa! Or had lived. We stepped from a large side door of the corridor, a glass door, right into a spacious living-room, which was furnished with what looked like yet other antiquarian furniture, massive oak and mahogany cupboards, fine paintings of landscapes on the walls, a large leather sofa and two leather chairs, and an expensive home cinema installation of electronic devices around a huge television screen. A splendid blue, silk Chinese tapestry lay on the ground. On that tapestry stood an exquisite low, black lacquered table with a glass top, and between that table and the television set lay a woman. She was fully dressed, but part of her robe was drawn up a little from her legs. She lay with her head on the tapestry, her back to us, and her head rested sideways in a large pool of coagulated blood that would certainly ruin the silk tapestry forever.

My stomach turned, so I looked away. Dominique didn't even blemish. That woman had a stomach like a cement mixer, while mine was of a more delicate nature that day. The woman wore a dress of red flowers on a white background. We saw her throat was cut. We touched nothing, turned only a little around the woman, did not really step on the tapestry. 'This is the same kind of murder as the one of Magda Balin,' Dominique muttered, and I nodded.

I was quite sober by that time. Crimes have that effect on me, especially such ones as we saw here.

'It is not exactly the same scene,' I disagreed. 'This woman is not a prostitute, though also a somewhat elderly woman, older than Magda Balin, I guess. She is not naked, but look, her dress lies high up. She may have been raped. Do you see any sharp object, a knife?'

'No, nothing, boss. I already looked for that. Nothing had been disturbed in this room, boss. Maybe the woman knew her assassin.'

Dominique knelt and looked carefully under the sofa and under the chairs. She went to the corners of the room and looked there too.

'No knife here, Superintendent,' Dominique announced. 'No knife, just like in the Balin house!'

When Dominique has something on her mind, it can be difficult to make her change opinions. 'A fight there has been,' I remarked. 'I can see the marks of how she clawed in the leather chair, here. No vases or objects are standing anywhere in this room, a wise decision, so maybe that is why the place looks so tidy and untouched. Forensics may find some DNA of the murderer on her fingernails. I think we should call the SER now, Dominique. Can you call your Inspector Danlois now?'

'He is not my Inspector Danlois yet,' Dominique grinned back at me, reddening, 'but I'll call him nevertheless.'

While Dominique phoned I went out of the living-room to venture into the adjacent dining-room and then into the kitchen. I found these rooms equally tidy, the sign of well-to-do people. From the kitchen I reached again the corridor. The corridor apparently passed through the entire length of the villa. I wanted to open the door to the back garden, the door at the end, but that door was still closed. I remembered too late I should have put on gloves. I found a

pair in my jacket and put them on, turned the key that stood in the lock, opened, peered outside, and saw a lawn surrounded by beds of plants and flowers and bushes. Two wooden rocking chairs stood around a table. I closed the door again, turned the key too, and walked to the stairs.

I went upstairs. I came on a landing with three closed doors and another staircase leading to the attic. The first door led to a large bedroom with nice, oak furniture, and a fine view on the back garden. In the far I could distinguish through a haze the low, square buildings of the industrial zone of Turgoux, but in between lay extended vast fields of corn. The corn stood high, its stalks gently swaying in the afternoon breeze. I detected no corridors in the corn, no car or other vehicle could have passed there. A man might have walked in the corn, but the distance was far, and with the door to the back garden still closed from the inside, the murderer must have come from the street.

The second door was an equally vast bathroom, nicely cleaned, no sign of a fight in here. The third door led to a small corridor that brought me to yet two more rooms. I first discovered another bedroom and then, on the far end, a large room that had been used as an office. Here stood a table with a powerful personal computer, and a stereo installation of an expensive brand. Against the wall stood bookcases with books on history and philosophy. Next to that room I found another, smaller room, filled also with bookcases along the wall and in the middle, almost a library.

I went back to the first bedroom. I opened a few drawers and found one drawer in front of the bed filled with jewel boxes, the jewels still neatly displayed in their velvet linings. In another drawer I saw a wallet and a thick packet of banknotes, notes of fifty and twenty Euro. Any thief would have found those in five minutes. In the wallet, which I took out with two fingers, I found two credit cards. I looked around, opened drawers and cupboards, but saw nothing interesting except the obvious signs of wealth and opulence. I went back down the stairs. I saw a lady's handbag stand on a side table in the corridor, opened it, and found also a wallet in there, no banknotes. Some money might have been stolen from that bag. The murderer had not sought through the house.

Dominique Bussy stood at the door, talking to the other officers.

'All right, Dominique,' I said to her, 'let's have a quick conversation with the neighbours, and then our job will be over for the day.'

Dominique threw me a reproaching glance, but she also nodded and accompanied me to the neighbouring villa. This villa was almost the twin example of the one in which we had found the victim, probably constructed by the same entrepreneur, which might well have been Robert Jacquet's firm. I rang the bell.

The same man to whom I had talked next doors opened. He invited us in to his living-room, where his wife sat on a chair, very straight, still dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. She was a small woman, but her face was nice and still beautiful for her age, with fine auburn hair in curls, brown eyes, thin lips. She had changed from her bright summer dress into a black silk dress, more appropriate for the circumstances, I remarked.

'We set some coffee, Superintendent,' her husband said thoughtfully. 'Would you care for a cup with us?'

I nodded thankfully. I could need another pot of coffee this afternoon. Dominique once more scolded me with her eyes.

She said to the man, 'I'll come with you to the kitchen,' but that was only a subterfuge to let me alone with the woman.

‘I am terribly sorry for what happened to your friend, Mrs Candribert. I would like to know whether you have seen or heard anything special yesterday afternoon or in the evening or during the night, at the house of your friend?’

‘Not much, Superintendent. We are pensioners, my husband and I. We go early to bed and we are good sleepers. We were friends of the Tamins, very good friends indeed. My husband and I, we were teachers, you know, and Marianne’s husband was a University Professor, also a pensioner. My husband and Marianne’s husband, though very different in character, got along very well. They both enjoyed a glass of wine. Marianne was quite a few years younger than her husband. Marianne still works. She is a nurse in Brussels. She works odd hours, because she is the Director of a department of nurses at her hospital. She also does night shifts now and then, though less than before. She is really a nice person. Her husband died five months ago. He died of a brain tumour. He died very rapidly, and that came as a terrible shock to us, for we were quite close. We went on holidays together, our husbands fished together. We had been to Djerba together in October of last year, and we were planning for a trip to Turkey in Autumn, maybe for a cruise in the Adriatic.’

‘So you did not hear any special noise yesterday, you saw nothing out of the ordinary around your friend’s villa?’

‘No, I didn’t. I heard her drive into her villa around five o’clock in the afternoon, open her garage door and take the car immediately into the garage. She always did that. She rarely left her car outdoors at night. She could have opened her garage door from out of her car, but she told me her remote control did not work anymore, so she had to tape a numeric code on the pad. I heard her drive in. She closed the garage door. That would have made me stop worry about her. She was safe in! That is all I remember.’

‘You heard no alarm ring?’

‘Oh no, not at all! I forgot, yes, Marianne had an elaborate alarm system installed. Her system is even connected by phone to a call centre, but the siren did not go off. We know that siren, my husband and I, for she tries it out every month. She always tells us beforehand when she tests her alarm system, and I can assure you the entire street hears that siren of hers! No, yesterday, that siren did not blow! When Marianne is out, she always activates the alarms. Also at night, but then she only activates the alarms for the rooms downstairs.’

‘Did other people but you visit your friend?’

‘Very rarely, Superintendent. Marianne has a son and a daughter living in Brussels, but it was usually she who visited them, not they her. She said she preferred to be cooked for than to cook herself! A good cook she is not. Her children are nice people, though. We always see them at Christmas and New Year. We have no children, my husband and I. Marianne’s boy and girl were like children to us too.’

At that moment, Victor Candribert and Dominique entered the living-room. Dominique wore a large wooden tray with a coffee pot, cream, sugar, and the cups. The coffee steamed. My stomach lurched at the sight. Victor trotted behind her. The Candriberts took yet another cup of coffee with us. Victor had of course forgotten the cakes, so he was scolded by his wife and whipped back into the kitchen. He went, and came back two seconds later with a plate of sliced cake. Dominique said thank you to the offer, I sunk my teeth in the delicious treats. Christine Candribert served the coffee.

While sipping the very hot coffee as if I was finally reborn into the land of humans, I repeated my question to the Candriberts, ‘do you know whether Mrs Tamin received male friends, or even female friends lately?’

‘No, no,’ Mrs Candribert answered impatiently, immediately. ‘She lived absolutely alone. We were the only friends she received in her house. She had no friends, no new friends either, at least not that we knew of, and Marianne would have told me right away of such encounters.’

She was a very dignified person, Marianne, very well educated. She had her work, and that mattered much to her. Her colleagues all live in Brussels.'

I then addressed Victor Candribert, asking, 'and you, Monsieur Candribert, have you noticed anything out of the ordinary yesterday, or maybe even the preceding days?'

'Well, Superintendent, now you mention it, there was something odd. I wonder whether it may have something to do with what we found in Marianne's villa, but there was something that struck me as strange, indeed.'

'What was that?' I urged him on, biting in my third cake and accepting a second cup.

'You may have noticed our street here is actually a dead end,' Victor continued. 'Therefore, it is a very quiet street, one of the reasons we came to build here. There is a roundabout a few villas farther, so you can turn back but not drive on. Beyond are the farmers' fields. Yesterday afternoon I was tending my garden, just doing some raking beside the house, and I saw a man walking slowly in our street. I first saw him a while off, then he came up to here. He looked to right and left as if he were studying our villas. He was still young, late twenties, maybe early thirties, and I wondered what he was doing here instead of being at work. He was nobody I knew, not one of the neighbours, and I know everyone in this street! He just walked, hands on his back, to and fro even, for I saw him walk towards the end of our road and come back a little later. I wondered whether I should go up to the man and ask him whether he was looking for something or somebody, but then our telephone rang, my brother was on the phone, and I went inside.'

'What time was that?'

'Somewhat before five, maybe four thirty in the afternoon.'

'Was it the first time you saw that man?'

'Actually no, now I come to think of it! I saw him a few days ago out of my car. He was strolling along the beginning of our street, but still on the N11, and I have seen him before on the N11 itself. He must live in the neighbourhood, maybe on the N11.'

'Could you describe him?'

'He was a young man, strong, heavy muscles, broad-chested, dressed in black, black leather jacket and dark blue jeans. Nice jacket, not one like of the Hell's Angels drivers, no metal on it. He had a heavy, square face, black hair, dark eyes, clean shaven, hooked nose.'

'Thank you. I have not yet mentioned this, but the *Service d'Enquête et de Recherche*, the SER, may still call you in to ask you some questions too. Would you collaborate in making a robot portrait of that man?'

'I could try, Superintendent. I didn't see the man from close by, though.'

There was nothing more I might have asked of the Candriberts. I stood up, thanked the couple, and I went back with Dominique to the villa of the crime.

Dominique whispered to me, 'the SER has arrived, Superintendent. The man standing at the door is Inspector Danlois.'

Dominique put up her nicest smile.

'Oh you great deceiver, you naughty Cleopatra,' I thought.

I looked at Dominique. I would meet her beau for the first time.

Danlois was a fine young Inspector, in his early thirties. He was very handsome in a very male way and he looked seriously at us. He said hello to me and gave me a firm grip of hands. Dominique introduced me to him. His face was bright, of one used to smile amiably, but not to laugh. His eyes glowed darkly and penetrating, but here was still a lot of innocence, expectation and youth in them. He was dressed casually but smartly, in a cream shirt, nice brown tie and dark blue costume of trousers and jacket. He too was broad-chested. I thought he must have no difficulty at all in charming Dominique, for he was more handsome than any

policeman in my squad. But then, Dominique out of uniform and in a dress, was quite a girl too!

Danlois said, 'I have just arrived, Superintendent. My boss sends me to the outskirts of Namur, now. Young men must drive, he says. What is this with Robois? I am beginning to know your town by heart. Robois draws crime to it, I believe! Oh, oh, it draws in the journalists too!'

At that moment indeed, three cars of the press arrived at full speed. They screeched to a halt nearby. Journalists and photographers began to run in the street. Two journalists we both knew began to ask us what had happened, and Danlois hurried off so that it was to me to explain whatever I wanted to say. I saw him disappear inside. He did not like journalists too much, Danlois. My message was brief. I said a heinous murder had been committed, and an investigation was on. Then also the camera team of the local television station arrived, and they brought their camera on a shoulder and started to shoot. A journalist came to me with a microphone. I repeated my message. To add to the chaos, the ambulance drove to us. The journalists were distracted by the sound and the lights of the white and red car, but the cameraman continued to point at me and then at the ambulance. They would have an exciting story for this evening. I asked my men to clear the entry, to let the ambulance in, but to push everybody else back. The journalists and a crowd of more people receded into the street, where the journalists began to interview the neighbours.

I had not been in the garage of the villa yet, so I discreetly stepped back and disappeared also in the house. I went into the corridor and opened the door that led to the garage. I had already remarked a digital pad outside of the garage door. I found a similar one inside, near the door that led into the corridor from the garage, and next to that pad was another one for the alarm system. Was it possible for a man to slide in under the closing door of the garage when the victim had parked her car, preferably unseen, waiting until she had deactivated the alarms for her house? Such a scenario was very plausible. It might have happened that way. It was true the woman had worn a fine dress, not the kind one wears at home when one is alone. I imagined Marianne getting out of her car, forming the number to close the garage door and then deactivate the alarms, a few seconds during which she would have her back turned to the outside, then go through the door to her corridor, hang her coat in a closet, go to the living-room, and then being surprised from behind by the criminal. Why would a criminal want to enter a house but to steal? Instead of stealing, the man had instantly killed the woman, maybe after raping her. The woman's bag still lay on a side-table in the corridor. The aggressor had merely taken some money out of her wallet in that bag, but stolen no money from her bedroom. Had he been disturbed by something or was he confused by the murder? The only reason, however, I could think of the aggression, was the urge to kill for pleasure, and to kill swiftly, by complete surprise, simply cut a throat, a compulsion the murderer could not repulse. I went into the corridor, and encountered there Inspector Danlois who descended the stairs. He also had taken a look upstairs.

'Strange,' he said, 'nothing of importance was stolen, although quite a lot of money lies in a drawer of her bedroom. That is very odd. The woman may have been raped, Superintendent, then killed. She wore no pants, the pants have disappeared. Have you touched the body?'

'No, I wouldn't do that,' I replied. 'I also used gloves. I may have touched that handle of the door to the garden, though.'

'Have you noticed the lipstick colouring?'

'What lipstick colour?'

'You didn't turn the body!'

‘No, of course not.’

‘A thick smear of lipstick red colour was applied around the lips of the woman,’ Danlois said.

‘Why would one do that?’

‘I have no idea, Superintendent. You haven’t turned Magda Balin over either, have you? She too had rough lipstick smeared around her lips. We didn’t find any lipstick dispenser in her house, though, and here too I found no such thing. The aggressor must have put it in his pocket. I should not tell you this, Superintendent, but I believe the same murderer has been at work here. If that leaks out in the press, you are going to have a wave of hysterical panic among the women of your town!’

I remained standing silently in front of Danlois for quite a few seconds, my mind racing.

Then I exclaimed, ‘oh sweet, sweet God, what else now?’

I turned, then came back to Danlois and mentioned, ‘Inspector Danlois, the neighbour to the right may have something for you. His wife found the body, but she knows nothing. Her husband, a pensioner, saw a person sauntering in the street. From the description he gave me, a robot picture could be drawn. You have artists in your service. When you get to such a portrait, please send it to me. I might recognise the man.’

‘Yes, I’ll do that,’ Danlois replied. ‘Thank you for the tip. We will take fingerprints and DNA samples, of course. The service is on its way.’

‘This guy is a pro, and a careful pro, Inspector. He wore gloves at Magda Balin’s, he probably wore gloves here, too. DNA comparisons might give something, but that will serve only after having caught him, not before. We have still nothing in hand.’

I turned again to the door, wanting to leave, but Danlois held me back.

‘Superintendent,’ he said, ‘thank you for that list of guests of the Horse Bayard. I checked on the men you highlighted. Blandis is the Director for Security of several companies of the same group as Aeolfast and Recycfast. He is a former policeman, you know. He left the force of Brussels a few years ago to earn much more money in private companies. He has a record of being ruthless. His superiors seemed to have been quite happy when he left. The other men are all hoodlums, known to the police for one or other misdeed, but only petty crimes, thefts, minor assaults in bars, some drug dealing, and so on. They are small grit with a past. What they are not is common labourers. None of them owns a diploma of some sort or is known to have worked in some trade or other. So I agree with you, what are they doing, together, as a group, in Robois, around a security specialist? Why would somebody like Blandis use hoodlums instead of men with a past in the security business? We should think this over, find a way to call them in and interrogate them. I have nothing to go on, though, my boss will never agree to call them to our offices with what I have now.’

‘Neither do I,’ I said. ‘How about your search for missing persons?’

‘We found only three unsolved murders in Brussels. Two throats cut, one battered to death. Three murders inside houses, not on the street. I did not get too many details. The reports will be sent to me, but that can take several days more.’

‘Are you convinced now we have a compulsive serial murderer here?’ I asked Danlois.

‘Yes I am. We should be quick, more murders may follow. The guy seems to have gone into a frantic mode. The murders follow each other rapidly! One thing is certain: sooner or later he will make a mistake.’

‘And a new murder,’ I whispered.

Danlois nodded.

‘Could you trail the gang?’ he asked.

‘That would take three teams of two policemen a day and if the gang splits, a lot more officers. I cannot spare my policemen for such duties. No, trailing a suspected gang with so

little to hold on is not feasible. We can keep guard at certain moments, but in the end that may prove to be counter-productive and we are not capable of sustaining such an effort for more than a few days.'

I left Danlois thinking, shouted to Dominique I would return to the office. I told her to join me later in another car. She threw me her keys.

Danlois then cried after me, 'we could call them in, nevertheless!'

I shouted back, 'how would that be? Why? When?'

'When we have the robot picture. Likeness or not, you recognise one of them, and we call them in. I tell nothing to my boss.'

I grinned, went back up to him, 'willing to take risks?'

'Yes,' Danlois replied, 'yes! Your list of men is the only element we have. It would be stupid not to use it. I do have my hands free, anyhow. I would prefer the interrogation to be held in the police office of Robois, with just you and me.'

'What your boss doesn't know doesn't hurt?'

'Something like that. Are you in? We simply go to Recycfast, tell we want to see those guys, pick them up with your entire force the same day, within the half hour, and then we ask them where they were at certain dates and times, and hear them out. If nothing comes out, no harm done.'

'But we would have to keep them an entire day in. We cannot call one in today and the other tomorrow.'

'I know. Do you want to do it?'

'With the robot picture in hand, of course,' I replied, but knowing I was putting my career on the block if not my head, the same for Danlois. 'Are you very sure you want to take the risk?'

'I am,' said the young Danlois, and I admired his daring. He was a good policeman.

'All right. When? Me and you, in Robois.'

'Not this week. Not the next week. I must be sure we have a decent robot picture, maybe some analysis of fingerprints and DNA from today. In the week after. I would have liked it to be earlier, but it can't be done earlier. Can you prepare the room and questions?'

'Sure. I'll phone you end of next week, or if you find something better you call me.'

'I'll do that.'

Danlois was a man of few words and high efficiency. We would get along quite well.

I remembered my car at the Horse Bayard, then, and decided to drive to there and to leave the police car parked in the neighbourhood. More journalists drove near when I sneaked out of the street of Marianne Tamin.

Campaigns

Robert Jacquet, back at the head of the IC elections list, kicked his election campaign off at the end of August, which was rather late. He first had to think of the campaign of the IC Group. He asked for a meeting once a week with an Election Committee of IC. All the candidates of IC Group were supposed to be members of that committee, as well as a few leaders, such as the President Albert Desjardins. Desjardins was chosen also to head it. During the first meeting, a few basic agreements were discussed. Candidates of one village or of a few adjacent villages, could team up to conceive a common publicity tract. They might help each other to find places where posters could be planted. Courtesy commanded that if

somebody else from the list wanted to add his or her poster at those same places, permission would have to be asked. No tract could be published without the consent of the President. He would control whether the tract remained positive in content, contained no libel against candidates of the same list, and also no negative personal attacks against candidates of other lists. Needless to say, Yves Govin never participated in any of those meetings, but the other candidates came regularly, and the atmosphere was nice.

The IC Group had assembled a war chest from a part of the salary of each Cabinet Member and other political positions. The money would be used now for the publicity of the IC Group as a whole, not for its individual candidates. Posters with the group photo would be printed, distributed and placed at crucial street corners by the smaller teams. Accounts of the actions would be given at each meeting.

The son of Albert Desjardins was an information technology freak. He would receive money from the war chest to construct an Internet website for IC. On that site would be placed the group photo, individual presentations of all the candidates in a standardised way, an article with the realisations of the current Cabinet, the IC Group's program for the elections and a ten-point plan for major new realisations which IC promised to fulfil in the next legislature. The war machine of IC began to roll with speed, organisation and efficiency.

At the end of August also, Diego and Laura Trioteignes phoned Robert Jacquet. They were ready to meet him and Simone Ash. Robert accepted gladly. He never refused help. Their first meeting took place in the living-room of Robert's lodge. Samia Bennani was also present, for she insisted she wanted to help during the elections. The meeting was cordial, the ice broken rapidly. Laura Trioteignes was appointed head of the campaign, Diego head of operations. In one afternoon they wrote a list of everything that had to be done from writing the texts of the election tracts to the graphic design of the flyers and posters, ordering the wooden panels to glue the posters on, finding pickets to nail the panels to, assembling a list of farmers and other landowners who accepted posters on their fields along the streets and avenues, finding sympathisers in the urban areas who accepted posters on their windows, printing the publicity tracts, and distributing the flyers. Teams would be sent out to ring at doors and propose a candidate, actions would be organised at the railway and bus stations in Robois. An odd point of discussion was how Chinese walls could be built between the addresses, flyers, posters and so on for on the one side Robert and on the other Simone, but a compromise was reached. One could hardly plant a poster of Robert right next to a poster of Simone. The situation was odd, and resulted in occasional protests when one team infringed on the turf of the other, when one 'recruited' a poster place under the nose of the other candidate. Laura played the reconciling boss. She had a natural charisma and authority everybody respected and accepted.

Diego and Laura came back for further meetings at Robert's lodge, every three days, and each time they arrived with more young people. The team grew out to a never-ending source of new, extravagant but quite feasible ideas for publicity, and the young people found any talent they needed to realise their ideas. One friend was studying marketing, another one was a graphist, yet another a web designer, one knew how to play on the social network software such as Facebook and Twitter for added publicity. Their campaign would be an example of the use of new technologies and concepts. Diego even brought a carpenter to the group, and muscles they had all.

Rose could not remain idle when so many other young people worked entire days. She began to help with the work. She carried materials to the ones who worked. After a while, she did not need more instructions than the rest of the youngsters. Diego warned the workers to watch

out what Rose did with hammer, pliers, saw and nails, but she hit the nails as straight as anybody else. She would come to stand next to somebody working quite a while, studying every movement, and then she repeated exactly the same, only better. Her interest did not waver, and when she gave a remark, she was listened to.

Samia Bennani helped by cooking for the gang and by preparing drinks. The group was often satisfied with pizza's or Spaghetti Bolognaise, but Samia proved she was the best baker in town. She made cakes and pastries and scones for tea. Robert also came to work whenever he could in the garage and the open space. Simone Ash arrived almost every evening. Samia drew Joseph Bikri to Robert's lodge like a fly to the light, of course, so Joseph often helped next to Samia.

Robert's lodge was constituted of several wings, in which were two large garages. One of those was rapidly transformed into a workshop for Diego, and the other into a warehouse. Robert had to park his car in another place. I had barely the place to put my car. The space behind the wing, hidden from eyes peering from the front of the house, became the place where posters would be glued together and the panels nailed to pickets. Robert had to keep his friends of IC away from that workshop, especially Nadine Dumortier, for posters and flyers of Simone lay mixed with his own.

On one of those evenings, Robert sat exhausted in his sofa with Simone Ash. It was late in the evening.

Robert started, 'Simone, we have several matters to clear up between us. First, I love you. I must now have repeated that so many times already you must get bored with it. I find you are just wonderful, the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on, and I am surprised each time I look at you I manage finding something new and delicious in your face I admire.' 'Only in my face?' Simone wondered, seemingly chiding Robert, but grinning at the same time.

'Simone, stop grinning! I love everything of you, also the way you think. I want to live with you. I therefore formally ask you to marry me. I want you for me alone. I have a little box here with an engagement ring in it, which I hope you will accept. I'm really too tired to get on my knees, I fear they shall creak and buckle under me, and I also do find that custom medieval, but I do ask you to link your fate to mine for the rest of our lives.'

Simone admitted she had expected Robert's plea.

She replied, 'Robert, I love you too. I thought it impossible still to love a man, but I've fallen in love with you. You are particularly handsome, you know! Nevertheless, you know nothing of me. I have been quite a wild girl before. I've had lovers and some of them used me badly. I can never tell anyone all the gore details, also not you, especially not you, because if I told you all, you might possibly call me a dirty slut and dump me. I have changed a lot, though. I needed years to form my character. I had to understand why nasty, totally egoistic, unfeeling people could live in this world beside me, and abuse of persons without scruples or emotions of empathy. As long as I did not come to that comprehension, which was really very hard for me to accept as truth, I was very much confused. I fled England because of that, and I thought at first I would hate to live in countryside Belgium, whereas I had been a queen of London nights, but now I am enjoying my life. I had to learn there is exquisite reward in little things, in simply saying hello to nice people and receive a happy smile in return, for buying your own bread at the bakery of the village and chat with the housewives, in getting involved as a Cabinet member with the sorrows and joys of a town, in the feasts of the citizens. I live a rebirth, a redemption, a cleansing of the spirit here, and I know I could live the rest of my life in that way. My work in the hospital is gratifying, too, on many levels. I even began to think

of children, although my age advances. You know I am tied to nobody, though, not by obligations nor by feelings, except to you. I hated all men when I arrived from England, Robert. I was out for revenge. I wanted to hurt the men that tried to accost me. It was my bad luck the one who reached me turned out to be you, a thoroughly good man. Are you sure you want a wicked girl? Could you stand before a guy in a street who says suddenly, I slept with your wife, old chap, and she was quite a good piece? Could you face that?’

Robert Jacquet had to reflect on that. Her last phrase was very hard on him.

‘I think I know how you are, now, at this moment, and how you act now. I don’t marry a girl of a past, but a woman of today. You have a kind heart. Oh yes, I would like us to marry. You know I too have lived a tough experience with my former wife, and I had a few adventures before her. We have arrived at a certain stage of wisdom and of chastening. But I’d better take a few boxing lessons, for a guy in front of me who claims he slept with you I will have to hit.’

Simone laughed, ‘well, then, my dear, dear Robert, yes, I want to marry you. There are consequences and issues, though, with our marrying.’

‘Such as?’

‘For one, there is Rose. How will Rose react on my marrying you and see us sleeping together in the same room?’

‘I shall have to talk to Rose, of course. We can build our linked presence up gradually, and watch her reactions. In theory, love should be able to solve most of the issues.’

‘I hope so,’ Simone chuckled. ‘There are also the elections of October of this year. If we announce today we are going to marry, I should stop my candidature. The issue is that the Party counts on me, and I don’t mean the institution, the organisation, but the people of flesh and blood, my friends and confidants. I would feel very, very guilty and egoistic to drop them like a stone today.’

‘That is a real issue indeed. Once married, only one of us can be a Councillor. The law demands that. Still, I also am willing to resign as Bourgmestre to marry you. But we do not have to marry immediately. How about giving us two years to sort these issues out? In the meantime, we can be engaged in secrecy, known only to very few people. We can see each other often. Imagine the faces of my and your friends in politics when we announce to them we are going to marry! It will be the sensation of the town!’

‘We could remain lovers for a while, yes. The secrecy adds some more spice to our relation. We shall play hide and seek with our fellow-citizens like two adolescents who do it in their cars!’

‘Don’t mock it, Simone! It seems to me the only way to remain honourable, both of us, considering our obligations.’

‘Honourable? Being a lover isn’t honourable for a woman, Robert. Nevertheless, I agree. It will have to do. There is no expiration date on the wedding book the Belgian authorities deliver. We had better be very sure about our feelings and wishes, and seek what we want from a wedding. A little time would be beneficial.’

‘I don’t need any waiting time to be sure I want to marry you, and you alone.’

‘Fine then. Where is that ring you had?’

Robert laughed, for he had forgotten all about the ring. He brought the little box wrapped in dark blue gift paper from behind his back. Simone accepted it happily and also a little greedily. She tore at the paper, saw the letters Bulgari printed on the box and gasped. She understood Robert had been more than extravagant for her. In opening the box she discovered on a red velvet field a ring with on top a large blue diamond, surrounded all over the ring by

numerous tiny natural pearls in a golden background. The ring was of gold. She slid the heavy jewel on her finger. It fitted not too well.

‘The ring must be adjusted,’ Robert explained, ‘but in the shop where I bought it, the seller assured me that could be done in a day or two. We would have to go to the shop, though.’

‘Where is the shop?’

‘Place des Vosges, in Paris,’ Robert mentioned.

‘You are asking me to Paris for our engagement holiday?’

‘I sure am, darling, but it will either have to be a very short visit or to take place after the elections!’

‘I choose for after the elections, in that case. I demand one week of Paris in a very fine hotel with extremely large beds. Rose can come too is she can stand me kissing you all the time, but I want her in a room of her own.’

‘She should indeed learn to stand me kissing you all the time,’ Robert smiled.

Robert and Simone announced their engagement to Rose, to Samia and to Joseph Bikri, to Simone’s family and to the Trioteignes. The declarations were happy occasions, with surprise and joy. When Simone Ash explained to Samia Bennani how happy she was, Joseph Bikri, the Superintendent, noticed how Samia, even though she congratulated Simone honestly and warmly, remained a little sad and pensive.

Joseph contrived therefore to be alone with Samia a few evenings later. He worked with Samia in the garage of Robert’s lodge, after a session of frantic preparations by Robert’s and Simone’s hectic campaign teams. They stacked the last posters to a wall and intended to join Robert and Simone later. These were discussing lists of people who might vote for them and who they should approach personally. Samia wiped the sweat of her forehead, washed her hands in the sink and wanted to go into the corridor, when Joseph held back Samia’s arm. He said, ‘Samia, I have still something to ask you.’

Samia turned her eyes to Joseph.

‘Samia,’ Joseph continued solemnly, ‘I am a Superintendent of the Belgian police. I don’t earn much money, but sufficient to found and raise a family. I fell in love with you. I too brought an engagement ring for you, bought not in Paris but in Namur, and I hope it will please you. Samia Bennani, will you please marry me?’

Samia, contrary to Simone Ash, had not thought Joseph Bikri would declare so rapidly. Her eyes went wide, her mouth screamed, and she brought her hands to her face, weeping and laughing at the same time. Then she flung herself on Joseph, buried him under passionate kisses, and truly wept hot tears. She had fallen in love with Youssouf, of course, and she could not imagine a more tender and thoughtful man. She immediately knew also that this meant she could stay indefinitely in Belgium, without the constant fear of ever being evicted, and she would have a home and she could study. Joseph offered her liberty and honour.

‘Before you say yes,’ Youssouf continued, ‘we have to agree on a few things. I still have my father and mother and a family living in Belgium. I do not want to hurt them by not marrying in the Muslim faith. We will have to find a very tolerant mullah to marry us. If we have children, I would like them to be educated in the Muslim faith, but I would rather prefer to teach them the Koran myself rather than send them to a Sharia school. I want them to be Belgians and to respect our law.’

‘I don’t want my daughters to wear a chador, and even less a niqab or a burka,’ Samia warned.

‘They won’t. I shall see to that. Our children shall be Belgians.’

‘I want to continue study law and become a Belgian lawyer, maybe specialised in Islamic Law. I want to be your equal.’

‘That you are,’ Yousseuf nodded.

Robert and Simone heard the screaming in the garage. They thought an accident had occurred, but they found only Samia and Joseph entangled in an impetuous, ardent embrace. It was time once more for congratulations then, and Robert went to his cellar to fetch his famous bottles of Champagne.

Samia shouted, ‘I must still open my box!’

She did so in the living-room, and found a gold ring with a large white diamond on it, set between smaller emeralds. It was a splendid ring, much more splendid than she thought someone like Yousseuf could afford.

‘You spent a fortune,’ Samia sighed.

‘You are worth it, Samia. I have set some money aside. I live frugally, you know. The emeralds reminded me of your eyes,’ Joseph remarked.

He was rewarded with a torrent of more kisses.

‘My lodge will bring us both luck,’ Robert concluded. ‘It has heard two demands for marriage in one week. Whatever nasty can still happen to us? Fate has turned, my friends! We have luck on our side. I drink to our happy marriages. May our marriages last, and in the meantime, we must enjoy our loves, for isn’t that the most precious possession on earth we have and can grow on?’

The Aeolfast project for modern windmills in Robois ran its course, the papers of presentation moved from commission to commission. Due to the public declarations of the Cabinet of Robois and due to the opposition of several committees of citizens, the project failed now in commission after commission. The elements provided by the Town Councillors of IC and of the two other large parties, the Socialist and the Liberal parties, who both finally also opposed the project, proved hurdles too high and too solid to be overcome by the Aeolfast Directors who were called in to explain the initiative. It seemed the project would have little chance to be accepted by the Walloon Ministry responsible for the final agreement of such projects. Some pressure was still exerted from the Federal level, and the Minister was an ecologist who was in favour of carbon dioxide saving solutions such as wind turbines. One after the other negative advice and one after the other petition of citizens, all opposing the installation of the towers, piled up on his desk, though. No Minister would risk so many votes, not only in Robois but in the entire province.

The Robois project had been discussed amply in the press and there too, despite the money and pressure of Aeolfast, the various citizen committees had made headway with the protests. These citizen committees had no hierarchical organisation anymore. They were merely workgroups, think tanks, and maybe because of those loose structures, they proved even more efficient than before. The journalists of the province came to consider whether they too would have liked to see eighty metre towers rise above their homes, close by, and their answer was commonly no. Neighbours and friends worked on them. The citizen committees provided them with information on the scarring of the landscapes by the machines.

The citizen committees, too many to stop, also began to pay visits to the farmers who had at first enthusiastically embraced the project for the extra money that was promised them for allowing the towers in their fields. The people explained calmly to the farmers they would not

be doing a favour to their neighbours. Their farms would be worth less, and the activists against the turbines explained some of the inconveniences Aeolfast had never mentioned.

In Brussels, when the Count of Buisseyre heard of the situation, he flung his fist to the table, raged against his Directors, promised them to be dismissed if his project was not realised, calling them utter fools and giving them two weeks to turn the tide. He told he would bring in real professionals instead of the weaklings he had before him. He reminded everybody, including Yves Govin and Max Blandis of their fat salaries, generous expense accounts, paid sedan cars, all fuel paid by the company, and of their outrageous bonuses for the realisation of the project.

Buisseyre's head of security, Max Blandis, was not impressed. He had become much disillusioned with his work for the Count. Too many people in Robois opposed the project. The tide was turning. One could not indefinitely impose something on so many people. The resistance against the project grew by the day. Blandis feared to bring more violence to Robois, for at some point that would become counter-productive, overt and hence dangerous for being found out by the police.

Blandis had been considering quitting from Aeolfast. Only the high salary Buisseyre paid him withheld him from turning his back to the Count. He had already covertly begun to solicit for other jobs in other companies. Blandis also wondered how long he would be able to control the team of hoodlums he had brought to Robois. Those men did not know when to stop. He had taught them how to work so that they would not be caught, but at each operation he had to hold them back from major errors. He was thinking not only of leaving Aeolfast, but of leaving the country, for if the group failed, he would certainly be drawn in a turbulence out of which he would not emerge. Blandis too cursed Robois, its inhabitants and its Bourgmestre Robert Jacquet for having withstood his efforts.

The unhappiest man by far, however, was Yves Govin. Buisseyre called Govin an idiot in front of everybody, a stupid, incapable man. Govin had not been able to reach one of his more serious objectives. He had become a Cabinet Member of Robois, but the other Échevins regularly shouted him down in the Cabinet. He could get no grip on the IC Cabinet Members, and the Liberal Échevins led by that cold, taciturn woman Simone Ash, clang to Robert Jacquet like dung to a cow. When he refused to sign a paper, the other Cabinet Members, IC and Liberals, discussed, reached a common ground and signed without him. They were sufficient in numbers according to the Law not to need him. He went less and less to Cabinet meetings. He also did not succeed in having resolutions voted and taken in favour of the Aeolfast project. Worse, he had not succeeded in ousting out Robert Jacquet from his prominent position in IC, and his campaigns of rumours seemed to have lost impetus and certainly did not have much effect in reducing Jacquet's popularity. The powerful Trioteignes family, together with the current inhabitants of Blouges Castle, had thrown all their weight in the balance in favour of the Bourgmestre.

Finally, Govin had not succeeded either in swing the IC Group of Robois back into the bosom of the United Democratic Party. He had lost face in Brussels because of that. Because of Jacquet's firm grip on IC of Robois, Govin had little chance of grabbing the place of Bourgmestre of Robois, and hence he would not be nominated for a post of Member of Parliament for the province. Yves Govin even feared for his re-election as Échevin in the next elections.

Bad news also trickled in from the headquarters of the UD Party. Rumours ran in the corridors of the vast building that the current party leaders seemed to have lost the confidence of many

very influential Members of Parliament of the party. Changes in the leadership of the party administration looked imminent, also the position of the National Secretary, and that meant Govin would be dismissed from his job in the party administration. His only consolation was that such a change would not happen before the elections of October, because of the detrimental effect it would have on votes. Govin therefore clung to his meagre hope of becoming Échevin once more, with a modest revenue, hoping that if he got dismissed from his place in the Brussels party, the party would not drop him entirely but find a well-paid job for him, maybe as Attaché to a Minister or a Directorship in one of the regional state companies for water, electricity distribution or housing.

Govin began to drink heavily, for he could not manage his setbacks. He hoped that by hanging out late in bars of Robois he might at least gather a few additional votes there. He met the farmer Guichand there, and both vociferated threats against Robert Jacquet. He did not see that by doing so he lost many other voters. He became very jealous of Robert Jacquet, for Robert, already a wealthy man, had everything coming to him, even that pale beauty Simone Ash, whereas he, Govin, who had nothing for him in life, lost even more things with each passing day. The gloom had changed camp. Yves Govin became a very bitter man.

Chapter 6. September and October

The Saint Adelbert March. Joseph Bikri

Certain traditions of the lands of Wallony lying between Charleroi, Namur and Brussels I will probably never comprehend entirely, if at all! One of those was the March of Saint Adelbert in Robois.

I quite easily understand the habit in Christian lands to organise processions in which the statue of a Protector-Saint is worn on men's shoulders and carried through the streets of a village. The Saint is thus shown his territory, the people honour the Saint, and the inhabitants see the Saint is officially called upon in a ceremony to protect his good people and lands. The habit may date from periods in which the village was racked by natural disasters such as the plagues, inundations, bad harvests, war, or pests of all sorts. The benevolent aid of the Saint is implored to help the village get rid of the calamities. I find that a very logical thought.

I also understand that the processions accompanying the Saint must be festive occasions during which the people put on their best clothes, for that is what honouring implies.

I do understand some need to commemorate such ancient procession events, so that the people dress up in the costumes of those ancient times. Some physical guarding of the procession is natural, so that the village and the precious relics not be attacked by villains.

On the other hand, I also understand the nostalgia the Walloon country retained from its having once been part of an Imperium, of the glorious empire in the nineteenth century forged by the Emperor of the French, Napoleon Bonaparte. I, myself, rather considered Napoleon as one of the many true mass murderers of European history, and I was glad when I read Lev Tolstoy more or less agreed with my vision on the great Frenchman. I could feel for the respect of my fellow countrymen for times in which the revolution of reason seemed to have banned the darker eras of religious zeal and of the power of the Catholic clergy of the times over their society. After the French Revolution of 1789, priests were killed, priests were forbidden to hold masses and to educate the children, priests were banned and then reluctantly allowed to serve the most innocent under oaths to the Revolution and to Reason. The Emperor Napoleon only admitted some freedom of religion when he needed the anointment of the Pope as Emperor, and that fact also taught me something about the opportunism of the man and about the resilience of the faith in God by European mankind. I understand that the Walloons admire Napoleon much, as Wallony was incorporated in the great country that was France in the nineteenth century.

All that I understand. What I do not, absolutely not understand, is the strange, paradoxical combinations in our regions of the Christian devote processions with the commemoration of glorious or inglorious battles of the Emperor! Yet, that was exactly what the March of Saint Adelbert was about in Robois. Sure, the Saint's statue and the procession could use some form of protection, but why had that protection to be held by a thousand Napoleonic soldiers and by the Emperor in person?

During the march of Saint Adelbert in Robois, the one metre and a half bronze and silver and gold and precious stones statue of Saint Adelbert, a statue allegedly dating from the sixteenth century, was worn on men's shoulders from the Abbey Church of Haut-Robois down to the Largeau, past the streets of Bas-Robois, on a seven kilometres long stretch of tortuous alleys and roads. The statue led the procession, but tradition also wanted that the Police Force of Robois, whichever that was in the ages past, preceded it. In our times, that would have to be me, the Superintendent of the commune of Robois.

In the Saint Adelbert March, I would step in front, then would come the statue of the Saint worn on holy shoulders, followed by the Christian Catholic priests of the villages of greater Robois, and then the other church relics worn by yet more devotees. Large numbers of singing boys and girls dressed in long white robes, representing heavenly angels, many with wings of feathers attached on their backs, even when they were the worse little devils I could imagine, would walk after the priests, and they would be followed by hundreds of soldiers of Emperor Napoleon! Napoleon himself would proudly ride on a white horse, accompanied by his staff generals, all on horseback too.

Robois counted only one association of about fifty Napoleonic marchers, but similar associations of Napoleonic revival troops existed in our larger region, and these apparently cared for only one thing: to assemble to as many as possible and to march together.

The most famous of such Walloon marches was the March of Saint Feuillen at a town called Fosses-la-Ville, not far from Robois. This march was organised only once every seven years, but it was the largest of all marches, in which could participate as many as three thousand soldiers, all dressed as men of the Grande Armée of the Emperor. The March of Saint Feuillen was also a lot longer than our march: twelve kilometres! The March of Saint Adelbert was more modest compared to the Saint Feuillen March, but organised every four years. I did not really understand by what kind of miracle the French Revolution, which had destroyed to the ground our finest cathedrals such as those of Bruges and Liège, had been reconciled with and absorbed in a Catholic procession! And yet, such was the marvellous case with the Napoleonic Marches, as with our Adelbert March. Napoleon himself would protect the relics of Saint Adelbert! It was a fine example of forgiveness, of retribution, of redemption too, and of that wonderful earthy spirit of being able to reconcile the Christian with the pagan. People all over the world have of course tried to reconcile these over the last two thousand years, and so did the Roboisians! I considered the March of Saint Adelbert as something like Giovannino Guareschi's Don Camillo and Peppone of the region of between the Sambre and Meuse Rivers of Wallony. I never told my opinion loudly to my townsmen. I fear hurting their feelings. I loved them too much to profess such blasphemous comments.

I had never participated in a Saint Adelbert March, none had been organised in my first year of duty, but the March would now have to be held in the Election Year, and proved therefore to be an additional attraction. I had been invited to numerous meetings in the Bourgmestre's office with the priests of the procession and with the leaders of the Napoleonic association of Robois. The meetings were joyful affairs, we laughed a lot, and we worked on a detailed list of timings and proceedings. The meetings had been called by Nadine Dumortier, the Cabinet Échevin responsible for Feasts. We had almost finished with the organisation, thought of about everything, leaving nothing to chance, and in the beginning of the month of September I went to my last session, two weeks before the March proper.

Robert Jacquet welcomed us in his office and invited us to sit at his long, oak table. We were about a dozen. Present were, beside Robert and me, also my eternal assistant Dominique Bussy, and the Catholic Dean of the parishes of Robois with two of his village priests. A little farther sat the President of the Napoleonic Association, which happened to be our good friend Paul Degambe, with his secretary and his treasurer. Also present were the leader of the brass band of Robois and the two Cabinet Members responsible for the organisation, the Échevin for Culture, André Bacca, and the Échevin for Feasts, Nadine Dumortier.

Together, we formed the committee that had been assigned to lead the March to a good end. Yet two other people sat at the table, a man and a woman of the town administration, who had ample experience with the March, who had organised the March two times already, and who

presented us a detailed schema of timing and itinerary, as well as a report of the various actions and meetings with subcommittees they had presided. It had taken them too an entire year of steady work to prepare the March, but finally, everything seemed ready. The groups that would join our own Napoleonic troops had been assigned a place in the procession. More than twenty groups from neighbouring villages and towns would join us.

I dared not utter the remark that the Christian catholic procession would be led by a Muslim Superintendent, but I believed everyone knew who I was and nobody seemed to care much. If Napoleon could accompany a Catholic Saint, a humble Muslim officer could do the same. Wallony was wonderful!

‘There remains only one item to be decided upon,’ Nadine Dumortier stated, scaring us not a little. ‘Who will be our next Napoleon?’

‘What? Our Bourgmestre, if a man, must represent Napoleon! It has always been like that! I thought that had been arranged since the beginning!’ Paul Degambe exclaimed.

‘No, out of the question!’ Robert Jacquet objected. ‘This is an election year. I feel the people of Robois would not like it to have a candidate Bourgmestre play the Napoleon, the dictator of the March. I said no to Nadine, a definite no! I decline the honour. I propose the President of the Marchers of Robois to be our next Napoleon.’

Robert Degambe guffawed.

‘Agreed!’ the other concluded in choir.

‘I cannot be Napoleon!’ Paul screamed. ‘It costs loads of money to represent Napoleon. Napoleon has to buy for drinks to the marchers. I am not a rich man. My wife will murder me.’

Robert Jacquet laughed, ‘the Napoleonic March shall be sponsored this year by Jacquet and Duchâtel SA. I suppose we can deduct the costs from our taxes.’

‘That can be done,’ the Treasurer of the Marchers nodded. He was also the main Tax Inspector of the region.

Paul Degambe remained looking at Nadine and Robert with open mouth.

‘A conspiracy has been going on behind my back,’ he bellowed. ‘You knew all along this would happen!’

‘Of course! But you have our blessing, my son,’ the Dean concluded wisely.

We all laughed.

Degambe then glanced at me with small, cunning eyes.

‘We have one more suggestion for this march,’ he began.

‘What now?’ Nadine Dumortier wondered.

‘The Association of Marchers of Robois found it heresy to have a man dressed in a contemporary uniform of the Police to lead the procession. It just doesn’t feel right,’ Degambe shook his head. ‘On the other hand, tradition demands the procession happens under the high protection of the Belgian Police. Therefore, we, the Napoleonic Marchers, propose solemnly that the Superintendent of Police indeed leads us, but dressed properly in a Napoleonic uniform. We thought Marshal Murat was endowed with dark, very curly hair, not unlike our own Superintendent, so we propose that our Superintendent rides out in front of us in the gala-dress of Marshal Joachim-Napoleon Murat, the leader of the cavalry of the Emperor, and has not merely to hurry on foot in front of us. We feel the Superintendent should be given a more dignified function.’

Degambe smiled an innocent smile as broad as the table was long. He had prepared his line too, for the words came out rapidly and fluently.

‘But, but, ...’ I managed to say.

‘You can ride a horse, can’t you?’ Degambe called.

‘Yes, of course,’ I granted. ‘I spent a few months at the National Cavalry School, but...’

‘No buts then! If you can’t get a horse from the Police Cavalry, we can find one for you.’

I rather preferred they did not do that. They might come up either with a wild, untamed mustang imported directly from US Indian territory, or with a Brabant draught-horse. Both horses would make me the laughing stock for the following four years. I would have to appeal to the Police Cavalry to lend me an animal that was trained for manifestations and that was as docile as a lamb.

‘I’ll get me a horse,’ I answered rapidly, and I bit my tongue, for with that I had agreed to be the lead clown. Nevertheless, I was a little proud also to have been asked for the honour of being Murat. The men and women around the table relaxed.

‘That is arranged then,’ the Dean concluded, smiling. ‘We have a new Napoleon, a new Murat and a new Superintendent! I had hoped for a while to dress you up as a Mameluk, but Murat will do!’

I considered it would be easier to sit on a horse and control from a height the crowds as well as my police officers, so I was quite satisfied. I tried to recall what I knew about Murat, but the only thing I remembered was that he had been a daring cavalry leader for Napoleon, and that he had been called the Dandy-King of Naples. The people of Robois did have a peculiar sense of humour!

After that, there were only a few minor items to discuss and decide upon. The Saint Adelbert March was ready to walk.

Two weeks later, on the Sunday after the Tamin murder, I stood outside the Abbey Church, now the parish church of Saint Adelbert of Haut-Robois. I walked to and fro, dressed as Joachim Murat.

When I had telephoned for a horse from our cavalry, the officer I was calling being an old friend, he drew all the worms out of my nose and I had to confess I was to be the Murat of the Saint Adelbert March. I heard quite a bit of laughter by more than one guy at the other end of the line, but I had no issue in obtaining a horse, courtesy of the Cavalry. The animal arrived the day before the March started and it was placed in a farm of Robois, but with it came a police car with four officers of Brussels. These would also remain the following day. I lodged them in the Horse Bayard. I wondered why four men were needed to accompany one horse, until I found out that two of the men were journalists attached to the Belgian Police. They wrote articles for the publicity papers of the Police! Therefore, when the men brought me my horse to the church in a brand-new trailer, they also watched me jump nervously on the back of the animal, cameras ready. They clicked one photograph after the other of me as Marshal Murat. My former colleagues in Brussels would laugh their heads off!

I made a grand figure nonetheless. The people from whom we hired the costumes had even done some research on Murat and sewn me a costume after a nineteenth century portrait of him in Hussar uniform, painted by François Gérard. When the people of Robois did something, they did it right! Even I was impressed by my stately figure, but that lasted only as long as I saw the grin on Dominique’s and Samia’s faces.

I did not have to wait long at the church. The doors opened, and the Dean stepped out from the mass celebrated to the honour of Saint Adelbert. Behind him followed the glittering statue of the Saint, worn by eight Grenadiers of Napoleon. The Association of Marchers of Robois were Grenadiers. It was said that you could only marry a daughter of a Grenadier of Robois if

you solemnly promised to become a Grenadier yourself in the next March, so being a Grenadier was very much a family honour. The priests and the children followed, dressed in long, white robes. I made my horse prance, so that an admiring 'wow!' rose from the crowd, and the Holy Procession of Saint Adelbert set in motion. I made my horse advance slowly, majestically, and it seemed to me the animal understood perfectly which role it had to play.

I remarked Simone Ash and Samia in the crowd. Robert Jacquet would follow Napoleon in the guise of another Marshal, as Marshal Louis-Alexandre Berthier. I pushed my horse down into the streets, towards Bas-Robois. I had learnt the itinerary of the March by heart. I should have asked for additional officers to secure the roads, but what might happen to the bronze and silver statue of Saint Adelbert, surrounded by a thousand French Grenadiers, Zouaves, Voltigeurs, Hussars on horseback, Congolese Soldiers, Mameluks, Chasseurs and the like? A potential thief would be torn to pieces in no time! My poor force of blue-uniformed officers merely served to keep the people from closing in too much and to guard the Nadar barriers along the way.

I looked cautiously behind me, fearing I was already too far out, but I saw group after group of Napoleonic soldiers joining the procession in a long, multi-coloured line.

The procession, except for the children, was to be an all-male March, but women sneak in everywhere! Here they ran along with the troops in the uniforms of female sutlers, wearing a chain around their necks on which hung a casket filled with brandy, with the local péket. I had serious issues with the péket, for I knew the propensity of my fellow-Roboisians for alcohol. Every soldier of Napoleon, also the Hussars on horseback, wore a pistol, a gun, a rifle, a musket, or a specific marching musket called a tromblon. The tromblon was a kind of blunderbuss, a gun with a short barrel and a widening opening at the end, like of a funnel. These weapons would be charged with powder only at the battle scene of the March, but a man with a lot of péket in his bowels and in his mind, might pour a lot more than the ten to fifteen grams of powder we allowed. That might lead to accidents, such as exploding guns. I saw the sutler women already darting among the men, serving the very small glasses of the péket, and two women ran back to a chariot on which stood several large vats of more brandy! I had to keep an eye on the péket distribution.

I drew the procession on. My horse was a little nervous from the large crowd, but I had no issue in mastering it, not even on the cobblestones of the oldest streets of Robois. The anima danced on the tones of the brass bands!

When I reached Bas-Robois in the valley, I turned once more in the saddle and I saw a long line of soldiers still walking down the hill-streets. The Hussars on horseback were dressed in green and white tricorne hats on their heads like the Emperor, sitting mostly on fine, white horses. The Chasseurs who followed were clad in golden breasts, an elegant red pelisse nonchalantly thrown over their shoulder, and wearing white breeches. Most of the soldiers on foot were Grenadiers, men clad in white but with a long dark blue vest, red shoulder marks, high fur hats. They wore their muskets with fixed bayonets. In between these groups walked the Mameluks and the Zouaves with their typical, wide trousers, dark brown for the Mameluks and bright red for the Zouaves. The Mameluks wore light blue vests and above that small red half-vests; the Zouaves wore dark blue vests over long, white shirts. Among these still walked groups of Congolese Soldiers, dressed completely in dark blue lined with gold. The most exotic group was the one of the so-called Ūlaus, dressed in pale blue trousers and long vests of dark blue, simple blue hats with flamboyant red plumes above. These carried the tromblons, which gave off the most powerful, frightening, thundering sound when shot.

Several brass bands, most dressed equally in blue and like the Ûlaus wearing high red plumes, sneaked in every so manieth group of armed soldiers.

The spectacle of the colours and the well-disciplined men walking solemnly through the narrow streets of old Robois was awesome. At this stage, the men stayed serious. I could not but wonder with amazement about what drove the hundreds of men, and a few women, dedicating so much of their time and energy marching together proudly in great numbers. Of course, the men showed some honest devotion to their Saints and flags, of which many were brought with pride, but I supposed the very social character of the Walloons drew them together. People don't like to be alone. They are very much social animals They like to agglutinate in groups and to have fun together. I could not believe one man walking or riding behind me to feel unhappy on that day, in this procession! Maybe that was Saint Adelbert's finest miracle!

We marched for about two hours and finally arrived under the hurrahs of more than a thousand mouths at an enormous, wide meadow limited on one side by the Largeau River. A large crowd had already gathered around that field. I had concentrated my policemen and policewomen here, to avoid the people mixing with the marching soldiers. In this meadow, we would enact a battle, though nobody could tell me which battle was to be commemorated. It was one of the battles of the Emperor, for sure, but French would fight French this time, and nobody knew which battle would be represented!

The groups of soldiers walked slowly onto the meadow, assembling into two battalion squares, such as the Grande Armée had formed before a major battle. In between, to the delight of the crowd, rode the Hussars and Chasseurs at daring speed, round and round the squares, with Marshall Murat dashing in the front. The apotheosis of the Adelbert March was about to commence.

The tradition of the March demanded now that Napoleon Bonaparte and his staff of Generals dismounted and place themselves together at the end of the meadow, facing the two battalions. Napoleon was to give the order to fire and start the battle. The men of the two blocks began to charge their pistols, guns, rifles, muskets and tromblons with black powder. All these preparations took quite a time.

I also left my horse, handed it over to a Grenadier who had been assigned to me, and I went on to Paul Degambe and Robert Jacquet, who stood aside as Napoleon and Berthier. A little behind them stood other Officers of the Grande Armée, looking at a series of five ancient field cannons. Paul Degambe watched the men in the squares loading their guns. He was waiting for signs by the Lieutenants and Captains that this manoeuvre was finished. The battalions stood magnificently with flowing flags and even a few Golden Eagles as standards in their midst. Degambe received a gun from a General, a tromblon. Jacquet-Berthier wore a pistol in his hands.

I heard Robert ask to Paul, 'have you loaded your tromblon already?'

'No need to,' Degambe answered. 'When I raise the gun, the cannon battery will shoot. That is the sign for the battle to start. We feared one gunshot would not be loud enough. And wasn't Napoleon mostly relying on his artillery?'

I saw Degambe bring his tromblon upwards, but I remarked also how his finger slipped along the trigger while the gun was still coming up, in front of Robert Jacquet. I don't know why I acted so violently and suddenly, but I hit with my right hand the short barrel of the tromblon so that it jerked more rapidly upwards to vertical, and I supported with my left hand the wooden butt. I guess I didn't like any gun to pass before a person, even an empty one, a natural reaction learned in the Police.

An ear-shattering sound split the air. The tromblon was thrown out of Degambe's hands. We stood under a large tree with ample green foliage, under an old beech, and the leaves above were torn with tens of small holes. A flurry of leaves fell down on us.

Everybody looked upwards in dumb amazement at the discharge, but I turned sharply on my heels and looked around, to the other soldiers standing about. Only one man, at ten paces from us, stood widely grinning with red-shot eyes, apparently unsurprised. It was a Grenadier of Napoleon, standing at the end of the left square. Despite his hat I recognised him as Michel Guichand. When our eyes locked, Guichand forgot his grin and he receded, stepping slowly backwards to behind the rows. I cursed loudly and began to run towards the man.

The battery guns shot. Flames emerged from the muzzles of the cannon and the deafening sound tore the air. While I ran, the two battalion squares accepted the sign of the shot of Napoleon's batteries as the beginning of the battle. Hundreds of muskets and tromblons let go off the first rolling thunder of shots amidst the shouting of Officers. The Hussars hurried away lest their horses would panic. I ran between the galloping horses and the frantic shots and became almost deaf from the noise. I ran right through the left square, amidst flaming powder, following Guichand with my eyes. The squares reloaded, Guichand fled. I ran after him. I passed the rows and saw Guichand flee towards the wood. I sprinted harder, catching his legs at the bushes that marked the beginning of the wood. Guichand fell headlong into a nasty patch of thistles, but I wished him no better. I scrambled about him, my arms around his legs. His musket flew among the trees. I was on him in no time and pinned his arms to the ground, then I struggled with him to turn him over until he lay with his back in the bushes. Guichand was a big man, but I kept yelling he had to remain still because I was the Police, and I had far stronger, better trained muscles than he. I had my knee in his belly and I pushed him down. He looked at me with a very angry, wild, reddening face, and I smelled the alcohol on his breath. Guichand was drunk. He struggled to get free, but I held him firmly until he gave up his vain efforts.

'Damn you, Guichand,' I accused, 'you put real shot in Paul Degambe's tromblon, not just powder! You are a murderer! You are under arrest.'

'I didn't do anything,' Guichand yelled back, a song we of the police had heard all too much.

'You fled, you scum, when you saw me watching you.'

'I didn't! I wanted to go home. I am not feeling well. I've had enough of this stupid procession. You can't prove anything. Let me go!'

'You put shot in that tromblon, I tell you!'

'No I didn't. You can't prove I did. Let me go!'

Guichand had a point. I had only run after him on a hunch. I had seen nothing. I had no proof. I wanted to punch the man in the face, punch his nose to pulp until he confessed, but such violence was not allowed to me. I couldn't do that. I was no General of Napoleon, but a Superintendent. I let go of one of his arms, hoping he would try to hit me, but he was smarter than I thought and he didn't move.

I brought a long finger to between his eyes and shouted, 'Guichand, I am going to investigate on this. If somebody saw you only came a kilometre near that gun, I'm going to nail you for attempted murder. I know now for whom I have to look out for. You are to come at ten tomorrow morning for further interrogation at the Police Office of Robois. In the meantime, and for the rest of your stinking life, stay away as far as you ever can from Degambe and Jacquet. Did you hear me?'

'I didn't do anything,' Guichand continued screaming, and maybe indeed had he done nothing. He might have merely known something would happen with the gun, for he hadn't looked surprised at all when the gun shot, but nothing more. I released his arm and stood, but

hit with my knee hard in his belly, as if by accident. I looked for his musket, found it two paces farther, shot it, but the hammer only hot air and nothing happened. His weapon had no powder in it, it wasn't loaded. I threw it to him so that it hit his legs hard, and turned my back.

The two battalion squares continued shooting salvo after salvo of powder. Nobody had remarked Guichand and me struggling in the bushes. The horses galloped aside, now, at the other end of the meadow. The air hung heavy with the stench of the burned powder. Clouds of white smoke hung between the squares. The men shouted, bugles and drums sounded, the crowd cheered.

I went back to where Degambe and Jacquet stood. I found them both pale in the face. Jacquet trembled.

'You saved my life, Joseph,' Robert said to me. 'That tromblon was charged with shot!'

Robert had understood.

'I didn't charge that tromblon,' Degambe stammered. 'I was even not supposed to shoot with it, just hold it up. It was not to be loaded!'

'I know,' I said. 'It was certainly not to be loaded with shot. I had a sudden hunch, call it my sixth sense. Your tromblon was loaded with shot. The tree was hit by real shot, by very small leaden balls. Somebody wanted an accident to happen. Who gave you that gun?'

Degambe paled possibly more. He looked around. He was looking for support. I thought he was going to faint. He went to lean against the trunk of the beech.

'I got it from one of our men,' he said. 'Who would do something like that?'

'I have no idea,' I replied.

I had a second hunch, saying, 'Robert, please hand your pistol over to me, will you, carefully, please.'

Robert looked amazed at the pistol he still had in his hand, a large, ugly, heavy piece. He gave it to me. I directed it to the grass and pulled the trigger. The sound was hard, and we saw the impact of small bullets from his pistol too, in the grass beneath.

'Goddamn,' Robert cursed, 'that pistol was loaded with real shot too! I never charged it!'

'Had you charged it, unknowing it had already been done, you might well have received that load in your face,' I confirmed. 'Somebody wants to play very nasty games with you two.'

I never doubted what Degambe and Jacquet told me.

I would indeed have to charge somebody with attempted murder.

I went to my own horse, the Police Cavalry horse that was still held by a Grenadier who was watching the end of the battle. I drew out the saddle pistol that had remained on my mount, and shot that one to the grass. Nothing happened. My pistol had not been loaded.

'I shall have to start an investigation,' I told Degambe and Jacquet. 'Somebody wanted one of you or both to cause an accident, either to yourselves or to somebody else. That man did very dangerous things to you. I need that gun and that pistol for fingerprints.'

I suddenly got it very cold in the back. How many other guns and rifles had real shot in them in the battalion squares? Luckily, every marcher knew the discipline of never shooting towards another man, always shooting in the air. How many men would hold that discipline, how many not? No, the marchers knew even powder could hurt a man. Also, all the muskets, guns and pistols had by now been shot at least once! I sighed quite relieved.

Robert and Paul could not speak. Robert sat down in the grass.

At that moment, another General of Napoleon, the Treasurer of the association of Robois, came running to us, shouting, 'Paul, you have to give the signal to stop them, or they will continue shooting till nightfall!'

Degambe grumbled something like ‘all right,’ and he went over to the battery of cannon to order the last salvo that was to end the battalions’ battle. Napoleon’s artillery let loose, signalling with a second salvo the end of the battle. Gradually, the soldiers in the square stopped shooting. The last muskets were emptied. The Lieutenants and Captains checked on all guns. Nobody reloaded.

‘Joseph,’ Degambe said, returning to us, ‘you must get back on your horse. You must lead us away from here, back to the church. We shall reform the procession. The battle part is over. We return!’

I nodded. I stepped to my horse, took the gun of Paul and the pistol of Robert with me, held my right hand up signalling to the men who stood around the statue of Saint Adelbert and waved forward. The statue had now been placed on a large chariot drawn by four horses, for the way up would be too heavy for the human bearers. The statue had been fastened to the chariot. I ordered the procession back to the Abbey Church of Haut-Robois. The female sutlers ran around the men, offering them péket, but I saw how every soldier held his gun to the air, so I worried less. Black powder burnt made thirsty. My throat was pretty dry too, but not from the powder. The guns would be gathered in the trucks of the armourers near the church, so that when the March disbanded the men could have fun in the bars of Haut-Robois without fear of hurting themselves.

We began the way back, and again I rode in front, followed by the Grande Armée. In the valley, the white smoke slowly dissipated.

When we arrived at the church, I began interrogating one after the other the men who had handed the tromblon to Degambe and the pistol to Jacquet, but I found out little. The men who had handled the guns were beyond suspicion and the guns had waited, unguarded, at too many places. Anybody could have loaded the guns, unseen.

Degambe, Jacquet and I feasted with the marchers for the rest of the day. We got all moderately drunk. We had escaped a tragedy, and the release from that tension came only after many pékets. Degambe felt very depressed in the end, constantly blaming himself for not having checked on his tromblon. We consoled him with alcohol. After all, nothing serious had happened. We had escaped from worse.

The next morning I interrogated Michel Guichand, who showed up with a lawyer. He denied having anything to do whatsoever with the loading of the guns and he kept to his version of having darted back home because he felt ill. I put him on the grid, cross-interrogated him, repeated endlessly the same question in other forms, going as far as accusing him despite protests of his lawyer, but he kept logically and stubbornly to the same simple version. I had to let him go.

The Aucourt Tragedy. Joseph Bikri

Inspector Danlois and I never got enough time to call the Aeolfast gang in for interrogation. On Tuesday of our second week, the week Danlois needed to get results from the fingerprints analysis and the robot picture of Monsieur Candribert, the Tuesday after the Adelbert March, Dominique Bussy once more shot into my office shouting a new crime had occurred, this time in the village of Aucourt.

It was early in the afternoon, around two o'clock. I had been preparing to leave early for home and finish my administrative work there. The sun was stood high in a truly torrid late summer's day.

I ordered a team of five of my men to Aucourt. Dominique and I drove as fast as we could with blaring siren and lights flashing on our car to the site given to us by the emergency call centre. The crime had taken place in a farm. I did not know what to think, but my heart raced. We would once more arrive too late, after the facts. Was this crime a family tragedy or had it something to do with the Aeolfast gang, or with the criminal of the previous murders, or with both?

The farm Dominique drove to was large, an imposing square set of stone buildings placed in the plain, a farm as one only finds in agriculture-rich Hesbaye country, a land of vast field-owners, of extremely fertile grounds. Robois still partially belonged to this region, and that country created a wealth of grain fields, and hence these vast farms.

The square farms of Hesbaye are all built on the same pattern. You have a monumental, wide porch, an arched gate that might indicate an abbey or a castle. The gate can be closed with enormously heavy, thick oak panels, which have been oiled and preserved for centuries. The road to the gate is long and lined with very high poplar trees in which many crows guard their nests. When you step through the gate, you enter the inner courtyard, a courtyard covered with nicely laid cobblestones, a huge dung-heap in the middle. The living quarters lie to your left, often directed towards the south. To the opposite side of the house, you will discover long two-storey barns. The tractors and other agricultural machines are stored there now. The animal barns are in front of you. Each farmer has a few pigs, chicken and rabbits, many cows, a horse or two. On each side of the gate stand high and thick walls to close the square. The impression you get, of course, is of a fortified world, of a small fort, and that is exactly what those farms were in previous centuries, and that is from what they evolved yet keeping their original character. Some of those farms date from the seventeenth century, re-built on more ancient sites, and most of them have been innovated according to the patterns of old in the nineteenth.

Such also was this farm we drove into. Dominique knew the place because she had lived a long time with her parents at Aucourt. She called it the Garnuée Farm, as the site had been called since centuries. The farm had been sold at the beginning of the twentieth century and then bought by the Terhave family, a family of Flemish farmers who had bought land in Wallony, in Robois, because Hesbaye ground yielded much. The Flemish Terhave farmers knew all about rich soil and how to exploit it. The grandfather of the current owner had two sons, so he offered the ancestral farm in the Polders near the North Sea to his elder son, and to his younger son he offered the Garnuée farm of Aucourt in Wallony as a wedding present. Dominique explained me all this while we drove, and I let her talk, for I saw she was in shock. We simply had too many crimes in Robois. I dove into silence when I was shocked, Dominique had a need to cackle. Our source of reaction was the same.

We left our car outside the gate and walked into the courtyard. It was oddly quiet in the large place, quite unlike other crime scenes to which the people immediately flocked, but the old farm stood isolated. We found no neighbours, here.

We went up to the house, to the living quarters, as huge as a rich mansion, knocked on the door and cried, 'police! Open up!'

The door opened almost instantly and showed us a boy of thirteen or so. The boy said not a word, looked us over, then opened the door wide and invited us in. We were both in uniform. We pushed behind him. The boy went to a living-room, where a man of around forty lay on a

sofa. He was dressed in blue working overalls. His very dirty boots hung over the end. He was a big, sturdy man, a rough beard on his face, with very red cheeks, his face not unfriendly. Blood seeped over one half of the man's face. Head wounds always produced much blood. The man held a piece of white cloth against his forehead, and the boy went immediately to his father to continue wiping away the blood with another cloth, which he drenched in a pail of clean water that he had brought on a small table. The boy cleaned the wound, meticulously, with tenderness. We were surprised seeing something like this being done by a young boy. It represented a deliberate show of affection. I would not have been capable of that at his age.

'We are the police,' I stated, although that must have been clear from our uniforms. I am Superintendent Bikri. What happened here? Have you phoned the emergency services?' 'Good afternoon, Superintendent Bikri. We know who you are. I feel very dizzy. Somebody hit me with a piece of wood on the head. I have a wound, but I don't think it is a serious one. My boy Thomas can tell you more than I!'

We turned our eyes to the boy, who stopped for a few seconds cleaning the wound of his father.

The boy whispered, 'I am Thomas. We got attacked by four men. They wore masks. They hit my father so that he fell to the ground and didn't move. I thought he was dead. I phoned the emergency number. Can we go outside for a moment?'

I nodded, the boy stopped wiping, and we went just outside the door of the house.

The boy continued, 'when the men hit my father, they came back out of the house and they saw my mother come out of a barn. They grabbed my mother and forced her back inside. That is the hay barn, there. Three men then went into our house and they smashed a few things, but one of the men stayed inside the barn with my mother. I heard her scream. I wanted to go to her, but then the three other men ran back into the courtyard, to the barn, and four men would have been too much for me. They came back out, all, and they shouted at each other and they were in dispute. They hit the man who had been with my mother. They exchanged angry words, continued shouting and gesticulating, but then they ran to their car, outside the gate and drove off. I ran to my mum, but I found her dead in the barn. My father doesn't know yet. Then, I ran back to my father, who tried to get up, and he told me to call the police, which I did. I do not dare tell my father my mum is dead.'

The boy told us his story with wild eyes, eyes that remained open very wide. His glances darted from one place to the other even while he spoke. Dominique and I looked at each other in horror, and also in admiration for the courage of the boy. The boy was seemingly untouched by the death of his mother, for he told us the story in few words, in short phrases like of a cold, factual report, but Dominique and I saw he spoke automatically, totally in shock. The boy was very near a nervous breakdown. He might also not yet have understood the full significance of the death of his mother.

'Are you sure your mother is dead, Thomas?' Dominique asked.

'Yes. I felt her pulse. She does not move. She is dead. I know when something is dead.'

We remained speechless.

We heard the noise of other cars driving into the courtyard. My men were arriving, and also an ambulance.

Dominique stepped to very near the boy, touched his shoulder, saying, 'we are going back into the house, Thomas. Let me continue cleaning your dad's wound. I could see he is not hurt badly. Wounds at the head above the eye always produce much blood, but they are seldom deep, serious injuries. Your dad may have suffered a contusion, though. That will also heal.'

Please let me help. We will have to tell to your father your mum has died, too. We cannot hide that from him, but we will tell him gently. I'll tell him, you listen. Is that all right with you?'

The boy nodded. We went back into the house. The boy let Dominique clean the wound, but he stayed close, one hand on the arm of his dad.

Dominique said softly, 'Monsieur Terhave, I am terribly sorry. Something happened in the barn. Your wife was injured too.'

The man on the sofa closed his eyes for a few moments. He looked back at the boy. He understood.

'Is my wife dead?' he then asked.

'Yes,' Thomas answered for us. 'Mother is dead. She is lying in the barn.'

'We have not yet checked her out, Monsieur Terhave,' Dominique gave him some hope.

'My mum is dead,' the boy insisted.

The boy wanted to sob, but he struggled against his tears.

I intervened, 'Thomas, boy, you are very courageous. Tell me, in which barn is your mummy?'

'In the hay barn, right in front of the house,' Thomas replied.

'Look. We are going to help your father first. The medics shall take over from Dominique, here. Your father must be brought to a hospital.'

The male nurse of the ambulance entered the house, followed by the driver, who was also a male nurse, and they took over from Dominique. The driver ran out again, fetched a first aid kit and then the two men began to clean the head wound better.

While the men worked, I tried, 'Thomas, can we talk a little more together? Will you come with me to the table in the dining-room?'

The boy looked at his father, saw his dad was in good hands, remarked he could do nothing better than the nurse, and he nodded to me. The boy had a small, long face, thin lips, a straight nose, huge ears, sunburnt cheeks, short cropped brown hair and piercing, intelligent eyes that looked at me earnestly and very sadly. I had rarely seen such sad eyes.

We took the boy to the table, at a chair from where he could still see his dad. Dominique held him at the shoulders, and she stroke his hair as his mother would have done.

'Thomas,' I began, 'where were you when the men ran into the courtyard?'

'I was also in the hay barn,' the boy told, 'but I sat upstairs. From there I could look through the window of the house, and I saw the men hit my dad. Then I saw my mum come out of the barn under me, and the men grabbed her. They forced her into the barn. The men came back out, except one. From where I sat I could only get down by the ladder of the hay loft, on the outside, but when I wanted to do that, for I heard my mother scream, the men returned from the house, all of them. I could not save my ma.'

'No,' I agreed, 'you couldn't have. You are very right in that! You couldn't have saved her from so many men. You did the right thing. I would have done the same at your age. You reasoned well.'

'What will happen to my sister?' the boy asked.

My stomach strung together. A sister? One more victim?

'I came back from school early today. My sister Anne-Marie is still at school. Mother was supposed to fetch her at school. Anne-Marie will be waiting at her school. Somebody should fetch her!'

'Don't worry about your sister,' I replied.

I called one of my policewomen in, a young, new recruit, and asked to the boy, 'at what school is your sister?'

‘At the Catholic College of Robois. She is nine years old. Her name is Anne-Marie Terhave. She is a good girl. She will wait and not know what has happened.’

‘Jeanne, you heard. Can you fetch the girl and bring her here?’ I asked.

‘Sure, Superintendent. Don’t worry, my boy, your sister will be here soon. I’ll get Anne-Marie and bring her here. Superintendent, we also found the mother. She is deceased.’

I nodded, and Jeanne left.

I turned back to Thomas, ‘do you have any family in Robois, Thomas, an aunt or an uncle maybe?’

‘My grandfather and grandmother live in Aucourt too,’ Thomas replied. ‘They are my father’s parents. They live in the *Rue des Déportés*, number 104.’

‘Dominique,’ I asked, ‘can you send somebody to their house? No, not you, please, I want you here. Let an officer get the grandparents for here.’

‘Would your grandfather and grandmother care for you, children, while your father gets better in hospital?’

‘Sure,’ the boy said, and then he could not stem the flow of tears anymore. He began to cry, to sob, to scream almost.

‘My ma is dead, my ma is dead, my ma is dead,’ he repeated over and over again, and he began to move his body to and fro, to shake and to move. Dominique held him lightly, but she could not say a thing, overwhelmed by emotions as she was, and I saw the tears also falling from her eyes onto the boy’s shoulder. It was an emotionally very tough moment, so I felt my tears welling up too. I stood, not to show to Dominique how touched I was by the boy’s sadness and by his mourning.

I said, ‘I’m going to have a look at the barn. I’ll be back.’

Dominique nodded, but didn’t answer. She bowed her head.

I left the house in a hurry, went into the courtyard and had to use my handkerchief to relieve my nose. I went to the barn. The officer who guarded the building looked awkwardly at me. I had not taken a look in the barn until now, because I did not doubt for one moment what the boy had told us. Right next to the door I found a woman lying on her belly. Her dress drawn high up above her legs. Her underwear torn lay next to her. Her head was buried in the hay and around her dried a pool of blood. Her throat was cut. I drew the woman’s dress down, but otherwise touched nothing. She had been killed the same way as Magda Balin and Marianne Tamin, I noticed. I found nothing special in the barn that could help me solve the murder, so I went back into the courtyard. The male nurses brought the farmer Terhave out. He needed not being supported. He could walk on his own to the ambulance, holding his head with one hand, but the male nurses nevertheless held him lightly and told him to step slowly. He sat a moment at the end of the ambulance before stepping in.

I went to him and told, ‘Monsieur Terhave, you mustn’t worry about the kids. One of our officers has gone to fetch your daughter at school, and we are warning your parents of what happened. I suppose they will take care of the children, otherwise we will. Believe me, they will be well cared for. Can you answer one or two questions for me?’

The man still held one hand to his temple and he made a painful face, but he nodded.

‘Have you any idea who the men were that assaulted you?’

‘No. They wore balaclavas. They were big men. They knocked hard. I know what they came to do!’

‘What was that?’ I asked.

‘A few days ago I refused wind turbine towers to be built on my fields. Several towers were to be built in my grain fields. The men hit me, but I heard them shout they would teach me to

thwart their intentions with the towers. They came to punish me for refusing them to allow the turbines to be placed where they wanted. They told me not to say anything about why they hit me. I will not remain silent any longer. What happened to me happened to others before, and may happen again. They have to be stopped. They were Aeolfast men! Have they really killed my wife?’

‘I’m afraid so, Monsieur Terhave.’

‘I want to see her.’

The man tried to stand again, but he staggered. A nurse and I grabbed him, otherwise he would have fallen.

I said, ‘Monsieur Terhave, you are in no state to walk. You have to go to the hospital. You need medication and medical care. Your head must be examined. You may suffer from internal bleedings. The quickest way to get better is to let these men take you to the hospital. We will take good care of your wife. We will handle her with due respect, believe me, and we will take good care of your children. Now, you must be sensible. Your children will need you in the future, so you must get well soon. Concentrate on that thought. I swear we will take care of everything and report to you in the hospital. Now, please go into the ambulance.’

I guess Terhave was still a little dizzy, for he obeyed. The male nurse went in with him. The ambulance drove out of the courtyard.

I had to go back to the house. Dominique still sat with the boy in the dining-room, but he did not cry anymore.

Dominique said, ‘Superintendent, Thomas has something to tell you!’

I took my time to sit in a chair opposite the boy.

‘What would that be, Thomas?’ I asked. ‘You know, you have been very courageous!’

‘I remained in the hay loft,’ Thomas whispered, inclining his head to me as if he wanted nobody else to hear what he wished to say. ‘I heard them talk! At first, they spoke to each other with Disney names, but later, after my mother had screamed, I heard them speak to each other by their first names. I heard Jean, Eric, and Hubert. I also heard them tell they had given a hard lesson to the people who objected to the windmills project. I heard them say the next who needed a lesson was Robert Jacquet, our Bourgmestre. I know Robert Jacquet. He is a friend of my father. He has already been at our farm. He knows my father and mother.’

‘Yes, I know who Robert Jacquet is. He is my friend too. Did the men tell when they would teach the Bourgmestre a lesson?’

‘Soon they said, soon. Everybody who opposed the project would be punished, they said.’

‘Thank you, Thomas. That was useful for us. Did you hear anything else?’

‘Yes, I did! One man seemed to be very angry with the man who went into the barn with my mother. He called him a dirty murderer. One of the men even hit him, another man began to sob. I think that man got into a panic, then. They seemed suddenly not to know anymore what they were doing. They shouted, they yelled at each other. Then, they ran away suddenly to their car.’

We got interrupted, for an elderly woman and an elderly man ran into the house, the old woman screaming, the man also very excited. The woman ran to the boy.

‘You must be the grandparents Terhave of young Thomas,’ I said.

‘Yes we are,’ the man shouted.

‘Can you come a few moments outside with me?’ I asked.

The man nodded, and we went to the door, remained standing next to the window.

I explained, ‘I am Superintendent Bikri. I am afraid there has been an assault on your son’s farm, probably because he refused allowing a company to build wind turbine towers in his fields. Your son was beaten on the head, but I sincerely think he will be well after a few days

in hospital. The ambulance took him, so you don't have to worry too much about that. He will be cared for. Worse has happened to your daughter-in-law.'

I cursed myself for being heartless, but I had to hurry.

I continued, 'your daughter-in-law has not survived the assault. I'm very sorry to have to tell you that, and I would have liked to use kinder words. The Special Services, the *Service d'Enquête et de Recherche*, will arrive in a few minutes, so I cannot allow you to see your daughter-in-law now, but, believe me, that is also in your own interest. We will bring your daughter-in-law later in an ambulance to Namur. You will be allowed seeing her there, and arrange for her funeral. Your first worry should be to your grandchildren, can you understand that?'

The man nodded again. The shock also became apparent on his face, so I told him to sit down on the threshold of the door. The man sat on the cold stones. His eyes wandered in all directions.

'Your granddaughter is at school, but one of our officers, a woman, has gone to fetch her there. Can your grandchildren stay at your place for a few days, until their father returns?'

'Of course, of course,' the man answered. 'They stay often at our home. We have rooms for them. They can sleep at our place and we will drive them to school.'

'Thank you, that would be fine. You may have to keep them away from school for a few days. Now, I am going to place two officers here at the farm for the evening and the night. I have to leave, but I'm going to tell you who will be in charge. It is a woman, called Dominique Bussy. Can you take the children away from here, to your home, but come back late in the evening, around eleven o'clock maybe, to close the farm? The door to the house must be closed, the gates too. Something will have to be arranged for the animals. Can you do that or should I foresee people to bring them food and water? My men will help. Can you do that?'

'Of course, Superintendent. We will ask help of neighbours. We will manage. We know who you are. We also know Dominique very well. What a tragedy! Such a nice family, Superintendent! We were so proud of our son! Why did this have to happen? What cruel fate for our grandchildren!'

I could not add much to what the grandfather of Thomas said. The man stood and entered the house.

I began to dispatch orders and organised the crime site. First, I phoned the SER. Dominique could not do that, for she was still consoling young Thomas and his grandmother. I got Danlois on the phone and explained him what had happened. I also told him I would no longer wait for the interrogation of the Aeolfast gang. I asked him how many men he could command to help us. He said five. I could muster ten. He talked of the Federal Intervention Team, but I thought it was not necessary to call on those men. That would take me too much time phoning to too many people and institutions, and answering too many questions. We could bring fifteen men. That would have to be sufficient power.

Then, I went to Dominique, and told her to take care of the farm. When our new policewoman Jeanne returned with the granddaughter, she was to accompany the grandparents and the children to their house in Aucourt. Two officers were to be posted at or in that house, too. I wanted two officers to stay in the farm until everybody had left, the SER, and our officers. Dominique was to close the farm with the help of the grandparents. The child Thomas or his grandparents would have a key. The seals would have to be placed on the house and on the barn, but if necessary for the food and drink of the animals to be re-opened. The outer gate would have to be closed too. Two officers would have to remain at the farm, in a car close by. There would be people coming in and out to feed the animals. I wanted their names, but the men or women would have to be given free access to the farm and accompanied for a few days.

I tried to phone several times to Robert Jacquet, but he did not answer at his home number, and also not on his mobile phone. I would have to drive to his house.

I told Dominique one last thing, and I will thank God for the rest of my life for that. I did it more on a hunch than on a rational motive of management. I told her that if I called in urgency with an address and the words of war gear, she was to assemble immediately as many officers as she could, even those assigned to this building and the officers that were on holiday. She was to bring them to the address I would give. The officers would have to come in bullet-proof jackets and with all the shotguns and automatic weapons we had in our offices, and also not to forget grenades and tear-gas canisters. Dominique looked at me as if I had lost my wits, but she did not comment further that evening. She just nodded.

Evening it was, for the hour was near eight in the day and darkening when I drove from Farm Garnuée towards Boyu, to the lodge of Robert Jacquet. I had to warn my friend.

The assault. Joseph Bikri

I drove to Robert's lodge in my own car. I arrived at the villa, pushed against the door, but it was locked. I rang and Robert came to open for me, dressed more formally than usual. He let me step in, and we went to his living-room.

'Samia is with Rose in the other wing,' Robert started. 'I kept Rose here this week because she complained of stomach aches, but I believe she wants too much to help us with the election campaign. The doctor said there was nothing the matter with her. We just returned from shopping in the city. I needed to buy a lot of articles our campaign team wrote on a list for me. Rose and Samia came with me. They are changing clothes. How are you?'

'I'm fine,' I replied, but I sighed. 'Other people are not so fine. I'm sorry to have come so late in the day, but there has been another murder, this time in Aucourt. A farmer who refused wind turbine towers on his terrains has been attacked by four men. His wife was killed. The man is willing to testify the gang spoke of the Aeolfast project, specifically. I have a witness for first names, and we will find other evidence surely incriminating this assault to the group of men I mentioned, the men who live at Recycfast, the Blandis group. I am going to raid them at Recycfast, hoping they have gathered there. In fact, I should already have done so, but we had many things to organise at the farm.'

'That is terrible,' Robert interjected. 'I have to go there. Where is it?'

'No, no, you cannot do anything there for the moment. Everybody left. The farmer is at the hospital and his parents are taking his two children to their home. Only forensics officers are still working at the farm.'

'Still, I have to see them. I must do that. Where is the home of the grandparents?'

'There is something more urgent,' I announced. 'The boy of the farmer heard the men shout the next lesson of the gang would be on you. I don't know when they intend to attack your house, and if they mean what they cried, but an assault on your lodge can happen any time. Something has snapped with the gang. They seem to have lost their minds entirely. They are not the disciplined group anymore that planned operations cold-bloodedly. Maybe they have a feeling they are losing everything. I came here as fast as I could. You didn't answer your telephone!'

‘As I told you, we have not been at the house and I blocked my mobile phone for a while. We went shopping, not only for my campaign, but also for Samia and Rose, and afterwards we had supper in the city. We needed some time to ourselves.’

‘I drove here to warn you, Robert. This is a serious warning. You had better leave for the night. Take Samia and Rose with you, and disappear for the night and tomorrow. Go to a hotel in another town, not in Robois, to Namur or Brussels, and hide until I call you. Keep your mobile active. I will telephone you when all is clear, but get out of here as fast as you can. Don’t take this lightly!’

‘I am not going to leave my house to those guys.’

‘I can place an officer for added protection at your door, but not right now. I have to gather all the men I can muster to arrest the Blandis gang at Recycfast, but I am not sure I will be able to locate them soon. They may be at Recycfast or they may not be there. Until I have arrested them, I want you and Samia and Rose out of here!’

Robert sighed, ‘all right! You know best. I’d better do as you tell. I’ll pack a few things and we’ll leave. I guess we can find a hotel in Namur or around there.’

Robert stood up to prepare. I felt relieved he agreed following my advice so rapidly.

He asked, ‘can I get you a coffee, a drink?’

‘No, no,’ I replied impatiently, ‘just go, Robert! Hurry! I have to get back. I’ll wait till you have gone. Please activate your alarm systems.’

Robert was moving to the door of his living-room, when I heard a slight noise of cars arriving on the gravel of the path outdoors. There was no window in the living-room that gave onto the front of the house, but there was a narrow, high window that ran from the floor up to the ceiling in the corridor next to the front door. Robert went rapidly to that window to have a look at who arrived, when suddenly all hell broke loose.

Robert had not yet even reached the small window in the corridor, when it shattered, throwing pieces of glass with great power all over the length of the corridor. The double-paned window exploded in a thunder of noise. Impacts of bullets, many bullets, pelleted against the walls and at the door of the lodge. The walls of Robert’s lodge were thick, made of hard wood and the isolation material stopped the bullets that might have passed, but several projectiles shot through the thinner door and were flung into the opposite wall, sending splinters of wood and glass all over the place. One of those splinters flew into Robert’s leg, so that he bent double. That probably saved his life, for he stood by then in the corridor, close to the door, flaming bullets passing around him.

I shouted to Robert to lie down, and he also instinctively did just that. I too flung myself to the floor, behind the sofa. I drew my handgun. I switched the safety catch off and pulled on the barrel to arm the weapon. I knew my poor revolver was no match for the automatic guns that flared outside. I had also only eight bullets in my police-gun, whereas we heard tens of bullets being released from automatic guns. They hit the walls, the door and the window of the corridor. The men outside simply sprayed the house with projectiles.

I looked at the large bay window of the living-room, expecting to see men arriving there and shoot at us, but remembered this window overlooked the plains below and was hard to reach from the front. Robert’s lodge stood on a promontory at that side. We were relatively safe in the living-room, for the men would have it extremely difficult to run around the house and pass the narrow ridge that led to the panoramic window behind me.

I saw Robert crouch, then stand. In the few seconds the firing stopped he ran the length of the corridor. He disappeared in his office room. I expected him to emerge soon and to dive into the other wing, the wing that advanced to the front, to where Samia and Rose were.

The firing resumed. The men took the lodge for firing practice. I heard the thundering impact of tens of bullets still, some of which continued to pass through the door and the small window. The men obviously just stood there and emptied their weapons at the lodge. There had to come an end to that. I stood up, crouched also in the living-room, ready to jump after Robert. I would have to hold the door in target, for I expected the men to burst in through the shattered door any moment. Robert stepped out of his room, ignoring the exploding bullets against his walls. He held his grandfather's double barrelled hunting shotgun in his hands, the gun broken open, pushing shells into it. Such a weapon was traditionally used in our woods and pastures for hunting small animals, but the pellets inside the shells spread when shot, so it had a formidable stopping power on humans, especially when shot at short distances such as here. I would not want to receive such a deflagration in my stomach! Robert was armed for his war. He tugged more shells from a carton box into his pockets.

We were both armed now, ready to halt anybody who would try to break into the house. Robert looked at me, saw me standing at the beginning of the corridor, both hands on my gun. He ran into the other wing. He thought of Samia and Rose. I ran after Robert into the corridor, as soon as the hail of bullets diminished. When I came near the window, I saw a man, dressed in black with a ski-mask on his head, holding a Kalashnikov gun coming up close to the door. I shot while passing the window, through the shattered panes. I aimed for the man's breast while I ran and dived to the floor. I shot three bullets and knew I could not miss at this distance. I heard a scream when I passed the door and fell to the floor. A man moaned outside. Then there was a moment's silence, after which more bullets flew into the corridor, so I stayed as flat as I could on the floor, but began to crawl forward, pushing on elbows and feet. I stood only at the end of the corridor.

I heard Robert's shotgun fire, twice. I ran into the wing, the wing closest to the front of the lodge, and saw Robert standing near a window there, breaking open his smoking shotgun and inserting two more shells in the barrels. Then, he quickly passed the window. Here too, bullets had been sprayed. I saw him disappear into the room of Rose. I sent two more shots through the shattered window, hitting a black car so that its windshield exploded, and jumped after Robert.

The bullets ceased coming. The men might have become very dangerous then. I feared they had come after us, but instead I heard shouts outside, bewildered shouts. I stepped back, dared to look with one eye through the window, and saw two men dragging a third after them. They ran towards their two black, heavy BMW cars. They dragged a man by the shoulders, and he trailed blood. He was severely touched in the legs by Robert's shot. The men jumped into their cars, pushed their wounded accomplice in the left one, and then they fired their engines. I sent a bullet after them, shattering a rear window. I counted four men in all in the cars, including the wounded one. The cars drove off at great speed.

The men had only shot a large number of bullets at Robert's lodge, then they fled. I could hardly imagine a more cowardly assault, but they had been stopped from entering the house.

I went into the rooms of Samia and Rose, and found Robert in the second one. He was staring at the floor, behind a sofa that obstructed my view. I entered more, saw Robert looking without moving at Samia and Rose lying on the tapestry. There was blood on the floor, not much blood, but blood meant injuries. Samia and Rose had been injured. I crouched, found Rose on top of Samia, both unconscious. They had wounds both. I did not see Rose's wounds immediately, for she lay on her belly above Samia, but Samia had been shot in the shoulders. I turned Rose gently over, and found the wounds in her belly, spreading blood over Samia. Robert did not move. He stood in shock and began to shake all over his body.

I cried, 'Robert, take hold of yourself! Samia and Rose have been hit. They need care, immediately. Grab yourself together, call an ambulance. I must go after the shooters!'

Robert moved, emerging from his paralysis. His eyes focused and turned to me. He too crouched near Samia and Rose. He dropped his shotgun and took his mobile phone from out of a pocket in his trousers. He dialled.

I did not dare touch Rose, who seemed very severely wounded, but I picked up Samia from the floor and placed her on the sofa. She did not open her eyes, but I felt her pulse and breath. She was still alive. I looked back at Rose, felt her pulse and put my ear to her nose, but I felt neither pulse nor warmth of breath. I suddenly feared very much. I could not move anymore. Robert said, 'I phoned an ambulance.'

'Good,' I said. 'The doctors will work on Samia and Rose. I have to go, Robert, I must stop those men.'

'Yes,' Robert agreed. 'You go. I'll handle this here. I'm back in control, now. You look very pale. Are you all right?'

I emerged slowly from my lethargy.

Robert put a hand on Samia's breast.

I hesitated, for Robert too needed help, but I decided to leave him.

I ran to the door of the villa. I ripped the rests of the door open, and remarked how many bullets had splintered the wood. How many chargers had the criminals emptied to the house? To my right I saw a man on the ground, still wearing a ski mask. I ran to him, drew off his mask, to reveal one of the men I had seen from the far in the Recycfast gang. I felt the pulse at his neck but found none. I had shot the man twice in the breast, once in the shoulder, from close distance. He had not survived. I left the man where he was, and ran to my car.

My car had been taken as target for many bullets, too. The windshield was shattered, and bullets had penetrated deep into the motor block. I jumped inside, but when I turned the ignition key, the engine wouldn't fire. I jumped back out of the car, ran into the house. While doing that, I grabbed my mobile phone and rang Dominique Bussy. I went through the corridor again, to Robert, and while doing that told Dominique to come with as many officers as possible, in war gear, to the Recycfast site. I also asked her to warn Inspector Danlois and ask for reinforcements. I told her Robert's lodge had been assaulted and I feared there were two victims, one a killer, the other Rose, Robert's daughter.

I hung up before Dominique could ask me more, but I had heard her gasp at the telephone.

She certainly had heard from my yelling voice how seriously I had meant the orders.

I ran back to Robert in Rose's quarters. Robert held Rose in his arms, and he sobbed.

He said, 'Samia is hurt. The ambulance is coming. I phoned again. Rose is dead, Joseph, my Rose is dead!'

These last words of Robert came out as a scream, but I could only nod. I knew already.

I shouted, 'Robert, I must mourn later. I need your car! Mine has been busted by bullets.

Please give me your car keys!'

Robert's hand went back to his trousers, and he came up with a set of keys.

'How do I open the garage door, Robert?'

'The remote control lies on the dashboard of the BMW,' Robert said.

Robert was trying heroically to suppress his tears, but I had no patience with him.

I ran to the garage, jumped over the rests of the election campaign material, almost broke my leg, entered Robert's four-wheel drive, found the remote control, opened the garage door, and

drove backwards. I turned on the gravel, and sped to Recycfast with screeching tires, throwing gravel up behind me, past my battered car. I swung in high gear over the gravel road, then by the roads of Boyu, to the N11. I had to be at Recycfast to halt the gang there, if that was where the murderers were headed. My mind was filled with stark hatred. I wanted revenge when I sped over the N11 at the highest speed possible.

I arrived at the modern buildings of Recycfast. I saw the complex, low and vast, rise to my left side. I slowed down, eased the beating of my heart, and drove cautiously to near the buildings. I saw the two cars in which the criminals had come to Robert's lodge stand to a side, one indeed with a shattered windshield, the other with a burst rear window. The men had assembled in their rat hole. They still did not seem to be aware that I, the policeman, knew where they had gathered. I looked around, and saw two other cars, a blue Peugeot and a grey Audi a little further.

I left Robert's car behind a tree and bushes, and went slowly closer on foot, holding my gun with two hands in front of me. I could not on my own enter the Recycfast building. I had only a handgun on me, with only two bullets left. I crouched behind a tree, not far from the doors that led to the men's quarters, the door through which I had seen them walk, not long after the Georgis rape case. I wondered whether there were other exits, but thought not, and the cars stood here. I guessed the men were as much in shock and in panic as we had been a few moments ago. They must be yelling at each other now, incoherent in taking decisions on what to do next. I supposed they would soon emerge and flee. I could not let them flee, so I would have to shoot. I covered the door.

Suddenly, I heard in the far sirens blare, lights flickered, and a little later two police cars arrived. I jumped up from behind my tree and ran to the cars, which stopped not far from me. Five policemen of my group ran to me, led by Dominique Bussy.

I cried, 'take cover! They are inside, and dangerous! They have automatic weapons. Put on your bullet-proof jackets!'

'Superintendent,' Dominique Bussy shouted, 'what is going on? You'd better explain us first!'

'The Blandis gang has killed two persons today,' I said. 'Put on your jackets! They will not hesitate to shoot! Take cover. The men are inside. Where are the others?'

'They are coming, boss. Danlois will also come with men, but I don't think we must expect him before another half hour.'

'Do you have a shotgun and a jacket for me?'

'We have things in the trunk of our cars, boss.'

I went with Dominique to her car, found a jacket and a pump action riot gun, a box of shells. I also saw a megaphone in the trunk, and that gave me an idea.

I ran back to the door of Recycfast, to behind the tree I had found. I distinctly heard voices shout inside the building.

I took the megaphone, pushed the button, and cried in it, 'this is the police of Robois! Men of Recycfast, this is the police. We have surrounded the building. You cannot escape. You must come out with your hands in the air. Come out! If you come out with weapons in your hands, we will start shooting. You have more than twenty heavily armed policemen around you. Your criminal actions are over. Don't add to them! Come out! You have five minutes to come out, hands in the air, then we will throw grenades in and blast you out! Hands up!'

I waited. I repeated my message, gave the criminals only two minutes more. From behind my tree I gestured to the officers to stay spread out. Dominique ran to me, sat on the other side of the tree trunk.

‘Boss,’ she remarked, ‘I think you are slightly biased. We have no more than five men and one woman out here. If those guys bolt with Kalashnikovs, we may have a restaging of the gunfight at O.K. Corral here. I’m not Wyatt Earp!’

I managed a grin. ‘You saw that ’57 film too, then, like every self-conscious policeman! The good guys won, you know.’

I knew all too well we had no more than five, but the hoodlums didn’t know that, and I detected no movement at the windows on the second floor. Maybe they were looking at the video cameras. I spotted a camera above the door. I shot at it with my shotgun, and then we had one camera less. The device exploded in a hundred pieces and a flurry of electric sparkles.

I took once more the megaphone in my hands and cried, ‘come out or die now, you scum! We are throwing the grenades in five seconds!’

Maybe my shooting at the camera decided the men inside. I had not really expected the door to open by itself, but exactly that happened next. Three men, still wearing ski masks, came out with their hands up. We did not come out of our hiding places. I spotted a movement behind the first two men, and saw another guy darting to the left, towards the cars. He held an AK47 and sprayed bullets around, but I expertly shot him through the leg. It was not harder than during an exercise. He fell but came back on his knee and he continued to hold on to his AK47, until I heard a bang to my left and the man got clipped. Blood sprouted out of his shoulder and the gun clattered on to the stones of the courtyard, the man tumbling away from it. I looked to my left and saw Dominique Bussy stand with her two hands cramped around her revolver. She was an excellent markswoman, even only with a handgun.

I cried to the rest of my men, ‘don’t shoot, don’t shoot! They surrender!’

The three men with their hands up advanced, and two of my men sprang to them. One held the men under fire with a riot gun, the other put handcuffs around their arms, pinning their arms on their backs. They led the men to the right, towards a police car. They held the three men with their bellies on the front of the car, their backs turned to my armed men. My men kept their guns pointing at the bandits.

I still was not sure how many gangsters remained. One had been wounded at Robert’s place. I had no idea where that man was. I dared to stand from behind the tree, ran to one of the handcuffed men and asked, ‘where is the wounded one?’

‘He can’t walk,’ one of the men answered. He is inside, on a couch. He is in no state to offer resistance.’

‘How many others are inside?’

‘One more, one who equally will do no harm. He is tied up.’

I did not wait for further explanations, although I did not understand how or why one of the gangsters might have been tied inside.

I shouted, ‘Dominique, you’re in charge here. Call an ambulance first.’

The ambulance service of Robois would be doing golden business this evening! I realised also how fast the darkness fell. I could not wait much longer.

I called to another officer, the one with the riot gun, and I told him to come with me inside the building. I had counted by then I had already one man too much in the group of gangsters.

How many had really remained inside? How many of those were armed and would resist being arrested?

The door of the living quarters of Recycfast stood wide open, so we entered very carefully but unhindered. I kicked at the door and heard no shots being fired. Behind the door ran a long, gaping corridor. I walked in, made a few steps, then gave a sign to the officer to advance. I covered him. He came to beside me. We both held our shotguns in front of us, high, ready to blast. I went on three steps, then waited. The officer took five steps forward, until he stood at a door on the right side. He continued until he had just passed that door. I advanced, covered by him. I kicked the door open, feared gunshots, but nothing happened. We entered, aiming to right and left. We only saw an empty office, desks with personal computers, no people.

We continued in the corridor. The corridor ended at another door, at the opposite end. We applied the same drill: one covered the door, the other opened the door with as much noise as possible. We entered another corridor, one that ran perpendicularly to the first. Here, we found several doors, but these stood all open. We first entered a kitchen, empty of people. The kitchen was much used. Pot and pans lay crisscross in the sink, used cups stood placed together on a table. A cloth drenched in blood hung, thrown over a water tap.

The second door led to a dining-room. In here stood only a large table and a cupboard. We entered through the next door and came upon a living-room. I saw first a large television set and two high sofas. Here, we encountered our first surprise.

A man was lying on the sofa, his legs half bandaged, his trousers torn. Rivulets of blood seeped from his legs on the floor. This was the man Robert Jacquet had shot. He wore no ski-mask, and when I came closer I recognised him as the farmer Michel Guichand, the man who had sworn he would make Robert Jacquet pay for the refusal of the extension of his industrial farm. Guichand had joined the party at some point in time! Guichand looked at me with panicked eyes. He recognised me too. He lay obviously in much pain and would not be able to do much harm, but his eyes wandered to a revolver on the table in the middle of the room. I threw that weapon from the table and kicked it to the other side in a corner. My officer was rougher. He hit Guichand in the belly, so that the man gasped, then he handcuffed Guichand with his right wrist to the wooden stand of the sofa. The man screamed, but my officer merely grinned and called Guichand a dirty bastard. Guichand was losing blood. We had to bring him to an ambulance soon, but we also had to discover what else was left in the Recycfast hangar.

We stepped cautiously out of that room, and through the following door. That was an almost empty hall. All sorts of tools, carton boxes, machinery and drums stood along the walls. We got our second surprise there, for we found a chair in the middle of that hall and taped to the chair sat Max Blandis. He was not in good shape. He had been hit. Blood hung on his face. His eyes and his nose were bloodied, the blood dripped along his cheeks and chin. His lips had broken.

‘There is nobody here but me, Superintendent,’ Blandis croaked.

I wondered what state his teeth were in, for a trickle of blood also seeped from his mouth when he spoke. Blandis wouldn’t be able to move, however hard he tried, so we left him as he was, and went out of the hall. We did not yet end Blandis’ suffering. We continued our exploration of the quarters.

At that moment, I heard multiple sirens outside.

‘The cavalry of Namur arrives,’ the officer behind me whispered.

I nodded. We continued our slow progression through the quarters of Blandis’ gang. We found two more rooms downstairs, both empty. Then, we went upstairs and searched through four other rooms there, bedrooms, plus two bathrooms. I looked out of a window and I saw more officers with black helmets and dressed in heavy bullet-proof jackets stream into

Recycfast. A team of four policemen also ran to the main entry of the company. Inspector Danlois had arrived with the attack squad of Namur!

We only relaxed when we had passed all the rooms upstairs. My companion blew out steam when we had searched the last room. We straightened, let our guns hang down instead of holding them to our eyes, and we went down again. We were met by a train of policemen running inside, but we told them the quarters were cleared. We indicated where the two men were, Blandis and Guichand. But for them, the premises were empty.

Danlois cried, 'well, Superintendent, it seems we arrived too late. Robois has cleaned up the mess on its own!'

'That we have done indeed, Inspector,' I answered. 'You will find two other men a little further, that is all. I suppose I can turn them in to you, now. They are all yours!'

'They are,' Inspector Danlois replied. 'I'll bring them to the prison, but I'll also want to interrogate them right away, Superintendent. You know a lot better than I what happened. Why don't you join us? We'll interrogate them together. That will win us a lot of precious time.'

'I'll come, Danlois, but first I have to pay a visit to the hospital of Robois. Do you have enough men to handle these guys?'

'I think we can manage, Superintendent. Recycfast will have to be secured, though. The seals must be put on the buildings.'

'Dominique will do that,' I smiled.

'Fine!'

I went outside.

I called Dominique and asked her, 'Dominique, my fiancée got hurt during the shooting of the villa of Robert Jacquet. She is in hospital. Can you handle things around here? The SER will stay quiet a while still, but then the company Recycfast must be searched and sealed. I want two officers to keep guard here throughout the night and block entrance to any workpeople tomorrow morning. We have to guard the Garnuée farm, as well as the house of the Terhave parents. The SER must be directed to the house of Robert Jacquet, for there lies another member of this gang, shot dead. One or two of our officers must remain this night and tomorrow to guard the villa of the Bourgmestre, for his front door is destroyed. A lot of work for us! I'm going from the hospital to Namur, to help Danlois with the interrogation of the gang this night. We hold a coordination meeting tomorrow at ten in the police station, then we decide what to do next. At least you should be present at that meeting. Can you handle all that? If you need assistance, call me.'

I think Dominique was more surprised from hearing me talk of my betrothed than about everything else that had happened this afternoon and evening. She merely nodded, however, and started yelling orders to left and right. She was quite good at that, I noticed.

I ran back to Robert's car and drove to the hospital of Robois. In the entry hall I inquired nervously after Samia Bennani, and the nurse at the counter told me it was far to late for visits. Nevertheless, seeing I was a policeman and how I touched my gun, she gave me the number of a room on the second floor. I ran.

In the room, which I reached panting, I found Robert Jacquet sitting near the bed of Samia. He sat in an armchair and had been dozing a little. Samia was fast asleep.

Robert stood, whispering, 'she has come back from the operating room about half an hour ago. She is fast asleep, and that may last another hour or so. They drugged her. She has been operated upon in urgency, but she will make it. She had two bullets in her shoulder. She lost a

lot of blood, but the wounds have been cleaned and the bones set. She will make it. Rose is dead, you know.'

I nodded. We embraced, and then Robert broke down. He wept. I let him sob for a few moments, then he gained control of his nerves.

'If only I had not been so stupid and stubborn,' Robert began. 'If I had not been the damn Bourgmestre, I would have saved her. It is all my fault for Rose and for Samia. I'm so sorry!' 'Robert, if I had acted sooner and put the entire gang in jail, this would not have happened either. We did what we had to do. The real ones who brought pain and death to Robois are the men we caught. They must stand to trial and be convicted. Do not blame yourself. It makes no sense and it simply isn't right. Rose's death has been brought to happen by the Blandis gang. They were die-hard criminals. We got them, but too late. For that I'm sorry and I apologise to you and to a few more people. What we must do is grieve and mourn, but what happened was not our fault.'

Robert pointed to Samia. 'She is asleep, Joseph. She will not wake up soon, the doctors said. I'll stay here, this night. When she wakes up she may need someone at her side, but you must go and do whatever you have to do. Please come back tomorrow.'

'I have to go to Namur. The SER Inspectors need me. We want to hold the first interrogations right away, while the gangsters are still in shock, all through the night if necessary. Have you called Simone?'

Robert seemed to talk out of a dream.

'Not yet. Yes, I shall call her. No, I can't use my mobile phone in the hospital.'

He pointed to a 'NO Smoking' sign and a 'No Cell Phones' sign beneath.

'Can you call her, please? Tell her where I am. I'll not leave Samia.'

'I'll ring her, Robert. I'll also be back as soon as I can, but it may be after dawn. Please explain to Samia.'

I briefly told what had happened at Recycfast, and that eased his mind some.

I went out of the room, closed the door very softly, and ran back to the car, to Robert's car.

Half an hour later, I stepped into Inspector Danlois' office. His room was filled with men in civil clothes, but a few still had their bullet-proof jackets on. Weapons lay everywhere, on desks, on aluminium cupboards. They looked at me with respect, and made way. One man applauded, and the other fell in. Suddenly, the emotions also overwhelmed me. These Inspectors were actually saying I, the Moroccan, had done a good job. I thanked them by nodding and waving with my hand.

Inspector Danlois stood in front of a blackboard as if he were a schoolteacher, and he had written a list of names in white chalk on the board. He stood, pointing at the names with the chalk in his right hand.

'Ah, Superintendent,' Danlois shouted. 'We have made a list of the criminals. You made quite a catch! We are going to have a lot of work, this night. We have Max Blandis, who seems to have been the leader of the gang, a security specialist, former cop, but he quarrelled with the others. We found him tied by tape to a chair, half beaten to death. He already told me he would be quite willing to talk. He has received some medical care. We'll interrogate him first. Then there was this guy called Vantandt. He was shot at the villa of Robert Jacquet.'

'I shot that one, then,' I added immediately. 'I was in the house of the Bourgmestre when the criminals attacked us. I came to warn Jacquet, because the boy of the Garnuée farm told me he had heard the gangsters talk about an imminent assault on the Bourgmestre. In the attack on the Bourgmestre's house, they shot Rose Jacquet, the Bourgmestre's daughter. She died. They also shot my fiancée, Samia Bennani. She lies in hospital with bullet wounds in her

shoulder, but she'll make it. Samia lived temporarily in Jacquet's house. Jacquet is my friend. He is with Samia now, at the hospital.'

Inspector Danlois remained speechless for a few moments, and the looks grew in amazement around me.

Danlois continued, 'a man called Guichand, a farmer of Robois, we found wounded by shot in the legs.'

'He got shot by a hunting shotgun at Robert Jacquet's house,' I intervened. 'Robert shot him with the double-barrelled shotgun of his grandfather. He was defending his villa. The gangsters picked Guichand up and took him with them. I was at the villa. Robert and I shot in self-defence. The assailers shot with AK47 automatic weapons!'

'Good. We also have Hubert Dusarme, Richard Mordine and Yves Govin. Govin is something of a surprise. He is the only one who does not have any former crimes to his name. He is also a candidate on the same election list as Robert Jacquet, Miss Bussy told me.'

'He is,' I confirmed. 'Although he is a member of the same political party or group as Jacquet, he is an adversary of the Bourgmestre. He must have joined the gang later, when his own designs collapsed. He wanted to oust Jacquet out of his first position on the list, but he did not succeed in that.'

Inspector Danlois coughed.

'The most interesting guy, probably, seems to me to be the last one, the one who has got one bullet and a lot of small shot in his body at Recycfast, in arm and legs. He tried to escape at Recycfast, although the other men surrendered. You shot him in the leg, Miss Bussy in the arm. Good shots you are, both of you. We put him and Guichand for the time being in the hospital ward of the prison. They may both be transferred to a civil hospital, but we keep them guarded, of course. This man, Eric Vrankaert, he babbled incoherently, crying he didn't murder the prostitutes. He was the only one to talk about these murders. I think we have a very dangerous man with him.'

'Fine,' I said. 'That seems to be the score. When do we start the interrogations?'

'Are you prepared to spend the night with us?' Danlois grinned.

'I do like these guys so much,' I smiled wryly.

'Let's go then,' Danlois decided. He gave orders to his men while we walked.

The rest is history of the police forces of Robois and Namur.

We interrogated each of the gangsters for two hours, also the ones that were wounded. When we had done with one man, we briefed our next team, handed the transcripts of the interrogations to them, and these two Inspectors made the criminals repeat over and over again what they had said to us. We obtained a very coherent story in the end.

The group of Vantandt, Mordine, Vrankaert and Dusarme had been hired in Brussels by Max Blandis to work on the people of Robois who would prove to be recalcitrant in their support of the Aeolfast wind turbine project. Govin and Guichand came later. They confessed they hated Robert Jacquet.

Max Blandis confessed everything first. He was the professional. He knew that, once caught, with sufficient evidence against him, it was only a matter of time until we found out the truth and the entire truth. He told us he had become disillusioned with the group already a long time ago. When he wanted to disband the group because the men became too violent, Count Buisseyre promised them a larger bonus if they continued. For Blandis, the opposers against the project were too many, grew in number instead of backing off. The more he, Blandis, wanted to contain the operation, the more Buisseyre promised money to the men. When the

group had attacked the Garnuée farm, Vrankaert had raped and killed the farmer's wife. Blandis had understood then that Vrankaert was a compulsive murderer, a serial killer even. Blandis suspected him from that moment on of multiple killings, done entirely on his own, the killings of which Blandis had heard by the newspapers only. When despite the bonuses Blandis had called off all further operations, the gang had hit him and tied him to a chair. That had happened before the attack on the Bourgmaster's villa. Blandis had no part in that attack. The other men confirmed Blandis' version, of course at first in variants, until the confessions and confrontations sounded in line. Blandis despised Govin and Guichand, who were more drunk than awake during the last raids.

Inspector Danlois wrote an arrest warrant for Count Buisseyre. Buisseyre was hauled out of his apartment in Brussels. He would be interrogated two days later. We interrogated Vrankaert and Guichand that night too, even though they had been drugged for quite a while, and though they spent the night in painkillers. I left these interrogations to Inspector Danlois and his men, for the SER had sufficient evidence against them, including fingerprints, DNA material and the description of Monsieur Candribert. Guichand finally admitted that he indeed had loaded the tromblon of Paul Degambe and the pistol of Robert Jacquet with real shot during the Saint Adelbert March. He had boasted about that to Yves Govin, who confessed the information to us.

Inspector Danlois had a very long report to write. He had to be precise, for Buisseyre would throw the best lawyers of the country against him. I helped him fill in the last details. Danlois had not slept throughout the entire night. He still had to finish his report, report to his boss and to the *Procureur du Roi*, and then the events would have to be presented to the press. His following days would have very busy.

In the morning, I was totally exhausted, but I drove back to the hospital of Robois. I found Robert and Simone in Samia's room. Samia had opened her eyes and had spoken to them. She was doing better. She would heal. She had slept with Simone's hand in hers. Samia lay as white in the face as the pillow into which she had dug her head. While Robert and Simone talked, she opened her eyes and looked amazed at me. Her eyes wanted to embrace me, so I went up to her, sat on the bed, and took her head in my hands. I dared not touch her shoulders.

I asked, 'how are you, darling?'

'The doctor said I would heal. Simone has looked at the X-ray photos too. She said I could have children still!'

I smiled, 'sure you can. You were only hit in the shoulders!'

Samia wept.

'I was shot in the shoulders because Rose threw herself in front of me. She saved my life and lost hers!'

Samia sobbed and almost screamed. She had come to love Rose very much.

Robert and Simone seemed appalled at what Samia had said.

I had no words. I put my head next to Samia's and kissed her. I kept her in my embrace a long time still, once more burying my head in the white cushions so that my own tears could be hidden. When I brought my face up, I had to wipe the tears away anyhow, and to blow my nose with my handkerchief. Robert and Simone patted my shoulder, this time.

Paul Degambe suddenly entered the room. He had heard of the shooting at Robert's villa and finding nobody there, he had driven to the hospital. He heard our story.

Paul bellowed with a voice that filled not only Samia's room but also the rest of the hospital, 'listen to me, you all! If I heard you well, you spent the night awake, here and at the police station. You look as if you could drop to the floor any minute. You go home! My wife is coming up, and we will stay around until you return, this evening or tonight. Poor Samia also needs rest more than anything. Out you all! We take over from here'

We protested, but Paul refused to take no for an answer. He literally shoved us outside. We said goodbye to Samia, made Paul promise over and over that if anything whatever happened to Samia he should phone us immediately, and then we left.

Robert took his own car. He drove to his lodge with Simone. From home, he first telephoned to have his windows and doors replaced as soon as possible. While he slept, Simone stayed awake a long time, then she slept too. My two policemen remained at their door until the repairs were finished.

I did not go home immediately. I first went to see the farmer of Garnuée in the hospital. I told him we had imprisoned the murderer of his wife. He too wept. I explained to him how very brave his son had been. I apologised for having caught the gang too late. He said the same thing to me as I had told to Robert.

When I left the hospital, I almost fell from exhaustion. The nurse at the counter phoned me a taxi and gave me something warm to drink. I reached the Abbey for my meeting at ten o'clock. The meeting went easy. Dominique Bussy had arranged practically all there was to do and organise. We needed more men to guard the sites and do our normal work, so I phoned my boss Timario and got rapidly what was needed. I thanked everybody for the fine work that had been accomplished the previous day and night. Dominique drove me in a police car to my home, for I would not have been able to turn a steer. She pushed me into my house. I took a shower, and slept.

Election debates. Robert Jacquet

The evening after the assault on my home by the Blandis Gang, I was to participate in a television debate for the elections, organised by our local television company.

We have Federal television transmitters in Belgium, three Flemish and three Walloon stations, but we also have a few local transmitters in Wallony. To reach the homes, all stations use primarily the Cable TV Operators and the former national telecommunications company's ADSL transmission service over the telephone pairs. Our local TV station was called Canal Robois. It emitted only a fifteen-minutes news journal each day, but repeated that every hour, interspersed by a few programs it shared with other such local stations.

During the election period, however, the time used by Canal Robois was much longer, because it organised lengthy election debates with all political parties. Several debates had been scheduled, on exiting topics such as social affairs of the town, finances, road works, mobility, health care, youth and the elderly. Last came the crown debate of the general overview of town politics. What had the former Cabinet realised in the previous years, and what were the global programs of the political parties for the future? In this debate, only the heavyweights of the parties had been invited, among which should also be me, the current Bourgmestre of Robois. The date and conditions had been agreed upon months in advance.

I had slept a large part of the morning and even of the afternoon that day. I awakened at the noise of the men who placed new windows at my house. Simone was awake too, and looked at me with alert eyes and much tenderness. She seemed even more tired than I. When I awoke, I remembered instantly I had only five hours left to take part in the television broadcast.

Rose lay in the morgue of Namur, so my first reaction was to refuse to participate in the debate. How would I be able to talk in front of a camera when Rose was dead since only one day? I had to be given time to mourn!

Simone made me think. She pointed out my responsibilities towards the people of Robois.

‘Do you want to quit now?’ she asked.

‘No!’ I cried back at her. ‘I have to go through with the elections, I know that. Too many people count on me. Rose too would have wanted me to go on, but I must mourn her!’

‘Then you must speak at the television studio this evening,’ Simone whispered. ‘You have a story to tell. A story of good and evil, and such stories must always be told. You must make the Aeolfast horror public, now. You should not mention names, for the trials have not even started yet, but you can explain the events and the violent acts that are absolutely true. Tell your story on television. Robois and the world must know what evils unscrupulous managers that totally lack empathy for people can bring on a town. You owe that to the people that died, not only to Rose, but also to the wife Terhave. That should be your way of mourning.’

Simone talked for so long to me that I had to give in.

I phoned to Albert Desjardins first. I announced to him I would mention Yves Govin as an accomplice of the Blandis gang this evening on television, and Desjardins agreed with me to do that. We decided to ask all IC voters not to vote on Govin’s name. We could not withdraw the name from the list because the list had been communicated officially to the judges that overlooked the elections, but we could ask voters to not vote for Govin. That was the only name I wanted to mention.

After Desjardins, I phoned to Joseph Bikri. Joseph was not up since long either, and I discussed in a few words with him on what I could say of the events and what not, to not endanger the rest of the investigations.

All that time, while the carpenters were hammering at my windows and door, Simone stayed at my side, but didn’t show herself to the workmen. I needed her very much by me. I was grateful. I asked her again whether she wanted to stay with me forever in the lodge, and she answered she would love to, but she repeated her plea for a two-year period of delay to reveal our relation. She confirmed she would marry me after the two years, but for the first time she told me she might not wait two years before she wanted a child.

I arrived late that evening at the studio of Bazaine where our local journalists had received a large country house to serve as their basis for offices, studios and storerooms. My opponents would be Eliane Collado of the Liberal Party, more an ally than an adversary, Jean Castelle, the representative of the Socialist Party and Member of Parliament, also a Minister now, and Christelle Romas, the representative of the Ecological Party. We had our chairs in a half moon with the reporter at the centre. Cameramen aimed at us from left and right. Behind a glass wall sat two other technicians of the TV station, who would mix and choose the images sent over the cable. The duel went live in the air.

The journalist of Canal Robois introduced the stakes of the election for Robois, the choice of Councillors, Cabinet and Bourgmestre. He explained the rules for the word tournament, thirty

minutes speaking time for each candidate in the debate. He invited Jean Castle to start. Castle criticised the work of the majority's Cabinet, castigating especially the Cabinet Members of the Liberal Party. He told we had neglected building homes for the elderly and crèches for the newly born. Our policy for helping out immigrants had failed, integration efforts had been zero and social lodgings had been built too few. He proposed to realise with the Socialist Party the many items we had overlooked in the social domain.

The reporter looked at Eliane and me for an answer, and Eliane being a woman, the social policy the domain of Simone Ash of her party, I let her answer to Castle's allegations. She did that brilliantly, explained starting from the budget on how much efforts had been realised with limited funds. She double dared Castle to do better without pushing Robois into heavy debt. She also mentioned how much more could have been done had the Regional Walloon Government, dominated by the Socialist Party, offered us more subsidies and had worked more rapidly and more efficiently in handling the permissions to build. An animated discussion between Eliane and Jean followed, which was broken off by the reporter when the words rose higher in tone and poison.

The reporter then proposed to Christelle Romas to criticise the Cabinet's actions on the environmental issues, and he asked her to present the ideas and the political program of the Ecological Party for Robois. Christelle was still quite new in politics, and she had obviously not yet heard of what had happened the previous evening in Robois involving Aeolfast. She talked about various problems of the environment in Robois. She reproached us using chemicals to kill the weeds along the roads, to not protect enough the frogs that passed the roads of Boyu when the animals left their hatching grounds to look for the river the Petiteau. She also emphasised we could do better for the employment in the commune. Lastly, she mentioned the wind turbine project presented by Aeolfast and said that although she understood a certain reticence of the population as to the towers in the landscape, we should help diminish the emissions of carbon dioxide in our countryside town too.

I had an answer ready.

I told to the camera, 'Mrs Romas, you reproached me in particular for not supporting wind turbine projects in Robois and thereby enhancing the problem of the warming of the atmosphere. I have much sympathy for projects that promise to better the way we eat and live. I encourage our citizens to install photovoltaic panels on their roofs. I believe that we have in those cells a technology that can help us to diminish carbon dioxide emissions in large amounts. I oppose the installation of large numbers of towers of eighty metres high in our landscapes. These towers pollute our view. I oppose projects that most of the inhabitants of Robois refuse for several reasons, the stroboscopic effects, the magnetic effects, the noise of the wings, the safety issues, and foremost indeed the destruction of our highest good, our landscape views in one of the most rural and beautiful towns of the country. As to the project under question, the Aeolfast project, I opposed that initiative most vehemently. Many people of Robois opposed that project heroically, and I join publicly the courageous citizens in their battle to preserve our villages. You must know that Aeolfast swamped our town in several aggressive publicity campaigns. Only the advantages of the towers were lauded in flyers and newspaper articles, never the disadvantages. The campaigns and rumours went all in favour of the many towers that would have to be built. What you may not know is that the Aeolfast company also hired a group of criminals to terrorise our population!'

Christelle Romas became very pale. The reporter leaned forward to me, temporarily at a loss of words, and the other political representatives stared at me in amazement.

I continued, 'the criminals terrorised our citizens by burning caravans of the terrain that stood in their way, by attacking farmers and killing or maiming their cattle. They also applied physical violence to people. They raped and even killed daughters and wives of people of Robois. Only yesterday, a farmer's wife was killed in such an assault on private property, and the same day during an assault on my own home, my daughter was killed.'

I waited for reactions, but my opponents kept a silence. They wanted to hear me out rather than intervene at this moment.

I went on. 'The criminals used automatic weapons of such calibre as even our policemen do not have. They were trained and led by a professional of the security branch, so the operations were planned with military discipline, until up to a point, when their actions degraded to open violence and killings. Our police force of Robois has yesterday evening been able to arrest six criminals. Among these criminals, our police believes hides a serial killer, a man who committed several as yet unsolved murders in Brussels, plus four murders in and around Robois. It was my duty to resist to enterprises that bring violence and death and blackmail to our otherwise peaceful town. The police force of Robois and the *Service d'Enquête et de Recherche*, the SER of Namur, will present a press conference tomorrow and provide more details. In the interest of the investigation I cannot reveal more this evening. The managers responsible for the Aeolfast company misdeeds shall have to justify themselves for their acts during trial. We must not, my dear citizens, allow companies led by unscrupulous Executive Officers to bring pain and sorrow over our villages, merely for the benefit of a few greedy men. Therefore, together with my citizens, I state here loud and clear that as long as I can remain Bourgmestre of Robois, such devastating projects will find an arduous opponent in me. We all care for our environment, but we are not ready to sacrifice what is dearest to us. Other technologies to help the environment exist and can be applied in mass.'

The reporter of Canal Robois opened his mouth to intervene, but I continued.

'I have a last word to add. Please allow me. I have one last statement to make before the cameras. Among the people who have been imprisoned is the last candidate of the IC list, of the list I lead. In agreement with the President of the Group *Intérêts Communaux*, IC, I must announce with sorrow today that IC cannot withdraw the name of that man from the list, although it would have liked to do so, because our list has been officially deposed at the judges controlling the election. We explicitly ask, however, for all voters, inclusive all IC voters, not to sign at that name.'

The people in the studio remained relatively calm, stunned as they were, but the reporter did not lose the subject.

He asked immediately, 'could you be more specific, Monsieur Jacquet, about the events you mentioned? How did the acts of aggression happen?'

I repeated, 'no, not now. You'll have to excuse me. You will learn more tomorrow from the police about the dead people we mourn. Two women died yesterday because of the Aeolfast project, one other was severely wounded and is in hospital. I definitely confirm this. Our citizens should not fear anymore, for everybody responsible for the crimes has been arrested. The group of criminals operated out of the Recycfast premises, which as you may know is a daughter company of the same holding as Aeolfast. In a police raid, our own police force of Robois has been able to eliminate the threat for our town. During the attack on my house, one criminal was killed and another one wounded. Another criminal was wounded during the raid on Recycfast.'

A long silence followed.

The journalist tried to curve the debate to other subjects. He passed to Jean Castelle, who nevertheless returned to the rumours against my person, saying he had never believed in them and knew very much that some of the rumours had been false. The family of Jacquet had acted honourably during the last World War. Castelle then continued detailing the program of his party in other domains, among which the future economic situation of Robois. The debate returned to more normal discussions.

When the debate of about two hours was finished, the cameras and the microphones were shut down. The people in the studio wanted to know much more, but I explained I could not mention names. I did tell them a bit more in the private sphere of friends, of co-politicians I met in the Council meetings, about the attack on my house and about the murder at the Terhave farm. We went to the room to have our cosmetics cleaned from our faces, and then I prepared to leave. The reporters of Canal Robois asked whether they could interview me tomorrow to talk a bit further about the events, and especially about the assault on my house. They asked permission to film my villa. I made a rendez-vous with them in the late afternoon of the following day.

When I stepped out of the Canal Robois house, a crowd had gathered outside. The men and women shouted, 'long live our Bourgmestre, long live Robert Jacquet! Aeolfast must be destroyed! No wind turbine projects in our villages! All criminals of Aeolfast in prison!' And so on.

I had to walk through a corridor of people of Robois who wanted to shake my hand, and I remained a long time among them, telling them to wait for more information to be given by our Superintendent of police, Joseph Bikri. Canal Robois brought a cameraman out again to film me and the crowd, and I presented a vibrant eulogy to our valiant police force led by Joseph Bikri. The woman who had been wounded in my house was his betrothed, I told, and I also acknowledged that Superintendent Bikri had been in my house at the moment of the attack, come to warn me of possible attacks by criminals. Right at that moment the gang launched their assault. Superintendent Bikri had defended my villa on risk of getting seriously wounded or worse, himself. The criminals had been fended off, but my villa bore the marks of tens of bullets in its walls. It was again Superintendent Bikri who had later in the evening led the raid on Recycfast and arrested the criminals.

While I told that story, the crowd became very silent and erupted later once more in shouts of revenge. I asked everybody to remain calm. I told we should mourn our victims. Our police force would handle the criminals.

All during that time, also the time of the television broadcast, I kept thinking of Rose. What was I doing here? Why was I not in some dark cellar, on my own, mourning and thinking of her?

The news was sensational, of course. The crowd thickened and the camera followed me until I stepped into my car. On the other side of the street I saw Simone Ash talking to Eliane Collado. Simone stood there, immobile, and listened, but she did not come to my car. I would have liked to hold her in my arms and cry. She still wanted to hold her distance, as I had agreed to. I waved at her, and she waved back, nothing further. We were being hypocritical, but I drove home. Halfway I turned, and returned to the hospital to hear how Samia Bennani fared. I found Joseph at her bed. Samia was feeling better, but sleeping. I exchanged a few words of courage with Joseph, told him to return home and catch some sleep. We went outside the hospital together. I drove him home.

My declaration at Canal Robois had unexpected effects, and effects that embarrassed me much but were also pleasant surprises. From very early in the morning, one car after the other drove onto my gravel path up to my house. The people were curious. They wanted to see by themselves how many bullets had been shot at my villa. The cars kept coming, so I called Joseph Bikri and asked him to contain the people at a respectable distance from my walls so that I could still have some privacy. Not only came a horde of people, but also camera teams and journalists from every possible national TV and radio station of Belgium, and even also from foreign countries, gave their comments live on my lawn and outside my door, showing the bullet holes.

Joseph sent four police officers to push the people back to the road, and they placed Nadar barriers in the street so that no cars could drive up to my door.

Another phenomenon then happened, one that touched me profoundly. The people had heard my daughter Rose had succumbed. The people asked to lay down flowers along the path to my house and against my wall. They asked the police, who knocked on my door to ask for the permission. I could not refuse. Cars had to remain in the streets, but I accepted that people came to my house on foot. I thought a few flowers would be brought, but hundreds of bouquets of flowers were placed against my wall and along the path. The bouquets were of roses, most of them of white and pink roses. I found even little dolls among the flowers, laid there by children as gifts for Rose. The homage touched my heart. I could not stay inside the house. That would have been callous. I went out several times that day to thank the people for the sympathy they thus showed, and each time the police had all the trouble of the world to push the sympathisers back. When I went out, the men stood in sad silence, the women and children wept. Then the cheering began.

The same scene happened at the doors of the hospital where Samia Bennani was cared for. When Joseph Bikri went to visit his fiancée in the hospital, he was almost crushed to death by the crowd that thanked him and considered him a hero. There also, the people of Robois brought flowers, hundreds of them, red roses and coloured flowers to show they loved Samia. A little later, when the people heard the name of the farmer whose wife had been taken by assault, flowers were placed at the gates and walls of the Garnuée Farm too.

Joseph Bikri and Inspector Danlois, both accompanied by their superiors, gave a press conference that day. Television cameras filled the room. Our Superintendent and the Inspector explained in detail what had happened, and they gave the names of the criminals that were involved.

The farmer of Garnuée proposed to hold a funeral ceremony together for his wife and for my daughter, and I agreed. A Catholic mass was to be performed two days later in the main church of Robois. I, Robert Jacquet, the father Terhave and his two children, his son and his daughter, stood with me in the church. Behind me sat Simone Ash with the entire Trioteignes Family, also with Diego and Laura, who had continued relentlessly to launch my election campaign. At the end of the ceremony, the coffins of Rose and of the mother of Thomas Terhave, were held by the corps of policemen of Robois in gala uniform. Among the bearers was Joseph Bikri. They received the loudest applause our church had ever heard in its five-hundred and more years of history.

In the cemetery of Robois I stood with the Terhave children between me and their father, when the two coffins were first blessed by the priest and then lowered into the ground. It was only then that I realised I would not see Rose again. In my house, I had expected her to turn a corner every minute. Thomas Terhave never wept. He was a very courageous boy.

In the following days, the excitement in Robois slowly petered out. Life took over, although the memories and scars remained in the minds of our people. I had to hire a container truck and a team of men to take away the masses of flowers that lay in my path and at my house. My front door got repaired. My own construction workers repaired the holes in my wooden walls with fluid wood, and they experimented with various paints to hide the holes, until even I could not point to all of them anymore.

For more than two weeks, Simone and I did not dare meeting, but then she hired another car and dared to drive into my villa, wearing black glasses and a dark wig. I could embrace her again for the first time since many days, and we realised how much we had missed one another. We mourned Rose in each other's arms.

We still wondered how the winds of violence unleashed by the unfeeling Aeolus Count Buisseyre had threatened and broken our peace.

The investigations of Inspector Danlois and of Superintendent Joseph Bikri continued all through the months of September and October. Danlois arrested two Directors of Aeolfast. The press conference Danlois and Bikri gave at Namur was the sensation of the year. Inspector Danlois fully exposed the detestable practices of Count Buisseyre. A large part of that information had been provided by Trioteignes.

Samia Bennani remained in hospital for two weeks. When the doctors released her, under the care of doctor Simone Ash, Simone could drive into my villa without disguise. Samia stayed at my lodge, even though Joseph's family claimed her. I would not have her now change places. Samia had to rest as much as possible and keep her calm for a few weeks more, but I and a nurse cared for her to the best of our abilities. I even perfected my cooking skills for her. Joseph Bikri became an even more frequent visitor to my lodge, and from him I heard all the details of how the investigation proceeded. In the beginning of October, Joseph brought Samia to the University of Louvain-la-Neuve. Samia continued her studies of law. She obtained the special permission from the University Authorities to skip certain classes, because she already had a Moroccan diploma in law. She envisaged getting the certificates of her first two years in but one physical year of study. At first, Joseph drove her each day to Louvain in his new car. Later, Samia refused his travels for her, and she took the train. Either I or Joseph deposited her at the train station of the nearest city. She returned by bus or phoned us to fetch her in the late afternoon. Still later, when she got her driver's licence, we gave her a small second-hand car of my company.

Samia regretted very much to have had to stay in hospital during the funeral ceremony for Rose, but she and I brought flowers to Rose's grave later, and prayed. Joseph and Samia would not wait much longer to get married, but until the day of her wedding, Samia remained in my house, in the Rose of Robois. We held each other company, and I dreaded when she would leave my lodge, the moment I would remain alone in the big house.

I longed for Simone at my side.

Elections. Robert Jacquet

The Town Council elections were held on Sunday, 14 October. We had done everything we could! Diego and Laura Trioteignes had prepared splendid flyers and tracts. These had been printed and distributed to every house of Robois. Panels with my portrait had been planted on

every terrain the Trioteignes and Blouges controlled, and on a lot more. We had no trouble finding sympathizers in the last days. The panels were about a metre high. They featured me, the simple slogan 'for the future of Robois' on a vague background of the *Hôtel de Ville*, the name and the logo of *Intérêts Communaux*, and the number two IC had drawn for these elections. The background of my poster was moreover a bleak orange, and almost the only difference of layout between my posters and those of Simone Ash was that her background was light blue. The same team had distributed her and my tracts, but the order of distribution had been varied, so that for example when our team placed my tracts in the letter boxes of Boyu, another team placed hers in the letter boxes of Haut-Robois, and two days later vice versa. In some fields our panels stood side by side, but that seemed to have provoked no new rumours. I also had tracts distributed on which I stood together with Nadine Dumortier, for Nadine had insisted very strongly on that. Simone drew a face when she saw me and another woman standing together on a few posters and tracts, but Nadine was married happily, so I waved Simone's protests away. Simone pulled my ears but did not have to worry.

The press had amply commented on the Aeolfast affair, on the dark side of Count Buisseyre, on the heroic resistance of the people of Robois and its Bourgmestre, so that huge articles plus the photographs of me continued to appear in the newspapers. They formed much unpaid-for publicity. I had these publications much on my conscience, for I feared having exploited Rose's death for my elections. I could not help that, however! The news had to be brought to the people, and the newspapers and television stations would not avoid talking of me. I gave interviews, but added each time how bad I felt about the publicity in this election time. I estimated it was important to bring the truth of the events to as many persons as possible. We did not want something like this ever to happen again.

Finally, during the last two weeks before the election day, I went on foot, accompanied by two youngsters, ringing at the bells of the Robois houses. I went to see the people personally, to talk with the voters on the issues of the election. My flyers were distributed on the markets and at bus stops, and I also passed to stand among my teams there. Marks of sympathy continued to flow in on my website, and on our Facebook and Twitter sites. After the campaign, on the fourteenth of October, we found ourselves utterly exhausted, but ready for the last sprint.

The cabins in which the people of Robois had to vote had been prepared by the administration of our town, and as Bourgmestre, I had also quite some work to organise the installations. The places where the voters would have to come to vote had been concentrated mostly in village schools and in our festivity halls, of which each village had at least one.

On the day of the election, queues of voters formed at the voting stations. I still had many youngsters with me to post panels with my photograph at the schools and halls. We even placed cars decorated with posters of me at strategic corners. The inhabitants of Robois could vote from eight o'clock in the morning till one o'clock in the afternoon.

Around six o'clock in the afternoon, *Intérêts Communaux* assembled in the large bar of Monsieur François. The entry hall of the hotel Horse Bayard had become our headquarters for the day. Monsieur François did golden business that evening, but he too ran, serving our members and guests. He darted to right and left in an orange T-shirt with on his back the logo of IC Group and my smiling face. The noise in the bar was overwhelming. Everybody shouted from one end to the other. Success calls in the crowds, so people stood even outside the bar with beer glasses in their hands. We drank while the votes were being counted in the Counting

Offices of Robois. If there is something I shall never really get used to, it's drinking beer by the litres. My fellow-politicians seem to be very happy with the sport, my tastes must be more feminine I fear, for I preferred wine. I drank a lot of sweet white wine that evening and when one glass was empty, usually two more waited beside me. Monsieur François beamed.

The first results of the elections started to seep in around six thirty. Each political party had eager members who waited at the exits of the Counting Offices, which had been organised in the Royal Athenaeum of Robois. Each party also had witnesses inside the Counting Offices, and these noted the results of each office. For IC, the results were brought in by these men and women to the Horse Bayard. The results were written on small, crumpled papers, but Albert Desjardins had placed a large whiteboard on the counter of the bar and on that board he noted the votes for the four parties with a blue alcohol pen. The votes of each village were mixed together at the Counting Offices, each time three boxes from different villages, so we did not know exactly from which village the results came in. Not all Presidents of Counting Offices mixed the boxes, though, and then the witnesses eagerly noted the local votes. Each time Desjardins noted a figure, shouts and applause accompanied his work. The applause and shouts came hesitatingly at first, and the people looked at me, wondering whether they could disturb my mourning. I made a sign with my head and hands to continue. I would not spoil their evening.

A tendency became very clear by seven o'clock. IC had won the elections and augmented considerably its score of six years ago. We could celebrate a triumph.

Albert Desjardins, who had experience with previous election nights, told IC Group had won at least twenty per cent more votes than the last time. We might win two to three additional seats in the Council. The excitement, applause, laughter of the IC men reached unknown heights. Another positive tendency was the gains of the Liberal Party. The Liberals might win a modest one seat more, firmly strengthening our coalition in the Council. Socialists and Ecologicals lost votes this time.

At seven thirty, I received a phone call on my mobile phone. I had Simone Ash at my ears. She first congratulated me with the fine victory, told me also my personal votes had soared, my preference votes had grown staggeringly. Simone had somewhat better information than we had. While she talked I shouted those across the bar, and everybody kept silence while I had a representative of the Liberals on the phone. The IC people understood a new Cabinet was in the making. Simone told me she was sitting next to the President at the headquarters of her party, and also the most important members of the Liberals stood around her. She asked me officially whether IC Group would still be willing to form an alliance for the next six years with the Liberal Party, even though she acknowledged IC might have won a slight majority in the Council.

I asked Simone to remain on the phone. I called Nadine Dumortier, the Secretary and the Treasurer of IC to me, and also Albert Desjardins, the President, and I proposed to them the offer of the Liberals. I added I preferred to accept the offer.

'We might as well continue with the Liberals,' Desjardins accepted when he saw most of the heads around us nod. 'I suppose we must continue with the same number of Cabinet Échevins, but ask them whether they can agree with one Cabinet Member less. We will compensate that with higher memberships of the Liberals in the regional institutions to which we have to send representatives.'

I explained this to Simone Ash. I could hear she was pissed off with our bickering on Cabinet functions, but she too asked for a pause and I heard fervent discussion going on around her. We stayed connected, and a few moment later she was back.

‘We agree, we agree reluctantly, but we agree,’ Simone said. ‘We shall want the function of Director of the PISC when the current one terminates his mandate, and two more representatives in the Intercommunal Societies.’

I could grant them those posts.

I ended by telling Simone, ‘we had a phone call a few minutes ago of the television station Canal Robois. They want to interview me and the IC President about the tendencies in the voting and the future of possible alliances. The meeting is scheduled at eight thirty and we will go live on TV. The First Cabinet Échevin, to be appointed by the Liberal Party and your President might join us. We could then announce our continued collaboration for the next six years.’

‘Thank you, that will be fine,’ Simone concluded dryly. She hung up.

The hurrahs sounded in the Horse Bayard and the beer was temporarily exchanged for flutes of Champagne offered by Albert Desjardins on behalf of the IC Group. IC had still funds left for this sort of occasions, preserved by Desjardins.

At eight fifteen, a man of IC who had been assigned not to drink alcohol that evening, affectionately called ‘the Bob’, drove me and Desjardins to the studios of Canal Robois. When we arrived, we saw also the President of the Liberal Party arrive, accompanied by Simone Ash. Simone remarked my astonishment. She grinned mysteriously, dared to kiss me on the cheek since we would once more be political allies and colleagues in the Cabinet. Simone enjoyed much pleasure in announcing, ‘I will be your First Cabinet Échevin, Robert! The Liberal Party of Robois has just decided so. Eliane Collado withdraws from her Cabinet function in my favour.’

I shook my head. What a combination would we make for Robois! But how could I work so closely as Bourgmestre with this First Échevin without showing blatantly I was formidably in love with her?

Simone laughed more when she saw my face redden. She was also happy because she had equalled me, though in a smaller party. Her preference votes were equally high, she told me proudly.

The television journalists also were astonished to see four people instead of two enter the studio. When we explained why that was, they first drew a very long face because most of the persons working at the station were members of the Socialist Party, and only then were they glad of the scoop we brought them. Ever since Simone had called me, Desjardins and I had switched off our mobile phones, notifying thus to the Presidents of the other parties that they had come too late. Two men of the studio were a little later discreetly working at their telephones, most probably to warn the Presidents of the Socialists and of the Ecologists.

We gave our interviews before the television cameras. President Desjardins explained to the population that IC Group had won the elections decisively, would present Robert Jacquet as the next Bourgmestre, and that we would continue the alliance with the Liberal Party. In the following days we would discuss the main action items of concrete realisations for Robois. A common program would be proposed to the population. The President of the Liberals confirmed the announcement. Doctor Simone Ash would be First Échevin for his group.

When we left the television studio, more journalists of the written press, who had seen by the broadcast we were at Canal Robois, waited at the door, flashes ready. We gave several more interviews.

When the humbug was finished, I asked, whispering to Simone, ‘can we drive together to my house? I missed you! I must go back to feast the IC victory, but we can escape for a couple of hours.’

‘You are in no state to drive,’ Simone answered. ‘I’ll drive!’

I smiled and followed her.

‘Hey Robert, where do you think you are going?’ Desjardins shouted from two cars further.

‘Have you changed camp already? We must return to the Horse Bayard! Our people are waiting for us!’

‘I’ll come! I’ll be there, Albert,’ I cried back, ‘but not yet! I have a few urgent political agendas to clear out with the Liberal Party first!’

Desjardins bent double for laughing, and that worried me a little. How many people in Robois knew already about me and the beautiful Simone Ash?

I discussed no political items with Simone at my lodge. We literally devoured each other on my sofa.

Epilogue. Joseph Bikri

Samia Bennani and I married in the month of December. Robert Jacquet, as Bourgmestre of Robois, married us civilly in the Marriage Hall of the Adelbert Abbey. Simone Ash, quite unusual for a wedding, stood beside him in front of the wedded. The religious marriage was held in Brussels, in my family, a few days later, according to the Islamic tradition. Simone and Robert were invited to the lavish feast, and so were many friends of the Robois Council and Cabinet. Inspector Danlois and three other men of the SER of Namur also participated. Danlois kept one arm all the time around the waist of Dominique Bussy as if he had caught her. I knew better! We would soon be invited to yet another wedding.

The trial of the Blandis Gang would only start after the holidays of the following year. Eric Vrankaert was convicted for life. He was recognised as a compulsive serial killer of eight persons, mostly prostitutes, but also the wife of farmer Terhave counted among his victims. Max Blandis got six years imprisonment, his men eight years. The reconstruction of the assault on the Bourgmestre's house proved that only Richard Mordine could have fired through the windows of the room of Rose. He was convicted for twenty years. Yves Govin and Michel Guichand, who had been too drunk to do much else beyond emptying their chargers at the front of Robert Jacquet's house, got four years imprisonment. Govin's political career was thereby finished. Count Buisseyre received two years in jail, but since he had spent already eight months in custody until his trial, he was set free by the judges. The Trioteignes told us Buisseyre had been declared bankrupt while in jail. His Aeolfast project for Robois had been dumped by his companies. No other enterprise proposed an alternative project, nor was his project taken over.

Robert Jacquet and I made many new friends in Robois. It became generally known that we were close friends.

In the summer of the following year, my capable assistant, Dominique Bussy, married her SER Inspector Danlois. They also organised a large feast to which Robert Jacquet and Simone Ash were invited.

Robert and Simone managed hiding their relation for one full year. After that period, their mutual involvement was a fool's secret in Robois. Simone announced she would resign from the Cabinet on the fifteenth of October of the following year, after having been Échevin during two happy years. Robert and Simone married at the beginning of November.

During the election period, after the death of Rose, Robert Jacquet thought much about the events that had led to Rose's departing. He felt depressed because he was a man who believed very much in having to pay for the good things that happened to him, in guilt, in retribution, in requital for evil done and in the balance between good and suffering in each life. Maybe God had taken Rose from Robert, but in retribution offered him victory against all odds over his opponents.

Maybe God had known Robert would win a great triumph and therefore had He taken Rose. Maybe Rose had realised her difference, realised earlier than Samia what the shooters intended, and had she sacrificed herself by throwing her in front of Samia.

The guilt of the horror that had happened to Rose as his, Robert's fault, pursued him for months. The contrast between the pain of Rose and the exhilaration of the IC people after the election victory gnawed at Robert's mind.

Simone Ash called his reflections nonsense. A God of love would not offer victories as his own sacrifice for having taken a life, Rose's life, and a God of mercy could not ask a life for a

victory in elections. She demanded of the Robert she was to marry to chase away the dark thoughts he nourished.

Aeolus had brought winds of violence and pain and sorrow to Robois, Simone argued, and to Aeolus, to Buisseyre, to a man without feelings of empathy for other people, to a genuinely egoistic man, to a psychopath, had to be attributed the acts of violence. The greed of Aeolus had caused the events of Robois, and only to Aeolus should be attributed the vice and the fault. Therefore, Aeolus had to be fought, defeated and punished! Such battles were eternal on earth, said Simone, as long as human nature would not change, and such battles would always rock our world.

God had created a human race that was very imperfect. That was the finest justification of my job I had ever heard, and I kept it in my mind always. We could only pray and ask God to preserve us from such haughty men, and maybe we had not done that enough.

Simone was certain of one thing, and in this she was strengthened by the Trioteignes Family. The peace of God always prevailed in the end! Such also was the nature of things.

I, Superintendent Joseph Bikri, shared that thought too, for I thought it the finest justification for my work. What else was I but the humble instrument of God?